SENATE

Wednesday, October 12, 2022

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[Madam President in the Chair]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Madam President: Good morning everyone, and welcome back. Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh who is ill.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2023) BILL, 2022

Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2023, brought from the House of Representatives [The Minister of Finance]; read the first time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

PAPERS LAID


3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts to the Fifth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the Examination of the Realignment of Ministries and Departments. [The

UNREVISED
4. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne)

5. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Fourth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Fair Trading Commission (TTFTC) for the financial years 2014 to 2018. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

6. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Public Administration to the Fifth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination of the Realignment of the Ministries and Departments. [The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West)]

7. Response of the Service Commissions Department to the Fifth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination of the Realignment of Ministries and Departments. [Sen. The Hon. A. West]


10. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Education to the Fifth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the National Schools Dietary Services Limited (NSDSL) for the financial years 2016 to 2019 and follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations in the Report of the Auditor General on a Special Audit of the School Nutrition Programme managed by NSDSL. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

12. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2017. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

13. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2018. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

14. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Racing Authority for the year ended July 31, 2011. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

15. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2015. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]


UNREVISED
19. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2018. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

20. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the Second Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an examination of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the State’s capacity to provide support to persons who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

21. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the Fifth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the National Schools Dietary Services Limited (NSDSL) for the financial years 2016 to 2019 and follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations in the Report of the Auditor General on a Special Audit of the School Nutrition Programme managed by NSDSL. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

22. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Sport and Community Development to the Fifth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the Examination of the Realignment of Ministries and Departments. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

23. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development to the Sixth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on an examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial Statements of the East Port of Spain Development Company Limited (EPOS) for the financial years 2012 and 2013. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]
24. Ministerial Response of the Office of the Prime Minister to the Fifth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination of the Realignment of Ministries and Departments. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]


27. Draft Estimates—Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the financial year 2023. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

28. Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the financial year 2023. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

29. Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the financial year 2023. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

30. Draft Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2023. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

31. Social Sector Investment Programme 2023. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

32. Public Sector Investment Programme—Trinidad 2023. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

33. Public Sector Investment Programme—Tobago 2023. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

34. Three-Year Public Sector Investment Programme 2023-2025. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

35. State Enterprises Investment Programme 2023. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]
36. Review of the Economy 2022. [Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne]

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS

(Presentation)

Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye: Madam President, I have the honour to present the following reports:

Finance and Legal Affairs

Examination of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic
Third Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs, Second Session (2021/2022) Twelfth Parliament, on an examination of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the State’s capacity to provide support to persons who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic.

Inquiry into the efficiency and effectiveness of the Central Statistical Office

Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities

(Including the THA)

Inquiry into the operational efficiency of TTPost
The Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal): Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper in the name of Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh:

Sixth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA), Second
Session (2021/2022), Twelfth Parliament, on an inquiry into the operational efficiency of the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation (TTPOST) and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on service delivery.

**Social Services and Public Administration**

**Inquiry into the Impact of Work-from-Home and Alternative Work Arrangements**

**Sen. Paul Richards:** Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report:


**Public Accounts (Enterprises)**

**East Port of Spain Development Company Limited**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report:


**Finance and Legal Affairs**

**Inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on the Micro and Small Enterprises Sector**

UNREVISED
Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye: Thank you Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper revised in my name:


Madam President: Minister Finance.

**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2023) BILL, 2022**

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

That a Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending the 30th of September, 2023, be now read a second time.

Now, Madam President, the Bill before the Senate has three clauses in and a schedule. The schedule gives various Heads of Expenditure and the amount to be appropriated to these Heads, ranging from Head 01, which is the President, to Head 82 which is the Ministry of Digital Transformation. Now, the amount to be appropriated is 48,543,000—so, $48 billion, my apologies, 543,241,359. Now, that is a lower figure than the planned expenditure for 2023. The planned expenditure for 2023 from where we get the fiscal deficit, and I will explain that in a little while, the planned expenditure, Madam President, is in excess of $57 billion. And in fact, if you go to page 43, of the bound and printed budget statement, you will see that the planned expenditure is 57.685 billion. So, there is a difference between the number in the budget statement and the appropriation of 48,543,000,000—it is about a $9 billion difference.

The reason for the difference is that there are a number of Items that are direct charges that do not have to be appropriated and the best example I can give
is the salaries of judges. So, Items that are direct charges are first in the priority in terms of payments, and they do not require us in this place or in the other place to appropriate funds for those payments. Those payments occur automatically and that is why you have a difference of approximately 9 billion between the planned expenditure of the Government or if you look at the revenue side, about 8 million between the projected revenue and what we are appropriating.

The estimated revenue for fiscal 2023 is 56.175 million. That is significantly more than the revenue for fiscal 2022. The revenue for fiscal 2022 was in the vicinity of $51.5 billion. So we looking at just over $4.5 billion more in fiscal 2023. The reason for that is that we are using a higher oil price and a higher natural gas price to inform our calculations for the revenue estimates for 2023.

I would like now to go to some information I requested from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries and I had asked them to give me details of the actual weighted average, local crude oil prices in Trinidad and Tobago. And I, just for reference, I limited it to the period January to August 2022, where I was aware that we had data. I also asked for what is called the netback price of gas, which is the price that is used for calculating revenue. And just for the information of hon. Senators, the average price of local crude, and we get crude from all sorts of sources, the Galeota crude is by far the most valuable and you get the highest price for that and then different crudes attract different prices. The local, what they call Molo crude which is derived or is produced or developed by Heritage, is actually fetching an excellent price on the world market. So the average—weighted average local crude price for January of ’22 was US$82.73 per barrel; in February it was $92.57; in March it was $109.96; in April, $104.52; in May, $109.55; in June, $117.80—these are averages for the month—July, $101.35; August, 96.60.
The weighted average for this period I just called out there January to August, was $102.06 per barrel so, that is what we got for our crude.

In contrast, the weighted average for West Texas Intermediate, which used to be a benchmark for Trinidad and Tobago but is no longer the benchmark, was $100.38 for the same period, and Brent, which is a better benchmark for us is—was an average of $104.01. So, our local crude, on average, fetched about $2 below the price of Brent, and about $2 above the price of West Texas Intermediate. So that for benchmarking purposes, I think it is safe to take an average between WTI and Brent, in terms of forecasting.

With respect to natural gas, the netback price in January 2022, the—let us use country weighted gas price is a better measure. In January, it was $5.86; in February, it was $7.29; March, $7.29, this is for MMBtu US dollars; April, $8.41 per MMBtu; March, $6.70 per MMBtu; June, $5.88; July, $6.45; August, $7.39 and in September, also quite high. So, for the January to August period, the country weighted gas price was $6.85 per MMBtu.

Now, these numbers are important, because the 2022 budget was predicated on a gas price of $65—sorry, an oil price of $65 per barrel, and a gas price of $3.75 per MMBtu. As hon. Members will realize, the gas price that we actually realized was close to $3 more per MMBtu than we did our Estimates, and the oil price was $35 more. So, we estimated at 65 and it came in at 100 or a little over 100—102 actually, $37 more and we estimated at 3.75 and it came in at well over $6.

If one looks at the prices today, the Henry Hub price of gas is $6.66 and the Brent crude oil price is $93.01 and earlier this week, Brent almost hit $99. There is extreme volatility in oil and gas prices, more so in oil than gas. Gas has been fairly stable for the last several months at somewhere between $6/7 per MMBtu so that
we feel pretty confident that our gas price is a good price because the gas price that we get in Trinidad and Tobago is really an average of a number of markets, is not just Henry Hub, you can be misled if you look at Henry Hub, it could confuse you. Because Henry Hub is an anachronistic measure, there used to be something called Lake Charles which no longer used, but our gas is sold all over the world, primarily in Europe, and in the Far East and there is a European benchmark and as there is an Asian benchmark for gas.

So our actual price—weighted price is a combination of the Henry Hub price, the European benchmark and the Asian benchmark. And this is why I was able to tell you that our netback price, on average is almost $7 for 2022. So that those who would want to say that the oil price forecast of $92.50 is a bad estimate, I would suggest you do a little more research. Because when we arrived at the 92.50, we consulted with the US Energy Information, we looked to the US—the International Energy Agency, that is a European agency, we checked with the World Bank, we checked with the IMF, we checked with Fitch, Standard & Poor’s. So there are a number of agencies that forecast oil price and the consensus at the time and it still is, is that the forecast for oil in 2023 is $95, so we shall see how it goes. I suspect our oil price may be just on target or maybe slightly above and I am fairly confident that our gas price is below. And since we get two-thirds of our revenue from gas and one-third from oil, I think our revenue estimates are well calculated. So we shall see how it goes. And it is intriguing Madam President, when you underestimate the price of oil, nobody says anything. So you are underestimated at 65, it goes to 105, nobody says you made a mistake. If you estimated 100 and it goes to 65 well, you have committed a mortal sin.
So we have been using a lot of international agencies to advise us on the way forward. So, the revenue estimate of 56.175 billion is based on a conservative forecast for oil production and a conservative forecast for gas production. The expenditure of 57.685 contains within it—hon. Senators, if they have had the opportunity to look at the 2023 Public Sector Investment Programme, will see the projects and programmes that are planned for fiscal 2023. There is a lot of emphasis in this year on infrastructure.

In previous years, the PSIP was not heavily weighted towards infrastructure and there are charts inside of here, if you go into this document—let me see if I can find one. There is a pie chart in the PSIP document on page 27 that gives you an understanding of the Public Sector Investment Programme for 2023 and there are five thematic areas. One of them is, “building globally competitive businesses”. The other is, “improving productivity through quality infrastructure and transportation”. A third one is, “placing the environment at the centre of social and economic development”. Fourth, “delivering good governance and service” and fifth, “putting people first”. And when you look at the spread of proposed expenditure in 2023 in the Public Sector Investment Programme, you would see that 39 per cent of the 2023 PSIP will be going towards infrastructure development, followed closely by 31 per cent going towards spending money on people, and then 12 per cent on building a globally competitive business, 17 per cent on delivering good governance.

10.30 a.m.

The projects in the PSIP are quite significant. In the health sector—I have gone through some of these projects in my budget statement—but in the health sector, for example, we will complete or we plan to complete, all things going
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)  
Bill, 2022  
Hon. C. Imbert (cont’d)

according to plan, the Sangre Grande Hospital in fiscal 2023, a 106-bed hospital, and it will provide a range of services, including medical, surgical, trauma, orthopaedic and so on. The 150-bed Arima and the 100-bed Point Fortin Hospital, already functioning, brand new. The Central Block in Port of Spain, which is a large component of the Port of Spain General Hospital, is under construction. It is expected to be completed in 2024, but there will be significant expenditure in 2023, and it is intended to provide acute care, surgical, pharmaceutical, laboratory diagnostic, ophthalmology and paediatrics and so on. The San Fernando General Hospital is also being refurbished to provide cardiac services.

The new Ministry of Health administration building is also expected to be completed in 2023, and the plan is to bring all of that Ministry’s services, units and departments and affiliated organizations, such as PAHO, the Pan American Health Organization, into one building. And when that occurs—when all of these disparate units are all collected and gathered and located at the new building there, just by Memorial Park, this will result in a savings of rent of over $12 million per year. So, there is a significant development programme taking place in the Ministry of Health.

In the transportation sector, we would certainly continue in 2023, with expenditure on the major highway programmes that are underway. The Point Fortin highway is expected to be completed and commissioned in 2023, and a number of other road works are expected to continue in 2023. But, in 2023, there will be a shift of focus away for just large projects, such as that Point Fortin highway, towards road rehabilitation and repairs. And I can say, Madam President, in addition to the budgetary allocations for the Ministry of Works and Transport in this $57 billion package, the Minister of Finance has also raised for
the Ministry of Works and Transport, loan financing, through NIPDEC, for the Programme for Upgrading Roads Efficiency or PURE, as it is known by its acronym, and we have raised the sum of $250 million for PURE in 2023.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** We already have an existing facility for PURE. So, I would say that the Ministry of Works and Transport will have in excess of $300 available to it in fiscal 2023, for dealing with road repairs, road rehabilitation, repairs of landslips and so on. So that we do expect a shift in focus from these large signature projects or, let us say, a complementary programme of road rehabilitation and repairs in 2023.

Similarly, we have funded the new secondary road improvement company. For those of us who are old enough, there was a secondary roads company many, many years ago and it, in fact, went beyond its mandate and started to build primary roads. And I do remember a section of the Churchill Roosevelt Highway—I think that was probably when I was in university, so you are talking in the 70s—between Valsayn and a little beyond Macoya, I remember that section of that highway was dualled, converted into a dual carriageway, by the secondary roads company. So, that secondary roads company really was quite sophisticated. It went way beyond secondary roads.

We thought as a Government that we should separate the functions. The road network is comprised of about 20 per cent of main roads and highways, and the 80 per cent secondary roads, local roads and therefore, we felt that there should be a specific focus on secondary roads and local roads. So, we have recreated this secondary roads company with a specific mandate to focus on local roads, neighbourhood roads, secondary roads and so on.

UNREVISED
We have already capitalized the company. In the last fiscal year, the Ministry of Finance was able to produce cheques totalling $100 million, which we have sent to the secondary roads company, which has a board and is now in the process of building out its organization, you know, hiring a CEO and that sort of thing. So, they are already capitalized to the tune of $100 million and in this package, in this appropriation, we have also included a further $100 million for that secondary roads company. So that secondary roads company goes into 2023, well-funded with financing available to it of $200 million.

So, when you take the $200 million for the secondary roads company, the $250 million for PURE, and in addition to the $250 million for PURE, the Ministry of Works and Transport has been given a capital appropriation, appropriation in the Consolidated Fund and the Infrastructure Development Fund in excess of $1 billion, that is separate and apart from these funds I have just mentioned. That $1 billion or $1.1 billion, I believe it is, that we are seeking to appropriate for the Ministry of Works and Transport for its development programme, separate and apart from its recurrent expenditure, is distinct and separate from the $200 million for the secondary roads company and the $250 million for PURE. So that I would think that the various agencies that have responsibility for road rehabilitation and repairs and road construction in 2023 are very well-funded and we expect great things from them in 2023.

I would also like to go back now to a point in the budget statement. Now, Madam President, in the other place, I spoke for four hours. I do not have four hours here, the Standing Orders do not permit it. So, I think I have 45 minutes.

**Madam President:** Yes, you have 45 minutes. You actually will finish 46 seconds after 11.00 a.m. It is now 10.37 a.m.
Hon. C. Imbert: Fine. So, I have about 20 minutes. Thank you. So, it is impossible to repeat the four-hour budget statement. So, what I would like to do instead, is to focus on certain important areas as I have just begun. I have explained the sort of oil and gas prices we got in 2022 and explained the process whereby we have estimated our revenue in 2023. I have also highlighted some aspects of our development programme. But it is all. In this document, there is also a separate Tobago Public Sector Investment Programme and there is a Medium-Term Framework as well. So, I would urge Members to take a look at that.

I also want to look at the fiscal measures because in this budget—and I understand—I mean, I have been around a while. This is not my first rodeo, Madam President—that within the fiscal measures, we have—how many of them do we have? We have 23, and they are contained on pages 44 to 50 of the budget statement. If I am going to be dispassionate about it, of the 23 fiscal measures, two involve the increase in fines for certain things that I think no one—or three actually—would want to contradict, that these are matters that we, as a country, must pay attention to: illegal quarrying, the theft of old mettle and the theft of timber from state plantations. So, those are fiscal measures 10, 11 and 12, where we are seeking to increase the fine for illegal timbering, the fine for illegal quarrying, and also to see whether we could improve the legislation with respect to illegal quarrying. I mean, this is a little bit of complex law, so we will be depending on the Attorney General to guide us to see whether we can levy and forfeit equipment found onsite at illegal quarries. That is quite a complex area of law, and the persons who do this have been quite successful in the courts to date, you know, utilizing various loopholes and weaknesses in the existing legislation.
So, we will see if we can improve the law, so that we can get rid of those loopholes that allow persons to engage in illegal quarrying and then somehow escape a penalty.

There is also in the budget a reference—well, in the fiscal measures, a reference to a giant African snail and other pests, and then we speak to increases in the price of the tickets for the air bridge and the sea bridge, and then the 23\textsuperscript{rd} measure is fuel prices. So, all of the other measures are benefits, and somehow in the discourse on this 2023 budget, all of the benefits that are in the budget seem to have been clouded by a lot of contentious debate. So, I think it is important that I highlight, for those who wish to know, what are the beneficial fiscal measures within this budget. I have made the point about the PSIP, the development programme, the capital expenditure programme and I want to point out that in fiscal 2023, we are being quite optimistic. We have a capital development programme of some $6.2 billion, $6.16 billion, somewhere around there. If one looks at the actual expenditure in the \textit{Public Sector Investment Programme} in fiscal 2022, it is less than $4 billion. It is 3.7, or some number like that, is the latest estimate I got from the Budget Division. Let us say it is 3.6. So, the expenditure on construction projects and other developmental projects and programmes in fiscal 2022 was $3.6 billion more or less. We are putting into this budget a capital programme of $6.2 billion. So, you are looking at a difference there of $2.6 billion. So, we do hope that Ministries, Ministers will, you know, burn the midnight oil, as it were, and will address themselves to our development programme, because that is where you stimulate economic activity, that is where you create jobs and that is where you create income for persons. So, we have a very ambitious development programme in 2023, and I certainly hope that it will
be realized. Certainly, from the perspective of the Ministry of Finance, we will be pushing all Ministries to utilize all the funding in the 2023 development programme which, as I said, is very significant.

But in terms of the fiscal measures, one of the first measures is increasing the personal income allowance from $84,000 a year to $90,000. Now, we looked at this. You have to be very careful with this measure, very, very, careful, because the number of people you are dealing with is, at least, 300,000. When we did the measure, increasing the personal allowance from $6,000 a month to $7,000 a month, in other words, from $72,000 a year to $84,000 a year, and that is from a previous uplift from $60,000 a year to $72,000—so, this is now the third incarnation of the increase in the personal income tax allowance from $5,000 to $6,000 a month; $7,000 a month, now $7,500. You have to be very careful with this because when we were doing the increase from 6,000 a month to 7,000 a month, the information we got from the Board of Inland Revenue is that you are dealing with 300,000 persons, at least, within the taxpayer group, and the taxpayer group is just over 600,000. So, you are looking at half of the persons who are in the PAYE system and pay tax.

So, if you do the maths, let us say we had increased the personal allowance from 84 to 96, let us say for argument sake, we had decided this year we will increase it from $7,000 a month to $8,000 a month, so that everybody earning $8,000 or less would be exempt from personal income tax. When you multiply that by the $300,000—and it is actually more because the $300,000 is the cut off at $7,000. So, as you go up, more people are coming into the loop, but let us use the $300,000. You take that $300,000 and you are giving people an additional allowance of $12,000 a year, the loss of revenue is $900 million. So, as a
Government, we have to be very, very, careful. So that is why we settled on $7,500 which still incurs a loss of tax revenue of $450 million.

Now, the theory behind an increase in allowance, which is effectively a lowering of the effective tax rate, because as you raise the allowance, the effective tax rate, which is what—if you take the person’s total income and you see what proportion of their income is actually paid in tax, you get the effective tax rate. So that somebody earning, let us say, $9,000 a month in the old system, $2,000 would have been taxable at a rate of 25 per cent. So, you are paying $500 a month in tax and if you look at that in terms of your income of $9,000 a month, then you see your effective tax rate is just about 5 or 6 per cent. Okay? So, one has to be very, very careful with these things because it is huge sums of money you are talking about.

But the theory behind increasing the personal allowance and reducing the effective tax rate is that you are putting more disposable income into the hands of consumers, which you expect them to spend and therefore, the multiplier effect comes into play. So, you expect that you give up $450 million in revenue, but you expect that the effect on GDP could be as much as double that. But this is all theory. You know, you have to see how these things work out in practice. So, we decided to be a lil careful with this one and that is why we went from $7,000 to $7,500, but it is still significant. It is still putting $1,500 a year extra into the pockets of taxpayers at the lowest level of the tax band. So that is one of the first things we did.

The second one, I think the jury is out on whether this is a benefit or not, but we think it is and most people think it is. We increased the threshold for VAT registration from $500,000 to $600,000, because many small and medium
enterprises—well, small enterprises would be at $600,000 one because they cannot—they do not have the discipline to keep the accounts to file the VAT returns, to do everything that is required to be in complete compliance with the Value Added Tax Act. And so, in any event, how much VAT you are talking about? If somebody’s annual income, a business, is $500,000, then the most you are getting out of that person at 12½ per cent—you could do the maths yourself—is just over $60,000. So, the administration to collect that $60,000 may not be worth it, so that is why you have a threshold below which a person is not required to register for tax and we felt, based on representations from the small business sector, that we could increase this to 600,000 now. So, it means that a small business that is earning $50,000 a month or less no longer has to go through the very difficult procedures to be totally compliant in the payment of VAT. With respect to—that is fiscal measure two.

Fiscal measure three, we felt it was important with the whole move for combating climate change, the whole move towards a green economy, renewable energy, et cetera, we thought it was important that for approved agricultural holdings, we can give a tax rebate of up to $25,000. Now, a tax rebate of 25 means that you are spending $100,000 if you are a small business, and maybe $80,000 if you are a big business, because as you get over $1 million, you get into the 30 per range. So, we felt to encourage farmers and other agricultural producers, agro-processers and so on to use solar energy for lighting, maybe for energy for their machinery and so on, wind energy, we would give a rebate of $25,000 and that is for approved agricultural holdings.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Madam President, the fourth fiscal measure, this has been a
programme that has been very, very successful and that is the subsidy for Housing and Village Improvement. This is a programme that began some years ago in the Moruga area, where it was found that there were people living in very, very underprivileged circumstances, in very unsatisfactory housing, board houses. And the whole point behind this Housing and Village Improvement Programme is to take these rudimentary board houses and convert them into concrete houses. So, what you do is that you form a partnership with a property owner, they put in their sweat equity, they would put in some labour, they are required to do some finishing—you know, complete the finishing of the house, but you construct a basic two-bedroom concrete house for them. You do not paint it, you do not do all the electrical, you do not tile it and so on, but you take them from a board house to a concrete structure. And we started off this programme years ago, where the expenditure by the Government—and this is not a loan or anything like that, it is a grant—was just over $100,000 and as time went by, the amount—as construction cost went up and so on—went up to $145,000 and in this budget, we propose to increase that to $165,000 for construction on flat lands, and $170,000 for construction on undulating lands and $175,000 for construction on hilly lands. So, the Government will spend $165,000 to construct a basic two-bedroom concrete structure for somebody who is living in, you know, very unsatisfactory conditions and they will finish the building themselves. I have seen this project and it really is fantastic, and that is why it won an award by the Inter-American Development Bank as the best housing programme in the world at that particular time.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: We continue to incentivize manufacturers. Madam President, I do not know what this murmuring is about. I should not take on the murmuring?
**Madam President:** Yes.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Okay, I will not. So, we continue to incentivize manufacturers and again, we have an incentive to encourage manufactures to invest in new machinery, new production lines, new equipment because that is the only way you can grow your business. You can expand it or you can invest in more modern equipment and machinery. So we are introducing a tax credit for manufactures of up to $50,000 for investment in new machinery and production lines and so on, again, using the same ratio, if you get a tax credit of $50,000, it means that you would have put out $200,000 or more in terms of expenditure. And, I must say, the manufacturing sector is doing very, very well in Trinidad and Tobago; very, very well.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** When I looked at the data coming out from the EximBank, in particular, which is assisting manufacturers with foreign exchange to buy their raw material, inputs and so on, and I am seeing the performance of the manufacturing sector over the last 12 months or so, you are looking at a 17 to 20 per cent increase in exports, Madam President. I want to compliment the manufacturing sector.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** They are really very quietly expanding production and growing their businesses. And these kinds of incentives are right in the place where we want to help them. Similarly, we have been convinced or we have agreed that because Trinidad and Tobago is a mature oil and gas province, and we are in competition with other new and emerging oil and gas provinces like Guyana, Suriname and so on, it is not so easy to produce oil and gas in Trinidad and Tobago anymore. It was easy 30, 40 year ago, you just drill a well and the thing comes out.
Now you have to use all sorts of secondary recovery techniques like steam, steam infusion and so on to get our oil out. So that we are no longer a competitive oil and gas province in terms of our taxation regime. I will give an example.

