

SENATE

Friday, May 20, 2022

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

**URGENT QUESTIONS**

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. To the Minister of Finance: Given the Chief Personnel Officer's offer of 2 percent for an eight-year period in wage negotiations with public servants, can the Minister indicate the Government's rationale for such an offer?

Madam President: Acting Prime Minister.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance and Acting Prime Minister (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam President. Sen. Mark could not be serious. I find it surprising that he would ask someone as experienced as I am a question like that thinking I would fall into error. Negotiations for collective agreements are not conducted in public. I will not fall into the trap of making an injudicious statement that could be used against the Government in court.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Yeah. Can I ask the hon. Minister whether the Government intends to address this provocative offer in the coming period, Madam President?

Madam President: Acting Prime Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: I repeat my previous answer. I am surprised Sen. Mark has not learnt—

Madam President: No need. It is fine. Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the hon. Minister whether the Government, given what is to come, whether the Government has in fact set aside, Madam President, a sum of moneys to address these negotiations, Madam President?

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

Sen. Mark: Thank you.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Madam President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Madam President, I am pleased to say that the Government is a position to answer all oral questions on the Order Paper. Thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Beetham Sewer Pipeline Project

(Completion of)

84. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:

Can the Minister state when will the Beetham Sewer Pipeline Project be completed given the health challenges being faced by the residents of the said area?

Madam President: The Minister of Public Utilities.

Madam President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much, Madam President. Once again, Sen. Mark has demonstrated that he is out of touch with reality and contrary to the false and misleading assertions in the question, the Beetham sewer pipeline project, inclusive of road restoration, was completed on April 8th, 2022. And this question should have been withdrawn by Sen. Mark since it is now otiose.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can the Minister indicate whether she is aware that since the completion of this project on April the 8th as she indicated, the hon. Minister that is, that there have been emerging problems and challenges? Is the Minister aware of this?

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I do not believe that there any such challenges at this time.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can the Minister indicate whether the Government has done any monitoring of this project since its completion to determine and to ensure that the emerging challenges are addressed?

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: There are no challenges at this time. And you may wish to pose the question in a different way to get the answer which you wish to get.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, is the Minister categorically stating for the records that there are no emerging challenges arising out of the completion by the Government of the Beetham sewer pipeline project?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, I will not allow that question because it is just repeating what you had asked before.

Sen. Mark: Can I proceed, Ma'am?

Madam President: Yeah.

Central Block at the Port-of-Spain General Hospital

(Details of Sub-Contractors)

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

Can the Minister provide the names of the sub-contractors engaged for the construction of the Central Block at the Port-of-Spain General Hospital?

Madam President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):

Thank you very much, Madam President. Pursuant to subclause 4.4 of the particular conditions which amended the general conditions of the FIDIC Conditions of Contract for Plant and Design-Build, 1999 edition, yellow book—known as the yellow book—UDEcOTT is not financially or contractually responsible or obligated whatsoever for the performance of any subcontractors.

The main contractor is responsible for managing, coordinating and paying all of his subcontractors and as such UDEcOTT does not and did not engage subcontractors on the redevelopment of the central block Port of Spain General Hospital project.

The information available to UDEcOTT on the subcontractors was derived from the information the contractor provided to UDEcOTT and as such the names of the subcontractors—subcontractor SEG Caribbean Group Limited identified as having been engaged on the redevelopment of the central block Port of Spain General Hospital project were as follows: Number one, G4S Secure Solutions Trinidad Limited; two, BK Holdings Limited; three, Pro-line Construction Limited; four, Massy Pres-T-Con Limited; five, Beston Consulting Limited; six, Earth Investigating Systems Limited; seven, Independent Materials Testing Limited; eight, Junior Sammy Contractors Limited; nine, Coosal's Construction Company Limited; 10, Surville Limited; 11, Trinrico Steel & Wire Products Limited; 12, Shang Zhi Tong Steel Structure Engineering Company Limited; 13, Shanghai Haizhi Construction Engineering Company Limited; 14, Trinidad Tower

Crane Service Limited; 15, In-Electra Limited and 16, Marble Renewal of the Caribbean Limited. Thank you.

Sen. Mark: Madam.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Yeah. Madam President, can I ask the hon. Minister to inform the Senate of the name of your main contractors on the said project?

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

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the hon. Minister whether Massy Pres-T-Con is a subsidiary of the Massy group of companies.

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

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the Minister whether Massy Pres-T-Con was not sold to a company owned by Allan Warner? And could this be an error?

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

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can I ask the hon. Minister whether UDeCOTT has determined the final cost of this project?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, that question does not arise.

Seuradge Trace Extension

(Restoration of)

86. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Can the Minister state when will the dilapidated bridge in Seuradge Trace Extension be fixed?

Madam President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, the bridge in question falls under the purview of the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation and not under the Ministry of

Works and Transport. However, the Ministry of Works and Transport is willing to provide technical cooperation and assistance that may be required. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the hon. Minister whether any approach has been made to his Ministry by the Penal/Debe Corporation for assistance, technical and otherwise, to address this problem?

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Thank you. Madam President, my information at this time is that no requests have been made to the Ministry of Works and Transport. Thank you.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can the Minister confirm that if and when such a request is made, the Ministry of Works and Transport will provide the necessary guidance, technical assistance and support to address this matter, Madam President?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, that was part of the Minister's answer to the original question. So that is not allowed.

Sen. Mark: Can the Minister indicate from his knowledge how long this particular bridge has been in need of repair?

Madam President: No. Sen. Mark, that question does not arise.

Sen. Mark: Thank you, Madam President.

Madam President: Okay. Next question, Sen. Seepersad.

Central Statistical Office

(Government's Plan to Address Ongoing Challenges)

148. Sen. Charrise Seepersad asked the hon. Minister of Planning and Development:

Given the Government's position that a similar Bill to establish the National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago will not be brought to Parliament at this time, what is the Government's plan for the short, medium and long-term to address the ongoing challenges faced by the CSO in relation to human and physical resources and access to the data necessary to produce critical statistical indices?

Madam President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much, Madam President. The proposed national statistical institute of Trinidad and Tobago is intended to modernize the Central Statistical Office and is not exclusively dependent on new legislation. And this ongoing transformation process would incorporate statistical development to meet the expected standards of the proposed national statistical institution of Trinidad and Tobago.

Specifically, with respect to human resources, the CSO is governed by the Statistics Act of Trinidad and Tobago Chap. 19:02. The Act provides for the organizational requirement of the CSO. In terms of human resource, CSO's organizational structure provides for 351 members of staff. At present, there are 256 permanent officers and 91 contract officers employed and 95 vacancies without bodies within the organization. In the short to medium term the Ministry of Planning and Development is working with CSO through the Public Service Commission to provide additional human resource support at the professional level, as well as to hire additional staff on contract to coordinate the collection of social statistics in general and in particular data pertaining to the Sustainable Development Goals.

To this end between December 2021 and March 2022, the CSO has recruited seven Statistician Is and that is entry level position at the professional level and six

Survey Interviewer Is to add to its cohort of permanent members of staff. Further, the CSO hired 91 contract officers, 73 on short term and 18 on a long-term basis.

In terms of short-term employment, field officers have been hired to enable the CSO to provide more timely data and resume its major periodic household survey such as the continuous sample survey of the population. The CSO can also meet its operational demands for a number of other non-periodic household surveys.

With respect to physical resources, the CSO is housed in two buildings in Port of Spain: Plaza 47, Frederick Street and Scott Building, 30 Park Street which provides sufficient accommodation for its current complement of staff in the short to medium term.

Ultimately in the long term the CSO will need to expand its accommodation to facilitate its transition to the NSITT and to accommodate the recommended staffing structure. Further, the CSO intends to upgrade its physical infrastructure at its Frederick Street office and is currently in the procurement process for the installation of furniture and equipment in the telephone system.

And regarding access to data, the CSO is responsible for producing data relating to the social and economic activities of the country, as well as coordinating the national statistical system of Trinidad and Tobago. So that in the short, medium and long term the CSO intends continue to improve upon the range and quality of statistical data produced and disseminated by working with international development partners facilitated by the Ministry of Planning and Development whilst continuing to fulfil its obligations by undertaking development activities that, inter alia, population and housing census, ongoing collaboration with the Statistic Canada and the IADB on the planning and implementation of the census, price and volume indicators. Work continues with the Caribbean Technical

Assistance Centre (CARTAC) to refine the price and volume indicators used in the GDP estimation process together with improving the scope and quality of national accounting estimates.

Also, the labour force survey, collaborating with the IADB and consulted with the International Labour Organization to undertake a labour force training and its revision of the survey instrument for the revised labour force survey. The survey is expected to be implemented in the third quarter of 2022.

And lastly, computer assisted personal interview, that is, to implement the use of the computer-assisted personal interview method of data collection in sample surveys whereby data are collected on computer tablets or similar digital devices which enable the faster processes and dissemination of data. Thank you very kindly, Madam President.

Madam President: Sen. Seepersad.

Sen. Seepersad: Thank you, Madam President. Through you, Minister, thank you for the response. Minister, what steps are being taken to provide the persons employed at the CSO with continuous training and development?

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I can give you the assurance—thank you. I can give you the assurance that the Ministry is working with the number of people they have employed, 86 in all, to ensure that they produce what they have done. And I think you can see from the current work being done and published in terms of the index of retail prices and inflation data and the GDP data, labour-force data and unemployment rates, they have been publishing more and more. So the training is an ongoing exercise.

Madam President: Sen. Seepersad.

Sen. Seepersad: Madam President. Thank you, Minister. Minister, do the measures include the development of a published code of standards and practice

for statistics?

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Well, I would imagine in the course of the development of the work that they are doing, some formation of what you have asked, I am sure that is going to be developed. But you could—you realize that work is progressing at a speed in all areas.

Madam President: Sen. Seepersad.

Sen. Seepersad: Thank you, Madam President. Yes, Minister, because I am also getting requests for data that had stopped over the years. Madam President, can the Minister say what steps are being taken by the CSO to ensure that they get the relevant data on a timely basis from organizations such as BIR, NIS, public and private enterprises?

Sen. Seepersad: But what you could—

Madam President: No, Minister.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: What I could—

Madam President: No. Minister. Sen. Seepersad, that question is not allowed.

Sen. Seepersad: Thank you.

FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTARY

APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2022

Order for second reading read.

Madam President: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance and Acting Prime Minister (Hon. Colm Imbert):

Thank you, Madam President. I beg to move:

That Bill entitled an Act to supplement the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2022) Act, 2021, be now read a second time.

Madam President, how much time do I have?

Madam President: You have 45 minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. Madam President, this is a finance Bill and it has been passed in the other place. I wish to state at the outset, I intend to stay in my section and deal with the matter at hand and I will not stray into extraneous matters so that hopefully the debate can be on the supplementation of appropriation.

I could say at the outset that I notice every year now, for over six years, whenever there is a supplementation of appropriation or a variation of appropriation Bill which deals with movement of money or supplementation to allocations to various Heads of expenditure and line Items, that notwithstanding the fact that that is what the debate is all about, the same commentary continues every year, that they expect a debate on a supplementation of appropriation to be a second budget speech and to give government policy going forward. Madam President, I want to repeat, I shall stay in my section and deal with the matter before us.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The details of the proposed changes were circulated to all Senators and it is anticipated that during the course of the debate the proposals contained will be addressed by relevant Members of the Government and Senators.

At this juncture let me advise the House, the Senate, that this honourable House that the supplementary appropriation for fiscal 2022 of \$3,081,703,900 affects 29 Heads of expenditure, comprises recurrent expenditure of \$2,976,878,900 and the Development Programme expenditure of \$104,825,000. The funds for the supplementary appropriation will be sourced from the

Consolidated Fund. At this time we do not envisage any significant borrowing but if that is necessary, that will be arranged in order to meet the requirements of any supplementary appropriation.

The appropriation \$3.081 billion is required to cover liabilities on hand and to meet expenditure to the end of the fiscal year. The Heads affected are, the Judiciary, the Industrial Court, the Parliament, Service Commissions, Election and Boundaries Commission, Tax Appeal Board, Registration, Recognition and Certification Board, Public Service Appeal Board, Office of the Prime Minister, Tobago House of Assembly, Central Administrative Services Tobago, the Personnel Department, Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of National Security, Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Integrity Commission, Ministry of Public Utilities, Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, Ministry of Works and Transport, Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, Ministry of Planning and Development, Equal Opportunity Tribunal, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Ministry of Sport and Community Development and finally Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. A grand total of \$3,081,703,900.

Seven of these Heads require a supplementation in excess of 200 million as follows: Finance requires the sum of \$225,966,500 to supplement the Infrastructure and Development Fund to allow the Ministry of Trade and Industry to pay Value Added Tax and other costs associated with the construction of the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate and also, to allow the Ministry of National Security's acquisition of a property located at 32 St. James Street, San Fernando, to

accommodate the south office of the Immigration Division.

The allocation for Value Added Tax for that project is \$92,066,500. The other cost on the project is 25,900,000. That is the allocation. This does not mean that that will actually be disbursed or spent. It depends on the outcome of certain claims the contractor has. And the allocation for the acquisition of that building in San Fernando for the south office of Immigration is 8 million.

Additionally, the sum of 100 million is being provided to facilitate the initial capitalization of the secondary road rehabilitation and improvement company proposed.

The Ministry of National Security requires additional funds in the sum of 206,900,000 to cover shortfalls in allocations for payment of remuneration to various officers, fire service, prison service, et cetera, to pay arrears of travelling and subsistence to officers in the Immigration Division and probation officers; to pay T&TEC and TSTT for services provided in the sums of 9 million and 14,200,000,000. And this is a feature of this supplementation. We have taken the opportunity because of improved revenues, we have taken the opportunity to clear a number of long-outstanding arrears which cash flow simply did not permit us to clear off in the past. So in this Ministry of National Security appropriation there is 9 million for T&TEC, \$14 million—14.2 million for TSTT.

The Ministry of National Security is an additional appropriation also provides for maintenance and repair of vehicles for the fire service, prison service, defence force also for vessels. It provides funding for settlement of a debt owed to NIB with respect of transit police in the sum of 3 million. It provides for arrears owed to MTS for janitorial services, it is 6 million. Further arrears owed to MTS security services, 19 million; food for the prison service 2.5 million, defence force,

6 million. And that is not arrears. That is carrying forward to September 30th for replenishment of fleet cars, purchase of fuel, et cetera, 11 million.

It also provides for current transfers and subsidies within the Ministry of National Security for the payment of gratuities, to allow the Strategic Services Agency to meet its operational cost and also to pay various expenses incurred by the transit police.

The Ministry of Education requires additional funding in the sum of \$300 million to pay T&TEC. Again, as I said a recurring feature of this supplementation, 26.25 million to T&TEC. And you will recognize, Madam President, that the Ministry of Education has responsibilities for electricity across the entire school system and 9.025 million for TSTT.

Payment of salaries to contract officers. Payments to PTSC for school transport by private providers. Payment to MTS for janitorial services in the amount of 54 million and security in the amount of 55 million. Payment to WASA, 3.25 million, payment to CXC, 9.8 million and payment of a number of grants and so on to primary schools. Arrears for telephone and water for assisted primary schools, government secondary schools, funding arrangements interim for Bishop Anstey High School East, Trinity College East. Payment of gratuities, school meals and also to payments to metal industries, skills development programme for administrative staff, again to September.

The Ministry of Health requires a sum of 362,887,700 for the acquisition COVID-19 vaccines for children and adults, 12.5 million for the continuing engagement of the ambulance service, 53.37 million to pay salaries and allowances totalling 274.3 million for the four regional health authorities for personnel assigned to various health facilities within the parallel health care system which is

a significant expense that we have carried for the last two to three years because of COVID; to meet principal payments of 17.7 million and interest on a loan facility at RBC for the acquisition of pharmaceuticals.

That is a very expensive item, Madam Speaker—President, sorry. We spend as a country, over \$1 billion on pharmaceuticals in the public health system—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—over \$1 billion on free medication in the public health system. The Ministry of Public Utilities requires a sum of 408,400,000 the pay T&TEC for street lighting and lighting of Parks, Recreation Grounds 68.4 million. Refunds owed to T&TEC from the rebates 25 per cent and 35 per cent granted to Rate A, the lowest level of customers with electricity billings of \$300 or less, \$12 million in rebates. Payment to WASA to meet wages and salaries 150 million, as well as principal and interest on a US 60 million loan facility to pay Desalcott, 161 million for principal and a 25 million loan facility to settle an outstanding balance of an existing revolving credit facility. That 161 is in fact to the US \$25 million loan and the revolving credit facility allocation is 16 million.

Under the Development Programme, the Ministry of Public Utilities also requires additional funding in the amount of 59.4 million for projects including, additional transmission infrastructure at the Union Estate Gandhi Village 220 kilovolt double circuit, the site of the recent cause of the nationwide power outage. So this is to establish secondary redundancy there to avoid a repeat of what happened there. Sum of 2.3 million for renewable energy for wind LiDAR units. Sum of 35 million for community water improvement programmes, 34 projects across Trinidad. Sum of 1 million for the upgrade of the network service infrastructure. Sum of 1.4 million for geostationary operational environmental

satellite receiving system to allow the Met Office to improve its environmental monitoring. The sum of 1.7 million for the refurbishment of the radar tower of Brasso Venado.

The Ministry of Energy is receiving interim additional funding in the sum of 300 million to meet the shortfall in subsidy with respect to the sale of petroleum products up to September. This is an addition to a surplus of 500-plus million that was generated in previous years, which will be added to this 300 million, making total expenditure on subsidizing motor fuels and LPG over \$800 million in this period. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will receive an additional sum of 390 million to facilitate payment to senior citizens. And Madam President, just may I say, we certainly have an ageing population, people are living far longer than they used to, and therefore, the number of persons on the list, with respect to senior citizens pension is constantly increasing, notwithstanding the pattern of births and deaths, our people are living longer and therefore, pension allocations are constantly increasing and now exceed \$4 billion a year. That, again, is a huge sum of money, Madam President, I think I want to repeat that that the Government spends over \$4 billion a year, every year on senior citizens pension.

The Industrial Court will get 7.9 million, the Judiciary will get 30.3 million for various things: to pay electricity bills, to pay for contract officers, to pay for telephone—outstanding telephone bills, for security, janitorial, etcetera.

The Parliament is getting 4.1 million to pay gratuities to persons who have completed their contract appointments, as well as, contract officers whose appointments will be completed in this fiscal. Service Commission, is getting 14.4 million, again a recurring theme to pay arrears to T&TEC, to pay arrears to TSTT, to deal with rental of properties. Some of the bills that the Government has which

we find it difficult to pay from time to time because of cash flow constraints are electricity, telephone, water, rental of properties, janitorial services, security services. So we are taking the opportunity because of improved cash flow with this supplementation to clear off a number of these things in addition to, accelerating—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—the VAT refunds. As I indicated in the other place, we have allocated an additional \$1.6 billion for VAT refunds and you are not going to see it in this supplementation because the VAT refunds are part of the VAT revenue. So that when you see a figure for VAT in the Estimates of Revenue, that is a net figure so, it takes into account the gross VAT collections and the refunds made. So we are reducing the net revenue figure for value added tax in 2022 by paying out an additional 1.6 billion in refunds over and above what we plan to pay.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So as I said, a recurring theme is payment of gratuities, TSTT bills, T&TEC bills, security, janitorial, rental, and so on.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The EBC is getting money to deal with outstanding allowances to pay, again, to pay TSTT arrears, to pay persons on short-term contracts and also to assist with upgrading its IT infrastructure, allowing it flexibility in terms of advertisements, and also giving the EBC funds to continue one of its core functions which is the registration of electors—this is supposed to be an ongoing exercise at the EBC, it requires payment of salaries to persons on a short-term basis, it provides—it requires contracted services, it requires equipment and supplies for all of the persons who would be going out into the field to verify electoral information and therefore we—there is a total aggregate within the EBC in terms of additional

appropriation for short-term employment, additional appropriation for contracted services, additional appropriation for goods and services and supplies, totalling \$10 million for this fiscal to allow the EBC to continue to keep its records up to date.

Tax Appeal Board will be getting 1.8 million for rental accommodation among other things. The Registration Board will get additional funding for consultancy services for upgrade of its air conditioning system and so on. The Public Service Appeal Board will get additional funding for rental accommodation. The Office of the Prime Minister will receive \$59.9 million for fees for the commission of enquiry into the land acquisition process carried out by NIDCO for the Solomon Hochoy extension project, to pay contract officers in the Division of Gender Affairs and again a recurring theme, to pay arrears to T&TEC, TSTT and also to assist the Communications Division to train its staff and to place advertisements within the traditional media. There is also 26.7 million for various elements within the childcare and protection sector. 1 million for non-profit institutions, children's homes, 289,000 for St. Dominic's Children's Home, 3 million for St. Jude's and 22.3 million for the Children's Authority.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: There is also 500,000 for the Cyril Ross Home and various other supplemental appropriations to deal with debt servicing and so on. We are also giving the THA \$60 million to facilitate the payment of outstanding debts, the National Helicopter Services—the THA uses the National Helicopter Services to transport critically ill patients from Tobago to Trinidad in the event that there is a critically ill person who requires tertiary care or specialist health care that is not available in Tobago, these persons are airlifted to Trinidad to the various RHAs such as the North Central RHA and so on for tertiary health care and for a

specialist health care. So that, we are providing 27.8 million for clearance of a debt owed to National Helicopter Services Limited and also, 19 million to clear off a debt owed to T&TEC and also, 13 million for gratuities for persons who have completed their appointments—that is THA, total 60 million.

The Central Administrative Services in Tobago would be getting additional funding of 2.6 million for rental accommodation, for janitorial services, security services, et cetera. Personnel Department is getting 8.2 million—that is the CPO's office for payment of salaries to monthly paid officers, rental accommodation, short-term employment, gratuities, et cetera. The Personnel Department is also getting a further 1.5 million under the Development Programme to develop its human resource capacity. Also, to look at the Public Service Employee Assistance Programme, to review it and also to outfit the building that it occupies at 3 Alexandra Street, St. Clair.

The Office of the Attorney General will receive 79 million for acquisition of new polymer certificates for births and deaths and other similar matters that the Office of the Attorney General deals with, to pay for arrears of salary due to revised terms and conditions for contract officers for short-term employment, to pay fees to local and foreign attorneys and accountants, to meet gratuity payments and so on. The Integrity Commission will get an additional 350,000 for the employment of persons on a short-term basis—consultants, I believe.

The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government is getting 95.3 million to deal with expenditure associated with the implementation of the Public Procurement Act, digitization of the Ministry's records, materials for the National Cleanup Campaign, additional funding for CEPEP and also, additional funding—

supplementary funding for personnel expenditure in all 14 corporations totalling 40.6 million.

Ministry of Works and Transport is getting 97 million to pay arrears of payments for contractors for works completed last year, for rental of equipment, for desilting of water courses, and also to award contracts for desilting of water courses and also to assist the Airports Authority which is quite challenged because of the closure of our borders and the suspension of air traffic. It is coming back up but it has not yet reached the level where the Airports Authority can generate sufficient revenue from landing fees and other fees and charges to cover its expenses. So to support the Airports Authority to maintain a fully functional international airport in the same way we are supporting Caribbean Airlines to a significant amount, we are providing 66.7 million to support the Airports Authority in fiscal 2022—a subvention as it were.

Housing and Urban Development is getting 76 million to pay contractors for the provision of various services, recurrent services, waste disposal, building maintenance, et cetera, 67 million for that. And then, for the payment of principal on a UDeCOTT loan for the construction of the phase one of the Piccadilly Street Urban Regeneration Project. Ministry of Housing is also getting 27.3 million under the Development Programme for the rehabilitation and maintenance of HDC rental apartments, to pay outstanding bills for rehabilitation work, for housing grants a further 4 million, and 11 million for the development of residential lots for Petrotrin workers—former Petrotrin workers.

The Ministry of Planning and Development, is getting 9 million for the payment of arrears of salaries and subsistence allowance at the EMA based on a new collective agreement and industrial court judgment. The Equal Opportunity

Tribunal is getting 2.4 million for various things, increments, contract officers, subscription and legal fees, security services et cetera. Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is getting 120 million to enable the agriculture Surveys and Mapping and Forestry Divisions to pay allowances for animal production and health, et cetera, to enable payments for travelling and subsistence and so on for short-term employment, and to assist with the payment of salaries for the Caribbean Fisheries Training and Development Institute, Caribbean Agriculture Research and Development Institute, Sugar Cane Feed Centre, farmers incentives for the period up to '22, 7.7 million and also to facilitate payment of principal on a loan for the settlement of a judgment debt incurred by EMBD in previous years.

With respect to Ministry of Sport and Community Development, the sum of 67 million is being provided to meet gratuity payments for contract officers and to pay arrears to MTS for security and other services in the sum of 62 million. Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, is receiving 20 million to meet a principal payment on a TT\$100 million loan facility which was taken out to provide assistance to artistes during the COVID period and also to clear off a lot of bills that the NCC had. And I want to make the point, Madam President, in the other place, I heard—trying not to be unparliamentary but I cannot—heard a lot of nonsense about allocations for debt servicing, that this will create a debt burden; it is the exact opposite. When you provide funding for the payment of principal, you are in fact paying down your debt and reducing your debt. So we are taking the opportunity with this supplementary appropriation, not just to pay bills, long outstanding bills, VAT refunds, et cetera, we are also paying down the public debt so that it will continue to go down.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: If I could just turn very briefly to the fiscal outturn. I think I have dealt with all the Heads of expenditure now—who is grumbling over there, Madam President?

Madam President: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay, the—still grumbling? The 2022 budget projected an overall fiscal deficit of 9.095 billion, 5.8 per cent of GDP. This deficit of 9.05 billion was expected to take place in installments over the 12 months of the fiscal year from October '21, to September '22. So, the Budget Division had estimated that by the time March 31, 2022 arrived, we would have an overall deficit of some 4.75 billion out of the 9.09 billion for the whole fiscal year. However, we have benefited from significant additional revenue, in particular from the petrochemical companies. And this is what allows us to pay these supplementations. I am putting it in context, Madam President. The way we can pay the supplementation is that the fiscal accounts are performing better than expected. So even though we are seeking Parliament's approval for additional and supplementary funds, in the amount of approximately 3 billion, the revenues have improved, so that we expect additional revenues exceeding \$4 billion. So that I will just give some brief details on how we are going to pay for this additional supplementation. Because that I want to defeat the argument that this is going to increase the debt burden; it is simply not true. We are paying for the supplementation entirely out of additional revenues.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So that we had expected by this time, that we would have a deficit of expenditure over revenue of 4.75 billion by the end of March. However, based on the actual revenue received and the expenditure incurred, the Government

recorded a surplus of 654 million by the end of March, significantly more if you take the two figures together. One is a negative, one is a positive. It meant that the fiscal accounts performed to the tune of \$5.4 billion better than expected. So instead of a deficit of 4.75 billion, we had a surplus of 654 million. This is as a result of higher than projected revenue of 3.13 billion, and a reduction in expenditure of 2.2 billion because we are still being very, very careful, Madam President. We cannot continue to run deficit budgets, we have had to do this for all sorts of reasons. Over the last six years, we have had to run deficit budgets because of the collapse of oil prices between 2015 and 2016 from a \$100, down to \$25 in just 12 months, or less, actually, from July 2014, down to—July 2015, sorry, down to 2016, the price went from 100 down to 25. So we had to run a deficit. But the revenue began to improve, we reduced expenditure, the deficit shrank and we were very close to achieving a fiscal balance in 2018/2019, then COVID hit. So we have had to run deficit budgets, from 2015 to now. Previous governments also ran deficit budgets, but you cannot continue to run a country like that because it means, a deficit means, that you have to finance it and you finance it either from borrowing or from withdrawals from your sovereign wealth fund. So that we achieved a surplus in March because of higher revenue, and we are still managing expenditure quite tightly.

The Budget Division is looking at all of the inflows and outflows, we are always looking at cash flows, we are always projecting cash flows, every day managing the cash flows and so on, and we expect to continue to have certain savings in certain areas and we expect to have additional expenditure in certain areas. So that total expenditure has now been revised upwards to \$55.19 billion up from the original figure, an increase of about \$2.76 billion. We were just over 52

when we did the budget—52.4 thereabouts, and we expect it now to go up to 55.12, an increase of 2.76 billion. But again, we will continue to tightly manage expenditure. So we may not spend that entire 2.76 billion, and that, if you look at the pattern over the last six years that is our pattern, we have tightly controlled expenditure, we very prudently managed the revenue that we have. So that the 2022 budget was predicated on an average oil price of US\$65 per barrel, and a natural gas netback price of US 3.75 per MMBtu.

In the 2022 budget, because this is a supplementation to the 2022 budget and again, putting it in context, total revenue was announced at 43.3 billion, total expenditure, 52.4 billion, those were the Estimates at that time. And that gives us the deficit of 9.09 billion estimated at that time. The revenue at this time, we are being very conservative, we are using an oil price of \$95 per barrel and we are using a gas price of \$5 per barrel. And if you will permit me, Madam President, just let me take a look—oil is \$112 today, and natural gas is \$8.13. Now, that price that is quoted, that Henry Hub price can be misleading, because in Trinidad and Tobago, we use a basket of natural gas prices. Now, we have over the last six years, we have had discussions and negotiations with the energy companies and we now use a basket of prices. This is how we get additional extraordinary revenue. So we use the Henry Hub price which is a North American standard, we use a European benchmark, and we use a far east benchmark to give us a formula—insert that into a formula to give us extraordinary additional revenue so that the natural gas price that will be used for the budget is not \$8.13. In addition, that quoted price, Henry Hub, is not a netback price. You have to subtract from that the cost of transportation of LNG and also regasification of LNG at the final destination wherever the gas arrives to get the netback price, which is what you use

in the budget. So our netback price of \$3.75 per MMBtu was predicated on assumptions relating to the transportation costs for LNG and also assumptions predicated on the costs for regasification and other costs associated with gas—natural gas production. Right now, we are looking at, at least \$5 per MMBtu as a netback price going forward, but maybe more, so we have been extremely conservative.

So using an oil price of \$95, and a gas price of \$5 we have—and also taking into account the reduction in revenue from the additional VAT refunds—I wish to make the point that when you pay out more VAT refunds than you planned, it reduces your overall revenue figure. So taking that into account, the reduction in revenue as a result of the payout of VAT refunds and the conservative oil price of \$95 per barrel and the conservative gas price of \$5, we expect an increase in total revenue of \$4,125,000,000 in this fiscal year. If this works out, and if our projected increase in overall expenditure when you take into account supplementation and the expected savings in various multiple Heads of 2.76 billion, we expect the deficit to be reduced from 9.09 down to maybe 7.7 or lower.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: In fact, I do expect it to be lower because the figures assume that we will spend every cent that we are appropriating which as I said, over the years we have tightly managed this so we should have a much better performance in 2022. I do not want to talk out of turn, I do not know what the deficit is going to be, but I know it is going to be much less than \$9 billion.

Now, the increase in revenue is mainly increased income from taxes on income and profits, primarily oil and gas and other companies and other companies in the books when you look in the revenue document and you see a line that says

“other companies”, that means the non-oil sector in terms of traditional non-oil manufacturing, retail, financial services, construction, et cetera, plus petrochemical companies. So petrochemical companies are lumped in that definition “other companies”. So we do expect significant increase in revenue, we have already started to receive it from the petrochemical companies. And that is because of the extraordinary prices of petrochemicals primarily for food production, fertilizer, ammonia, urea, et cetera. Some of these prices are two and three and sometimes four times what they were two or three years ago. That is a product of demand from the developed countries and emerging economies, from large economies like China and so on, the demand for fertilizer in United States, demand for fertilizer, recovery from COVID and so on, and also the war in Ukraine has contributed in some way to this, so that we find that petrochemical prices are much higher than they used to be, which is helping our revenue situation in Trinidad and Tobago tremendously.

In terms of the actual numbers, I can give some details—just excuse me one second, Madam President, and I am watching my time.

11.00 a.m.

Madam President: Acting Prime Minister, you have five more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Pardon?

Madam President: Five more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes. I have a stopwatch on. So, Madam President, the primary increases in revenue for 2022, as I said, are focused mainly on improved revenue from oil and gas sector but also from petrochemical sector, and so on. Taxes on incomes and profits, we expect it to be up by 3.2 billion; taxes on goods and services, that is value added tax, 178 million, despite the fact that we are putting

out significant refunds. International trade, customs duties, that is 22 million; unemployment fund which is derived from oil companies, up by 122 million; Green Fund, again primarily from the energy sector, up by 207 million; and then we have some lower than projected receipts in some areas. The petrochemical sector in particular is contributing almost \$2 billion in additional revenue in 2022. So those are some of the numbers.

In the short time remaining to me, Madam President, I would just like to give some information, because as I indicated at the beginning of my presentation, this is not a budget speech; this is a supplementation of appropriation. As I said, every time I do this I hear people talk about, why did I not talk about this and why did I not talk about that. Well, I have 45 minutes; they seem to think I have 450 minutes and it would be a disservice to the Senate if I did not deal with the matter at hand, which is the supplementary appropriation to Ministries, and I did not explain—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—but commentators are mischievous.

