

SENATE

Wednesday, January 26, 2022

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

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

Bill to vary the appropriation of sums, the issue of which was authorized by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2020 and varied by the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2021 [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

PAPERS LAID

1. Response of the Personnel Department to the Third Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the implementation of the recommendations of the Twenty-Fourth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the Examination into the Processing of the payment of Pensions and Gratuities of Retired Public Officers and Contracted Employees. [*The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West)*]
2. Response of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to the First Report of the Public Accounts Committee of the Follow-up on the Implementation of the Recommendation made in the Twenty-Fifth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an Examination of the

UNREVISED

- Audited Financial Statements and Internal Controls of the National Lotteries Control Board (NLCB) for the years 2008 to 2021. [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat)*]
3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service to the Interim Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the Response of the Public Authorities to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
 4. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Labour to the Second Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an Examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
 5. Second Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2007. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]
 6. Second Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2008. [*Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat*]

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT

(Presentation)

NIHERST

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

UNREVISED

Sen. Nigel de Freitas: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper in the name of Sen. Deyalsingh:

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

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Madam President, there are three questions for oral response on the Order Paper this morning and the Government will respond to all three. Thank you.

South West Regional Health Authority

(Alteration to Terms and Conditions of Workers)

40. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Health:

In light of a November 2021 protest by an Industrial Relations Officer at the Public Services Association (PSA), highlighting the unilateral decision of the SWRHA to alter the terms and conditions of employment of health care workers without any negotiations/consultation, can the Minister advise as to the following:

- i. whether an investigation has been launched into said allegations; and
- ii. if the answer to (i) is in the affirmative, what are the findings of said investigation?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam President, and good morning to you and this honourable Chamber. The question does not arise as no terms and conditions were altered and as a result,

there is no need for an investigation. And two, part (ii) of the question does not apply as the answer to part (i) is in the negative.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Can I ask the Minister whether he is aware of a memorandum that was issued by the South West Regional Health Authority unilaterally altering the hours of work of personnel at that Authority from eight hours to 12 hours? Is the Minister aware of this memorandum?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: If you could produce the memorandum, we will investigate it but the question as posed, there was no unilateral decision to alter terms and conditions which is what was asked.

Sen. Mark: Could I, Madam President, may I wait on you to guide me? When I say so, I am rushing so I will ask you if I can ask my question.

Madam President: Yes.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can the hon. Minister share with this House what was the decision that was arrived at? Was it a decision based on consensus? Was there an agreement between the parties, that is the SWRHA and the PSA to address working hours of personnel within that Authority?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, I will not allow that question based on the answers that the Minister has already given.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, the Minister indicated that there was no unilateral decision.

Madam President: No, you have two more questions you can ask. You can pose.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can the Minister indicate whether at any point in time based on discussions between parties any attempt was made to adjust the hours of work of the personnel attached to the SWRHA?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, I will not allow that question.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, may I ask the Minister whether negotiations have begun between parties as it relates to the alteration of terms and conditions of employment of workers in the SWRHA?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, I will not allow that question based on the question that has been posed and the answers already given. Next question, Sen. Mark.

South West Regional Health Authority

(Recruitment of Additional Health Care Workers)

41. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Health:

In light of the November 2021 protest action staged by a Ward Manager attached to the SWRHA, to highlight the fatigue and frustration of health care workers, can the Minister indicate whether the Government will be recruiting additional health care workers?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, again, Madam President. To address the need for additional staff during the period October 2020 to December 2021, which is last month, the following categories and number of health workers were hired by the regional health authorities to assist during the COVID-19 pandemic: One, doctors 387 made up of 342 House Officers, 25 Specialist Medical Officers and 20 registrars; nurses, 443 comprised of 293 RNs, registered nurses, and 150 enrolled Nursing Assistants; Medical Laboratory Technicians, 33; Hospital Attendants, 98; Patient Care Assistants, 109; Patient Escorts, 32; Customer Service Representatives, 23; Medical Orderlies, 30; Ward Maids, 42; Clerk Is, 96; and Cleaners, 36. This amounts to a total of 1,329 additional workers hired in our public health care system specifically to meet the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further, the Ministry of Health and the regional health authorities remain cognizant of staff fatigue throughout this pandemic as it is happening around the

world and has implemented various strategies to assist staff with coping with their mental health issues and these include: One, staff rotation; two, the use of an anonymous private employee assistance programme or EAP; three, the use of mental telehealth consultants and one-on-one counselling with officers, and four, sensitization sessions with frontline staff in psychological first aid and maintaining mental well-being. Thank you very much, Madam President.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can the Minister share with us out of 1,329 additional personnel employed in the regional health authorities, how many were employed specifically at the South West Regional Health Authority?

Madam President: Minister.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I would not have that disaggregated figure but these were employees mainly through North Central RHA and South West RHA which bore the brunt of the COVID response so most of it will go to those two RHAs with a smaller percentage going to Eastern RHA and North West RHA but I do not have disaggregated figures.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Can the Minister indicate what is the nature of these employment arrangements, meaning, are these workers employed on contract or are they employed on a permanent basis?

Madam President: On what basis?

Sen. Mark: Permanent basis.

Madam President: Minister.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: These will be contract workers.

Sen. Mark: Would the Minister share with this honourable Senate whether these contracts are for six months, three months, three years, two years, five years? Can the Minister share with us the duration of these contracts?

Madam President: Minister.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: They will vary in term. I do not have the exact contract per person or per category but they were hired for the COVID response and they will vary in term from three months upwards.

Sen. Mark: Is there any intention, hon. Minister, to address the challenges faced by these workers who are employed on three, six, maybe a year of employment via contracts so that they can have more certainty and stability in their employment? Can you share with us whether the Government intends to regularize that arrangement?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, I will not allow that question.

Sen. Mark: Can the Minister therefore indicate whether he can provide us in--

Madam President: Sen. Mark, you asked four supplemental questions already.

Sen. Mark: Oh, I asked—Thank you, Madam.

Madam President: So next question, Sen. Mark.

Integrity Commission

(Reduction in the Budgetary Allocation)

42. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Prime Minister:

In light of the Government's decision to reduce the budgetary allocation to the Integrity Commission by approximately 60 per cent, can the Prime Minister advise as to what steps are being taken to ensure that the Commission's operations are not being negatively affected?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam President. This question is based on a false premise and as such the scenario

hypothesized in the question is not supported by the facts. The budgetary allocation for the Integrity Commission has not been reduced by 6 per cent as inaccurately alleged. In fact, the allocation for the Commission in fiscal 2022 is higher than the total expenditure by the Commission in the fiscal 2021 and only 4 per cent lower than the original allocation in fiscal 2021.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can the hon. Minister indicate what was responsible for this reduction in allocation of 4 per cent in the arrangement with this very important institution?

Madam President: Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam President, 4 per cent is not a significant amount and in any event, we have a standard practice, which Sen. Mark is well aware of, of a mid-year review where any additional appropriations required for any department of Government is resolved.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can the Minister indicate, Madam President, whether any request has come to him thus far as it relates to an increase in allocation to the Integrity Commission so that they can carry out their independent functions? Can the Minister indicate?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, that question is not allowed.

Sen. Mark: Okay. Thank you, Madam President.

Hon. C. Imbert: “Come better than that next time, eh.”

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

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

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

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

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Madam President, I would not be taking all of that time. The Bill before us has been passed in the other place. The Bill provides for the variation of the 2021 appropriation in the sum of \$574,889,840 and this is to bring to account expenditure funded by advances from the Treasury deposits in fiscal 2021. One of the main, or, let me elaborate on the main reasons for which additional funding of \$574,889,840 is being proposed by way of a variation of appropriation.

Firstly, under Head 03: Judiciary, an increase of \$35,195,944 is being sought to retire an advance made from Treasury Deposits that facilitated payment to vendors who provided security and telephone services as well as rental or lease of office accommodation for the Judiciary.

Secondly, under Head 17: Personnel Department, an increase of \$8,640,671 is also being sought to retire an advance again made from Treasury Deposits that facilitated payment for the rental and lease of office accommodation for the department and the renewal of software licences and to vendors who provided consultancy services and janitorial services for the Personnel Department which is also known as the Chief Personnel Officer Department.

Finally, under Head 78: Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, an increase of \$531,053,225 is being sought to retire, again, an advance

from Treasury Deposits that enabled the payment of grants in respect of senior citizens, public assistance and disability grants.

I would ask hon. Senators to note that in accordance with section 17(1)(b) of the Exchequer and Audit Act, Chap. 69:01, advances made from Treasury Deposits are recoverable within 12 months after the close of the financial year in which the advances are made. It is also a requirement that the accounts for a particular fiscal year be closed within four months of the expiry of the fiscal year and therefore the deadline date for this matter is the 31st of January, 2022. The \$574,889,840 is being taken from Head 18, the Ministry of Finance, and that following a final review of the 2021 accounts by the Budget Division, savings were identified by the Ministry of Finance under various Sub-Items with the amount spent or disbursed were less than the funding allocated in fiscal 2021.

And may I make a point, Madam President, at this time, that the very fact that the document laid in the Parliament in both Houses during the budget exercise are defined as estimates should give an idea that the Budget Division at the beginning of a fiscal year makes its best estimate based on requests made to it, based on an analysis of funding and expenditure in previous years and based on programmes and projects that have been approved by Cabinet and also on-going programmes and projects. The Budget Division makes its best estimate of what the expenditure will be under all the Items and SubItems contained within the Estimates of Expenditure.

For this reason, we have a mid-year review, which is what I referred to a little while ago, where, if it is determined that a Department or Ministry requires additional funding and funding is not available within its overall allocation, that we come to the Parliament in the mid-year review. Quite often, we do a variation of

appropriation or a supplementation of appropriation. Variation being where you just move money from one Head to another, from one Ministry to another, you need parliamentary approval for that, or a supplementation where it is felt that additional funding is required to increase the total appropriation for the year and then we come to this point where we do the closing of the accounts.

Now, we did not do this last year, Madam President, because there were no variations between Heads. Variations can be done within a Head so that Permanent Secretaries are authorized to do virements within Items within an overall Head. So let us just take the Ministry of Education for example. The Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education is authorized to move funding from one Sub-Item, let us say contract officers to another Item, let us say gratuities. So that within a Head there can be transfers. That does not require the approval of Parliament. What requires the approval of Parliament is when we move money from one Head, in this case, Head 18: Ministry of Finance, to other Heads, in this case, the three Heads that I have mentioned: the Judiciary, Personnel Department and Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

The total increase in the Heads of Expenditure that I just mentioned, the three Items is \$574,889,840 and the total decrease in the Ministry of Finance is an equivalent amount of \$574,889,840 which produces a nil net effect. What this means is that the appropriation for fiscal 2021 is not being adjusted at this time.

So if I move on now to the specific matters, there are some issues that need to be elaborated upon. I will start first with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and I think it is very, very important to let Members know that over the last three years, I have asked the Budget Division to give me the figures for the last three years—and this is just for information only—there has

been constant increase in the expenditure on the senior citizens pension. And in 2001, fiscal 2021, the actual expenditure so far that we have come up with for this closing of the accounts on Senior Citizens Grants, one of the Items, one of Sub-Items that we are moving money to, in 2021, the Government spent \$4,237,063,733 on senior citizens pension. Let me repeat that. In fiscal 2021, the Budget Division has advised me that the Government spent \$4,237,063,733 and the total number of recipients of senior citizen's pension in 2021 was 109,132 and when one goes back a couple of years, you will see that that figure has gone up by 10,000 in the last two to three years.

So it is a significant Item and this is why I commend the Minister of Social Development and Family Services for her efforts in rooting out—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—duplication, wastage, fraud and unauthorized payments within this system, because as a country, this is a staggering amount of money, \$4.237 billion, on an unfunded pension arrangement where senior citizens do not make contributions to this pension system but receive a pension once they attain the age of 65 and they meet the income criteria to be in receipt of a senior citizens pension. There are few countries in the world, Madam President, that do this. I cannot think of any at this point in time in our hemisphere that provides a pension of this magnitude to this amount of people in an unfunded situation. This is part of the social safety net in Trinidad and Tobago and it needs to be emphasized, \$4.237 billion in fiscal 2021 on senior citizens pension.

In addition, I am advised that with respect to social assistance, public assistance as it is also called, in 2021, the expenditure was \$352,754,469 and there were 18,430 persons on the list in terms of beneficiaries of public assistance. With

respect to urgent temporary assistance when people have problems with fire or other natural disasters, the expenditure was \$11,309,982. With respect to the disability grant, I am seeing 22,856 persons with disabilities receiving a disability grant for a total of \$622,617,199. A total of just these four grants: senior citizens, social assistance, urgent temporary assistance, disability; \$5,223,745,383; \$5.2 billion spent by this Government on these grants in one year, fiscal 2021.

10.30 a.m.

And what we do in the Ministry of Finance and what I know the Minister of Social Development and Family Service is doing, is constantly reviewing all of these grants to see, as I said, where there are areas of leakage because of the huge sums of money involved. And the fact that it has been established that persons who may have passed away, persons who are no longer eligible for the senior citizens pension, for example, because they are in receipt of some other income that exceeds the limit, persons who no longer qualify to be on social assistance for one reason or another, and may have got a job and so on. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services is constantly reviewing these huge numbers, and these huge numbers of beneficiaries. When I add up everything here, what I am seeing, Madam President, is over 150,000 beneficiaries of just these four grants in fiscal 2021.

And therefore, at the beginning of the year the Budget Division does an estimate based on what it expects the expenditure to be, but despite the best efforts of the Government and the Minister in particular, we had to supplement the allocation in fiscal 2021. And that is the reason why we are asking for approval today to retire treasury deposits in the sum of 531 million, which was sent to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to deal with these social

grants.

There were some other issues; the movement of money from Head 18 was in a number of areas. I am starting with the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses, and I am advised that in that particular year the GATE Fund is a rolling fund. And therefore, the fund has money in it at the beginning of every fiscal year. So what the Government does in the budget exercise is it tops-up the GATE FUND, so that in fiscal 2021 there was no requirement to spend all of the money that had been appropriated for the GATE FUND because there was a balance in the fund at the beginning of the year, and that was sufficient together with the appropriations that were actually made to allow persons who accessed GATE in fiscal 2021 to receive assistance for their tuition expenses.

With respect to the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company, I was advised that the TTMF received funding over a period of years. And in fiscal 2021 I am told, this is the information that I have received from the Budget Division, that loans totalling \$463 million were dispersed by TTMF in fiscal 2021. And we continue to support TTMF in fiscal 2022, and the reason for the support is the fact that the Government has a Mortgage Loan Interest Programme where two types of interest arrangements are provided. One, at 2 per cent which is for the lower level of mortgage loans, and one at 5 per cent when persons cross a certain threshold in terms of the amount of money that they are seeking to borrow from the TTMF, the interest rate is 5 per cent. But it is still lower than the bank rate in many instances.

So, what the Government does and what governments have done for many, many, many, many years is the Government makes up the difference between the 2 per cent and what the prevailing mortgage interest rate is. There is a cost associated with that and this subsidy of mortgages has been facilitated by numerous

governments over the last 20/30 years. And the principle is that the Government makes up the difference between the interest rate charged, let us use the 2 per cent as an example, and what the proper bank rate would be. And that is a benefit that the numerous governments have made available to its citizens when they avail themselves particularly of public housing through the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company.

With respect to the two other, two items where money was available there was a loan facility for UDeCOTT and there was no requirement to make this money available in cash in 2021. And what was done instead was that the financing was refinanced. And this is part of debt management. Every year the Ministry of Finance, particularly the Debt Management Unit will look at loans that are maturing during the fiscal year and decisions will be made to refinance some of them or to pay off some of them.