The royalty on oil in Guyana is 2 per cent. Now, that is extremely low. The world average is somewhere in the vicinity of 10 to 12, but because they are a new province and they wanted to encourage the oil majors to come there, they agreed on a 2 per cent royalty. Our royalty is 12\(\frac{1}{2}\) per cent, which is the world average. So that in order to continue to encourage investment—

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you. I am almost finished—we made a number of adjustments to the petroleum tax regime, an investment tax credit for energy companies to stimulate exploration. We have adjusted the supplemental petroleum tax, which has been a bugbear of the industry for some while. They have been clamouring for reductions in the supplemental petroleum tax. We are giving incentives for exploration and production in the deepwater.

Another very important feature of the budget which was lost in the noise is the fact that we intend to introduce a tax amnesty from November 14, 2022 to February 17th. And the purpose of this, Madam Speaker—Madam President, sorry, is that many businesses have come to us and told us that they were damaged by COVID that they simply could not pay their taxes. They had to make decisions as to how they spend their savings and so on, their income dried up and they did not pay their taxes. And even though we gave previous amnesties, they were not able to put their house in order to take advantage of the amnesties. In fact, the last amnesty, I had a number of people coming to me, asking me to extend it, because they simply had not been able to do their audited accounts and so on. So, we do
believe that this measure will help a lot of small businesses, in particular, and that it will generate significant funding for the Treasury.

And the last thing I would like to touch on, Madam President, is the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses, the change we have made to GATE, Now, GATE is a programme of the PNM. I was the Minister of Tertiary Education in 2004, and I had the privilege to introduce the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses. At that time, the enrolment in tertiary education was somewhere around 11 per cent, and we were able to take it from 2004 at 11 per cent up to over 60 per cent in 2010, which was our target. And after that, because of reduced revenue, we had to cut back, but this year—and how many minutes do I have, Madam President? Two?

Madam President: Yes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. Sorry, Madam President. This year, we recognized there is a particular cohort of students who really got left out, and that was the group who, for one reason or another, are unable to do a full bachelor’s degree at first instance—maybe they are working, maybe they come from an underprivileged background. In fact, many of them do. So, they go the associate’s degree route or the diploma route, and then go on to do the bachelor’s degree and they got caught by the one tuition GATE rule. So, this year, we decided to change that. It is going to cost us $50 million. We are expected to help over 4,000 students who have done a diploma or an associate’s degree and cannot get GATE to go on to do engineering or medicine and so on, but we felt this was very, very important to allocate $50 million to help those 4,000 underprivileged students.

I beg to move, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]
11.00 a.m.

Madam President: I just want to remind Senators that in accordance with Standing Order 43(1), each Senator can speak for a maximum of 40 minutes. Sen. Mark.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Madam President: Hon. Senators, as Sen. Mark readies himself for his contribution, on behalf of all of you and on my own behalf, I want to welcome the San Fernando East Secondary School students here present in our gallery.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Madam President: May I also point out that they are members of the debate and speech club, and I am hoping that when they leave this gallery today, they will be saying that they want to be able to debate like this particular Senator or that particular Senator. That is such a good impression everyone will be making on them today. Sen. Mark.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me to contribute to this critical debate. Indeed, budget 2023 may be the most critical and historic budget in our nation’s history. Madam President, before getting into my contribution, allow me to quote Proverbs 24:16. It states:

“The godly may trip seven times, but they will get up again.

But one disaster is enough to overthrow the wicked.”

Madam President, budget 2023 is a wicked budget. It is brutal and callous in its assault on the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized citizens in our country. It is a disaster for the majority of the people and, Madam President, the wicked will
pay a price for this disaster—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—on the voiceless and defenceless people of our nation.

Madam President, the fiscal measures in the budget have only transitioned the continuing increase in the rise of the cost of living. Madam President, after carefully reviewing this budget, I overwhelmingly agree with the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Siparia, who has branded budget 2023 as a great betrayal of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Why does the PNM Government brutalize the poor? Poor people have feelings too, Madam President. This Government has failed the citizens of this nation for the past seven years. They have failed to create well-paying and productive jobs for the thousands of families they have put on the breadline when they destroyed Petrotrin, the Point Lisas Industrial Estate and the Mittal steel plant. They have failed to help the many micro, small and medium-sized businesses across our nation which account for the vast majority, Madam President, of the private sector employment, going bust and slipping into ruin. They have failed to keep the citizens of our nation safe from violent criminals who stalk our land, with murders on track to surpass all records this year.

They have failed to support our farmers and agricultural industry, thus increasing food insecurity and hunger and starvation. Madam President, they have failed to improve the basic metrics by which nations measure their quality of life, such as equitable access to quality health care and education. Madam President, after seven years people have become used to the failed budget statement of this Minister of Finance. But the Leader of the Opposition rightfully pointed out, this
budget is more than a failure. It is a budget that actively works against the interest of the people of our beloved country. And when I say, “the people”, Madam President, I mean all of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word “betrayal” means:

“the act of not being loyal when”—others—“… believe you are loyal”.

A democratic government of a nation must be loyal to the citizens they serve. What does being loyal mean? It means working to serve the best interest of the people of a nation. It means putting people first in the policy decisions a government makes. It means planning ahead so that future generations can have access to new opportunities. It means helping the people of the country become the best version of themselves by pursuing their hopes, dreams and aspirations.

Madam President, I will outline and identify how this PNM Government’s budget statement for 2023 betrays every single sector of our society. I will show how it betrays the poor and the vulnerable, as well as the middle-class; how it betrays our once proud energy sector, transforming it into a scrap heap; how it betrays the hard-working labour force of this country, the nurses, the protective services, the teachers and many others; how it betrays the students and young professionals in our nation, many of whom now seek to leave these shores for greener pastures; how this budget especially betrays our young children who are the future of our nation and who this Government has completely abandoned.

Madam President, we on this side of the House on the Opposition Benches, we want our nation to succeed. Our motto is not, “Things could be worse.” No, Madam President, as the alternative Government our motto is, “Things can be better and things will be better.”

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]
Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, the utterances coming from Members of the Government in recent times can best be likened to the arrogance that pervaded the last days of the Bourbon monarchy in France, when the cries of the people for bread evoked the now infamous response, “Let them eat cake.” Citizens are watching in shock but not in surprise at the pronouncements of the privileged Ministers as the shadow of the new Balisier House falls across the country, much like a modern-day tower of Babylon. It is a backdrop of PNM hubris, contempt, disrespect and arrogance dipped in almond milk.

The citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are living under the strain of an economic decline and inflation that has been overseen by this Minister of Finance for the last seven years. In that period, Madam President, the economy has contracted by 19.4 per cent. Under this Minister there has been no growth from 2015 to 2021, and no growth means less economic activity and less economic activity means less opportunity for the people. One cannot divorce the economic decline of our country from the crime situation and the runaway murder rate. The consequence is a brain drain. People are fleeing from the four horsemen of the socio-economic apocalypse. Madam President, the signs of the decline are all around, businesses are buckling, some have closed and there is growing unemployment; unemployment is but one side of the equation. According to the CSO, in the first quarter of 2022, the average number of persons with jobs for all sectors was 574,100 or 55.9 per cent of the labour force. In the fourth quarter of 2015, that figure was 621,600 or 60.4 per cent of the labour force. Madam President, our labour force participation rate is falling. It is the lowest in the Caribbean at this time. Where are these people living, who have dropped out of the labour force? What is their gender? What are their ages, Madam President?
Against this backdrop, the Government continues to misguide the country and misrepresent the true position of our economy.

The latest come from the Minister of Trade and Industry who declares that business is booming. Where? Where? Let us know. This follows on the heels of the Minister of Finance who prefers to use nominal GDP to describe the economy, when any A Level student of Economics would tell you, Madam President, that real GDP is the accepted measuring stick to gauge the economic health of nations. The reliance on nominal GDP helps this failed Minister create a deception that suits his political narrative. It reminds us of one of his budget performances where he crowed, “I can see clearly now the rain has gone.” This Minister who has dared the people of Trinidad and Tobago to riot as he raises fuel prices, not once, not twice, not three times in seven years, but six times, Madam President. And while all of the reasonable leaders of Caricom are seeking to reduce the economic hardship on their citizens, this Minister of Finance is turning up the heat on our population. Like his almond milk-drinking colleagues, he is completely out of touch with reality, disconnected completely from the people.

Madam President, then we have the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries who paints a glowing picture of the energy sector that is a shadow of itself in 2015, and then says, “The UNC created a mess.” When the UNC left office, Madam President, every plant in Point Lisas was operational.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Every LNG train was operational and the refinery was up and running and functioning.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** The Minister says, “The UNC left a debt at NGC of US $1.2
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)  
Bill, 2022  
Sen. Mark (cont’d)

billion”, which he says, Madam President, he settled, but the Minister cannot say who he paid, how much he paid, when it was paid or where evidence of said payment could be found in the NGC audited financials. It is Animal Farm, Trinidad and Tobago style. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries must also say whether the refinery is now dead, whether the country was not told the truth about the reason for its closure in 2018, Madam President. Madam President, for the last seven years PNM governance has been constructed on a bedrock of untruths, falsehoods. It is almost a kingdom of untruths and falsehoods, Madam President—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—unsurpassed in the annals of Trinidad and Tobago’s history.

Madam President, let us look at the macro fundamentals, the outrage we have seen from every sector of society. Since this Minister presented his budget it is proof that the people of the country are hurting, and we must never forget, Madam President, that it is the people of this country who are the economy of this country, and when the economy is hurting, it means our people are hurting. Madam President, real GDP has fallen by $37.5 billion between when this Government took office and 2021, which is the last full year that we have data from the CSO. We note, Madam President, that the hon. Minister came to the Parliament and presented nominal GDP figures, but real GDP is the value of goods and services, corrected for price increases caused by inflation. Real GDP is the universal standard by which economists measure progress, not nominal GDP. This visionless Government is trying to gerrymander our GDP figures. Madam President, even the nominal GDP figures presented appear to be dubious.

The Minister of Finance claimed that in 2022 the nominal GDP will increase
to $190 billion, but he has provided no source of this projection. It appears as if he simply pulled it out of thin air, Madam President. Madam President, the *Review of the Economy 2022* paints a truly horrific picture of the reality of our economy. It shows that, in 2021, mining and quarrying sector declined by 5.2 per cent; trade and repairs declined by 4.7 per cent; accommodation and food supply declined by 5.9 per cent; information and communication declined by 0.5 per cent; professional and scientific services by 2.1 per cent. The first quarter data for 2022 shows contraction in almost the same sectors. Madam President, these startling numbers show an economy almost in free-fall under a Government which is itself in rapid decline.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Madam President, the silent catastrophe occurring in the country today has to do with unemployment. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic you could have seen the signs of unemployment rising, yet we have no reliable data on the number of persons who are jobless; and worse, there appears to be no urgency on the part of this Government to determine the extent of unemployment. Madam President, what we do know is that in 2020 contributions to the NIB declined with approximately 113,000 persons no longer contributing to the fund. It means almost 20 per cent of the labour force had disappeared in just five years. The official CSO official data shows 54,500 previously employed persons have disappeared from the labour force, Madam President. The people cannot find work because the PNM Government is simply not working.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Madam President, another indicator is inflation, the greatest threat to the citizens of our nation. It was not so long ago in 2020 that this Government
was boasting that it kept inflation under control. Now, today, there is nothing they can do to stop inflation. The magic powers they had in 2020 have apparently disappeared. Madam President, as we speak, according to the Review of the Economy, inflation at the end of July, 2022, headline “Inflation”, stood at some 5.9 per cent. Madam President, what it means, Madam President, is that inflation is on the rise. It means that the cost of food and other goods and services, Madam President, is also on the rise.

We are experiencing a cost of living crisis. Even in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Consumer Affairs Division revealed that the price of a basket of 118 basic food items increased by 9.7 per cent between February 2020, and February 2022. Madam President, they indicated that vegetable and soya oil increased by 42 per cent between February 2020, to February 2022; corned beef by 40 per cent; poultry by 20 per cent; infant formula by 26 per cent; milk by 20 per cent; red beans by 16 per cent; salted fish by 15 per cent; rice by 13 per cent; and granulated sugar by 11 per cent. This Government wants people to cook their food on coal pots, but at this rate the Government—Madam President, ordinary people cannot even afford to buy anything to cook, much less to cook on coal pot.

Madam President, these are not luxury food items, they are basic food items that families depend on. However, the Minister spoke today and nowhere did the Minister outline any plan or policy to deal with runaway food inflation and to come to grips with the skyrocketing cost of living. Madam President, the cost of living is wreaking havoc on the elderly, the poor, the working-class, the urban poor, rural communities, pensioners and minimum wages workers. Madam President, people cannot afford to eat or to have three square meals a day. Mothers are skipping meals because they just cannot afford, Madam President. Madam
President, think about a minimum wage worker who gets $2,800 a month, 50 per cent of that goes towards food. We are not talking about rent. We are not talking about transportation. We are not talking about school books for the children. How can citizens live on $2,800 a month and you are talking about thousands and tens of thousands of citizens, Madam President? This is not—the insensitivity; that is why, Madam President, today we call on the Minister of Finance to reverse, to remove and to get rid of that hike in fuel prices at the pump.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Get rid of it. Remove it, Madam President.

We call on the Government, Madam President, to recall this brutal and callous budget that is anti-people, anti-worker and anti-ordinary people. Madam President, if we look at the labour sector—Madam President, I joined the movement in 1983. I have been in this Parliament for almost three decades. I have witnessed many governments and many changes. Madam President, in my whole career, I have never seen a government treat workers of this country with as much disdain, contempt, disrespect and scorn as this current PNM Government. Madam President, this brutality and betrayal towards the labour sector is almost unsurpassed. Imagine the PNM Government failed to settle an entire decade’s worth of salary negotiations in the public sector. The public service, Madam President, is evidence. This very Government was singing the praises of those on the frontline in the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors, nurses, teachers and shop workers, but once again this Government’s words do not match their deeds or actions.

Madam President, for decades this Government has dragged its feet, or their feet, barely lifting a finger to try and work with the unions to improve the lives of
workers, citizens of our nation, but when it comes to repressing workers’ rights, the Government goes into overdrive. Madam President, everyone was shocked when the Minister of Finance in his winding up statement in another place, which came live on television, stated that:

“…four unions had negotiations with the Chief Personnel Officer…”—their negotiations were—“…sent to the special tribunal as discussions could go no further.”

Who determines that, Madam President? Who determines that? The CPO? The Minister of Finance? The trade unions? Well, the trade unions said, in an article published in the Newsday on October the 10th, headline, “Unions: Referrals of wage talks to tribunal”—is—“dictatorial”. They are saying in that article, Madam President, that they were never made aware by the CPO or the Minister of Finance that their matters were being sent to the special tribunal.

I read in the papers, only after three rounds of negotiations with the CPO; it was sent to the Minister of Finance, who under the law sent it, Madam President, to the special tribunal. Did these trade unions not deserve the courtesy, the decency, the respect, the basic human dignity of informing them that these negotiations were referred, Madam President? But like a king giving a proclamation, the workers of this country had to find this out whilst the Minister read the budget statement. What a fatal blow to the collective bargaining process in our country, Madam President.

Madam President, even the nurses—even the nurses who were promised a regularization of their status, instead of that taking place, they came with a 200million, or above, mamaguy to the workers. And whilst they are giving the workers $210 million, they took a matter that came out in favour of these very workers.
workers at the Industrial Court. They have appealed that very matter where workers would have had regularization of their status, rather than working for a one-month contract, on a three-month contract; no gratuity, no pensions, the Government has appealed that matter, Madam President, and it is now before the High Court of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, they are telling the workers to ride a bike to work, to eat less macaroni, to cook in a coal pot; these Ministers have fixed themselves for life, Madam President, but they are telling workers cook on a coal pot.

11.30 a.m.

Madam President, we have some policy measures we will announce for the trade union movement when the United National Congress assumes office. We will replace the PNM, and we will replace the PNM shortly.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, let me just look briefly again at this energy sector. Madam President, the energy sector is the heart of our economy, the once beating heart that this Government ripped out of the chest of our nation. Madam President, the catastrophic destruction of our energy sector will be the scar of our nation—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: —will be the scar our nation will forever bear. The transformation of our once proud oil belt into a scrap iron heap, Madam President, is the eternal legacy of this Government. For the first time in our history, whilst the world is experiencing a boom in oil and gas prices, we cannot benefit, and the reason why we cannot benefit is because the Government chose to shut down Petrotrin and its refinery.
Madam President, look what is happening to the energy sector. According to the CSO, refining fell by 12.1 per cent; natural gas exploration and extraction by 5.5 per cent; condensate extraction by 4.5 per cent; petroleum and natural gas distribution by 0.5 per cent, and for the first quarter of 2022, the energy sector has declined by 5.2 per cent. Madam President, the history is clear. From 2016 to 2022, the energy sector has been in continuous decline from 2016 to 2021.

But, Madam President, it is clear. We understand the importance of this matter of the energy sector. We understand the importance of renewables, we understand all of these things. We want to give the undertaking to Trinidad and Tobago that a United National Congress will address this energy sector. We will have the energy sector up and running once again, including the reopening of the Petrotrin refinery for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Madam President, I now turn to the vexing issue of procurement and institutional degradation. Madam President, the failure of this Government to fully implement and operationalize the procurement legislation is going into its eighth year. This represents a direct assault on the principles of good governance. This is manifested in the lack of accountability, transparency, value for money, integrity and the institutionalization of local content.

The Minister talks about a secondary roads company that they are about to form. That is jobs for the boys. We do not have an independent oversight mechanism or machinery to deal with the awarding of contracts in this country. Madam President, you know what has happened? This lack of procurement legislation has literally resulted in the reallocation and the redistribution of wealth and income in favour of a tiny minority. They are the chief beneficiaries of all
these contracts. Mr. Moonilal Lalchan has estimated that we lose $5.2 billion every year because of our failure to implement and operationalize the procurement law.

This is the eighth year we are going into. That is almost $40 billion that we may have lost to corruption, bribes and kickbacks. Yet still the Government cannot find $1.2 billion to support our citizens, so we could keep the price of gas down at the pump, but they are turning a blind eye to $40 billion being misappropriated over the last eight years. Madam President, that is unfair.

These awards of contracts are being allocated to a tiny minority. Not only is democracy and the rule of law being undermined, but we have, as I said, a redistribution of wealth. This is generating a lopsided economic model of development—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Yes, Madam President—and its inevitable social ills and challenges. These state contracts are going to companies that are now involved in the construction of the Tower of Babylon. Would you believe the Tower of Babylon that the country is talking about is almost seven to eight stories high, costing just over $100 million. We are told that that was as a result of raising what, Madam President? *[Laughter]* Raffles, $1 raffle. We want the FIU, we want the FIB, and we want the police to investigate this Balisier House, Madam President.

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

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, as you are winding down your contribution, your voice is getting louder and louder, so.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Madam President, I do not have to tell you. You look at the
papers today, every paper, and you would see what is happening. Democracy is under attack. The rule of law is under attack. The Government is using its power to undermine democracy, to undermine the rule of law, and we see it in all the columns today.

Look, Madam President, the time has come for this Government to pack up and go.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping] Go!

Sen. W. Mark: Pack up and go. They have failed the country and they have failed the people. Madam President, the people demand a review of this budget. The people demand the removal of this oppressive gas hike, and the people call on the Government to recall this oppressive budget.

Madam President, there are very many other troubling issues affecting us. THA Chief Secretary revealed a corruption scandal that took place under the PNM that is now the subject of a forensic enquiry. When we look we see all around us distress, unrest. We see inequality. We see injustice. Even the International Monetary Fund Chief warned policymakers to be more sympathetic to the vulnerable and to the weak, because if they are not those people are going to take to the streets. We are not predicting unrest. I am quoting a statement from the IMF Chief, that if we do not take stock of our situation, Trinidad and Tobago will be faced with massive social unrest. That is what will happen, Madam President.

I want to say also that we need to do an investigation. I have called on the Head of State, the head of Government, to tell this country if he is the owner of a five-storey apartment block in Tobago. It is a place called “Forest Hills”, formally Landate. It was built by the Warner Company. I call on the Prime Minister to tell this country if he has ownership or knowledge of a five-apartment, multi-family
residential complex on the hills, called “Forest Hills”, formerly known as Landate. We need clarification from the Prime Minister on this matter, Madam President, because we need to really investigate Warner and we need to investigate the Prime Minister on this matter. Once he is able to clear the air on it.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, I will ask you to withdraw that last statement.

Sen. W. Mark: Okay, I withdraw Madam President.

I have come here today to warn the people. Warn the people that they are facing political enslavement by this PNM Government. Their country, their democracy, the rule of law, their cherished human rights and freedom are under attack, under assault, and we need to stop this Government. The people must stand up. The people must defend their rights. The people must rise up in defence of democracy and in defence of the rule of law in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, in closing, let me remind you of a statement made by Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi said, and I quote:

“When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time”—

Madam President: No, Sen. Mark, your time is up.

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

Hon. Senators: [Continuous desk thumping]

Hon. Senator: Bring some dignity in this House.

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine.

Sen. Amrita Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Madam President, there is no debate that Trinidad and
Tobago has experienced significant challenges over the last seven years due to volatile energy prices. Public revenues declined from a high of $58 billion in 2013 to $36 billion in 2017. So in the space of three fiscal years, the country lost almost $22 billion in revenue, while the average annual total import bill ranged between $15 billion and $16 billion, and average annual recurrent expenditure ranged between $45 to $50 billion. Then the pandemic struck in 2020 and further exacerbated the situation.

Now, due to the poor state of revenues, the country simply did not have the fiscal space to sustain a high level of public spending. Therefore, there was no choice but to continue the pattern of running a fiscal deficit, as was started in 2010. The fact is that Trinidad and Tobago has been running a budget deficit since 2010, and with the volatilities in the energy sector from since 2015, the country’s vulnerabilities were exposed and harsh decisions had to be made. So we were caught in a position where we were basically living beyond our means. So there was no choice but to engage in a cutting expenditure between the years of 2015 to 2018 of around $9billion. There was no choice but to increase borrowing, implement policies to curb import demand, rationalize state enterprises.

So it is important to note, Madam President, that all this was able to be done or implemented because Trinidad and Tobago had extremely large—have, still have—but at that point in time had, extremely large buffers in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and reserves in the net official reserves to help the Trinidad and Tobago economy buffer itself from these stormy periods.

Now, the global energy market is currently in turmoil due to geopolitical tensions, sanctions on Russia, and while worrisome for commodity important countries, it is a blessing in disguise for Trinidad and Tobago. The improvements
in Government revenues and the narrowing of the fiscal deficit that we are projected to experience in 2023 is as a result of an upside scenario taking place. An upside scenario in the sense that the energy prices have rebound, that has turned around our situation.

So domestically the macroeconomic indicators and fiscal accounts are showing signs of improvement. We are projected to experience real economic growth between 2022 to 2024. The Minister of Finance is forecasting a downward trajectory to the debt to GDP ratio, and actually a positive debt stabilizing indicator is that we are actually going to record a primary surplus in this fiscal year. That is the end of fiscal 2022, and if projections turn out to be as the Minister of Finance has predicted, then we will continue to do so at the end of fiscal 2023.

The current account balance is expected to record a surplus, and inflation, although high compared to recent years, is still expected to remain well below the international levels that our international counterparts are experiencing. That is primarily due to our exchange rate remaining stable as it is able to anchor inflation in Trinidad and Tobago. However—however, we are not immune from rising inflation internationally. We still need to keep a watchful eye on it, because we continue to have a very high food import bill that ranges around $5.6 billion annually. But all these positive indicators—oh, and I forgot to mention, there is even some non-energy sectors in the economy experiencing real year-on-year growth.

Now, Madam President, does all these favourable indicators indicate that we are no longer in the deep waters? Could we now breathe a sigh of relief? I would say, not quite yet. Though we are experiencing recovery and projected to experience real growth within the next two years, including this year, the
economy’s capacity to withstand another negative shock is far less now than it was prior to the pandemic.

Now, when I read the budget statement, the Minister of Finance in his statement did acknowledge that there are downside risks that they are aware of, and even if downside risks prevail, we suffer a negative shock to energy prices, we will revert to a situation of a wider fiscal deficit, a debt to GDP trajectory that will take another U-turn, and there will be limited monetary policy flexibility, due to our exchange rate policy. So in some instances, say if inflation is to get out of control, the Central Bank may very well be put in a position where they have to raise interest rates, and this could be detrimental for the small, micro and medium enterprises, especially the non-energy sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, it is important to note with respect to the non-energy sector, despite the country recording a primary surplus, we are still recording a non-energy sector primary deficit at around 10 per cent of GDP. While there are positive signs of growth on several of the non-energy sectors, the balance of trade surplus, that is exports minus imports, that we are recording in the food and beverage sector, non-petrochemical manufacturing sector, is still negligible compared to total exports.