So let me just make some points here. The public debt is coming down. It was 130.6 billion at the end of December of '21, it is now 129.8 billion.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: We have not borrowed for five months. The overdraft limit has dropped from the usual 80 to 90 per cent last year to 50 per cent at this point in time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Our debt to GDP, because our GDP is now far more than originally estimated—we had used preliminary data at the time of the budget, we

now have actual data for 2021—our GDP is now \$180 billion, up from 151—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—at the time of the budget. And the GDP for 2021 is now confirmed at 170 billion. What this means is that instead of a debt-to-GDP ratio of 87 per cent, which is what we thought it was when we had preliminary data from the CSO last year at budget time, it was in fact 77 per cent, 10 per cent lower, and now, today, it is 72 per cent; 15 per cent lower than it was thought to be in 2021.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: This gives us far more fiscal space than we thought that we had and puts Trinidad and Tobago in a much better position to deal with critical expenditure. And in fact, when I look at the graphs, which we will be publishing in due course, you will see a significant recovery of our GDP, both nominal and real GDP, starting at the end of 2020 and climbing to a point now where our GDP in 2022 is higher than it was in 2015, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: You know, the commentators like to say a lot of things that are simply not correct. Our GDP is now higher than it was in 2015; I want to repeat that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So, Madam President, with these few words, I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you. Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam

President, according to the Explanatory Note accompanying the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2022, we are advised in this Senate that the object of the Bill is to supplement the appropriation provided for by the appropriation (Financial Year 2022) Act, 2021, by authorizing the issue from the Consolidated Fund in the sum of \$3.081 billion. Now, we are further told that it is to address, Madam President, urgent and critical recurrent and capital expenditure to the end of September of 2022 in areas where insufficient or no allocation was provided. The document that we have before us for reference purposes outlines exactly where the Government intends to spend the 3.081 billion in supplementation. This would, as the Minister has outlined, increase the budget, the expenditure for 2022 from 52.4 billion to just over 55 billion. So the budget for 2022, for all intents and purposes, will now read \$55 billion and not \$52 billion.

So when we look at the various Sub-Heads that this money would be allocated to, we see Personnel Expenditure around 52 billion; Goods and Services, 621 million; Minor Equipment Purchases, about 5 million; Current Transfers, roughly about 1.8 billion; Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies, just about 5 or 6million, and the saddest Item of them all is the Development Programme which has been provided with a paltry 104 million. And one would have thought that if the Government is interested in improving productive investment, productive capacity to generate greater levels of economic activity and generate employment opportunities in this country, more money would have been allocated towards the capital programme, Madam President, and not this paltry \$104 million.

Madam President, this mid-year review from where I stand, and from where we stand is an exercise in deflection, derision and deception.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: The Minister of Finance is boasting using nominal GDP figures to paint a picture of a rebounding economy when every A-level student of Economics knows that the health of an economy is described, not in nominal GDP terms but, Madam President, in real—in real GDP terms.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: So who in the world uses nominal GDP to describe the health or the condition of an economy? Madam President, the only person that does that is the Minister of Finance in this country. The boost to revenue is due not to plans, not to strategy, not to any kind of economic activity dealing with new streams of revenues. It has nothing to do with the attraction of foreign direct investment by this Government. It has only to do with the war in Ukraine.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, if I could just ask you to lower your voice.

Sen. W. Mark: Thank you, Madam President. It has only to do with the war in Ukraine. So if it is anybody we should be thanking is maybe Vladimir Putin in Russia.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, because of this war the prices of energy or hydrocarbon products, whether it is oil, Madam President, whether it is gas or petrochemical products, prices have been driven to higher heights, and therefore, Madam President, the boost in revenue is due to high oil prices; high natural gas prices. And, Madam President, as the Minister has alluded to in a contribution elsewhere, it is also due to historic high ammonia prices among other petrochemical products.

So, like the Minister of Energy told Richard Quest in this infamous CNN interview, the price of ammonia has gone from US \$182 per metric tonne to just

over US \$1,400 per metric tonne. So here is where, Madam President, the air becomes rare. So therefore the boost in revenue has nothing to do with the policies of this intellectually bankrupt—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark:—PNM Government, Madam President. Madam President, may I remind you that oil production was projected by this Government to be at around 83,000 barrels around this time. Madam President, it is now around 60,000 or thereabouts per day. Natural gas production is still under 3 billion cubic feet per day. We were told it would have been at around 3.3 or thereabout. Train 1 has crashed; it is down and may never restart. The refinery remains down and it is headed for its fourth year of shutdown at the time, Madam President, when refinery margins around the world are at record highs and refineries are making money hand over fist, whilst ours is closed and is fast becoming scrap iron.

So, Madam President, I want to say it from the opening, that in spite of the crowing by our hon. Minister of Finance, the average citizen in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, with all this \$180 billion GDP, nominal growth or value, boasted by the hon. Minister of Finance, ordinary average “John Doe”, ordinary “John Citizen” still cannot get US \$200 in a bank today.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, despite the exuberance of the Minister of Finance, trade unions and workers are being offered 2 per cent over an eight-year period in bargaining at this time. If the economy is so good, if GDP nominal growth is so high, Madam President, we call on the Minister of Finance and the Government to pay the public servants properly.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: So, Madam President, despite the economic aerobics of the Minister of Finance, inflation is troubling the ordinary man; capital flight has increased, unemployment is rising exponentially. There is growing income and wealth, inequality as never seen before. Citizens are emigrating to new lands and—

Sen. Mitchell: Madam President—

Sen. W. Mark:—the private sector is in retreat—

Sen. Mitchell:—on a point of order, please.

Sen. W. Mark:—after the battering of the past seven years.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, a Standing Order is being invoked. Yes, hon. Minister.

Sen. Mitchell: On a point of order, please, Madam President, 46(1).

Madam President: So, Sen. Mark, I am giving you some leeway so that you can put your contribution in context, but I will ask you to try and get to that context now, please.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, may I indicate, as I take your very powerful advice, may I revert immediately to the documents that we have been provided with. And, Madam President, the Minister indicated—not in so many words but I would like to summarize what I took from what he indicated; that is the Minister—that the supplementation of 3 billion will go towards paying bills, paying arrears, paying gratuities, paying arrears to T&TEC, WASA, TSTT, paying suppliers, paying contractors, servicing loans, among others. And of course, Madam President, the Minister took the opportunity to also tell us how the macroeconomic indicators, how are they faring, and he talked about debt-to-GDP ratio, total public debt. He talked about fiscal balance, fiscal deficit, among other things.

Madam President, when I rifled through the document that is before us—

and, Madam President, may I advise that the 3.081 billion will be spread among 29 Heads of Expenditure—29 Heads of Expenditure, but, Madam President, when we examine very carefully these Heads of Expenditure, what do we see? We are seeing, as I said earlier, arrears of moneys going towards WASA. In the case of T&TEC, we are seeing where, Madam President, owing—the Government owing arrears to T&TEC dating back to '18, '19, '20, '21. Madam President, when you add up the numbers under the various Heads of Expenditure, I have been able to come up with the figure of close to about \$78 million or thereabouts that the Government owed to T&TEC over the last so many years. These are the figures that are before us. So the Government, Madam President, owed T&TEC close to \$100million. In the case of TSTT, another 34 million when we looked at it. Madam President, so whether it is short-term employment, whether it is gratuity payment, whether it is contract employment, whether it is short-term employment, whether it is salary, COLA, NIS, overtime, whether it is travelling and subsistence allowances, over \$200million and climbing, this Government owed these people. Owe public servants, owe ordinary people for years, Madam President, and because of the war in Ukraine we are able to pay these workers and pay COLA and pay salaries, and pay subsistence and travelling allowance.

These are documents that are here but, Madam President, what this tells us—and I hope you appreciate it, Madam President—is simply this, the Government, in a very skillful manner, was able over the years to under budget. They were able to actually provide figures to the country that really did not reflect reality, so they are now coming back—they are now catching up, Madam President, in all of the funds that they did not allocate in the years gone by. The chickens are coming home to roost at this time. Madam President, I want to

indicate, when we look at this 3.081 billion—I would like to ask the Minister of Finance, how will this percolate down to the ordinary citizen in a real and meaningful and tangible manner? The Minister talks about a surplus at the end of March of just under \$700 million but, Madam President, with a projected increase in revenues that could reach as high and past \$5 billion at the end of fiscal 2022, as a result of higher oil, gas and petrochemical prices, how will the people benefit?

Madam President, one of the biggest challenges facing the people of our country are higher fuel and food prices and I thought that the Minister of Finance would have used this surplus, this extra moneys that he got, like any ordinary citizen going down a road or going down a street and was lucky to find a bag of money, Madam President, I thought the Minister would have been able to use that money to bring down the price at the pump further. I thought the Minister would have used that money to bring about some degree of easing up of what is called, Madam President, the crushing increases—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark:—in the prices of food stuff. Every time you go in the supermarket, every time you go in the grocery, every time you go in the parlour or the shop, Madam President, the prices are going through the roof. And, Madam President, we would have thought the Minister of Finance and the Government would have utilized a certain percentage of the revenue surplus to provide some cushioning for the ordinary people. And I have some suggestions for the Government as to how they should go about doing so, Madam President, but I will tell you so, Madam President, in a short while.

Sen. Mitchell: Madam President, 46(1), please.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, may I continue? Sorry.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, continue.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, I would not spend too much time on the ratios that the hon. Minister sought to address because he did not have the time at his disposal to do it. All I can tell you, Madam President, is that when we look at the reality facing Trinidad and Tobago today, we are seeing where the Government is saying one thing, Madam President, and the experience is another.

Madam President, do you know as we speak today, when we look at the real side of our economy, which is what we need to look at if we are to make sense, Madam President, do you know, Madam President, what is happening? Madam President, the data that we have looked at revealed that there is a contraction in the trading sector by close to 13 per cent. So the trading sector, whether it is oil, whether it is gas, whether it is manufacturing or agriculture is contracting by 13.8 or 13.1 per cent, I think, or thereabouts, Madam President, between 2019 and 2021. So the economy is contracting, the trading sector is contracting and, Madam President, the non-trading sector, which is made up of services, retail, distribution, that sector is also contracting by close to 9 per cent. So the trading sector in our country is contracting faster than the non-trading sector, and this Minister comes here to boast about the economy is in good hands and nominal growth in terms of GDP is up to \$180 billion. Madam President, I give you the assurance today that if there is a peace relationship emerging between Ukraine and Russia and the price of oil goes down to \$40 a barrel, we are back to square one—we are back to square one. So that is why I am saying, Madam President, let us be real. Let us look at the real side of our economy and look at how our economy is performing. We are living in a fool's paradise.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: This is a house of cards that can crash at any time, Madam President.

So, yes, we are glad that they are paying VAT. We are glad that they are helping out these people who are owed money, Madam President. Madam President, I want to ask the Minister of Finance or the Minister of Public Administration who might have information on this matter; I have been advised that businessmen in this country are receiving VAT repayments, some of them 600,000, some of them 800,000—but whilst they are getting that, Madam President, in terms of the VAT refund, and as you know, Madam President, in this budget supplementation the Minister of Finance spoke about \$1.6 billion that they are going to utilize to pay out outstanding VAT. The IMF says we owe or we have an outstanding balance of, I think, close to 7 billion. So we want to know, Madam President, if the Government is aware that whilst they are seeking to provide some degree of relief in terms of VAT payments, the very Board of Inland Revenue and VAT office is sending out letters to the very businessmen, telling these businessmen that they owe them 500,000, 300,000, Madam President, and that is going back to 2006 and 2008.

So we do not know what is going on. They are saying they are paying back, but at the same time they are telling the businessmen you owe, and “yuh” owe five years ago, six years ago, seven years ago. Madam President, we need to get the Government to clear the air on these matters.

11.30 a.m.

When we look at the matters before us, and we look at the various Heads of Expenditure that we have before us, I want the Government, through the Minister of Finance—and I am going to Head 18, Madam President, with your leave. If you

go to Head 18, which is the Ministry of Finance, we are seeing where the Government has allocated the sum of \$100 million for what is called a “secondary road programme”. It is called a Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Programme, and this money is in our supplementation to establish a company called the Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company Limited. This is to facilitate, according to the notes here, the initial capitalization of the Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company.

Madam President, when we checked the Companies’ Registry for this company, this company does not exist. The last time we checked, there was no company incorporated by the Ministry of Finance called this company, this named company. If they have since done it, please inform this honourable Senate, but we cannot approve \$100 million to go to a company that does not live, that does not exist. So we want clarification from the Government on this matter. This is a very serious matter.

Hon. Senator: A ghost company.

Sen. W. Mark: No, they may not be a ghost company. It might be a real company, but there is no evidence to show in the Companies Registry that this is a real company. That is why we are asking the Government to intervene and provide clarity for the country at this time. So that is one area, Madam President, that cries out for some clarification.

Madam President, I go to another very critical area, that is energy. If you go to energy, Madam President, as a Head of Expenditure, and energy is Head 40, you see \$300 million going towards subsidization of fuel. Madam President, we would like to ask the Minister why the Government could not provide a greater level of subsidy to the ordinary people, particularly those who utilize diesel and super.

Why? You have only allocated 300 and then plus a five, so in all “is” 800 million you are subsidizing. But, Madam President, when we look at these figures here carefully, “de” moneys will end up going for financiers, “de” money will end up going towards friends, it will end up going to families of the PNM, and poor people who need support, either for food or fuel, is not getting the kind of support.

Madam President, I would like the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries to come to this Parliament and explain the following. Madam President, we are subsidizing fuels to the tune of 800 million. The Minister told us it is close to 2 billion. But you know what we do not understand, and we need the Minister to explain? In the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries Bulletin 2021 and 2020, and for January of 2022, we are seeing where in 2020, Trinidad and Tobago importing, in terms of fuel that we use, whether it is premium, whether it is super gasoline, whether it is diesel, whether it is kerosene, we are importing 2.4 billion litres of refined fuel products. But, Madam President, you know what? We are only using 1.1 billion litres. So 1.3 billion litres of our refined fuel is being re-exported.

I would like the Government to tell the country today, where is the 1.3 billion litres that we are using scarce foreign exchange to import? Where is it going? To whom is it going to? What moneys are we gaining from this 1.3 billion litres? We need to get—

Madam President: Tone it down.

Sen. W. Mark: Sorry, Madam. We need to get clarification, because I would hate to believe that we are re-exporting this 1.3 billion litres. And, Madam President, you know what? It is being re-exported at a loss. Madam President, I raised all this to let you know that if this is being exported at the real price, we should be able to get sufficient money to subsidize the \$2 billion for the people of this country,

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particularly the motorists, the super gasoline users, the diesel users and the kerosene users. We have increased kerosene from \$1.50 cents per litre in April, to \$3.50 cents per litre. That is unconscionable and, therefore we call on the Government to give us an explanation. Is the Government exporting our refined fuel products to Venezuela? Is the Government breaking and busting sanctions? These are questions we want clarified. I am not accusing the Government of anything, I am asking for clarification.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of order.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: 46(1).

Madam President: Sen. Mark, I have to agree that you have now strayed very far from the matter at hand, and I would ask you please—

Sen. W. Mark: Madam, I am guided.

Madam President: Thank you.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, I welcome you back. I missed you. [*Laughter*]

Madam President, may I say in going forward, let us go to Head 61. Madam President, let us go to Head 61, and let us deal with Housing and Urban Development. Madam President, I looked on in amazement at proceedings in the other place. The Government has allocated, according to the document that we have before us, some \$103,600,000 to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. When we look and we ask, what is this money for, it is to pay suppliers and to pay contractors. We asked them, who are these contractors, give us their names, let us know how much moneys the taxpayers are putting out. I was shocked to know that the Government is paying to the Government, through a company called Pical Services, \$4 million. [*Sen. Gopee-Scoon rises*]

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

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, that is in the document.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, just allow the Minister to invoke the point of order please. Minister.

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

Madam President: Sen. Mark, just continue.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, I would like to ask the Government to clear the air because we read, with some degree of astonishment, moneys going to a particular credit union, not in the name of a company, but in the name of an individual personal account.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, even though I allowed you to continue to make your point, I am not sure what point you are making, that particular one, so I will ask you please just move on.

Sen. W. Mark: Okay, Madam President. In terms of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development we ask—

Madam President: You have five more minutes.

Sen. W. Mark: Yes. We asked, Madam President, there are a number of contractors we are told that are involved in repairing and maintaining and repainting these HDC rental apartments. So we ask for the names of these contractors. We want to know how much they got. All we got were the names. We got no equivalent values.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: So what did you ask for?

Sen. W. Mark: What we saw was apart from the 4 million given to this company called Pical Services, we saw the new one with Pical services again and Klydon Services, or Enterprises. So on two occasions this company is featured in this

arrangement.

Madam President, I ask a simple question. Should the police, should the FIU, should the BIR, should the Integrity Commission get involved in this matter?

Sen. Mitchell: Madam President, on a point of order please. Madam President, 46(6).

Madam President: Actually Sen. Mark I am going back to the relevant Standing Order. You have made your point, I am asking you please to move on, because what you are saying now is not really relevant to the matter at hand.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, in closing, I have a few initiatives I would like the Minister of Trade and Industry to pay attention to, to bring down the pressure, to ease the burden, to ease the pressure on the poor man in this country. The first area I would like to recommend for the Minister's consideration, revert to the freight costs prior to COVID-19. Madam President—[*Sen. Gopee-Scoon rises*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: On a point of order.

Sen. W. Mark: No, I am putting forward proposals.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: What is the relevance of freight costs? Which Head are we on?

Sen. W. Mark: I am saying that the high cost of living—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: What Head are we on?

Sen. W. Mark: I am saying that the high cost of living—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: What Head are we on?

Sen. W. Mark: The high cost of living.

Madam President: All right. Sen. Mark, Minister. Let me just say here Sen. Mark. All these recommendations—you are making recommendation about matters that have not been raised and are not part of what is before us. So please, use your last

few minutes to deal with the matter at hand.

Sen. W. Mark: It may not have been raised, Madam President, but fuel prices is leading to higher food prices. It is affecting the ordinary people, and all I am saying, if we have a heart and we understand the troubles that the ordinary people are going through, I am putting forward some proposals for the Government's consideration to help the ordinary people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Look what is happening in Sri Lanka. We do not want Trinidad and Tobago to become a Sri Lanka!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: That is why I am putting forward proposals for the Government's consideration, to ease the crisis. So I am asking the Government to go back to the pre-COVID period, before freight prices went through the roof. It is costing a lot of money to get food into this country. So that is the first area. I want the Government to go to the CARICOM desk, and with a list of products, like condensed milk and black-eyed peas, and let them remove the Common External Tariff on these products so people can get those things at a lower price.

The final point, Madam President, VAT. There are a number of products that still fetch the 12.5 per cent. The Minister of Trade and Industry should revisit these lists of food items and remove the 12.5 per cent on these food products to ease the burden. I am a spokesman for the ordinary and poor people of Trinidad and Tobago, and I am making a plea to the Government to rescue our people. Hunger is stalking our land, poverty is rising.

Madam President, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to bring these matters to your attention. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Seepersad.

Sen. Charrise Seepersad: Madam President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2022. The Bill seeks to authorize the Government to access 3.082 billion from the Consolidated Fund to fund urgent and critical recurrent and capital expenditure to September 2022 in areas where there are insufficient funds or no allocation of funds were provided in the budget 2021/2022.

The additional 3.082 billion is only the about 7 per cent of the budget presented for this fiscal year, and in the overall scheme of things is really not exorbitant. Comparatively, most projects were saddled with cost overruns for unplanned and unforeseen expenditure.

The supplemental appropriation of 3.082 billion comprises COVID-19 related expenditure, 41 per cent, or \$12.5 million; other recurrent expenditure, 96.1, 9 per cent or \$2.964 billion, and PSIP expenditure of 3.4 per cent, or \$104.825 million. An analysis of the details reveal that most cost items are payment for bills that have long been outstanding, Madam President. They include salaries; wages; cost of living; travel allowances and gratuities; contract employment payments; maintenance; insurance and rental costs for buildings, vehicles and equipment; janitorial and security services; loan payments; office supplies; subsidy payments for fuel, LPG; housing grants; water; electricity, et cetera; payments to construction project contractors and payment for services from utility companies.

I assume that the Minister has a plan to rationalize the lease rental accommodation for Government offices to move to Government-owned

accommodation in the very near future so that we can see significant cost savings in this line Item.

Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance has provided details on the marginally improved performance of many sectors of the economy from the pre-pandemic period starting from January 2020. While there are no major new revenue-earning developments, the windfall of \$5 billion was due to general business recovery and high oil and gas prices.

The increase of Government revenue was due mainly to higher tax received, and arriving from the availability of these increasing revenues, payments would be made to Items such as increased VAT payment refunds to businesses, \$1.676 billion; payment of outstanding bills to utility companies; payment to MTS for janitorial and security services provided to Ministries and state enterprises; use of part of the surplus generated from the sale of petroleum fuels to fund subsidies, including LPG, the allocation in the Bill from the petroleum subsidy is \$300 million.

Madam President, \$18 million is to be allocated to the Ministry of Public Utilities for the additional infrastructure to move power from Trinidad Generation Unlimited. This allocation I believe is to address the critical issue of upgrading the electrical distribution system. The nationwide blackout on February 16, 2022, was caused by the failure of the one T&TEC power line from Trinidad Generation Unlimited.

The international developments which positively impacted Trinidad and Tobago's economy includes the rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the reopening of worldwide economies. This is notwithstanding the current China lockdown. The war between the Russia and Ukraine has also provided upward

pressure on energy prices. The main driver for the increase in ammonia prices is the monthly loss of 300,000 tonnes of Russian material because of the war in Ukraine.

While Trinidad and Tobago is the eighth largest world producer of ammonia, Russia and Trinidad and Tobago are the largest exporters. The price increases is the main driver for the reopening of the ammonia plants in Point Lisas, and the shelving of the Natural Gas feedstock price dispute. Ammonia companies can now accommodate the prices demanded by bpTT and Shell in the last round of negotiations. The increased prices in ammonia and natural gas are critical to Trinidad and Tobago's revenues.

Madam President, it must be noted that increasing energy prices, including natural gas, affects T&TEC and increases the subsidy which individuals and companies enjoy. This puts further demand for the Government's financial resources, including subsidies. We see this effect in the Bill by the additional subsidies under several Heads of Expenditure.

The IMF has projected that the medium term energy sector performance is going to flatten because of the increasing transition to renewables. While we cannot continue to depend on the energy sector, the renewables must be aggressively brought on stream. I am hoping that part of the windfall revenues will be invested in this sector.

While we must take care of and include diversification and development for the future, we need to focus on diversifying the economy, reducing the public debt, increasing competitiveness, attracting investments and instituting measures to make Trinidad and Tobago resilient to regional and global shocks.

Madam President, the supplemental appropriation Bill 2022 includes the

payment of subsidies, as I have just said. Fiscal subsidies include the GATE programme. While the GATE programme has now been restructured, previously saving for tertiary education was unnecessary for parents, and left graduates with very little debt. Parents are now required to fund part or all of their children's tertiary education through savings and/or debt.

Healthcare—the recent shortage of medicine highlighted the subsidized health care system, even if the subsidized service is left undesirable. Subsidies are also paid for public housing, water and electricity. There seems to be a direct correlation between rising energy prices and the increasing subsidy requirements.

World food shortages are protected because of war, famine and pestilence. The heatwave in India and other parts of the world present growing climatic challenges and hardships for citizens. Therefore, the budget allocation for drainage and desilting works to the Ministry of Works and Transport and other relevant entities is essential, especially with the rainy season on our doorstep.

Subsidies in general transfer wealth to the wealthy and seldom adequately alleviate the long-term needs of those who it was intended to assist. In rationalizing subsidies, the impact on the broader society will be disproportionate. As the income divide grows, the threat to democracy grows as well. Madam President, we need long-term inclusive and adaptive planning for real growth.

Data from the CSO shows that headline inflation is increasing, because of higher food prices, shipping costs and global supply chain disruption. Predicated on the rising Cost of Living Index, families will continue to be hard pressed to afford basic living necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, education, medical expenses, savings for retirement and so on.

The burning issue of an ageing population, and the associated vulnerabilities

of the country's social security systems are ever present. To address this issue in part the Bill allocates \$390 million for the senior citizens grant. Madam President, the total cost to the Government for senior citizens grant every year is \$4 billion.

COVID-19 vaccines: 12.5 million is allocated to the acquisition of COVID-19 vaccines, which is essential to ensure that the population is fully vaccinated against this virus. This is essential. We all know the cost in lives and livelihoods of uncontrolled virus spread.

Pharmaceuticals: To provide for these essential items for the health care sector, the Government financed part of the procurement, storage and distribution of pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical items by a \$284.19 million eight-year loan. Madam President, \$22,673,500 is allocated in this Bill to meet the principal and interest payments up to September 2022.

Agriculture is a main pillar of the Government's diversification thrust. Government's initiatives include \$500 million for rural access roads; \$3.2 million is allocated in this Bill for praedial larceny; animal composting waste projects with best practices implemented; public/private partnership between the Government and Aripo Farms with procurement of 100 Holstein cows to boost local milk production; public/private partnership to establish a technology-driven sprouting operation on lands belonging to the St. Augustine Nursery.

Madam President, the greatest challenges to agriculture include poor access roads. This negatively affects farmers' vehicles. Madam President, \$100 million is allocated to fund the initial capitalization of the Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company. I hope this means there will now be a significant drive to build proper access roads.

Slow rate of refunds under the Agricultural Incentive Programme. While

\$7.723 million has been allocated in the Bill for agricultural incentives, attention must be paid to significantly improving the refund system.

[Mr. Vice-President in the Chair]

Praedial larceny. This is a major cost to farmers and a serious barrier to entry into the agricultural sector. However, I am not sure that \$3.2 million allocated to this line Item will be adequate to deal with this problem. In the Finance Act 2021, fines under the Praedial Larceny Act were significantly increased. These punitive amendments are necessary and a step in the right direction to reduce the incidence of these offences. However, Mr. Vice-President, I have serious concerns with the continued inability by law enforcement to adequately enforce these laws.

Another challenge is weak implementation of policy recommendations, weak transfer of technology, escalating costs of inputs, which include fertilizer, agrochemicals and fuel. No water for agricultural policy, so farmers are limited to rain fed agricultural systems and agricultural products are not grown to any standardized system. However, the three Ministers now appointed to this sector must aggressively address these and other issues.

12.00 noon

Mr. Vice-President, the Government accounts are prepared on a cash-based system which cannot accurately reflect the true indebtedness of the Government. The overall Exchequer overdraft is one of the many exclusions that contribute to an inaccurate picture of the country's actual indebtedness. From what I have found, the Exchequer overdraft which stands at \$42.641 billion as at September 30, 2021, is not included in the public debt position of Trinidad and Tobago. Interest is payable on this liability and the debt itself must be repaid. The cash-based system excludes liability such as government-to-government debt obligations, government

current liabilities to contractors and trade suppliers, future liabilities for current commitments, state enterprise obligations and refunds, including VAT and income tax refunds to businesses and individuals.

Mr. Vice-President, the Government must implement an internationally recognized public sector accounting system so that the Government accounts and budgeted—and budgets are prepared on the accrual basis of accounting. The benefits of implementing such a system include a more accurate record of Government's financial position and allows for more accurate budgeting and reporting of financial performance. The country and its citizens deserve better records and reports from the gatekeepers of its wealth. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Minister of Public Administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, anybody can manage in plenty. It is he or she who manages well in the face of adversity who must receive kudos.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: I therefore want to echo the sentiments of the hon. Prime Minister in the other place earlier this week when he commended our hard-working Minister of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: The Minister of Finance who often gets blows when things

go wrong, the inevitable cry being, “insufficient funds to”—and you can fill in the

blanks—“complete a project, insufficient funds to engage the right quantity or right quality of staff, insufficient amount to pay bills, insufficient amount to purchase much needed equipment, renegotiate salaries”, and the list goes on. But that very same Minister of Finance seldom gets recognition when things go right.

And, Madam President, while we continue to suffer—Mr. Vice-President, I am sorry—the effects of the pandemic, the ongoing disruption to supply chains, the impact of the war in Ukraine and the attendant increases in prices on many basic and not so basic items, we have to acknowledge, although I am sure the Opposition will not, that based on the Minister’s report this morning, that some things are going right and in our favour. Mr. Vice-President, the last two years have tested our resolve as a people and as a government, but one thing has marked our approach to managing our country’s affairs through the COVID-19 pandemic, and that is consistency. The book of Proverbs, Chap. 29:18 of the King James Version of the *Bible* says:

“Where there is no vision, the people...”—suffer—“...the people perish:”
—I am sorry.

Happily, this administration even in the face of the scientific uncertainty of the pandemic, had a vision. It was encapsulated by the Prime Minister’s often repeated commitment that the Government is about saving lives and livelihoods and laying the groundwork for recovery and resilience. The Minister of Finance’s stewardship has echoed that commitment. While we continue to grapple with the pandemic and its as yet uncertain future, at the same time we are reminded of the volatility of the international system as we observe the situation in Eastern Europe and acknowledge its impact on us in Trinidad and Tobago, physically far removed from the battle, but impacted as part of this ever shrinking global village in which

we live. And on that issue, Mr. Vice-President, I really would like to urge Sen. Mark in his flippant references to the war in Ukraine, to try to be a little more sensitive to the suffering that the people there are undergoing.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: People are losing lives, homes, loved ones, so we cannot just be flippantly referring to the ones seeking to congratulate the leaders of the countries involved.

So, as we look to the future the mid-term review is a good time to see how we are faring. PricewaterhouseCoopers in its global—PWC global publications suggest that the best option for countries to spur recoveries post-COVID-19 are policies that promote local investment, identify and support industries that will drive economic recovery, promote domestic spending through cash transfer programmes, protect local businesses, promote exports, and create a society that is inclusive, more equitable and skilled for the future. The Singapore post-COVID recovery programme is built on four main pillars;

- Rebuilding to emerge stronger and more competitive;
- anchoring locally and capturing value from innovation to compete globally;
- transforming through technology;
- assisting local enterprises to emerge stronger from COVID.

And finally, Mr. Vice-President, permit me to quote from an article on the COVID-19 recovery, written by Gulcin Ozkan, and published on June 07, 2021, in a newsletter called, *The Conversation*. In that publication Ms. Ozkan said as follow, and I quote:

“In 2020, the global economy contracted by 4.3%...the UK...suffered its

worst recession in 300 years, shrinking by nearly 10%. The resulting impact on jobs was also unprecedented, and ten times worse than during the 2009 global financial crisis, with 114 million jobs lost globally in 2020.”

And the reason why I thought that was pertinent, Mr. Vice-President, is that members of the Opposition and other commentators tend to spew the narrative that suggests that the suffering that Trinidad and Tobago has gone through over the last two years is unique to Trinidad and Tobago and is as a result of poor management of the Government, and this clearly indicated it is not so, it was a global issue that everybody was dealing with and everybody across the world was impacted. Ms. Ozkan goes on to say as follows:

“Two main factors underpin the speed of”—recovery of—“a country’s economic...”—position;—“...the strength of its COVID-19 policy response, and the success of its vaccination programme.

Leaders across the globe deployed a range of economic policy responses in the fight against the pandemic...measures included transfers to (low-income) households, grants and tax holidays to businesses, and additional funding for healthcare systems...supplemented conventional interest rate cuts with unconventional measures such as liquidity injections...financial measures including foreign exchange interventions.”

Mr. Vice-President, if these lists of measures sound familiar to you and the national community, it is because the PWC suggestions, the Singapore pillars and Ms. Ozkan’s observations are consistent with our own home-grown approaches as expressed in the Road Map to Recovery, the Community Recovery Programme, the 2021 budget, the 2022 budget, and now the Minister of Finance’s mid-year review. Permit me to remind the country, Mr. Vice-President, that Trinidad and

Tobago did not follow the lead of others. We took on the fight early and were among the leaders in devising robust responses to our medical, economic and social challenges arising from the pandemic.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Trinidad and Tobago recorded its first COVID-19 case on March the 12th, 2020, and our health task force was put in place and began responding immediately having started preplanning when it became aware of the outbreak in Wuhan China in November 2019. Our borders were closed on March 22nd, and the country was put on lockdown. Less than a month later, on April 20th, 2020, the Road Map to Recovery Committee had been envisaged, formed and held its inaugural meeting, thanks to the foresight and strategic brilliance of our Prime Minister, the Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley. We planned and strategized to save lives and at the same time acknowledging the likely impact of the pandemic and the closure of the economy, we started devising and putting measures in place to protect livelihoods. So while the naysayers will want to ascribe the better than expected performance of the economy in the first half of this year to chance, and to us profiting from the impact of that unfortunate war, on energy prices, let us not ignore the impact of the careful management of our limited budgets over the last seven years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: And the very many impactful relief measures introduced over the last two years which have allowed most businesses to stay afloat—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West:—and are allowing them now to work towards recovery. While the stories may not make the news because they lack the sensationalism,

apparently needed to sell newspapers, I have heard from many grateful citizens who welcomed the many relief programmes introduced by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Persons like service providers working within this very building, hairdressers, barbers, nail technicians and the like who benefited from the income relief programmes. Persons like mortgage holders who welcomed the moratorium on mortgages and other loans, businesses who benefited from business support programmes.

Just this weekend, Mr. Vice-President, a small business owner who started her business just as the pandemic was hitting the shores of Trinidad, said to me that she applied for the NEDCO loan. It was a difficult application because a lot of information was needed, but she stuck it out. She submitted it and forgot about it, and she was pleasantly surprised a couple of months ago to receive a cheque from NEDCO which is helping her in her recovery programme.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: These are just a few examples of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago saving lives and livelihoods. So when Sen. Mark claims, “I am speaking for the small man”, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is acting on behalf of the small man.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: So, what is the Minister of Finance doing in this mid-year adjustment? Mainly, he is seeking to release some of the additional funds earned in the first half of the year into the economy:

1. To provide relief to businesses to whom we owe fees for the provision of goods and services, and to whom we owe VAT refunds which will further assist them in their recovery efforts.