When you pay off a loan, you have to have the cash flow in your government account at the Central Bank that will facilitate a utilization of cash, so that as the year progresses the Government will make decisions. Sometimes loans that were earmarked for refinancing, once the cash flow is available the Government will pay those off. Other times when there is insufficient space within the overdraft facility the loans would be refinanced. And this is what occurred with these two loans, the one for UDeCOTT and the loan for eTeck.

The eTeck loan was for the development of the Vanguard Hotel. This is a loan that would have been taken out long ago. The Vanguard Hotel is now called the Magdalena, and this loan would have been taken out you know, maybe 20 years, 10 years before. It was a loan provided by the First Citizens Bank and the facility was refinanced by the Government as part of its debt management.

Similarly, the UDeCOTT loan was an FCB loan and it was the repayment of a previous loan that had matured and was refinanced.

So those are the four areas where funding was taken. I would also indicate that funding was also made available from an allocation for the Agricultural Development Bank, and that was because the Ministry of Finance facilitated all requests available, so all requests made to it by the Agricultural Development Bank for funding. Again, the ADB is a bank that engages in tremendous subsidy, provides loans at rates way below the market rate, and exercises tremendous forbearance in terms of dealing with borrowers. And therefore, the ADB needs to be supported financially to make up the difference between the cost of the loans that it makes to the agricultural sector, the write-off of debts and so on in the sector, and the actual prices at which these loans are made available to the agricultural sector.

During the period, there was no requirement to spend all of the money made available in the budget to the ADB. And I would think that COVID-19 may have had something to do with that, or it may very well be that the ADB had improved its operations, and therefore did not require reliance to that extent on the Ministry of Finance to make up the shortfall in what it charges for loans and what it receives for loans, Madam President.

So that I want to confine my contribution today to these narrow areas. I am advised that this is what the Standing Orders require, that this debate is confined simply to the matters related to the movement of funds from the Ministry of Finance to the three areas, and the purposes of the money used by these three areas, and explanations for the availability of funds from the Ministry of Finance. And I think I have covered everything, and I beg to move. Madam President.

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

2022.01.26

Question proposed.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I rise to make my contribution on the Finance (Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2022. Madam President, we are essentially addressing the close of the accounts for 2020/2021, and the Minister has indicated that the sum of \$574 million had to be located in order to deal with unforeseen—that is my word—expenditure that would have arisen during that fiscal year, leading to a situation in which they had—that is the Government—had to access Treasury Deposits to avoid a major crisis in the areas identified, including, Madam President, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services as it relates to pensions for senior citizens, public assistance, and what the Minister—well, disability allowance as well, and Emergency Relief Grants. Four items.

Now, Madam President, the Minister went on to indicate and may I say, Madam President, these moneys have already been spent. So this Senate is being asked to approve these expenditures because they were transferred not within Sub Heads which as the Minister said does not require parliamentary approval, but it had to do with the transfer of expenditure or allocations between Heads of Expenditure. And therefore, it was more like a supplementation.

Madam President, the Minister went on to indicate, and it is in the Bill that is before us, that to find the relevant moneys to retire these deposits to facilitate the closure of the accounts for 2021, we had to retire these treasury deposits which were advanced in order to facilitate expenditure—increases in expenditure in the Judiciary amounting to \$35,195,944; the Personnel Department, \$8,640,671; and

the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, an allocation of \$531 million and a couple thousand dollars. And that came out of the Ministry of Finance allocation where the Minister just provided this honourable Senate with some information not all, some information on where this \$574,000—\$574million rather, I beg your pardon—came from.

Madam President, the question I want ask the Minister from the outset: Are these savings? We are being told in this Senate that as a result of savings the Minister of Finance was able to reduce some \$574 million that was initially allocated and approved by the Parliament for certain expenditure including loans, to retire loans for UDeCOTT, eTecK as examples. And then, Madam President, the Minister did not for some reason I do not know why, did not indicate to this honourable Senate consistent with information that was circulated, that \$15 million that was supposed to go to the Caribbean Development Bank was not disbursed to the Caribbean Development Bank. That was left out. I do not know if he left it out because of an oversight, because he had time, 45 minutes. He did not take his entire 45 minutes.

Then, Madam President, if you look at what I have before me the document that is helping us deal with the transfers between Heads of Expenditure, there is another item called the Community Improvement Services Limited or CISL which is another \$14.8 or \$14.9 million. So, between these two items that the Minister never mentioned, the Caribbean Development Bank and the Community Improvement Services Limited, the Minister tells this honourable Senate that the Government was able to save \$30 million.

Madam President, is this for real? Or is this surreal? This Madam President, has become a habit of this Minister of Finance to tell this country through this

Senate that savings occurred. Is that true, Madam President? Have savings occurred? Or is this a suppression of expenditure that is being called savings by the Minister of Finance?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: What is the real story? Do not take this Senate for granted. When you are coming before the Senate, you must come with clean hands. I am not saying the Minister's hands are dirty.

Madam President: No well, that is exactly——

Sen. W. Mark: Well, I want to withdraw that immediately.

Madam President: Please.

Sen. W. Mark: I withdraw that, Madam President, because I do not want you to be on your feet today. Madam President, the Minister must tell this Parliament whether this is really savings or a suppression of expenditure. That is what he has to tell us and he has not told us this.

Madam President, I will demonstrate in my contribution that what we are going through every year with this Government is what I call a “vaille-que-vaille” approach to economic planning and development in our country. There is no medium-term economic plan for Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Imbert: Madam President, point of order, 46(1) I think it is in the Senate.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, I am putting my contribution in perspective and nobody could——

Madam President: Sen. Mark, a Member—anyone is entitled to invoke the Standing Order. I think the Minister has invoked Standing Order 46(1). I will allow you to continue but I am, Sen. Mark, taking notice of the fact that 46(1) speaks to relevance but you just said you want to put your contribution in context. You need

to do it a little faster.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, I am seeking your guidance. We are dealing with a Bill second reading, and under Bill second reading, Madam President, we deal with the principles and merits of a Bill. I am putting my contribution in a perspective. That is all I am doing.

Madam President: So, are you seeking my guidance or are you lecturing me on the Standing Orders?

Sen. W. Mark: No. I am seeking your guidance.

Madam President: So, let me give you the guidance then. You are quite correct about the second reading of the Bill. But I just want to point out that this Bill is very limited in scope, and I would ask you please even in dealing with the policy and whatever, you have to be relevant.

Sen. W. Mark: Yes. Madam President, I will be guided, I should say. So, Madam President, I am saying that the Minister has come here on another occasion to tell this Parliament these unforeseen expenditures arose because with the best estimations by his technicians, no one could have forecasted these unforeseen expenses that we are now being asked to approve after the fact. And I was just making the point, Madam President, if we had proper planning in our country and proper data-gathering, we would have been able to predict this supplemental that we have here today.

Madam President, I speak specifically now to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. The Minister lamented and literally served notice on pensioners in this country that there is going to be a consistent and constant review because there is too much wastage, there is leakage, there may be fraud involved. But, Madam President, why should a Minister be guessing on these

matters? If we were planning and we had the data available, Madam President, would we not know, Madam President, that the population is ageing? We now have the phenomena of ageing in our country. So if the population is ageing, Madam President, then you are going to have people who would be coming towards the Government to access pensions. But we do not know what the data is. What we have here, Madam President, is what the Minister has just indicated to us.

And what did he indicate to us, Madam President, the Minister indicated, Madam President, that at the end of 2021 for senior citizens pension we had a population in receipt of senior citizens pension totalling 109,132 people—citizens, rather. And, Madam President, the total that we were provided is \$4.237 billion.

I want to ask, Madam President, when the Minister is wrapping up, when the budget was passed in September/October of 2020, Madam President, for 2021, what was the number of pensioners that we had on the roll? How many people? Was it 100,000, Madam President, was it 95,000, was it 102,000? What we do know from what the Minister has said is that at the end of 2021 we had 109,132 recipients of pensions. That is senior citizens pensions. Madam President, what he did not tell us, and he did not tell the Senate and your good self, were there additions? So at the start of the year we had one number and we anticipated that is the number, and at the end of the year we had another number. We would like the Minister to indicate in his winding up: How many additional new recipients came on the pension payroll, Madam President, from the point of the passage of the budget in October of 2020 to the end of fiscal 2021? We need to get clarification on that.

And, Madam President, whether you go to the issue of social assistance where we are told there was a sum of \$352 million and some 18,000 citizens

benefitting there from. Again, Madam President, we were not given sufficient details because the Minister takes the Senate for granted. So we now have to be asking questions that the Minister ought to have provided to this honourable Senate so we could have made sense of his presentation. But he did not do it.

So, Madam President, whether it comes to Senior Citizens Grants, I just mentioned public assistance, when you go to what is called Disability Grants, 22,836 individuals, Madam President, costing the people of this country \$622,617,199 in terms of millions, 622—or \$623 million to round it off.

11.00 a.m.

And, Madam President, we talk about urgent temporary assistance. The Minister just told us it was \$11,309,982 but we got no figure from the Minister. How many citizens access these emergency grants? The Minister did not tell us, so we have now to be asking questions of the Minister on these numbers. So I am saying, Madam President, this is the Senate and you must—the Minister when he comes here must take the Senate seriously and provide us with detailed information.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Do not come here and give us short-changed information and we now have to seek clarification when the Minister had time to delve into these matters.

So, Madam President, the Minister is very concerned about this situation and he should be because, Madam President, let us face the reality. It is not only the Old Age Pensions Bill that is at \$4 billion and rising, you know, with 109,000 people. Madam President, they have the NIS pension, it is also in trouble. Madam President, you have an unfunded—

Hon. Imbert: Madam President—

Sen. W. Mark:—public service pension plan—

Hon. Imbert: Point of order, point of order—

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, all these things—

Hon. Imbert: 46(1)—

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

Hon. Imbert:—46(1), NIS is not in this at all.

Sen. W. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: No, Sen. Mark, that is stretching it. You really are to treat— the Bill treats with the pensions administered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Sen. W. Mark: Yeah. Madam President, has the Government come up with a plan to deal with this issue of ageing in our country? Because this is going to have a continuous impact on the pension allocation and the Minister cannot come here every year crying crocodile tears about the amount of money being allocated. What is the policy plan that the Government has to deal with this matter? How are we going to address this? We got no answers because, again, the Minister takes us— takes this whole exercise for granted and he rises at every moment when we seek clarification and greater transparency.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, I really have to—

Sen. W. Mark: Sorry, Madam, sorry.

Madam President: No, no, let me make an interjection here. First of all, you have said it once, you have said it twice that the Minister is taking the Senate for granted. You are imputing improper motives and anyone can rise to invoke a Standing Order. Okay?

Sen. W. Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I am guided. So, Madam President, what we are saying as it relates to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, there is clearly a major challenge confronting that Ministry to have the Minister of Finance scrambling literally through Treasury advances and deposits to meet a supplementation amounting to half a billion dollars, Madam President, to avoid the senior citizens from not getting their pensions in 2021. And, Madam President, all I was saying to you and this honourable House, there appears to be an absence of a structure of planning in this exercise. That is all I am saying, Madam President, because we have work to do and the Government must take this thing very seriously. Because this thing is not going to be reduced, you know, Madam President. It is going to be rising continuously unless we have a definitive policy to address it. We know that the Government, Madam President, did some review through the World Bank of some expenditure—review of expenditure but we have never seen that report. So we do not know if that report—what that report contains. But it is an issue, Madam President, that as I said, we need to pay attention to.

Madam President, let us go to this matter of the Caribbean Development—no, I will deal with that later. Let me just deal with the Personnel Department. Madam President, we are told in terms of the Personnel Department, which had an increase allocation of \$8.6 million and this \$8.6 million was for consultancy and janitorial services provided by vendors, as well as rent/lease of office accommodation and storage. Madam President, this is the Senate. We demand transparency. We demand accountability. We would like the Minister of Finance to tell the Senate when we speak to consultancy and janitorial services, Madam President, who are these vendors that are supplying janitorial and consultancy

services? How much money, Madam President, out of this \$8.6 million went towards janitorial services? How much went towards consultancy services? Who were the individuals or organizations or companies or firms involved in these services or the provision of the services? Madam President, I am not aware and I am speaking on a matter immediately after the Minister of Finance but I do not have a clue who are the vendors involved in provisioning these services. Is that a secret, Madam President? Why could the Minister not reveal that when he was speaking and leave the details for his Minister of Public Administration? At least he could have told us but we do not know.

Madam President, look, again rent/lease of office accommodation and storage. We are being asked to approve a Bill, moneys have already been spent and we do not know, Madam President, out of this \$8.6 million, how much was spent on rent and lease of office accommodation and storage? Who are the people renting these buildings and to whom? How much money, Madam President, was allocated to the owners of these properties that are being rented? Is it being rented by the State? Yes, it is been rented by the State because we are paying for it. So the State is occupying these buildings? Who are the owners of these buildings? Who are the persons benefitting from these rentals? Nobody tells us.

So, the Minister of Finance comes to the Parliament, presents this statement in less than the appropriated time allowed, sits down, Madam President, and I rise on your instructions to speak and I have to be asking questions that ought to be given to us by the Minister of Finance. So, Madam President, may I ask, through you, to the Minister of Finance: The persons who are benefitting from rental of accommodation and storage, are these people associated with the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago? Is this building owned by the Attorney General of

Trinidad and Tobago? How much money is being paid? If I am asking a question, Madam President, we would like to know how much money would have been paid, if I am right, to the Attorney General or his family as it relates to this rental of office accommodation.

These are issues that we ought to be clear about. I should not be speculating, Madam President, I am a taxpayer, I pay my taxes. It might not be much because I do not earn much in this country but the limited amount that I am able to earn, I pay my taxes. So if you are taking part of my taxes, Madam President, to pay rental arrangements for someone who might be in the Government, who owns a building and is renting that building to the Government, tell the Parliament. That is what we are here for. So I await the Minister of Finance clearing the air on this matter. Who are the owners of these properties that are being—and how much? So, Madam President, that is it.

Madam President, you know what was also amazing? I read in the newspaper where a contribution made by the Ministry of Public Administration and the Ministry of Public Administration is reported in that newspaper to be saying—I do not have a copy of it right now. It was in the *Newsday*, Madam President. I think it might have been in Saturday's *Newsday*. And we are reading, Madam President, that salaries that workers were supposed to enjoy, they were scrambling to pay. So in order to meet those salary commitments, they had to take moneys that were allocated to pay rental fees to the owners of these buildings in order to pay salaries and wages of workers, when we are told that salaries and wages are mandatory payments, it is not discretionary. Madam President, this is a very serious matter and I do not think any government should find itself in a situation where it is scrambling and it has to vire money from rental payments in

order to meet salary commitments and obligations to workers in any particular Department or Ministry of a government.

Madam President, let me invite you to join me in the area that deals with what is called—the particular areas that the Minister indicated he was able to save moneys. And I put “savings” in inverted commas. I do not see that as “savings”. I see the Government in a crisis of cash and they do not have money and instead of meeting their obligations that they are supposed to meet, they simply use that money to deal with other pressing matters like pensions, money towards the Judiciary and money towards the Personnel Department.

So, Madam President, join me as it relates to the Caribbean Development Bank. You are with me, Madam President? There is an allocation—

Madam President: Sen. Mark, are you asking me if I am following the debate?
[*Laughter*]

Sen. W. Mark: Yeah, Madam President, thank you very much. Madam President, if you go to this matter of contribution to the Caribbean Development Bank, we are being asked to take the Minister’s word. And what we have here is that the funding allocated for disbursement to the Caribbean Development Bank was not requested in fiscal 2021. Madam President, who did not request the disbursement? Was it the Caribbean Development Bank that did not request the disbursement? The Minister did not tell us so we do not know, Madam President, what is the situation. Is this a Chinese parlour? Is the Caribbean Development Bank a Chinese parlour or is this a serious institution? And I see the Caribbean Development Bank as a very serious institution.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, just to show you how I am listening intently, you have five more minutes.