So, for example, I did a quick analysis with data from CSO. The non-alcoholic beverages sector, for example, even though they record a balance—that sector is recording a balance of trade surplus—it is only 3 per cent of our total balance of trade surplus. Glassware, for example, it is 1 per cent of our total balance of trade surplus. Preserved fruit, less than 1 per cent of our balance of trade surplus. So the non-energy sector revenues, while it is improving, it is still at risk of being very volatile, even more volatile than the energy sector, should
downside risks prevail.

So I would say, Madam President, that this windfall is largely temporary and could disappear if the world economy goes into a recession, or even a slowdown. Now why am I talking about these downside risks? Madam President, the World Economic Outlook by—the IMF just yesterday revised their World Economic Outlook figures downwards for 2023, because the three largest economies in the world, China, the US and the Euro area, are forecasted to go into recession—not recession, into great economic slowdown in 2023, and this brings me to the price of oil and gas.

Now, I heard what the Minister of Finance said with respect to the price of oil and gas. I understand what he is saying, but I would have preferred to err on the side of caution. Why I say err on the side of caution is—I mean, I too did my research. I looked at World Bank estimates. I looked at the IEA estimates, and even IMF World Economic Outlook updated their projections, and for next year, for 2023, the price of oil is forecasted to be around $85 a barrel.

You know, Madam President, while I was listening to the debate in the other place, in the House of Representatives, I heard the hon. Prime Minister in his contribution allude to the fact that the budget revenue is one based on the most optimistic outlook.

[Mr. Vice-President, in the Chair]

So I feel like we have forecasted, we have based this budget on a price of oil that is all the way up to the maximum price, that is where it could be. So I would leave that there, Madam President.

So the Minister of Finance did indicate that he would be continuing fiscal consolidation. Mr. Vice-President, my apologies. I agree, yes, medium-term fiscal
consolidation needs to continue to reduce public debt and rebuild buffers, while we create room for essential capital expenditure, which is, and I acknowledge the increase in the PSIP allocation of $6.2 billion, and improving the targeting of social programmes.

Now, while the debt to GDP ratio is declining on one end, debt servicing is increasing considerably, and this is as a result of the efforts over the past couple of years to soften the impact of the pandemic. When I looked at the draft estimates, I realized that the Minister of Finance engaged in a couple of short-term debts that are maturing this year and within the next five years. Actually, for this year, the debt service approximates to $15 billion, which is around 19 per cent of current revenue, 51 per cent of non-energy revenue, and for the next four years, the debt maturity profile shows that around above $10 billion per annum in debt servicing.

So while most of the elements of debt dynamics, which is inflation, growth, the exchange rate and primary balance, are treading towards a debt stabilizing path, we need to recognize and we need to keep a very watchful eye on the rate of growth of the stock of debt. It can easily gain momentum, and there is danger in debt momentum. So more debt means more vulnerability. So any downgrades to the growth projections on account of a global slowdown, spillover effects happening in Trinidad and Tobago can quickly alter the course.

It should be noted too, with real growth forecasted to be well below the weighted interest rates of domestic and international loans right now, that is between 5 and 7 per cent, we need to record, we actually need to work towards growing faster in order to allow debt to GDP to start a downward trajectory, because right now the primary surplus that we are recording only allows us to stabilize debt at this level.
So, Mr. Vice-President, my overall view on the budget and, well this Appropriation Bill and the allocations, is that there is not a lot on the expenditure side that commits to current expenditure to roll over into the future. Most of the grants are one-off in nature, and where they are not one-off in nature, the intention is to incentivize investment.

On the revenue side, there is a cut in subsidies and measures to increase tax revenue through the property tax and the Gambling and Gaming Commission, and there is the rationalization of state enterprises, to eliminate duplications and inefficiencies.

Mr. Vice-President, these are permanent features of a structural fiscal balance. It does not lend itself to additional fiscal sustainability risks, which is something very important. If grants were not one-off, and I saw a resurgence in the pattern of committing to further recurrent expenditure in an excessive way, then there would have been cause for great concern. So, perhaps, this is one of the lessons from previous windfalls that we have learnt. When you have a temporary or short windfall, you do not commit public finances beyond the time frame of the windfall, or else you will be committing to the cycle of pro-cyclical fiscal policy, and going down a path of continuing or increasing the chances of living beyond your means.

So, Mr. Vice-President, there is one issue that I want to flag, and I have been monitoring closely the tax incentives, tax breaks and so on, that the Minister of Finance has been offering since 2017, and more so since 2019, since I have been an hon. Senator—since I have been a Senator. I want to flag the issue of the potential narrowing of the tax base going forward. The Minister of Finance did allude to it in his contribution this morning. Now, the budget increases the

UNREVISED
personal income tax allowance, increases the VAT registration threshold. There is a manufacturing tax credit. In previous budgets, there was the zero-rating of multiple items, and there are multiple tax incentives. So while these will offer some assistance to cope with the higher cost of living and rising levels of vulnerability, I would keep a watchful eye on the size of the tax base.

12.00 noon

Mr. Vice-President, business tax incentives must have a timeline as well. Now, I know some of the business tax incentives do, but we need to be conscious of the fact that we are training these businesses in the non-energy sector to export. And not only to export but also to compete internationally. And the more protection that we offer to them for a longer period of time could hurt their ability to compete fairly internationally.

So, also I want to caution that, you know, we really do not want to have to position ourselves to have to dip into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and ramp up their already high debt-servicing bill should some negative circumstance elude us. Remember, Mr. Vice-President, there is also an offer on the table to increase public sector wages by 4 per cent. And if this is accepted, it is an additional $1 billion that will be added towards recurrent expenditure—$2 billion will be added to recurrent expenditure annually.

Now, to keep the economy where it is at, you need to be earning a tax revenue from the non-energy sector of around a minimum of $25 billion at current prices to maintain where we are today. And where we are today is not where we want to be. We want to be in a better off position. So I would really advise the Minister of Finance to keep a very watchful eye at the size of the tax base and the narrowing of the tax base.
So with respect to the increase in the personal income tax allowance, I would not have too much enthusiasm that this increase in the personal income tax allowance through the multiplier effect will boost economic activity. I do not think that it will be of a magnitude to stimulate that much additional economic activity that would point where businesses would want to expand, hire more persons, hire more persons who will add to the tax-contribution base. I mean, it is when you calculate it, it is an additional $150 per month that will mostly go towards increased prices in the grocery or at the pumps and this is to purchase an existing stock of goods that the consumer is already purchasing. So I would not be too enthusiastic about that.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, a big part of what is needed for the country going forward to carve out a path of sustainable development while fiscal consolidation and rationalization of state enterprise is important, from doing these front-loaded fiscal adjustment measures, front-loaded fiscal adjustment measures meaning fiscal adjustment, meaning fiscal consolidation, cutting expenditure, rationalization of state enterprises that is done gradually over a period of time rather than large, huge chunks of cuts at one point in time that can have severe economic impacts on the population. So from doing these fiscal adjustment measures the intention is, and I hope, is to shift the expenditure composition towards essential capital expenditure and improve the targeting of social programmes. And I saw in the allocations in this budget there was conscious effort to target social programmes and increase capital expenditure, something that in previous budgets we just did not have the fiscal room to do especially with capital expenditure.

Now, I acknowledge the increase in the Development Programme of $6.2 billion. When we look at the allocations in the Appropriation Bill we will see that
some $26 billion is allocated towards health, education, national security and social
grants and housing combined. Now, I have to say that I am concerned about the
targeting of the $5 billion towards social grants and will zero-in on the social grants
under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services here. And I was
listening to the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services in the
House of Representatives where she made several revelations on the duplications
and misallocations of social grant funds to those who do not belong to poor and
vulnerable households. And this worries me. This information was actually
published in an Auditor General report. I would not go into the details of the
report. And I thank the Minister of Social Development and Family Services for
being so transparent with the details and admitting that, you know, there are so
many misfortunes that are happening with the allocations of these social grants and
that work is being done to fix it. But when I look at the allocations I see under the
Ministry of Social Development and Family Services under the Development
Programme, I see that there is an allocation for an integrated social enterprise
management system. And approximately $10 million is inclusive of the Actual
spend in 2021. Approximately $10 million is allocated to be spent towards this.
And I want to ask, how far are we with this project?—because this project would
actually help the Minister to target these grants more efficiently and effectively and
allow these grants to be targeted to the persons who actually deserve them. So
moving on.

What also worries me, Mr. Vice-President, and the Minister of Finance
when he was speaking about the personal income tax allowance today said that
some 300,000 persons who earn below $7,500 a month would benefit from the
increase in the personal income tax allowance. Now, that is almost half of the
labour force. The labour force is just over 600,000 persons. We are talking 300,000 persons here. So this begs the question—the current state of inequality in Trinidad and Tobago, if the majority of our labour force is earning $7,500 and below. Now, that says something about the distribution of income across the population when you compare it to the GDP per capita. Because according to the Central Statistical Office who in their recent publication of GDP data indicated that GDP per capital is 120,000—$128,083 per annum. When you calculate that monthly it works up to $17,826. So what that says, Mr. Vice-President, is on average each person, each working person in Trinidad and Tobago who is willing, able and employed is working on average for $17,826 and we all know that is far from reality because it seems as if the majority of the working population is earning below the per capital income average.

Now, let me go into the allocation under the Ministry of Planning and Development which deals with the Survey of Living Conditions. And the allocation towards the Survey of Living Conditions and the Household Budgetary Survey. Now, Mr. Vice-President, these are two social surveys that assess living standards, income, income earning potential of individuals and expenditure patterns of households in Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, the last SLC that was published, and when I say SLC I mean the Survey of Living Conditions, the last SLC that was published was in 2005. Now, there was one done in 2014 but it was never published due to some technical difficulties. Now, in 2005 the poverty head count ratio, that is the percentage of the population living in poverty, was 16.9 per cent. In 2014 the unpublished report which I received a copy of indicated that the poverty head count ratio was 24 per cent. And to date, we do not have an updated Survey of Living Conditions.
Now, if Madam President was here, Mr. Vice-President, she would very well remember that on multiple occasions since I have been sworn in as a Senator, I have always been asking questions on notice, raising matters of the adjournment, raising this in speeches on what is the delay with the Survey of Living Conditions and Household Budgetary Surveys. And when the pandemic had hit, Mr. Vice-President, I raised the issue again.

So, I have to ask, why did we have to wait until this point where there is widespread anecdotal evidence of poverty, exorbitant cost of living to put this at the forefront of the agenda because it made its way in the budget statement this year. It cannot be that we now see the importance of getting the social statistics and understanding the living conditions of households in Trinidad and Tobago. It cannot be. Because according the National Development Strategy of the Government, goal one in the Social Sector Investment Programme given to us in our budget package is tied to the number of that indicator. Goal one is tied to the number of persons—reducing the number of persons living in poverty. That is goal one, Mr. Vice-President. And this is something that is very important especially when you have undergone unprecedented cuts in expenditure and reduction in revenue.

When you have—and when you have implemented widespread social grants to support the vulnerable during the COVID-19 period as well, I beg to question, how do you know whether the persons who received social grants and salary relief grants have found their way back to meaningful employment? Do the systems in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the systems in the Ministry of Finance track these individuals to see whether they have gone back to meaningful employment, able to earn a decent living, because that is what is
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)  
Bill, 2022  
Sen. Deonarine (cont’d)

important, you know. It is not about giving the grant, you know, Mr. Vice-President. Giving the grant at one point, yes, it helps. But it is helping the individual, the vulnerable individual or the poor individual to get back on their feet to become meaningful members of society contributing to the labour force and to the GDP of the country. So I continue.

COVID-19 cannot be the reason for the delay in the SLC and the household budget survey because Suriname, they did a Survey of Living Conditions in the middle of the pandemic. So it cannot be COVID-19 as the reason. And if resources were an issue, when we were re-prioritizing expenditure through those variations of appropriations, we could have easily re-prioritized expenditure from one area into the Central Statistical Office to have it done. Because it costs roughly 1.5 to $2 million. The last I checked it is around US $350,000 to conduct a Survey of Living Conditions.

Because there are—when we were—this social statistics is so important, Mr. Vice-President, to help in policy design and policy-making and help targeting the social agenda in Trinidad and Tobago to get us back to a point where we can operate at full capacity, a point where the labour force participation is increasing, where unemployment could decrease. So expenditure could have been re-prioritized. I could identify quickly, Mr. Vice-President, one, two, a couple of areas that expenditure could have been re-prioritized from.

Let us take, for example, the feasibility studies that were done on the Toco ferry port. I think annually it cost—$7 million was the allocation. That could have been—part of that could have been re-prioritized into the Central Statistical Office. The walkover in the San Fernando waterfront that was recently opened, $16 million. Part of that could have been re-prioritized to ensure that our social
statistics were on board. So the Government could have sought—and if re-prioritizing was difficult, there was also the option to reach out to multilateral lending agencies and have them assist through technical corporations and whatnot.

Hon. Members: [CrossTalk]

Sen. A. Deonarine: So, Mr. Vice-President, this brings me to the NSITT the National Statistics Institute of Trinidad and Tobago. And I do not think, forgive me if I interpreted it wrong when I read the budget statement—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Deonarine—

Sen. A. Deonarine: Yes.

Mr. Vice-President: Although I would like to give you your six minutes notification of wrapping up, I would just like to ask all Members, kindly allow the Senator to contribute in a decorum of the Senate in silence and respectfully.

Sen. A. Deonarine: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. This brings me to the National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago, and from my reading of the budget statement, it came across to me that the reason why these social statistics were not up to date was because we did not have a national statistical institute and I just want to indicate that that is far from the truth in the sense that Survey of Living Conditions does not need a special majority to be done; neither does the Household Budgetary Survey. Household Budgetary Surveys are usually done every five years. That is when they usually should be done, every five years. And Survey of Living Conditions is usually done every four years. So no special majority is requested, is required there.

What the special majority is requested, is required for, is to ensure the National Statistical Institute becomes operational, is to allow the Central Statistical Office to get permission from the Board of Inland Revenue for personal income tax...
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023) Bill, 2022
Sen. Deonarine (cont’d)

information details that would allow the statistics office to calculate GDP on the expenditure method. Because right now the country’s GDP data is calculated using a producer method which is a completely different method that is usually a little bit more of an underestimation if you have proper consumption expenditure data to calculate the GDP because the producer GDP is based on surveys that are given to firms which do not always have a high response rate.

And before I move on to my last point, Mr. Vice-President, I want to stick a pin here and commend the work that the Central Statistical Office has been doing. There has been a vast improvement in the way in which data is published, made available and I want to commend the work, the staff of the Central Statistical Office and also the—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. A. Deonarine:—the United Nations, I believe, is assisting them and I think, I do not know, there is another multilateral lending agency that is lending support to the Central Statistical Office and I have seen vast improvement and I want to commend that.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. A. Deonarine: Now, as I move on to my last point, Mr. Vice-President, it takes me to the fuel subsidy reform. And one of the first things that you learn in economics, Mr. Vice-President, is that energy subsidies are regressive in nature. The rich benefit more than poor. Furthermore, it represents a large fiscal burden on the country. Now, the Minister of Finance has repeated that over and over again reminding us. But despite consensus among many professionals who study in this area and who understand how subsidies work and the regressivity of subsidies, efforts to reform fuel subsidy almost inevitably run into tremendous
resistance. Why?

The removal of fuel subsidy has a direct effect and an indirect effect. The direct effect is in the short run where the prices increase at the pump and you have an increase in headline inflation. The indirect effect is when that increase in the fuel prices seeps into core inflation and you have a general increase in prices beyond transportation. But the indirect effect is something that is difficult to measure, Mr. Vice-President. And it is difficult to measure and when it is quantified, what is realized is that households is—that households that are poorer tend to be more disproportionately affected from the removal of the fuel subsidy but this depends on the size and the persistence. This depends on the size and the persistence of the fuel subsidy reform. Right? And how the design of the fuel subsidy reform has been, it has been gradual over a period of time and it has been gradual and it has been concentrated in certain areas. So, for example, LPG remains untouched. So these are good elements of the design.

But what is also important, Mr. Vice-President, is that to understand why many oppose changes in the fuel subsidy, it is important to analyse the impact on households relative to their income or consumption levels. The bottom line, Mr. Vice-President, is $100 in subsidies may seem small or negligible to a household making tens of thousands of dollars. But to a poorer household it represents a big chunk of their budget. Mr. Vice-President, I realize my time has been concluded and I thank you very much.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Laurel Lezama-Lee Singh.

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

**Sen. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing:** Thank you so very kindly, Mr. Vice-President,
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023) 2022.10.12
Bill, 2022
Sen. Deonarine (cont’d)

for affording me this opportunity to join this very important debate on fiscal 2022.
Mr. Vice-President, permit me first to, please, to register my disappointment with
the first responder from the Opposition Bench. That contribution was tragic. It
was regurgitated. It was filled with dog whistling, gaslighting.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: It was fictitious. It was a regular fabled flight of fantasy, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: And it sounded like the rant of a disconnected, disgruntled, disingenuous, bitter, non-patriot.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: I really expected higher standards from somebody who has been in public life since around the time of my birth, Mr. Vice-President, and I want to apologize to the students of the San Fernando East Secondary School for having to bear witness—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:—to having to bear witness to that piece of madness of what passed as debate in this Chamber. Mr. Vice-President, there was a rant about things that the UNC would like the population to believe. Things that we all know are simply not true. Like Sen. Mark, I could say, I could even perhaps prove that the UNC reduced the civil rights of citizens. You remember the limited state of emergency. I could say the UNC is bad for the economy.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: We could talk about all the moneys that have been lost in these different contractual arrangements that we are still struggling to tie up. I

UNREVISED
could say the UNC almost totally diminished our regional status and our relationships with our islands.

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

**Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:** If we remember hurricane Tomas, Mr. Vice-President, and the then Prime Minister’s statement that Trinidad and Tobago is not an ATM. One of the first acts our Prime Minister had to do was to go to Jamaica to try and reconcile with Prime Minister Holness.

[Technical Difficulties]

**Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:** There is something wrong.

**Mr. Vice-President:** There seems to be some technical difficulties.

[Technical Difficulties]

[**MADAM PRESIDENT in the Chair**]

**Madam President:** This sitting is suspended for 10 minutes.

12.26 p.m.: Sitting suspended.

12.36 p.m.: Sitting resumed.

**Madam President:** Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing, please continue.

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

**Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:** Thank you very kindly, Madam President. You know, I was in the middle of reminding the nation of all the things I could say, through you, Madam President; of all the things I could say. But there are two more points I have to drive home before I start to respond to what was put in. You know, I could say I heard Sen. Mark talked about the NGC. But I could say that the NGC nearly completely collapsed under the People’s Partnership and the UNC government, because there were wild allegations of financial mismanagement.

UNREVISED
During that tenure, $1 million would have been spent on carnival fete tickets, that is ludicrous. And, Madam President, there was the happiness campaign. How could we ever forget the happiness campaign, and they raised the corporate communications budget from 67 million to $200 million to run a campaign, a happiness campaign with the face of the then Prime Minister all over the country.

I could also say that VAT administration from 2010 to 2015 almost single-handedly dismantled our national security apparatus and left us exposed and vulnerable from every angle when they cancelled those OPVs, Madam President. And so, this is why it is important for us to have this national discussion on budget 2023, which Sen. Mark rightly states, is one of the most critical and historic debates in the nation’s history. I want to remind Sen. Mark, he quoted from Proverbs that:

“...one disaster is enough to overthrow the wicked.”

Well, we saw the disaster of 2010 and 2015 completely overthrown on September the 7th, so we thank God for that, the Bible was absolutely right, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: I also heard Sen. Mark talk about the horsemen of the apocalypse, and wonder if he heard that statement from his former senatorial colleague, Mr. Maharaj, who called the current UNC bench “the four horsemen of the apocalypse”, and I am minded to believe that. Madam President, he talked about a kingdom of falsehoods and untruth, but what happened under the queendom? What happened in 2010 to 2015? We are really reeling but thankfully, we have a very sober Prime Minister, a very straight-thinking Minister of Finance, and we have put our shoulders to the wheel and we are persevering in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: Madam President, I listened to the first speaker for the Opposition Bench and I am certain that there is no connection with the reality of prevailing circumstances around the globe. We are still reeling in the effects of COVID, and please permit me again to thank all of those people from the protective services, the health services, the teachers, everybody who rallied together, and the Government especially, led by our Prime Minister and Minister of Health, who rallied together to bring us safely to this point.

You know, Madam President, this whole COVID thing changed the way we do business. Look at me speaking to you from behind a sheltered booth. This did not obtain prior to COVID. Luckily we are here now, we are able to sit a little closer together, but life has significantly changed. Forty-eight hours before the Minister of Finance presented the budget, the energy market completely changed in that little 48. We are seeing global data changing rapidly, every single day it is something different, and we have to be able to move and adjust ourselves according. So, there has been a dramatic change in the world and how things are operating. We cannot discount what is happening with Russia and Ukraine. We cannot discount what was happening in other countries around the world. We cannot discount the challenges all of the major economies are having. But we here in Trinidad, we are trying our very best, under this Government, to keep our country afloat.

Madam President, I want the people of Trinidad and Tobago—I want to talk to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and I want them to understand that this Government has a strategic plan which we call Vision 2030. We were working towards that goal, but all of those disruptions would have happened over the past

UNREVISED
few years, and so these uncontrollable factors and these new variables would have emerged, and so there have been variations and adjustments which simply had to be made. But the budget is built on the work of the past decisions to ensure that there were social safety nets, decisions to invest in our people, and decisions to stimulate other sectors and diversify our economy. And so, Madam President, I am going to use this opportunity to talk about the Government’s investment in the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:** We must all appreciate that the young people of Trinidad and Tobago are in fact the greatest resources. It is our greatest asset, that demographic, those young people. They carry our future, they carry our hopes, our dreams, and they are the ones with the ability to continue building and fulfilling our potential.

Sen. Mark talked about the budget actively working against the people. So, I am going to show Sen. Mark that this Government puts our people first and I am going to show him that this is how the budget is working to serve the best interest of the people; how this Government is planning ahead; how this Government is giving the future generations access to opportunities; how this Government is helping people to pursue, particularly young people, to pursue their hopes and dreams. In 2020, our Prime Minister introduced the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, the mandate of which was to focus and put a sharp eye on the young people of Trinidad and Tobago and to present them with opportunities for development and growth, supported by the Government, those who want to follow academia, those what want to do vocational, those who have special needs and otherwise, but there is something for every young person in this
So, permit me, Madam President, just to go through some of the things that have been mentioned in the budget which have started, some have started in the past, and some will continue, and some will be introduced in this coming fiscal year. So, under the Ministry of Youth Development and National Services there is the Youth Development and Apprenticeship Centres, and these centres, highly subscribed this programme, will facilitate a two-year residential programme to young males between the ages of 15 to 19 years old, with a focus on the principles of self-efficacy, employability and good citizenship. Madam President, it is a serious thing. We talked about the girls performing better than the boys in SEA exams, we talked about some boys being lost to gang activity, and this is merely one intervention that the Government has put in place. It is one of several. And there are centres located at Persto Praesto and Chatham, which affords the trainees the opportunity for cognitive, social and culture development as well as tech-voc skills training.

The Ministry of Youth Development and National Service operates six state youth facilities: St. James, Laventille, Basilon Street, Malick Youth, California Youth Facility and Los Bajos. These youth facilities are non-residential community-based and they are youth friendly spaces, where the youth between the ages of 10 to 35 years can participate in a range of youth development programmes and activities. There is the Caricom Youth Ambassador Programme. It is a mechanism for deepening levels of youth participation and partnership in regional integration, and in broad social and economic development processes. The Caricom Youth Ambassadors, which is not exclusive to Trinidad, but all Caricom countries participate in this, it is a region network of young Caribbean nationals.
mandated by the Caricom Heads of Government to advocate for and educate young people about regional priorities, such as HIV/AIDS and the Caricom Single Market and Economy.

The Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme. Madam President, this was introduced just a few months ago and I believe the initial intake was 200 people, and there were over 2,000 applications, if I am not mistaken, highly subscribed, and so the Ministry has taken the decision to do several more cycles so that applicants, many more applicants can have the opportunity. And what is the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme? Young nationals, male and female, between the ages of 18 and 35 have the opportunity to enrol in a programme to become 21st Century agri-entrepreneurs. These applicants who are successful will be required to enrol in a full-time programme through the University of Trinidad and Tobago. And on completion, successful participants will be awarded an accredited Certificate in Agriculture and Agro-Processing.