2. He is providing additional funds to support our social relief programme. He is settling debts owed to public servants, he is providing additional funds to some agencies to advance their PSIP projects, and he is replenishing some of the funds that were withdrawn from the HSF to continue the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund to continue to provide the buffer for future generations.

And with all of this, Mr. Vice-President, we are still expecting a reduced deficit at the end of this fiscal.

Mr. Vice-President, the three pillars of Phase 2 of the Roadmap to Recovery report are, “Transforming the Economy”, “Making Food Security a Reality”, “equity and empathy”. The components of transforming the economy as identified in the road map report include:

“Adopting modern technology nationally...

Enhancing the ease of doing business;

Deepening research and building human capacity...”

Digitalizing delivery—“...of public services;”

Incentivizing—“...small and medium-sized businesses...enabling the

Private

Sector;

Strengthening...capacity at...State development entities;

Expanding the use of renewable energy and...”—increasing—“energy efficiency;

Investing in...the Creative Industries;

Strengthening and leveraging...”—indigenous—“Financial institutions;”—

And,

“Promoting Tobago as a Green Tourism destination.”

All of these, Mr. Vice-President, are projects in progress, and these mid-year adjustments will allow them to continue. In particular, Mr. Vice-President, let me highlight our digitalization programme. I would like to assure the nation that each Ministry, division and agency of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is working on digitalizing its processes—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West:—to more efficiently and effectively serve the public of Trinidad and Tobago. And we are seeking to do that in a way that we reengineer the processes to make them more user-friendly. I also want to highlight the components of the equity and empathy pillar which are:

Creative programmes for—“Developing small and medium-sized enterprises...”

Providing financing for lower income housing...”

Creative solutions to—“...increase access to capital for start-ups;

Strengthening the DevelopTT initiative...”

Increasing—“...affordability and equity of digital access...”

Expanding national youth training programmes...

Expanding support of vulnerable persons...to propel them to self-sufficiency;”

And, Mr. Vice-President, let me just say here, that that is an important shift on the traditional support of the vulnerable.

In the past the focus has been on supporting the vulnerable for as long as they need it. What we are seeking to do now is not only support the vulnerable but to work with them to put them in a position to make them more self-sufficient.

“Providing continued protection from COVID-19...

Enhancing the provision of readily available primary”—health—“care...”

Enhancing protection against—“...domestic violence...”

Again, all of these projects are in progress and are being monitored.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Let me in particular mention the project of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service in respect of the Homestead Programme which it actually launched recently, having identified, I believe, 100 potential farmers who are being provided with land—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West:—being provided with start-up houses, being provided with training and support to turn them from aspiring farmers into real successful farmers.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: And this is one of the ways that we are seeking to address the rising cost of food. Sen. Mark suggested that what the Minister of Trade and Industry should do is reduce freight cost. Now, for the members of our national community who may not know what that means and may be persuaded by Sen. Mark’s comments, let me advise you, freight costs are the costs paid to international shipping companies who transport goods from one port to another. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago does not run a freight company. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago therefore cannot reduce freight cost. The entire world is suffering from the impact of increased freight prices and the disruption to the supply chains. Trinidad and Tobago cannot control that.

We are takers of these services. What we can control is ensuring that the

people of Trinidad and Tobago can lead a comfortable life based more on consumption of locally produced products. That is why we are building out the agriculture programme which the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will tell you more about when he comes to the podium. That is why we are introducing the Homestead Programme and so on and so on. In respect of the Ministry of Public Administration which I have the pleasure to lead, and the agencies which report to Parliament through this Ministry, let me mention that the mid-year adjustments seek to: provide additional support for the continued roll out of and improvements to the electronic human resource management system; additional support for the ongoing job evaluation exercises which will help us to better structure and resource the public service to better serve the public; a review of Employee Assistance Programme which would provide much needed support to employees in the public service; an enhancement of resources to better fulfil the mandate of those agencies; and succession planning. These are the areas in the main where the agencies which fall under the Ministry of Public Administration have sought and are receiving additional funding from the Minister of Finance.

So, Mr. Vice-President, let me comment more directly on some of the issues raised by Sen. Mark and to a lesser extent, Sen. Seepersad. Sen. Mark sought to denigrate the Minister of Finance for referring to the nominal GDP. Now, Sen. Mark has no problem referring to the nominal GDP when he wants to castigate the Government for a debt-to-GDP ratio which is higher than it should be. But, when matters are reversing and the debt-to-GDP ratio which is based on a nominal GDP is raised, Sen. Mark all of us sudden wants us to back away from any references. Because anything that looks good for Trinidad and Tobago while this Government is in power, Sen. Mark wants to hear nothing about it, and more importantly he

wants the national community to hear nothing about it. Sen. Mark wants us, despite the fact that he says we are living in a fool's paradise, and as soon as the war in Ukraine comes to an end, things will collapse, despite that fact, he wants us to use the current improvement in our circumstances, which he is saying does not exist, to pay public servants significantly more money than they are paying now.

What I would say to Sen. Mark is, this Government consistently takes a responsible approach in the management of the affairs of this country. Unlike the administration which went out of office, fortunately in 2015, this Government will not be offering—will not be creating a debt for the public that it cannot afford. When the UNC was in power and offered public servants and other public sector officers salary increases between 8 and 14 per cent based on a temporary spike in the price of oil which left a burden on this country that we are still seeking to meet, and took salaries from \$4billion when they came into office, to \$10billion, this Government cannot take that irresponsible approach.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Because we do recognize that there is a spike in energy prices, and we do recognize that this will not last forever. Se we need to be responsible, we need to ascertain the long-term impact of any salary adjustments and take that into account in our negotiation.

Sen. Mark commented on the fact that we are talking about paying VAT refunds on the one hand, but then the Board of Inland Revenue is withholding—is sending out notices to the same individuals to whom we are paying VAT refunds, indicating to them that they owe taxes from as far back as 2006. Now, I want to ask Sen. Mark, who is supposed to be a representative of the people in this place, whether he thinks it is okay for a person who has owed taxes to the Government

and therefore the people of Trinidad and Tobago, since 2006, to walk away with \$600,000 and continue to ignore his obligations to the Treasury? It is reasonable and right, and in fact the duty of the Board of Inland Revenue to ensure that as and when it can collect taxes, including when it can offset those taxes against debts due by the State to the taxpayer, that it must do so.

So, I do not understand the rationale for Sen. Mark's complaint on that score. Sen. Mark is complaining about the fact that we owe TSTT money and we owe T&TEC money and we owe the public servants money, so we are seeking to pay that. That is what a large part of this budget is about, so we are sorting out those matters.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Sen. Seepersad mentioned that she was hopeful that the Government was looking at the issue of the ongoing rental cost versus switching to owned property to reduce the rental cost for the Government. And I would like to reassure Sen. Seepersad, that as the Minister responsible for securing accommodation for Ministries, divisions and agencies, that the Ministry of Public Administration is in fact embarked on that very exercise. We are seeking to reduce rents where we can, and we are also looking at the ratio of rented property versus owned property to determine what the ideal—where we should target that. Because, it would not be ideal to have the Government occupy only state-owned property, because we have to remember that there are costs incurred in respect of state-owned property as well. There are maintenance costs, there are replacement costs and so on. So what we have to do is strike the right balance. And that is what we are investigating to determine where that right balance is, and in doing so are working towards reducing what we fully acknowledge are the very heavy rental

and property costs that the Government pays. So you can rest assured the Ministry of Public Administration is focused on that matter and will continue to work towards bringing down the overall cost to the Government.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

So, Madam President, I want to return here to where I started about the need for clarity of vision and consistency in execution, the protection of lives and livelihoods, and building the foundation for resilience. The Minister's budget from last October laid the foundation, and now the Mid-Year Review Statement highlights the Government's commitment to invest in people and businesses.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: To put money in the pockets of citizens and to position the country to face the challenges ahead. This is all consistent with the vision of this administration implementing its road map to get us there. So circling back to the Proverbs quote which says:

“Where there is no vision, the people”—will—“perish.”
—let me say that Trinidad and Tobago can rest assured that once this administration remains in the driver's seat, this nation will certainly not perish. I thank you, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. John.

Sen. Jerlean John: Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity. Madam President, the Minister of Finance in this Supplementary Appropriation Bill is seeking this additional sum of \$3,081,000,000 for the financial year in order to fund, as he stated, urgent and critical recurrent and capital needs to September 2022, as he put it.

Madam President, unfortunately I too would have felt exuberant and exuded the kind of optimism coming from the Government Bench had it not been that, and it has been spoken here, that this is as a result of this unfortunate war. And I cannot say I heard Sen. Mark particularly celebrating this. He was just stating a fact. Because the Minister of Finance in outlining the money he was receiving, never really stated the real source of the funds. Yes, ultimately it was through the petrochemical sector, et cetera. But it was as a result of, and if this was as—if we had come into this great fortune because of focused strategy and management, and this was a result of that, one would have felt better, because then you would have supported a long-run curve that the former Minister just spoke about, when she said, this by and large is probably something very short term, and therefore they have to be prudent, and that is so.

12.30 p.m.

But if it was focused strategy then perhaps it would have been a better strategy. So it appears that this entire three billion it still has nothing to do with stimulus or stimulating the economy. It does not really create any jobs and there is joblessness out there, never mind the bounciness of our colleagues on the other side of the aisle. Nothing really to help crime. It is all to fund recurrent expenditure and one is very happy that a lot of the utilities—and I will talk about that a little later on, that they are being—there are allocations to pay at least \$192million long outstanding to them.

Madam President, in Head 03, I think, of the Judiciary, recurrent expenditure, 02/001/16. There is an allocation for 30,300,000 for contract employment. And you get the sense that this is after seven months we would have debated the national budget. One wants to know, how are these budgets really

compiled, because how could you have missed a substantial, a material sum, as \$30 million? Is it that this is deliberately left out to place the national budget in a favourable light, maybe try to balance it? So some cost is deliberately omitted and in the mid-term review it is kind of brought before the Senate for approval. Because I do not know if these are new contracts, and you see it running throughout all of the allocations, you know, things like employment, other cost attached to that, things like transportation and rental. I do not believe these are new costs at all.

So, Madam President, a legitimate, authentic national budget will list all or as far as possible because granted some things, unusual things will crop up, spontaneous things will crop up, sometimes random things, but you have to as far as possible placed on your record all of your expected revenues and all of your expected expenditure and then of course you can cut and paste as you see it fit. Because that then is a genuine guide in the management of the state resources.

However it appears that the Ministry of Finance has decided on where it wants to land and then produces the figures which will present the most positive light at the time of preparing the major national budget. And I think the same is true, as I said for the Judiciary, with the Industrial Court, where you have a sum of over seven million, 7.9 million for traveling and subsistence. Is it that this just appeared? Are these new officers requiring new allocations or provisions or were these expenses presented during the period when the budget had been compiled but ignored based on expediency?

Madam President, the Head 08, for Election and Boundaries. They are being proposed for an allocation of \$23.5 million. And again, it is—the explanation is to facilitate the payment of subsistence for officers engaged in the preparation of the

annual use of electors. And sometimes these are casual workers. And one is always happy when someone could get a little job, but also there is something called a registration pop-up initiative. Madam President, and you want to know if this is really in terms of the value for money, because you are seeing these initiatives very busy all over the country, it appears, it was I think on the day in another place when you had a particular committee being examined. They were in Barataria/San Juan and prior to that they would have been in Chaguanas and then Penal/Debe and San Fernando. And I think they are proposed next week for Couva.

But, Madam President, in this case, with this pop-up registration people do not require an appointment. Only people who are registered in the registration area where this pop-up is should show up. And you want to know, is there a review, an analysis done prior to, to really decide this need, in terms of where to put this pop-up. If they would maximize the use of the pop-up because you are talking about \$23 million. And folks from outside of the community, currently being served, like somebody from I suppose Tunapuna cannot go to Couva to be served and there is most likely excess capacity. But at the same time, correspondingly, you have folks going to the EBC offices, the fixed permanent spaces and they are being given appointments for December 2022. So that is way down the road. So I think this is something, I do not know if it makes sense to the EBC maybe they have their database and they will know that there is a lot of demand for it, but somehow I think there is a lot of redundant capacity and basically, maybe they have to look again at their business model.

Madam President, again I noted when TSTT, EBC was asked about the non-payment of their TSTT bills since 2018 or thereabout. Because it is I think part of the payment here in this supplemental Bill. They said they had not been billed or

they did not see an invoice. I do not know how you could run a business and not ask about your utilities even if you are not seeing an invoice. So I think it is something they have to look into, because when they are not paying their bills, when the State sector is not paying their bills and the State sector tend to be some of the largest customers, then alternatively these State utility companies they suffer, the WASA, the T&TEC and the TSTT. And then one is told how lazy they are and unproductive they are and the Government has to retrench and to close down. But you cannot—if you are not being paid and you are not being paid on time, worst, you cannot run any business. Where are you going to get your resource, any money from when you are using all of your factors of production? And on the flip side you are not getting payment in return.

So, you know, I know Sen. Mark was talking about that and the Government Bench had a lot to grumble about, but notwithstanding that, it is not a matter of pay whenever and now they are paying, say, thank the Lord, they are being paid way too late. These businesses are collapsing and this has implications for people's lives and people's jobs and their livelihood. This is not just a matter of sitting down and saying, well they are not making any money, they can sit in their ivory tower and say these things, but when a decision is taken for redundancy or to retrench this is peoples' lives that are being impacted. And maybe the Government should see to pay these state companies, these utility companies in a little more timely fashion.

Madam President, another Head 04/005 Contribution to Non-profit Institutions, Children Homes and they have several other Sub-Heads, that is: St. Dominic's Home to receive 289,000; St. Jude's Home, 3 million; Children's Authority, 22 million, et cetera. Madam President, I do not know if you have had

the time to look at the front page of today's newspapers. One said, the *Newsday* has:

“It's not too late.”

The *Guardian* has:

“Prosecute them.”

And the *Express*:

“I am sexual abuse evidence.”

And the *Express* editorial called for audits. So we are giving more money—I think one is really walking a fine line in terms of—I suppose they need the money based on what you are reading in these reports something terrible has happened and continuing to happen in these spaces. And basically in giving them the money without accountability they continue to just use this money and you get the same outcome, whether it was 25 years ago or five months ago.

Madam President, you know, the media as I said is replete with stories and citizens have been taking to social media to express great outrage. And basically continuing to leave these vulnerable children without really, I mean, yes, the budget is to express some figures, but the Minister himself in giving us an overview of what is to be done, I think given the level of public interest a little more should be said about where is the Government going with this and it cannot be one task force to look after another task force, because it is really overbearing now. I mean, today more money is in the supplementary appropriation and so on. Up to now I am not sure if any of these recommendations of the most recent report will be acted upon or is being acted upon because you know there is a lot of twiddling and deflecting and distracting. But that helps nobody, that does not help the children. At the end of the day they, another child is being abused, another task

force to take maybe a next six months or six years money or what have you. Madam President, you know money can buy love and our children really need to be cared for and to be protected.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: They really need to be protected. Right. You know Pope Francis said, abusive—well, he was talking about what is happening in his own community. He said, abusive priests become tools of Satan and clergy guilty of abuse were tools of Satan. And one can say the same for our folks who have the responsibility for these children. I am just saying that because, again, you are seeing more money being allocated and yet the abuse, there seem to be no end to this totally unacceptable state of affairs. You know, children are starved, children are beaten and even worse than that. And this money, it seems, is to deal with arrears. What about the look ahead, the going forward to look after the children? Because 46 per cent of these homes, Madam President, are unlicensed. Okay. So it appears as if it is better for them to go and sit down in Woodford Square, they might be safer than to have to continue in these conditions.

Madam President, there is Head 15, the Tobago House of Assembly, \$60 million. Again a lot of it is to do with contract gratuity owed for the past four years. Madam President, I do not know if any of the Government Ministers had ever been on these contracts. People really look forward to this gratuity payment, you know. It really forms part and parcel of their remuneration and they have plans for it, you know. It is not that people are working for all this money. They really need that gratuity when it is due. And I think the Government really needs to come up with a better system to disburse gratuity in a more timely manner. One is not doing people a favour, it is part and parcel of the contract that they would have

signed. And they really need this money giving it to them four years after they would have completed that contract. Sometimes your contract is not renewed. So the gratuity is what you need to tide you over. And if you are waiting for it for four years this could really wreak havoc on a household and on people's lives.

Madam President, Item 04/011/96 under the heading: Secondary Road Rehabilitation. Sen. Mark would have spoken about that and this 100 million allocation where it seems as if it is just there as some provisional sum waiting for something to happen. And I think, one, it would be good if the hon. Minister will give a little, more explanation in terms of, where is this going, what is the organization in terms of it will be going into the oversight, who will be managing it, et cetera?

Head 22, Ministry of National Security. And they have a massive sum of \$206 million, Madam President. And again these are predictable expenses. So it will be really interesting to know why these were not picked up in the original budget which had been debated last year. But more than that there is an Item at 04/009/024, Strategic Services Agency of 66 million. And, Madam President, I think this agency is responsible for the CCTV cameras. And since some time ago, maybe two years ago, the country was told that over 800 of these cameras were not working. And there was a commitment not long after by the then Minister of National Security that they will start to fix them. But there appears that nothing has been done and I do not think if there is something—one did not see specifically that these cameras were going to be—there was any importance or priority paid unto the repair of these 800 cameras.

Because, Madam President, again in one of these newspapers today I saw this story of Sharda Emmanuel a girl who disappeared, well so many girls, but

this one I remember walking in the rain because the parents had invited me to Mamoral, they were doing a candle light vigil. And this young lady disappeared in 2018. In 2019 they found some clothes which the father identified. And up to now they are awaiting on the DNA samples, you know for what. The father said, okay, fine this is her clothes so they probably reconciled that she is dead. But they cannot even get closure, because what is happening now this, just having it is really an open case and if they get the results of the DNA sample then it can become a homicide and people can then be prosecuted. So they can get some kind of closure and maybe justice for Sharday. You know, but we do not have anything here, we are not fixing these cameras which also affect the young ladies at the Heights of Aripo where criminals have long been using that area to dispose of bodies. Up to this week I was reading the papers where a 22-year-old young lady was raped after having taken—

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

Madam President: Sen. John, please continue, but please remember what we are treating with.

Sen. J. John: Yes, I thank you, Madam President, for your discretion. But, Madam President, one has to say these things. When would these people get a hearing? These are poor people, they are poor. Because Mr. Emmanuel is poor his daughter cannot get her DNA sample tested. They are poor and the Government gets up on a point of order. I am sorry, Madam President, I apologize for that. So, you know, they need to fix the cameras. What is so hard about that? I mean billions are being allocated and put aside for all manner of things but none to fix these 800 cameras. It will give young women a fighting chance. At least you will see a car number as it were or whomever it was who would have perpetuated these deeds against these

young people.

So, Madam President, the Ministry of Education, another one of my colleagues, I suppose, will talk about the violence in schools and they have 300 million and I am sure it is all well accounted for in terms of what it will be used for. But this violence in school is a major problem because these are the same little children, teenagers who come out on the streets to either be good or bad citizens. So I do not know, again, I think Sen. Mark and some one of the other colleagues would have spoken about T&TEC. And this, I think, it is 192 million it adds up to, this amount of money owed to the utilities. And why it was allowed to accumulate in terms of this large sum now. I am hoping that when this part of the budget, the supplemental sums would have been approved that the Government moves expeditiously to disburse the sums to these utilities. I am not saying that the organizations are not to be encouraged to do better and to be more productive, but no organization can survive if it uses its factors of production to produce and sell the output and receive no payment nor does it receive the payment on a timely basis. One does not know if that is a deliberate ploy by the Government to ruin these organizations by withholding payments for their services and then hand them over on a platter to so-called efficient private sector management. Because I want to see this same government not pay on time to the private operate their public utility bills.

So, Madam President, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, they have been allocated 390 million. And, again just last week or earlier this week there was an Auditor General Report, 2021. And I know the Minister has been saying that they are dealing with irregularities and so on. So I am hoping that they do deal with them because there appears to be a lot of double dipping and

people are getting access to funds that they are not entitled to. So one is hoping that since 2021 to now when this audit was done things would have cleared up and be in much better state at that Ministry.

So, Madam President, again the—unfortunately not one job is being created, it appears, from this \$3 billion. There will be no ease on accessing forex for micro small and medium size businesses. The Minister said that VAT repayments will be facilitated but I cannot recall seeing any provisions and maybe they will say if they—meaning those on the Government Benches, but worst is sometimes the attitude that the VAT repayment, it is a gift. It is not a gift. This was paid by the businesses and they expect that their VAT repayment to be done on time and this has not been coming on time either and some of these businesses are desperately in need of the payment, especially these micro, small and medium size businesses.

So, Madam President, excuse me if I do not share the Minister's optimism because the extra money received in this treasury is unfortunately not because of government's policy. Right? We know why it is there and one still hopes that the Government will use it judiciously, not just to run through and well I mean it is good pay as many bills as you can but certainly to put in place some mechanism that at last this country could be on some path to some level of diversification to maximize the resources we have that are even outside the oil and gas. So, Madam President, I really want to thank you for this opportunity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Amrita Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President. Thank you for recognizing me to contribute to this debate on the matter before this honourable

House today to deal with the supplementation of appropriation for fiscal 2022, to authorize the issue of some \$3.08 billion from the Consolidated Fund.

As it is expected, Madam President, in these appropriation Bills my comments would be strictly focused on the line Items provided to us by the revisions, by the supporting documents. And what I gather from these line Items and the previous two Government speakers is that these line Items, the supplementation of \$3 billion is entirely to support, to clear any arrears, long outstanding arrears and bills to various institutions, both public sector and in the private sector when we speak about janitorial services and security services, to increase the quantum of payment of VAT by \$1.6 billion even though all of it is not included in the line Items. I think it is around 94 million that is included in the supplementation to refund VAT. And the payment of gratuities, short-term employment and contract employment. And also to some extent increasing—supplementing the increase in demand for social welfare especially when we look at pension grants.

So, the current theme of these types of Bills since I have been here has primarily been to finance recurrent expenditure when we look at mid-term reviews. Hardly ever likely since I have been here, I have seen a mid-term review come or a supplementation for an appropriation come that has a high focus on development expenditure. So, as previous Bills, this Bill does focus a lot on recurrent expenditure. And I suspect this is really to kind of navigate the whole management of cash flows from the favourable windfalls from improved energy prices.

So the first line Item that I want to go to, Madam President, is the allocation in the Development Programme under the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs of \$16,543,000 to complete components of the strengthened

information management of Registrar General's Department Project. It is an IDB loan arrangement which was executed in January 2014—which began in January 2014 and ended in January 2022. So, Madam President, the original allocation for this loan, for this fiscal year, was \$10.6 million and now we are supplementing with the \$16 billion bringing it up to around \$27.2 billion.

So in the latest, if you look at the latest Project Progress Monitoring Report from the IDB published on its website on this project, it indicates that almost 77 per cent of the money has been fully disbursed. My first question is, whether this allocation is going to complete the remaining or fulfill the remaining requirements for this project to bring this project to a close?—because this project has been on the books for some time. The other question—so, so far actually TT \$75 million has been spent on this project and I see two major outcomes being achieved from this project. It deals with reducing the average number of days to complete an instrument search at the RGD from 11 days in 2012 to one day. It also includes increasing the percentage of citizens that have their names registered on their birth certificates from 78 per cent to 85 per cent.

But, Madam President, after we see \$75 million being spent over seven plus years there is one indicator that stood out to me for which there is not significant progress and I would like to humbly seek some sort of clarity and answers from the Government on whether this component was completed and whether they really received the value for money. And that indicator deals with the number of Registrar General Department's IT systems to allow information exchange with stakeholder institutions.

So, Madam President, this indicator is the bulk of the project which accounts for around 36 per cent of the project financing and it is a significant part of the

project which will allow for a lot of integration within departments, Ministries and other public bodies to allow the Registrar General to complete its business, do its work within a more reliable and realistic time frame that matches with improvements in the ease of doing business.

So the other line Item I would like to look at, Madam President, actually it is not one particular line Item, is the whole issue of long standing arrears, gratuities, payments to T&TEC, WASA, janitorial services, and security services. Now the Minister of Finance when he piloted the Bill he did indicate these long standing arrears in this appropriation amounted to around \$600 million. But rental accommodation is also included in this. What I would like to know, Madam President, is whether this allocation brings all outstanding expenses in all Ministries to an end? And I do not think that is the case, and if that is not the case, to date, what is the total outstanding payments across all Heads of Expenditure in various Ministries? Because, Madam President, as a member of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee almost every time we have a stakeholder, a state enterprise come before us we hear this complain. When we look at the audited financial statements, the audited financial statements is evident of this situation.

So in the supplementation we have some 73 million outstanding to T&TEC and WASA, some 151 million outstanding for janitorial and security services; across six Heads of Expenditure, the Industrial Court; Service Commission, Central Administrative Services in Tobago; Ministry of National Security; Ministry of Education; Equal Opportunity Tribunal and Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. So, while I understand the Government's cash strapped position over the past fiscal periods, Madam President, this pattern of outstanding arrears cannot be a common thread that continues in the future. And what it does,

Madam President, is that it not only affects liquidity or cash flow within these state-owned enterprises and thereby affect their viability to the extent that they are so reliant on subventions. But when you look at the private enterprises, the individual contractors that provide the janitorial services and the security services, what we see happening is that the profits, it affects the liquidity and profits of these entities, both in the private sector and the public sector. We already know the financial constraints that are affecting the viability of T&TEC, TSTT and WASA, I mean, that has been well ventilated in the public domain.

1.00 p.m.

But there is for the MTS, that is, the Government's maintenance—I cannot recall the name, the full acronym, but MTS—is one that has an allocation throughout the appropriation of \$142 million in arrears being paid to MTS. It may be less, Madam President, but based on what I calculated because some of the figures were lumped into one, 142 million is now being paid to MTS. The thing is, Madam President, the problem has become so pervasive in state-owned enterprises, especially in the case of MTS. If we single out MTS, they had to establish a receivables department in 2018 to monitor the amounts due to the company for services provided. The company is challenged with this, debt collection mechanisms, as many of its clients are Government Ministries and Departments.

So, Madam President, outstanding receivables from the public sector on the books of most state-owned enterprises is a common occurrence, and as I already said it affects cash flow and daily operations of these state-owned enterprises. It has become so frequent that it has become normalized because there is nothing really that these state-owned enterprises can do. There is no penalty for, for

example, the Ministry of Education owing T&TEC X number of dollars for over X period—X years. And the only recourse that they have is the hope that the Ministry of Finance cash flow improves, revenue collection improves, and that will allow them to get an increase allocation or increase releases that can allow them to pay their bills. This is not good public sector administration.

The Government, I think, needs to take a closer look into the performance of these state-owned enterprises especially when it comes to accounts receivables. I do not think we could sit back comfortably and say that, “You know well, you know we need to tighten our belt. We do have any money. We don’t have any allocation.” They do not have enough funds to give releases for these various Heads of Expenditure. So therefore, you need to keep it. You need to sacrifice paying that bill for now because these things tend to have long-term consequences, Madam President. So perhaps the Government should take a serious consideration to conducting an audit of the management of accounts receivables in the public sector to understand the extent of constraints that they experience; to assess the cost effectiveness of the management and administration of the accounts receivables function; to identify, develop and report better practice to promote overall improvements in the management of accounts receivable.

Madam President, I want to move on to a line Item under the Ministry of Finance for the amount of 92 million to enable to Ministry of Trade and Industry to pay VAT and other cost associated with the construction of Phoenix Park Industrial Estate. So as I mentioned earlier, the Government did mention its intention to accelerate VAT refund payments to the amount of \$4 billion in total of which \$1.6 billion is the increase from its original plant. When we look at this line Item, Madam President, what we see is that 92 million is being paid to a foreign

investor for the construction of Phoenix Park Industrial Estate and this is being paid to them for VAT refunds, and, Madam President, this just caused me to question the number of local companies that are going to benefit from these VAT refund payments. How many foreign companies would be receiving VAT—not how many, what is the quantum of refunds to international companies versus the quantum of refunds to local companies? And I think it is important that we understand that because in order to get the benefit, the economic benefit that we are seeking of economic recovery and improving the cash flow management within the businesses in the country, then we really need to ensure that these VAT refunds are coming in locally.

And I would also like to hear—I know the IMF in its Article IV publication did indicate the total VAT outstanding is around \$7 billion, but what I would like to hear is what is the Government's plans to bring this to zero because the Minister of Finance alluded to covering \$4 billion, but what about the rest? Because remember, VAT refunds are being claimed on an ongoing basis. As we speak persons are preparing their VAT returns. Based on their cash flow position in any particular period they would either have to pay or claim. So I mean we really need to get to the bottom of this issue because, Madam President, as I said, if the larger quantum of refunds are for external companies, then the majority of smaller businesses may not benefit from these VAT refunds. I know previously when we were just at the outset of the pandemic and the Minister of Finance accelerated VAT refunds, what he presented to the country—which I thought was extremely helpful—was a breakdown of the different amounts for different sized businesses that were being refunded, and he made reference to a very easy accessible integrated software that the Board of Inland Revenue has that allowed him to

access his information so quickly.

So it would have been helpful to have a breakdown like that as well so that we could really understand the extent to which we are going to have these VAT refunds injected into the economy and the extent to which it is going to increase spending power of persons in the economy or businesses in the economy, and understand whether is it that they are going to just be able to manage cash flow or is it going to be as far—is the multiplier effect going to be so far that we might really achieve things like increased investments, increased generation of employment and so on? So looking at the long outstanding Government arrears together with the line Item under the Ministry of Finance on the VAT refunds and the general statement of the intention to accelerate VAT refunds from the improved energy windfalls, the point that I am trying to bring across is that there is an inverse relationship between the delay in public payments to overall economic performance especially when payment delays are substantial in amount and the time outstanding can put significant strain on private sector liquidity and growth.

However, when you have to consider the macroeconomic effects of this you have two things to consider, the extent to which these arrears are anticipated by recipients. And quite frankly, Madam President, a lot of businesses when they file their VAT returns and if they claim for a refund they count that as dead money. The second thing you have to look at is—let me further clarify that statement. Why they count it as dead money, Madam President, is because the Government has been so lax in its VAT refunds so that they do not include it in their cash flow projections, in their plans, or anything like that. They do not even hope, and when it comes then they use it. They will find something to use it for. The second thing we also need to consider with these long outstanding backlog of bills and

outstanding payments to the private sector and the public sector is that we also have to understand the extent to which the creditors are limited in their ability to neutralize the impact of arrears. So we are clearing some of the outstanding payments, Madam President, but Government policy needs to focus closely on closely monitoring the amounts of arrears and payment practices in these Ministries, state-owned enterprises, and public bodies.

As a matter of fact, Madam President, I really do not want to stray too far from the subject at hand, but if we—and I know we have an ongoing loan with the Inter-American Development Bank to implement an integrated financial management system within the public service. Now if we have—that project I do not think it is even 50 per cent disbursed. If it is 50 per cent disbursed it is just around there, and it is also a project that has started since 2014, and to date that project has not realized a lot of its outputs and its outcomes. And if it is we are really serious about digitizing and integrating the accounts, and the books, and the payment systems of all public bodies, we really need to push forward with this loan. The information I am referring to is all available on the IDB's website in a document called “The Progress Monitoring Report” for the period January to June 2021.

So, Madam President, I turn now to line Item which deals with—I am not too sure what this was, Madam President, but I am reading it as it is, Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company Limited, \$100 million: to facilitate the initial capitalization of Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company Limited. I found this allocation to be a little bit strange. While there is no common—I mean we know—so clearly it seems as if this is a company that is going to be created to deal with secondary road rehabilitation.

Now there is a common consensus that the secondary roads in Trinidad and Tobago are in deplorable conditions especially down in my side—that is the Rio Claro/Princes Town area, terrible—and something needs to be done. We know that something needs to be done, but I am not sure creating another state-owned enterprise to do this is the solution.

And I am saying this because not to make the Government look bad, but to really get some clarity on what the Government's intentions are with this allocating of \$100 million to establish a state-owned enterprise to deal with road rehabilitation of secondary roads when we know that is under the responsibility of local government. And also, Madam President, with local government reform coming on stream and recent announcement that property tax collections would begin very soon, and from what I understand the property tax collections are meant to assist with development and reinvestment at the municipal level, at the local government level, why did this \$100 million not go directly into local government rather than spending \$100 million to set up a whole new state-owned enterprise?

Lately what I have noticed, Madam President, is that we have been developing a pattern of creating more and more public bodies and authorities, and in creating these bodies, the ones that come along with law, with statutes, is that they are provided with borrowing power. So I hope this is not another one that will be created to add to our list of contingent liabilities, and I speak of contingent liabilities in the sense that contingent liabilities are the loans that state-owned enterprises take.

So, Madam President, I do not understand why we are heading in this direction. I really do not. To create another state-owned enterprise, and it really goes against the Government's objective as outlined in the budget that the

Government read for this fiscal year. And if I am to quote directly a statement from the budget, it was the focus is on “financial restructuring of the state-owned enterprises”. Now it does not make sense that you are spending a lot of time, effort, and resources into restructuring two major state-owned enterprises to increase efficiency and so on, but then on the other hand you are creating more and more state-owned enterprises and adding them to the books. Quite frankly I do not understand the approach, the strategy, and I humbly seek some explanation.