Sen. W. Mark: Yeah, Madam President, I do not understand it. So, clearly and so on, something is wrong there. Madam President, may I go on to tell you that the moneys that they allocated towards UDeCOTT that was supposed to be paid, was not paid. Moneys that were allocated to eTeckK was not paid in terms of retiring their loans, as the case may be, they were refinanced, according to the Minister, and they were refinanced by the First Citizens Bank. If these loans were refinanced, Madam President, do we have an idea as to the terms and conditions of the refinancing? Was it at a higher interest rate? What are the terms and condition? What is the duration of the loan? The Minister is kicking the can down the road for somebody else to deal with.

Madam President, may I advise you that the Minister talked about debt management strategy. I want to inform the honourable Senate that Trinidad and Tobago under this—under the stewardship of this Government, Madam President, has now reached the unenviable position where the public debt just keeps ballooning. So, Madam President, when the Minister refinances loans, the debt is not paid, so the debt is not being reduced so we have to continue servicing loans, maybe at a higher rate of interest. We do not have the evidence, we do not have the information. But the evidence that we have so far and that we have estimated is that given the state of play as it relates our public debt, Madam President, by the end of 2022, we have estimated in the UNC that the public debt of this country would be some \$139 billion.

Madam President, you know what it was—Madam President, you know what—so yeah, we are estimated at that. Madam President, in 2010, each individual in this country, debt per capita—

Madam President: Sen. Mark—

Sen. W. Mark: Yes.

Madam President: I have to caution you about relevance and you have two more minutes.

Sen. W. Mark: Yeah, Madam President, I am talking about, for instance, as we refinance loans, our debt is what we have to deal with and I am saying that we are estimating the debt at 139 to \$140 billion.

Hon. Imbert: Madam President, point of—

Sen. W. Mark: And we are saying debt per capita—

Hon. Imbert: Point of order—

Madam President: Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark.

Hon. Imbert: 46(1), the Senator is ignoring you.

Madam President: Yes, Sen. Mark, you have one minute to wrap up.

Sen. W. Mark: As far as we are concerned, the Minister is again confessing to this country the economic mismanagement of the resources of this land, the recklessness of the policies of the Government, the inability to manage and plan properly for expenditure. And, Madam President, we are just going around in circles and this country is going nowhere fast under this administration. The Minister of Finance is a monumental failure as it relates to preparing our country for what is called growth, development, sustainability and transformation. All we have, Madam President, is a lot of “ole” talk from the Minister of Finance and no real action. It reminds me of NATO, no action, talk only. That is what the Minister of Finance represents in this country. Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity of making my contribution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Amrita Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Finance (Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2022.

Madam President, this Bill intends to account for fiscal—close the accounts for fiscal 2021, the year—the fiscal year that the pandemic had hit Trinidad and Tobago. Just as a reminder, in fiscal 2021, expenditure was budgeted at—initially budgeted at \$49.6 billion and was then supplemented by \$2.41 billion during the mid-year review. So, we are really here today as a matter of formality to recognize the finances that were already varied amongst four Heads of Expenditure, a total of \$575 million that was reallocated from the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the Personnel Department and the Judiciary.

Madam President, this exercise is entirely procedural in nature but it is also an assessment on how well finances were allocated or, want of a better word, reallocated in the midst of the unprecedented challenges that we faced due to the pandemic. So while this exercise may be procedural in nature, I see it as a very important point of reflection on how we managed our priorities during the crisis, to see how well the allocative and redistribution function of the Government was performed. So it is evident—upon review of the Bill and the supporting documents, it is evident that across every Head of Expenditure, moneys had to be transferred to payments to meet salaries, cost of living allowances, gratuities and occasionally to meet operating expenditure of several state enterprises.

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine, let me just caution you here.

Sen. A. Deonarine: “Um-hum”.

Madam President: The Bill which is before us deals with specific transfers. Okay? All right? There may be some other documentation that had been circulated which would be for the information of the Senators. Okay?

Sen. A. Deonarine: I am guided, Madam President, I was just mentioning that for the sake of setting context. So let me go quickly to—I just wanted to make the point that it was important that these reallocations took place because we had to put ourselves in a position where we had to sustain the livelihood of the population and keep a significant part of the labour force employed and at the same time securing tax revenues from income tax.

So, Madam President, the decrease in the allocation from the Ministry of Finance of approximate—of \$575 million was as a result of savings generated from unutilized allocations according to the Minister of Finance. In some specific instances, I would beg to differ in the sense that the savings generated from the GATE fund of \$80 million—what I understand from the Minister of Finance is that this fund is a rolling fund for which at the end of each financial year there is a balance and that balance is usually transferred over to the next fiscal year. In this instance, what ended up happening was that the balance was reallocated to another Head but I beg to question if this amount would be reimbursed into the GATE fund because I still see it as a withdrawal from the GATE fund that should be replenished. And when I looked at the draft estimates to see whether in fiscal 2022, it was reimbursed into the account, that was not so. So that is a question that I have for the Minister of Finance.

The other area that I would beg to differ, with respect to whether the unutilized amount was savings or not, is under—the amount of \$25 million under the Agricultural Development Bank that was unutilized. Now, it could have been

that this unutilized amount was as a result of a decrease in demand for the loan resources from farmers who sought credit facility with the Agricultural Development Bank. But if that was the case, I would have—and that amount had to be utilized, to be reallocated into another space, I would have preferred that it had been reallocated to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to support our farmers who very much well sustained us during the pandemic in terms of keeping us fed, in the sense that this fund could—this amount could have been made available to the farmers in the form of grants instead of paying rent.

Now, let me clarify. I am not saying that we should not have met our rental expenses but, Madam President, since we were in crisis, we should have been in a position to negotiate with our landlords and so on, to receive a moratorium. So we could have deferred that expenditure and reallocate whatever unutilized amount into more pressing areas. I think that—I honestly think that this would have been a better reallocation for the unutilized amount from the Agricultural Development Bank, especially in the spirit of supporting the economy's immediate priorities during the pandemic.

So, Madam President, just like we are seeing the pandemic as an opportunity to streamline public expenditure, to revise the programmes or take a second look at the programmes under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and escalate the work by the CPO on the public service job evaluation exercises, as we recover, we need to take into consideration this annual—this hefty annual rental cost that the Government is burdened with on an annual basis. We need to move towards accumulating more assets in the form of property to provide office accommodation for our offices.

11.30 a.m.

So, Madam President, I want to bring my attention to the job evaluation exercise. There was a reallocation to the CPO of an amount of \$5 million; that is to the Personnel Department, and what I understand is that extensive work has already been taking place with the Chief Personnel Officer and also in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance. And at this point I would like to take the opportunity to ask both—either the Minister of Finance or the Minister of Public Administration, where are we on this exercise? It has been ongoing for some time and I am seeking some sense of what the preliminary findings of these recommendations—findings, recommendations or conclusions of this exercise has been is because we have been incurring an Actual spend under this line of expenditure since 2012.

To date the Actual spend under this line Item is \$46 million. This is according to the Draft Estimates which records the Actual expenditure as each fiscal year proceeds itself. And if you take into consideration the allocation that we have of \$13 million for fiscal 2022, that is a total of \$59 million allocated on this job evaluation exercise. So, Madam President, my question is, “Where are we?”, because it seems as if—since 2012 we acknowledged that we needed to build a public service aimed at improving delivery and efficiency. We recognize that there is a sizeable contract workforce coexisting with significant vacancies for permanent positions on establishments. So all I am saying is that at this point we should have some tangible outcomes or deliverables forthcoming out of this exercise.

So as I move on, Madam President, I am keeping very much within the remits of the Bill. I want to zero in on the refinancing of the two loans, one by UDeCOTT for \$230 million and the eTecK, \$160 million, which according to the

Minister of Finance was an unspent allocation that became available to reallocate and meet expenditure, of course, under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the Personnel Department and the Judiciary. What this refinancing essentially did is delay current expenditure into a later date, so that it practically freed up that \$390 million to fulfil immediate priorities under the Heads that I mentioned. But, Madam President, what raised a red flag for me was when the Minister of Finance said that the alternative to refinancing this loan—these two loans would have been to use cash from the Central Bank overdraft facility which charges of course and interest rate at the repo rate which is 3.5 per cent.

So what this is telling me is that the overdraft was essentially getting too big and too expensive and when you look at the—not to delve into the details, there had to be a revision of the allocation to debt interest payment of 733 million which is in addition to the initial allocation of 1.15 billion to paying the overdraft facility, bring it at \$1.9 billion for fiscal 2021. So essentially, Madam President, this kind of shifting and maneuvering shows the extent to which the Minister of Finance had to go to, to manage cash flow in fiscal 2021. What is striking is that the alternative to refinancing apart from—was short-term lending from the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, this is an indication of how severe the cash flow problem was, how severe the cash flow problem we were in fiscal 2021 was and to even—and this is after we have consecutively withdrawn from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund every quarter since March 2020. From March 2020, to June 2021—

Madam President: So, Sen. Deonarine, I need to caution you a little bit. The Minister in his presentation would have said, yes—actually said about the debt management with respect to these two loans and he gave you all the alternative

solution, you are now going off on the alternative solution and going more into that and I am asking you, please, this debate is not as wide a debate as that—I am asking you, please, you have to confine yourself to the Bill. Okay?

Sen. A. Deonarine: Okay, Madam President, I am guided. So, Madam President, what I am saying is—just to wrap up, to bring everything into a nutshell without delving into the details is that the cash flow management was severely tight and very problematic such that it resulted in a situation where the alternative to refinancing—we had limited alternative to refinancing and because of this limited alternative to refinancing, Madam President, it meant that the refinancing need was high at that point in time. And therefore I beg to question—now I know the Minister of Finance did say that he was able to secure those two loans, refinance at an interest rate lower than 3.5 per cent, however, I would question as to what exactly that interest rate was. And, further, in mentioning the consideration that the Debt Management Unit—it takes with refinancing, I would advise that additional focus be placed on the expertise of the Debt Management Unit in assessing, refinancing risks when considering debt sustainability and to ensure that that is done according to internationally recognized standards and methodologies.

So, Madam President, I would be short today. And the last point I want to deal with is with respect to the 531 million supplementation that went to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. So based on the breakdown that the Minister of Finance gave us, 418 million of this 531 million went towards support of the social—the senior citizens grant and as we—and what I want to say is that, as we continue to embark on this whole public expenditure rationalization exercise which includes a comprehensive review, an ongoing review and comprehensive review of the programmes underneath the Ministry of Social

Development and Family Services, we need to be at this point—and I honestly think that we are already too late—at this point we need to be thinking about policy that addresses the high and increasing proportion of persons over the age of 65 years old. I mean, the Minister of Finance said within a short space of time because Senior Citizens Grant recipients went from 105,000 persons to 109,000 persons.

Madam President, the fact that our economy is characterized by an ageing population with some 109,000 persons receiving retirement benefit, that is 70 per cent of the population over 65 years, we really need to take a serious look at the age demographics of our population, coupled with the high incidence of non-communicable diseases and the potential widespread effects of COVID-19 on our labour force and our labour force participation rate. Madam President, all of these factors, when we look at them holistically can contribute negatively in generating a productive labour force and have an output—and reduce our output-generating capacity.

So in conclusion, Madam President, when I started my contribution I noted that this exercise to close the accounts for fiscal 2021 was an especially important one as it allows us to reflect on how well the crisis was managed. From my analysis it is evident that cash flow management proved to be a very difficult exercise despite steep increases in borrowing for budget support and withdrawals from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. The second conclusion I arrived at is that, as refinancing of loans continue to be an option for liquidity support for freeing up cash and to supplement cash flow management, it has to now become a significant part of the debt management strategy that abides by internationally recognized methodologies. And because of how significant of a cash flow management problem we had during this fiscal period, I too, like the International

Monetary Fund according to its conclusion from the Article IV Consultation in November 2021, would recommend that the Government publish a COVID-related spending report and also prepare for a contingency plan in the event that we are hit with crisis again or we have another triple shock or double shock. Because, Madam President, the reality is that we are still operating in a pandemic where new variants of the virus keep emerging. And the final conclusion, Madam President, is that whilst we continue on our public expenditure rationalization exercise in many forms, withdrawing support to the vulnerable when it is done should be done very carefully to ensure that we do not undermine the potential for economic recovery. I thank you, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Minister of Public Administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Thank you, Madam President, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Madam President, once again Sen. Mark engaged in some reckless statements to the House this morning and in circumstances where our sittings can and often are viewed by audiences across the world, with tensions rising in Eastern Europe, Madam President, as we speak, we can only hope that Sen. Mark's decision to end his contribution with a loud insult to NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, will get no further than the floor of the Senate. This is just another example of the reckless irresponsibility of the UNC Bench.

Madam President, going straight into my contribution on this morning's Bill, the Personnel Department is responsible for determining and advising on terms and conditions of employment for employees in the public service estimated to be

around 90,000 workers. The Department determines through consultation and negotiations with appropriate recognized majority unions and associations, the terms and conditions of service of persons in the public service. It also provides secretariat services and advice to the Salaries Review Commission in respect of public officers falling under its purview and the Human Resource Advisory Committee to treat with organizations in the state sector. The Department is also required to advise on a wide range of HR issues in the public service, including matters related to industrial relations.

Currently the Department is engaged in two job evaluation exercises: one, for officeholders within the purview of the Salaries Review Commission; and two, with respect to officers within the civil service, Tobago House of Assembly and the statutory authorities. The adjustments for which we are here seeking approval are in respect of the Personnel Department relate to transfers that became necessary as a result of adjustments made during the budgetary process that reduce sums requested by the Department under various Heads. One of the Heads of Expenditure which was underfunded was Personnel Expenditure, Salaries and Wages, and Goods and Services under which contract officers are paid. To ensure the timely payment of salaries and wages to public officers—not “scrambling” as Sen. Mark would have indicated—the sums were transferred with the relevant approval for other allocations, namely the allocations for rent of property and Other Contracted Services.

As a result of this, the CPO had discussions with the Minister of Finance to fill the various gaps in the allocations to cover the underfunded areas. Arising out of those discussions, Madam President, a warrant was issued by the Minister of Finance out of Treasury deposits to settle certain expenses, and I will give some

detail on what those expenses relate to. One, in respect of rental or lease of property, the transfer amounted to \$2,192,433. This was to cover the shortfall of rent arising from the original shortfall in the allocation which was only 600,000 but also to cover the transfers made from the rental allocation to cover salaries and wages. The rental being paid by the Personnel Department is in respect of four buildings, one to house the operation of the Personnel Department and three to house records, furniture and fixtures pending the conduct of a board of surveys exercise and the digitalization of these records.

Madam President, just in response to one of the things that Sen. Mark would have said, why did the Minister of Finance not provide all the details as to who we were paying rent to and so on, I will remind this honourable House that this Bill is seeking to deal with variations. We would have provided this House ad nauseam with information on the rentals; it is especially in respect of rentals by the CPO, provided all details over the course of the last couple of years and nothing has changed in respect to the landlords or the location since that time. The reason why the Minister of Finance did not go into that is that none of that has changed. The rents have remained the same since last we presented to the House on the rents. The landlords would have remained the same and the only thing that we are seeking now is to get approval for the transfer of funds to cover rent that had been agreed and settled a long time ago and was due before the end of the last fiscal.

Fees is the second item in respect of which an adjustment was made; fees in the amount of \$67,800 and this was for the renewal of software support services. The third Item in respect of which an adjustment was made was under the Head Other Contracted Services in the amount of \$1,340,538. The bulk of this was to settle an invoice to KR Services for the review of the group health plan for

monthly and daily rated employees which commenced on June the 1st, 2021, and was scheduled to span a period of six months. So that exercise is almost completed. The next item of adjustment, Madam President, was for the sum of \$85,988 payable to MTS for services rendered during the year 2021. All of these expenses that I would have mentioned previously fall under Recurrent Expenditures.