The Youth Agricultural Shade House Project launched just a few weeks ago. This is a project designed to equip nationals between the ages of 16 to 35 with the skills and resources to develop agriculture cooperatives focused on the production of high value short-term crops. This shows that not only the Government is serious about investing in young people, but we are serious about food security as well. We have just gone through the ravages of COVID, and we have seen many people starting their home gardens and many people eating what they grow. And this is something that we must encourage, because not only will you save on your own expenditure, it will bring down the country’s food import bill and it certainly will give the young people nutritious and healthy food, because we are not talking about what our consumption is. We really need to be a little more serious as a
people in Trinidad and Tobago about what we consume; about the foods that we eat; eating purer, natural, more healthy options.

The other programme, AMPLIFY, is a seven-week programme intended to train young people between the ages of 16 and 35 years to become skilled music producers and arrangers. The overall objective is to facilitate the continuity and longevity of our country’s indigenous musical art form. We are very proud; we are very, very proud as Trinbagonians to be the founders of the steel pan, to be the founders of calypso and soca. We are parang, we are chutney soca. There are so many different genres that are indigenous to Trinidad and Tobago, and we must seek to both preserve it and build upon it, so this AMPLIFY programme is for young people to do that.

ALLSET, to foster and promote employability through tech-voc training as a means of development. It focuses on training in heavy machinery operations. I remember a number of people reaching out asking if they could be involved in it, but it was up to—the cap age was 35 years. But a number of women, people my age, over the age of 35, wanted to learn how to handle a tractor because we need to diversify our skills so that we can always fall back on something. And so, I endorse this ALLSET programme.

The Apex training programme to address—and this is something very, very serious, Madam President—the mismatch between training and employment opportunities so that young people can become job creators instead of just being job seekers. So, it is to enhance innovation, creativity and spark entrepreneurship and business development, giving the young people the necessary business acumen.

The Generation Unlimited is a global multisector partnership to transform
education so that young people will have the skills that future employers desire of them.

Civilian Conservation Corps: we have known Civilian Conservation Corps to be in existence, but it continues to be promoted under the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, established in ’93 to positively alter the behaviours of the unemployed and socially marginable youth between the ages of 18 and 25. These are not forgotten populations. This Government is determined to ensure that every person, regardless of your circumstance, has an opportunity to grow, develop and thrive. And so, the Civilian Conservation Corps, it is accredited by the Ministry of Education and it runs for a six-month programme.

We have MiLAT and MYPART, the Youth Development Empowerment Webinar Series to alleviate the debilitating psychological and social fallout of COVID-19. COVID-19 really did us a number. It really, really did everybody a number. There were challenges of being confined in your homes by yourself. The lack of social interaction. Young people not getting to go outside and play; play with their friends. I am a mother, I have my three children. My three children luckily had each other. But their friends, they were constantly on their iPads FaceTiming or Zoom calling their friends, who would have been only children, and that was a challenge for people who are only children. The loneliness, the mental challenges of having to deal with that isolation for such an extended period, these were very trying times. And so, the Youth Development Empowerment Webinar Series was put in place to innovate digital opportunities of learning and it is geared towards assisting young people to better cope with the trauma that was precipitated by the COVID-19 virus.

Madam President, it is very clear, the Government is serious about young
people, it is serious about social development, it is serious about gender issues and protection of our women and children. These initiatives are not only designed to protect these vulnerable groups which are susceptible during these challenging times, but also to create vast opportunities to allow them to thrive and succeed. This Government cares about our future, grounding strong policy on the development of our young people. We have discussed the many initiatives available to the young people out there, Madam President, through you, I am speaking to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago, and so there is no excuse or there is no reason rather for the UNC to be coming out here and saying that this Government does not care about people, when we have clearly demonstrated over the years that we continue to invest in the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Members:**  *[Desk thumping]*

**Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:** We know that that criticism is not based on fact. That criticism is not based on fact. It is based on whatever is convenient for their narrative and they continue to try to peddle an alternative narrative in Trinidad and Tobago, I suppose for the alternative country that they are living in.

Let us talk a little bit about what happened under gender and child development in budget 2023. So, the issue of gender and child development strikes at the heart of who we are as a society and the level of importance we place on the quality of opportunities based on gender and our ability to raise and develop happy and healthy children who become productive members of our society. However, it is during times of great risks and challenges that girls, single mothers, children, and those most vulnerable need protecting and empowerment the most. And this Government has always placed great importance on female empowerment and so, I am going to speak about some of the initiatives that have happened under
the Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs.

The Trinidad and Tobago Spotlight Initiative: this initiative was aimed at reducing family violence and ensuring integrated quality and accessible services, and robust prevention approaches.

Rehabilitative centres for male perpetrators of domestic violence: this centre will provide a rehabilitative space for these perpetrators, and the residents will receive counselling and they will benefit from targeted interventions to treat with anger management and other triggers of violence.

The retraining of women who are survivors of domestic violence: domestic violence is something that is very serious, it can be debilitating to the victims and to the children and to all those concerned. But in this instance, this programme is to retrain those women who have survived instances of domestic violence. And it aims to build sustainability in the social safety net system for these victims through training and education, with an underlying thrust towards graduation of beneficiaries to independent income earners.

The Ministry of Child and Gender Affairs also has given one-off grants, the provision of grant funding to groups and other organizations, so that it is a whole-of-country approach. So, these NGOs come on board to help with administering some of the solutions or some of the support mechanisms for women who have been challenged. The barbershop initiative is extremely popular. It is a programme implemented to increase awareness of gender inequality and negative stereotype by creating a space for men and boys to discuss behaviours, attitudes and gender relations. Now, when we talk gender, very often people assume we are talking about women, but that is not the case. Gender speaks to either male issues or female issues, and we need to change, we need to wrap our minds around the

UNREvised
notion that men need support as well. We see men lashing out. We see young boys lashing out and getting involved in gang activities, and it is because they need a space, a safe space to be properly mentored or moulded so that they can really make a positive impact in Trinidad and Tobago.

The UN Women Foundation Programme, it is a group-based education programme geared at consciousness of raising multiple ways in which notions of gender shapes sociocultural realities in our region. Then the Ministry has also taken to the reconstruction of the former government quarters to establish a shelter for female survivors of domestic violence. And this project will add to already existing spaces which are shelters or safe homes. And then there is the gender-based violence mini course designed to cultivate improved public awareness and knowledge on the issue of gender-based violence. Sometimes, you know, not intentionally, definitely not intentionally, Madam President, but sometimes we are, as a people, we can be so insensitive. So, someone is a victim of domestic violence or GBV, some form of gender-based violence, and we easily just say—we easily just dismiss their situation or we easily just say, “Well, just pick up yourself and walk.” But sometimes we have to think about all the circumstances, all the factors that affect this person’s decision. So that is what this course is designed to do, to improve public awareness and knowledge on GBV.

And so, in the Child Affairs Division of this Ministry as well, there is the National Child Poverty Reduction Strategy, and this is to address the issue of child poverty in Trinidad and Tobago, including the intergenerational cycle of deprivation, and this is critical to advancing the strategies development—critical to advancing the strategy of development undertaking a national child poverty analysis.
The National Child Safeguarding Strategy—Madam President, it is important that I go through these programmes so the people of Trinidad and Tobago are aware, this is what you money is being spent on, all with a view to improving your circumstances or giving you a space to grow or thrive. The National Child Safeguarding Strategy, it aims to mainstream child protection as a key component of the rights of children aligned to the principles of preventing gender-based violence.

There are a number of online courses as well: Child Abuse Awareness Quick Course, Child Protection Animated Quick Quiz, courses that will be developed in 2023, basic behaviour management for parents and caregivers of children with disabilities. This is not a forgotten population, children with disabilities. There will be a course in child abuse awareness, core behaviour management for caregivers within community residences. Then there will be a review of Caregivers Training Programme which will provide participants of the programme with the tools and skills necessary for employment within community residents. We have talked about the National Children’s Registry and electronic database that will foster an integrated, proactive and collaborative approach to addressing child development issues.

Financial assistance to community residences with payment per child: so, the payment per child system provides financial assistance to all eligible community residences that provide care and protection to children. A migrant home for girls, a confidential place of safety for migrant girls, due to be opened in the calendar year—this year it is due to be opened. The Child Rights Ambassadors Animation Programme. I note that that is already in swing. I know the mother of one of the children who was selected to be a child rights ambassador.
The U-Report, an online platform which allows young persons to speak about issues that affect them. Child Abuse Awareness Quick Course, it was developed following the increase in child abuse reports during COVID-19. It is a 24/7 free 30-minute video which educates participants on identifying and responding to child abuse.

So, Madam President, there are so many initiatives that have been undertaken by this Government over the past several years and which will continue or which will be introduced in the coming years. And so, to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, to the young people, to the single mothers, to those who are victims of domestic violence, this is what the Government is putting in place for you. And so, I want to endorse all of these programmes.

Madam President, today is Wednesday the 12th of October. Five years ago, on Friday the 13th of October, the Government granted a one-off public holiday for the indigenous peoples, recognition of the Indigenous or First Peoples of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, there are several things that I am, that I am very proud of. I am Trinidadian, I am very, very proud to be Trinidadian. I am Arimian. I love Arima. My navel string is buried there and it will never leave. I love the PNM because I believe it is the correct vehicle for good governance in Trinidad and Tobago, and I am very proud of being a PNM.

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

**Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:** I am proud of being a mother of three wonderful girls—

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

**Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:**—but I am incredibly proud to say that I am of First Peoples lineage which—
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: Yes, and I am a member of the Santa Rosa First Peoples Community. And this morning, Madam President, before the sitting started, and during the sitting, the Santa Rosa First Peoples held a ceremony just on the northern side of the Red House, outside of the House Chamber. And the Chief of the First Peoples, Ricardo Bharath Hernandez and our Queen, Queen Nona Lopez Aquan, and several members of Santa Rosa First Peoples Community, along with a few visiting delegations from the indigenous communities around the region, were outside in the traditional smoke ceremony, one, honouring the ancestors and two, recalling the find of the indigenous bones from the excavation exercise or the renovation exercise in 2013. And as we know in October of 2019, these bones were buried at the exact site which has now been covered up.

So, this morning as the First Peoples celebrate what we call Heritage Week in Trinidad and Tobago, that ceremony was taking place. Yesterday was the river ceremony and we will have other ceremonies continuing during this week. And, Madam President, I say all of that to say that the Government, this PNM Dr. Keith Rowley-led administration is very serious about the advancement and pre-eminence of the First Peoples of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: This is not a joke. This is not something to take lightly. I was highly offended and I remain highly offended last year when the Leader of the Opposition borrowed a carnival costume and put it on to represent the First Peoples, and I found that highly offensive to the First Peoples of Trinidad and Tobago. But this is not a costume party, Madam President, this is serious business we are talking about.
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: The First Peoples were the first people of this country, and this Government is serious about the pre-eminence of first people. We are all aware that the Government has granted 25 acres off of the Blanchisseuse Road in Arima and so, Madam President, work continues on this site. It was announced that water and electricity will be put on that site in the coming year.

So, last year the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, which is the line Ministry for the First Peoples was intended to undertake a feasibility study for the traditional village and living museum, which is part of the grand plan of the First Peoples village for the Santa Rosa First Peoples Community. The Ministry completed the terms of reference for the study in consultation with the Ministry of Planning and Development. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, that study was halted, but the study will now take place. And so, the Government in the PSIP, the three-year PSIP for ’23, ’24, ’25 devoted energy and resources toward the development of the First Peoples. And this project, which falls again under the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, is a medium-term three-year project. It is anticipated that the feasibility study will be completed and development works will commence. And so, the Government has allocated $11.77 million over that three-year period, and the planned works, I am going to outline it, they are as follows: in fiscal 2023, there will be the conduct of the feasibility study; the construction of two benabs—a benab is a traditional Amerindian native hut or shelter; and the installation of totem poles.
There will also be the continued construction of the retaining wall, road works and drainage.

1.05 p.m.

Next fiscal, fiscal 2024 the construction of a cassava factory. Cassava has so many uses for the First Peoples and can be so beneficial. So next fiscal we anticipate that there will be the construction of a cassava factory. There is also anticipation that within fiscal 2024 there will be the completion of the Amerindian Village and the living quarters. And I want to invite, Madam President, you, Members of this Chamber and the national community to visit that Santa Rosa First Peoples site and see the work as it continues. We have been having several ceremonies there over the years and we anticipate in fiscal 2025 the continuation of works on that village which is meant to be a medicinal centre, traditional centre, and honouring of what our traditions are in the First Peoples community. And I want to thank the Government for investing in the First Peoples of Trinidad and Tobago and continuing to support the First Peoples on whose shoulders we really, really stand in this country.

And so, Madam President, this budget presents hope. I want the people of Trinidad and Tobago to know that there is hope coming out of this budget. I want the people of Trinidad and Tobago to know or rather to be confident so we will emerge out of these very, very, trying times. This budget shows us clearly that we have a very promising future in Trinidad and Tobago. We are all in this together, Madam President. We will shoulder this together. The Government continues to do the most with the least. The Government continues to be very, very prudent in its allocation of resources. The Government understands what the priorities needed to be, given prevailing global circumstances that we must consider,
regardless of who wants to discount it and say that Trinidad and Tobago obviously lives in its own little bubble. We are not. We are interconnected in this world and anything that happens in any other country will have some sort of effect on us.

And so, Madam President, as I close, I just want us to remember that in this global COVID era there are so many distortions to what we know as the traditional normal. You know the global food supply has changed, our shipping mechanisms have changed, costs have changed, but one thing that remains constant is the love that this Government has for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And as I close, Madam President, I commend this budget and I tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago we are in this with you and together we will emerge a successful nation and people. Thank you Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Madam President: Sen. Dr. Ibrahim.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Dr. Muhammad Yunus Ibrahim: Madam President, many thanks for recognizing me early in this, what is hoping to be a very lively debate as it pertains to the finances and the financial runnings of our twin-island Republic, to make some comments on a Bill in front of us in this honourable House labeled:

An Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending 30th day of September, 2023.

I must say it is a pleasure being back in the booth, it is a very refreshing position to be in, albeit, all Senators normally for the purpose of the finance debate of the budget everyone does normally come up to the booth to make their contribution. It gives me great pleasure not just to highlight the positives and the realities of this budget presentation as it is what it is, titled, which is: Tenacity and Stability in the
face of global challenges. Tenacity, as it applies to our Government, to the never giving up fight to do what is best with what comes our way for the betterment of each and every one of our citizens of this great nation, regardless of the macroeconomic climate that we may face in today’s world and regardless of the social fallouts that have been allowed to fester themselves when it comes to opposing forces, not necessarily from the Government, but more so from the citizenry.

We say it is challenging not just because of the economic output and the economic reality, we say it is challenging because a lot of doubt, internationally, has been placed upon the shoulders of the leaders by many persons who would have been exposed to so many different conspiracy theorists during what had peaked in a time of pandemic. Leadership in any country at this moment faces its most vertical challenges and it is not to get over the Opposition or to the other party. It really and truly echoes to the citizenry of every nation whose skepticism and levels of doubt compounded by more and more as governments around the world did their very best to preserve life, limb and a standard of living and in so being hit with a pandemic were not able to focus on everyday matters which people took for granted.

But before I get into this Bill, Madam President, allow me to, based upon what I just said, engage the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, those who are listening, those who are viewing on all of our platforms and to understand the following message. We cannot know where we are going if we do not know where we have come from. And let me ask of you, oh great citizen, how many of you follow your government? And I am not saying blind faith and blind following, I am speaking about following your government as it applies to the decisions that
they make that is in your best interest as opposed to following your government via headlines, via social media spirits, which we are all victims of on a day-by-day basis, whereby you will be able to filter out what the false news is, where we will be able to understand what the true message is.

So whether it be on the press, a social media feed, the nightly news, state-owned Trinidad and Tobago Television, find your Minister, find your MP, no matter what side of the political divide you are on, and follow them and be informed so that you may be able to equip yourself with the best tools of how to run your family and you community. Because when we take into consideration a year and two months ago to now we have four simple occurrences as it applies to finance. We had the budget last year, which was followed by a mid-term review, which was followed by a spotlight on the economy and then this budget, but still people are alarmed when certain revelations and strategies are revealed to the national public. But if it is we follow what is being said, if it is we take the time to educate ourselves and look at it on a holistic perspective rather than a warped perspective and delve deep we would recognize that, yes, the budget is an annual event but it is a rollout plan to formulate the rollout of strategy for governments of the day. And for what we have been through for the last seven years, in addition to the last two years, we must all as citizens count our lucky stars that this is the Government that has been serving us and making decisions on our behalf.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: And that is why I love the title of the budget which says—pointed towards tenacity, because it takes a lot in this day and age to do what is being done.

Now we have had a few speakers before. Sen. Deonarine pointed to a few
very pertinent topics which in my humble opinion when she was throwing caution
to the wind she was suggesting personal income tax is a risky business, fueling
debt and paying for debt later on is something that we have to look out for.
However that is what governance is. You cannot be scared to make a decision and
you must have the know-it-how and the testicular fortitude to make that decision in
the betterment of your community.

I would like to share in my readings after this budget debate, budget
contribution, one of the executive summaries by a world renowned company in
addition to all those business communities and business bodies who lauded the
performance of the Government. And this executive summary comes from Ernst
& Young. And it goes as follows and it is very small paragraph but it is very
loaded:

“Given our considerable advantages, we, the business community ought to
pivot our focus away from what our government is not doing; and instead
focus on what we ought to be doing. It remains profitable to continue to
meet the”—growing and—“relatively high consumption needs of our
population with imported goods and services. However, given the steady
erosion of our foreign currency reserves, and global supply chain
bottlenecks, we ought to act upon the critical desirability to allocate risk
capital and resources to value-added sectors, such as agro-processing,
business process outsourcing, ecotourism, logistics, manufacturing,
recycling and technology innovation. Similarly, while our domestic market
remains viable action ought to be taken to target markets beyond our shores.
It is readily discernable that the Government is not only speaking to this
requirement but is also implementing incentives to support this orientation.
Some recent examples, amongst many others, is the additional funding being provided to the Exim Bank, the institution of incentives for technology solutions and digitization, research...incentives, Jr. Stock Exchange enhancements, and the enactment of a globally compliant Special Economic Zones regime.”

Madam President, when I read this, to me, first and foremost, these guys get it. And what do they get? They get what the Government has been doing and they get what the Government has been saying. In this paragraph there lies a wonderful co-habiting relationship with the public sector and the private sector, where there is respect for what is being done for the movement forward of our economy, recognizing the tools that the Government has been giving, recognizing the incentives that the Government has been putting forward, embracing it and like a happy marriage, every citizen comes together for the betterment of all and we all move forward.

Now when I heard Sen. Mark’s rant I now understood why in another place on the first response of the budget I now understand why it is one of their Members, I mean, was only quoting Ernest and Young as opposed to Ernst & Young. Because Ernest is the guy who went to camp back in the 90s.

**Hon. Senators:** [Laughter]

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Ernest is the guy who went to jail in that slapstick movie. Because there is no way you can listen to the followings and the flowing of our Minister of Finance, the progress that we have been making, the accolades coming in from all business sectors and literally stand up in the House and make such claims of dying economies, losses in exports, still graveling with ideas of nominal versus real GDP on the business community accepts it, moves on and

**UNREVISED**
enhances it.

So we have a budget of 56.17, a revenue budget of 56 billion roughly, with an expenditure of 57 billion. And, Madam President, we have been lauded. This Government has been lauded by the business community in making every effort to reduce the fiscal deficit which at this year is projected with a 3 per cent growth of economy to be $1.5 billion, only. as opposed to the other years where the deficit would have been much higher based upon the allocation of funds and having to dip within our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund for the purpose of keeping the country going. So we hear a lot of these terms, we hear a lot of these big figures, the national community will be like, “wow they are spending lots of money” but they do not know the how. And the how is governed by our Public Sector Investment Programme. And the Public Sector Investment Programme, the PSIP, for the listening public is described as the strategic investment management tool utilized by the Government to transform its vision and policies into tangible programmes.

This year, the Government has allocated $6.16 billion for the implementation of this programme and its projects. You see in the last two years although we had projected a certain amount for the PSIP we had to redirect funds for survival, we had to redirect funds to the Ministry of Health for the betterment of our nation. However, where these funds are going it is upon what the public is asking for. Over the last few years we have heard the cries, infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure. We have heard health sector, we have heard agriculture programmes and when it is spelt out to us and how it is going to be spent the largest allocation of this $6.16 billion, 39 per cent will fund critical programmes and projects in the following sectors: roads and bridges, transportation, information technology and infrastructure, drainage and water
security. These are all topics that plague us as citizens and users of our nation’s roads and our infrastructure and this is where it is going. But it goes into areas where we have to understand that it is going to build the country, not just infrastructurally but create jobs in the construction sector, create jobs in the services sector. It is not just hand me outs, fixing something and nobody benefits. It is the economic turnaround where you inject the money where it counts the most, where you can get the widest appeal and the widest catchment to the user and our user is the citizens of this country. So look out for the development rollout.

Another portion would be spent, directed towards health and HIV/Aids, community development, tertiary education, housing and shelter, sport and recreational, primary education. Funds totaling $1.58 billion or 17 per cent will enhance the following areas: Administration, law enforcement, public safety and citizen security and capacity building institutional strengthening.

“Youth Development and Entrepreneurship, Economic Restructuring and Transformation and Agriculture remained the top three sectors under which the highest allocations were recorded for this thematic area”—according to the PSIP report.

The Government hopes to achieve macroeconomic sustainability over the medium term with an emphasis on the fiscal and debt consolidation with a social conscience while at the same time creating the fiscal space to address critical challenges.

“The overarching aim of the PSIP is to ensure that capital investment is strategically directed towards economic recovery and the acceleration of growth which will boost economic performance”—according to the PSIP document.
So do not just feel that money is being spent in recurrent, money is being spent in development and the trickle down economic of development is employment and jobs and the injection of funds where it is needed.

You know, Madam President, after every budget one of the number one feedbacks over the last few years from economists is that agriculture is the bastard child. One has to, as a citizen of this country, understand where agriculture has reached and where the vision of it is going for us to really appreciate the investment and the timely investment of what agriculture is going through at this point in time in our career and in our nation. Yes, we have programmes happening, but why are these programmes happening? And while people might say, “oh” agriculture gets a meager $1.8 billion but you want us to replace products and services for food and you are talking food production and food security, but you are putting one of your lowest figures towards it. It is simple. Not everything you throw money at would give you results. We are not into plant and equipment agricultural practices on behalf of the Government. We are about putting the incentives and the facilities in place to encourage agriculture within a wider scope.

Now, having attended the agriculture—the recently concluded agriculture forum one of the most important and one of the most amazing parts of that forum, Madam President, was actually the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding, the MOU, between the private sector and the governments of the region.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** When you think about it and how unified Caricom is on this having had the fall-out and the concern of the global constraints on nutrition for the citizenry and how we depend upon foreign tracks to come in for food, which is the main contributor of headline inflation and we see where we want to go
in a few years’ time and be able to be what this Government doing now, is nothing short of amazing strategic planning to pull this off.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** We are taking a group of youth to train from 18 to 35 years old and to retrain 36 to 50-year-olds in modules for programmes in collaboration with the Metal Industries Company Institute of Technology. The Homestead Programme is going to train them to understand short, medium and long-term crops and giving them the availability of land.

So we are setting the foundations here for when it is, what I would like to call, the Caricom silk road, where from Suriname to Guyana to Trinidad and Tobago, up the chain of the islands to the United States of America and back, we take our product, supply ourselves and then open it up to avenues in North America and beyond. And that is what the vision is. The vision is where we put things in place now to encourage and to enforce, put out the incentives now to ensure that we are ready with a properly planned programme, because we cannot grow everything for ourselves. We will be dependent upon our Caricom brothers and sisters to grow other crops to make it happen. In addition to which 100 participants will be selected to go for the youth agriculture Shade House Project which is administered by the University of the West Indies and the Agricultural Research Extension Units in the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, which is a one year programme which focuses on farming on small parcel of land with very high yield.