So, Madam President, the other area I want to move on to deals with the allocations for contract employment, gratuities, short-term employment, salaries, and cost of living allowances. Now these spread across almost all—multiple Heads of Expenditure and they total to \$331 million that is being supplemented in this appropriation Bill. What I noticed though is that there was a 176 million increase allocation for wages and salaries—just to disaggregate it—97 million to supplement contract employment, the majority of which is going to the Ministry of Education and the Industrial Court; and there is also 155.4 million for short-term employment, gratuities and contract employment together. Now my question here is whether this is for an increase in employment that the Government is seeking because of reopening the economy and it has created a greater demand for employment within these public bodies; or is it a matter of shortfall in the initial allocation such that we are seeking as supplemental allocation to meet the salaries and payment for contractor employment and short-term employment of existing staff? That is one question that I have. And I also want to highlight the number of vacancies in the public service has been something that is an ongoing debate so I am not going to go into that. But what I am not sure of, Madam President, is how much efficiency and productivity we are going to get in an economy where we are

creating or we have this continued drive to short-term employment.

And also, short-term employment in the public sector deals with employment on contract that does not exceed six months, and I thought that with the good news of realizing this additional \$5 billion in fiscal revenues that we would be at this point moving towards reducing the amount of short-term employment or moving towards at least more permanent based type employment in the public service. Because, Madam President, having—another question that I have is the number of persons that we have currently in the public service on short-term employment. Because having employees work on a short-term contract that does not exceed six months and having to be constantly renewed every six months, you are really, really not stable as an individual. So I would like to know the number of persons who are contracted on short-term employment, and I would also like to know what the Government's plans are to reduce the number of short-term employment to get these individuals on more stable footing. The other point I want to note about this, Madam President, is that I know the Personnel Department did some work on preparing a policy note to govern the engagement of persons on short-term contracts. The last I heard about it was that it was before the Cabinet. So I know the Government has been looking at it, so I would also like to get an update on what the policy is.

With respect to gratuities, now we have \$28.2 million owed in gratuities to contract officers across 10 Heads of Expenditure, but my understanding, and I am looking at it from an internal control perspective not an economic perspective, is that my understanding is that the lag time in the payment of gratuities sometimes is not always because of cash flow. Sometimes it is owing to staffing deficiencies in the office of Comptroller of Accounts. It is due to untimely or submission of

documents for request for gratuities and so on. So I mean this is an ongoing issue. Madam President, these are issues that I have heard of, I have become aware of when I was sworn in as a Senator, and these problems keep popping up. Now I know we had a pandemic, I know the entire public sector was busy and thrown off guard, but these are issues that we cannot allow to linger for very long.

Madam President, let me move on to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. There is one line Item that I would like to speak to here, and this deals with the Agricultural Incentive Programme and a supplementation of \$7.7 million to pay outstanding farmers incentives for the period 2020 to 2022. Madam President, when you read the budget statement, you read the PSIP supporting documents for Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and when you look at this line item of 7.7 million to pay outstanding farmer incentives for the period 2020 to 2022—that is from since the start of the pandemic to now—it really makes me question whether we have forgotten the recommendation from the Roadmap to Recovery Report that food security should be ranked as top priority. And are we forgetting that we are primarily trying to really incentivize agricultural production in the country, and stimulate investment in the agricultural sector to encourage young persons to invest in agriculture?

So on one hand we hear the Government is encouraging farmers to take advantage of these incentives, but then you see here in this line Item that is outstanding two years. You know, Madam President, just last week my father was telling me about some cheque he is waiting for from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries that it has been for some piece of equipment he bought, and you know what they told him? They said, “Well you know Mr. Deonarine, your cheque is ready you know but the Government does not have funds to pay you.” So

they have to hold on to cheque until moneys will be released which I believed would happen after this process is finished here in the House. Now, Madam President, this cannot be right. It really cannot be right. Because—and mind you that is a piece of equipment that was bought almost eight to nine months ago. So there is a timeliness issue, there is a cash flow issue, and we are talking about stimulating agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago.

When we look at the variation of appropriation I just want to go back to this a little—I just want to go back to the variation of appropriation that we did earlier on this year. There was a \$250 million savings under the Agricultural Development Bank. Why then if we knew then that we had two years outstanding payments for the Agricultural Incentive Programmes for farmers why then did we not use that savings into the Agricultural Incentive Programme?

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

Sen. A. Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President. So to me, Madam President, my final statement on this line Item is that this is just disappointing.

The next line Item I want to move on to, Madam President, is Government's vision and accomplishments, other contracted services for 300—is it \$300,000?—to meet the cost of engaging a social media specialist for upskilling a team of officers with respect to the presentation of Government vision and accomplishment. Now, Madam President, I would have preferred if this 300 million was allocated towards hiring experts to give more clarity to the public on reporting on progress of Government's *Vision 2030* key achievements. Now when I was just sworn in as a Senator one of the first things I got was a budget package with these really, really glossy, very nicely printed laid out documents, and one of the documents was "Reporting on Progress: Vision 2030 Key Achievements".

The last time one was done was for that period 2015—2018 and then a National Performance Framework was done for the periods 2017—2020, and what it looks at is the performance indicators under the various thematic areas and report on how Government has progressed against its baseline when the whole *Vision 2030* initiative had started, and that to me is what should be marketed and promoted. But in order for it to be marketed and promoted and explained to the country it needs to be done first. So I would like to see—we are about eight years away from 2030 so this would come in very, very well at this point in time, and not only as a Member of this House but also as a member of—a citizen—I would also benefit a lot from it.

Madam President, so let me wrap up quite quickly. The time went by really fast. I just want to—in the last few minutes that I have I just want to give some thoughts about the overall economy. I mean the figures that the Minister of Finance spoke of: the improvement projected; budget deficit; the forecasted nominal GDP to increase from 117 million to 180 million; the increase in the debt to GDP, the decrease, sorry, in the debt to GDP ratio; just let me stick a pin here. I know that there were some debate between Sen. Mark and Minister West on the nominal GDP and real GDP just to clarify real quickly. When you speak to the debt to GDP ratio you can either use the nominal or real GDP because it is a ratio. Either way when you calculate it, it is a ratio. So the number would be the same.

So my final statement is that these figures do point to good news. I mean who would be against the additional fiscal space to allow for more flexibility in managing the fiscal affairs of the country after operating in such a tight cash-strapped environment since 2017. But whether we should breathe a sigh of relief just yet, Madam President, I would advise the Government to be vigilant on the

turn of events in the global economy, and try not to shrug off serious concerns of inflationary pressures which will and is going to escalate and continue to affect the cost of living and the cost of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago. So it is not time to slacken our belts yet and get too excited. I thank you, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

1.30 p.m.

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox): Thank you, Madam President. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services continues to unwaveringly support thousands of citizens in our twin-island Republic who are in need of state financial assistance during their twilight years. As a consequence, the Ministry's strong commitment is essential if we are to meet the growing needs of the vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, you may recall that during the debate on the Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation Bill 2021/2022, I reported that the Ministry received supplemental funding in the sum of \$531,053,225. Of this amount, \$418,315,156 or 78 per cent of that was allocated to 109,132 senior citizen pensioners. The steady growth of our ageing population with 13 per cent of the population averaging 65 years and over, has resulted in the Ministry having to once again request additional funding to meet the payments associated with the needs of this particular cohort of citizens. The Ministry recognizes its fiduciary responsibility to ensure that the resources it is allocated are adequately managed.

We also note that the source of revenue in the economy has declined and therefore public funds must be dispersed with fiscal prudence, equity and fairness. These matters are also exacerbated by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other world events, which continue to significantly affect prices

across global economies, including that of Trinidad and Tobago. In spite of this, Madam President, our senior citizens continue to receive their pensions as they have in the past in the same amounts and on time. The senior citizens' pension is one of the core social assistance measures provided by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for the elderly who are vulnerable. We recognize, however, the need to review our grants, to improve our efficiency in delivery and to identify areas of cost savings.

In my contribution to the debate on the Appropriation Bill 2021/2022 at the other place in October, I reported that fraudulent practices at the Ministry were engaging the attention of the Financial Investigation Bureau, the Anti-Corruption Investigation Bureau and the Fraud Squad of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. In fact, in the preceding 12 months before my address, there has been a 241 per cent increase in the number of reports to the TTPS, with the majority of cases, 151 per cent, involving senior citizens' pension. Back then, I assured the nation and I wish to reassure our citizens, even now, that every effort is being made to ensure that the nation's resources intended to support the vulnerable will reach them and that any and all nefarious activity will be halted, investigated and where possible, prosecuted.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: We have continued to pursue these matters, Madam President, and I can report that investigations are ongoing, some at a very sensitive stage. Twelve persons will soon be interrogated by the police with a view to arresting and laying charges against specific individuals. Ghost beneficiaries have been identified on the payroll and names have been sent to the police for investigation. As you can see, Madam President, we are making some headway

and some have been deactivated and we have realized that those who have been deactivated, no one—and out of those who have been deactivated, no one has come forward for reactivation. So, Madam President, that says a lot.

We are also implementing several strategies to reduce the leakage of funds from the system and to ensure that grants are targeted only to those who are in need of them and some of these strategies being implemented are well advanced and include reduction of errors, fraudulent transactions and corruption in the processing and payment of our senior citizens' pension, removal of ineligible clients, particularly those residing permanently abroad, streamlining of payments to clients via direct deposits thereby reducing and/or eliminating payments by cheques and of course, the digitalization of the Ministry's service to facilitate greater efficiency and cost reduction.

The Ministry is in the midst of a data clean-up and validation exercise which aims to populate all records with only the most accurate and current information on our clients. Our clients are being asked to complete a special data form as part of the life certificate process and this will allow us to receive travel information, national insurance and death information, thereby ensuring that the senior citizens' pension remains targeted to only those who are alive and in need of such support. Currently, some 38 employees have been engaged and are dedicated to this clean-up and validation exercise. The process is already bearing fruit.

Since October 2021, the Ministry has been able to remove 12,010 pensioners from the system. Of this, 7,554 persons accounting for approximately \$94 million were dead persons who have not been removed from the system. During that period, we added 5,400 persons resulting in a net reduction of 6,610 persons. Our MOU with the Immigration Division is expected to realize the removal of at least

of another 5,000 clients, pensioners who are living abroad and also receiving senior citizens' pension.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: As of April the 30th, 2022, 68 per cent of our pensioners are on the direct deposit payment method and an active on-going programme with the banks and our service centres is in place to encourage maximum use of the direct deposit initiative. Our target is 95 per cent by September 2022. We have met with the Bankers Association and they have agreed to institute several extra measures to support those who are still being paid by cheque before they graduate to our direct deposit system. At the same time, we are moving towards a new digital payment system which will change the current arrangements with the National Insurance Board to print cheques and TTPost to deliver them. Madam President, we expect this measure to close the door on stolen cheques at post offices and from pensioner's mailboxes.

In order to correct specific findings made on certain records by the Auditor General, the Ministry has already engaged all the local boards with the task of pulling the manual files and updating the data on the existing database. And this exercise will be monitored by the central board of the Social Welfare Division, internal audit unit and the investigation unit to ensure compliance.

It is important to note that the Ministry has already assessed the payments currently being made to our pensioners and added the estimated number of new clients who are expected to join between May and September 2022, and has calculated that the increased allocation of \$389,073,000 is required to meet our commitments to senior citizens to the end of the fiscal year. And this is in fact a reduction in supplemental funding required in this fiscal by some \$29,242,156 or 7

per cent over the same period last year. Although modest in this instance, this reduction is a mere indicator of the direction in which we are going and we expect to report more substantial savings when some of the strategic and administrative initiatives to address the leakage of funds that I mentioned earlier are fully executed.

The Ministry is also actively pursuing collaborative measures with key agencies such as Immigration, the Registrar General, the Elections and Boundaries Commission, the Supermarkets Association, the Central Bank, the National Insurance Board and of course the Bankers Association to bring needed changes to the system and to the Ministry's internal processes for the senior citizens' pension. The aim is to protect our clients, especially the elderly from fraudulent and corrupt practices as well as prevent the leakage of funds from the system due to theft, overpayment and of course, human error. Data management and data analytics have become critical inputs into the management of the grants at the Ministry.

Additionally, ongoing collaboration with the Fraud Squad will serve to treat with the issue of fraudulent encashment of cheques from what may possibly be organized crime. It is with this in mind that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is moving full speed ahead with its direct deposit initiative and the establishment of our investigation and compliance unit.

From a legislative perspective, the Ministry has been actively engaged in a comprehensive review of the Senior Citizens' Pension Act, Chap. 32:01 and its accompanying regulations with a view to providing greater clarity and enabling legislative amendments for more cohesive and efficient administrative arrangements, monitoring, evaluation and compliance with the social protection system. This includes a comprehensive review of the qualifying eligibility criteria,

issuance of stricter financial penalties and/or imprisonment when breaches are made, introduction of new approaches to recover overpayments to ineligible recipients and or relatives of beneficiaries who are deceased. It should be noted that these are only a few of the aspects of the transformation and change initiatives taking place at the Ministry to create a targeted social protection system which allows our clients to build their own resilience.

Madam President, in closing, I must say that in spite of the many obstacles and challenges faced over the past two years, this Government has never wavered in its mandate of putting people first—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—and they have used measures adopted to manage the economy in such turbulent times. We hope that the global economic situation will not continue for a prolonged period. The Government continues to be cognizant of its obligations to the vulnerable and we will always provide a cushion for our elderly who have already made a significant contribution to the development of this great nation and are now most deserving of our care and our attention.

I wish to thank the executive and staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for their hard and dedicated work. I thank the Minister of Finance for his understanding and support of our elderly and I thank you, Madam President, and Members of this honourable House for the opportunity to make this contribution in support of the supplemental funding for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Damian Lyder: Thank you, Madam President, and we are here today for this

mid-year review where this Government after spending more than \$393 billion in their tenure, now comes to the Senate seeking approval for an additional \$3.081 billion and it becomes very hard to debate this Bill today because it is my opinion that it lacks substance when it comes to the Government's effort in diversifying this economy outside of the oil and gas sector.

We see this Government coming at a time where they have neglected and broken the promises to farmers in the agricultural sector, we see this where businesses in this country continue to struggle. It is reported that more than 6,000 SMEs closed, reported from the various Chambers of Commerce that they have closed, shut their doors. Several large businesses and I think recently I saw Ansa Merchant Bank reporting losses. The inability of international firms to come to our shores, in fact they are leaving our shores under this Government and no doubt, all these business closures would have led to unemployment in this country.

We see in a time when exports in our last check have been in decline, when the tourism sector has suffered from a lack of planning and a lack of vision and most of all a lack of investment from this Government. I see the Minister of Tourism has just joined us, I am happy he has joined for this part of the debate and hopefully he will not try to derail me but I move on. He may learn something from this debate. This will constitute some of the key areas that I intend to prosecute, namely trade, agriculture and tourism in this debate.

For us to understand these Ministries and the sectors, one would have to look at the certain economic indicators, and we heard the Minister of Finance note a number of economic indicators in his presentation and the piloting of this Bill today. So it is important for us to understand some other economic indicators that he may have left out, to understand where we have been coming from and to know

where we are going, especially as this Government seeks to ask for \$3.018 billion more.

Madam President, what the Minister of Finance left out in his economic indicators is that the Government has lost more than \$10 billion in foreign direct investment in stark contrast to a Kamla Persad-Bissessar-led government that brought in more than \$48 billion between 2010 and 2015. Over 100,000 persons having lost their jobs and we saw this from an NIB report. Foreign reserves continue to be in decline down to US \$6.65 billion as of March, coming down from US \$10.46 billion at the end of September 2015 under UNC-led Government.

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

Public sector debt has risen to in excess of 140 billion by the latest Auditor General's report for the fiscal ended September 30th, 2021 and the total budget deficit over the past six years has been in excess of some \$63 billion. The entire deficit over the period of five years under the People's Partnership government was a paltry \$15 billion which pales in comparison to what has happened under this Government. These high budget deficits and resulting borrowing has caused the debt-to-GDP to rise as high as 87 per cent debt-to-GDP. I heard the Minister state that earlier. And the Minister of Finance comes today and informs us that it is now dropped to 72 per cent based on GDP projections for the current fiscal year.

So I would like as my colleague Sen. Mark indicated, I would like to ask the Minister of Finance maybe to call Vladimir Putin and thank him and do not take credit for bringing down this debt-to-GDP, Minister of Finance.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, good afternoon. You have started just shy of five minutes and we have already heard rebuttals along the lines for what you are saying again, so I ask you to stay away from what was said and to stick to the task

at hand.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President and I will take your advice only hoping that I would have been able to get some latitude to open my statement with certain comments. So I was not going to speak at length about Vladimir Putin but I will take your advice, Mr. Vice-President. The Minister of Finance's statement implies that the economy has virtually turned around and returned to 2015 or even better levels despite the fact that we saw this Government put forward a 16 per cent decline in the economy between 2015 and 2020. The result, Mr. Vice-President, has simply been a windfall of tax revenue from petroleum and petrochemicals. That is what happened.

In fact, when I was listening to this debate in another place, the Minister of Public Utilities in the mid-year review had stated that money was not a problem but I thought I was listening to an old speech from Dr. Eric Williams. The Minister went on to state that the problem is management. Now, the Minister was speaking in terms of WASA, Mr. Vice-President, but of course, we can say the same for this Cabinet, for this Government. Since October last year, money has not been a problem. They have been bringing in \$1 billion more per month on average since October of last year but they have not passed on this benefit to the families that struggle every day to provide access to education for citizens.

When I looked at the Supplementary Appropriation, the Ministry of Education had \$300 million there. And it was for what? T&TEC, TSTT, bad debt. But at the same time, parents had to suffer the indignity of hearing a particular Cabinet Minister calling them fools because they could not get US dollars to support their children who were studying abroad. I have not called any Cabinet Minister's name.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder. Sen. Lyder, 46(1), irrelevance. You are bringing measures from different timelines that one, do not fit into the current debate today in its timeline, you have gone back at least three to five years for one item and you have gone back as far as seven for the other. This is for this current year and ask you that you keep it within the line without going so wide.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for your advice but, Mr. Vice-President, we are here debating a request from the Government of \$3.081 billion, there are Heads of expenditure for each of these line Items, under the Ministry of Education, there is 300 million. So it is my duty to examine this, examine what the expenditure is and when I have completed that examination, I have concluded exactly what I have said, which is that there is nothing there to help parents who need to seek to get US dollars to send their children to school, so I think it is extremely relevant, Mr. Vice-President, but I will move on with your advice. I will move on with your advice.

Mr. Vice-President, whilst we are very relieved that the price of oil has risen, it is not lost on us, to the Opposition, that this harvest is not as a result of economic diversification nor the efforts of this Government and their policies and their decisions. So whilst we are happy this is happening, the Government has not been proactive. The Minister of Finance sits on a windfall, not by his doing but by what has occurred in another land and it is unfortunate that this windfall is happening on the deaths of those in a war in Iraq—sorry, in Ukraine and Russia. It is unfortunate. However—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, we have established the fact from one of your Members on your Bench, the same point as it applies to the current world markets because of what you may see as lack of vision and also the war. If you can say

anything new to that, we will appreciate it.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, but I am here dealing specifically with trade, agriculture as well as tourism and just like others who would have mentioned the war that caused a problem within other Heads, other areas and Ministries, I should be entitled to speak about this as it pertains to agriculture, as it pertains to trade and as it pertains to tourism in this country. So I am not being repetitive but the war is affecting all of these places so I must make reference to that respectfully, Mr. Vice-President.

So, Mr. Vice-President, the Government did nothing special. VAT refunds stand at about \$7-plus billion based on an IMF report and we see that \$4 billion is projected in VAT refunds for this financial year according to the Minister of Finance, so this will not cover the total amount of over \$7 billion. And I must remind this Government that VAT belongs to the businesspersons, it is not for the Minister of Finance to hold it as if it is an interest-free loan. Pay them back the VAT that is owed, all, all, all! They know that term. There is nothing being done to address the decline in the ease of doing business down to 105 in the world from 66 under the last Government.

This Government boasts today of a half-year surplus of almost \$2 billion from a turnaround in fortunes of almost 6 billion but still businessmen are struggling to get foreign exchange. Still they are struggling. This week alone, I had to beg one of the six banks I bank with to get US dollars. I had to beg them for a paltry sum just to conduct my business. Mr. Vice-President, “money eh no problem” for certain friends and financiers who benefit from fully paid rents which I saw in this Supplementary Appropriation Bill, legal fees, yet children are still home because parents cannot afford school uniforms. One billion extra per month

on average yet students have to face a close in the GATE programme. Students at secondary schools still do not have laptops.

The Minister of Finance was heard in the wrap up, both in another place and in here today, chastising certain economists and I think from the other place, it was an economist in UWI. Chastising them for being critical in the midst of an economic largesse. So, Mr. Vice-President, it is important—I looked to see who these economists were. So I noted economist Dr. Roger Hosein who featured in an article with the headline:

“2021 looks better because 2020 took a hard hit”

Mr. Vice-President, to be fair to Dr. Hosein, this article was published prior to the Minister of Finance’s outdoor of the statistics that only he had access to, and wants us on this side and the rest of the nation to trust him and believe him when we did not have access to this data, and I am going to get to that because I want to respond to the Minister of Finance. Another UWI economist, Dr. Vaalmikki Arjoon, reported to have observed that after the mid-year review, that, and I quote:

“...the key reason that the Debt to GDP value has fallen by such a substantial amount is not due to a meaningful fall in the public debt, but because of the denominator - Nominal GDP, which according to the” Minister of Finance—“increased to \$180 billion.”

So it must be noted that Dr. Arjoon alluded to the fact that only the Minister has access to this data he referenced to show this 72 per cent debt-to-GDP, this reduction, and we hear this coming here again. The Senate should be minded to note that the debt-to-GDP statistics and revenue statistics outlined by the Minister were not shared with the public and I heard the Minister state that this information was available on the—the data was available in the CSO online but when I last

checked the CSO online, we saw that GDP was reported only up to the third quarter of 2021. So that means we have no information online in the CSO that takes us from the third quarter of 2021 to the second quarter of 2022. So, Mr. Vice-President, this for me raises questions of credibility. If the Minister cannot come out or come out beforehand and share this data with UWI, with the Central Bank, if he cannot do that, how can we stand here today and properly debate this? The Government has been working—this information, they hold close to their chest, it is almost veiled in secrecy.

So I am asking the Minister of Finance in his wrap up if he could indicate that if he could provide to the public the necessary data that is being used to justify his \$180 billion growth in nominal value of this country's GDP because we see nothing after the third quarter of 2021. But so be it, we have grown accustomed to the Government locking out access to persons who could potentially help this country.

So we are here in this Motion speaking about debt today also, Mr. Vice-President, of the total supplementary allocation of 291 million is targeted towards repayment of loans, that is about 9.5 per cent of the 3.08 billion additional being asked by this Government. So this is only from the 3 billion but we know last year that the Government has paid somewhat of about \$10.75 billion in charges on account of public debt. In other words, debt servicing. This 291 million is a mere 3 per cent of the total annual loan servicing. So what is worrying is that the Government would have budgeted for loan payments for the fiscal so the Minister ought to have known what the loan payment figure would have been at the beginning of the fiscal year. This really begs the question to me if this large sum of 291 million is as a result of new loans taken on during the fiscal period. I think

I heard in another place, the Minister spoke about no new loans being taken after December. Mr. Vice-President, but I remind the Senate that the fiscal year started in October the 1st, 2021, so I am just asking is this for servicing new loans.

Mr. Vice-President, in this debate here today and in another place because I looked on in another place, the Minister of Finance outlined his agenda for the 3.08 billion supplementary allocation, so I will highlight some of those bits that he would have spoken about, about a balanced budget or maybe have some small deficit. That is what I gathered that we should be balancing the budget.

2.00 p.m.

Sen. D. Lyder: But this Government has continued to suppress spending by simply ignoring certain citizens in this country. I heard a \$2.2 billion reduction in expenditure. But who does that affect? It affects citizens when it pertains to education, health care, better roads and social assistance. Therefore, it will it as no surprise if they seek to balance the budget by cutting back on support for the vulnerable, but still paying rentals and legal fees, as I saw in this appropriation all throughout various Heads.

I heard discussions of a deposit into the HSF, based on income made in the first half of fiscal 2022. Now, Mr. Vice-President, everyone will know that this is a mandatory legal requirement, as I heard my leader in the Opposition remind the Government in the other place. So they can take no praise for merely following the law. But what they can take, bolted to the chest of this Government, is that they have raided the fund in the tune of \$17 billion to date and depleting the fund's capital balance below 5.6 billion. The Minister of Finance may argue that they merely took interest coming out from the HSF. But we saw in the last annual report of the HSF that at the end of fiscal 2021, that the fund declined by \$1.8

billion. So, therefore, is the hon. Minister just putting back the money, paying back the money? Great.

We saw money being spent on social assistance here. But I ask the question: For who? Because in January, when we were counting our luck with the high-rising oil prices, the Government shut down the NAMDEVCO market box food support for thousands of families. So who is getting this social support? Mr. Vice-President, families lost their jobs and livelihoods as a result of these prolonged and unjustified COVID-19 lock downs.

This is an act, Mr. Vice-President, of cutting this programme of an uncaring Government. So I do not know if it is in their DNA to really meaningfully assist those in the social assistance programmes. I heard the previous Minister speak about the expenditure in this regard. But that is on the backdrop of shutting down this NAMDEVCO programme.

Throughout the different Heads of expenditure we see outstanding bills to service providers of the State: T&TEC, TSTT, WASA. We note that several bills to the State entity such as those that I spoke about are being paid. And as the Opposition Leader said in the other place as well, I looked at her debate, the Minister of Finance is merely moving funds from one spreadsheet in the Government to another spreadsheet in the Government.

If they really wanted to pay outstanding bills then they should repay the contractors who are being owed huge sums of money. I am sure the hon. Minister of Works and Transport would appreciate that. I know he has a lot of work to do. Ramping up of capital expenditure, we saw this. But they have allocated a mere 3 per cent of this supplementary allocation. This does not sound to me like ramping anything up. It sounds like shutting down. And then, of course, the payment of

billions of dollars in VAT refunds.

I heard Sen. Deonarine speak about the Government looking to pay \$4 billion. But what about the \$3.5 billion, which was identified by the IMF? Pay the private sector this money so they can thrive. As long as you owe people this money as a Government, Mr. Vice-President, as long as you owe people this money, it is a Government debt. So you say you have the money today from the windfall, pay the next 3.5 billion.

Then we see some settlement of wage negotiations with the labour sector and the CPO. Mr. Vice-President, I will believe that when I see it. I seem to recall the hon. Minister of Finance some years back talking about zero, zero, zero for public servants. And he has kept his promise. But, Mr. Vice-President, the last labour-friendly negotiations that we have had was in 2013 under a United National Congress-led Government. And then, Mr. Vice-President, we heard about major road repairs and a desilting programme. That to me, I had to laugh at that one. Even the Minister of Works and Transport, I am sure, the hon. Minister of Works and Transport will laugh at this. We know that that Ministry has been deprived of funds to fix the roads in this country. And I know the Minister is trying but his funds have been depleted. There are so many potholes in this country today, Mr. Vice-President, if there is one more pothole the road would be smooth. Maybe that is the strategy, to smoothen roads.

Mr. Vice-President: fund Government's affordable housing programme. Well the housing, Mr. Vice-President, has all but collapsed under this Government, despite coming to the Parliament to approve \$1 billion in a housing bond and going through six Ministers of Housing, including one of which included the Prime Minister of this country. But what was not included, Mr. Vice-President, and I

would say this very briefly, because I understand some Senators have allowed a small bit of leeway to speak in this regard. What has not been stated in the Minister of Finance statement was any mention of some of the bread and butter issues for the citizens of this country. For example, Mr. Vice-President, food support given, given that they have taken away food cards from thousands of families, health sector support such as CDAP for medicine for the elderly. I heard the Minister of Finance speak about \$1 billion in this debate being spent on pharmaceuticals, yet we hear the horror stories coming from citizens that they cannot get access to proper medication in this country.

Education supporting laptops and the GATE programme shut. And, of course, foreign exchange supply to the citizens and the private sector in this country. So the Minister of Finance in his debate has basically indicated we are awash with foreign exchange from the petroleum and petrochemical sector. Yet I myself, as I said earlier, had to beg for US dollars.

Mr. Vice-President, when we look at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries under Head 77, \$120 million, this Government has presented a mid-year review with little in the way of support for farmers. In fact, of the \$120 million stated here, 56million is targeted to repayment of a loan and settling judgment debt for the litigious EMBD, Estate Management & Business Development Company Limited.

I have heard people state outside of this Parliament that it seems as though the Government is running down money to prosecute the Opposition, but no money for farmers. That is what I have heard. And these cases they have repeatedly lost by the way, costing taxpayers of this country money, not for productive enterprise but for paying legal cases lost by the Government, and the

rest of the money, no surprise, being used to pay outstanding bills such as T&TEC, WASA, security companies and, of course, salaries and wages; salaries and wages which included, when I was listening to the Standing Finance Committee, something for the praedial larceny unit which, I will get to shortly. I was able to review the Standing Finance Committee on television and I saw the praedial larceny unit recorded there.

Mr. Vice-President, regarding the agriculture incentive programme, a paltry sum of \$7.7 million brings the total figure to 18.76 million, target to pay outstanding moneys to some 890 applicant farmers during the pandemic from 2020 to 2022.

And I listened to Sen. Deonarine when she indicated the savings of the 25 million from the ADB Bank. Why could that not have been allocated here to increase? But what are they left with? What are these 890 applicant farmers left with? They are left with less than \$21,000 per applicant. For a low sum of \$21,000 members have to cover stuff like packaging material, post-harvest equipment, agricultural equipment. And according to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, he accounted to this in another place, not heard in the debate, any of the three Ministers' debate here today. So I have to look at what happened in the other place.

Mr. Vice-President, when we look at food security, and this is why I referenced the war. I heard Sen. Deonarine speak at length when she spoke about food security and the various programmes outlined in the budget debate. So I am responding to her. She also spoke about food security in the roadmap for recovery. Mr. Vice-President, based on the war in Russia and Ukraine, which is specific—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Vice-President, point of order 46(1). I am hearing several

matters which have no relevance to this supplementary appropriation such as Standing Finance Committee in the other place, comments made by Independent Senators, not relevant.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, you are reminded, as in the deliberations of the Minister of Finance earlier, that this is an appropriation, a budget Appropriation Bill. It is not budgetary discussion. So many of the items that you are raising do not apply to the Bill and the matter at hand. Please stick within the confines of what has been started in the debate, please.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, as I lost minutes from my contribution you would know, Mr. Vice-President, that we are allowed to respond. We are allowed to respond.

Mr. Vice-President: You have not lost minutes. You are taking it up by talking about stuff that is not there. So if it is you use your time wisely, you will actually gain minutes.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I was responding to Sen. Deonarine. I am allowed to do so. It is a debate.

Mr. Imbert: Point of Order, Mr. Vice-President. It is a supplementary appropriation to Heads of expenditure, 46(1).

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, I have ruled on the same Standing Order within the last two minutes. Please be guided accordingly.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, I have noticed that some of the money that is being paid for salaries in the Head of expenditure in agriculture has been towards salaries in the praedial larceny unit. Mr. Vice-President, I am happy to see some funds going there. I am happy. And now that the Government has this windfall that the Minister of Finance speaks

about, maybe the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is in a position to get some more funding. Because whereas it is good to settle some wage issues with the praedial larceny unit, there are significant other grievances that I must bring to this Senate's attention.

Mr. Vice-President, we saw last Monday reports of the praedial larceny unit being plunged to intensify their work stoppage action. This is despite the funds now being spoken about today for the praedial larceny unit. Workers' grievances such as being overworked, on short-term contracts, rendering them unable to take sick leave or vacation, lack of radio communication, disparity in working hours, disparity in salaries for officers of the same rank. If these were not enough, Mr. Vice-President, officers also complained about lack of firearms to protect themselves and a lack of working vehicles.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, a repetition on 46(1) as it applies to pertinence, not on issues that were raised last week and items that have been approved to come.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, I am saying that these moneys have been put there to help with the praedial larceny unit. And I am saying that there is not sufficient funds in this allocation today. I am calling for the Minister of Finance to reconsider increasing the funds to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries beyond salaries, Mr. Vice-President, beyond that. I do not know where I am repeating. But Mr. Vice-President, the Senate has three Ministers of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries here today, yet not much was said about the \$3billion in this address today.

Mr. Vice-President, when I move on now to Head 80 in tourism and culture, and I suppose the Minister of Tourism and Culture, through you, Mr. Vice-

President, will be listening attentively now. After the 20 million spent on the Taste of Carnival, the NCC still made a loss in carnival. And now, Mr. Vice-President, given the distress that our tourism and culture product suffered throughout the pandemic, I had hoped in this season of plenty from petroleum and petrochemicals that the Minister of Finance stated in his speech today, that the land of the greatest show on earth and our festivals, our cultural aficionados, would have gotten a share of the cake today, Mr. Vice-President. But unfortunately all that was reported was the additional payment of 20 million that will be made to repay an existing loan facility that will cause the loan to be retired in June this year, according to the Minister.