In respect of the PSIP, Madam President, the one adjustment under that Head was for in respect of a job evaluation exercise being conducted under the CPO's Department in conjunction with the CPO's—as part of the CPO's operations. I am unable to address Sen. Deonarine's claim about the total expenditure of \$44 million in respect of a job evaluation exercise, but what I can say to Sen. Deonarine is that this particular contract in this particular job evaluation exercise was approved shortly before I joined the Government in 2016 or 2017. The activity actually commenced just about a year and a half ago. The service provider is PricewaterhouseCoopers. They have been diligently conducting the services that they are required to conduct under this exercise. The exercise is progressing quite nicely. There have recently been some hiccups mainly because of the involvement of the union and the fact that there has been some push back. We are trying to make up for the slight slippage in time to ensure that it keeps more or less on track. So we expect to complete that exercise during the course of 2022.

So, Madam President, that is the sum total of the variations that arise under the CPO's Head and they total, \$8,640,671. They did not arise from any variation of activity or any unexpected activity. It really had to do with seeking the Minister of Finance's—engaging with the Minister of Finance to ensure that expenses that were incurred during the year that were anticipated to be incurred during the year

and were actually incurred, we could have settled the sums due, owing in respect of that. I would say, Madam President, that under the leadership of the current CPO, the Personnel Department is providing good support to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and performing well and I seek your support in the approval of these variations. I thank you, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. John.

Sen. Jearlean John: Madam President, I thank you so much for this opportunity to join this debate for the Items presented by the hon. Minister of Finance as variations which I too beg to disagree. Well, I mean they are variations but these are Items which properly should have been with the initial budget presented in October of last year and I think the previous contributor, the Minister of Public Administration, would have admitted to that, that these were Items which were recurrent in many instances. I think the Minister owes the Senate an explanation as to why these very predictable expenses were not budgeted for in the—well, the last debate, budget debate and in their fiscal allocations or when they were doing their projection because there is nothing unexpected in these—in the Items presented before us which total \$574,889,840. It is really just moving the money around and it is not savings.

These are not savings. This is more or less cut and paste and wherever you cut, you paste it, but I mean, the paste is very targeted pasting. And the Minister of Public Administration, hon. Madam President, chided Sen. Mark for the way he ended his contribution and summed up that it is the usual style of the UNC to be reckless, but, Madam President, I do not know what you call the cutting of GATE. If that is not reckless behaviour on the part of the Government—when you could

cut being able to afford going to school, the access, the only opportunity, an avenue out of poverty is education, and when a Government could recklessly cut that or say they have some kind of \$80 million in a fund, how could you have budgeted—your budget could have fallen so far short, your estimates, that you can have \$80million remaining in a fund, Madam President? I think that requires explanation. It is not a matter of just a revolving fund, the fund goes up and it comes down, but based on your own estimate I do not expect that a revolving fund would have \$80million, which is very significant, lying there just to be scooped out to be further allocated or reallocated for the payment of rents amongst other things.

So, Madam President, GATE, as I said—I mean, it is the only way some of our young people would have access to opportunities to education and opportunities or even older folks and the Government would have found it necessary in 2017 when they realigned or restated their policy that they more or less have cut out the older folks from being able to access this facility. Madam President, you will recall that our first Prime Minister would have famously said that, “The future of the children resides in the book bags”, but I do not know if it is that this current PNM administration are not as concerned with the future of the children because to have just reallocated this \$80,000, I think is very troubling because, Madam President, in 2015 when this Government came into office you had 59,000 students accessing GATE—59,605, and you went—they cut it progressively each year from in July of 2017, 29,492 students, and in 2020 was 28,534, and in 2021, 21,201 students, and this, Madam President, the source is the *Social Sector Investment Programme* reports, 2022 to 2016, speaking about the amount of students. And what I have would have heard is that there are times when students are asked as a bridge to find loan or other source of bridging to access the

tuition at our University of the West Indies and thereafter when they come, or the means test is applied to them, they are told that, “Well, you do not need GATE because you have been able to find the money”, and I find that to be very cruel and unusual punishment, Madam President. Because to move this facility, this much needed facility from 2015, or the end of 2015 to now, to less than half—mean the ability—

Hon. Imbert: Madam President—

Sen. J. John:—of less than half the number of students to access it—

Hon. Imbert:—point of order—

Sen. J. John:—you know, its—

Hon. Imbert:—2015—

Madam President: Sen. John—

Hon. Imbert:—2015 is not under discussion; fiscal 2021, not 2015.

Madam President: I will allow Sen. John some leeway because I understand that she is making—giving just some ideas of figures but, Sen. John, I would just ask you to remember the previous rulings that were made.

Sen. J. John: Thank you. Thank you, Madam President. Thank you for the guidance and thank you for just allowing me.

So this GATE would have been cut by more than 50 per cent, Madam President, and that is the context that I was making but, you see, the Government does not like the truth so they do not like context. They want to come and tell us, “Well, all right, we have a fund, it is 80 million. We have scooped it out to pay the rent of our colleagues”, and that is okay. That is not reckless, that is good. That is fine. So the problem the hon. Ministers have is not the people in NATO, it is really the man on the street outside.

12.00 noon

Madam President, with respect to the other matter I want to talk about briefly, it is the allocation, the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company under the Head, I think, 04/011/26 where, again, the Minister, well I mean, he said it was sayings but is listed here as \$50 million, the funding disbursed to the TTMF company for fiscal 2021 was less than the amount allocated for the same period. So again, this was reallocated maybe there in the Consolidated Fund and reallocated to wherever. But this probably goes counter even to the Government's own policy where in a, I think, a national address on the 29th of December 20—and I am quoting, 2015 again, Madam President, to put context, that there was a policy where the Prime Minister said:

We intend to ramp up housing construction as a major driver of the economy.

And nobody could disagree with that because housing creates jobs and brings economic activity into any economy, Madam President. But what has happened here is that in taking out or not allowing the TTMF to use, to have use of this \$50 million, Madam President, it means that the 170,000 applicants or so who are existing on the Housing Development Corporation what they called the House Application Fulfilment System (HAFS), it means, Madam President, that this 50 million that could have been released to TTMF and would have been of great benefit to the persons listed on this database because, Madam President, on this particular database, people earning from zero to 2,500 a month, it numbers about 32,599 or 19 per cent of the database. And persons earning 2,500 to 6,000 numbers about—

Hon. Imbert: Madam President, point of order. This is not an HDC debate, 46(1).

Madam President: So, Sen. John—

Sen. J. John: Yes, Madam.

Madam President:—we cannot—let me advise a little bit. You are dealing with the amount reallocated from the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company and you are trying now, I think what you are saying is that, this money could have gone elsewhere and now you are elaborating on the elsewhere. And what I am saying to you is, we cannot be doing that because then we are straying from the Bill because now we are introducing other elements to the debate which are not relevant to it. Because just about everybody here in life can come and say, well this should have gone to this and this is needed in this particular sector. So could we please tightly manage our contributions. Okay?

Sen. J. John: Yes, Madam President. And I am trying but, sorry. I am not arguing with you at all, Madam President. The \$50 million which was reallocated from the TTMF or taken away from the TTMF could have been better applied with this 2 per cent loans, Madam President, for this 170,000 people. That is all I am saying. And really, I am sure that there are many demands for scarce resources. But one, we as a Senate must question where this allocation goes. Not question you, Madam President, but certainly question the Minister's decision where he reallocated these funds because basically these funds really were needed right there at the TTMF. I think that is the point I am trying to make. These funds ought not to have been reallocated. And I am sure the Minister will have a reason why he saw it fit to not expand the TTMF's ability to meet the needs of people over 100,000 persons and maybe more who would have the need for that \$50 million.

And, Madam President, my final point has to do with the refinancing of the loan, the \$230 million loan with—from UDeCOTT. Madam President, the Minister did

indicate to the Senate that the refinancing of the eTecK loan, the \$160 million would have been with the same financing agency. But I do not think he quite said whether the \$230 million was refinanced by FCB. And if the Minister would be so kind through you, Madam President, to just advise whether it is under the same terms and conditions. And I think Sen. Deonarine would have mentioned that. Or what is the cost, I mean except the cost of the extension of time because the longer it takes to settle this loan, the more it will cost the country.

But I also will like to just flag for the hon. Minister that UDeCOTT, he has had to take the decision to refinance this loan and the agency for which this loan is ascribed, UDeCOTT, they, in their own management, there are issues in the public domain and I know he will say that is not, what I am going to say is not before us. But certainly there are other contractual arrangements, Madam President, that may be coming to this House in the midterm review where they will have to pay for an extension of time and the determination of projects—

Hon. Imbert: Madam President, point of order. The Senator's statements have nothing to do with this Item.

Madam President: Well, may I just say that, I am following what Sen. John has been saying. She is linking it and I am hoping that Sen. John does not dwell too much on what she is saying. But she is making the point and in my view it is relevant.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: I thank you very much, Madam President. Thank you very much. And, Madam President, I am very guided because I have a lot information on what I am alluding to and I am sure the Minister also is aware. But I am just cautioning that, as much as he is deferring at this time an existing loan for 230, one has to

look ahead that we do not accrue—

Hon. Imbert: Madam President, point of order. This is a 2021 situation not a 2022 situation. If I did not make that clearly before, I am making it now. We are talking about the closing of the accounts for fiscal 2021 which ended on September 30, 2021. So, events after that are not relevant, in my respectful view, 46(1).

Madam President: Sen. John, if I would invite you to just finish off your point and move onto other points, if you so have.

Sen. J. John: Yes, Madam President. As a matter of fact, I am just about wrapping up because I realize the Minister is very jumpy. So, Madam President, with those few words, I thank you so much for the privilege.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Seepersad.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Any conversations that Members would like to have, you are free to have it outside the Chamber. Sen. Lyder, your voice is carrying. Okay? I will ask you please to desist. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: And, Minister, yours is now. Yeah.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Please. Members, can I ask, if you really want to have these conversations, there are some little conversations you have across the floor, no problem. But when I am hearing everything that you are saying, it means it is a problem. Okay? Sen. Seepersad.

Sen. Charrise Seepersad: Madam President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Bill Finance (Variation of Appropriation) (Financial

Year 2012), Bill 2022.

The Bill seeks to authorize the Government to decrease the financial allocation to the Ministry of Finance by \$574.89 million and reallocate the amount as follows: One, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, \$531.053 million, 92 per cent of the allocation; the Judiciary, \$35.196 million, 6 per cent of the allocation; and three, the Personnel Department, \$8.64 million, 2 per cent of the allocation.

These are areas where there were insufficient or no allocation was provided in the budget. The funding identified for the reallocation in this Bill bears heavily on the citizens who are finding great difficulty in weathering the storm that continues to rage in the face of this COVID pandemic. The COVID statistics released daily by the Ministry of Health is staggering with no end in sight. Some international Governments have decided to treat the situation as an epidemic such as the flu with the expectation that citizens will have to live with the virus long term. However, these countries have high, over 70 per cent vaccinated populations.

The decrease of \$574.89 million in the Ministry of Finance's allocations is derived from:

1. The Caribbean Development Bank contribution \$15 million not requested.

Madam President, through you to the Minister of Finance, can he advise if the CDB would require the \$15 million contribution at a later date?

2. Deduction in the request for loan funds from the Agricultural Development Bank, \$25 million and the TTMF, \$50 million.
3. Reduction in GATE requests for GATE funding, \$80 million.
4. Refinancing of \$160 million, eTecK and \$230 million UDeCOTT loans.

Madam President, can the Minister of Finance advise if there were additional costs in refinancing these loan and what were the costs?

5. Community Improvement Services Limited, \$14.9 million, a reduction in operating expenses.

Madam President, when I analyse the details, I find the major cost items comprise, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services \$5.1—\$5 million, sorry, \$531.053 million.

1. Senior citizens pensions, \$418.315 million. The number of pensioners increased by approximately 10,000 persons in the last three years to approximately 109,000 persons.

Madam President, the senior citizens total pensions paid in 2021 was \$4.237 billion. This is an unfunded liability for an ageing population. Is the Minister of Finance reviewing funding operations—options, sorry, for this increasing liability?

2. Disability grants, \$13.109 million, 22,856 persons received grants in 2021.
3. Public Assistance Grants, \$99.629 million, 18,430 persons received grants in 2021.

Madam President, approximately 150,000 persons in 2012 are now accessing social financial assistance.

Judiciary, \$35.196 billion.

1. Security services, \$22.622 million.
2. Telephone and Internet costs, \$6 million; rental and lease cost for buildings and storage, \$6.5million.

The Chief Personnel Officer's Department, \$8.640 million.

1. Rental, lease, cost, \$2.192 million.

The original allocation was used to pay salaries and wages of public servants.

2. Software licence fees, \$67,800;
3. Other Contracted Service, \$1.341 million;
4. Janitorial Services, \$86,000; and
5. Job evaluation exercise for the civil service, \$4.953 million.

Madam President, the hon. Minister of Finance and the country are faced with a very dynamic situation. With such a moving target it is virtually impossible to plan adequately and achieve success. The task is even more difficult as economic factors continue to deteriorate. Stagnant economic activity in many sectors, loss of jobs and livelihoods and declining inflows of revenue challenge the immediate economic needs of the population. The global economic difficulties along with increasing cost of production and distribution will only exacerbate an already grim position and the increasing rate of inflation together with rising prices for basic supplies add to the burden. As I said before, the world COVID-19 pandemic is at the heart of the matter. The obligation to save lives and livelihoods is partly responsible for the need for supplemental funding identified in the Bill. Can I go on?

According to the US Energy Information Administration, January 14, 2022 natural gas prices are expect to decline in 2022 and 2023.

Madam President: So, Sen. Seepersad, I am now rising to ask you—to remind you that this not a general debate on the state of the economy. This is a debate that is very specific and limited in scope. So I will ask you to, yes, try and come back to the matter at hand.

Sen. C. Seepersad: Madam President, I am guided. Thank you. As I said, this will

negatively impact the availability of funds in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, I just want to raise another point on the Food Support Programme, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Madam President, I raise this issue because the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' allocation in the 2022 budget is \$5.433 billion or 10 per cent of the national budget. Further, 92 per cent or 5.310—\$5.31.053 million of the reallocated funds identified in this Bill is for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

An evaluation by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services into its Food Support Programme has revealed numerous irregularities and breaches including: favouritism in the application process, no assessment of beneficiaries, food cards allocated to ineligible persons instead of the poor and needy. While the Ministry has created an investigation and compliance unit, according to the article “Millions to help the needy feared gone into wrong hands” in the *Trinidad Guardian* dated January 09, 2022,

“...millions of...dollars could have gone into...hands...”
—of people cheating the system. It is imperative the investigation be executed swiftly and all irregularities, breaches and corrupt practices be terminated. The funds allocated for social services must go to the citizens most in need.

In conclusion, Madam President, across many communities in which sizable portions of the populace have stable jobs such activity fed into these local economies and kept life going through the multiplier effect. However, the restrictions in place to manage the rate of infections and deaths have forced many businesses to close their doors and lay off or furlough employees.

Madam President, in the coming months of this fiscal year the Ministry of

Finance will undoubtedly return to seek further adjustments to the sums allocated to assist the needy and other subsets of the population. The Omicron wave is now in communities and is expected to cause havoc with the health of many citizens for an indeterminable period. The recommendation to vaccinate and operate is still in the best interest of everyone. While not foolproof, the science strongly encourages everyone to get vaccinated. The probability is quite high that the vaccine can save lives, so I encourage everyone to get fully vaccinated. Thank you, Madam President.