Three hundred million dollars for incentives; infrastructural programmes have also been increased before the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Renewable energy business rebates for agriculture, effective next year for the
implementation of renewable energy such as solar and wind energy for approval of agricultural holdings. And how does it feed in? The farmers fed into our “Feed the Nation Programme” when we need the food the most, when we had to have hampers, when people were without jobs, when people were without finance and our agricultural basin is what stood out, one of the things that stood out in times of the COVID. So how do we maintain that?

Ministry of Social Development and Family Services although they have the Food Card Programme it was recently announced through the Minister of Finance that we would be engaging upon a food box programme. And as much as in the other place it was said that the Food Card Programme was being diminished, that is not the case. It was the entire share of social interjection for food, for the needy and the indigent, for the sustainability of the nutrition of our nationals is why the food box programme has been sought.

This food box programme taps directly into our agricultural basin. It puts more control over purchasing and deals directly with the farmers without having to go with a card to a retail outlet where the general yield to the user of the programme will be less than the box programme. Because when you go with the card, you have to pay the mark-up of the institution, when you go with the food box programme and the vegetables and legumes and the produce is handed to you, it is from a direct purchase of the market. But that is one way in which the agricultural programmes with these incentives and links with the general goal of where we are trying to reach as a nation, feeding ourselves and also reducing our debt.

The Memorandum of Understanding was a major one and that spoke towards retail Caricom, the business heads saying that they are committed to
making the switch. When we get buy in from the businessmen and the conglomerates which we have done in the MOU this is when success is going to come and the demand and the supply of goods and services of food from our region is going to reach the shelves of supermarkets and all wholesalers and our products are going to skyrocket, we are going to be able to feed ourselves and we are going to be able to be self-sufficient when it comes to nutrient.

1.35 p.m.

People may scoff at the 75 per cent grant facility which is to a maximum of $340,000 for all producers as an incentive to incentivize them to create a viable source of reliability in usage when it comes to flour alternates. But with billions of grain not being able to meet the world market because of world wars or conflicts, the only solution is to find a replacement. So putting an incentive inside there and creating competition whereby we can start to mill our own ground provisions and replace grain—which is a healthier way any how because it is gluten-free living—we are already a few steps well.

Having attended the forum we would recognise, especially from the sister isle, that we have a lot of cassava flour on the market, we have a lot of yam, we have a lot of green alternates. However, we need to make this in a way that it can compete with the palate and the pocket, and by putting these incentives in place it is only for the envisaged ballooning of the agricultural sector. As we speak of incentives, let me not rein in much more than I am sure the Ministry of Trade and Industry is going to come and say soon, but as I tie it back to the very poignant comments of the EY, let us focus a little bit on the successes of the Ministry of Trade and Industry as it applies to the incentives, Madam President—as it applies to the incentives.
So I am linking the incentives of agriculture, I am linking the incentives of infrastructure, I am linking the incentives of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the business incentives of tax incentives to show that over the last few years the people were scoffing, “Oh, dey just giving a 5 per cent to so and so, yuh giving ah 6 per cent, who is going to take up that.” Some Members who were here up to last year saying, “As a businessman that is a small piece of the pie.” But let us see where these incentives have taken our country, and taken our export market, and to understand the drive with which we are moving forward into a global economy with Trinidad and Tobago products, food and beverage, and general manufacturing products from wood products have grown from a pre-COVID time to now, to 47.6 per cent growth.

And up to August 2022, over 2021, it was recorded to be a 23.4 per cent increase. These come from the removal the trade barriers putting offices in the global market, in the Dominican Republic, in Colombia, in Costa Rica, and taking the product of Trinidad and Tobago and exporting it throughout the rest of the region. Another area where people always say Governments of the day fall short upon, Madam President, as it applies to what is the Government doing for the environment. A very, very, very powerful body; very, very, very, very powerful body and something that should always be taken into consideration.

Was it last week we had about three weeks of rainfall in a few hours in the area of Arima and environs, and when the residents were interviewed one of the first things they came up with is, “Hey, it is the indiscriminate cutting down of the bushes, the deforestation occurring on the mountains that is causing this amount of water.” Now I do not know because that amount of rain in one day or five hours will cause a flood. And what we are dealing with on a worldwide basis, the
realities of the climate as evident to what recently happened up in Pakistan where 30 per cent to 40 per cent of a country who lived along the river ways were washed away and devastated, we have to understand, as the Government does, what in the environment can we do to stop the indiscriminate use or abuse of our environment.

Illegal quarrying, as the Minister of Finance stated, it not only cheats on state revenue, but it encourages criminal activity as it poses a clear and present danger to the environment. This Government, therefore, intends to impose heavy penalties for such environmentally dangerous and illicit activities. Legislative amendments will be introduced to allow the State not just to fine you, but to seize and forfeit your equipment found on a site of illegal quarries. So this is the level of seriousness when we take the raping of our country’s resources illegally that is done in a non-sustainable manner. When we point towards more environmental issues such as illegal state timbering, it is proposed that we will increase the fines from 20,000 to 100,000, and 10,000 to 100,000 as it applies to oil pollution.

Up to recently I read an article, it was this morning, the Minister of Works and Transport was lamenting over the fact that a floodgate was stolen. The fines for scrap iron and to mitigate the theft of scrap iron, in addition to bringing about legislation to control that industry is on the agenda, and the fines have been raised from 15,000 to 100,000. Now we would say, and we all would say, that you can raise the fine how much you want but what the enforcement? Let us talk about the possibility of the enforcement of law as it applies to spreading out the roles of not just the current police force, but the municipal police which forms a huge part of the powers being given to a Bill that was passed for local government reform. But as of this year, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has received an allocation of $2.7 billion, $327 million more than the previous year,
and this is how it has been spread.

There has been 154 per cent increase for the Port of Spain Corporation; a 148 per cent increase for the San Fernando; a 242 per cent increase for Arima; a 133 per cent for Point Fortin; 74 per cent for Chaguanas—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Thank you, Madam President. Got a little carried away, but it is just so much good to speak about in this budget it does not allow a 40-minute contribution—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—plus I do not get the opportunity to speak much anymore. So I would have asked you for a “Vice-Senator” five-minute bligh but I know that does not exist. But we have to understand—what we have to understand is the vision of the local government reform. The vision of the local government reform which has already been pushed forward as it applies to the appropriation of the proceeds of the lawful much anticipated property tax, can we imagine the delivery of the Government when it is more funds are available?

Every regional corporation, every single regional corporation there is one common trend, we do not get enough money, we have programmes, we would like to do more. This year 327 million more. Think about what is going to happen next year—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—when the money in hand, they are in charge of collecting and they are in charge of spending. Think about the levels of road repair, bridge repair, facilities, road signage, drainage, box drain, homes, social outreaches, and more so the funding of the municipal police. The municipal police
will be a much needed addition to the eyes and ears for anti-crime in our country as it applies to praedial larceny, as it applies to a thief in the night, and it applies to ensuring that law and order it is maintained throughout all.

So I look forward to this. I would like to comment, Madam President, just on two more items hopefully if time allows me, and to let the general population understand something about Trinidad and Tobago. In fact, I will brush past a few things very well and I will summate. Every morning I wake up, I thank God for being alive as you should do. That is not anything special, but it is something that is special to me because in my book there is a saying or there is a verse that goes as follows and I will not give it to you in Arabic because I do not believe the *Hansard* people will be able to write it, but I will give it to you in English.

> Which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?

Absolutely none. That is the answer. From sight to hearing, to your environment to everything that surround you.

When I take a look at the budget and I ask myself, and I take a look at the subsidies, the total subsidies— I am not talking about money spent per capita, but I am talking about the subsidies. Even when held at a billion dollar cap for fuel, when we look at 5.4 billion social grants; $2 billion for water; 60 million for electricity; 100 million for the air bridge; 200 for inter-island airfare; 700 million for electricity; 220 million for transport—that is international—GATE, 400 million; free health care, 6 billion; and the current cap it comes up to a tidy sum, $16 billion in total subsidy and there is more.

On a per capita basis that works out per citizen as an annual spend on every citizen in this country so that we can able to live and prosper to the tune of $10 million and more; and more so for an average life expectancy of 65 years, $804
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)

Bill, 2022

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim (cont’d)

million spent so that we can enjoy free education, free health care, and a good life for all. And I thank God every day for the tenets that has been maintained since the first PNM Government in this country to now.

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

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Madam President, thank you very much.

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

**Madam President:** Sen. Seepersad.

**Hon. Senators:** [Crosstalk]

**Madam President:** Sen. Seepersad.

**Sen. Charrise Seepersad:** Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to—

**Madam President:** Members. Members please. Sen. Seepersad.

**Sen. C. Seepersad:** Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2023) Bill, 2022. Over the past few weeks I have listened, seen, and read many observations on the 2023 fiscal measures. I keep reminding myself that an annual budget is an attempt to gauge revenue inflows and make provisions for meeting recurrent and fixed expenditures. Even with the windfall in revenues, the Minister of Finance is hard-pressed to balance the budget and projects a deficit of $1.51 billion. All of this, Madam President, is taking place in a global environment of uncertainty, if not chaos. Among these events are wars and threats of wars, together with inflationary pressures on most economies.

I am assuming that the COVID pandemic is contained and does not pose a significant health and economic threat at this time. We are all part of this country and every one of us has been impacted by the hardships over the past two years

**UNREVISED**
and ongoing into the future. To make light of serious business as it is the trait of the typical Trinidad and Tobago citizen, cannot and must not form part of this conversation. The gravity of the financial and social situation in which we find ourselves requires strong, inclusive, and enlightened leadership, and input from each one of us. Blaming and shaming will not solve anything in the current situation.

Trinidad and Tobago is struggling to maintain economic stability in a volatile and uncertain environment of unstable oil and gas prices, widespread disruption in the global supply chain, higher inflation, and instability in the financial markets. The country is also contending with many systemic issues including foreign exchange shortages, food security, spiralling crime which threatens economic and social stability, the rate of recovery, and the standard of living enjoyed by citizens. Even countries with fiscal resources and strong currencies must be judicious as the United Kingdom has come to realize. What differentiates countries is how they adapt and respond to internal and external shocks, and most importantly chart a realistic course forward.

Madam President, it is abundantly clear that many, if not all our services require repair and reengineering. For instance, utilities including water and sewerage, telecommunications, electricity, the transport network and health, to name a few, require serious attention. Social support systems and services also require rethinking and rebuilding. Education is another example. Given the limited available resources tough decisions are needed in allocating these resources to areas where citizens are more seriously affected. The results of these decisions will cause pain. While it may be impossible to mitigate the consequences, we must respond with empathy to those who are bearing the brunt of the fallout.
Citizens are drowning financially and are unable to keep up with the rising cost of living and daily struggle to cope with inefficient and malfunctioning infrastructure and services. A truly scientific poll of citizens living conditions may reveal the true depths of suffering and allow more efficient targeting of social needs. Madam President, the cost of such a survey is approximately US $350,000. This is not exorbitant for the results to be gained. From a macro viewpoint the international outlook is bleak, and there are more risks to the downside according to the IMF. Yesterday, the IMF downgraded its world outlook for the world economy for 2023 to 2.7 per cent. The reasons for the downgrade include Russia war against Ukraine, inflationary pressures, increase interest rates, and the lingering consequences of the global pandemic. While the war in Ukraine is not a good thing, it is one of the causes of significant financial benefits to Trinidad and Tobago. It is also the root cause of a Eurozone recession that has detrimental consequences for the entire world.

The measures announced by the Minister of Finance in the 2022/2023 budget presentation which are intended to directly benefit citizens include an increase in the personal income tax allowance from $84,000 to $90,000, an annual tax savings of $1,500, a one-time transport grant of $1,000 to all social grant recipients. However, other proposed measures and initiatives could reduce citizens’ disposable income. These include the reduction of the fuel subsidy, implementation of the property tax on residential properties, reductions in the air bridge and ferry service subsidies. It is now clear that more citizens must lower their expectations and standard of living. Further, the increase in fuel prices also has the potential to limit or nullify the overall benefits from the energy transition projects identified by the Minister of Finance in the 2022/2023 budget.
Crime. Crime continues to threaten social and economic development and impacts all citizens. While the Ministry of the National Security received an allocation of $4.684 billion in the 2022/2023 budget, there is an urgent need for crime to be addressed for both the social and economic fronts. Economic stability demands that this issue be aggressively and comprehensively tackled.

Trinidad and Tobago’s energy transition. Madam President, I am heartened that we have finally recognized that climate change demands serious attention and focus. The erratic global weather patterns associated with climate change including the devastating flooding in Pakistan, hurricanes Fiona and Ian, as well as localized flooding, underscore the urgency for effective action to mitigate these effects and provide timely relief assistance to affected communities and industries. While we cannot abandon the oil and gas sector in the short to medium-term, I suggest that more of the energy surplus be channelled into developing the non-energy sectors.

We are aware of the finite nature of hydrocarbons and we must be prepared and ready to transition into renewables. This is critical to Trinidad and Tobago’s economic survival. Major energy companies such as BP and Exxon are pivoting their businesses to becoming integrated energy companies committed to net zero by 2050, including emissions associated with the use of hydrocarbon. BP and Shell have committed two grid scale renewable energy projects in Trinidad and Tobago. In the upstream sector DeNovo Energy and Trinity Exploration have introduced low carbon technologies into their facilities.

With the present elevated prices for gas, the Minister of Finance is projecting increased economic development. The proposed measures with respect
appropriation (financial year 2023) 2022.10.12

Bill, 2022
Sen. Seepersad (cont’d)

to:

1. Renewable energy includes the waiver of VAT on new equipment for manufacturing companies utilizing alternative energy technologies; renewable energy options such as gasifiers to use biomass and harnessing renewable energy through wind, solar and water.

2. Increase in the investment tax credit for energy companies from 25 per cent to 30 per cent to further stimulate exploration and development related investments in the energy sector.

3. Changes to the supplemental petroleum tax.

These are all expected to boost gas production and foster several significant upstream projects.

The Government is to be commended on its investment in several projects to support its energy transition strategy. This includes the feed-in tariff policy, a renewable energy policy in keeping with its carbon emissions commitment and the target of 30 per cent renewable energy by 2030, and the low carbon hydrogen industry is being developed with green or blue hydrogen which is a carbon neutral alternative and can use as feedstock for petrochemical production. Madam President, these projects are in keeping with international trends and a move in the right direction. However, to maximize the impact and encourage corporate citizens and individuals to participate in a non-energy sector, comprehensive incentives, structural reforms, and infrastructure must be developed and made accessible.

Madam President, we urgently need a national strategic plan to ensure we maximize all possible opportunities and move the country forward in a structured way. This positions Trinidad and Tobago to be well placed in the energy transition for the foreseeable future, and this plan cannot be treated as so many others by

unrevised
being abandoned and left to gather dust on a shelf. The views and inputs of technocrats and a wide cross-section of the society will augment the quality and transparency of such an endeavour.

Subsidies. Scarce resources are costly. Sooner or later these costs must be repaid. The longer you take to recognize and deal with these costs, the more difficult and expensive it is to address. The world is now waking up to the reality that after decades of greenhouse gas emissions because of industrial activity and deforestation, the resulting global climate change will take billions of dollars to mitigate. This is assuming this is not too late or too little.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we have numerous examples of subsidies which resulted in wasted financial and other resources, ISCOTT, sugar industry, world gas to liquids project, Beetham Wastewater, Caroni, and the fuel subsidies. The consequences of the fuel subsidy include: the cost to the country of billions of dollars benefits the rich than the poor, and promotes excessive consumption of fuel. Madam President, an effective public transport system, safety of all citizens, and traffic management are the responsibility of the Government. These must also be addressed and not just the removal of the fuel subsidy.

Education. Budget allocation, $5.504 billion. Locking children out of school during the COVID pandemic has prevented many of them from learning how to read. According to the World Bank, before the COVID pandemic, 57 per cent of 10-year-old children in low to middle income countries could not read a simple story. The figure is now estimated to be 70 per cent. The situation in Trinidad and Tobago is no different. Nine thousand students scored 50 per cent or less in the recent SEA exams. Further, the purpose of school is not only about learning. It facilitates learning to coexist in groups, social interaction, self-control,
and self-esteem.

The escalated level of violence in schools suggests that there are other areas which need to be addressed, and have deteriorated more with the COVID lockdown. Against this background, Madam President, the school system needs to be more relevant to the education needs of 21st Century Trinidad and Tobago. We need to radically reform the education system where it is every child’s right to attend secondary school and all secondary schools are of a high standard and provide quality education; where every child is literate, and skilled and can find a place to grow and earn a decent livelihood. There will always be exceptions, but life in the underworld must never be a first choice.

Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses, GATE. Currently, funding under the GATE Programme is provided for no more than one programme up to the undergraduate level, therefore students currently cannot access GATE twice. However, the Government proposes to relax these restrictions and provide tuition assistance for those students who have already accessed GATE at the diploma, associated degree, or lower technical and vocational education and training level, to pursue bachelor level degree programmes consistent with the country’s development needs. This plan is commendable. Education at the tertiary level can positively impact the intelligence core of the available human resource pool. My concern, however, is the lack of development of technical and applicable skills which can accelerate economic activities and opportunities. Presently sufficient opportunities for graduates are scarce to non-existent. The consequence is that the best, brightest, and most ambitious leave Trinidad and Tobago to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Special needs children. Madam President, make education of special needs
children a priority. Every time I make a contribution on the budget I raise this. We are doing nothing really to help special needs children. The education needs of special needs children have been largely ignored or treated in a haphazard manner. Many of these children have little or no access to formal education. Internationally recognized figures are that between 15 to 20 per cent of any population will have a reading delay or other literacy challenges.

2.05 p.m.

This extrapolates to 150,000 to 200,000 people in Trinidad and Tobago or between six to seven students in each classroom and about 50 to 70 students in a school of 350 students who need reading support using special methods for teaching literacy, not just extra lessons. Madam President, since 1990, the Dyslexia Association has been training teachers in specific methods for teaching dyslexic children. There are about 800 teachers trained in the public and private schools who received this training. The teachers are spread all over Trinidad and Tobago. But this is not enough, there is much more that must be done.

Agriculture. Budget allocation $745 million. Managing the country’s food supply in the face of COVID-19 and the global energy crisis is critical. Successive governments have attempted to jump start the thrust in local food sufficiency with minimal results. Available data shows food imports between 2011 and 2021 were $61.06 billion. Imports increased by 26.7 per cent from $4.72 billion in 2011 to $5.98 billion in 2021. Contribution to GDP is below 0.5 per cent since 2012. Employment in the agricultural sector is approximately 4 per cent of the population. Food inflation was 10.3 per cent in July 2022 because of increased commodity prices and shipping costs, transportation delays and adverse weather conditions.
Agriculture can provide significant benefits including the creation of industries and jobs, saving billions of dollars on food imports by feeding citizens with home-grown produce, making a substantial contribution to national income and foreign exchange savings. If we are to substantially reduce the bleeding of foreign exchange and the country’s reliance on food imports, then sustained and concerted efforts by this sector are mandatory.

Madam President, agriculture must embrace modern methods of technology-based farming to provide the nation with an adequate supply of food products. The renewable energy and business rebate for agriculture proposed in the Budget 2022/2023 of up to $25,000 for the implementation of renewable energy such as solar and wind energy for approved agricultural holdings is a first step. This proposal recognizes the importance of blending renewable energy with agricultural production. However, we need a consistent thrust and further incentives to promote agricultural production for food supply sufficiency.

Competitiveness and the ease of doing business. Reforms must continue to be implemented to significantly improve Trinidad and Tobago’s competitiveness which includes the ease of doing business that would allow the private sector to invest. This would lead to economic growth and job creation so that there would be a reasonable level of local business activity, import substitution and exports. In the World Bank Ease of Doing Business 2020 rankings, Trinidad and Tobago ranks 158 out of 190 countries for registering properties, 174 out of 190 countries for enforcing contracts, and 166 out of 190 countries for the payment of taxes. These indicators support the experience of public offices, frustration and the high cost of doing business. While many processes can now be done online, it is only up to a point. In some cases, aspects of the process must still be completed in
person. The Global Enterprise Registration Network gives Trinidad and Tobago’s business registration website a three out of 10 for its single electronic window and a 4.5 out of 10 for providing information on how to register a business. Madam President, clearly, there is room for significant improvement.

Some recommendations:

1. An integrated digital infrastructure is critical to enable cashless transactions for businesses and creates opportunities for entrepreneurs. It is critical that Trinidad and Tobago move to a fully digital environment in the short [Technical difficulties] that includes the entire public sector.

2. Customs processes must be fully [Technical difficulties].

3. Expansion of tax payment facility to allow online payments for under $100,000.

4. Efficient VAT refund system. While approximately $4 billion was paid in VAT refunds in 2022, the efficiency of the VAT refund system is unresolved. The Government is providing incentives for businesses to go into [Technical difficulties] these companies with inordinate delays in receipt of VAT refunds.

5. Digitization of the trade facilitation process.

6. Streamline processes including obtaining construction permits, electrical connections, land administration system, et cetera.

Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. A deposit of US $163 million or the TT equivalent of $1.11 billion into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was made in 2022 because of the higher than expected oil and gas prices. However, prior to 2022, the last contribution to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was made in
2013. While there were no withdrawals in 2022, US $893 million was withdrawn from the Fund in 2021 to help finance the fiscal deficit. The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund returned 11.75 per cent for the financial year 2021, that is the strongest annual performance to date, up from 8.2 per cent in the previous financial year. The net asset value was US $5.6 million as at December 2021. This may be materially different from the current value of the fund given the deterioration across the international equity and bond markets.

However, according to the IDB, the rules for the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund have contributed to less than optimal savings. It has been argued that these rules contribute to undersaving, overspending and an erosion of the wealth of future generations of Trinidad and Tobago citizens. Therefore, Madam President, Trinidad and Tobago could have had better fiscal performance if the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund had enhanced savings and withdrawal rules combined with an expenditure fiscal rule.

Government’s accounting system. Madam President, the Government accounts are prepared on a cash-based system and do not actually reflect the true indebtedness of the Government. The Exchequer overdraft is one of the many exclusions that contribute an inaccurate picture of the country’s actual indebtedness. The Exchequer overdraft which stands at $42.64 billion as at September 30, 2021, is not included in the public debt of Trinidad and Tobago. Interest is payable on this liability and the debt must be repaid. The cash-based system also excludes liabilities such as government-to-government debt obligations, Government current liabilities to contractors and trade suppliers, future liabilities for current commitments, state enterprises obligations and refunds including VAT and tax.
Some recommendations:

1. Government must undertake a comprehensive review of all government debt to understand the size of current and future liabilities obligations and upcoming payables. This includes debt that will be incurred from government-to-government arrangements, other commitments with delayed repayment terms or moratorium periods have to be monitored and included as part of public debt. This is critical to the development of a successful execution of a debt management plan.

2. Implement an internationally recognized public sector accounting system so that the Government accounts are prepared on the accrual basis of accounting.

Madam President, the 2022/2023 budget represents a ballooning levy on the financial resources of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. The cost of living for basic necessities such as food, housing, clothing and medicine are all rising, and added to that is the impact which has not yet been factored in, of increased fuel prices. Also in the pipeline are the soon to be introduced increases in water rates, electricity rates and property taxes. While we have natural resources, oil, gas, asphalt and fertile land together with creative and resilient people, we are in an extremely vulnerable position as a country. More and more people are falling into poverty and the living standards of the middle-class are being eroded.

We cannot continue to rely on oil and gas revenue to finance our future in an environment of high price volatility and energy transition around the world. We need more than ever broad economic diversification, transformative initiatives for the long-term survival of the country. We also need enlightened leadership. We
need this now. This is our life and livelihoods. We are all part of Trinidad and Tobago and everyone has been impacted by the hardships that we have endured over the past two years and expected to be continued into the future. Reliance and tenacity, yes, but empathy, compassion and understanding of our fellow citizens also.

Madam President, I thank you.

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

**The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus):**

Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me the honour and privilege of addressing this House on the national budget for fiscal 2023. I would like to start by congratulating the hon. Minister of Finance for his customary excellent presentation and of course, his lucid statement that has given us a deep understanding of the circumstances that have led us to where we are today and also how it has significantly shaped the Government’s fiscal policies. These policies, of course, would be translated into outcomes that will take Trinidad and Tobago, the people, the private sector and yes, the public sector to the next level. So, Madam President, I thank you.

The theme of this year’s budget is “Tenacity and Stability in the face of Global Challenges” and when reflecting on what that means in the context of the TT environment, a quote that came to mind made famous I think by a few people including J.D. Rockefeller, said that the pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity whereas the optimism sees opportunity in every difficulty. The challenges of the past eight years and more have significantly exacerbated you know, three years, things like the global pandemic have seriously tested us as a government and as a people and as a nation. Despite the real and tragic losses that
we have experienced and the challenges that we have had to endure, we are now faced with an opportunity not only to recover but to prosper and grow. And in this regard, digital technology continues to be a key enabler that will enable many of these opportunities.