Mr. Vice-President, again listening, listening, not referring that I have read, but listening to the Standing Finance Committee, I was hoping to hear an additional allocation. However, for our culture and tourism operators there was nothing. Mr. Vice-President, and you know why this is unfortunate? Because when we look at the contribution—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Vice-President, Standing Order 46(1), the Standing Finance Committee is irrelevant to this matter before the honourable Senate.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, 46(1) is upheld simply because you have gone off of the relevance of what you are saying to this matter here today.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, we have been asked to come to this Senate to approve an additional \$3.081 billion that this Government is asking for certain expenditure. And if I am here to debate this, Mr. Vice-President, it is pertinent that I would have listened to the Standing Finance Committee to understand how this money was being broken down—

Mr. Vice-President: Exactly.

Sen. D. Lyder:—to be able to properly debate this.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, when you do that you are working with the assumption that it has not been appropriated, period. What this is about is moving forward for the matters inside the Bill.

Sen. D. Lyder: Yes, Mr. Vice-President, and as such when I see that only \$20 million is put into tourism and culture in this appropriation, supplementary appropriation, I ask the question: Why not more?

Mr. Mitchell: Mr. Vice-President, please 46(1). It has to do with the repayment of a loan and nothing else. It does not have to do with all that is tourism and culture. Standing Order 46(1) on relevance relevant, please, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President: Once again 46(1) upheld, Sen. Lyder.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, for the record, in listening to this debate earlier today, I have heard various Members on the Government side. I have heard various Members on the Independent Benches make reference to things that they did not hear, that they would have liked to have heard because of certain other debates or certain matters that happened in the Standing Finance Committee in the other place and they were allowed the flexibility. Why are we being—

Mr. Vice-President: Are you using your time to object instead of contributing? Sen. Lyder, you have six minutes to the close, I suggest that you use it wisely.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, we in the Opposition are not permitted to properly debate today and given the fairness, as we have heard those in the Government and the Independent Bench today. We have not been given that luxury. We did not get up and stop the Government when they were talking about irrelevant matters.

Mr. Vice-President, I heard right before I spoke, just before I spoke, Sen.

Deonarine referred to food security in this country and she was allowed to go and I am not allowed to bring up matters pertaining to the Ministries?

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Vice-President, a point of order. That is a grave breach, accusing the Presiding Officer of unfairness. It is a contempt of the Parliament.

Sen. D. Lyder: It is my person—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, in the best interest of the debate I ask that you use your last four minutes wisely. And this is my last warning to you.

Sen. D. Lyder: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Well I was going to speak about Head 18, under the Ministry of Finance for Phoenix Park and the 25.9 million that is going to be used under eTeck. But, of course, I would not worry to waste time with that, Mr. Vice-President. I would not worry to tell this Senate about all the ills and the problems in eTeck such as bad roads, bad security. I will move on. I will move on. No money to that, but I will move on, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, thank you very much for your contribution today.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Dillon-Remy, you may come to the next booth please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, can we get a little quiet for Dr. Remy to start please? Thank you.

Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy: Mr. Vice-President, I am honoured to have another opportunity to make a contribution in this honourable Senate and to speak on

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

2022.05.20

Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2021, where the Government is requesting \$3.081 billion.

As I peruse the Bill, Mr. Vice-President, I thought that there were three areas that my attention should be addressed to and that is what I would spend my time doing this afternoon, highlighting those three areas.

The first Head is the Head 13, the Office of the Prime Minister, relating to the additional \$59,961,300 requested for the Office of the Prime Minister, and I would focus my attention specifically, as it relates to the 22,397,000 allocated to the Children's Authority. And the reason I am doing that is because I am really concerned about what is happening now, as it relates to the reports that are having the attention of the media and as it relates to an increased allocation to the Children's Authority to conduct its activities, I just want to make three brief points.

We have the video of the children being abused at an undisclosed children's home in Trinidad being aired on television and which had this disturbing encounter that left many saddened and others enraged, and even more disturbing to note that instances such as these are not an exception but they may be a little more than the norm. We also have the task force report that has just been laid in Parliament where there are allegations that our children's homes need a lot of attention.

I quote the *Newsday* article dated May 02, 2022, which highlighted some of the main points of that report. And I quote:

“The report lamented that some security guards sexually and/or physically abuse children in care of certain homes...

‘Security guards have been found complicit in supplying psychotropic substances and other unregulated drugs to residents.’”

Mr. Vice-President, the report also chided St. Jude's Home lamenting frequent

sexual activity occurring among residents, including gang rape, et cetera.

Mr. Vice-President I am sickened by the thought of the wrongs that are being committed against wards of State, innocent and precious children. I think it is important to talk about this, because as I said even though the allocation, the allocation that I am talking about here, is for improved management at the Children's Authority.

The article went on further to say that they were concerned that they needed more injection of funding into the Children's Authority, so that they will improve on the investigating and monitoring. The article said:

“There is no demand by the (Children's) Authority for proper investigations into incidents such as sexual interaction between children.”

The Authority is not conducting its monitoring activities appropriately.

“The Authority does not always follow up on reports...”

—that are made between children having sexual interactions.

“Children...leave the home to buy marijuana, increasing the probability of child abuse in the form of transactional sex”

The editorial piece in the *Trinidad Guardian* of May 20, 2022 commented on the report and again highlighting the failure of the Authority to ensure the care and protection of children, especially those who are at risk who have been victims of abuse or neglect.

Mr. Vice-President, I make a call for more to be done by the Children's Authority as the overseer of these homes, and more importantly as the overseer of our nation's children. If our children are our future then I ask: What kind of future are we creating by allowing our children to become scarred and bitter, because no one protected or stood up for them? These sentiments extend, not just for the

authority but also to parents of children.

I am making these points because I was a part of the start-up for the Children's Authority, the group that was there before the Children's Authority, before the Act was proclaimed, and I remember us trying to make sure that things were going to be put into place to ensure that children would be adequately cared for.

I quote from news.gov.tt, dated May 19, 2015, a quote from the then Chair of the Children's Authority, and that is Stephanie Daly SC. She was the Chairman of the Board of Management then, and she said at that point in time:

“The Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago is now operational and ready to deliver services to children and their families.

This comes following the proclamation on Monday 18th May...of the following pieces of legislation:

1. Children's Authority Act, Chap. 46:10;
2. Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act...;
3. Children's Act, 2012; and
4. Adoption of Children's Act, 2000.”

And she said:

“we welcome the proclamations as they contain many new options that can better respond to the needs of children, and represent a new beginning in the way issues related to children will be addressed’.”

She ends by saying:

“The Authority reminds the public that child protection is everyone's business.”

I am saying this because when this Authority was started, it was supposed to

solve many of our problems, including the reports that happened like the Sabga Report of 1997. Again, I would not go into details for that.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy, as much as the topic you are speaking about at the current moment is extremely relevant, as it applies to the current on goings of matters in Trinidad and Tobago, you started off your contribution just over eight minutes ago and I am giving you a long run up to making some of your points. You did state that you were speaking under the Head of the Office of the Prime Minister. Can you tie in your comments, as it applies to the horrendous acts to children within the Bill that is in front of us? We have another Bill coming up, sexual offences, where it may be more pertinent to bring up these items then.

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. My final point about that is that as a community, we must do better with our children. If we value their lives as parliamentarians, when we pass the laws, as Government when we govern, as community, as faith-based organizations, we must do our best for them and the Children's Authority does have a role in that. So I will move forward, Mr. Vice-President.

2.30 p.m.

My second point relates to the increase allocation Head 26 to the Ministry of Education for \$300 million dollars. Mr. Vice-President, the point I want to make here is the moneys that have been requested are for things like paying of gratuity, paying of T&TEC and those outstanding payments. But I want specifically to mention here what is happening in the schools now post COVID—well not post-COVID. As schools have now been reopened recently, we have a situation where teachers have to be quarantined, children have to be quarantined, and when that

happens our children are not being taught because teachers are home and there is no connection right now between what happens when a teacher either has to be quarantined or has COVID and is home—no, you do not have assistant teachers there or, you do not have a situation where a teacher can teach from home and the child is in school.

I am saying that because our children are being disadvantaged right now and as we seek to give more allocation to the Ministry of Education we must look at this, specifically, as we are coming through we are—I am saying post COVID I know we are not truly out of it as yet but a lot of—we had a lot of gains during the pandemic in terms of the ability to do things online and now it seems as though it is just gone back, you are either in school or you are either home. We must be able to do something better for our children. We must have probably a blended learning system. That, right now, is not happening. And I think I should mention that as it relates to the allocation for education. I must remind our parents and our children that we should get vaccinated.

The third point I would want to make, Mr. Vice-President, is about the allocation of the \$60 million to the Tobago House of Assembly. The Tobago House of Assembly made a request, I understand, for more than 200 million and 60 million was allocated to pay the outstanding moneys to the Helicopter Services, outstanding moneys to T&TEC, and also for gratuity. Mr. Vice-President, the THA is on record as saying they have approximately \$1 billion right now in debt, and I am wondering where is the money going to come from to pay all these contractors that are there waiting, where is the money going to come from to help with the tourism product? Again I am saying post-COVID but now as we are seeking to improve on what we have to offer, where is the money going to come for the

Tobago House of Assembly in terms of the tourism product.

Mr. Vice-President, we are in a season where we are seeking to come out of one phase of the—a phase that we would love to think that it did not happen but the reality is that COVID has happened and now that we coming out of it, we are asking for a change in the way we operate. Yes, the moneys have been—the Minister of Finance has spoken that we have had an increase in the revenue as a result of moneys gained from petrochemicals and that is great. And, as a result the moneys are here to do very important things like paying gratuity and paying the utilities et cetera, and that is great. But I too am concerned about where we are, of the moneys that we have—we are probably, well let me put it positively—that I would like to make sure that we are not going to continue to depend on the increase moneys that we are getting from the petrochemicals going forward and that we really seek to diversify the economy and that all the stuff that is happening right now in terms of agriculture—people mentioned that, in terms of the tourism product, the areas that we are seeking to improve so that we can get some—a change from the—our main source of income now that we are not going to be so happy that we have more money now from the petrochemicals that we just forget all of the developmental things and only concentrate on recurrent expenditure. I am just noting that for the Minister of Finance.

Finally, I would like to make the point that as far as the Tobago House of Assembly is concerned, I cannot leave here without saying we need to get the Tobago Internal Self-Government Bill back on the agenda. And I am saying that because it is time, we are now mid-term of this year of the Government and it is now—the Bill is lying in Parliament, lying in State and I would like the Minister whoever it is responsible to bring that Bill back out because I would prefer that we

are discussing it now rather than discussing it before the next election. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, thank you for giving me the opportunity once again, to make a contribution to this mid-year fiscal review, and to demonstrate through the Ministry of Works and Transport that this Government continues to deliver on its mandate, despite stringent financial times in the development of this beloved country. Mr. Vice-President, this Bill seeks to approve the variation following the mid-term review of the 2021—2022 fiscal period which has recently concluded. Mr. Vice-President, before I go into the three areas that we were allocated additional funding, I would just like to respond to Sen. Mark, when he indicated that the Government had to sing praises to President Putin. Without going further into that, I just simply want to tell him that we are an oil and gas niche economy and whenever there is a windfall, the responsibility of the Government is to utilize that windfall in the best interest of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: We sympathize with the people of Ukraine, however, we just cannot say do not pay us the market price for oil and gas, just pay us \$10 or \$2. We are an economy which is funded mainly by the energy sector and I want at this point in time to congratulate the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: —utilized that windfall. And what are the facts that the Opposition fail to acknowledge? One, a reduction in the overdraft of close to 50 per cent from a mere 98/99 per cent when we first attained office, now down to close to 50 per cent. The GDP has increased and the ratio of the debt to GDP is now at about 72 per cent, one of the best in the world. So what we have done is to utilize that windfall to ensure that at least there is a bright future on the horizon for the young people of this country.

Mr. Vice-President, this is not a budget reply or a budget debate. It is simply the mid-year review. So, I will just stick to the three areas that I would want to speak on, where the allocations for funding would have been made available to us.

Under the Highways Division, we got \$11 million. What that \$11 million will do, it will help us with the allocation to ensure that some 97 projects in this fiscal 2021/2022 would be completed. So that money will be there. It entails work on the construction of some road stabilization, cylinder crossing, Gabion basket walls, replacing of some of the cable barriers, piling and shoring work and, some other critical works that are undertaken by the drainage department. In terms of the Drainage Division, an allocation of \$10 million dollars for the Vote 09 which will allow us to continue the desilting programme. We all recognize that over the last couple of years in the Ministry has undergone a very vigorously desilting programme annually. This is to ensure that once the rainy season comes, we can minimize the flooding.

This year we would have projected or attempted to do 417 projects. To date we have completed 217 and this additional funding will help us to move that figure up closer to the 400 projects that we have earmarked. This—with the desilting

programme this helps us significantly in the movement of water once we get that downpour in a short space of time to ensure that the channels are cleaned to the extent that we will have that quick run off and this has been working for us. Also, we got some additional 9,333,000 under the Vote 28 for desilting. This too will help us in all the districts—the four districts in Trinidad and will allow us to do some additional desilting and some capital projects under the Drainage Division.

Mr. Vice-President, we also got an allocation of 66,700,000 under the Airports Authority. Now, we all recognize due to the COVID-19 pandemic that air travel would have gone through a very difficult period. The Airports Authority, despite the challenges, would have done what it has to continue to do because we cannot just shut the airport down. So this \$66 million will help the airport to continue to meet its monthly recurrent expenditure. I must congratulate the airport. Although we had the COVID pandemic, the Piarco International Airport was able to achieve the number one airport in the Caribbean, the third best airport in Central America, the cleanest airport in the Caribbean, and I think it is the second cleanest airport in the Caribbean.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: So, despite whatever challenges the Airports Authority would have had, they would have earned their place in the airport industry and at a national level—at an international level. So Mr. Vice-President, having accounted for where the expenditure will be, the most I can do now is to give the assurance to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, that whatever allocation is given to the Ministry of Works and Transport, that money will be well spent, and the citizens can guarantee that they will get value for money. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. David Nakhid: In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Especially Merciful. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for allowing me a brief intervention. Given the narrow scope, I would just like to ask a few questions and some clarifications. I go directly into it.

Mr. Vice-President, Head 22 in the Ministry of National Security, with a recurrent expenditure of over \$206 million, if the Minister could clarify in this reserve storage part of the 11 million indeed is that for patrol vehicles?—because I saw maintenance but I am asking this for clarity, since a major complaint of officers, coast guard officers, was not only the poor maintenance, but the lack of fuel provided for regular surveillance and so. I did not see that. If—hat part of that reserved storage was specifically for to provide fuel for those patrol vessels. So, just as a point of clarification, maybe in his winding up, the Minister of Finance.

Then on to Head 26—I saw for janitorial services and for security for the both of them close to over \$100 million. Which period exactly are those numbers for? Nothing was given specifically for those—and I saw in some of the other headings that there was a specific period given but I have not seen in Head 26 a specific period given for that allocation in the Ministry of Education to the company MTS. And I would like to know if part of that over \$100 million, if those nine schools that were 90 per cent completed but then subsequently gutted it because of a lack of security and so forth, or lack of completion, if they were under the remit or the jurisdiction of that—those moneys located. I would just like a little clarification on that as well.

Mr. Vice-President, then I go to Head 13: Office of the Prime Minister. And I relate specifically to 04/005/10, the St. Jude's Home for Girls, 3 million allocated. And the question must be asked, Mr. Vice-President, how could an allocation for St. Jude's Home for Girls be further justified until a complete audit is completed? And I will go into more detail. People glossed over it but I will go into more detail with the numbers. And we must not be distracted. We must not be distracted although we know it is not palatable, what has happened in the cases of the sexual abuse, physical abuse. We accept that but we should be able to walk and chew gum at the same time, Mr. Vice-President. So while we are actually dealing with those investigations and the task force report, we must recognize that if these children in state care were indeed not well clothed, not well secured, not well fed, as those reports indicated, then where did that money go? That question must be asked.

So, and I remember, Mr. Vice-President, last year, the mid-year review, when 16 million was asked for or allocated again, by the Children's Authority. I ask the question in this honourable august Chamber, if that would be prudent given that, based on my investigation after 300 million in the last five years, up until 2021, 64 million per year, had been given to the authorities and reports, based on my investigation, were forthcoming that that was the case, indeed, the children were not been well cared for and so, and that is apart from the abuse. And I was told, and it was said in this august Chamber that that was the worst statement they had ever heard, asking for that audit and questioning the allocation of that 16 million. I would like to ask whoever made that statement, if that is indeed so now, given the subsequent revelations that has come out glaringly in the public domain.

So in parallel with all other investigations, I would hope that the Government would reconsider not only the allocation to St. Jude's or wherever. But I think it is time for us not only to have that audit of the entire Children's Authority, but to move expeditiously on that audit, so no one can be accused of not wanting those homes to be properly resourced and financed. I want to make that abundantly clear. Because making statements like care for children in the arm of the state or the under the jurisdiction of the state could amount to more than what is paid for at home serves no one, Mr. Vice-President. It is really just a distraction and does not afford us the opportunity to really look and make adjustments to what should be a system that provides for the better care of the unfortunate.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I go on to Head 78: the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And \$390 million, and it is specifically for the senior citizens grant 4/007/02. Now, I am asking myself that I know that something was allocated for the displaced in the budget and now we are dealing with supplemental. But the question must be asked, if something was allocated in the budget for the displaced and we still have people living in a car park, Mr. Vice-President, which is definitely not a home for the displaced, then why is there not something—I am giving the Government the benefit of the doubt, Mr. Vice-President. I am saying maybe what was allocated in the budget was not enough to find suitable accommodation other than a carpark for our displaced, Mr. Vice-President. Then why has not this Government now, if, from what I heard from the previous speaker, is intent on providing for the people of Trinidad Tobago, and the youth and the poor, then why was now an allocation now, made to help them possibly find better housing for those displaced there in Riverside Plaza who live

that carpark in virtual squalor? Maybe the Finance Minister can in his winding up and can let us know why nothing was allocated for them.

Hon. Imbert: Point of order, Mr. Vice-President, the only item under Social Development is a supplementation for senior citizens pension.

Sen. D. Nakhid: And that is precisely my point, Mr. Vice-President, I am saying if something was allocated for displaced people under—

Hon. Imbert: Point of order, Mr. Vice-President, the only item is a supplement—
46(1) sorry. The only item for a supplementation for senior citizens pension.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid, in the context of the debate, for the 46(1) applies by raising points for what it has to be spent for, not where the thoughts of where it could have been spent, or in the ignorance of what allocations in the central budget is to be spent.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I love your guidance, Mr. Vice-President, especially the word “ignorance” of what should be allocated, thank you. I move on. In the Head 79 we had the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, 67 million; 5 million for gratuity and 62 million for the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago. Again, MTS and SWAT up to September 30th 2022. And we must then again ask the question, given that we are coming out of a pandemic, and two years of lockdown, where we know that most of the people involved in sports in our country who represent our country, who put our country on the map, are those poor underserved communities. And again, the question must be asked, I mean, given that the budget for them is 11 million under lockdown, why at least some supplemental allocation was not allowed for them. That question must be asked, but I move on. I move on. But it must be asked. I mean, if you can spend 62 million for maintaining stadia

and securing stadia, we can find something for the people who use that stadia, that is just the point. I continue.

Lastly, in closing before the Finance Minister “geh ah heart attack”—in Head 80: Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. Again, 20 million to meet certain principal payments of 100 million right. Given that a taste of Carnival costed 20 million, revenue came in at close to 4, I would imagine—I witnessed firsthand the bare bones display that this Ministry of Tourism was part of in Dubai should something not I have been given to at least alleviate that embarrassment?

[Interruption]

Sen. Mark: On a point of order, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President: Before you point of order the point of order, let me give a ruling on the point of order, right.

Sen. Mark: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. Vice-President: Yes, because we want order and that is because we want you to focus on the debate, please.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Guided, Mr. Vice-President. I am closing up Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President: Just hold a second. I must allow—

Sen. D. Nakhid: Sorry, sorry, Mr. Vice-President, sorry Sir.

Sen. Mark: Mr. Vice-President, I would like to have your interpretation as the Presiding Officer of Standing Order 65, because we are dealing with the second reading of a Bill. It deals with the general merit and principles, which is a standard, and this attempt to stymie our contributions by 46(1) all the time is clashing with Standing Order 65.

Hon. Senator: *[Desk thumping]*

Sen. Mark: So, could you, on a point of order, give me your interpretation, because we cannot continue with this abuse of the Standing Orders.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Members, members—

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: —for your clarification, point of order. I am on my feet and you are crosstalking.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Hello, Mr. Mark, any outbursts like that again I would ask you to leave the Chamber. That is absolutely inappropriate and that—

Sen. Mark: I withdraw it.

Mr. Vice-President: —you know you cannot withdraw it, it has been said. I will read for you so, you can understand.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: “On the second reading of a Bill a debate may arise covering the general merits and principles of the Bill subject to the Standing Order 64 (4).”

64 (4) does not apply to what you are bringing up. So, take the time to read 64(4) and understand that that too is out of context. Continue.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Well as I said at the beginning, Mr. Vice-President, I would be brief. So, what I have outlined here in this very narrow, what I term, as usual, a supplemental allocation that serves only the short-sighted needs of this Government. Nothing is here for the vulnerable of the society—same old, same old from this “Perverted National Movement” and I thank you.

3.00 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President: Thank you. [*Crosstalk*] Thank you so much for the intermediate entertainment, gentlemen. I ask for the contribution of Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for allowing me the opportunity to comment on the supplemental appropriation for fiscal year 2022, and the matter for consideration is the provision of supplementary funds in the sum of \$3,081,703,900 to fight urgent and critical recurrent and capital expenditure to September 30, 2022. So in a sense what we are doing here today, Mr. Vice-President, is to try to give blessings to this appropriation, these moneys that were spent or needed to be given and transferred from different areas to pay certain salaries. I see in certain instances to pay rent for offices, to pay for certain contractual services. And I must say, Mr. Vice-President, a lot of these expenditures there are necessary for us to keep the “runnings” of certain departments properly. So therefore, it is really vital that we see that what is spent and how is it spent, or even if, you know, there are any ways that we can somehow minimize the expenditure because this is basically taxpayers’ money giving into the funds that are needed.

And as I look at the different Heads, I see Head 04, the Industrial Court, and I looked at Rental and Lease, Office Accommodation and Storage, and, Mr. Vice-President, I think it was Sen. Wade Mark who made mention to the fact that, you know, rental of offices, that we should in a sense look to purchasing these offices, and this is something I may have to agree with him in the sense that why we are paying rent and we could probably purchase. We can have other areas that we can be allocated to offices that we currently rent.

So this is something I think Government would look into and should look

into. And I make the point that, even if we are going to look into this, years ago I remember—since I was growing up we always talked about the—you know, getting the business places, the Government offices, away from Port of Spain, to decentralize; to get it centralized in the sense that, you know, you can access these easily. And the reasons for that is traffic going into Port of Spain, the green effect, the fumes from the cars, the loss in persons' productivity sitting in traffic jams. So again, when I look at the Rental/Lease, Office, I respectfully say, we may have in the future to look at purchasing of offices or even rental of offices, if you are going to do that, in the central area which could be accessed to both south and north. Even though we have offices set up now where people can have computerized access—so you find, you know, that problem where persons are having to leave south to come to Port of Spain, you are not seeing much of that, but certainly, I respectfully say, certain government buildings should probably look at rental or purchase in a centralized area that could get persons from both ends of the country.

As I look at the expenditure, the Heads of Expenditure, I look at Service Commissions and it makes mention of Janitorial Services and Security Services, and this goes right through in different departments where we are paying for janitorial services and security services. Now, with the pandemic we see the importance of having proper janitorial services. We see the fact that you have to have equipment. You have to have persons, you know, on board that could clean up the environment easily. Even right now in schools, the opening of schools, if we even go in further and looking at janitorial services in school, security services in school, we see the importance there. We see the pandemic has certainly brought to the forefront the need and the importance of those personnel. And I am saying that, any sort of expenditure to help in that environment, to help the cleansing of the

place, the sanitization of the places, I would support that because I have seen the need. I see the need for the environment to be a safe environment and even for security, because with the crime that we have in our country now, any places that you may go, you may be a victim of crime.

So even though this speaks to the Service Commission and trying to improve their security service there, throughout this whole expenditure, when I look at the different expenditures—and we are looking at even security services at other areas, I would support that because I think we need to keep in touch with what is going on out there in terms of crime. So we have to have better security wherever we go. We have to have better cleaning service. So I would support those measures throughout the Bill and I think it is something that we may have to continuing addressing with the security services especially if you do not put a handle on crime.

Looking at the Elections and Boundaries Commission, Head 08, and I make reference to the Promotions, Publicity and Printing, and this was really needed to facilitate payment to media houses, for advertisements in respect to registration, pop-up initiatives, and the recently concluded Tobago House of Assembly elections and the local government by-elections in Penal/Debe. And I must say, this initiative was very successful. I have met persons who spoke about it and I congratulate the Government for at least having that initiative; the EBC also for getting that funding from the Government to be able to put that in to really get persons involved in the electoral process which is so important in our democratic state here. So I commend that and I would support any move like that to at least, you know, in giving the voting populace out there these reminders, these aspects of the—any sort of pop-up initiative so the population out there, the young ones

especially would see the importance of elections; see the importance to come in and register, come in and get your card. So I commend this initiative and I think the importance is there and we need to get persons out there to get more involved in our voting procedures. As we know we have had a shortage sometimes of voting persons to come out.

When I look at Office Equipment, Mr. Vice-President, and in various parts of expenditures, we see Minor Office Equipment, you know, the need for it, and for instance when I look at this one here, the Elections and Boundaries Commission, looking at:

To facilitate and purchase items of office equipment such as a server, 80 computers, 10 colour printers, multifunction plotters, consumables, as well as other minor equipment, which includes a new PBX system and cell phones for use by returning officers.

So we see there is the need to provide this equipment obviously, because if you are having a greater workload, a greater need for online sort of information, we need these things. But, Mr. Vice-President, I also caution the fact that in Government you may have equipment that maybe goes missing, equipment that may somehow, you know, disappear from the office. So we obviously know if it is taxpayers' money going into buying these equipment, we have to know there is a method of tracking this equipment. Because we had cases where—I remember it was public knowledge, San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation, computers disappeared, so we still wait for what transpired there; who was held accountable, if anybody held for that. So in cases of we are giving out more taxpayers' money, we need that responsibility to say, “Hey, we are taking care of it as if it is our own and we are

ensuring that any theft will be reported, any theft would be—persons will be set and, you know, made examples of”. Because I think in our society now, we need that example out there for persons to see that wrongdoers will be punished.

And while I make that, I will jump now to our Minister of Social Development and Family Services where she made mention of—and she actually went into—the Minister went into detail on the expenditure for the old-age pension. And I must say, it comes again to the fact that, you know, when she mentioned that persons—sorry, the Minister mentioned persons actually tried to use fraud to trick the system to actually get these pensions, we have to realize that this is something that we really have to take seriously because every dollar taken from a senior person would be something that they would suffer. We have an increasing population of persons older than 60. We have persons now at 65 would be able to access these pensions and persons need the moneys. It is a good service Government has been giving. It is something welcome. It is something that these senior citizens look forward to, and we even have seen young relatives even trying to swindle those individuals out of their grants. But looking at what the Minister said, you know, that you had probably recipients who were not deserving, and I take comfort in the fact that she has mentioned that she would be weeding out that corruption there because every dollar taken away, I think, from our senior citizens is such a criminal act.

And I am hoping, you know, that the moneys there are needed for those persons to buy food, medication, security, and definitely I take comfort in what she said and I am waiting for the day that the persons who actually did this, the persons who are responsible for the acts, for trying to defraud the Government and those persons to let them face that punishment, because we are seeing this and we had

cases where there were ghost gangs sometimes in different departments. And I am thinking, yes, we are giving money into this but we are also weeding out and showing a responsibility that we are aware of the fact that certain things are not right and certain persons have been getting these pensions who are not deserving. And I call on the Minister also, to please find out how these persons access these pensions, if there was some fraud into that department of members of staff and let all face punishment because it is something that we know we are in a difficult time in terms of our economy and we know—even though some may say it is a boom, we know that—you know, we do not know how long it will last, but we have to get the mindset changed that persons who swindle the system, persons who are abusing the system would feel the full brunt of the law.

I now look at Head 13, the Office of the Prime Minister, and at Head 13 there, I want to make a comment on Other Contractual Services that were, you know, deserving of funds. And we look at this section here where, 02/003/28, to meet the cost of engaging a communication consultant for the training of staff. I think it is a very important function. We saw the need for this, especially during the pandemic where we had announcements made from the Office of the Prime Minister. We needed a proper communication to get to the populace that was not alarmist and at least making persons feel uncomfortable. We needed proper communication where the public access to information was given. I think the moneys there, if any moneys were spent, they are needed. It is vital that we continue, not just in the Office of the Prime Minister, but I am most respectfully saying that there are other departments that may benefit from this because we need a sensitivity how we communicate information. And I make mention, Mr. Vice-President, where there was a fire in Beetham and a child died, and the mother

of this child was informed by the father, “Well, come home the child is inside the building”, and she was coming home with the anticipation the child was there and still alive, but a police officer called her and said, “Madam, your child dead”. Now, if this lady was crossing the road in that state of mind, it would have been a disaster. So what I am saying the communication consultants is probably something you need for all departments for training, not just in the Prime Minister’s office but in other departments where you can relate information. And this is something I am thinking, moneys spent there would be moneys that would ease the pain and the burden of persons.

I come to a sensitive part now that was mentioned by, you know, Sen. Dillon-Remy, where she looked at contribution to non-profit institutions and children’s homes. Well, we know this is topical. We know she made mention of the hurt and what we saw there. So what I am saying, Sir, we do need these homes. We have no choice, but we have to ensure that these homes are doing what they are supposed to do without the horror stories happening, without the children in these homes undergoing this tremendous stress, not just now but for years. You see, some of these homes were not really safe havens for children but a safe harbour for predators. So giving money to these homes, I have no problem, but what we need—there is a responsibility. When the Archbishop or the present Archbishop said he is now going to launch an investigation on what happened, I took note to the fact that even in the last report, 25 years ago, that Archbishop there, Mr. Pantin, knew about what happened. So you have homes that are run, homes that are asking us to put money into them, but we have now to tell those homes, 25 years ago to now, we see the same problems reoccurring.

So the homes must now show us how they are training their staff to identify

and prevent child abuse. Show us what policies or procedures they have to ensure proper supervision of children, and also how to maintain appropriate boundaries between adults and students. And you see, I am saying, if we could get that policy, those policies in the homes, those sorts of guidelines that they are now following, then I am thinking that any money spent there, we would be happy, because a child from a home, a family home who is being abused would need to be rescued in a home but our duty is to provide these homes properly. So I am saying, yes, the money is there.

Now, a problem I have also—well, something I am seeing here that I am comfortable with now, is the Children's Authority also would have been getting this subvention. And Sen. Dillon-Remy did mention that she was there from the beginning when the Children's Authority was in its concept—when it was in the embryo stage and they recognize the difficulty. You may have an authority, it may look good on paper, but if you are not getting the money to hire the staff—if you are not getting the money to hire a staff who can go and inspect these homes, if you are not getting the persons who have that, you know, within them to say this, “My job is an important job to safeguard children”, you would be falling short. So giving the Children's Authority money, I think it is there. This is something to be supported and I am thinking we need much more money than this because, quite frankly, more children are giving problems. We see more children in schools giving problems, more children at homes giving problems, so therefore we have to—and globally we know that the World Health Organization did make mention that depression in children is increasing and we know there is a mental fallout and therefore we could anticipate that we would have children in the future, more children needing access. So I am saying, we may have to factor in, Minister of

Finance, in the future a greater funding for the Children's Authority so they can have their mandate to rescue children, as well as inspect these homes that are at least having children in their care.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*].

I also now would like to look at Head 17, the Personnel Department; again, we see the normal expenditures where renting, leasing offices, salaries of persons, for contract employment, et cetera, which is needed; persons work hard, they were on contract, they need their money, prices are going up, so definitely all these are moneys given to paying salaries, paying the salaries of cost of living allowances. These are things that would help persons out there who are really—you know, some of them are in a financial distress and those are any sort of expenditure for persons to get their money that they worked hard for, I would support. When I looked at again, Head 17, Personnel Department, Furniture and Furnishing; okay, you have to buy and purchase modular storage units for Personnel Department, and one thing I must ask for, is if we can have a sort of—you know, some sort of an agreement with whichever department wants to buy furniture and furnishes, that they buy locally.

I went into a certain—what I may say—a commissioner's office recently—a chairman's office recently and, you know, there was beautiful furniture; Ashley Furniture, expensive furniture, and I said, "But what the amount of foreign exchange we spend to get this furniture and there are persons in Macoya, in Arima industry—I know the Minister of Trade and Industry has been out there all over trying to whip up support for these, and I commend her. I see her very active. I do not know where she gets that energy from. And what you may have to do, Minister, is you know there are people making excellent furniture locally, you may

have now to try to get it across the board that whichever government department needs to purchase furniture, they would first do locally, and if not, you cannot get something, you can outsource it. But I think the time has come for Ashley Furniture to stop and we can get furniture from places in Arima, the industrial estate there. And I think this is a change that we may have to put in until we are out of the woods in terms of—at least out of a financial distress in the country.