Madam President: Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox): Thank you, Madam President, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on behalf of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has consistently without wavering supported hundreds of thousands of citizens in our beloved Republic who find themselves, many through no fault of their own, some because of choices they made and others because of factors over which they had no control, were unable to adequately provide for themselves and for their families.

On this side we have made this commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and we have held to this position while in Government over the past 66 years starting with our founding father Dr. Eric Williams and continuing today with our current Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley.

So, Madam President, today we again are holding fast, deepening and keeping our promise to take care of our vulnerable and poor. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the already challenging circumstances many persons face. Madam President, governments throughout the world

responded to their citizens in different ways but the common thread running through the different lands was the need to provide a cushion for those who were most affected. And we are proud of our efforts to reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic on the less fortunate, the vulnerable and those already on the State's welfare system.

The Ministry received the additional sum of \$40 million specifically for COVID-19 related expenditure for fiscal 2021. And these funds were needed to process additional income support grants for phase two of the COVID-19 relief programme. A total of \$17.2 million was expended for both phases one and two in fiscal 2021 with \$14.2 million paid to over 50,000 applicants for income support grant for phase one and \$3 million paid to some 1,200 persons for phase two income support grant. The Ministry can justify the needs for the funds that were paid under this allocation which supported thousands of families.

Notwithstanding the challenges of the times, I think the people of Trinidad and Tobago can rest assured that this Government provided resources and took decisions in the national interest. Not our interests, Madam President, but on behalf of all the people of Trinidad and Tobago and this we will continue to pursue even to this very minute.

I want to respond to Sen. Mark question re: forecasted and projected numbers related to senior citizens pension. The Ministry requested \$4.5 billion in anticipation of an 8,000 increase in senior citizens who may apply for pension. And this is based on the average of 13 per cent of the population over 65 years of age. So the actual amount of new pensioners added was 7,935. The Ministry was allocated \$3.8 billion and this, of course, resulted in an estimated shortfall of \$732 million. The actual expenditure spent was \$4.184 billion making the shortfall of

our senior citizens pension \$418,315,156. And this was, of course, provided by the allocation of \$531,530,225 of the sums allocated via the appropriation Bill. The Ministry engaged in an exercise in August and September to interrogate the data with both the EBC and Registrar General and we removed 2,876 pensioners who were deemed deceased based on the Registrar General and the EBC report.

Additional funding was required to meet the needs of the vulnerable households through our three major grants, our core grants namely, public assistance, senior citizens pension and Disability Assistance Grant. So the supplemental funding which amounted to \$548,533,578 was indeed needed. We expended \$531,530,225. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services applauded the additional funding that was allocated and this was to address a shortfall for the months of August and September 2021. It is in this context that we took care of our citizens who needed our help. Through this funding we were able to feed more persons, shelter more persons and clothe more persons. With this additional funding, Madam President, we ensured that our core grants, the senior citizens pension, the public assistance and disability for adults and children were paid on time, all the time without disruption, thus contributing to the stability of thousands of lives throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, I am sure it has not been lost on the national community that the Ministry received by far the largest allocation under this supplemental funding, in fact, a full 92 per cent of this total allocation. And you will agree that the Government had countless demands to which these funds could easily have been diverted but chose instead to secure our commitment to the vulnerable within our midst. And for this we are grateful.

The funds we received were applied in the following ways. Senior citizens

pensions, 109,132 clients benefited; \$418,315,156 was expended for the months of August and September; public assistance, 18,851 clients benefited at a cost of \$13,108,970; disability assistance, 22,856 clients benefited at a cost of 99,629,99 persons—dollars. Madam President, altogether 150,839 households have been and continue to be supported financially by the Government through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services utilizing these core grants.

In fact, Trinidad and Tobago has the second highest total expenditure on social protection excluding health in the English-speaking Caribbean according to the *World Social Protection Report 2020—2022* published by the International Labour Organization, Geneva 2021. And this report demonstrates that Trinidad and Tobago non-contributory pension of \$3,500 administered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is one of the highest in the world.

What this means for us is that all of our citizens over 65 years can expect to receive an income once they retire and meet specific income and residential criteria. The funds allocated to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services were critical because they ensured the maintenance of a social safety net to protect vulnerable citizens. In other words, Madam President, it is the Government's responsibility to take care of those who are having difficulty in the face of economic and social pressures and this Government will not turn its back on its citizens. We have done it and we will continue to do so. This Government puts people first.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Madam President, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, indeed the Government of Trinidad and Tobago remain committed to ensuring that no citizen is left behind. And we understand fully that it

takes cash to care and the supplemental funding received by the Ministry continues to reach those for whom it is intended, the vulnerable amongst us. We are aware that many families are enduring significant challenges at this present time with regard to the COVID-19. And in this regard our national family service has also extended its outreach services to families and is assisting with additional counselling, advice, referrals, advocacy and training to those who may it need most. So when we are hearing that people are saying that we are not doing anything, it is very painful because we know that we are doing good by our people. We know that thousands upon thousands and they know who they are have been benefited and continue to benefit from many of our initiatives.

In the last fiscal year 2021, Madam President, the Ministry spent approximately \$5 billion on grants for the vulnerable and needy in our society. Madam President, I give this House the assurance that the Ministry remains committed to ensuring that every dollar received by the Ministry is spent to make the lives of our citizens healthier, happier and more abundant.

12.30 p.m.

To ensure the highest level of probity in our operations, Madam President, the Ministry has embarked on the digitization of our processes, our records and streamlining of our service delivery to more accurately target and serve the vulnerable amongst us. Moreover we continue to place focus on the removal of wastage, duplication and mismanagement within the Ministry's operations, and to find instead more efficient and cost-effective ways of providing our grants and services to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, thereby freeing millions of public funds for other beneficial programmes and projects that served the national interest. And we have pledged to continuously monitor and review our operations

whilst educating and sensitizing the citizens and transitioning our clients through the welfare system to more independent and prosperous lifestyles of which we can all be proud. So there is no talk about stopping the grants. All we are talking about is reviewing to ensure greater efficiency, and it is for this reason I am in full support, Madam President, of reviewing any programme to weed out any untoward activity so that the greatest number of our citizens can benefit all the time.

Madam President, while reviewing we have found that there are still dead persons on our system. There has been some human error with regard to inputting of information and so on. There is a report of ghost clients on the system. We have found that there have been some dead persons' cheques being cashed and therefore I do not think anyone would want us to just leave this as it is. There must be a review. There must be an investigation, and this is what is taking place. And I want to repeat, at no point did the Ministry or the Government ever speak about stopping any grants, so there are some persons going down that road, that is not the case. We shall remain steadfast in our promise to our people to support those who need us regardless of who they are and which side of the political divide they stand.

The additional funds that we have received were applied to persons in need of our help. Those who had no or reduced income due to the COVID-19 pandemic: Our senior citizens, those in need of public assistance, and adults and children with disabilities. At the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services this is our mandate. We see this as our sacred duty. I thank the executive and the staff of the Ministry who every day diligently go out in front to help, empower and transform the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And I encourage them to maintain their commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago as we continue to enhance our service to the nation. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Damian Lyder: Thank you, Madam President. And, Madam President, I appreciate the opportunity although coming very late in the batting innings and seeing how narrow this debate has been kept, and not wanting to be repetitious or irrelevant in my contribution, I still want to make a small contribution here today, and I thank you very much for this opportunity to come and debate the Bill which asked the Parliament to approve the Variation of Appropriation for fiscal year 2021 which would see us agree transfers to the tune of no less than \$574,889,840.

Madam President, this expense is to facilitate what I would consider to be the under-budgeting in three main Heads of Expenditure: Namely, the Judiciary at 35 million for Telephone, Security and Rental of Office Accommodation; for the Personnel Department in an amount of just over \$8.6 million for Rental of Office Accommodation and Renewal of Software Licences, as well as Janitorial and Consultancy Service. And, Madam President, under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services a whopping \$531 or more million for Senior Citizens Pensions and Social Assistance Disability Grants. And, Madam President, when I first saw this list of expenses, I first thought that this would have been for COVID support. Because I know the Government typically uses the excuse of COVID when they are attempting to add—to take moneys out of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and to reallocate money. I thought it might have been COVID. I would have thought that the Ministry of Finance would have been justifying something here today which was COVID related expenses. However, Madam President, on listening to the hon. Minister of Finance and on closer examination I realize that this is the simple case of under-budgeting or even under-stating the Recurrent Expenditure required for a number of categories, and namely two

categories that in my humble opinion cannot reasonably change so drastically: This being the Senior Citizens Pensions and the Disability Grant.

The hon. Minister of Finance having recently come in October in 2021, came to the Senate to present the financial Appropriation Bill, and now coming here a mere three months later to ask for us to approve this \$575 million to be transferred from the prior year, this to me raises some flags. It begs the question, it is either the Government has been under-budgeting or there has been bad spend with these allocations. You see, I cannot see, Madam President, how a serious Government could misallocate over \$500 million, because the number of pensioners could not have miraculously increased overnight? A substantial amount of this transfer is to cover these pensions. The Minister stated that the Ministry of Finance uses—in his contribution he stated that the Ministry of Finance uses the best estimates and info from the previous years of expenditure. So, “how they fall” so short, Madam President? How did they fall this short, over \$530 million in social development? How could that be? I heard Sen. Mark go at length at it, I will not repeat, but I too would like to know what information is being used? What measure from history is being used? What data is being correlated to understand that this year there will be X amount more pensioners? Because I want to know this, because I want to know if they have taken into account an increase in pensioners this year? If there is another 50,000 pensioners that have now become due for pensions, and if we are going to come here asking for another 50—\$200 million for this financial year, when we come back to the Senate next year. So what data is being used? How are they measuring this?

You know I am puzzled by this, Madam President. So the question is, does this also mean that the deficit was also underestimated? Because when I look at

some of the line Items for transfer as the Minister had presented to us to support this \$575 million, they cannot be deemed to be savings, Madam President. I agree with Sen. Mark, they cannot be deemed to be savings but really deferrals of payment of expenses that have already been accrued, Madam President. So, in an effort to bring light to issues that arise in this Bill it is important to understand some key factors, Madam President. So we are transferring money from an existing seven Heads now to three new Heads of Expenditure, so the question I ask myself is: where is the money coming from? Well, the Minister indicated that in the presentation. Why the sum of money is being taken from these Heads? Well, I think after listening to all persons presenting from the Government today, I am still with a question mark over my head about the reason why. We saw some clarity, but 575 million, I still cannot see it. But hopefully in the Minister's wrap up he will bog down into the details and let us know exactly why the sum of money is being taken now.

And that, Madam President, given that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago inevitably contribute to the Government's spending it will also be important to understand the implications of moving these funds, as we are asked to do here today. Well, they have already moved it, so I want to know what the implications are. We cannot simply come and say that this is a narrow debate without understanding what are the implications caused when you move the money from one to another—

Madam President: Sen. Lyder, I just want to caution you that I am the person. I have been trying to get Members to remember what is before, and I have used the words that this is a narrow debate. So I certainly hope that you are not making a reference to what I have said—okay?—in my rulings.

Sen. D. Lyder: Absolutely not, Madam President. I would never make a reference of what you have stated. I am actually referencing what the hon. Minister of Finance stated in his final sentence when he was wrapping up his presentation. He indicated, the hon. Minister of Finance indicated that he did not take his full time, he is keeping within the matters of the Bill here, and he clearly stated that it was a narrow debate. So I am referring to the hon. Minister of Finance when I say that, Madam President.

And so, as in any business or government institution we cannot look at financial matters in silos. As a businessman when I budget for my companies, should it be necessary to change allocations, I must always understand several things: What am I trying to achieve by moving funds from one place to another? How much am I going to take from areas of my company budgeted to support either a new or an existing initiative? And what are the implications or effects of the area I am taking these funds from? Madam President, I heard the Minister of Finance, I repeat it again, I heard the Minister of Finance in his opening statement, and I was intending to clarify it to you, Madam President, and you were ahead of me, so, thank you for your guidance. But, you know, I heard the Minister of Finance conclude that this was a narrow debate, and that he was keeping his contribution narrow. But one cannot apply tunnel vision and consider only the money taken without considering the effects of moving these moneys. Madam President, as such—and I am being asked today, I am being asked today to lend my vote to approve funds moving from one Head to another Head in the tune of \$575 million. That is no paltry sum, Madam President. That is a significant amount of money that I am being asked here today to vote. So I must take into account when I move this \$575 million that is not savings, I must understand what would be the

implications, and I think the Senate must understand what will be the implications of moving these funds.

As such, I would now like to take this opportunity, Madam President, to circumscribe myself to a few Heads of Expenditure in this Bill that this money is being taken from, and the potential impact that moving these moneys will have on the Government's ability to deliver on the promises and the mandates made to specific industry stakeholders, as well as the impact it will inevitably inflict on the tax-paying citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. You know, it was interesting, Madam President, I was listening to Sen. Deonarine, and I have to agree with Sen. Deonarine when she had indicated that the \$25 million that is now being transferred from the ADB, from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries should have been transferred internally in this Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to deal with the major issues such as praedial larceny and diversification of the agriculture industry. I agree with her. And in fact, even the Minister of Finance is on record here in the Senate stating that one can within Ministries, one can move money or transfer money from one area within a Ministry to another without having to seek the approval of the Parliament. And that simply the Permanent Secretary could have moved money from one place to another without us coming to the Parliament to approve that. So I have to agree with Sen. Deonarine on that point.

When we see every year the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries having their budgets cut, I would have thought that you the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries who has not been in the Chamber here for most of this debate, Madam President, and I could only assume that he may be very depressed and upset to hear about this \$25 million being moved from his Ministry.

I can only assume. I am just assuming. I hope he is not depressed about it.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Order, point of order, 46(4).

Sen. D. Lyder: Just an assumption, Madam President.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: No. Point of order, 46(4).

Madam President: Sen. Lyder, please just move on.

Sen. D. Lyder: Yes, thank you, Madam.

Madam President: Yes.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you very much, Madam President. So, if you would allow me, Madam President, just a moment of a preamble now to sort of set the context that would kind of assist me to show the relevance of what I am about to say here. I heard the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in his contribution state that the \$25 million was a savings. He said it was a savings because the ADB had no requirement for this allocation. He even went on, Madam President, to make some assumptions. He assumed that, and he put it on *Hansard* that maybe the COVID-19 had something to do with it. He said that also well, maybe there was an improved process in the ADB, seeing that for years the ADB has had to be subsidized, so maybe the processes have been improved in ADB, lending to the possibility that there was no need for a subsidy of the \$25 million this year.

Those are the two assumptions he made, and I will address them directly, Madam President, because it cannot be rational to assume that because of the COVID-19 pandemic there was no requirement. In fact, because of the COVID-19 pandemic there was every much the requirement of farmers to want access to \$25 million. We have seen what is happening now with forex issues and supply chain issues in importing food items into this country, and as a result of that there is a higher demand now for locally produced products in this country. There is a higher

demand. So if there is going to be a higher demand—and I am addressing the Minister directly on his assumption.

Madam President: So, Sen. Lyder—

Sen. D. Lyder: Yes.

Madam President:—at this stage I have to caution you. You are now not being relevant to the matter at hand, and I will ask you to desist and to move on to another point please.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Madam President. Okay, just for your guidance, Madam President, I just was responding to the Minister, with your guidance.

Madam President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. D. Lyder: Yes.

Madam President: I thank you. Thank you for giving me guidance, but I am paying very close attention to what each speaker has been saying. Thank you very much.

Sen. D. Lyder: Madam President, I am asking you for your guidance. Not I am giving you guidance, respectfully. I am asking you for your guidance. The Minister stated something in his debate and I am responding to what he said.

Madam President: And Sen. Lyder, I gave you an opportunity, in fact I gave you some leeway and I am asking you now, having given you that leeway to please move on to another point.