I am of the firm belief that this budget debate is about optimism and not pessimism. It is about the glass being half full and getting fuller and not half empty and it is about exploring solutions and strategies to overcome challenges and not just identifying problems.

As far as digital transformation which is one of the main mechanisms that will enable Trinidad and Tobago to take full advantage of the opportunities coming out of this trial by fire we just had, and of course, the significant amount of debate that has happened in the other place and some here already and in the public domain, it is really no surprise that everyone seems to have an opinion on what it is we are trying to do within digital transformation and so I am going to dig a bit deeper in the Government’s vision for transformation and how that is reflected in the measures in the budget.

This journey we are on started way back. With your permission, Madam President, we will talk a bit about where we started. This started way back probably in 2003-2008 period with a programme that was launched called Fast Forward and that came along really, one week after the United Nations convened the first phase of a World Summit on the Information Society. It was in Geneva, Switzerland. And the timing of that launch was not all entirely coincidental because the WSIS as it was called, was in recognition to the extent to which ICT was transforming the way in which the world lived and conducted business. Equally significant to that was the approach that was used by what was then the
national ICT strategy which was exactly what the UN adopted which was to pursue ICT planning as an equal partnership between government, private sector and civil society.

Well, what made and happened in Fast Forward unique and why it is applicable today is that it was the only plan that was of truly national scope and so there were a number of things that made that work which we have taken on board even now. And three of those elements would include: strong leadership and support at the highest levels of the Executive and the public service; the ability to assemble small but strong pools of talent and draw from leading practitioners specifically within Trinidad and Tobago and of course from overseas and using examples from countries of international state, Canada, India, et cetera, and of course, the successful collaboration between societal stakeholders and again it is the civil society, the private sector and government working closely together as equal partners. The Ministry of Digital Transformation is a partnership Ministry and so the benefits to Trinidad and Tobago as a holistic, collaborative approach to the national ICT plan were significant. And what the budget does is that it fills within almost all of the Ministries, Divisions and agencies, specific amounts of allocation that will ensure that they are able to play their part in what that collaboration would require.

The Government’s digital transformation agenda right now is seeking to recover some of the ground that we would have lost after Fast Forward was completed and not—you know, things did not pursue quite as well after that. And so while the Ministry has been in operation for only a year, if you look into the budget, you will see where the three pillars in the Government’s approach to transformation are being funded: the digital society, the digital economy and the
digital Government and I will just say a bit of what they are.

The digital society, of course, is an approach to building Trinidad and Tobago as a digital society. It is based on the fact that access to us, available and accessible broadband as a public good is an inherent thing and so ubiquitous broadband across all of Trinidad and Tobago is important. It also has elements in it of education in that raising the IQ of the society, there is another bit in it of training. A number of things in it, creating avenues and opportunities for people to be able to access government services. All of that is contained within the digital society pillar.

There is the digital economy and that focuses on the ICT sector to create jobs and grow the national economy. Of course, we know of the dependence of the economy on gas and oil, we plan to create ways in which we can make the ICT sector contribute to the national GDP and grow what already is there. It also addresses the fact that we have to do that by strengthening the private sector and making companies more competitive and focus specifically on small and emerging businesses and young and innovative entrepreneurs.

Digital government is probably the one that requires the most amount of partnership. It is really about using ICT to improve the delivery of public services to citizens and of course to increase the efficiency and effectiveness and value for money of Ministries, Divisions and agencies. I say it is the one that requires the most collaboration and partnership simply because it has to expand across all of government; every Ministry, Division and agency will be touched. Some have the lead in it, for example, like the Ministry of Public Administration that will address a lot of the procedures and processes specific to the Government service. And again, if you examine the allocations there, you will see where that has been
adequately covered in the allocation for that Ministry.

One of the main factors that have influenced and of course the measured approach that we have to take over the last year since we are doing this, is that we had to understand the lay of the land and there were two specific studies that were funded and completed in the last year. The first of these was the Digital Readiness Assessment of Trinidad and Tobago. It was done by the United Nations Development Programme. It was done in the first quarter of 2022 and the results were made available in the second quarter of 2022.

The second was the National Digital Inclusion Survey and this was recently completed by the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. Why is that important relative to what we are doing? Well, a digital divide, and I am saying a digital divide, is a gap that exists between those who have access to the ICT and those who do not. I recently returned from Romania where I attended and participated in the ITU’s Plenipotentiary Conference 2022 and in it, the Secretary General identified that there are 2.7 billion people worldwide who have never had access to the Internet. So when we talk about a digital divide and gap, if you look at it on a global scale, that is what we are talking about. And this gap occurs within population groups, geographic areas, municipalities, communities, urban and rural classifications, regions and countries.

And following the assessments that were done, the authority in partnership with Central Statistical Office conducted the survey and measured the divide according to those conditions to determine what is necessary for digital inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago and that was completed in fiscal 2021 and the results were published earlier this year. And the outcome of this survey and the other pieces are what are guiding us in how we are doing things relative to the national ICT plan.

UNREVISED
The digital society pillar is funded in the allocation to the tune of $50 million and I think I should give some examples of what it is exactly we are going to be doing under that pillar. So when we talk about the digital society, as I mentioned before, it is one of the cornerstones of the digital society agenda under which we are delivering to provide broadband as a public good and this is being funded through universal service in some cases.

So what is important to note about the universal service approach is that it is based on partnership and again, the close collaboration between the Government, the private sector, in this case, the service providers, communities and citizens who benefit from these projects. If you wish, and I am speaking through you, Madam President, to the population, if they want to understand what one of those projects would be, let me take an example of my homeland Tobago where in the communities of Parlatuvier, Bloody Bay and L’Anse Fourmi, a universal service infrastructure project that is being financed by the universal service fund of TATT is establishing broadband infrastructure in the St John’s Parish of Tobago and again that is the areas of Parlatuvier, Bloody Bay and L’Anse Fourmi. And what they will do is provide the participating communities who were identified in the digital inclusion surveys within this case fibre to— we are basically going running fibre to almost every building and home in that area. So when that is finished, the service will be robust, it will be secure, it will be consistent and it will be capable meaning that the quality of service that you get and the capabilities of that service will be no different in those areas as it would be as if you were in Port of Spain or San Fernando.

Also under that pillar under the theme of leaving no one behind, you would find that persons with disabilities are also catered for in the projects that we have.
There is an initiative that we have there dealing again in alignment with the United Nations Convention on Persons with Disabilities is that we are providing under that again, subsidies for people to acquire devices to improve access to persons with disabilities and using ICT services. So on one hand, you are talking about providing connectivity and infrastructure to allow for areas that require it to get it, and the other hand you are talking specifically to people, for example, that would need it so that they themselves can participate in what we are doing within the national agenda for digitalization.

TT WiFi is another initiative I think, that is worthy of mention. Again, it is funded under that $50 million and it deals with really having WiFi available for public consumption in private areas and public areas. So for example, the locations that we are dealing with will include transportation hubs, libraries, public health institutions, public schools—well, public schools that do not have connectivity because a number of them already have. As of the 1st of October, my information is that TT WiFi is available in 99 locations including 23 libraries, 12 public transport hubs, 48 primary schools and those would be those that are without connectivity, and 16 health centres. If you want to have an idea of how that money will be used going forward, again, out of that allocation of that, there are 114 public health institutions that will have WiFi availability by the end of the next fiscal, so it is going to happen inside of there.

Another important factor that we are dealing here with in terms of how that money is going to be spent deals with the community ICT centres and again, this is another one of these cornerstone initiatives to help and improve the ability of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to use ICT services and the idea with that is really about meaningful connectivity, it is not just about connecting people or providing a
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)

Bill, 2022

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus (cont’d)

way but meaningful connectivity. And again, what does that mean? Well, it is about building the confidence and capabilities of residents in either underserved or areas where these are deemed to be necessary, to work collaboratively with residents to provide and add value to their community.

So in these access centres, what happens is that you can go to one of them and they are normally very topical and easy to get to places. They are staffed by people from the community itself so you are meeting local and people that you understand and you know. You have access to every possible device that you would want to use while there without you having to own one, meaning that you do not need a computer, you do not need anything. As a matter of fact, you do not even need the skills to be digitally literate when you visit there because there are people there to help you. There is a wide plethora of services available at these centres and I implore people if you have one in your area already, please visit them. I know the Cabinet has already approved I think another 32 of them to be built and before the end of the fiscal will have some very high numbers of them.

But while there, you can obviously access Government services, you can access online things for research. I have seen children there doing after schoolwork, they are getting homework assistance from the people that are there. I have seen people doing SEA past papers, there is software coding going on, website design. And that is also being done again with the partnerships that we spoke about, the Adult Literacy Tutors Association ALTA has their programmes being delivered within those facilities in a number of them now. YTEPP is there. The Microsoft foundation is there. Lenox in there and RAC, robotics is there as well who would have assisted us with some of the things that we have. Again, in partnership where we are. So during fiscal 2023, again, out of that allocation of
money, a number of community ICT centres will open and more programmes will be added to what we have.

Under digital literacy, again we have to improve the literacy of the citizens to be able to partake in this digital programme that we have. So we launched a digital literacy programme during the last fiscal and in the pilot, we set out to deal with a cohort of 1,000 people. It was fully subscribed I think within three hours of being put online. And the programme is really conducted entirely online. It last four to six weeks. The first phase like I said is currently ongoing. It started there but these are some interesting statistics and through you, Madam President, I would like for the citizenry to understand. It was well received, like I said 1,100 applicants within the first three hours from all parts of Trinidad and Tobago but look at these statistics. Of the 1,100 applicants, 942 were female. The age of the applicants ranged from 18 to 70 years of age and 25 per cent of the applicants were between the ages of 18 to 25. Just under 30 per cent of the applicants were between 31 and 40, and applications were made from people living in all parts of the country. The single largest number of applicants coming from residents of the south Trinidad, about 30 per cent. Like I said, the first phase is ongoing but the thing about it is this, and this is why when we speak of a government and we speak about a divide, it is not just about coverage and access to broadband but think about this, 900 participants taking place now, arrangements are being made for the final 100 or so who lack what? A suitable device and or Internet from where they are to take part in the programme.

So providing the programme, even creating the environment where the broadband is available is not enough. When we as a Government speak of a divide, we are speaking also about the providing of devices, et cetera, and you see
it with the Ministry of Education, you see it with the Ministry of Social Development, you see it with the youth development programmes. You see it in a number of places. You see it with the Telecommunications Authority. And what they are doing in those cases is not just providing access on this but all of the things that are required to create connected areas.

2.35 p.m.

Connected communities is a natural evolution to what we are talking about there and that initiative, of course, is to be able to move what we are doing now to the larger community scale. Connected Arima is the model that we are using for that now and, again, that is funded in this budget. What this really does is that it is identified and developed in close consultation with the stakeholders. Again, it is the Government, the private sector, the local community, civil society groups. And what are we trying to do with this particular programme? It is a range of mobile applications to support local community life. And in Arima, you know what that is, pan, parang, et cetera, et cetera. The development of a public transportation app that would enable the public and transport providers to connect in a way that maximizes safety, security and, of course, reliability and then, it is as simple as knowing where the next bus or maxi is. The development of apps to assist small and medium enterprises in the use of ICT to market their produce; vendors, to be able to buy and sell things. The establishment of multiple ICT centres, of which I just described in the Arima area, to cater for the special needs of the community, including the older members of the society. Remember that the people who are enrolled in this thing includes the people up to the age of 70. And, of course, expanding the range of e-services available to the residents of Arima.

So that is the commitment that we are giving where that this concerned.
There are more things that will deal with that but—maybe I will give one more. We are also talking about, in that Connected Arima initiative, we are working with the Inter-American Development Bank to finalize the use of a citizen engagement platform developed by CitizenLab of Belgium, but in Trinidad and Tobago. And the platform is branded engagegov.tt. It would be launched shortly. It is fully operational by the end of the month and it would be linked to the app development aspect for the developers hub, and I will tell you a little bit more about that in a little while. But the idea about that is, it represents a way in which the community can engage with all of the people and the stakeholders involved in Arima’s development.

Of course, the lessons learnt from Connected Arima, we will take them on board, we will rehash them, go through what we have and we will look for the best practices and the replicability of what we have done and then simply roll it out to other communities. So, you could do it in Scarborough. You could do it in Couva. You could do it in a number of other places.

Digital Government—well, let me deal with the digital economy next. As a partnering Ministry, the Ministry of Digital Transformation is deliberately designing projects in such a way that they will contribute to the digital economy. Now, what does that mean? Really, we are trying to increase the contribution of the ICT sector to the GDP. And there are numbers that deal with that. Now, I think the number really is about 3 per cent. But the percentage could be somewhat misleading because the revenue numbers would change. And so, even if your contributions remain stagnant and things change within, other parameters change, the number will look the same. We are really trying to increase it in real numbers, as opposed to just a percentage of it.
The telecommunications and broadcasting sector generates significant revenues for Trinidad and Tobago. And I have some numbers they quoted on the Telecommunications Authority website. But just suffice it to say that the telecommunications sector really contributes about 75 per cent of the total industry revenues. And, of course, the broadcasting sector contributed about 1.2 billion or 24 per cent of that number over the last year. So, the intent is to increase that and see where we are.

The developers hub is something, again, we are trying to work to help with that increase in ICT. It is really a strategic initiative to enable the growth of the digital sector across a number of different entities. So, it is really intended to encourage and grow support for digital entrepreneurs. So, the developers hub, which would make extensive use of government open data, is best designed as a digital ecosystem, which will include and use creative training across a number of places, Microsoft, Cisco, Linux, et cetera; development of tool boxes and toolkits; mentorship in a number of places; development opportunities, which would include markets, and so on. And that particular digital government thing is funded under the—in the current allocation of about $10 million, and, of course, it would lead eventually to the creation of the national software development export capability, in keeping with the principle that I have kind of coined “made in Trinidad and Tobago for Trinidad and Tobago and the world”. That is really what we are trying to achieve with that.

So, we believe the developers hub would be highly aligned with other economic development and diversification initiatives by the private sector, and that would include nearshoring, which is happening now. We have been working with AMCHAM with this, where we really want to develop this nearshoring piece,
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)

Bill, 2022

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus (cont’d)

where the private advocates and optimizes synergies to enable some of the best possible outcomes for these initiatives. Nearshoring is—and we are seeing more and more requests for this, where international companies are seeking to use our greatest natural resources, which is not oil and gas, it is actually our people and the skills that we have, for their own purposes by setting up their operations here. It is going along and it is something that we will continue to partner but, again, the initiatives for that would be funded under that allocation for digital government.

Just so that they are aware, Madam President, the budget allocation for ICT projects increased by 32per cent over last year’s budget. And so, some people believe the speed of transformation across the Ministries and agencies is not going as fast, but it has been speeding up over the last year. So, in last year’s proposals, the proposed spend on digitization and digitalization projects across government as a whole was about $341million. This year, it is up to $437million, an increase of about 32per cent.

While the MDT itself provides guidance and a number of other things and facilities for those Ministries, Divisions and agencies who have to spend that money, and that would have included advocating for those allocations for those Ministries, the Ministries themselves still have significant responsibility in the execution of what they are doing. But we do provide support as well as guidance, and in some cases, control for those Ministries to make sure that they are working in adherence to policies that we would have set out specifically for technical infrastructure, and also ensuring levels of alignment with what the Ministry of Public Administration would have put out as general policies and guidelines.

There is a marriage between the processes and the changes, and so on, that are required, as well as the technology that is being deployed to allow for those
things to happen. And so, you will find tremendous synergies happening between the Ministry of Public Administration and the Ministry of Digital Transformation and the client Ministries, who are trying to execute on those things.

Legislation: now, again, there is a portion in that for—and you say why is legislation important to the Ministry of Digital Transformation? Well, a lot of the legislation that we have now is antiquated and will not work with the solutions that we have deployed at present and are going to deploy.

I want to—maybe I should give some examples. I am the technology guy, so I have these things on my phone. But just to give you an example some of—because people ask a lot about that sometimes. What are the pieces of legislation that you are going to address, that needs to be adjusted? And some of them would sound familiar, the Data Protection Act and, again we are talking about the appropriate and effective proclamation of some of the pieces inside of it. I would mention some. Obviously, for time, I would not mention all of them. But we are talking about, for example, the Office of the Information Commissioner, the protection of personal data by public bodies, protection of personal data by private bodies, the contravention and enforcement, et cetera. There are also amendments of that same Data Protection Act to create exemptions for, for example, investigative journalism, forms of creative expression, et cetera. Those are there.

If I talk about things under the digital economy: the Electronic Transactions Act—and, again, we are talking about electronic authentication, intermediaries and telecommunications service providers, consumer protection. The Electronic Transaction Act would also have amendments to deal with it, to deal with section 6.

I can go on again further. The Telecommunications Act would have to be
adjusted, the broadcasting code, the Cybercrime Bill and so, the raft of things that need to be addressed under the legislative agenda, and the Attorney General and the entire Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs would be there to help us to look at what we are dealing with where that is concerned.

Major projects that we have—Madam President, can I ask how much longer I have, please?

Madam President: You finish at 2.57 and it is now 2.44.

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: Thank you very much. Interoperability and e-identity, these are two programmes that we have heard a lot about, bandied about in a number of places. Again, through you, Madam President, I want to provide some clarification as to where they are. These are funded under the digital government programmes, under the IDF, and the budget there under that is about $30 million, which we plan to utilize all of it. And two of the major initiatives there would be that, as I have declared, the e-identity and the interoperability network.

I saw in one of the dailies, someone expressing an opinion—I am sorry I did not clip it out to find it—that the interoperability network is nothing more than just connecting Ministries together by fibre. I wish if those people will understand what we are talking about, they would understand that that is not the case. Connecting something together by fibre is as easy as calling a crew and telling them to run it from here to there. What we are talking about is a robust, secure and fairly intelligent and sophisticated network that would provide for the appropriate exchange of information between Ministries, Divisions, and agencies, and eventually the private sector. So, if anybody believes that they could do that by just connecting one fibre to one building to the next, they are welcomed by me to
try to do so. Hence the reason, Madam President, why I am using you as a platform to explain these things to people.

What we have, what we are dealing with, these interoperability networks and the national identity, is that both of these initiatives have the potential to revolutionize the way in which citizens are able to access services. Both the e-ID and the interoperability framework are highly complexed projects and require collaboration, again, between multiple divisions and agencies and therefore, will need to be properly thought-out and carefully planned. We have been doing that for the last year.

The national e-ID will allow us to uniquely identify anyone across a platform using zero, notice the word, zero biometric hash; zero. We are exploring the mechanisms to which a citizen’s identity can be validated without soliciting or storing their personal biometric data. This is very, very important. So, we will not only improve the delivery of e-services to citizens, but we will enable those services to be personalized and meet the needs of individuals’ safety and security. Your information will be secure. Your transactions will be secure. The e-ID is also being designed to support the banks and insurance companies. And you know their KYC processes and how difficult they can be. So, expect that the e-ID programme will benefit both Government and the business community equally.

So, we are working on two parallel tracks to allow us to achieve this goal. We have been working with Estonia, and you would know about that, and the interoperability solution, which will allow, of course, us to interconnect Ministries, divisions and agencies to access data between them safely and securely, and more importantly consistent with good data protection practice.

The application, I can say it now, that we are working on with Estonia is
X-Road model and we are ready to accelerate the implementation. Now, that is covered under the funds that were provided for us in that space. To this end, myself and a team from the Ministry will visit Estonia at the end of this month. That has already been declared to the public, to firm up these plans and these tools.

There will also be a series of further consultations with entrepreneurs and businesses to empower them to be able to use the e-ID and the interoperability ecosystems, and also to be able to consume e-ID services, to provide expanded services. So, the banking and finance sector would be supported with services. And so, that is well on its way, and we will start the implementation of that because we have done all the studies for the last year. So, we are ready to start to get to work where that is concerned. We have already discussed having discussions with the Bankers Association to make sure we have all the functional security aspects to support specifications that would allow the banks to start collaborating with us on the integration requirements for their system. So, we will be connecting to them as well.

And I want to add that while the e-ID solution would be integrated with the interoperability solution, it is being developed with the assistance of the international development partners, such as the UN Development Programme, United Nations Capital Development programme. The Ministry is using the best available advice from international experts to craft these same solutions that would meet the needs and expectations of our citizens.

I ask my colleagues on the other side of the floor that we may have some legislative pieces, as I identified before, that would be required for this to work. I look forward to your support, understanding what this means for the national landscape. So, I ask Members opposite to support us in what we are doing where
that is concerned. So, upcoming, I am sure you would see those things when we get to the legislative pieces, whenever those things come to the House. The thing about this is that these solutions are being enabled by locals but powered by technology from companies like Estonia and other providers who already provide these digital ecosystems worldwide.

These initiatives will also include the required cybersecurity elements. And I know that is a big thing where this is concerned, but we are building those things in by design. Basically, at the Ministry we prefer to do everything—say the things that we deliver need to be reliable, scalable, capable, agile, resilient and secure. So, in this case, we have been measuring twice and, obviously, we will cut once.

We would be rolling out these solutions in sprints, according to our new agile way of doing things, with citizens’ feedback being the driver of what we do next over the next sprint. So, people, I am, again through you, Madam President, I am speaking to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and saying, when we start these things and they start impacting you, your contributions will be really, really important as to how we do what we do going forward. You have a say, we want to listen. We will make the adjustment.

Private sector partnership and enablement of rapid development solutions, via our digital hub will also allow the Government to move forward with the digitalization plans that we have being an enabler, rather than a driver. We are an enabler. We are not the people driving this. So, all of that would redound to the benefit of the Government, the private sector and ultimately, the citizens of the system.

We have looked at, you know, a number of countries, again, over the last year, studying what would be the best approach and design for the roll-out of the
e-ID. And strangely enough, we found—the place that we found the one that is best suited for us so far, and I would say it again here, is India’s ADA solution. People can look it up. It is available online. It is quite a thing. It is one of the most appropriate. We have therefore incorporated and initiated partnerships with India to adopt elements of their equivalent e-ID system. And that is ADA. It is more suited to our strategic intent and change of management approach for both citizens and businesses. So, we can proceed, again, within the current legislative framework.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: Under ICT Infrastructure, well, obviously, there are two major projects that we are dealing with there, development of a government cloud. We are building a distributed cloud. There are a number of cloud providers in Trinidad and Tobago and we are working with them. But obviously, the Government itself needs to have its own cloud facility and service. We are building that primarily for things that we want to keep close to us, national security, et cetera, et cetera. Those would be there. Apart from that, there is available cloud service within Trinidad and Tobago. We want as many services locally as possible because of our vulnerability being so far south and our connections being directly associated with undersea cables. So, we want to do that.

There are two other initiatives that are critical again under that, a cybersecurity strategy for the entire country, something that is important. We are working on that, again, in partnership with international partners; and an integrated service centre. I do not know why we did not build this before. If you are starting and launching digital services, one of the things that you must have is support for
people who have problems using them. So, if you have a problem using a service now, I wonder where do you call? Who do you call to say I am not able to do something? An integrated service centre is something that is critically important and will be built, again, using the funding associated with this.

So, in conclusion, Madam President, and I thank you again for the reminder, the Government is engaged in a wide range of digital transformation activities that together reflect the ubiquitousness and the holistic nature in which technology is transforming the country. So, over the next 12 months, we have some priority areas: increase the access of ICT for students in underserved communities and disenfranchised groups; increase the digital literacy of all of our citizens; improve internal GORTT efficiencies, along with our partner Ministries and particularly guided and led by the Ministry of Public Administration; reduce bottlenecks and duplication and fraud in our public systems, technology has a way of doing that; bring our ICT infrastructure home, again, using local cloud and, of course, the creation and build of our own data centre here, specifically for us, which we will share with others as well; strengthen the ICT legislative framework, I elaborated on that earlier; stimulate the local economy, again, using our best thing, which is our people, and obviously by doing that we have our own thing, develop our own institutions here and reduce forex really that we are spending on a lot of those technologies outside; and become a local and regional model for transformation so we would be able to do that.