I also now look at the review of the public service Employee Assistance Programme, and I must say, the Employee Assistance Programme is a very important programme where you find individuals at work having problems within that work, department may need to go and get it out, to talk it out, and the Employee Assistance Programme deals with an individual who may have problems at home with stress, with dealing with the COVID, dealing with the lockdown before, dealing with the new work to rules, dealing with all the problems that the pandemic brought on, dealing with the death of relatives. So the Employee Assistance Programme, in my opinion, right through should be given more money. And why I am saying that, because I expect more mental health problems in the country. I expect more desk rage that is occurring. I expect more road rage. We are seeing things like that and therefore I would always, in my mind, support measures to help the Employee Assistance Programme because I think it is needed. And one thing I may suggest to the Ministers here present, even though you have the Employee Assistance Programme and you find certain employees may not want to go, there is always a hesitancy where they figure their business will be somehow office gossip, we need to convince them that whatever is said privately in these programmes remains private. It would not affect them.

In fact, I try to tell persons, if you are going to suffer from depression and

you come to see me privately, you know, I rather you to go to the EAP and also have a file there too so at least—you know, people may accuse and say, “You are going by your private doctor to say you have depression”—I say, “No, go and get treatment there, it is free”. But one thing I might say, Madam President, while I support this and I support an increase in this, and why I am saying I need an increase in this, because I am also asking that not only the employees be treated but you can bring in their wives because I think for couple and family therapy you do involve them, but their children. So I am saying, we have to expand that system. We have to be aware of the mental fallout that we are going to be seeing and this is why we may have to put more money into that. We may have to convince persons to seek these programmes, but we may have to bring in children and allow children to come on board for counselling also. And even though the Ministry of Education has the student support system, sometimes we are also getting that hesitancy where children do not want to go into the school system because they figure the children will say that they are suffering from sort of crazy or madness, so you give them another way that they could go in daddy’s work where nobody will see them. So we have to start thinking of expenditure in terms of what we are going to be facing with in the future in terms of mental problems and stress-related problems.

Madam President, I look at Head 18, Ministry of Finance, where we were given—some moneys were, you know, given to facilitate the initial capitalization of Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company, Madam President, you know the roads in the country have been not—it needs a lot of improvement. I mean, driving here you could tell that but, you know, the infrastructure needs. So we really need to help the persons who own cars, who are complaining to get car parts. It is now difficult because you may not have supply chain and, you know, it

is problems to be changing shocks. So therefore, even though people may say they are paying the road taxes, I am saying that we need to improve and if this can help improve, I will support this. And, you see, Madam President, it is not just Trinidad, in the United States what was found is that President Biden had to get bipartisan support to pass an infrastructure Bill. So even in that major democracy, First World country, they are having challenges with their roads, their ageing infrastructure and their bridges. And he actually was lucky to get that support so now he can plug money into that. So it is not just Trinidad would have a problem with their roads, but I am saying, all over we would have ageing infrastructure. So I commend this, if we can get money put into this. And as I am on that, I was happy to hear the Minister make mention of the flooding, alleviation of flooding.

You know, public—you know, we are looking at the aspect of desilting rivers. And what I must say, Madam, we have the rainy season coming up soon and persons who live in these flood-prone areas would be getting a little, you know, nervous, jittery—I thinking there is a word, “tizick”—where they are thinking, “Oh, my God, we are going to have this flood again”. And, you see, the Minister of Works and Transport there had mentioned that he is working on it, and I must say, we normally have floods where I live in Valsayn in Real Spring and some heavy rain we had recently, we did not see that. So we know there are works going on in the river; GuayamareRiver, et cetera, and I commend the Minister for that. But I tell him, you know, sometimes you do something, then we lapse, and then it comes again, so it is to keep a maintaining of these desilting would really bring sort of a relief to the persons there. Bamboo, all these areas who would be frightened when the rainy season—so it is something we need to go.

But when I looked at Rent, Lease, Vehicles and Equipment, and I noticed

that it is to meet the cost of rental equipment to undertake an additional clearing and desilting of watercourses, I think probably it is time the Minister—I do not know if he may give us an idea, you know, why not buy that equipment, keep it there and have it running, you know, start from the top of the river go down, and you continue like that, and it is something, I think, we need this. We need that continuing. So instead of renting, I am suggesting we may purchase and have that running continually.

I look at the Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, and I must say, the Airports Authority did in the past mention that they were making their—they were actually making a profit so, you know, I kind of looked at this and wondered, how come now they are needing money to meet its operational cost to September 2022. But I understand with the COVID, with the pandemic they would have needed to probably change their infrastructure, to have more cleaning materials, to buy equipment to sanitize, because, remember, you are dealing with a travelling population who may be bringing in any sort of virus. So probably they may have—their operational cost may have been increased due to the pandemic that we saw.

3.30 p.m.

Madam President, I would like to make mention now of Head 61, Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. I looked at the section, Developmental Programme, where rehabilitation, maintenance of HDC rental apartments and housing. I am happy this is being done, because it was in the newspaper recently people complaining that they are living in conditions that are not nice, the staircase, the infrastructure. So, again, this would help those persons who were in the media recently complaining about their living conditions in certain of these units. So I support this, because you have to have the persons living in areas that

they can feel proud of. Not just painting it orange or these things, the whole infrastructure, having trees, having greenery. There is, as people know, the Broken Glass Theory. You give those persons a pride in their environment, giving them swimming pools or whatever, but you have to maintain it, and you find you can have a psychological change in persons living in those areas, that they now would start to think differently.

Now I go to Ministry of Public Utilities, and I see there is an aspect there for street lighting. Again, I thank the Minister there, because recently where I live again in Real Spring, Valsayn we had four streetlights recently fixed, and it after we wrote letters and complained about the darkness, and the crime that may—you know, people walking in at nights may be a bit skeptical, a bit scared. So, again, I have to make mention that any sort of lighting initiative, to let the persons who have to walk in lonely areas get that better lighting. I will support that.

I also make mention to the fact that Head 42, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, recurrent expenditure. I looked at that section, 02/001/23, to meet expenditure associated with the implementation of the Procurement Act, the digitalization of Ministries' records, legal services, as well as acquisition of software licence. Madam President, anything to help the Procurement Act, and to help the persons in that department I would support it, because I think the public outside wants to see that there is transparency and there is that ability to scrutinize any sort of Government expenditure.

I want to also look, Madam, at the Ministry of National Security where, again, salaries, costs, allowances, all these things are vital. I saw here a section, maintenance of vehicles. Again, I welcome this, because recently there was a fire in Beetham where it was on the social media, they could not open the back of the

fire vehicle. So, therefore, any sort of expenditure to facilitate the maintenance or repairs of vehicles, I think I would welcome that, because a fire may break out anytime and persons may be in distress, if they are not able to get that fire vehicle to operate properly.

I looked at security services, 02/001/43, and I see here, “To meet the cost of arrears owed to the National Maintenance Training and Security Company, MTS, for security services provided, and arrears owed for prisoner transport for the period of August 2020 to September 30, 2022”. So I was not sure here if MTS did do or partake in security transport. I thought it was Amalgamated. So I do not know if somehow I am missing something here, if Amalgamated Security would have been there somehow for transport.

The food at institutions—again, the food for prison service, Defence Force. I am happy about that. I remember one time Her Excellency had to make mention of the food that was fed to the Defence Force persons. Again, we have to feed those officers in the prison service well. We have to feed our Defence Force well. Again, this initiative I am happy.

The 04/009/02, to Strategic Service Agency. Someone made mention of the CCTV cameras. I think we all know we need that, and if moneys could be spent to this, I think it is commendable. Even recently in the Heights of Aripo people are still clamouring for the use of security cameras, and I am thinking we have to seriously—

Madam President: Sen. Deyalsingh, if I could just point out that what you are referring to is not contained in the Bill. So I would ask you to confine yourself to the Heads that are in the Bill please.

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam. I just made mention of the fact that

one of our Senators before did say the SSA Agency was responsible for the cameras. I just thought I would support that initiative.

I also would like to look at the Ministry of Education, where we are looking to enable payments to the Public Transport Service Corporation for provision of school transport for term three, much needed. I am hopefully and respectfully suggesting that all the PTSC buses have notice boards on it about ChildLine and where you could go for abuse and all these things, printed on these things. I am just pulling in that there because I think it would help.

I also see here, again under Ministry of Education, to pay the National Maintenance Training and Security Company, MTS and other companies, for janitorial and security services. I make mention schools have to be safe. Parents have to know it has been sanitized properly.

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

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam. Parents have to have the knowledge that I am sending my child and the toilet will be clean, the cafeteria will be clean. Money spent there, well spent, if it is going to give a peace of mind to a parent. There is more violence in school, so more money spent to the MTS officers I see no problems there, once they get adequate training how to hold a child in a violent situation.

I also must say, Madam President, I looked at, again under Ministry of Education, we are looking at 04/010/02, National School Dietary Services, to meet the cost of provision of school meals for term three. There are a lot of children now with parents who are unemployed with the COVID, they cannot afford to feed their children. So with this, more children would be needing school meals. So you see with this, I am thinking this may have to be expanded, because we are seeing out

there poverty among some persons who cannot even feed their children. So it is an excellent initiative, but we need to expand it. Poor nutrition could lead to academic decline, if they are not getting fatty acids in their veins, or fish, all these things are needed.

Ministry of Health, I am looking at the related materials and supplies, drugs and other related materials and supplies, to facilitate the acquisition of COVID-19 vaccines children, adults. Our Prime Minister did mention to us that we would be getting the antiviral tablets. We need that, because some people in our population do not have vaccines, and when they reach hospital we can offer them that. Again, I look at the Regional Health Authorities, we need to ramp up that, because more persons who are unemployed are now going to the public service, so we need moneys there to help them run more efficiently.

In a sense, Madam, what I am saying here is that, in conclusion I think we have gotten a reprieve, I must say. The war, some people may not think so, but the war did give us a little reprieve. We have to be thankful for our exports of ammonia. We have to be thankful for the governments who—you know, the dream of Eric Williams, Ken Julien and those who developed the ammonia industry, because look today we are benefiting from that. So thank God for the vision of those people before. We are now bearing the fruits for ammonia prices and what not.

So I dare say, we have to know that we have challenges in the country, and even though I am not an economist to look at the figures and what not, my yardstick is to judge how people are saying they are getting the services, how they are eating, how they are feeding the family, how they are getting their medicine. Part of the thinking is to really reconstruct our thinking in terms of this recession,

to probably lower our lifestyle temporarily until we can catch ourselves. Our greatest challenge is to really convince the citizens to work hard and honest.

I enjoyed hearing the Minister of technology when she quoted Proverbs 29:18, when she said: Where there is no vision, the people will perish. I want to close by also quoting Proverbs 21:20: The wise store up choice food and olive oil, but fools gulp it down, and Ecclesiastes 11:2: Invest in seven ventures, yes in eight. You do not know what disaster may come about you.

Thank God we had the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund that we saved. We have to continue saving for a rainy day, because we do not know when a next disaster will come.

So, Madam President, I thank you for allowing me to partake. Thank you.

Madam President: Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Nigel de Freitas): Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute to this Supplementation Appropriation Bill, 2022, better known as the mid-year review, that is currently engaging debate in this august House.

Approximately six months ago, during my budget contribution I made a pretty bold statement that was borne out of the confidence I had in the stewardship of Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the Minister of Finance, to take us through what we all knew was a financial storm that seemed to be pretty long-winded, because we had been already going through it over several years. Today I am back contributing, six months after, and I have cause now to once again commend the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and the Minister of Finance for their stewardship.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Everything I have heard here today coming from the Opposition, and a lot of the speakers that have gone before me, have spoken to—when we speak to the Independent Bench, I think it was Sen. Deonarine in her contribution—the idea of, yes, we are experiencing a windfall, but what are we going to do to fix the situation so we do not end up in this particular situation again. Opposition spoke to the fact that, yes, we are experiencing a windfall, but it has nothing to do with you. That was the general sentiment coming across in the debates and contributions that have gone before.

I want to use a particular analogy to say why it is I must strongly commend those two individuals I spoke to a few short minutes ago. When you are in a storm, it matters not why the wind has stopped and why the seas have calmed. What matters is how fit your ship is for sailing, and that fitness of ship for sailing is the sole responsibility of the captain and the persons steering the ship, and that is the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and that is the Minister of Finance, and that is what they have been doing.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: The Minister of Finance in moving this Bill this morning, if I am to just wrap it up as simply as I can, all he was saying was this: We are not out of the woods yet, but we can see the break in the tree line. We cannot scream hallelujah, but we can definitely smile at this point in time. If it is you did not understand that, then you completely missed the point of what he was trying to say.

The way I heard it from the Minister of Finance, is that at this particular point in time he was expecting a deficit in the budget, and that did not happen.

What we ended up with was a surplus. That is what he said. In that surplus, he took the fiscally prudent decision to pay down on the public debt and reduce that. What could be more financially responsible?

The Opposition got up to speak, predominantly with Sen. Mark shouting—I have never heard Sen. Mark shout, so I guess he got emotional today—to literally say that you cannot take praise for that. That has nothing to do with you. That has to do with the Ukraine war, so do not take credit for that. The same Sen. Mark and Opposition who when the oil prices started to fall again, due to circumstances beyond our control, was quick to blame the Government and saying you are mismanaging the economy. Who, when COVID happened and we had to take certain measures, again due to circumstances beyond our control, was quick to blame the Government and say that you are mismanaging the economy. But now, when there is a windfall and a surplus, okay, due to circumstances beyond our control, do not take credit for that? Well we are going to take credit for it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: The reason we are going to take credit for it is because we have been able to weather that storm, bring the ship to sail into the waters, so that we can manage this windfall better. And what has he done? He has indicated that in the management of that windfall, the first thing that we are going to do is pay down on our bills, pay our salaries and wages and ensure that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago benefit from that windfall.

If Sen. Mark and team do not understand that, let me put it this way, and he thinks that there is something untoward about that, and saying that the average man is not going to feel any of this. The way you have to see this is like this. A married couple has five children. They are living pay cheque to pay cheque, nothing is

wrong with that. They wake up one morning and realize they have won the lottery, \$1 million. They then take that \$1 million and pay off their mortgage. They pay off their car loans. They pay off their credit cards, and then they put some money aside for the education of the children in the future. The million dollars is done, it is completed.

The point is that that family after using the money for that, which is again financially responsible, is still in a better position financially than they were prior to winning the money, and that is the gist of what we are speaking here today. The Minister of Finance has said that. We are in a better position now financially than we were six months ago. To understand the difference between this Government and the Opposition, when it comes to the economy and finances you have to understand this, and the Minister of Finance spoke to it earlier, but I think it was missed by many.

Trinidad and Tobago as a nation has, for the better part of a decade, been running deficit budgets. He indicated in the Eleventh Parliament that one of his objectives and goals was to balance the budget by 2018, and it is due to circumstances beyond our control, which is COVID, and we know what happened, well that got extended further. But he did indicate today, and I heard him say it, and I want everybody to remember this because this is important, that we have to get away from deficit budgeting, because every single argument put forward today, whether it came from the Opposition, whether it came from Sen. Deonarine in relation to what she was saying, could be explained by the fact that we run deficit budgets. What happens when it is you do not have enough money to meet your bills, you have to pick and choose which bills to pay.

Sen. Deonarine spoke to the fact that state institutions are in arrears, and that

is why with this windfall of money we are paying it off now, but they should not have been in arrears in the first place. Well that is what happens when you run deficit budgets. What you have to understand and look at, Sen. Deonarine and Opposition, is when you run those deficit budgets—and you would notice that for the period 2015 to now, the deficit budgets were run because revenues were dropping. However, during the period 2010 to 2015, deficit budgets were run because they were spending more than they were making. Fundamental difference in financial responsibility.

When you put that into the context of how the economy in Trinidad and Tobago is managed, there are very few ways—the Minister of Finance will tell you that—there are very few ways in which you could make adjustments. You have your revenue coming from the energy and the non-energy sector. In the energy sector, it is either you are producing as much product as you can, to be able to make as much money based on the price that is in the market, which we do not control, or you make whatever necessary adjustments you can make in the non-energy sector to try and increase revenue.

The only other avenue as you would have heard the Minister of Finance speak to since he became the Minister of Finance in 2015, is to manage your expenditure. That is something that we have full control over, and that is what he has been doing. I said it in a budget debate before, that if we continue with this mindset of being fiscally prudent and managing our expenditure, that at some point in time we are going to enter a situation where things are going to look up, and with that mindset could you imagine what is going to happen? Well today we no longer need to imagine, because that time is here. Thank God that this Minister of Finance is the Minister of Finance—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas:—who has brought us through that time period, and I look forward to what he can do going forward. To me I am very happy to hear that the majority of this money is going to be spent on salaries, wages, paying bills. That is what any normal, average person would do if they come into the windfall of money.

So I did not understand what Sen. Mark was shouting at earlier, talking about if you find a bag of money on the ground, but that is their mindset, because they like to spend “other people” money. That is not your money. If you find a bag of money on the ground, you take it to the police, it is not yours. So how could you use that analogy to explain this?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: That is the kind of thing that makes me fearful, and why I say thank God for this Government, and thank God for this Minister of Finance and thank God for this Prime Minister.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Madam President, I want to just at this time respond to Sen. Lyder. You were not in the Chair. Sen. Lyder’s contribution ended abruptly, and he quickly blamed this Government, saying that we do not want the Opposition to contribute. I would say to Sen. Lyder, in order to contribute you need to be relevant. That is just simply what I would respond and say. [*Laughter*] Do not blame us for your irrelevance. Elevate your words. Elevate your content. Elevate your points, and you should not have any problems.

Madam President, let me move to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and some of the funds that would have been allocated to us in the

specific areas that have been identified in this Bill. As I indicated in the first part of my contribution, salaries, cost of living allowance under “Recurrent Expenditure”. I see nothing wrong or untoward with that. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, both my colleagues there thank the Minister of Finance for that, and I am absolutely certain that the employees who would benefit from this thank him as well. You have travelling and subsistence, you have electricity, telephones, WASA, all pretty straightforward, you are paying your bills, nothing untoward.

We understand that some of them would have been in arrears. Again, to answer Sen. Deonarine, the fact is that if you are going through a period of hardship, you have to pick and choose, but as soon as you get some money the first thing you do is pay your bills, and that is exactly what is occurring here. Contract employment, again Minister of Finance, the employees thank you. Short-term employment, same thing. Security services, pretty straightforward.

We have the Caribbean Fisheries Training and Development Institute, the Caribbean Agriculture Research and Development Institute, better known as CARDI, Madam President, and the Sugar Cane Feed Centre. Sen. Mark indicated that this money would not trickle down to the average man, but the fact is all of these institutions that I have just spoken to engage the public by way of training, by way of research and development, and that is how it would trickle down. Because once you fund these institutions to continue doing that work, then it means that the public can benefit from the programmes that they put forward. That is how it trickles down Sen. Mark.

We have the Agriculture Incentive Programme, and I listened to Sen. Deonarine when she spoke to that, and was asking the question as to the Government has a priority, or has placed priority on the agricultural sector, and if

that is the case how come that this particular programme is in arrears 2020 to 2022. Sen. Deonarine, I would respond to that by saying this. A parent prioritizes the education of their children far into the future. Child is five years old, you prioritize education, you put away money as best as you can, so that when the child turns 18 they can go to university.

But during that period from five years old to 18, things may happen. You may lose your job, you may have a reduction in salary. What happens? Yes, you still have a priority of the child's education, but you may not be able to, for a certain period of time, put away the money that you were putting before. It does not mean that the priority has changed. It just means that you are not able to at that particular point in time, and when you are able to, then you start to put money away again for the children's education.

If you look closely at what it says: To pay outstanding farmers' incentives for the period 2020 to 2022. What is occurring between 2020 and 2022? A massive global pandemic, which had to be treated with, which meant that you may not have had the funds during that time period to put where you wanted it to go, in terms of the priority that you had. But the point that I have been making since I started my contribution is, as soon as the money came in, the priority is still there and the programme is now funded and up-to-date, and that is commendable.

So the farmers will be able to continue benefiting from the incentive programme going forward, because agriculture is still a priority for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, the EMBD principal on the \$90 million loan, again nothing wrong with that, and that ends the supplementation given to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. My colleagues, the Minister of Agriculture,

Land and Fisheries, the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, once again through me, commends the Minister of Finance, and commends the Prime Minister for their prudent fiscal responsibility shown during the period 2015 to now, 2022. As I indicated before, the future is looking a little bit brighter, and I specifically look forward to what the Minister of Finance can bring forward, once things get back to normal.

Madam President, with those few words, I thank you.

4.00 p.m.

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial: Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on an Act to Supplement the Appropriation for Fiscal Year 2022 by approximately \$3 billion. Madam President, coming a “lil” bit low down on the batting order, I think a lot has already been said about the various allocations, and so I just wish to make some very brief comments in general about two things: One being responsible spending; and the second thing, on the question of oversights and controls. Because, the reason being is that just like when you are running a household, you are managing that household—a country also needs to ensure that when it is spending money it is spending responsibly for the maximum benefit of the persons.

So, when you are managing a home you want to make sure that you are not spending all your money on frivolities, and that you are meeting the basic expenses that you have, utilities, food, groceries, et cetera. But unlike a household, when you are running a country you are not accountable just to yourself but you have to make sure that there are adequate measures in place to ensure transparency and accountability. And also that you are not losing the opportunity to earn whilst you are spending, so you want to make sure that you are plugging leaks wherever they

may be, and, you know, be prudent in how you are expending moneys.

Now, when we talk about responsible expenditure, and we have heard a lot today about, we are paying down bills and we are paying down the public debt, and that sounds nice, it sounds promising, but one has to also question, how did we get here with bills piling up? You see, that does not happen overnight, it happens over a period of time. It happened because perhaps we prioritized spending in other areas as opposed to meeting these bills. Because a lot of what we see here today we are talking about paying utility bills, we are talking about supplementing allocations to meet contract gratuities. Things that really should not come as a surprise to anyone.

Contract gratuities, for example, is something that could be calculated from the time a person takes up a contract in the public service. You know when the contract is going to end and you know how much the gratuity is going to be as well. Unless, of course, there is some adjustment by the CPO or something in terms of the amount of salary payable to the person. Because, of course, sometimes people come in on interim offers and then there are adjustments, but generally speaking, you know when the contract is coming to an end.

So, one has to question when it is that we have to come here for supplemental allocations if it is that there is just in the past leading up to this point, moneys being spent on things in a manner that has not been in the best interest of the country and it has led to a build-up of bills and outstanding moneys for persons. And I raise the issue of contract gratuities, because, of course, the length of time that it takes for public officers to obtain their contract gratuities has been a sore point for a very long time and it continues to be an issue. So, that is one of the things that I want to talk about. We also have to talk about the high level of debt. Yes, we are paying down the debt now, but we reached a very high level of debt

because, perhaps again, money is being allocated and money is being spent on things that may not have been in the benefit of all and have taken us and have brought us to this point now.

Madam President, the Government is talking about bringing down public debt, and I heard a criticism today levied against the previous administration, the Partnership administration for what I consider to be giving public servants in the year 2014 a living wage. A living wage. And that Government that is criticizing the Partnership government for raising the salaries of public servants just lost a billion dollars in an arbitration matter involving a cancelled contract. How can it be that we are critical of spending on things such as wages and salaries for, and wage negotiations for our public servants, when we are following the advice of I do not know who to cancel a contract and then lose a billion dollars in an arbitration. But we are here talking about we are paying down the public debts. We have to consider whether or not the actions being taken and the moneys being spent are going to, later on down the road, come back to haunt us when the public debt starts to increase again.

So the issue again, Madam President, and one of the things that we are seeing here in this Bill is an appropriation made for children's homes, and it is very topical. I heard Sen. Dillon-Remy raise the issue and the importance of looking after our vulnerable children, as we call them the children in need of care and protection. And I have nothing against making allocations for the Children's Authority and for children homes. Of course, I think it is absolutely necessary to strengthen the framework and the level of supervision and oversight and so on that we have over these children's homes. But, you know, it should not be, or no one in the Government should be able to sit here and feel or portray some sense of shock

and surprise over what has now become public about the condition of children's homes, about the fact that they are—many of them do not meet the requirements in the law for licensing by the Children's Authority, that they have some many shortcomings. So we are putting aside the money now.

But, Madam President, why I say they cannot be shocked is because the suitability of children's homes have been the subject of litigation since the year 2015/2016 around there. And in one matter that has been concluded in the Privy Council, the State fought all the way to the Privy Council, spending money on legal fees to go all the way to the Privy Council to challenge whether or not they could have housed children in certain homes, in adult prisons, mixing with adults and all of that.

Now, this is where I come back to the point of responsible expenditure, because I want everybody to understand how perhaps that money could have been better spent to improve the oversight, and the facilities, and the level of compliance in those homes with the standards that have been set in the regulations. Could it have saved the life of a child or save a child from some sort of abuse? The kind of abuse we are seeing now in videos that are circulating in the media. So, when we hear about the Children's Authority not having a facility, for example, to place children with very special needs, medical conditions, and I want to refer to an article written by Dr. Shelia Rampersad sometime ago. And again, this is why I say I do not know why the shock on the part of the Government, this was on May the 2nd 2021, an article entitled, "How childcare failed abused Jake." And, Madam President—

Hon. Imbert: Point of order, Madam President, sub judice, that has nothing to do with the supplementation Bill before us.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, is it before the court? Is what you are referring to before the court?

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Madam President, I believe those matters were concluded in the Court of Appeal.

Madam President: Okay. All right, but I also have to advise you on—again, and the ruling has been made before about trying to keep it within the ambit of what is before us.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Please, Madam President, thank you. I am guided. The point is, the short point is that when, we are allocating moneys now towards these things, but, as I said before, when the money was being spent on various matters involving children and we were taking those matters to the Privy Council there were children like this person spoken about here, could have benefited.

Hon. Imbert: Madam President, point of order, the Privy Council issues of which the hon. Senator is speaking do not form part of this supplementation.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, you made the point already, I think you can move on.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I will move on. So, Madam President, Sen. Deonarine also raised another issue which I wanted to speak about, which is an allocation made for a state enterprise that does not legally yet exist. And I want to also ask the question of why are secondary roads, which I agree are in a very deplorable state, being placed under the purview of a new company and that funding is not being given to regional corporations to carry out their mandate, because those roads are currently under their mandate?

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: 53(1), several speakers have made this point over and over again.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, just continue.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: And I raise it again just to say this, that I have a difficulty with state enterprises and the amount of controls that are in place with respect to expenditure of funds through state enterprises. So the creation of a new state enterprise to deal with this matter, Madam President, I am concerned about the level of scrutiny.

Hon. Imbert: Madam President, 53(1), Sen. Deonarine made that exact point.

Madam President: I am aware that the point has been raised but I am allowing Sen. Lutchmedial to make—she is making it succinctly and she is going to move on. Continue Sen. Lutchmedial.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Madam President, I think that the Government is, they know where I am going, because, you see, just this week—*[Interruption]*

Madam President: I, me, is it that I have been away from here for too long because it is almost as if the Standing Orders have changed. One Standing Order that has not changed is that when someone is speaking I would like everybody else to remain silent so that I can hear them. Continue Sen. Lutchmedial.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Thank you, Madam President. Yes, just this week in response to questions being raised a particular state enterprise said that it is a normal practice, for example, to make cheques payable to a financial institution. Now, I want to put this in the context of myself, because I would not send myself any pre-action letters, so let me say this—*[Interruption]*

Hon. Imbert: Madam President, 46(1), as far as I can tell, irrelevant—

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial—

Hon. Imbert:—and sub judice.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial, I allowed you to make the point but I think

you are moving off into an area now that I would appreciate you not do. Okay.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: So, Madam President, with respect to the issue raised about controls with state enterprises, if it is that we are allocating moneys for new state enterprises, I am making the simple point, that the Government should also pay attention to the controls and the regulations and the rules that apply to these state enterprises, because the problem that we have occurring over and over again with state enterprises is that the level of oversight and the controls that are applicable in Ministries, the procurement processes and procedures, tendering and so on, are not there, and we cannot say that we are fiscally responsible simply because we are paying down debt and paying of bills when we are not supervising the expenditure of funds.

So if you want to create a new enterprise, as dealt with in this supplemental appropriation, then tell us how you are fixing the problems that are existing, and if you want to stand here and say that there is no problem existing well then you are in denial. You are simply in denial. I want to raise another issue that came up again, and I make no accusation or no aspersion against anyone, but we have seen, for example, where people are being retained. There is an allocation for service commissions, and when questions were asked in the other place about allocations made here, it is to pay fees. And through a freedom of information request, which is in the public domain, we found out that persons were retained to perform certain, or to conduct certain investigations and so on, but they never sorted out the issue of remunerations.

So a person appointed in August 2021 to conduct an investigation, when in January 2022 the question was raised, the service commission said, well, you know what, we are now working out the issue of remuneration. How can it be, and they

are now coming here and saying that they need to make a supplemental appropriation to pay off fees in that particular issue, and the person's name and the matter that was dealt with was there and it was discussed in the other place, Madam President? It is irresponsible. So, the Government is pleased with itself and its managing and the decisions that it has taken to pay down debt and to pay off bills and all of that, but at the end of the day all expenditure should be subject to strict rules, to a certain level of oversight, and anybody that is committed to transparency and accountability should not be willing to turn a blind eye to those things. You want to reduce public debt and you want to be prudent with expenditure and see ourselves out of a difficult situation that we have been in for some time, and you really want to be in a ship that is fit to sail, then you have to make sure that you are not plugging holes on one side and somebody is not drilling holes on the other side, and you are ignoring it, and that is the simple point please, Madam President.

So, again, I say that many of these supplementations they deal strictly—in conclusion—with paying things which ought to have been predicted before, like contract gratuities and so on. They deal with a lot of outstanding bills which were not paid in the past, and I think that some—it cannot be that we are simply saying COVID and difficult times that we were not paying bills when we have seen a lot of expenditure on things that, in my view, and I think in the view of many people and people who are aware of the situation and circumstances could say, may not have been to the benefits of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and quite simply, that continuing to make allocations and removing money, in this case we are not incurring debt. The money is coming from the Consolidated Fund, but for many years we were incurring debt to finance our expenditure and we were also drawing

money down from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. So, going forward, I believe that there is room for consideration for tighter controls and a greater level of oversight for the expenditure. With those few words, Madam President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Thompson-Ahye.

Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye: Thank you, Madam President, and welcome back. Sen. Lutchmedial spoke about being low on the batting order. Now I will have to say therefore that I am the night watchman today. [*Laughter*]

My plan for today was to be like Brer Rabbit, lie low and say nothing. So I went to bed and then something awoke me very early, and when I got out of bed it was like I was hearing a baseman in “meh” head, and what was being said to me is, “You see this Bill on appropriation you should say something about education”. So, when I looked at Head 26, Ministry of Education I see a number of Recurrent Expenditure, electricity, telephone, contract employment, other contracted services, janitorial services, security services, water and sewerage rate, Caribbean Examinations Council, grants to assisted primary schools, school equipment and upkeep of school premises, grants to government secondary schools, education programme, grants to private secondary school, gratuities to contract officers, National Schools Dietary Services Limited, and so on.

Now, the first Item is to meet Recurrent Expenditure is electricity. I was involved in a hell has no fury as a woman’s scorn case in the Family Court a few years ago. What kind of case is that you might ask? That is a case when a man has decided that he can no longer live with the woman with whom he has had children, and therefore he has moved on. And, the woman scorned now decides that this father

of the child, even though he is paying maintenance, she is going to get back at him by bringing an application for the child. Now there are many good men in this country minding their children.

Madam President: Sen. Thompson-Ahye, you said you are dealing with Ministry of Education, Recurrent Expenditure, Electricity. Is that what you are dealing with?

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: Yes, I am.

Madam President: Are you going to come to tie in?

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: I am.

Madam President: Okay.

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: Most decidedly, thank you. So she decided that she would shame him by taking him to court. Unfortunately, sometimes the magistrates do not recognize it for what it is and is complicit in this revenge application. So I was representing such a good man and I decided that I will visit the school, which was very close to my office at the time, to speak to the child's teacher to verify some of the things the mother had said.

And, Madam President, I was appalled at the conditions of the school in this heart of Port of Spain. The hapless students were packed like sardines in the classroom, and what disturbed me most was how dark the place was. So my first feeling was, T&TEC had cut the electricity in the school. But when I went into the classroom I realized that the bulb was a very weak bulb, so I asked the teacher, how can you possibly have students in these conditions, can you not see how dark this classroom was? So this is not a case where the electricity bill had not been paid, but that the bulb was so low that the poor children was suffering. So I could not for the life of me imagine how a teacher could be so uncaring about her pupils,

seven-year-old children. My mother used to say they were at the mercy of Tiberius, so before I left the premises I mounted—

Madam President: Sen. Thompson-Ahye [*Laughter*] you did promise me that you were going to tie this story into what is happening here. [*Laughter*] You did promise me, and you also promised that it was going to be soon.

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: That is what I said that the electricity bill was not a contention but there was darkness in the classroom. Right. So, parents have to be careful about the resultant eye strain, and maybe they should be suing the Government when the electricity bills are not paid. There is also the contention when the electricity bills are not paid that T&TEC cannot meet its obligation to its workers, same as when the telephone bills are not paid.

Now, one of the best consultations I have ever attended in this country was one that was held when the first Rowley Government came into power. And at this education consultation I made an intervention in favour of restorative justice, and a very proactive teacher approached me and asked if I will come to speak at a school in Chaguanas. I readily agreed as I am always happy to spread good news about restorative justice. When I attended that school I could not believe, and I asked as Earl Lovelace would have said in Jestina's calypso, "Dis Trinidad, dis Trinidad". I could not believe the school was state-of-the-art. I did not think there were schools like that in this country, spacious school, library, music room, everything clean and pristine.