Sen. D. Lyder: Okay. Thank you, Madam President. And, Madam President, so in the response to—so coming back to the statement that there was no requirement by the ADB for this \$25 million, Madam President, I found this very curious. And in trying to agree with the Minister and vote in favour of moving this \$25 million, I took the liberty to look at the history of this allocation to the ADB and the fact

that—because I found it curious that they would not require this money. When we look at the term of the People's Partnership Government under the UNC, over \$256 million was disbursed to the ADB then at that time. And now I come to the current administration and I look at this 25 million that comes on the budget and reoccurs every year, and I see that only in 2016 and in 2018 was this \$25 million actually allocated to the ADB. And despite an allocation every year of 25 million, and in this case in 2021, coming now to this particular matter which we are now debating here today, there was an estimate of 50 million, not 25. The original amount was 50 million. And then this was revised down to \$25 million, Madam President. And from the proceedings today now of this Bill we know now that this money has been transferred out to cover this \$575 million transfer, which leaves zero as the actual funding of the ADB in financial year 2021, Madam President.

So, after hearing that the Minister indicated that there was a savings, it begs the question, what this money would have been needed for by the ADB, and what would now be the implications of this money being moved? You see, Madam President, the Minister of Finance is on record stating that the money was not requested by the ADB, which to me suggests that less farmers qualified or required these loans. That is what it suggests to me. Madam President, I took the time to consult with a number of farmers about this 25 million that would have been allocated for loans, and one of the main grievances that these farmers reported was the issues in qualifying for these loans, these needed loans, to getting access to this 25 million being transferred out today.

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

Sen. D. Lyder: What?

Madam President: Sen. Lyder, I actually have to uphold what the Minister is

invoking, because you really are straying from the Bill now, and I will ask you please to make another point and make a point that is relevant to the Bill please.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Madam President. So I will close this point on the ADB and agriculture by clearly stating that this \$25 million should not have been moved and transferred to these other three Heads, because this \$25 million should have been available and readily accessible to farmers who would have better qualified if they had land tenure or if the percentage interest rates and other barriers to borrowing from the ADB allowed for easier access. And I am going to close that point now, Madam President, because the farmers now would tell you that they want that \$25 million—

Madam President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. D. Lyder: They want it back.

Madam President: Sen. Lyder, please, if you have no more points to make, I am going to have to ask you to end your contribution. If you have other points, please move on.

Sen. D. Lyder: No, Madam President. I will move, yes. Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I will move on given the narrowness of the debate. So, I turn to another significant transfer being from eTecK. I see the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry is here with us and always happy to hear about eTecK. And when we look at this \$160 million from eTecK—in June 2021 the Government has agreed to refinance eTecK \$160 million loan, which would have matured in September the 14th, 2021, and the Minister of Finance indicated here that the eTecK 160 million was to meet the funding for the Vanguard Hotel, now the Magdalena Hotel in Tobago. I took the time to investigate the details further on this eTecK loan, and the Government's refinancing of it to be able to facilitate this

transfer that is being—that we are being asked to approve here today.

And when I examined the Auditor General's statement in Volume 1, Accounts of Treasury 2020, I noted, Madam President, on page 71 that the eTeck is listed as the following. I noted, and the Minister also indicated the lending agency. So I noted that e Teck would have taken this loan, the lending agency as recorded for financial year September 2020, was First Citizens Bank Limited. He stated that. A commercial bank that is the majority owned by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. But I went further, Madam President, and noted that the loan amount obligated to be paid by the Government was to the tune of \$160 million. So, the exact amount that is being transferred across.

And I further looked to determine what are the terms and the conditions of the loan to understand the true cost to the taxpayers when you now defer this loan and refinance, which is going to affect the taxpayers, Madam President. It is an implication. And lo and behold, Madam President, the data—there was no data entered by the Auditor General's statement. We do not know the rate of interest. We do not know how much was repaid on the loan to date, and we do not know the present debt to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, unless, of course, we take what the hon. Minister says on face value. And, Madam President, so surely the Government could have done the decent thing and furnished Members of the Senate with the details of this loan as well as—also, I heard Sen. John speak of the UDeCOTT loan for 233 million, where the same information has not been printed in the Auditor General's Report. This information is important, Madam President, as it will help us to understand what would be the new cost to the taxpayers as this loan has already been refinanced, which on its own, Madam President, and I will tell you, when I heard the Minister say that it was refinanced it raises red flags, as

we are not furnished with the new terms and conditions of this refinancing of the loan.

Madam President, even simple knowledge of who is the financial agency that would refinance this. He indicated that it was First Citizens who financed it. Sorry, the hon. Minister of Finance stated it was First Citizens that financed it, but then the hon. Minister indicated that they had refinanced it. But what he failed to do is indicate whether it was being refinanced by the same First Citizens Bank or is it being refinanced by some other agency, some other lending agency that may cause some people to have to recuse themselves due to conflicts of interest. I am just asking, who is the lending agency that these two loans are being refinanced with? I sincerely hope it is First Citizens, as it is a government owned bank, and the Government should reap the rewards of the new interest payments that will now come available, and that the taxpayers would have to inevitably pay. It cannot be right for these very critical details to be veiled in secrecy like this, Madam President? Especially when we are talking about a significant amount of finances at stake here, which in the end could potentially leave taxpayers of this country at risk of exposure.

You see, if the Government is going to take this 160 million, I ask myself the question, again just like what Sen. Deonarine had stated about internal transfers. Would this \$160 million not have been better used to facilitate the shortfalls as it pertains to maintenance, repairs and securities of the over 20 eTeck parks that have fallen into disrepair? I will move on. I am not going to elaborate much on that. But I will close this point on eTeck by making reference to the statement made by the Minister that I disagree that the loan payment refinancing will not impact on our debt levels. I heard him state that in another place, Madam

President, for the record. This is because the Minister himself stated on Monday in another place that the financial deficit for 2021 was \$13 billion. This year the financial 2022, the deficit is set at 9.1 billion based on the budget statement made by the Minister of Finance. By deferring these loan payments, Madam President, they are piling up debt which will be added to the expected increase in debt in the current fiscal period. That is why I say to you, Madam President, we have to understand the implications caused by these actions here today. The Government is in Parliament here today, indicated that they have decided to refinance a UDeCOTT loan of 230 million which was due for payment in September 2021. So they would have had to repay this loan in financial year 2021, which, when considered along with the \$160 million eTecK loan, raises the issue of our debt burden.

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

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Madam.

Madam President: And may I just point out to you that you are now starting to repeat what others have said, but even what you yourself have said. So I will ask you in the last five minutes, please, as you wrap up to try not to do that.

Sen. D. Lyder: Right. Thank you, Madam President. So, Madam President, I will just kind of end the part on the debt by saying that when we defer these loans, Madam President, both of these loans, the expenses go over into the following year, which given the interest charges and other potential expenses associated with servicing this size of loan, nobody mentioned that. Servicing this size of loan, Madam President, the population has to end up paying, and the population is not aware of what that cost will be to the taxpayers because of this.

Madam President, net public debt by last check stood at 122.19 billion. I

heard Sen. Mark make an estimate. So I am saying what is actually down in our last check at a 122 billion up to December 2020. And we have no information from the Central Bank data centre for debt levels over the past 12 months. So I ask myself the question, Madam President, is the Government also hiding the debt levels as they are hiding the unemployment data? Is that what is happening? When you turn to the Estimates of Expenditure you see how the 390 million debt refinancing of UDeCoTT and eTeCK adds up, and you see it, as I heard my political leader Kamla Persad-Bissessar say this week in a conference, that our charges on account of public debt are already in the tens of billions of dollar mark. That is the interest, the charges piling up when you defer these loans, Madam President.

1.00 p.m.

Madam President, when I looked at comments made on—let me see. How much time do I have left, Madam President, if you can furnish me with that?

Madam President: You have exactly three minutes.

Sen. D. Lyder: Three minutes, thank you, Madam President. Madam President, when I looked at the comments made regarding GATE funding being slashed by 80 million to be transferred to cover this 575 million and especially in a pandemic when families would need it most, this again brings to mind an issue that my hon. political leader, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, raised this week regarding foreign direct investors requiring skilled and trade labour.

So you take away—and I am closing this point by saying you take this money away, you restrict our locals from getting a free education, we have a brain drain in Trinidad and Tobago now—

Madam President: Sen. Lyder—

Finance (Variation of Appropriation)
(Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2022
Sen. Lyder (cont'd)

2022.01.26

Sen. D. Lyder:—with persons leaving this economy—

Madam President: Sen. Lyder, you have—

Sen. D. Lyder:—and now you cut—and foreign direct investments runs out.

Madam President, in conclusion, given that there are so many others that have spoken before me and seeing how really narrow this debate is, a mere three months after a budget presentation it is clear that this Government, and more specifically the Ministry of Finance, miscalculated and understated the size of the deficit of fiscal 2021. The deferral of payments from fiscal 2021 will inevitably lead to an understatement of our current year financial deficit which the Minister indicated was targeted at \$9.1 billion.

After listening to my colleagues, it is clear that the money has come from somewhere and I shudder to think if this year the Government would once again effect drastic cuts to the education, to ADB or to refinance key debt obligations. It is clear—this shows the Government's lack of planning, lack of control on spending and the lack imagination to create income from Trinidad and Tobago when we see them removing funds from areas such as agriculture and industrial parks that were earmarked for diversification of the economy outside of the oil and gas sector.

I conclude by declaring my concerns with the way this Government has been mishandling the finances of our nation, concerns with the mountain recusals for personal benefits whilst stakeholders are marginalized—

Madam President: Sen. Lyder—

Sen. D. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: Sen. Lyder, at this stage you have one more minute but I will ask you now to please discontinue your contribution. Okay?

Finance (Variation of Appropriation)
(Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2022
Sen. Lyder (cont'd)

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Deyalsingh.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: The truth hurts.

Madam President: Sen. Lyder, if I could point out that this is not the place to be shouting as you just did. I would ask you, please, to apologize. I am awaiting your apology, Sen. Lyder.

Sen. D. Lyder: To whom am I apologizing to, Madam President?

Madam President: Apologizing to the Senate for your outburst just now and to me.

Sen. D. Lyder: Oh.

Madam President: So, will you please apologize?

Sen. D. Lyder: I apologize to you, Madam President, and to the Senate as well too. Thank you for your consideration.

Madam President: Sen. Deyalsingh.

Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me to partake in this debate. But, Madam, I must say anytime we have to discuss finances, the economy, I realize that the Government has a task in this COVID time, in this time where it is economic hardships, not just here but worldwide, globally. We have seen in the United States their inflation increasing, the prices of goods, the prices of services, the prices of supermarket items. I mean people are complaining in the United States. So it is just not a matter of Trinidad and Tobago but it is a global problem brought on by the COVID.

So therefore, how our government plans to tackle the social fallout, how our government plans to maneuver the funds to see how they can best put funds where

it belongs, this is a task that—it is a task that, you know—it is a bit challenging because, you know, what may have worked before now with COVID, with the extension, it may be very challenging. While we thought COVID would have ended after a year, two years, it is there still and there are challenges right through in different Ministries which may need to get funds from other Departments which are not using it.

So, in short, we are looking at this—it is really a procedural nature we are having this debate this morning because the funds are already spent. It comes like a movie I saw, *Back to the Future*—well, we cannot really go back and change it, but we have to look and see that in this unprecedented times we have to see that transfers were made and I am hoping that I am allowed to look at some of the reasons for savings that were given and some of the reasons that the funds were transferred to different departments and just to get an idea if I am in a sort of agreement or have something to add to it.

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

So, looking at this variation of appropriation for the fiscal year 2021, we have seen now it is \$574,889,840 would have been needed to be moved from different Departments and it really went to three major areas: the Judiciary, Personnel Department and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

And, Mr. Vice President, I must say, looking at some of the reasons given for this transfer, I have seen rental and lease of buildings. Some government buildings, some buildings from government institutions and some from the Judiciary. So, we may not be able to tell the Judiciary who to rent from, where to rent because they are an independent institution. But even if the Government as a

stakeholder, you know, they must learn to negotiate just as how private individuals have negotiated with tenants and landlords. The Government—any sort of rental agreements or the fact that they are dispersing funds, you know, the Government should at least tell us, “Hey, we are negotiating rental agreements with whoever we are renting from to see if we could negotiate or renegotiate prices in this time.” And I think it is something that the population will feel nice to know that, you know, it is good fiscal management to say, “Listen, we have to bring down prices that we are paying for rental.” So this is something, I have seen the thread, the common thread of rental expenses and I am thinking we could somehow get a little relief from that.

When I looked at the variation of the appropriation, I looked at the Government assistance for GATE. I think the—

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

What I must say, Sir, is that GATE, I think, is very important and when we have any sort of problems to balance a budget, you know, we may decide to cut certain funding to GATE. And it was, I think, a bit unfair that the GATE allocation to senior citizens was somehow tapered off in the past. And we have seen in this presentation that the Senior Citizens Grant is there and we have to realize we have an aging population and even if we are taking money from GATE, I most respectfully want to say that probably the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Education would have to reconsider next time putting—taking funds from GATE.

I think Sen. Deonarine made mention to the fact that if you take money out, this should have remained there for the next year. And I predict probably next year

when the universities and the classes and the technical institution, UTT, have come on board with a fully functional system by doing, you know—via computer, people can now take classes, via their—they can take classes via the Internet, I think the GATE funding is something that we have to—we should at least ensure that we have that moneys in there.

So as Sen. Deonarine was asking: Would that money be put back in? Because I predict that soon persons will access it as there are more online classes. University persons had dropped out. We have seen universities themselves—the University of the West Indies itself was kind of looking to see how they could offer classes. But I have seen classes back online now and I am seeing a lot of courses offered. So therefore, GATE approval has to be taken into account there.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I would like to look at the explanation of transfers 2020 and I want to make some comments about these things. Looking at the Judiciary, Head 03: Judiciary, where it was—one of the reasons for transfer was to facilitate the payment of electricity bills in respect of courts located in Trinidad and Tobago. Now, I do not know who actually pays the electricity for the court, if it comes out of a government fund or because the Judiciary as an independent institution may have their own fund for that. But what I am saying, Sir, is coming here today, I saw all the lights on outside in the veranda, all the bulbs, the lights were on. And I wondered, if you are looking at electricity, if we are looking at good fiscal management—I remember Central Bank had all there lights on in the night sometimes and I wondered why that cost factor. So somehow we may have to—the Minister of Finance may have to tell the other Departments, “Look at what is happening in the nights. Are we wasting electricity? Are we now adding to that burden to the taxpayer to have to pay this?”

When I looked at also, Sir, the—looking again, Judiciary, the reasons for savings and arrangement for filling vacant positions on the contract establishment was not finalized. I am thinking that, you know, being an independent institution, I thought they would have had their funds to do that themselves, to make their own contracts. So I am not sure about if—where that would have come out from, if it would have been taking funds from the Judiciary or giving them if they requested more.

When I looked at Statutory Authorities Service Commission, that is Head 07, facilitated the purchase of seven laptops, computers. So throughout this we have seen reasons for transfers and I have no problems with—especially now in the COVID, we know that the laptops, the computers, it is really an essential part of how government does business. We have seen the Minister of information and technology would have told us that they are setting up systems in place. So therefore, any transfers given throughout the whole explanation of transfers, I support that once it is the laptop, the computers because that is the way we are now handling our activities during the COVID and post-COVID. We will have to go with this. Also, when I looked at the reasons for the savings—and again, the common thread right through was the curtailment of activities because of the pandemic. So, part of the benefit of the pandemic probably was also to cause this curtailment which actually gave us that extra money to put elsewhere.