Given the interconnectedness of the digital transformation landscape and the practical constraints and the limited time and resources that we have to do, and, of course, the holistic nature, an inclusive approach of digital transformation, we clearly have to do what we have to do in the very immediate and now. And that is
why the MDT is leading the development of Trinidad and Tobago’s first National Digital Transformation Strategy. And that would be, of course, covering the period 2023 to 2027, and that would replace the current National ICT Blueprint, which was really 2018 to 2022. That expires at the end of this year and we will finish this document, at least have the first draft of it, by December of this year. The stakeholders are there. We ask people to join with us. Madam President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial: Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to join in this debate on the budget debate for fiscal 2022/2023.

Madam President, I have to say if nothing really good comes out of the debate, at least by Sen. Bacchus speaking so early and during the daytime hours when the population is tuned in, they will actually see what Sen. Bacchus and his Ministry, what he looks like and learn a little bit about it. Because I think that the Ministry of Digital Transformation, to date, is something like an urban legend and a myth that has existed since it was created. And no one, particularly the parents of the thousands of children who lost their educational opportunities during the pandemic, can actually say that they know anything about digital transformation being done by this Government.

Madam President, equal access, equitable access to education was a goal that was actively pursued by the People’s Partnership Government. And his Government destroyed it. So, sitting here today and coming immediately before me, to listen to a whole contribution on what a Ministry intends to do with digital
transformation, I have to say it reminded me of how out of touch this Government is with the real critical needs of the people.

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

**Sen. J. Lutchmedial:** And that, if anything, is the theme. It is the theme that has underlined this entire budget debate.

As we speak about destruction and education, Madam President, you know we are in the season of Divali, the time leading up to Divali. I attended a Ramleela celebration on Sunday night and I witnessed the burning of the effigy of Rawan, the symbol of evil and wickedness. And someone who, in the story of the Ramayan, he allowed his ego to get the better of him to inflict hurt and suffering upon people. It is amazing that on Monday, what transpired in a virtual courtroom in this country reminded me so much of that story that I witnessed in a play form, in dramatic form on Sunday night.

And today, Madam President, I feel like we are the city of Ayodhya, where we witnessed the victory of not one, but two Rams that have become victorious over the schemes, the maneuverings, meant to score political mileage. And it has a cost attached to it, which the taxpayer must continue to bear because this Government, through its budget, through its expenditure, continues to use the Treasury to further its own motives, its own objectives, to improve their lives and secure themselves in office, but not treating with the needs of this population.

And I will demonstrate, throughout my contribution, how ineptitude, bad mind, nepotism are the key factors which have influenced so much of our public expenditure, that I think it deserves—this budget deserves the outcry that it is receiving from the public because when you see the wastage of public funds by this Government, you have to wonder how it is they can stand with a straight face
and tell people to make sacrifices.

Madam President, the sad thing about it is that when the Ramdeens, the Rambarans and the Ramlogans of this country overcome what is meant to destroy them, based on nothing, but political bad mind and malice, the taxpayer must continue to foot the bill.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: When the budget was first read on the 26th of September and the series of fiscal measures were laid out, increasing the burdens on an already burdened population, what stood out to many people is that there was not a single meaningful policy measure to address the scourge of crime and several other social issues, making life unbearable for the working class in this country.

The Government’s failure, inability or unwillingness to deliver on projects and to implement meaningful policies means that the return to the taxpayer is simply nothing. The Treasury is being emptied via the payment of legal fees, the payment of damages and costs to citizens who are successful against the State because the State has embarked upon a series of positions and actions that are detrimental to our institutions in this country. They ride roughshod over the rights of citizens and they are wrong and strong. And again, every single loss is not a loss felt by the individual pockets of the decision-makers in those cases, Madam President, it is the person who has to cringe when they stand at the fuel pump now, at the gas station.

And in the middle of all of that, people who are paid a salary in Parliament, have their private practice and, on top of that, which is now public knowledge, collect something like $1.8 million in legal fees in the last three years, will stand and tell us, “Well, if you cannot afford certain things go back to riding bicycle and
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)

Bill, 2022
Sen. Lutchmedial (cont’d)

cooking with coal pot.” That is the advice coming from a Government which squanders our money on, what I could only call, vanity and malice.

Madam President, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, a critical constitutionally-secured independent office, is being trampled on, starved of much-needed resources. It is part of an overall trend of institutional degradation that we see taking place since this Government came into office.

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

**Sen. J. Lutchmedial:** So bad it is, Madam President, that in today’s *Express* editorial they were compelled in their opinion relative to the Government’s overreach in the Ramlogan and Ramdeen matter, to say:

“This indemnity...”

—and I quote from today's editorial in the *Express*:

“This indemnity will stand for all time as evidence of a government’s flagrant abuse of power and willingness to subvert key institutions of accountability and justice and to commandeer State resources in a dogged and questionable pursuit of political rivals. Only a desperate government could’ve offered the guarantees given by Al-Rawi to Nelson.”

Madam President, I could not have put it better than that myself. What is said today by the *Express* must reverberate throughout this country—

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

**Sen. J. Lutchmedial:**—so that every time you stand by that fuel pump and you understand why you are deprived of the fuel subsidy you enjoyed for years; every time your child cannot go to school because the place flood out and the regional corporations have no releases to clean the drains in your area; every time—the new rule used to be we drive on the left side of the road, now we do
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial:—you must remember that millions and millions and millions of your taxpayers’ dollars have been spent by this Government to pursue their political rivals in the most underhanded manner that we have ever seen in this country.

I say that it is the most underhanded, Madam President, but I feel that I must take the opportunity to remind the population today that this is not the first time. And earlier this year, with the collapse in the Privy Council having to quash the Piarco 1 enquiry that took, I think, something like 20 years of judicial time—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial:—20 years of judicial time, resources and legal fees in pursuit of another set of parties linked to the Opposition by a PNM Government, the whole thing fell apart, based on the interference of an Attorney General. And it was well-documented, Madam President, since what it is?—maybe 2006 or ’7, around there. And I have to quote—I must quote from the Mustill Report because I am demonstrating to the population how this Government spends their money to weaponize a legal system in order to target their political opponents.

In the Mustill Report, which was around 2007 and which, again, was featured and reported again when this matter came up in the Privy Council earlier this year, the Mustill Report said the Government continues—sorry, let me find it. It said, when we called for the investigation—in an article entitled the:

“Many roles of…”—the Attorney General.

They quoted from that report in the Express, Madam President. The date of the article—I will get it for you now, I am trying to be tech-savvy like my friend,
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)  
2022.10.12
Bill, 2022
Sen. Lutchmedial (cont’d)

Sen. Bacchus—July 11, 2022, just a little bit earlier this year. Quoted again from the Mustill tribunal when they examined that whole incident involving the interference of a PNM Attorney General in the Piarco 1 enquiry and his influence. And what they said:

“‘The picture presented to this tribunal almost defies belief... We have heard allegations against the Attorney General, who could have given oral evidence to rebut them, but did not.’”

They went on to say, and I quote:

“‘It is plain that the imputations are that they got together and influenced what was being done...What has been said is that there has been a small group of conspirators designed to pervert the course of...justice and the Attorney General at very least was a part of the scheme…’”

3.05 p.m.

Madam President, history is repeating itself and thousands, upon thousands, and millions upon millions of dollars going down the drain again now. That was then and this is now but it has not changed, the modus operandi of the PNM remains the same.

The Government will use the pandemic as a crutch to disguise its incompetence and failure to improve the lives of citizens. They have done so for the last three budgets that we have stood here and listened to. And they do not deliver to citizens on their promises. I will focus specifically on how broken promises, and what has become known as the implementation deficit of the PNM Government, continues to create a society that is like a ticking time bomb, because citizens are so frustrated. Nowhere is that more evident than in the Government’s failure to tackle crime and improve the delivery of justice in the country.
The crime and justice system, Madam President, will be the focus of my contribution and the allocations and provisions for expenditure in this budget. When we say it is a justice system, the reason you say that is because the essence of a system is that it consists of many parts that have to work together and complement each other to produce the desired results. It is exactly that, it is a system. So when you make a tweak here and a tweak there and you do not have an across-the-board aligned objective pursuing you know, a common goal, and the individual goals of each agency are not pursued in manner that consistent with the overall objective, you have chaos. And that is what we have right now. We have chaos in our justice system, particularly on the criminal side.

Let me use the example of staffing. We have heard over and over about the backlog of matters in the judiciary, so they created more posts in the Judiciary. You have the creation of the post of Magistracy Registrars and you have Masters being put into the Criminal Division of the High Court. And that sounds nice right, they boast and they pat themselves on the back, “we getting” plant and machinery people and what was the next thing?—process. I do not know where all the plant and machinery, and people, and process was when indemnity agreements were being drafted in the back room, if the plant and machinery, and people, and process did not get involved then.

But when they boast about these things, Madam President, that they do not tell the population it has a significant number of people who have filled these new posts came out of the DPP’s office. Likewise, when they created the public defender’s office and expanded the staff complement of persons who will deal with criminal matters through the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority, there was a large exodus of staff from the office of the DPP.

UNREVISED
So as anybody would know, in any given courtroom, at a minimum you have at least three people that you need, the judicial officer, the prosecutor, and the defender. And if all three moving parts of the criminal justice system are not being staffed and one is draining the other, and you are improving on two but not the other, then the system goes nowhere. And this is where we have been going with this Government, nowhere. We come here year, after year, after year. Every time we have a Bill in this House talking about crime, we talk about it but we going nowhere.

Madam President, some of the most experienced staff have left the DPP’s office for greener pastures. And I commend them, I compliment them, I find no fault with them, they are doing what is right. But if you do not build up the office of the DPP at the same time that you are building the others, what do you expect to happen? You cannot sit here and boast of accomplishments when the system as a whole is simply stuck. This is not rocket science. It is commonsense.

But I think if it is one thing I have learnt with this administration is that there is an uncommonness of commonsense, and it has been nothing short of astounding, particularly when it comes to the Office of the Attorney General and the management of the legal affairs of this country. And in fairness I would like to say this is a situation that was created and, you know, came long before this particular Attorney General was sitting in the seat.

But now the problem has to be addressed and has it been addressed in this budget? We must look at what they are doing. If you look at the allocations, there is no increase in Wages and Salaries under the allocation of Personnel for the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution, and there is a $500,000 decrease in the allocation for Contract Employment.
So what is the plan? What is the plan? I found an allocation for Fees to be paid to external counsel. And there was an allocation for $20 million and they used $19.1 million out of it. So, is that the plan that we will starve the DPP’s office of permanent staff and permanent resources so that we could continue to brief our external attorneys, and enrich them?

The allocation coming down for this year for Fees is $15 million, a savings of about a $4 million savings. I do not know now that they do not have to retain Mr. Jenkins to persecute Mr. Ramdeen and Mr. Ramlogan if they have saved some money there. But the understaffing of the DPP’s office is nothing new.

When we had the Akilli Charles decision and the Court of Appeal of this country refused to grant the State a stay of that judgment so that they must deal with the applications, the Director of Public Prosecutions filed an affidavit and it was widely reported in the media on April the 7th 2022:

The DPP’s office said that they were overburdened by 78 bail applications. Bail applications you know, not 78 trials that they had to do. Not 78 people who had been waiting on a trial for years and years in Remand Yard. The people just make a bail application and his office was inundated, so much so that they went before the court to ask for a stay. And, of course, the court refused them because the court is mindful. The court is mindful that what they must do is in the best interest of the people of this country.

In an article written by Prof. Ramesh Deosaran about the situation that emerged at that point in time, he made mention of that situation that was occurring there, and he talked about the fact that the DPP’s office only had, I think 46, 46 of 137 approved positions. And do you know when those 137 positions were approved, under the People’s Partnership Government. Because under the
People’s Partnership Government, recognizing that we needed to get talented, and skilled, and professional staffing into that office in order to move the criminal justice system forward. There was an entire plan consisting of specialized division, sexual offense crimes and gender-based violence, fraud, fraud division to be staffed with you know specialized and thing. So that you are not paying millions, and millions, and millions, to the forensic auditors on the outside and so on. You build your capacity in-house.

That was the plan and the vision of a government that had vision. But this Government’s vision is to just write cheques for their friend, family, and financiers. They just want to spend the money on the fees, external fees. And of course, who could forget, who could forget that it is this Government that came to this Parliament and made sure that they remove legal fees and accounting services from the purview of the Procurement Regulator—

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]

**Sen. J. Lutchmedial:** —because they have to make sure, they have to make sure that whatever allocation is made in this budget for any Ministry, Department, Statutory body, or otherwise for legal fees, it is at their own will and discretion. And they hid for years, and years, and years, behind privacy and all sorts of other ridiculous arguments to not disclose those fees, until we took them to court under the Freedom of Information Act and they were forced to disclose it.

And the same people who stood in this Parliament and lamented for years about the UNC spent $1 billion in legal fees, have spent over $1 billion now across the board in Ministries and Statutory Authorities. And what do they have to show for it?

In one matter alone, the Attorney General under the People’s Partnership
Government which is the OPV arbitration brought home a cheque for $1.4million.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I could anticipate the Attorney General getting up and boasting that they win—what?—the case that confirmed Suratt is good law. That is their claim to fame. That is their claim to fame, Suratt. But they have actually done nothing. They have not won a single critical matter against anyone who has sued the State and they have spent over a billion dollars.

Now, when we had that plan for the DPP’s Office, Madam President, the reason why we were doing that and building the capacity is because we understand you have to keep the talent in-house. Being prosecutors is a very specialized field and some people want to specialize and develop themselves in various areas.

The $19million that was spent last year on fees from the Office of the DPP, is the equivalent of salaries for you know how many Senior State Counsels? And a Senior State Counsel is very senior you are like four or five tiers up. You work there for almost eight to 10 years before you reach the stage of Senior State Counsel. You could have retained 600 Senior State Counsel for a year for that $19million. We do not even have enough criminal in this country to prosecute with 600 Senior State Counsels.

If you add to that the $35 million that the TTPS is paying for people involved in what they call “specialist prosecutions.” I call it something not close to prosecution but not quite prosecution, sounds like prosecution. But the people from the United Kingdom who are tasked with targeting high level as they say high level political targets, $35 million when they asked to be retained, SRP Kate and others, to target the political opponents of the PNM. If the PNM say jump, they ask how high. If they say wine to the side, they say left or right. And that is what they
want. They do not want a strong DPP office, a strong DPP or a strong DPP’s office, and we could see why now. Look at “wuh happen” to them on Monday. And that is why they will continue to starve them of resources.

Now again, if you want to train people and staff the office, you have to have a place to put them and there must be somewhere. Because you know, we are not a disciplined people who would work from home apparently, so we have to have office space.

I want to address the issue of new office space for the officers of the DPP in both north and south. Madam President, on the 30th of July about 10, 11 days before the General Election in 2020, I “ain’t” talking about July this year, I “ain’t” talking about July last year. I am talking about July the year before. Keys were handed over in a nice ceremony to the brand-new spanking offices for the DPP’s office in north. NIDCO handed over the keys to the then Attorney General smiling and gushing saying that it came in $2 million under budget, 2 million under budget, and that it was ready now. And I quote from what he said:

We have quadrupled the office space. We can now take the entire short fall of the DPP’s office and fill it because they have quadrupled the office space of the DPP’s office.

Madam President, those offices remain vacant today. As we speak that office building is “vay-cant.” And in that same interview when the offices were handed over the Attorney General said the south office is to be ready in September. Not September as in last month, not even September last year. We talking about September 2020. Again, those offices are vacant. They have nobody in them.

The two places, the two offices to hold staff for the DPP are both there vacant and they are still there overwhelmed, getting “bouffed” when they go to the
Court of Appeal, as many people would have seen in the papers recently, and they cannot even handle 78 bail applications at a time.

But Madam President, when we look at the expenditure for the outfitting of the offices, the DPP’s office in North in 2021, $4 million was the Actual Revised Estimate. 2022 nothing was estimated but they spent $2.7 million. And in 2023 there is an Estimate for another $1 million. This is the office that they boast about and collect keys for in 2020. And $4, plus $6.7 and $7.7 million later when they boast about saving $2 million the DPP cannot occupy the office.

In San Fernando $1.3 million estimated in 2022, but they actually spent $2.3 million, and in 2023 another $5 million estimated to get those offices ready. So clearly they “ain’t” going anywhere this year because there is still $5 million worth of work to be done in that office promised to them in September of 2020.

Where are we going with the criminal justice system when an integral part of it cannot move? And why that is the case? Is it deliberate? I must ask the question. Is it deliberate because other people are being better paid and are willing to give the advice and the opinions that they want?

When we move on to other areas that affect the delivery of justice to people, let us talk about forensics. Forensic Science Centre, I filed some questions earlier this year about the Forensic Science Centre and samples and it turned out about overall 16,000 samples were awaiting testing. I will file an updated one soon or I will file an FOIA to get the information and again see what they have done.

But then they were answering those questions they boasted about this new modern forensic science centre that was coming that would deal with all these problems, backlog, and everything like that. Because in the old Forensic Science Centre a whole area was closed down, roof falling down, all kinds of things, those
are the excuses that we heard about.

I have been reading the Public Sector Investment Programme book, Madam President, and again, since 2000, this is the 2001 book delivered in 2020. They talked about the Forensic Science Centre. They said they were entering into agreements and so on that they will get funding from China and that they will be able to deliver this Forensic Science Centre.

Madam President, today we are still reading in the 2023 Budget, Construction of a New State of the Art Facility for Forensic Laboratory and Pathology Services, the Government has signed an agreement with the People’s Republic of China for the financing of the construction of the facility. The Government will provide the funding for the project, for project development, project management services designs have been revised for a new site and grant funding from the Government of China is to be received.

They “doh even have de money yet for the centre. They doh even have de money” as yet for the centre based on what they say here. I am not making this up, it is what they have put forward here.

So while the 16,000 samples were awaiting testing, and I do not know if that situation has improved, I say I really do hope it has. But where are we going? How are we moving forward with this? We need a modern criminal justice system based on DNA analysis, based on CCTV, CCTV, and body cameras for police. They buy the body cameras, they have not purchased chargers. Half or more of the CCTV cameras not working. When you invest and you spend money in those types of things, you improve your detection and your conviction rate. And that is what the people of this country deserve. They do not deserve to be told stop eating ham and macaroni pie. They do not deserve, when half of them cannot even get

UNREVISED
water three times a week, to be told, “Stop going cinema three time a week”. Nobody going cinema three times a week. You begging for water three times a week in this country.

And that is the arrogance and the level to which this Government is so simply out of touch with the population, Madam President.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]

**Sen. J. Lutchmedial:** On the issue of CCTV cameras, one of the things that has been raised over and over particularly at joint select committee meetings and so on, is security within the prison, not just to deal with contraband and all of that, but also to deal with the security for our prison officers who are risking their lives.

Madam President, again, every time you look at these reports 2021 delivered in October 2020 in that budget. In the PSIP, they said, the installation of closed-circuit television systems at all prison facilities was 85 per cent completed. All prison facilities, 85 per cent completed. The following year, I do not have the book with me, they said they were completing it at MSP, only as MSP. Not all the prisons, only at MSP. They did not give a percentage that was completed. This year I think they said last year it was almost completed at MSP. And this year they say that the TT—the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service utilized a total of $23 million for the following. They talked about the construction of a sewerage treatment plant, the purchase of three buses at the cost of $.5 million to supplement their fleet, and the completion of the installation of CCTV systems at the Maximum Security Prison at a cost of $.7 million. So for three years to finish a project of putting in CCTV in one prison. In one prison. At the rate we going by the time they get to another prison all the cameras in MSP will stop working and they may not budget to fix them. Going nowhere and going nowhere fast.
When we have to address our minds to the issue of legal fees, Madam President, and how they have continued to spend the money of this country, it is astounding when you look at the types of matters that they have engaged in. For us to find out, for example, about the reasons behind this Government discontinuing the matter against one Mr. Malcolm Jones and to do with the WGTL scandal that plagued Petrotrin. We had to go all the way to Privy Council to get those disclosures, and to get the advice. The advice delivered by one very flip-flopping attorney who I will refer to as a scoundrel. But it cost the State, it cost the taxpayer an 850—

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial please, please.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: So one person who flip-flopped on their advice and decided to give advice to lay a charge, and then withdraw that advice and give advice to discontinue a charge. We wanted to see the advice. We just wanted sight of it to understand what was going on with that matter. We had to go to the Privy Council to get it. It cost the taxpayer of this country $850,000, because they went all the way there fighting us not to disclose that information.

The Government lost the OAS arbitration. They have to pay $126 million not even legal fees being included in that. When you look at the breakdown of legal fees and we got that breakdown of legal fees paid out by state enterprises because we realized that a lot of the money was being spent by these State companies and it was not disclosed by the Ministry of the Attorney General.

The matter involving A&V Oil and Gas Limited, a total $19.3 million in legal fees, and the simple advice, the simple advice to go to the court and try to set aside that arbitration judgement after they spent $19.3 million, they said, “No, is all right, we wuh pay it. We wuh pay A&V. Is all right, we doh want to go and try to
that is the level at which this Government is operating, Madam President. And it is quite frankly extremely, extremely, shameful. I feel a sense of anger on behalf of the population when I look upon these things.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: And the population in the meantime—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: The Government offers absolutely no hope. None whosoever. I woke up early this morning to take my daughter to school before I come here and I read that two planes almost crashed because a radar system is not working at the airport. I am reading about the fact that—we used to say that everything come through illegal ports but things—all the guns and ammunitions. The bandits have literally outgunned the TTPS because scanners are not working on the ports, forget about the ease of doing business and all of that. That is a whole other story by itself where people are suffering because of the crime situation. And businesses are suffering because of what is happening on the port.

And when you take those two things together it is enough to frustrate any citizen and that is why people are so frustrated. It is not because they missing the ham and the macaroni pie, they just miss that feeling of being safe in their homes at night. They do not even need to eat. They might be willing to ride their bicycle to work if they could feel safe and get a proper road to ride it on. But they cannot get that because this Government cannot offer that to the population.

By way of policy, by way of policy in terms of national security, I was astonished really. I thought about it, you know. I believe in paying fair wages to all of our public servants. They must get a fair—a living wage. They must be able to go to the supermarkets and be able to afford the basic essential items at least.
And I believe in fair negotiations with them to settle wages.

What I do not agree with is what I saw and this is national security policy taking place. A memorandum from the Commissioner of Police dated the August the 29th 2022, the subject:

Accelerated awards for Patrols.
The initiative as carded to take place from September to December 2022 is designed to supportive active direct patrols and will comprises the following components.

This went out to all Deputy Commissioners, Assistant Commissioners, Commanders, and Heads.

Individual commendations, divisional commendations, commendation for traffic and highway patrol branch, commendations for emergency response patrol branch, commendations for divisional operation centres.

Individual commendation will be awarded within 72 hours to officers who whilst on active direct patrols seize illegal firearms and ammunition.

Okay, no problem—

Large quantities of narcotics, intercept stolen vehicles, arrest wanted persons, charge offenders for other serious offences. Additionally, officers must adhere to instructions—

—and so on and they go on. And they say that the—

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

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Yes Madam President.

They must adhere to the instructions outlined in the strategy and so on. Divisional commanders will be given a sum of $10,000—will be awarded and will be used to recognize and commend officers.
Listen to this.

To engage both in foot and mobile patrols for the four-month period. They must establish standards including punctuality—

Punctuality.

The issuance of fixed penalty tickets

Those are some of the things here. We going to pay police to come to work on time and share tickets. We are going to—these are the policies implemented to improve national security in this country whilst nobody is safe and people coming into your home with I “doh” even know what you call it, AK15 or whatever it is. The big, big guns, bigger than anything the police have. This is what they are doing.

And you know what is dangerous about this, Madam President? A simple Google search, if you Google search about malicious prosecution claims in Trinidad and Tobago you will find a litany of cases. In this year alone I can read for you—I am sorry my thing went down there—you could go down the road, just look at the news this year alone about the amount of money again, that the taxpayer has to pay.

And I would just read the headlines, “Claxton Bay man awarded $150,000 for malicious prosecution”; “Repairman awarded $127,000 for malicious prosecution”; “State to pay…”—Inshan—“Ishmael $.3 million for wrongful arrest.” And it was on and on and on. “Cunupia man awarded $280,000 for malicious prosecution.” And that is where we are going. “Lumber contractor $170,000 in damages for malicious prosecution”. “Strip-searched in public? Man awarded $.3 million against police.”

But the problem is it is not against the police. It is me and you and every
other citizen that has to pay taxes that have to pay for this. So when you incentivize, rather than you negotiate in good faith with the unions and set proper wages for the men and women of our police service, you are incentivizing just locking up people.