Madam President: Sen. Thompson-Ahye, I would love for you to come and chat with me, because these stories really are very entertaining, and the stories carry a lot of history, but I need you, just as I have been cautioning other Members, I really do need you to come to the Bill, please.

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: Thank you, Madam President. So the point I was making is that there was no question that there was a lack of janitorial services to be paid for in this particular school. But, in some instances it is so different, because there is no money and the schools are not as clean and pristine, and it is because there are problems with janitorial services, which is the thing, one of the recurrent expenditures that the Ministry is now seeking to pay for the Ministry of Finance.

Madam President, I would have liked to see in the allocation provision for continuous professional development. So in fact, what we have here in many cases is that there is default in the education of the children, and if it is that we do not pay for the various people who can run contracts to involve themselves in professional development then we will find that we would not have the best education possible for our children.

The area of education is extremely important, and when we look at Goal IV of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, we find that there is need to re-enforce on inclusive and quality education for all. And when we look at the various studies we see that there is not equal access to education, and when we see what is happening with children in terms of the meals that they cannot get because they have not been paid for, even the transport to schools. So that when they do not have these facilities it means that these hapless children are not getting the best that they can get out of the education system.

So, non-payment of these bills that facilitate the children and their education is really a dereliction of duty of the Government, and we hope that these bills would be paid not as recurrent expenditure in the late term but on a timely basis so that they would never be what it is, what they need. They would never be without

what they need. So, drivers are to be paid promptly. Those who provide school meals who are many times are not wealthy people, who have to wait for their money, we would hope that this would not happen. I am happy to see grants to private secondary schools such as Bishop Anstey High School East and Trinity College East. That is a success story for other schools to emulate, and I must say that my Mausican friend Barbara Davis, former principal, a big hand in laying a wonderful foundation, and that school is getting a lot of scholarships.

So we hope that the bad behaviour in schools, sometimes that we have, that it could be corrected, because of the fact that you have now the people who are engaged with security services. And we have to ensure that they are people who have been trained to deal with children, and deal with children in a proper way so that they are not trained to just use the baton on children, but also to understand the children and their needs. Because it is important that we do not suspend children, that we do not brutalize children. So let us keep our children in school, engage them in a meaningful way, help build their self-esteem and stop the insults and brutality, and let school be a safe haven for them, and help them to withstand anti-social pressures.

So, cherish our children, partner with parents who sometimes do not know how to parent children. I am happy to see that we are paying National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited 55,000, and other companies for the services that they provide. I welcome the payment to Metal Industries Company, because not all children are academically inclined. So that the National Skills Development Company should recognize that there are children whose future lies not in academia, but it lies in provision and development of their technical skills, so that they could realize their full potential.

So, Madam President, I must say that I feel it difficult to be constrained, but I do understand what this Bill is about, so that hopefully when we come to the next budget we will be able to say what we have to say about the education system in this country. So, I thank you for your patience and your guidance.

Madam President: Attorney General.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC): Thank you, Madam President, and may I use the opportunity to welcome you back to this august Chamber. Madam President, I am going to use this opportunity to just respond briefly to a couple comments which have been made this afternoon by Members of this Chamber, to address and to correct information which could otherwise provide a wrong impression of some of the material which I thought had been sufficiently put before the other House, and laid before this Chamber.

As I have said in the other House, it is my constitutional function to operate as a conduit for the Judiciary, and the Judiciary would be the Supreme Court, the Industrial Court, and other judicial tribunals. I was taken aback earlier today when the hon. Sen. Jearlean John suggested that the request for the supplement of 30.3 million by the Judiciary seemed to be an act of someone deliberately missing out on the previous allocations. I will not ask for particulars of that because that would be to compound the wound. It certainly could not be that the Judiciary in requesting 30.3 additional million dollars for its budget could have or be accused of deliberately misrepresenting its position on a previous occasion. That would not only be wrong, but the records do not bear it out.

4.30 p.m.

The fact of the matter is that an original sum was allocated of \$134,417,800,000. That sum was deficient and only catered for the payment of salaries up to May 2020. Additional funding was required and requested in the sum of 57,583,000 and the Government has agreed by this supplementary allocation to provide \$30,300,000. So there has been no deliberate missing out of an allocation or a requirement to attend to the business of providing justice to the people of this country by a Judiciary which is, as I said in my remarks in the other House, committed in its agile way as it can in difficult circumstances to provide for justice in support of the rule of law of this sovereign democratic state. So I just wish to put on record that there could be no suggestion that the deliberately missing out was culpability on the part of the Judiciary. That would be a grievous wound to lay at the door of the Judiciary.

In fact, when the report, the Standing Finance Committee Report was laid on the 24th of January, 2022, the hon. Minister of Finance, our Prime Minister today, said with respect to the Judiciary, the Judiciary has been on a development programme within the last several years building out the new facilities, new systems, increasing the number of judicial officers and their support staff and so on. And again, we had made an estimate at the beginning of the year as to what the Judiciary would require and again, it became apparent during the year that we would have to supplement the Judiciary. So I hope that the record is clear.

The hon. Independent Sen. Deonarine has questioned the allocation of \$16.5 million to the Registrar General's Department. And again the fault would be all mine, but I got the impression that the hon. Senator was questioning the proper use of the IDB loan which had originally been taken by the Attorney General and Legal Affairs Ministry to allocate to the Registrar General's Department. May I

say this, Madam President, one of the first visits that I made on assuming office as Attorney General was to the Registrar General's Department. And I came away vastly impressed by the work, resourcefulness and the commitment of the staff of that department.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: And we understand the work of that department is at the heart of so much that we as a young developing nation hold very dear. Among other things it has to do with us being able to own a piece of land, to have a deed and to be able to will that land to our children. I was taken to the basement of the Registrar General's Department where there is a vault where the actual Deeds of Title on some of them now on special paper are kept and I was shown the exercise which is afoot and still afoot with the loan that has been received from the IDB. There are property deeds, books larger in size and width than this podium at which I stand, and eight inches to a foot in depth that date back to the year 1700. Paper, Madam President, that dates back to the year 1700.

I was struck by the condition of some of those books, I was struck by the fact that they had even survived. And those are the books when the search clerks go to trace title for land that we would wish to will to our children, those are the books which the search clerks have to thumb through, brittle, frayed and literally disappearing in dust as they are handled to affirm our ownership of a piece of earth that we can call home. And the staff of that department are painstakingly reconstructing those books with the technology, the IT technology and equipment that has been provided to them by that IDB loan, to create digitized records that allow us with confidence to be able to say my great, great, grandmother left me this piece of land.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: And here is my digital copy of my deed and I am putting it in the will which will go to my children and my children's children. That is just part of the exercise, the pride with which the workers of that department showed me what they were doing.

There was a young man I recall he could not have been more than about 23 years of age and he showed me how painstakingly he would place these large books to be x-rayed and filmed by the digital equipment so that the book, 1700-year-old piece of deed paper could be converted into a permanent record to be able to enable us to own land and to have proper title. And indeed to be able to implement a comprehensive gender outreach campaign for data collection around women's land ownership trends. The capacity of women in this country to own land.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: So I would like to reassure Sen. Deonarine and I have no doubt that her concerns are well intended, and I would like to reassure her and invite her, and I am sure that the Registrar General, Ms. Bridgewater would welcome her to take the tour that I did to see the work that that department is undertaking to be reassured that the funds which were loaned by the IDB have been put to very good use and that the supplementation which the Ministry of the Attorney General has come to Parliament to ask for approval is to continue with that work because it is to continue into the foreseeable future. It is not an endeavour that can be accomplished overnight and I take the opportunity here to pay tribute to all of those members of staff of that department.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Madam President, another concern that was expressed here today on the question of the different allocations, and it was a question that was raised in general terms by Sen. Deonarine, has to do with the number of persons. She questions, what are the number of persons who are contracted on short-term employment? And she made the point that she was speaking across the board. The short-term employment applies to some aspects of those institutions for which I have constitutional responsibility, one of which is the Industrial Court. I wish to assure Sen. Deonarine the Industrial Court, an invaluable institution, when we read Dr. Zin Henry's books and we remind ourselves looking at *Hansard*, when the Industrial Stabilisation Act was piloted, when the Industrial Relations Act replaced the Industrial Stabilisation Act, we remind ourselves what an invaluable role the Industrial Court played from its fledgling days to the growth that it has continued to climb within this society towards stabilizing the labour environment and providing security of tenure to workers in this country and a harmonious relationship between employers and employed. And the Industrial Court is central to that endeavour.

The court has grown from a very small staff complement and has moved from managing less than 500 cases to an additional thousand cases-plus each year. Several pieces of legislation since 1965 have been passed to bring more and more persons and institutions under the remit of the Industrial Court: the maternity protection legislation, OSHA Act, Minimum Wages Act, retrenchment and severance benefit, a swathe of legislation. And short-term workers, Madam President, I wish to reassure Sen. Deonarine, have had to be brought on to supplement the establishment temporarily because of the increase in the work of that court particularly during the pandemic which exacerbated the need for workers

of a court which provides an essential service. And I compliment the court and I say that the court's employment of short-term staff was necessarily the case in point and to that extent it is an appropriate allocation that this House is being asked to accomplish.

There is a record I would like to correct, Madam President, that has come across from the other House and I do not wish to leave it unstated in this House lest the record is—

Sen. Mark: Madam President, 46(1). Can we refer to what went on in the other place?—because we have been told we cannot. So I would like you to guide this honourable Senate as to whether the Attorney General can refer to matters that took place in the other place in this debate.

Madam President: Attorney General, I would allow you to continue just to make your point very quickly.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Thank you very much, Madam President, and I am grateful to Sen. Mark for being sufficiently astute to keep me on track. There is a sum of money that is being put about that has been spent by the Industrial Court on legal fees. The sum of money is \$790,000. And I wish the record to show very clearly that that sum is not correct. The sum of money that has been expended on legal fees for a named senior counsel whose name I have got his permission to give and he said to me, “Call my name, I have nothing to hide”, is former Sen. Mr. Russell Martineau who was paid 168,750 by way of the senior counsel retained by the Industrial Court, arrears of 84,375 and other attorneys. The total sum that was paid to Sen. Martineau and his team amounts to \$415,815.63 and the sum that is somehow or the other being suggested of \$790,000 is simply incorrect. And I would like this record to show that for the future. Thank you very much, Madam

President, and for the astuteness of Sen. Mark.

Sen. Deyalsingh raised an interesting point when he was speaking, Madam President, that I would like to address and I am grateful to Sen. Deyalsingh for raising it. I had not intended to but it is an opportunity for me to speak to the work that is taking place. He spoke about the senior citizens fraud that is taking place in this country. Senior citizens who have spent their full lives working for this country and their families whose pensions are being defrauded and he asked, through the opportunity presented on this debate, for something to be done about that. And I wish to reassure Sen. Deyalsingh that in the very early part of my assuming this office, Sen. Cox reached out to me to ask me to have a look at the pending legislation which is in the Chief Parliamentary Counsel's Department and it is going to be brought up shortly on the Legislative Review Committee to address that very, very, grievous wrong that is being done to senior citizens being defrauded of their of their monthly pension cheques at the end of the day. So I am grateful to Sen. Deyalsingh to have brought that up so I could put the point before this House.

I promised the Leader of Government Business, Madam President, that I would be brief and I will be brief. I say only this in closing with, of course, my gratitude to, Madam President and Members, for me to be speaking on the supplemental financial appropriation Bill is testimony that I have a constitutional duty to discharge. Because those who know me well will tell you that I am not the best at financial management in my own household, my wife looks after that. But I know terms and I know language that speaks relevantly to finance and financial management and we have experienced it in the last two years of the pandemic. It is something that is called, colloquially, "the guava season". This country has gone

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through a remarkable “guava season”, and I wish to close by paying tribute this evening to the hon. Minister of Finance—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:—to have brought to this House a supplemental appropriation Bill that is now demonstrating his astute management and the astute leadership of Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley. Thank you very much, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Roberts.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Anil Roberts: Thank you, Madam President. Let me first of all say condolences to the family and friends of Sri Lokesh Maharaj, grandson of Satnarine Maharaj, former CEO of Radio and TV Jaagriti. Condolences to all the members of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha and the Hindu community as a whole.

Let me now, secondly, correct the record that was attempted or purported to be corrected by the hon. Attorney General just a moment ago. Hon. Attorney General, at no point in time did or will the hon. Senator Jearlean John ever accuse the Judiciary of anything untoward or acting in a manner that can only be described as without repute. I will forgive the hon. Attorney General as he is fledgling Attorney General, but the process for budget and appropriation—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, please. Could you withdraw that description of the Attorney—?

Sen. A. Roberts: Withdrawn, Madam President.

Madam President: Thank you.

Sen. A. Roberts: But I do forgive the hon. Attorney General. But the process, and the Minister of Finance could alert him, is that all Ministries and all Heads go when the budgetary process begins and make requests. No Ministry, no statutory authority, no government-funded body ever gets a 100 per cent of what they asked for. It is the policy of the Executive, the Government, the Cabinet, the Minister of Finance, the Permanent Secretary and the officials at the Ministry of Finance who will allocate a portion of what is requested. So it is in that vein that the hon. Sen. Jearlean John said that the PNM's policy was clearly not to fund the Judiciary to a high percentage and that requires a Head increase in this supplementation.

To the hon. Sen. de Freitas you told my hon. Sen. Lyder to be relevant, but I have searched through every Head in this supplemental and appropriation Bill and I have not seen anywhere where a family won a lotto or a child at five was—they were putting aside education investment for them. So I will definitely try to be as tight as possible. Clearly even political stalwarts and parliamentary warriors get old and tired. I could hardly believe my ears at the beginning at the onset of this debate when I heard the hon. Minister of Finance and acting Prime Minister beg for mercy before kicking off the debate on the supplemental appropriation Bill, 2021/2022. I guess all must know when it is time to hang up their boots. So I will confine it to the Bill, I will keep tight, as tight as a former Attorney General's suits. The hon. Minister of Finance has come here today—

Sen. Mitchell: Madam, Madam, Madam President, 46(6), please.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, please continue but, you know, please continue.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Madam President. This emotion from the hon. Minister. The supplementary appropriation—and I will stick clearly and I want to thank the hon. Minister for allowing me to utilize his presentation as the skeleton

for my contribution. The Government comes to request an increase of \$3,081,703,900 billion as urgent and critical, yet we see that 2.976 billion of this is for recurrent expenditure, and a paltry 104 million is for PSIP. One of the examples given by the hon. Sen. de Freitas and Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries was that a family who got a million dollars, they paid bills and then the million dollars was finished. On this side, if we won the lotto of a million dollars hon. Senator, we would have invested, diversified, created different revenue streams—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—so that we could generate money rather than finishing out the windfall. There were 29 Heads that were increased. Head No. 18, the hon. Minister of Finance said there was going to be arrears of payments due to the COVID-19 and collapse of oil prices from 2017 to 2020, and he is going to increase the quantum of VAT refunds that will be paid. He is appropriating here 1.676 billion that he said would increase and allow businesses to improve their cash flow, generate job creation and allow for investment. Well, conversely I would put it to the hon. Minister and he could let me know, that if the VAT refunds were delayed, would this have had the opposite and reverse effect of stifling business, putting people out of business and therefore I ask the silly question, of the 6,000 medium businesses that shut down over the last two years, a survey done by the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, how many of these businesses that shut down, hon. Minister of Finance, will receive VAT refunds from this improved allocation?

The hon. Minister said, there has been recovery in most sectors, and this is very amazing. It all depends on what your definition of recovery is. Because if you are a sprinter running 100 metres and you break both legs, you spend six weeks in

traction and on the bed with plaster of paris and then you get up and walk, you have made a recovery, but have you recovered to your great sprinting style. So for the PNM to just say that we have shut down everything, we were on state of emergency and lock down, there was no productivity but now we have increased and recovered.

The Minister said that \$570 million surplus will be used as an LPG subsidy to subsidize cooking gas for the population, and the UNC on this side we like that, we agree with that and we believe that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, everyone born here has and owns a bit of the resources of the country so when the Government uses the resources to keep prices low we agree. But we use the same argument to ask the Minister to answer, how come he has that policy for LPG but not for diesel and premium and super and where is the regular gas? Because the principle is the same. The subsidy assists the citizens and the resources belong to them.

We saw that in Head 40, under energy, we see some allocations but the discussion by the hon. Minister of Finance says that there is a surplus and that he thanks the life jacket, the life jacket of the petrochemical sector. But we have seen that US \$650 million was utilized to purchase fuel for the refinery, Petrotrin before.

Mr. Imbert: Madam President.

Sen. A. Roberts: But Paria has spent—

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, I said none of those things in this debate, 46(1).

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, continue.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Madam President. And when we note and we take

note of the increase in Head 40 for energy, we ask the question, what is the policy of the PNM Government, because we know that there is a foreign exchange crunch, we are hearing discussions about coming out of a slump and moving forward, but the Government has spent US \$3.5 billion to import fuel when we had the refinery and we purchased oil at US \$650 million per year we would produce products that would create—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: On a point of order 46(1).

Mr. Imbert: I never said that. That is all irrelevant.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Sen. Roberts—

Sen. A. Roberts: I am keeping it tight, Madam President.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, continue.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Madam. And when we notice in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries we see as stated by the Minister of Finance that things are improving in energy, we ask the question: Why was there was no subvention from 2016, 2017, 2018 at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries? But in 2019, 1.3billion had to be paid on the shutdown of Petrotrin.

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, 46(1), none of this is relevant in supplementation.

Madam President: Yes, Sen. Roberts, yes, now you are going off track with those last statements. So, please, I would ask you to—

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Madam President. The PNM's priority is not people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The constant theme of this Bill is long-standing arrears, the contracts, gratuities, T&TEC, TSTT, through every Head we are seeing that the policy is, "Oh, we got a cacadah, now let us pay some of our bills". But this cannot

be acceptable—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, I have to caution you on your language, remind you—

Sen. A. Roberts: Which word?

Madam President:—no, I am not, you know the word, so I am going to ask you, please, please—

Sen. A. Roberts: “Cacadah.”

Madam President: Sen. Roberts. Please proceed but remember where you are.

Sen. A. Roberts: All right, Ma’am, thank you, Madam. And we see, for example, at Head 39, that the Government is taking an extra portion of millions of dollars to pay arrears from each and every Ministry to WASA. Yet we have heard ad nauseum that WASA is a drain on the treasury and the number one culprit who is not paying bills is the Government. So the Government does not pay bills and then comes to tell people that WASA needs to be restructured and jobs will be lost.

In Head 13, OPM, 59.96 million for fees, part of which for a commission of enquiry into land acquisition on a highway that was built and an arbitration that was just lost. And maybe the Minister of Finance in his wrap up could tell us how he is going to pay that \$1—“buh, buh”—billion through what supplementation of appropriation—

Mr. Imbert: 46(1), Madam President.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: 46(1).

Mr. Imbert: I did not say that.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: This is irrelevant.

Mr. Imbert: That is not in the supplementation.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, [*Laughter*] Sen. Roberts, please, all right, could you move on to what is relevant, please.

Sen. A. Roberts: I am very happy to move on, Madam President.

Madam President: Could the Members here please allow Sen. Roberts to continue his contribution.

Sen. A. Roberts: Madam President, I am glad to see that my contribution has the PNM finally working like a team.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping and laughter*]

Sen. A. Roberts: With the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Trade and Industry jumping up, they look like ballerinas. In the Office of the Prime Minister, Head 13, 59.96, we are seeing allocation for the children's homes, more money for these children's homes. But I am asking in the wind up if the hon. Minister can tell us if part of that money will be spent on more security, a different security company, CCTV cameras, lighting, counsellors and psychologists for the children that are currently being abused, raped, plundered and ill-treated at the state-run, state-funded institutions.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Head 17, this one was amazing. Head 17 the hon. Minister of Finance said it is two, part of which is to outfit the CPO building at Alexandra Street, the building that is owned by one of his colleagues in Cabinet. A building that previously received \$38 million of taxpayers' money to be outfitted and we are seeing that another quantum of 1.5 million is going to outfit an existing building that is rented by the Government of one of their Cabinet colleagues and I ask them, why do you all continue down this road? The CPO's Office previously was in a building that was outfitted by the landlord. The Government of the PNM shifted

from that and is continuing to use taxpayers' money to ensure that the Cabinet colleague's building that he was unable to outfit, receives—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, you are imputing improper motives and I will ask you, please, to desist.

Sen. A. Roberts: Moving right around to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. It was really amazing that we see an allocation of \$100 million for local government roads and yet in the Ministry of Works and Transport, my last check, that holds about 72 per cent of the roads, highways and byways of Trinidad and Tobago, only gets a 97 million, supplemental appropriation, but the new Minister of Rural Development and Local Government and this new company gets \$100 million for local roads as opposed to giving the money to the allocated, to the corporations who do the work, please explain in your wrap up.

5.00 p.m.

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, I raised this as a point of order before with somebody else. This is tedious repetition.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, yes, you are now going into a territory that has been—

Sen. A. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: No—spoken about repeatedly on this particular Bill. So I will ask you, please, to move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Madam President. The Ministry of Education gets 300 million—you know I am a trained soldier, you cannot disturb me, Sir—26 million for TSTT, 9 million for T&TEC, arrears for school transport. This is really amazing that the budget brought in October, September/October, by the Minister of Finance totally did not take into consideration the payment to TSTT and T&TEC.

These figures are known from way in front, and to leave a deficit of \$9 million for T&TEC and \$26 million for TSTT while putting labour and workers under pressure because the bottom line of the companies are not looking good according to the Government, that in itself shows the population what the PNM is about.

The Integrity Commission has been given a whopping \$350,000. My goodness, what are they going to do with that \$350,000? That would not even be able to pay investigators to investigate the missing Form B or the lack of information put on the Form A about an Inez Gate property. WASA, there was nothing allocated to WASA, yet at the Joint Select Committee about a month ago—

Madam President: So Sen. Roberts, when you are contributing to the Bill, on the Bill, it has to be about what the Bill is about. Not what it is not about. So I will ask you please as you continue to deal with what is in the Bill. Okay?

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am. What is in the Bill is a mere \$35 million for WASA as a public utility. Yet six weeks ago at the Joint Select Committee the Chairman of WASA said that they are going on a three-month programme to end in June 2022 to fix 3,160 leaks across Trinidad and Tobago, which are currently wasting 4.8 billion gallons of water per month. Yet the Government has not given WASA the money to even attempt to fix these leaks. Thirty-five million dollars cannot go anywhere near to solving that problem.

The Ministry of Works and Transport a mere 97 million. I commensurate with the hon. Minister of Works and Transport because he is going to get bouf, but his colleagues are not helping him out with an allocation. The Minister of Planning and Development in the response to—oh, sorry. We then went into an amazing development that the Minister—the new Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture,

Land and Fisheries came to say that part of this appropriation is going to the CFTDI, the Caribbean Fisheries Training and Development Institute in Chaguaramas, when right here on record in the Senate we had learnt that the very man who was the chairman of the board made himself the principal and was paying himself—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, I am not seeing the relevance of that to what is here in the Bill. So you know—

Sen. A. Roberts: Madam President—

Madam President: Yeah? Could you—

Sen. A. Roberts:—I am not saying Head 77. They are appropriating more funds, but they have not rectified the poor corporate governance with the chairman being the principal man because he is signing his own cheques. So we call on the Government to try to do better.

The hon. Minister of Finance went on to the economy and the review. He said that the CSO is now presenting timely data that is six months—six months ago he signed on to the IMF and now we are getting timely data.

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, the hon. Senator is continuously referring to another debate in another debate and pretending that I said it in this debate. 46(1). I said none of those things in this honourable Senate. Nothing like that.

Madam President: But—

Sen. A. Roberts: Ma'am, I am not imputing improper motive. I am not pretending.

Madam President: Just one second. Minister, what has been raised by Sen. Roberts, if he is responding to something that is on the public record, he can. But what I would ask Sen. Roberts is that, again—and please I really do not want to be asking you again to link what you are saying to this, to this, to what we are treating

with. Not giving us anecdotes about everything the Minister has said, whenever the Minister has said it. It needs to be linked to what we are treating with here.

Sen. A. Roberts: Madam President, it is amazing that the hon. Minister may have been able to shift himself into different personalities, but he himself said in the debate for the—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of order 46(6).

Sen. A. Roberts: Madam President—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, please, when you are speaking about Members in this Chamber or the other place, I would ask you please to remember the Standing Orders and treat with the Members in a respectful manner. Okay?

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, it is a matter of public record statements by the hon. Minister of Finance on this Bill itself, the appropriation—is that as a matter of—you said I could speak on public record?

Madam President: Listen. What I have said I have said. I think you heard me. And what I am saying is whatever the Minister has said, whether he has said it here or in the other place, what he has said in the other place may be on the public record so you can make reference to it but not debate it in its entirety. You can make reference to it and I will ask you to do so and move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you.

Madam President: And make reference to it, but make it also relevant to what we are treating with and not just in this anecdotal manner.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you very much, Madam. In the other place the hon. Minister of Finance said that all of a sudden the CSO's statistics are up to date, they are timely and he signed IMF agreement—excuse me Sir, she just clarified—and I am saying to the hon. Minister of Finance, when he is wrapping up please

give us the improvement—

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, 46(1). There is no allocation here for the Central Statistical Office. None of those statements are made on this Bill that is before the Senate.

Madam President: And that is what I am trying to telling you as well, Sen. Roberts. Yes, what is said by Members will be on the *Hansard*, will be on the public record, but when you are quoting any Member it has to be relevant to the matter at hand. I am upholding that objection because we are treating with this appropriation Bill which has specific allocations to specific entities. Yeah?

Sen. A. Roberts: Yes, Madam President. Thank you very much. It is clear that the Minister cannot defend the statement because that was the means and the rationale for his appropriation. The country may have also been able to share in the Minister of Finance's unfettered, unsubstantiated, illogical, exuberance, and glee in his perceived—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of order.

Mr. Imbert: Madam President—

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

Mr. Imbert: 46(1).

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

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

Mr. Imbert: And (1).

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, I just told you about how you—Sen. Mark, please. Sen. Roberts, I just told you the manner in which you should make reference to Members of this Chamber and the other place. You are not doing that right now. I will ask you to withdraw those statements, move on, but please, please

Sen. Roberts. Yeah?

Sen. A. Roberts: I will withdraw, Ma'am, but I did not describe anybody you know. I was talking about the Minister's exuberance. He was happy. We are booming and we would want to share in that exuberance, but we do not see the information on the CSO's website as stated which created the background for this Minister's Bill. But I am glad that he is very fit. His exercising in the morning is working. But, we also see that the Central Bank was quoted as one of the independent institutions that provided information for the Government to bring this Supplementation of Appropriation. But I quote from the *Express* editorial, December 15—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, now you have me a little concerned, because I listened when the Minister presented and there was no reference to the Central Bank. So now you really are—really, I am going to have to caution you. Okay?

Sen. A. Roberts: Madam, the hon. Minister in the other place presented and created—

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, 46(1). That is not true.

Sen. A. Roberts: But the *Hansard* will never lie on you, Sir. I will never do that, Madam President.

Madam President: So Sen. Roberts let me tell what I am getting here from you. I think you are taking statements that the Minister may have made and which are on the record. Perhaps he had made them in the other place.

Sen. A. Roberts: Yes, Ma'am.

Madam President: I have allowed you to make reference to some statements, but really and truly I am trying to tell you, you cannot just keep pulling strands of statements that the Minister has made and without tying it in to what we are

treating with here. And Sen. Roberts, I have to tell you, please, I really have to caution you that I do not want to have to bring this up again. Okay?

Sen. A. Roberts: Yes, Madam. I am trying to tie it but my two colleagues over there are just jumping up every time I try to tie the shoe lace, but it was the introduction by the hon. Minister of Finance. I will never fabricate on that hon. Minister, not even for one second.

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, 46(1). I did not bring up the Central Bank and there is no appropriation to the Central Bank in this supplementation. 46(1).

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, continue you please, but can you move away—

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister stated that 9.095 billion was the deficit projected in the initial budget, and that 4.75 billion between 1st October and 31st March that should have been the deficit, but the Government performed so well that they made a surplus of 654 million during that period. But I ask the hon. Minister when he is wrapping up, while he tells us about that surplus, please let us know during that period what were the drawdowns that were made from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund so that we would have the real picture.

The global shocks have created a boom for the Government. The hon. Minister said the petrochemical surpluses have provided a life jacket. It is our position on this side that had the Government been prudent and kept the energy sector viable, and kept the refinery, that that life jacket would have been a yacht that Trinidad and Tobago could have sailed up the Caribbean Sea.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister of Finance said the windfall would reduce the budget deficit, making a deposit into—he is going to make a deposit into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund—we admired that, but we know that he has to. It is

law. He has no choice—and that this will improve the standing with the credit rating agencies and mitigate against higher interest rates in future borrowings. But this went against all the public statements of the hon. Minister of Finance previously where he said Trinidad and Tobago had never been downgraded. He always whether on Twitter, on Facebook, wherever. He talked—

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, 46(1). That form no part of my submission in this honourable Senate today. Nothing like that. 46(1).

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, just continue please.

Sen. A. Roberts: Madam President, the hon. Minister also gave five areas that he is going to assist and move with this Supplementation of Appropriation. He is going to clear arrears—we are happy for that—increasing demand for the safety net. The Minister also spoke about pensions and he seems to be always decrying that our people are living longer and earning and deserving of their pensions, but we would like to see—and we have not seen any appropriation for baby milk and to assist mothers and single mothers.

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

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, you know I did caution you that to treat with what is in the Bill as opposed as to what is not in the Bill. And you are going—

Sen. A. Roberts: Please forgive me, Madam President.

Madam President: All right. So—

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you.

Madam President: Yes.

Sen. A. Roberts: Please forgive me, but children are very important to us on the—

Madam President: No. Sen. Roberts, please proceed, but proceed with what is in the Bill and what is relevant to this Bill please.

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister of Finance said he has taken some of the windfall and put it aside for labour negotiations when they are completed, but yet we see police, prisons, public service, zero, zero, zero, one, zero, one. That is what the Minister has offered. So I ask him: How much have been put aside; and what negotiations does he expect to be completed when he starts off at such a position of disrespect to labour in Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister boasted that the Government has not borrowed since December. I did not know whether to dance to soca or to join a gymnastics class, but that just made me say, “Wowww”. You have not borrowed since December and that makes this Government feel proud.

The overdraft at the Central Bank, the hon. Minister continues to repeat the same nonsensical story of 2015 only having three days to carry the country, and the Central Bank Governor—the then Central Bank Governor said that that was totally false and he never said that. They have always—he said that the Government has always managed to pay salaries regardless of the overdraft being at 82 per cent, 90 per cent. Well I would like to ask the people at MIC who did not get their money last month, or UTT, or MTS, or COSTAATT who have not been paid—

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

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, just continue.

Sen. A. Roberts: Hon. Minister is normally very affable. She seems a little agitated today.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, please move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am. The hon. Minister of Finance said that our GDP is now estimated at \$180 billion, not letting the country know that that is a

nominal figure and has not been taken—he did not take into consideration inflationary pressures that have been exorbitant over the last 18 months.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Furthermore, in his wind up I would like him to say what would be the GDP if Petrotrin was still opened; if Point Lisas was still operating above—

Mr. Mitchell: Madam President?

Sen. A. Roberts:—30 per cent; and if—

Mr. Mitchell: Madam President, 53(1)(b) and 53(2) please.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, tedious repetition is being cited. I will ask you please to move on. You have a few minutes so—

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Madam President. The joke does not miss me that it is the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts that is talking about tedious. Recovery is in every sector.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, Sen. Roberts—

Sen. A. Roberts: Yes, Ma'am.

Madam President:—you may have your—

Sen. A. Roberts: Opinion.

Madam President:—opinion or whatever, but not all opinions have to be expressed and put on the—here when we speak it is on the public record. So please withdraw that statement.

Sen. A. Roberts: I withdraw the tedious remark about the—

Madam President: Just withdraw the statement.

Sen. A. Roberts: I withdraw the—

Madam President: I do not need to hear it again.

Sen. A. Roberts: I withdraw the statement from the bottom of my heart. The

Government said, through the Minister of Finance, that the average price that they are going to budget on is going to be \$95 a barrel and gas at \$5.00 per mmbtu, and they will estimate that till September, and that will give them an extra \$4.5 billion to \$5 billion. Then why, PNM, why cut the fuel subsidy to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago if you have so much money?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Help the people, they are suffering. Why bring property tax if you have this great windfall and you managed so well? Why—

Madam President: Senator—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, please continue, but can I ask you, just as I had asked Sen. Mark, to just lower your voice please. There is no need. I can hear you.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Madam President. I get emotional when we are talking about people and their families, and food on the table. So please forgive me. Then if you got so much money clear arrears, open back EFCL and pay contractors so they could pay their workers who are owed, pay the contractors at EMBD, Sport Company, and local government. The PNM pays no one, but selected financiers and landlords, credit unions, and land developers. The present and nightmare scenario for T&TEC, WASA, TSTT to increase rates on the people, to increase the rates that people have to pay while the service is diminishing every day. The economy is on auto—

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

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, just continue.

Sen. A. Roberts: Yes, Ma'am, I am going to wrap up. It took me a little longer because of all the interruptions. The economy is on automatic pilot. This Minister

is simply nothing more than a cashier. If we believe the good news according to this Minister, you could imagine if our beloved country had a real Government, with a real Minister of Finance, and a creative qualified forward-thinking—

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, once again please. It may be amusing to some, but you are speaking about Members of Parliament and I would ask you please to find a way, please, to show the respect that we are supposed to.