Coming down the list Head 07: Tax Appeal Board, again, installation of computers, all these things have to be supported. The Office of the Prime Minister, Head 13, reasons for transfer to meet the cost associated with the care and upkeep of children accommodated at community residents over the period June—September 2020. Now, Sir, what I must say, during the COVID, we have seen

increase in domestic violence, we have seen increase in child abuse. So this is very important here. So any funding that goes towards this— because remember, we may not have predicted during the COVID we would have had more cases of child abuse.

So, in 2020, in 2021, all those factors that we have, children are calling in, children are getting more depressed and the funds that were given to enable the Children's Authority to meet its operational expenditure at the end of fiscal 2020, all these things I support and I think anything that will help with our children in this pandemic should be supported and I have no problems in that funding going there.

When I looked at the—also, the reasons for saving. Now, I am looking at the Ministry of Finance, Head 18, the reasons for savings—and I looked at the second paragraph there—the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the engagement of consultancy services which were required for the divestment of state enterprises. So good, we saved. But you see, what I am saying is that we were probably—it is really, really, important that the state enterprises—the divestment of state enterprises, you know, be handled in a manner that would be to the benefit of the country. So I was thinking probably the engagement of consultancy services could have been done online. I do not know if they would have had to make field visits which could have been compromised in the COVID time but even with that, you know, there had been a time even people were home, you would have been able to interview personnel to make some recommendations how you are going to divest the state enterprises. So I was wondering, could that not have continued? Because remember time is running. If you find a state enterprise is serving as a parasite on the taxpaying public, we would have benefitted if the consultants were there to say,

“This is the best way forward.”

When I looked at the—also another reason for saving is the:

“...continuous review of the Food Support Programme...has resulted in the reduction in the number of persons meeting the qualifying criteria for food cards.”

Now, this has some sort of contention out there. I had patients who—they said that, you know, suddenly the Government stopped the food cards and they started to say that, you know—so politics comes into it. But again, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services did mention there were a lot of irregularities and we know there were irregularities existing before. And her attempts to clean up this, I think, is commendable but she has to realize that those persons who are denied food cards, who feel aggrieved, give them a forum where they could probably vent because they come to me in clinics to vent thinking I can help. I say, “You are speaking to the wrong Deyalsingh, I am not a Minister.” So they have to get some way there that those persons could—their food cards, they would not think the Government is taking away from that.

Mr. Vice-President: So, Senator, so I have been listening to you and you are going relatively deeply into things that do not find themselves in the Bill that is before us. If you take a look at the Bill itself, you will notice it lays out three different Heads and moneys that are transferred accordingly. What I would need you to do is to keep it tightly to what is before us in relation to the Bill itself. You do not need to go deeper as you are going now. But what I would also like you to do is to if you are coming with new points outside of what has already been stated by every contributor that has gone before you, I invite you to do that now because you will find yourself in, one, tedious repetition if it is you repeat what they said

and two, you would find yourself outside of the relevance of what is before us if you continue along the lines that you are going now.

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I was just attempting to, you know—I have seen the reasons why they were given for savings and transfers. So as part of my discussion, I was trying to see if some of those moneys given, like for savings, if I may be permitted to say, if I think it was in a good way, a bad way, if somehow the Finance Ministry, part of their savings, part of their transfer was lacking in such way. Because even though we have this total figure allocated to the Judiciary, I would have wanted to peruse the information given where it came from to see if it was actually something that I am in an agreement with to agree with the total figure.

Mr. Vice-President: No. So it is either you respond to what has gone before by way of arguments put forward or you introduce new points.

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Yes, Sir. So, some of the new points I would look at—because I think nobody mentioned the fact that Head 22: Ministry of National Security actually—

Mr. Vice-President: So, Senator, that is what I am talking about. So we are talking Judiciary, we are talking about Personnel Department, we are talking about the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. You do not need to go further in relation to the Ministry of National Security or anything as such. Again, I am going to ask you, if you have new points in relation to those three things that I just mentioned, you can talk about that now. Just be mindful of tedious repetition and also be extremely mindful of relevance.

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Sir. I must make mention, Sir, that when I looked at the, as I say the explanation for the transfers, it was made mention that

social services would have taken a lot—I think it was almost 5 billion— more than 5 billion and from the—and needed that. And I want to make mention the fact that we would have had to give out that money to our citizens who would have been put under—unemployed citizens, citizens who were strained, disabled individuals, senior grants. And I am saying the senior grants—I must say that if we are having an increase in an aging population, this is something we have no choice but to continue increasing as the years go by.

Social assistance grants: Again, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services actually mentioned that it was challenging to see how those persons were able to exist. And I remember, Sir, when I was younger, I used to pay \$6 to go, take a taxi, go and buy two doubles, a red Solo and come back home. Now a doubles is \$6. So the cost of living, you know—these grants would definitely help the dwindling middle class. It will definitely help—to go towards the relief that the citizens need. And I remember once, Sir, the Prime Minister had said that Trinidad cannot be a welfare state. But as we realize with COVID, we have no choice but to continue giving out these services.

And I have to commend the Minister of Social Development and Family Services for her work trying to disperse these funds, trying to at least get the funds to those in need. And for every person she gives, there are people waiting out there, waiting for food cards, waiting for these reliefs and their—I mean, it is a situation out there I think she has to realize that it is challenging and to make that money balance, to get rid of the dead persons she said that are on the list, all these are challenges that we face and her clean-up activities certainly will go a long way in helping us at least get the funding going towards persons who really needed it.

When I looked at, Sir, the fact that moneys were taken from health—and I

would want to say that, you know, Sir, in these challenging times the COVID has given us the problem where more moneys would be needed in health. Because remember it is not just—

Mr. Vice-President: So again, Senator, you are being cautioned in relation to relevance. You are focusing on something very specific and so there is a lot of stricture in this particular debate. You are not going to be allowed to go outside of that. So, if you have anything else you want to add in relation to what is before us, I invite you now to do so. If not, well then, you would have to consider wrapping up.

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Well, Sir, I think, one, Sen. Lyder had mentioned the fact that the concerns he had with agriculture, with funds being taken out from the Agriculture Ministry. Because he raised this in this debate, I would also like to factor in a bit on this. Because I think the main driver for inflation, as Sen. Lyder put it, you know, I think the main driver is really food prices, especially prices of fruits and vegetables. So as he mentioned that, you know, the fact that agriculture has to be somehow given that support—and I must say, I must agree with his comments in the sense that I am thinking that this is something that we have to commend what the Ministers have done before in agriculture, what they are doing in the micro-environment in south. And as it may, I am happy we were able to get funding for the Judiciary and for the social services. But I am, on the other hand, a little unhappy that it came from agriculture. So this is all I wanted to say. I would not go into the details how it came out but that is something I have to say that taking it out from different areas, you know, I would have probably supported but not coming out from agriculture, not coming out from health, even though it went into these ventures that are there.

So I must also make mention, Sir, that two speakers mentioned the Vanguard Hotel in Tobago. And it was, I think, the Minister of Finance mentioned that they had to refinance the loan. I think Sen. Lyder mentioned this and by mentioning this, I want to just say that this hotel—financing this loan, it was really set up by private business enterprise. The Government bailed them out and I guess—look, we are still reeling—the taxpayers are still being forced to try to bail out the Vanguard Hotel which is—

Mr. Vice-President: So, Senator, like I said, because of your positioning and where you are in the debate right now and you just stated that other Members would have mentioned it, you are going to run into tedious repetition in relation to that. What I am looking for very specifically—and it is the last time I am going to rise on my legs to say it—is anything absolutely new at this particular point. It is not a very long Bill and it is very, very, specific. And so, when I am saying that I am looking for something new, that is exactly what I need in order for you to be able to continue.

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Sure, Sir. I am looking at the transfers to the Judiciary and I have seen the transfers to the Judiciary is to enable the payment of contract gratuity to persons whose contract has come to an end and also to meet the principal and interest payment for a UDeCOTT loan to develop the Waterfront—to outfit the Waterfront. So what I am looking at, the moneys given to the Judiciary, I have, I am saying full support to getting the Judiciary to function properly. The moneys given to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for senior citizens, public assistance, disability grants, again, I have full support for that. The reservation of rental, I say we need to look at the rental arrangements sometimes.

And as I conclude, I want to say we really need, you know—we are in a sort of socioeconomic crisis and we need structural reforms needed. The Government has to be the driving force behind this and I am saying that we need the Government to get this right, not just for managing the fiscal management purposes for bookkeeping but also for the citizens who would really feel the brunt of what is happening. I see ammonia prices rising. I see some optimism. I have some cautious optimism and I give the Minister of Finance all my prayers to see if he can get us out of this difficult situation. Thank you.

Mr. Vice-President: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. It is obvious to me that the narrow parameters of this debate were not fully appreciated by hon. Senators. I just want to make the point that the information circulated to hon. Senators regarding the transfer of funds between Sub Heads has absolutely nothing to do with the matter before the Senate.

And to correct the record, I heard commentary with respect to funding being removed from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, to allow the supplementation of the three Heads that we are looking at which is: the Judiciary, the Personnel Department and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. That is completely incorrect. No money was taken from the Ministry of National Security; no money was taken from the Ministry of Health; no money was taken from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries or any of the Ministries mentioned in the document that gave for the information of Senators, information on the transfer of funds between Heads. I want to repeat that, no money was taken from Health; National Security; Agriculture, Land and Fisheries or any of the other

Heads in the informational package given to Senators, not one cent.

What we are about today is looking at the transfer of funds from six Sub-Items in Head 18: Ministry of Finance only. So the only area where money was taken from was Head 18: Ministry of Finance, nowhere else. So that, the contribution of Sen. Lyder, who I understand kept carrying on about we took money from agriculture, was completely unwarranted, unfounded, baseless and without any merit whatsoever.

Let me go now to the Heads from whence the money came, 04/001/01 Sub-Item: Contribution to the Caribbean Development Bank, \$15 million was not required for that expenditure in fiscal 2021 and was therefore utilized or is being utilized to retire advances from treasury deposits for the three Heads: the Judiciary, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Personnel Department; 04/009/17: Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses. At the end of fiscal 2020, a balance of deposits remained available in the GATE fund. As a result, the entire sum allocated for deposit to the fund in fiscal 2021 was not utilized.

1.30 p.m.

Now I would have thought that that was self-explanatory, but clearly Sen. John does not think so. So that I will explain. As I indicated, the GATE fund is a rolling fund. So in fiscal 2020 the sum of 435 million was allocated for deposit to the GATE fund to meet the cost associated with students attached to tertiary level education institutions. However, as we all know, the whole country knows, that in March 2020 something occurred called the COVID-19 pandemic and all of us who live in Trinidad and Tobago, including Sen. John, know that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Public Health Regulations that were published as a result of the pandemic, a number of tertiary education institutions were closed, and

therefore, the demands on funding from GATE in fiscal 2020 were not realized. As a result, the sum of \$81.6 million, being the balance in the GATE fund in 2020, was carried forward to the fund at the beginning of fiscal 2021. So the GATE fund began the year with a credit balance of \$81.6 million.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

There was an appropriation, \$400 million for fiscal 2021, and of this amount when you add the \$400 million appropriated in fiscal 2021 plus the \$81.6 million balance standing to the credit of the fund, the amount of money available for GATE in fiscal 2021 was \$481.6 million. But the expenditure based on the actual request coming from tertiary level institutions—because again in fiscal 2021 the pandemic continued. When I listen to some contributions from Members on the Opposition Bench it is as if they do not live in Trinidad and Tobago, as if they are not aware that there is something called the COVID-19 pandemic that is still with us. And in 2021 there were a number of restrictions which affected the operations of tertiary level institutions. So that the 81.6 million credit that was carried forward into the fund, plus the 400 million, made 481.6 million available, but only \$400 million was required.

So, at the end of the fiscal year there was an available balance of \$80 million which could be then transferred for other purposes, other important purposes, such as the funding for social grants, senior citizens pension and so on. But at no time was there thousands of students being denied assistance for GATE. That is just preposterous. So I wanted to put that on the record all of the requirements for GATE, all of the requests for funding for GATE in fiscal 2021 were satisfied, because we had more than enough money in the fund because of the reduction in the operations of tertiary level institutions in fiscal 2021 because of the COVID-19

pandemic. So that clears up that GATE matter. That theory that came for Sen. John has no foundation whatsoever.

The Agricultural Development Bank. I am advised that the \$25 million that was allocated to the Agricultural Development Bank at the beginning of the fiscal year was not required. The Agricultural Development Bank granted 747 loans in fiscal 2021 in the sum in aggregate of \$102 million. So this theory that the ADB somehow was constrained, hamstrung, punished because this \$25 million was not released to the ADB is just nonsense. Let me repeat that. In fiscal 2021 the Agricultural Development Bank made 747 loans in an aggregate total of \$102 million and the money did not come from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. In fact, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries had more than enough money available to it in fiscal 2021. There was no shortage of funds in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. There was no effect on agriculture with respect to the non-release of this 25 million to the ADB. None whatsoever.

In fact, we ended off the year with more than enough money for the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries from the various allocations available to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, its primary allocation, and also the allocation within the Ministry of Finance which is specifically for the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries which was used for all of the things that Members opposite have inaccurately alleged were not available for agriculture in 2021. This allocation was in the Ministry of Finance for disbursement to the ADB for on-lending to its clients, but the ADB was able to manage its business properly during 2021 and, therefore, did not require this funding from the Ministry of Finance. Nothing to do with any sort of starvation of money for the agriculture sector or the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Absolutely nothing.

With respect to Community Improvement Services Limited, that is another area where 14.889 million was not required in fiscal 2021 and then became available for the Personnel Department, for the Judiciary, for social grants, and so on, that is simply because there was a court matter in 2021 and the parties agreed with the court that they would enter into mediation. So that an allocation had been made in anticipation of an award of the court in this sum \$14.8 million against Community Improvement Services Limited which is a non-functional company. It is a company that has not had any active operations now for several years and is now engaged in its winding up process which includes settling litigation. So, in fiscal 2021 it was anticipated that Community Improvement Services Limited would have to make provision in the amount of \$14.8 million to deal with a court judgment, but the matter went into mediation and by the end of the fiscal year the mediation process was still ongoing, and therefore, the \$14.8 million was not required. It is not that \$14.8 million was supposed to be spent on infrastructure work in communities. I want to debunk that right away. This is a non-active company. It has not been active for years. This money was for a court matter which was required during the fiscal year, and therefore, available for transfer to the three areas that I have spoken about.

With respect to other matters raised by hon. Members opposite, it is very, very difficult, Madam President, very, very difficult to make head or tail of contributions coming from Sen. Mark. It is almost impossible because this is a very narrow debate. It was not open to me to go into all sorts of adventures in terms of the outcome of the fiscal year in 2021, the deficit, the debt management, the revenue for 2021, the expenditure for 2021. That was not open to me, Madam President, under the Standing Orders. This is a very, very narrow debate, and

therefore, it was my responsibility to deal with these Items, the six Items where money was not spent in finance that were then available to retire Treasury Deposits that were required to finance critical expenditure in Judiciary, Personnel Department and Social Development and Family Services. It is not available to me to go all over the place in an adventure.

I am sure, Madam President, that if I had done that you would have certainly stopped me. And I was very well aware that there should be no mention whatsoever of transfers between Heads because that is not before us. So that it is difficult to respond to Sen. Mark because Sen. Mark makes all sorts of statements that just make no sense. So that I am simply dealing with the matters at hand, and that is the number of Heads here, the fact that this expenditure was not required, and the fact that this money was needed by the other three areas and that we were able to finance this expenditure, the expenditure in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services—very, very important expenditure. We were able to finance the expenditure in the Judiciary and in each case there was a rational explanation.

In the case of the Judiciary, the Judiciary, as we all know if you have been paying attention, has been seeking to expand its operation over the last several years engaging and hiring new judges, magistrates, masters of the court. In fact, if one were following what was going on there is a significant number of masters have been brought on into the system within the Judiciary over the last several years. So the Judiciary has expanded its operations. And therefore, even though each Ministry and Department is required to try and live within its allocation—this is the direction given by Finance to everyone, this is your allocation, try and manage it. Try and live within it—we found as we got towards the middle of the

year that there were some inescapable expenses within Judiciary, Personnel Department and Social Development and Family Services that we had to fund. And this why we used the mechanism of Treasury Deposits which is quite standard to temporarily finance these arrangements, and then we look for at the end of the year whether we had in fact spent all of the funding that we had appropriated at the beginning of the year.

So, Madam President, I think I have explained everything that is needed to be explained. I wanted to make the point to hon. Sen. Deonarine that some of these items are just not available for movement to other places. I want to make the point in particular with respect to the funding for the ADB that that funding simply was not required. The ADB was able to manage its own business. I want to make the point that the GATE fund did not suffer in any way. I want to make the point that the \$25 million that was allocated for the ADB but was not required was not needed to be transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries because we had made available a fund of \$500 million for the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in fiscal 2021, and this year we made available a special fund of \$300 million which is disbursed from the Ministry of Finance. So there was absolutely no need to transfer that money from the ADB to Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries because agriculture had more than enough financing available to it.

So again, I do not want to expand the Items that we are dealing with today. I think I have done as best as I can in terms of responding to the relevant questions that were asked by hon. Members opposite. I hope I have corrected the record in terms of why we are here, and I have hoped I have corrected the record in terms of the mistaken belief that money was taken from a number of Ministries like

National Security, Health, et cetera, to deal with this expenditure. That did not happen. In fact, in terms at the Ministry of Health, just to deal with a comment made by Sen. Deyalsingh, every cent that the Ministry of Health required during fiscal 2021, we in the Ministry of Finance made arrangements to make that money available because we consider in this pandemic the Ministry of Health to be number one. So that whether it was appropriated, or whether we used loan financing which is what we do to pay for pharmaceuticals in large measure, we made sure whether it was to purchase vaccines, whether it is to engage temporary staff—you would have heard about that earlier today—whether it is to purchase ventilators, whether it is to purchase medication, whether it is to provide goods and services to our public health systems, whatever the Ministry of Health required within fiscal 2021 was made available to it because that is the number one priority of this current Government of Trinidad and Tobago. So I just wanted to clear up all of that, and with those few words, Madam President, I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Madam President: Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam President. In accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that a Bill entitled an Act to vary the appropriation of sums, the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2020 and varied by the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2021 not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

Madam President: Leader of Government Business.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Tuesday, February 08, 2022 at 10.00 a.m. Madam President, we propose on that day to deal with—there are 10 Motions on the Order Paper dealing with the Procurement Regulations and we intend to deal with those Motions. Thank you.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, before I put the question on the adjournment, leave has been granted for two matters to be raised. Sen. Mark

Lack of Burial Spaces in Cemeteries (Princes Town)

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, the first matter that I would like to bring to the Senate's national attention, through you, is the need for the Government to address the lack of burial spaces at cemeteries in Princes Town. Now, Madam President, it was drawn to my attention that there appears to be emerging a crisis as it concerns burial spaces in the Princes Town region. So, under this current administration with the COVID pandemic and the number of citizens who are perishing there seems to be a shortage of, as I said, burial spaces. So the living are experiencing crisis and the dead seem to be also experiencing challenges because there is no room for many of the dead to be buried peacefully. So both the living and the dead seem to be under pressure.

So, Madam President, I have brought this matter to the attention of the Senate to get from the relevant Government Minister what measures are being

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Sen. Mark (cont'd)

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taken by the Government to the address this situation affecting the people of Princes Town and its environs. From the data I have been able to gather, Madam President, the following is noteworthy. Madam President, I have been advised that there are some 23 named cemeteries in the Princes Town Regional Corporation, and based on the data I have been able to gather some of these plots located in these cemeteries seem to be reaching what I call crisis levels in terms of the remaining spaces. And in this regard, Madam President, I would just bring to your attention the following areas where we need to pay attention, and the Government needs to intervene to provide this corporation with more land space or spaces so that the dead can rest in peace.

Madam President, from the information that has come to my attention it appears that in one particular area called Busy Corner—that is the name of the cemetery—the number of plots, 300; the numbers utilized, 250; the remaining is 50. In the area called La Lune, 65 plots are available, 50 have been utilized, there are only 15 remaining, Madam President. In a place called Batchyia, Madam President, 240 plots available, 200 have been utilized, 40 unutilized at this time. Madam President, in a place called Cumuto, there are 635 plots; 520 have been utilized; and there are only 115 remaining. You go to a place called Indian Walk, Madam President, 783 plots are located there; as we speak 703 have been utilized; and there is a remaining 80. St. Clement's, Madam President, 200 plots available for burial purposes; 200 have been utilized; there is none available for burial. And we go to a place called Taylor, Madam President, 653 plots, 549 utilized, you have just 109 remaining.

So, Madam President, I have brought this matter and I said I do not want to go through each area because there are 23 areas that I have before me, but I think I

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have made the point as to the emerging situation affecting the residents and the citizens of the Princes Town Regional Corporation, and I have brought this to the attention of the Senate so that the relevant Minister can be made aware if he is not so as yet—

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

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

Sen. W. Mark: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President—so that this matter could be addressed and the people of this community called Princes Town can bury their loved ones who require to be buried peacefully in the particular area that they need to conduct those services.

So I look forward to the Government dealing with this matter, and I suspect, Mr. Vice-President, this matter will have to be addressed with the Government intervening to provide further land spaces so that the Princes Town Regional Corporation can begin the process of addressing what is emerging as a crisis of burial spaces in the Princes Town Regional Corporation. So I look forward to the Government addressing this matter and providing some kind of guidance as it relates to the future of the people who are affected by this development. I wish to thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President: Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, I thank Sen. Mark for bringing the Motion, and this intervention is what I consider to be very timely except that, Mr. Vice-President, I would say that the issue in Princes Town as far as the Government knows is really connected to COVID-19 burial spots. Because I can assure the community of Princes Town, the

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municipality, that based on very recent discussions the hon. line Minister has had with that corporation, the corporation has reported that in the 23 cemeteries within the Princes Town Regional Corporation there is currently available 6,007 plots. So there is no issue of a crisis in Princes Town, the region of Princes Town, in relation to burial plots because 6,000 represents a significant number that is available.

2.00 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President, the responsibility for burial grounds in relation to the law falls within the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and it is a matter that the Ministry and the Government has been addressing in relation to availability of burial spaces throughout the country. And I can say that very recently in relation to the Princes Town Regional Corporation, the Government took steps to finalize arrangements which we met in 2015 and which were incomplete and that led to the Islamic Cemetery ground in Barrackpore. We also, outside of Princes Town, dealt with a long-outstanding issue in the Borough of Chaguanas by formalizing the grant of space to the Islamic community for a burial ground and also additional land to the corporation for the expansion of the non-Islamic burial space.

In, fact, Mr. Vice-President, Sen. Mark is not incorrect in saying that some places have exhausted or are close to exhausting the space, Princes Town is not one and we are currently dealing, for example, with a request from the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force for additional space for military burial , they having indicated that there might be fewer than 20 spaces available in the cemetery on Long Circular. So the issue of burial spaces is something that the line Ministry and the Government as a whole has been dealing with and it is something that we have been actively engaged in.

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I will say, Mr. Vice-President, that in relation to COVID, there has been an issue with the availability of burial space for COVID deaths, not only in Princes Town, across the country. The line Minister had a meeting on Thursday, January 13, 2022, with all the Mayors, Chairmen and CEOs of the corporations and this issue was discussed and I could say that at that meeting, the Chairman of the Princes Town Regional Corporation indicated that there were no issues regarding regular burial in the region. As I said, there are 6,007 plots available across 23 cemeteries.

But the chairman did indicate that the number of spots for COVID-19 burials were depleting and that had to do with the fact that about 45 per cent of the population of that region, Hindus, and at that time, Hindus who had died on account of COVID could not be cremated so there was an increased demand for spaces in the COVID designated burial areas for the Hindus. But, it is a matter of public record that very recently that matter of the open cremation of the Hindu population, people who have passed away on account of COVID-19 has been resolved and the Ministry expects that there will be a shift from the demand for use of burial plots reserved for COVID deaths among the Hindu community and a shift towards the preferred open air cremation.

And it is something that the Government continues to monitor. Of course, there is no way of predicting what the deaths would be. We all wish it would be zero and it is something that the Government as a whole and the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, particularly, as the line Ministry continues to monitor and as required, it is possible to expand the existing cemeteries in terms of state land or private land that is contiguous with existing cemeteries, it is also possible to expand the boundary line of the COVID designated areas so that we

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have increased plots.

What, Mr. Vice-President, as I close, I would say is that in some cases, there have been the desire of families to have family members dying as a result of COVID buried in their own family spaces and this is not something that is easily accommodated and that remains an issue of concern I know amongst families but in terms of COVID deaths, I think we have made the arrangements and in terms of deaths on the whole in the Princes Town Regional Corporation, there is absolutely no issue in relation to non-COVID or regular burials because there are 6,007 plots currently available across 23 cemeteries. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark.

**Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago
(Restructuring/Reorganization of Workforce)**

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. The second matter that I would like to draw to your attention and bring to the attention of the Senate deals with the need for the Government to explain the reasons why the Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago is seeking to engage in another round of restructuring or reorganization and the implications of such action on the company's workforce.

Mr. Vice-President, recently, we read in the newspapers where the current Chief Executive Officer, one Mrs. Lisa Agard, wrote a letter to all major stakeholders in the company representing workers, both at the junior and the senior levels. You have the Communication Workers' Union representing senior and junior staff and of course, you have the security workers or members of the security force represented by another group of—another union I should say.

So having regard to the experiences that we have had back in 2018, when I say “we”, the workers at TSTT underwent a restructuring of this very important telecommunications giant in 2018 resulting in some 500 plus workers being retrenched, being removed from the company’s operations. And here it is, Mr. Vice-President, we are in 2022 and we are hearing about another round of restructuring when initially, the first set of restructuring that took place, the company’s management and the directors would have had the workers believe that with 500 plus workers going home, there would be greater gains and efficiencies which would not require further retrenchment of workers. So you could well imagine the tension that has arisen amongst the workers with this call to come in to discuss a further restructuring of TSTT.

Mr. Vice-President, we need to find out from the Government what is the real objective behind this restructuring, because from 2015, 2016, TSTT has been sliding, sliding. You have, Mr. Vice--President, the Government agreeing—or let me restructure that or recast it. The TSTT board of directors bought a company called Massy Communications somewhere between 2015 and 2017. It cost the taxpayers \$215 million. When we did the research, this company that was purchased by TSTT was a loss-making company. It was not profitable. “Why did the TSTT directors and management went” and purchase that company is anybody’s guess. That resulted in a drainage of critical resources and may have contributed to the restructuring of the company in 2018 and the laying off of close to 500 and above workers.

They transformed this company, Massy Communications into something called Amplia and what has been happening, Mr. Vice-President, is that over the last four years, all of the assets of value, lucrative assets have been transferred

from the company called TSTT into Amplia. And therefore, there appears to be some plan on the part of the management, directors and I dare say the Government to literally get rid of TSTT and put whatever assets there is, as they have done, into Amplia. Now, what this means, Mr. Vice-President, is that there are two parallel tracks within this organization's operation. You have contract employees at Amplia and you have the secured permanent workers in a place called TSTT and sometimes there is a cross fertilization depending on the circumstances.

Now, the company has been making losses as was recorded in the last financial statement. And, Mr. Vice-President, in those circumstances, we want to find out from the Government what is their real intention. What do they want to do with TSTT? Mr. Vice-President, you know TSTT is 51 per cent owned by the people of T&T and 49 per cent owned by Cable and Wireless but since Cable and Wireless bought Flow, they bought the assets of Flow, they are no longer on the board of TSTT. So TSTT has nine directors. Five supposed to come from TSTT, 51 per cent and four supposed to come from Cable and Wireless. As we speak, there are no directors representing Cable and Wireless on this board. Right.

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

Sen. W. Mark: So you have the Government of Trinidad and Tobago essentially in charge of the running of the affairs of TSTT. So this is a company that is now owned almost a 100 per cent by the Government because the directorship is only Government but as we speak, there are only five members in operation, four of them have resigned.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I have brought this matter to this honourable Senate today to get from the Government their real intention. Is the Government's intention to privatize TSTT? Is the Government's intention to retrench another 500

workers? What is the true objective of this Government? And that is why we need to give the workers of that company and their representative unions some assurance that this so-called restructuring/reorganization of the company is not another round of retrenchment that they experienced just a few years ago. So hence the reason, Mr. Vice-President, we are seeking clarification from the Government as to the real intention and objective of this arrangement under the leadership of the TSTT management and the board of directors and of course, the Government which owns 51 per cent of TSTT.

So, Mr. Vice-President, we seek clarification, we seek answers, we seek guidance so that the workers and the stakeholders and the customers of TSTT will have a good appreciation of where this company is going in the coming period. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Let me make two points at the opening. The first is to say that once again, Sen. Mark creates this issue of privatization as a red herring whenever the Government tries to streamline or bring increased efficiency or improve the management of resources available in the State sector. So it is not the intention of the Government to privatize TSTT. It is not the intention at this time but the concept of privatization in TSTT already exists. Sen. Mark himself acknowledges that the Government is a 51 per cent shareholder, the other shareholding is held in private hands. So that it is not something that the Government plans to introduce to TSTT. TSTT is already a partnership between the State and private ownership. Whatever the composition of the board, that has

not changed in relation to the ownership of TSTT.

The second point is that the Government does not have a free hand in its dealing with TSTT because as Sen. Mark knows from his experience, Government is constrained by agreements with the other shareholder but more importantly, TSTT is a unionised environment in respect of which the Communication Workers' Union is a recognized majority union in respect of significant parts of the employment in TSTT.

So what Sen. Mark is quarrelling about is simply the invitation by TSTT to the recognized majority union to discuss matters relating to TSTT and that invitation is consistent with the existing collective agreement and good industrial relations practice. Had we not done that, we would have been here on a different motion which would have been the failure of the Government of TSTT to respect the existing collective agreement and/or good industrial relations practice.

Mr. Vice-President, the matter to be discussed should not be a secret to anybody. Sen. Mark has said it himself and the Minister of Public Utilities in response to the statement made by the Member of Parliament for Princes Town, Barry Padarath, the Minister has said these discussions centre around the loss of revenue by TSTT and the loss of revenue by TSTT should not be too much of a secret. It is a matter of public record that the revenue has declined for a number of reasons, particularly during the COVID period. And the decline in revenue has to do with the previous cash cow.

There was a time in this country when a call to Canada or the United States costs TT\$6 per minute. Anyone of us could make a call to the United States or Canada, someone there, for free using one of the widely available apps including WhatsApp that is available to us. So that the revenue situation has to do with the

change in the business performed by TSTT and not only the phone call business but the general IT business and the Internet business.

It also has to do with the fact that this is not the Telco and Textel environment. TSTT faces competition, not just from Digicel but in every segment of the telecoms business that TSTT operates in, it faces locally-based competition and also global competition like WhatsApp. So the loss of revenue and the change in circumstances over TSTT in its lifetime are matters that TSTT believes it should discuss with its recognized majority union, recognizing that again, TSTT is not 100 per cent owned or not even close to 100 per cent owned by the State, its partner is a private sector entity. Notwithstanding the 51 per cent, Government is constrained by having agreements with its co-owner and also TSTT is constrained by the requirements of its collective agreement and good industrial relations practice.

As I close, it recognizes that TSTT operates in a highly competitive environment that is rapidly changing and that involves competition in each of its business segment from locally based and globally based businesses, including a simple thing as a free app called WhatsApp. Thank you very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 2.22 p.m.