Sen. A. Roberts: And if there was a compassionate Cabinet we would have seen the refinery open bringing revenue, negotiated beneficial gas prices, Point Lisas would have gotten up to 100 per cent, diversify the economy. The Minister could have come here with a supplemental appropriation of \$8 billion or \$9 billion balance budget and jobs would have been created. We could have protected our borders; reduced taxes; increased agricultural production; minimized lost productivity in traffic; attracted FDI; improved safety and security; improved the ease of doing business; reduced opportunities for corruption by adhering to the corporate governance best practice; and implemented the real procurement legislation not the legalized thieving Bill that was passed by the PNM. Then we would really be in sweet, sweet—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: On a point of order, 46(4), 46(6). What thieving PNM?

Madam President: Sen. Roberts? Sen. Roberts, please, you said you were wrapping you. Please.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am. I think they are getting so frustrated, they are hearing wrong. Then we would really be in sweet, sweet T&T. Alas, elections have consequences, but elections also bring hope. So PNM, if you believe your narrative here today then call the elections now.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):

Thank you very much, Madam President. Firstly let me say at the outset, I am very happy that it is still daylight. This has been quite a long debate today. We started at 10 o'clock. As I go through the various contributions let me just deal with some of the more egregious statements made by Members of Opposition. Sen. Mark in his usual way, his usual dissonant tone, I have heard one of the Opposition apologists say that Sen. Mark's dissonant tone is as a result of—I saw in a letter in the newspapers—some form of disability. I cannot believe that that is—

Madam President: Acting Prime Minister please, do not start your contribution on that note. Please.

Hon. C. Imbert: Certainly. So, Madam President, when I listened to Sen. Mark's screaming and shouting I took some notes—it was difficult because of the decibel level—but Sen. Mark screamed about the use of nominal GDP as compared to real GDP. For the benefit of those who are watching let me explain what nominal GDP is, lest they may be misled by the hon. Senator although the number of people who would be misled will probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. Nominal GDP is the monetary value of output produced in a country for a particular period, usually annually. It is measured at current prices, at market prices. It is in contrast to real GDP which measures output but uses prices that are referred to a base year.

In Trinidad and Tobago we have rebased our real GDP to the year 2012. Prior to that, it went all the way back to the year 2000. So when one is measuring real GDP one looks at volume using the prices in 2012, but nominal GDP gives

you the value of production at the particular point in time. Nominal GDP is very important. It measures a country's economic size. If you want to compare the size of the economy of one country to another, you must use nominal GDP, the current GDP level adjusted for what is called purchasing for our priority using an exchange rate of currency such as the US dollar. So in our particular case we can take our GDP at this point in time, which is close to US \$27 billion, and compare it to other countries and you will get an idea of the size of the Trinidad and Tobago's economy under the PNM Government compared to the size of other economies in the region and elsewhere.

Nominal GDP is also used by rating agencies, by international institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and so on, to measure the debt to GDP ratio. Our debt to GDP ratio is measured using nominal GDP, not real GDP. In addition, our per capita GDP—again an important measure of the situation in a country is measured using nominal GDP. And therefore, Madam President, nominal GDP is very, very important. And therefore, Madam President, when I see nominal GDP growing from the level that it was suppressed to during the COVID period in the vicinity of \$140 billion when we were in the throes of COVID, when we were in the midst of a complete lockdown, our nominal GDP had gone down to somewhere in the vicinity of \$140 billion back in 2020, and I see now in 2022, May 2022, our nominal GDP is now in the vicinity of \$180 billion. That is a \$40 billion increase in production in Trinidad and Tobago, and that is nothing to sneeze about, Madam President, and I feel very good for Trinidad and Tobago that we are in this position. I know hon. Opposition Senators are allergic to good news. It makes them ill.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It makes them sick. But it is necessary when we have good news to let people know.

With respect to the data and where does it come from, there are several, I call them go to commentators in the public domain. When the comment is required on something, there are a number of personalities who make themselves available to the press to make a comment on this or that. But, Madam President, regrettably, these commentators never go to the publicly available sources of data to determine what is really happening in Trinidad and Tobago. And in response to Sen. Lyder, the Central Statistical Office has been publishing actual GDP data for quite a while now. And if one goes to the CSO website—the information has been out there for months—one will see the actual data going back as far back as 2015, 2013, all the way back to 2012 actually in terms of nominal and real GDP, Madam President, and you do not have to be a rocket scientist.

You do not even have to be an A level student to look at the pattern of growth of GDP for the first three quarters of 2021 to know that commodity prices which have a direct and profound effect on nominal GDP have increased in the fourth quarter of 2021. And therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the quarterly GDP for the last calendar quarter of 2021 would at least be the same as the third quarter of 2021 because it is in the last quarter that we began to see an increase in oil prices, we began to see an increase in natural gas prices and so on.

5.30 p.m.

So one does not need to be a rocket scientist and as I said not even an A level student to know that you can easily do a very reasonable estimate of what our GDP would be for 2021 using the actual figures up to the third quarter and if one were to do that, one would see that our GDP for 2021 was at least \$170 billion. So I do not

know what or who Sen. Lyder was apologizing for. There is no need to apologise for mediocrity in terms of commentary in the public domain and that is a tragedy in this country, that there is so much information available.

I noticed since I presented this Bill in the other place, there has been very little commentary on the data. It is a tragedy for Trinidad and Tobago that our intellectuals and the commentators, they run away from the publicly available data and engage in speculation using uninformed information, uninformed commentary and bogus information. So there is not much more I can say about what Sen. Mark and Sen. Lyder had to say. Very little.

What I can say about the composition of GDP which is important and you can get that from the CSO website in response to comments made by Sen. Lyder, Sen. Mark and so on is that if one looked at the composition of our GDP, one would see—let us take 2015 for example, one would see that of a total GDP of about \$160 billion, \$120 billion of that was not in the oil and gas sector. The oil and gas GDP in that year was about 40 billion. The non-oil and gas GDP was 120 billion. So our non-energy sector is contributing to 75 per cent of our GDP and our energy sector is contributing 25 per cent. That is how it was in those days and that is the pattern right through until the recent increase in commodity prices so we now see our energy sector contributing somewhere in the vicinity of 60 billion out of a total GDP of 180 billion.

So, again, the non-energy sector contributes two-thirds of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago so it is a fallacy that the energy sector is the dominant contributor to our GDP. It is not. We have a very diversified economy and that is a product of the Chambers administration when a number of transformation moves were made to diversify our economy.

If I were to go now to comments of Sen. Deonarine, one of the points made by Sen. Deonarine was a question about what is going on with IFMIS. IFMIS is a part of the Development Programme and it is relevant to all of this because IFMIS is a financial management system, information system that would allow us to get real-time data at the Ministry of Finance and also for publication for the wider public in terms of real-time data, in terms of revenue and expenditure and allocations and appropriations and so on. And we in finance have put a dedicated team in place to deal with this and I personally have given them a deadline of the end of this year to have this real-time financial information system up and running by December 31st, 2022. So that is in response to a comment made by Sen. Deonarine because she emphasized the importance, the hon. Senator, of this integrated financial information management system.

I want to thank the other Senators who contributed for their supportive comments in terms of the appropriations that we are making, especially in terms of dealing with arrears and dealing with supplementations to various Heads for all of sorts of things: janitorial, security services, other goods and services, paying off electricity bills, water bills, telephone bills, et cetera, funding the Children's Authority and so on. I want to thank hon. Senators who have contributed who noticed all of this in the supplementary appropriation and confined their remarks in dealing with the matters at hand.

Apart from that, the last speaker, the hon. Sen. Roberts did not seem to understand that his technique of scattershot, going all over the place is well known to us on this side and we knew that he would soon fall into error and find himself afoul of the relevance rule. But there are some points that we need to make in response to some of the points Sen. Roberts made.

Sen. Roberts told us that if the UNC had been the beneficiary of the windfall that we are experiencing now, they would have used the increased revenue for diversification. Before I make my main point, I want to make the point that the average oil price enjoyed by the UNC Government during 2010 to 2015 was \$100. People do not seem to know that. The UNC enjoyed an average oil price for five years of US \$100 a barrel, US \$100 a barrel. We for the first time in almost seven years—not almost, in seven years, we are seeing oil prices of \$100 a barrel. Prior to that, we have had to deal with oil prices of \$25. There was an incredible situation in 2020 when COVID began where the oil price went to zero and then became negative on one particular day. But the UNC Government had an average oil price of \$100 and a gas price way above the gas price that we have had to deal with over the last seven years. We have had to deal with a gas price less than \$2.00. They enjoyed gas prices well over \$5.00. So I need to make that point because we have had to struggle with depressed commodity prices until now, Madam President. It is important that people know this.

But Sen. Roberts said that if the UNC had received the windfall that we are receiving, they would have used it for diversification. But they had a windfall for the whole five years that they were in Government and they did not use it for diversification simpliciter. They used it for diversification of new ways and means to engage in graft and corruption. That is the only diversification that Government was good at—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—diversifying, misappropriation of public funds.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And I think that is very relevant to some of the Members—

Madam President: Acting Prime Minister, just one second. Sen. Mark, please. You know I am requiring an—yes, thank you. Continue acting Prime Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam President. As I said that is the only diversification the UNC engaged in, diversification of corruption.

So Sen. Roberts also asked about the fuel subsidy and alleged that the present Government was not using part of the windfall to subsidize the price of fuel. That is totally untrue. The cost of the fuel subsidy to the Government and by extension taxpayers in 2022 will be in excess of \$800 million. I want to say that clearly and again. The cost of subsidizing fuel and LPG in 2022 will be in excess of \$800. There is still a fuel subsidy—\$800 million, sorry, \$800 million. There is still a fuel subsidy.

With respect to withdrawals from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and all of this is publicly available information, the last withdrawal from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, the last one was in July of 2021, almost one year ago. This is publicly available information. Yet, hon. Members of the Opposition would like the public not to be aware of these things. It is a fact that we have not gone to the local or the international commercial market to borrow money since December 2021. That is a fact.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It is a fact that we have not had to utilize our rainy day fund, our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, since July of 2021. Those are facts.

With respect to the refinery, I notice this is a very topical matter. It came up again in Sen. Roberts' contribution. It is a matter of public record that in 2017, 2018, Petrotrin had to declare losses of over \$4 billion and put it on the books. Under the former administration, the accountants were hiding that and they were

calling it tax credits so they were losing billions of dollars every year and not declaring it in the liability side of their balance sheet, they were putting it in the asset side as a tax credit, a future tax credit that they could use against future profits.

But the fact of the matter is the refinery was not profitable so it was all a game and eventually the auditors said this has been going on for too long, we were forced to do it by the previous administration, we are not going to do it any longer and Petrotrin had to book all of the losses in the refinery during the UNC period and declared a loss of over \$4 billion. Not only that, Petrotrin was not paying its royalties and taxes and still has an unpaid bill to the Government in excess of \$3 billion. Those are the facts.

Furthermore, when we came in, Petrotrin was in such a dangerous position in terms of finance that we have had to guarantee loans, US dollar loans for Petrotrin, totally TT \$3 billion, in excess of US \$400 million. And you know what those loans were for? Those were to pay for the losses on operations of the refinery, Madam President. So that I reject this narrative that is outside there that the refinery was profitable. That is poppycock, poppycock.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Debts totalling \$3 billion to cover losses and unpaid taxes of another \$3 billion plus, Madam President, those are the facts. That is the fact of that refinery.

So when I go through the other comments made, Madam President, again I want to thank the Independent Senators for taking the time to go through each Head of expenditure and to make a series of comments. There are a lot of interesting comments made, the time simply does not permit. We simply do not

have the time in the limited time available here. If I go back to Sen. Deonarine, Sen. Deonarine asked a series of questions with respect to a particular loan from the IDB for the Ministry of Attorney General and Legal Affairs. I am aware that there is an IDB financed arrangement in the Ministry of Attorney General and Legal Affairs to deal with information management at the Registrar General. I am told that this is nearing completion and that the Registrar General's Department is going to be significantly improved in the near future.

I also saw from a comment from Sen. Deonarine asking about the quantum of refunds going to foreign investors versus local investors. This is not the kind of information that one has at one's fingertips but I can tell you that we make sure that there is fairness and equity in the distribution of VAT funds and certainly this information, now that I have seen these questions, this information will be made available at an another time when I get the opportunity to do so.

With respect to the secondary roads, we have had a company called the Secondary Roads Company in this country for those of us who are old enough to remember. I remember the second lane on the Churchill Roosevelt Highway in the vicinity of the UWI. I remember when I was just graduating from the UWI back in the 70s, there was a company called the Secondary Roads Company and they did significant work in this country, it was a very successful company, did a lot of work, a lot of very good work. For some reason when the Government changed in 1995, the incoming Government, for reasons best known to itself, closed down that company and started to pave roads using the Tourism Industrial Development Company. I do not know how many of you remember that, you may not be old enough to remember, but a former Government used TIDCO to pave roads. "Ah 100 million loan" to pave roads using the Tourism Industrial Development

Company.

And therefore with the very effective performance of that Secondary Roads Company, because it had focus on secondary roads, we in the Government believe that it is time to reactivate a company along those lines and with a specific focus on the rehabilitation and improvement of secondary roads and that is the rationale behind that state enterprise.

I see a number of other comments from—a question from Sen. Deonarine, very complex, with respect to policy regarding contract employment and permanent employment. Time does not permit a sufficient elaboration on those matters but again, these are very important points.

If I go now to comments made by Sen. Seepersad. Just give me one second, Madam President. Sen. Seepersad went through and analysed the cost items and I thank her for that. I thank her for the focus, I thank the hon. Senator and I thank all the Independents for their focus on the matter at hand rather than going all over the place like Sen. Roberts and Sen. Lyder and so on. And I want to make a point. When you add up all of the arrears that we are dealing with, arrears of electricity payments, payments for telephones, gratuities, janitorial and security services, et cetera, it comes up to about \$631 million.

So the point that Sen. de Freitas made is very relevant. We thought it very appropriate that having got improved revenues, unexpected revenues, having had to manage cash flow in this country very tightly for the last six years, we thought it highly appropriate to take whatever funding that was available and to clear off all of these long outstanding arrears and any sensible person would do that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: As Sen. de Freitas made the point if you come into a windfall,

the first thing a responsible person would do is to clear off your debts, get them off. Do not engage in additional debt, clear off your existing debts and that is why you would see that there is over 600 million here dealing directly with arrears to suppliers and so on and there is additional funding for paying down debt, for the payment of principal on a number of loans for both the central Government and also for the state enterprise sector.

With respect to the idea of rental accommodation, the concept of rental accommodation versus Government owned accommodation, that is very complex, Sen. Deyalsingh, very complex, because many studies have shown that in many occasions, the cost of the Government constructing its own building or acquiring its own building and managing its own building because of inefficiencies within the public service bureaucracy, quite often, that cost exceeds the cost of rental accommodation, believe it or not. There are many studies along that way. Of course, from a purely philosophical point of view, it is a good idea to own your own property but then you have to create a bureaucracy to manage it.

And if you look at all the writing about public service bureaucracy all over the world, the consensus is that once your bureaucracy gets too large, it becomes unmanageable. So that if you continue to own your own buildings, you continue to own your own vehicles and so on, you have to have a bureaucracy to support this and then you have the challenge of managing that bureaucracy. There always has to be a judicious mix of owning some of your property and renting some of your property, owning some of your vehicles and renting some of your vehicles. So that it is not a simple equation at all.

With respect to using the funding for, and this is Sen. Seepersad speaking here, using the additional funding available for business recovery, I want to make

the point that the Cabinet has approved something that we in the Ministry of Finance have been working on with the Central Bank now for about a year and I have announced this already in the public domain but I will reiterate because sometimes you have to repeat. Because Madam, President, in this country, quite often, good news is not news. In fact, the journalists among us will confirm that, that good news is not news, is not news, bacchanal is news, dissonance is news, negativity is news but good news is not news. So, therefore, you have to keep reinforcing the good news all the time.

So that for a year now, together with a team from the Central Bank, we have been looking at the whole question of business credit because one of the greatest challenges to the growth of particularly small and medium enterprises is access to credit to buy machinery, to expand their business, to get working capital to grow because the only way you can have economic activity, stimulation of economic activity is if you have growth and the biggest problem for small and medium enterprises is access to credit, to financing in order to equip themselves to grow.

So we have looked all around the world because we have looked into the banking sector and we have noticed that we have a banking sector that is averse to lending money to small and medium enterprises because those enterprises have a high-risk profile in terms of their discipline, in terms of their track record of repayment of loan financing. So a small and medium enterprise is going to run into trouble when they go to the bank to try and get financing to grow their business. So we looked all over the world, we looked in the Far East, we looked in Europe, we looked in other developing countries, we looked in Central America, we looked in the Caribbean and we eventually found a model in Singapore and I am happy to say that we decided to adopt the Singapore model.

And in this model, you have a continuous Government guaranteed loan programme for small and medium enterprises and the Cabinet has agreed to capitalize this new small and medium enterprise guarantee programme to the tune of \$500 million. The maximum loan that will be available to a small business would as much as \$1.5 million and the Government is going to provide an 80 per cent guarantee for that financing to the commercial banks and the small and medium enterprises will be required to put up the other 20 per cent. And we believe that this is going to provide the impetus and the platform for business recovery going forward. And I need to repeat this—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: —and this programme will be launched within the next two months, Madam President. It is not a COVID recovery loan, this is a long-term Government guarantee loan facility specifically aimed at small and medium enterprises because that is the source of growth in any economy. In Europe, for example, most businesses are small business employing five to 10 people, the majority, vast majority, over 80 per cent of businesses in Europe are small and medium enterprises. So that is one of the things that we will be allocating funding for.

And the way it will work is the same way we did the COVID guarantee loan facility, we will raise the \$500 million, we will put it in a sterilized bank account, the commercial banks will go ahead and provide the loans and if after all the normal recovery measures are taken a borrower is still in default, then the commercial banks can access that fund to recover the portion of the loan that has been guaranteed by the Government. So that is what we are doing. As I said, this is not a budget speech so there are many things that one does not have the

opportunity to say lest one runs afoul of the Standing Orders.

Let me just see what else. [*Pause*] I am sorry, I cannot see anything else relevant from any of the Opposition Senators. With respect to the Independents, I have already dealt with issues raised by Sen. Deonarine, Sen. Seepersad, Sen. Deyalsingh, and so on and I thank them for their very insightful comments.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Madam President. According to Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that the Bill not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Madam President, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Wednesday, May 25th, 2022 at 1.30 p.m. And I believe that the Opposition and the Independents have agreed to debate Motion No. 2 in the name of Sen. Vieira.

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

Long COVID

(Clinical Management)

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. The first matter I wish to raise deals with the negative impact of long COVID and the need for the establishment of specialized medical teams for its clinical management as well as remedial action

in COVID-19 social support mechanisms.

Now, Madam President, COVID-19 has become a chronic condition for tens of millions of people and I dare say an expensive one.

6.00 p.m.

Long COVID, a condition marked by lingering symptoms that can involve multiple bodily systems, has cost, according to the research, a cumulative \$386 billion in lost wages, savings, and medical expenses in the United States alone as of January, according to one estimate.

Just recently, President Biden's administration announced that it was making Long COVID a national priority. The administration unveiled a plan to accelerate efforts to prevent, treat, and detect Long COVID through a national interagency research programme. Madam President, in February, the National Institutes of Health announced a \$1.15 billion initiative to support research into this condition.

The question that has to be asked is: Why have we not done a similar kind of research initiative here in Trinidad and Tobago? Madam President, there is no cure or specific treatment. There is not even a test for Long COVID, as it is called. Madam President, scientists still do not fully understand and/or grasp some of the symptoms. How long these symptoms will last through this Long COVID, or why some people get it and others do not? Scientists have not even settled on a name for it, properly speaking, whether it is Long COVID, post-COVID, long haul, post-acute COVID, or even chronic COVID.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines Long COVID as health problems that could last four or even more weeks after one gets infected with this virus. The World Health Organization definition adds that the symptoms are not ones that can easily be explained by any alternative diagnosis. So, therefore, Madam President, it is unclear exactly how people have this particular

challenge.

Estimates range from—people who may have it, estimates range from 5 per cent to 80 per cent of those what may become infected with the Coronavirus, may end up experiencing this problem. And the condition, Madam President, can affect persons of all ages, genders, races or ethnicities. Some can develop Long COVID after a mild infection or even after an infection with no symptoms at all. They may have symptoms for a short amount or period of time, or even for years.

Madam President, the Centers for Disease Control lists some of the physical symptoms to include: difficulty breathing, fatigue, problems sleeping, cough, chest and stomach pain, headache, racing heart and other heart problems, high blood pressure, joint and muscle pain, a feeling of having pins and needles under the skin, fever, dizziness, rash, diarrhea, a change of the menstrual cycle, type two diabetes, hair loss, rashes, Madam President, and it continues.

Madam President, we are calling on the Government today to pay attention in a very serious and organized and systematic way to this particular development. And we are also saying that the Government can look at even the Couva Hospital as a central area for Long COVID treatment, with the relevant medical specialists and equipment located there. We should use this national asset for the treatment of our nationals. We cannot continue, Madam President, to ignore this problem. And, therefore, I am calling on the Government to look at decentralization of treatment in this process. Madam President, we can become a leader in this field. We can become a pioneer in this area, and this hospital in Couva can become the Caribbean centre for Long COVID treatment.

So, Mr. President, people, a number of persons have approached me on this matter and I thought it was my duty to bring it to the attention of this honourable Senate so that, for instance, the Government, through the Minister, can share with

the population what steps or efforts are being taken, Madam President, to treat with this particular problem which, apparently, is affecting hundreds of citizens in our country, and there is no centralized location for treating this particular problem, which can have long-term consequences for citizens in our republic.

So Madam President, with these few words, I would pause at this time.
Thank you.

Madam President: Minister of Health.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam President, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to Sen. Mark. First of all, let me say that this Motion is based on a totally false premise. It is hypocritical and does not acknowledge the fact that Trinidad and Tobago has been in the forefront of treating Long COVID since October 2020.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam President, according to the WHO, the term Long COVID refers to a post-COVID-19 condition that occurs in individuals with a history of probable or confirmed COVID-19 infection. It usually kicks in, Madam President, about three months after the onset of COVID-19 and the symptoms can last for at least two months and cannot be explained via an alternative diagnosis. Common symptoms include fatigue, shortness of breath; very important, cognitive dysfunction and others that generally have an impact on everyday functioning persons; the ability to climb steps, lift up your grocery bags.

Sen. Mark spoke about the United States in very glowing terms and what they are doing now. And this is why I find this Motion hypocritical, because I have answered questions in this Senate, posed by Sen. Mark, on Long COVID. So he knows the

facts. So here we go. The following measures were implemented, not are being implemented, were implemented by the RHAs in conjunction with the Ministry of Health to treat patients suffering from Long COVID. In October 2020, that is 17 months ago, and 10 months into the pandemic, the Executive Wellness Clinic was established at the Arima General Hospital, where over 215 new patients were seen with Long COVID and there were 361 revisits. We did not wait for any country to tell us what to do.

In August 2021, nine months ago, before the country so praised by Sen. Mark, a Long COVID clinic was established at the San Fernando Teaching Hospital where over 121 new patients were seen with Long COVID, and there were 99 revisits. That is nine months ago. At the Sangre Grande Hospital, Long COVID patients are seen by the internal medicine team; and at the Port of Spain General Hospital, we started the Long COVID clinic there in May 10, 2022.

I am absolutely shocked, absolutely shocked, that the UNC, via Sen. Mark, is recommending that patients with Long COVID be put into a hospital. The doctors will tell you that is the worst thing to do with a patient with Long COVID. Because you have recovered from COVID and the last thing you want to do is to have them in an environment in Couva, where we are co-treating COVID patients. I mean, how—is “idiotic” a parliamentary term?

Madam President: Actually, it is not.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: It is not. How misinformed. Is “stupid” a parliamentary term?

Madam President: It is.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: How uninformed and unintelligent it is for the UNC to be wanting to put patients who have recovered from COVID, with Long COVID, into an institution where you have people with COVID. That has to be the most

“dotish”!

Madam President: Minister, please.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes. That is unparliamentary?

Madam President: Well, I will ask you to dial back, please.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: That has to be the most unscientific measure I have ever heard. We treat Long COVID patients on an outpatient basis. They come in, they get their therapy, they get their medication, they are taught respiratory exercises. They go through their spirometer testing and then they go home in a cleaner, non-COVID environment. We continue with population level sensitization, so patients could recognize and seek treatment for symptoms of Long COVID.

Madam President, I said initially this is a hypocritical Motion. Why? It is this very same Senator, in this very same Chamber, at the start of the COVID pandemic who said lime and puncheon is the way to treat with COVID. You remember that? Lime and puncheon. But now he is concerned about Long COVID. That is why I said this Motion is farcical. It is without merit, and it has come 17 months after the fact, after the Minister of Health, after the Government established its first Long COVID clinic. We have had the foresight to be in the vanguard, in the forefront of treating Long COVID. But as my acting Prime Minister said before me when he was speaking, good news has no currency in Trinidad and Tobago. This will never fire the public’s imagination, because it was done. It was done quietly. It was done successfully. So to ask me today, what am I going to do, especially after the fact that questions were answered in this very Chamber posed by this very Senator on the issue of Long COVID, as I said, is hypocritical. Thank you very much, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Mental Rehabilitation
(National Social Support Network)

Sen. Wade Mark: Madam President, I would not—let me just go on to the next thing. Otherwise, you know, if I respond to him, you know. Madam President, let me deal with the second one.

I am calling, via the Senate, on the Government to look at the establishment of a national social support network to aid in the mental rehabilitation of those citizens who have been mentally affected by this particular virus.

Madam President, this matter has certain unexplained—this issue, this challenge, this difficulty that people are experiencing. People have reported unexplained, as a result of this challenge, mood changes, difficulty in thinking, memory problems, difficulties with language, Madam President. Studies have shown that this is a matter that can also lead to behaviour of a suicidal nature. And, therefore, it is important that we pay attention to this phenomenon among citizens and take action.

Madam President, this is a situation in which the symptoms can come and go over a period of time. And, therefore, this challenge requires social support mechanisms to facilitate, as the Motion has stated, a rapid degree of mental rehabilitation of persons who may have experienced this challenge. Because it is leading to these kinds of mental challenges for citizens who have gone through this experience. And we are calling on the Government to pay attention and to take the necessary action to address this issue affecting citizens in our nation.

And, therefore, we have brought this matter to the attention of the Government, with a view to addressing it and to taking the relevant and necessary action to assist those citizens who might be experiencing challenges in that particular area, Madam President. It is associated with what I have spoken about

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Sen. Mark (cont'd)

earlier on and, therefore, I am asking the Government to look at this question very carefully and see to what extent we can provide assistance.

I have noted that there is an attempt by the SWRHA to address the issue of mental health services for persons, Madam President, who are residing in this part of the country, that is the southern part. And, therefore, we are hoping that this ability to establish that national social support network to aid citizens in their mental rehabilitation, particularly as those experiencing challenges arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic would go a long way in treating citizens in a manner consistent with a proper programme of rehabilitation. So I am hoping that the Minister and the Government can in fact indicate what kind of social support network mechanisms have been established to assist those citizens who are seeking a programme of mental rehabilitation as a result of this particular virus that has inflicted severe challenges to them and by extension their families.

So, Madam President, that is another area I bring to the attention of the Senate and we hope that the Minister and the Government can provide us with some solutions as to the way forward. Thank you.

Madam President: Minister of Health.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much again, Madam President. And I welcome the opportunity to reiterate what we have been doing, because if the population believes Sen. Mark, we have been doing nothing.

Let me start off by saying that mental health is one of the biggest challenges around the world. The detection and diagnosis—and we have Sen. Varma Deyalsingh here who can back up this. The detection of mental health is one of the most difficult things to diagnose, because unlike other diseases, there are no

markers. There are no visible markers like diabetes. A good clinician can look at somebody with dark rings around their necks called acanthosis nigricans and diagnose that person has diabetes. There are no, at this point in time that I know of, blood markers to detect mental disorders. And we often stigmatize those with mental disease and say, “snap out of it”. But we never tell a diabetic, “snap out of your diabetes”. We never tell a cancer patient, “snap out of it”. But we always tell somebody suffering from mental disease, “Snap out of it nah, man”. But it is a real issue. And people suffering from mental disorders and mental disease with COVID really need our understanding and our support.

From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, since March 2020, the Government remains cognizant of the need to have a holistic plan. Sen. Mark spoke of South West RHA. It is not South West RHA. It is a Ministry of Health-led initiative across all RHAs. And what would we do?

- We set up a Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Technical Working Group, which developed and implemented a mental health care action plan for the treatment and care of persons who tested positive for COVID-19;
- the ongoing use of virtual mental health sessions for patients within the parallel health care system throughout the length and breadth of the pandemic;
- the continued access to mental health, health care services for health care workers, very important; we never left them out, through our Employee Assistance Programme;
- the continued use of the network of mental health services offered at our public health institutions;

- outpatients clinics namely the Child Guidance Clinics at San Fernando, Port of Spain, and Scarborough, and the Children and Adolescents Living with Mental Health clinic at Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex.

Those are things that have been done, have been done:

- The establishment of a stress clinic at the North Central RHA;
- the priority treatment for staff at the mental health wellness clinics; and
- the landmark or signal achievement, the establishment of FindcareTT, with over 30 entities, which has been published widely. The types of services, the directory has include:
 1. Mental health services.
 2. Counselling services.
 3. Helpline services.
 4. Social support resources.
 5. Coping materials.
 6. Addiction services.
 7. Gender-based violence services.
 8. Children and adolescents support services.

Because we recognize the adverse mental health impact on our children.

The 30 entities were engaged in this, and they are:

1. The Alzheimer's Association of Trinidad and Tobago.
2. ChildLine Call 131.
3. Community mental health services.
4. Coalition Against Domestic Violence.
5. Consortium of Disability Organizations (CODO).
6. The Children's Authority.

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Hon. T. Deyalsingh (cont'd)

7. ERHA.

I have the hard copy to give to *Hansard*.

8. Families in Action 24/7 helpline.
9. GROOTS T&T - 24/7 hotline.
10. HEAL - Helping Every Addict Live.
11. Judiciary Domestic Violence hotline.
12. Lifeline Suicide Prevention 800-5588.
13. Mindful KITES - mental health practices including mediation and emotional resilience services.
14. National Domestic Violence Hotline.
15. National Family Services Division.
16. Older Persons Information Center.
17. The Ministry of Health COVID-19 helplines.
18. The Ministry of Health's Health Education Division.
19. Ministry of Sport & Community Development, through their Community Mediation Division.

So this is a whole of government approach.

20. The National Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Programme.

Because we recognize addiction is going to be an issue.

21. NCRHA Chaguanas Stress Relief Center.
22. Office of the Prime Minister, leading the charge.
23. PEAPSL Consultancy Limited - counselling services.
24. The Rape Crisis Society of Trinidad and Tobago, for our women especially.
25. RN Vincent & Associates - servicing the impact of COVID-19.

Hopelessness, depression, anxiety.

26. The International Organization for Migration, for our migrants.
27. TRHA mental health services.
28. Trinidad and Tobago Association of Psychologists.
29. Trinidad and Tobago Red Cross Society - psychosocial support and social outreach.
30. Victim and Witness Support.

What has been the outcome of this, Madam President? I will give you some data. To date, users, 34,804, and page views, 65,336. But, when you disaggregate the data, the most visited pages are:

1. Suicide prevention, which is a current topic.
2. Gender-based violence, current.
3. Addiction, current.
4. The 24/7 helplines.
5. Trinidad and Tobago Psychologists Association; and
6. The North Central RHAs.

When we do a deep dive into the demographics, males make up 42 per cent of persons visiting the sites, and females 58 per cent, because we recognize that females carry the bulk of the burden.

Also, Madam President, the implementation plan for the National Mental Health Policy anticipates and provides for further increases in mental health needs through the creation of community mental health teams. This is the decentralization of mental health, and the incorporation of mental health into the primary health care system. So persons with mental health issues now can get treatment at the primary level out being referred up the chain and having their

treatment delayed. Persons who are ripe and ready for that type of intervention at the primary level will now get it.

The key objectives of this initiative to this effective decentralization of mental health include:

1. To strengthen governance in leadership for mental health at all levels.
2. To provide a comprehensive integrated and responsive mental health care approach with special emphasis on rehabilitation and recovery in community-based settings rather than institutionalization.

This is something I pioneered and we are going to go full stream ahead with it. Gone are the days where you institutionalize people for 20 years and 30 years, who are mainly social cases.

3. To implement strategies for mental health promotion, prevention of mental health disorders where possible. And most importantly, to decrease stigma and discrimination.
4. To strengthen the HR in mental health and develop—we need data—a mental health information system.

Madam President, as I close, it is envisaged that the above changes will result in a wider range of mental health services being provided at the community level. This is the final act of decentralization which we started and will make those services more accessible to persons who need them, including persons whose mental health challenges were triggered or exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic.

Madam President, I close as I began. Mental health and mental disorders are one of the most challenging aspects of medicine and we ask the population if you are challenged, go on to the FindCareTT website, the 30 organizations are there to help you 24/7.

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(National Social Support Network)
Hon. T. Deyalsingh (cont'd)

Madam President, with those few words, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.30 p.m.