You do not incentivize making sure your matter sees its way through court because in almost all of these matters where people sue the State, the criminal matters fall through at the Magistrate’s Court level due to the non-attendance of police, due to the fact that they did not follow proper procedures. And now you are incentivizing so that they will do these things and what the police call “bad case”. They are going to share “bad case” for people because you are rewarding them for just making up the numbers. It is a public relation stunt. It is not a policy to deal with the crime situation.

So Madam Chairman, in closing, I just want to say the last time a population in this country was so frustrated with a government, you know, there was this thing called the “do so” and there was a hand gesture that went with it. Because they had to get rid of the Government of the day. They were tired of the nepotism, they were tired of the corruption, they were tired of the fact that every budget after budget it was just a disappearing middle class and more oppression for the poor.

It may very well be the rally cry of the tired and the oppressed. And as you drive along the highways and the byways and roundabouts and places of assembly here, there is a new cry of resistance and defiance that will inspire revolutionary zeal to get rid of the wicked and malicious regime.

And I want to join all of those who believe they deserve more than 4 per cent. I want to join all of those who are feeling the pain at the gas pump. I want join all of those who are the subject of malice and ill will and political bad mind,
the Ramdeens, the Ramlogans, and the Rambarans. And I want say Minister Imbert, have yourself a Merry Christmas. Thank you.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]

**Madam President:** Sen. Vieira.

3.35 p.m.

**Hon. Senators:** [Inaudible]

**Madam President:** I think, Members, Members, I think—

**Sen. Mark:** Sorry Ma’am.

**Madam President:** —we are getting so happy with ourselves that we are forgetting where we are. So I will ask you please rein in that joy that you seem to be feeling. Sen. Vieira.

**Sen. Mark:** [Inaudible]

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

**Sen. Anthony Vieira:** Thank you, Madam President. Despite the criticisms, despite the gloomy prognostications, I do not agree that this budget is wicked and brutal.

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

**Sen. A. Vieira:** It should not be demonized as a betrayal of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. Senators:** [Crosstalk]

**Sen. A. Vieira:** Yes, yes, there are dark clouds.

**Madam President:** No. Stop. Excuse me, Sen. Nakhid just hold on one second. Members have been allowed to make their contributions. Okay, and I would ask
then that when Sen. Vieira is making his contribution that he be paid the respect that others have been paid. Continue Senator.

**Sen. A. Vieira:** Thank you.

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

**Sen. A. Vieira:** Yes, there are dark clouds. And yes, the country is going through rough waters. We had the COVID pandemic and the resulting fallout. We had a steep decline in energy prices prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and there is escalating crime. But on balance, it seems to me that there is still much for which we should be thankful.

**Hon. Senator:** Absolutely.

**Hon. Senator:** Yes.

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

**Sen. A. Vieira:** The economy is stable.

**Hon. Senator:** Yes.

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

**Sen. A. Vieira:** Our currency is stable.

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

**Sen. A. Vieira:** And we live in a diverse, free, stable democracy.

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

**Sen. A. Vieira:** In this country, people get to speak their minds freely. Our courts robustly uphold the constitutional rights of every citizen to freedom of political thought and expression. Here, free, fair and transparent elections remain the order of the day. We have had a high turnover of governments, whether PNM, UNC, NAR, People’s Partnership, the most recent example being what just occurred in
Tobago. Here, the institutions of democracy, elections, political parties, the courts and Parliament, they remain strong.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. A. Vieira: I say this not to diminish or to minimize the hardships being suffered by many, which as parliamentarians we must do everything in our power to alleviate but simply to point out that Trinidad and Tobago is doing better than many other places—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]


Madam President: I am not going to warn anybody again. The next time I hear the comments that I have been hearing, I am going to ask various Senators to leave the Chamber. Continue Sen. Vieira.

Sen. A. Vieira: Thank you. Let us look at how those horsemen have plowed through some other countries. China, whose economy has not just slowed down, but it is in contracting with a weakened and uncertain currency. Turkey, where inflation has not—has climbed not at 5.9 per cent but above 83 per cent and prices in the transport, food and housing services have skyrocketed. Britain, where living standards continue to fall as wages fail to outpace inflation, amid soaring energy prices, food prices, potential power shortages, manufacturing output down and a probable recession. Consider the plight of workers in the United States, where companies routinely forego responsibility to their employees, leaving it to customers to supplement their meagre incomes via tips. In cold hearted, profit driven societies where capitalism favours the few at the cost of the many, you can
work very hard at two jobs and still not be able to make a decent living, still not be able to pay your bills. Now, that is treating workers with disdain, contempt and scorn. Happily in Trinidad and Tobago, as recognized in this budget, that is not who we are and it is not where we are.

Accordingly, we should not be ungrateful. We should not take for granted that this budget, even in the face of an uncertain global economy, people are officially recognized as the most valuable asset and central to our development.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. A. Vieira: Citizens should be grateful for Government’s very careful stewardship of the economy over the last couple of years.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. A. Vieira: They should not be blind to the beneficial fiscal measures geared towards putting more disposable income in the hands of consumers and towards safeguarding our social protection system and safety nets. Interventions for the socially displaced, social housing accommodation, access to education, the reopening of the GATE, access to free health care.

My impression of this budget is that the technocrats who prepared it did a good job explaining the circumstances which have brought us to where we are today. They have done a decent job in the conventional sense in treating with the Draft Estimates and the allocations, using a cautiously optimistic approach for handling the country’s finances over the next year. It seems to me that the Minister of Finance and Government have done a good job in maintaining economic stability during a period of high disruption, uncertainty and volatility. The last couple of years would have been a roller coaster for whoever was in government. Government deserves credit for keeping the ship of State afloat—
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. A. Vieira: —in turbulent and uncharted waters, where ineptitude would have resulted in either capsizing or running aground.

But, the budget is not perfect. In fact, from my perspective, there are some gaps and there are areas in need of improvement and I offer the following suggestions by way of constructive criticism. To begin with, the budget suffers by being overly conventional. Typically, it is based on GDP, which reportedly has grown by 34 per cent since 2020, but GDP only focuses on the market. It ignores the values and services produced by other actors in the State, and it has blind spots where externalities are concerned, that is to say, costs imposed on others without paying the price.

Mainstream economics is blind to the fact that while our per capita GDP may be higher now than it was seven years ago, or that while our nominal GDP is the highest it has been since we became an independent country, the rise in income levels has not made our society more equal. Accordingly, GDP, whether real, nominal or otherwise, should not be treated as the be all and end all when considering what makes a country successful. We need to turn our priorities away from GDP growth.

The budget also suffers by applying conventional thinking to solving complex, social and economic problems, at times perpetuating the very problems we are trying to solve. Because the problems of the 21st Century are not conventional and they cannot be solved using 20th Century approaches and systems we need to reassess the way we do things and we must be willing to abandon methods which are not of much use. An example of this is the continuing use of mosquito spraying. Now I have complained about this in the past. How is it even though
they are aware of safer, more effective alternatives that the Insect Vector department at the Ministry of Health continues to spray neighbourhoods with Malathion?—a toxic substance, which kills our pollinators and other beneficial insects yet has little or no effect against very mosquitoes been targeted. Is this based on habit; the fact that the Insect Vector Control has been doing this for the past 50 years? Or is it because we like to make is as if—make as if we are doing something, even when those who know better are fully aware that nothing constructive is happening, in fact, the opposite, because you are harming the environment. Instances like this cast doubt on those who are supposed to serve and protect us, on how they conduct their operations. When administrators persist in pressing forward with the same old same old in the face of change circumstances, when entrenched methods and systems are out of step with the needs of the time, it is Government, who runs the risk of disconnect and possible loss of trust.

Besides relying on models, which are overly based on how things have been, rather than what is to come, is the oft heard complaint about red tape and bureaucracy. Now, I readily acknowledge that work has been done in terms of reducing red tape and improving systems in some quarters, for example, the renewal of driver’s permits and identification cards, but much still needs to be done. If one can incorporate a company and file annual returns online, then why the need to go physically to Companies Registry for registered copies and certificates? Why should getting a grant of probate, effecting a change of car ownership, or the typing of criminal depositions be such a hassle and take so long? When will the call for meaningful Customs reform be heeded? Reform that can reduce delays at the ports, delays which cost importers more, even when those delays are caused by Customs.

UNREVISED
Now that we have grown accustomed to virtual meetings, why must decisions taken during meetings be put on a back burner until paper records are physically signed or initialed? Regulations should be updated to allow for electronic signatures. Minister Bacchus talked about the marriage that takes place between systems and the digital world. But we are not married as yet. I do not even know if they engaged.

Why are some institutions still requiring job applicants to provide proof of inoculation to qualify for employment or to be considered for a job interview?

The following analogy could help put things in perspective. Not so long ago I attended a meeting at Mt. Hope Hospital. Now, when I got to the carpark the security guard would not let me drive into the empty lanes right in front of me, or to use the car spaces there. Now, I am not talking about one or two empty spaces but a virtually empty car park. I was made to drive around the whole car park and park in a little poorly cordoned off area, a considerable walking distance from the building that I was looking to get to, even though directly in front of that building there were rows of empty carpark spaces available. So, even though one should have been able to drive and park easily within the carpark some technocrats has made it unnecessarily difficult, having fenced off entirely lanes and blocking passages for no good or any apparent reason, resulting in unsightliness, wasted space and inconvenience to users. And this may be analogous to some of our regulations, systems and procedures, which to begin with were never designed to promote efficiency or productivity.

Unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape has made matters—simple matters—unnecessarily complicated and time consuming. Unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape are symptoms of poor business processes, a lack of proper planning and
oversight. Can you imagine that in this day and age, women are not allowed to enter public offices if their tops are sleeveless or they wearing tights? I mean, what is with that? Government must take meaningful steps to clear the bottlenecks and to get rid of unnecessary red tape. Resources should be allocated for streamlining and simplifying the country’s regulations, systems and procedures geared towards customer satisfaction and the promotion of efficiency and productivity. Regulations, systems and procedures should serve citizens, not the other way around.

Now, besides red tape reform, perhaps the greatest shift needed is reducing this country’s overreliance on the energy sector. The budget gives lip service to the notion of diversification, but offers no pathway or identifiable signposts on how such a transformation might be achieved. Indeed, the Minister of Finance’s insistence on oil and gas being the:

“cornerstone of our economy”—and I quote from the Budget Statement—“for years to come”

Coupled with the fact that the Government’s best plans for diversification, actually relate to diversification within the energy sector, only serves to underscore an unhealthy addiction to oil and gas and an unhealthy reliance on the energy sector. Now, do not get me wrong, I recognize and I am very grateful for the energy sector. It has served us well for many years and it offers a lifeline in keeping this economy afloat. But the energy sector distorts the financial reality among other things by underwriting inefficiencies in the non-energy sector. So, while it is good to hear that higher prices for oil, gas and petrochemicals, will spur on economic recovery and strengthen economic resilience, I am concerned that economic
resilience seems to be revolving mainly around the energy sector. We should be expanding our horizons not shrinking them.

I am not going to rehash what I have said in previous contributions about the blue and green economies, even though both promise immense resource wealth, great potential for boosting economic growth, employment and innovation, other than to point out that neither aspect really feature in the budget. I am not going to dwell on the need to take advantage of new opportunities in the services sector, for example, as relates to medical tourism, or the need to develop the services sector as an engine of growth. But I do caution that, given the extreme volatility in oil and gas prices, and that it is no longer easy to produce oil and gas anymore, when the energy money eventually stops rolling in, as started to happen in 2014, unless we use this unexpected oil and gas windfall wisely, the consequences are going to be catastrophic. It is going to take daring and imagination to find and create jobs which are self-sustaining as we transition and diversify from the extractive sector, but it needs to be done. How we transition to sustainable diversification, I believe, is Government’s greatest challenge, a challenge substantially complicated by the fact that this is going to be happening while robotics, automation and artificial intelligence are having a destructive impact on employment. All ramped up, all ready to go in the aftermath of COVID.

Technological disruption should be at the top of the country’s agenda. In an era of relentless change and uncertain future, we need all hands on deck, not just Government, but private sector, the unions and the professional organizations to tap into and to develop more diverse talent pools. We should be investing in technology that will empower and enable citizens to be self-sufficient and productive. We need to be reskilling and upskilling the existing workforce.

UNREVISED
Digital literacy, that is to say having the skills to thrive in a society where communication and access to information is done via digital technologies, such as, online platforms and mobile devices. Digital literacy is essential and those who fail to acquire digital expertise, they will be left behind. So, I was happy to hear Minister Bacchus speak on digital literacy, the ICT centres and the digital divide. Reskilling and upskilling may also take the form of on the job training, online learning or development courses. All must be readily available. As the economy and the labour market gets more digitized, the greater the imperative to update citizen skills, including the elderly, the bar is being raised all the time.

Now the budget also makes mention about digitization of the creative sector, and providing assistance to small and micro enterprises in that regard. Now, whether you are making movies, furniture, or music, unless small business and our creatives understand their intellectual property rights and how best to exploit them, we may be putting the cart before the horse. The Intellectual Property Office and the IP Academy should be front and centre of this initiative, since the failure to register trademarks, designs, or apply for patent protection can be very damaging to our business. Yet, the IP Office is literally and figuratively stuck in an old building between Frederick and Chacon Streets—difficult to get to by car given the congested traffic in the area, the number of one way streets and the lack of parking.

Studies have shown that investing in IP rights during bleak times can greatly increase market share. So, if Government is sincere about integrating the creative sector, into the global marketplace, then the assets and resources at the IP office need to be better housed and more conveniently located. Those who work there and those who want to access the resources there in order to take control of their IP assets, they deserve better.
Now, I have spoken in the past about the desirability for mass transit, in particular, air trains, trams, and rail. The response that we will use buses instead is in my view unacceptable. Buses cannot move hundreds of people at a time. Buses gets stuck in traffic, and they are notoriously unpunctual and unreliable. If we want to reduce traffic, if we want to get people to stop using cars, we have to offer them an attractive, affordable and reliable alternative, which means mass transit.

It is recognized in the budget that much of our food is imported, with annual food imports averaging more than 5 billion. It is also recognized that the crisis in Ukraine impacts the ability of the world’s most powerful economies to feed their citizens and there is a need to boost local production geared towards agro processing to reduce our reliance on highly processed imported food. Government promises to build a more effective agricultural sector based on sustainable value chains using innovation, digitization, and technology and engagement of the private sector.

Now, while this all sounds good, unless the constraints affecting agriculture are first addressed, they may just be platitudes. If we are to achieve food security, Government must tackle the issue of improper land use, farmers need better access to feed, veterinary care, financial and other support services. There must be greater concern for negative environmental impacts, and the Ministry of Works and Transport, together with the regional corporations, must address the poor roads, and weak transportation networks serving our farmers. The Minister of Works and Transport spoke of a shift in focus from large projects towards road habilitation and repair and upgrading road and efficiency. Well, I hope that the farming areas will be beneficiaries of this initiative.
Last but not least, we also need to deal frontally with praedial larceny, livestock theft and piracy on the sea. How can we be talking about boosting agricultural production when these nefarious activities are allowed to flourish unabated? There are measures we can take geared towards the curtailment of these activities. Consider for example, the establishment of anti-theft committees comprising farmers, police, regional authorities and the Ministry of Agriculture representatives charged with the formulation of anti-theft strategies, community and cluster policing, which will allow stakeholders to actively participate in decision making and implementation. Is there sufficient branding, tattooing, electronic tagging to identify livestock? Are the authorities monitoring the sale of livestock to butchers abattoirs? Are farmers keeping up to date stock records, livestock inventory, using photographs and videos where possible?—important evidence for successful prosecutions if and when those matters reach court. The authorities should be encouraging and supporting neighborhood watches in and around farming communities. If we want to boost agriculture, farmers must not only be incentivized financially, right, it was— I read in the budget that we are going to be encouraging farmers to use solar energy. That is nice, but it is not enough. Our farmers need to feel safe and secure in their occupations. They must be provided with proper guidance and support in ways that are relevant to their needs.

Piracy on the sea requires dedicated legal, military and innovative interventions. The penalties for piracy should be increased and the coast guard and the Police need to be more proactive in taking preventative action, keeping constant watch in areas prone to piracy. If they are not up to the task, then perhaps the time has come to employ the services of privately contracted security
teams; private security contractors to provide security personnel, both armed and unarmed onboard for protection against those cruel, bloodthirsty, voracious monsters.

Under the rubric of medium term policy framework, mentioned is made about Government’s awareness of several downside risks, which could derail our economic recovery. Yet notwithstanding all the flooding, which has negatively impacted both islands these last few months, I see little or no provision for climate change, or the need for disaster reduction and disaster preparedness. Anyone who was unconcerned about hurricanes, floods, droughts, and forest fires here or abroad, must be living in a bubble because climate change is happening, and it is biting hard. While we may not have experienced devastating hurricanes, floods and landslides on a scale as occurred in parts of Florida, Germany, Pakistan, Japan, and China recently, what we have experienced, has nonetheless, hobbled and ravaged communities, laying waste to roads and bridges. Besides the obvious inconvenience and setbacks for citizens, floods and natural disasters can cost the State billions, undermining gains made under the budget.

Accordingly, reducing disaster risk should be a primary goal of the State and this includes setting appropriate budgets for disaster risk reduction. We should not wait for problems to occur and then try to fix them, we should aim to fix them before they start. The current reactive approach is not cost effective. We need to implement disaster risk reduction using the Sendai framework as a starting point. Under the Sendai framework, we can prepare communities to bounce back after disasters by better understanding risk, by strengthening risk governance, by promoting resilient investments and by preparing, responding and building back better. The Australians are developing what they call the concept of betterment.
4.05 p.m.

A decision to delay investments in resilience today will mean the nation will struggle to pay for recovery from disasters tomorrow. Disaster risk reduction requires government to work closely with communities and stakeholders. It requires government to shift its focus on strategy from disaster response and recovery to risk prevention. It requires government to review and evaluate disaster management and sectoral legislation and it requires an understanding of the future of interconnected, interdependent multi-hazard risks and their potential impacts. Government must be held accountable for disaster risk reduction actions or the lack thereof.

Now, I leave it to the economists and numbers crunchers to say whether the policies under this budget will help or harm the poor and middle class in the long run and, if so, to what extent. My concerns have been directed towards the need for diversification, technological disruption, red-tape reform and a new paradigm for development.

As stated in the beginning of my contribution, there is much for which we should be thankful, and while there may be positives to the budget, it falters by being out of step with the gestalt. The budget fails to appreciate that people have come out of this lockdown feeling anxious and pessimistic. Some were ill, some lost loved ones, some lost jobs and some lost businesses. Almost everyone has suffered a loss of income and, added to the stress of the pandemic, people are understandably concerned about price increases across the board, about disaffected youth and escalating crime, and whether the country is heading in the right or wrong direction.

Becoming poor can happen quickly. One retrenchment or death can plunge
a family into poverty. People want to see buffers against this in place. They want to see policies that will leave them feeling uplifted. People are more worried than hopeful. In a time of prevailing uncertainty, when an anxious population is looking for reassurance, hope, guidance, this conventional budget, this solid budget, does not go far enough. It lacks imagination. It does not resonate with people. It fails to offer a vision of hope with a clear path towards a future we can believe in. And I would like to believe that we can do better. I thank you.

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

**The Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal):** Mr. Vice-President, I thank you, most sincerely, for the opportunity to join in this debate. I would firstly begin by, of course, commending Sen. Vieira for his contribution here today, reminding us as Senators that this is, indeed, the Upper House and reminding me, as a new Senator—a relatively new Senator, only serving here for approximately two and a half years—that that is the quality of contribution that you expect from the Upper House, because this is certainly not a Monday night forum—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:**—or a show or even the political hustings.

You know, I would immediately jump into some of the contributions because, of course, there are certain things that I have to address on the record that were placed onto the record by Sen. Lutchmedial. You know, I want to share an opinion that Sen. Lutchmedial—she articulated that, you know, he sometimes feels vexed and she is upset or something to that effect. Well, I, after listening to the Senator’s opening comments, immediately I was vexed and upset, because the
Senator made reference to viewing a Ramleela not so long ago, and in addressing the Ramleela, she spoke about the burning of Rawan, and she also spoke about the not so recent decision made by the DPP that two “Rams”, two “Rams” were elevated. And, as a Hindu, and a practising Hindu, I would say to the Senator, bat in your crease, and “doh” make reference to— Your Ram, and the Ram that I know are two completely different Rams, and I will tell you why.

For the non-Hindu public, the Sri Ram that I know, Mr. Vice-President, being a Hindu, and understanding what the Ramayan stands for, the Ram that I know—because while the Senator witnessed a Ramleela, I narrated Ramleela for more than 15 years of my life, and in narrating the Ramleela, I understand the virtues that the Sri Ram in the Ramayans stood for. I understand that he stood for dharma. I understand that he stood for truthfulness. I understand that is what the Ram of Ayodhya represented. But the Ram that the Senator referred to, one of the Rams did not make—my Ram did not make $11.9 million in legal fees during years of 2010 to 2015. Maybe her Ram did that, the Senator’s Ram did that. But the Ram in the Ramayan that I know, did not also collect legal fees for persons who were dead or deceased. Maybe her Ram did that. But the Ram that I know in the Ramayan did not do that. So, I would respectfully submit to the Senator, bat in your crease.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramp Singh-Sooklal: If you do not understand the tenets of the Ramayan, do not make that analogy. So, the same anger that the Senator felt, one could imagine as a practising Hindu, what I felt when that analogy was made in this honourable Senate.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]
Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Also, Sen. Lutchmedial is so predictable, and my good friend, Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing reminded me that I was not allowed props. But even before entering into this budget, I did do a prop, but I understand the Standing Order prevents me, and what I did, I knew I was coming after Sen. Lutchmedial, “I draw a line down meh paper”. “I write ‘Faris’ on one end and ah write ‘fees’ on the next end”, because I know that is the only thing the Senator was going to come into this Senate and make her contribution about, Faris and fees, nothing else of value to uplift this country, nothing of substance to lift the people of this country. So my paper was divided into “Faris” and “fees”.

The next prop that I prepared, which I know I cannot present to the people of Trinidad and Tobago because, of course, again, my friend reminded me that the Standing Orders would prevent me from doing that, was a prop where I wrote, “$137 million, 2015, inherited UNC legal fees”. But, again, I cannot present it to the public, because that is what we at the Office of the Attorney General inherited when we assumed office in 2015, approximately $137 million in legal fees, fees that were accrued during the UNC tenure in office.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: So, again, Mr. Vice-President, I was not surprised, I was not taken aback. All the fire and the flame that the Senator displayed, I know it was “Faris/fees” and that would have been the end of the hon. Senator’s contribution. Anyway, Mr. Vice-President, but there were some critical statements made. There was also another contribution as it relates to fees, again, and I have to remember that I am also speaking to the good people of Trinidad and Tobago, the people of Trinidad and Tobago who are logged on to this debate. Again, this not the political hustings, this is where we are here to report to the
people of Trinidad and Tobago for them to understand where their moneys have been spent.

And I want to make reference, Mr. Vice-President, to a document that was laid by the previous Attorney General, in another place. It was laid in this Parliament. It was laid in the Parliament, it was the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of July, 2021, and I think it covers a snapshot of what has happened in the Office of the Attorney General. And if you may permit me to read into the record, because it speaks to expenditure and it speaks to the kinds of savings that took place in the Office of the Attorney General, under a PNM-led administration as opposed to what happened in a UNC-led administration. And in that particular document that was laid in the Parliament, if I may quickly read it, it said:

At the onset the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs is able to report that the Government has achieved a saving of some $2.456\ billion in expenditure—and listen because of what—by the simple reorganization of three Ministries into one umbrella Ministry.

And that is where, what we would have had under a UNC administration, was and Office of the Attorney General, the Ministry of Legal Affairs and the Ministry of Justice. There was a Minister in every Ministry—a Minister collecting a Cabinet salary in every single Ministry. What we did, as an effective administration, was consolidate all three Ministries and that report that was laid by the hon. Faris Al-Rawi, when he was then the Attorney General, it spoke about that simple amalgamation. What it says:

The Appropriation and Supplementary Appropriation Acts for an 11-year period 2010 to 2021, demonstrate that for the period 2010 to 2015, the three separated Ministries incurred expenditure in the sum of $4.585 billion.
While in comparison for the six-year period 2015 to 2021, the Office of the Attorney General expended a sum of 2.12938, sorry—$2.129 billion. So, we are clearly seeing, whereby from the get go of the PNM administration coming into power and serving in the Office of the Attorney General, by consolidating three Ministries which, as I said before, three separate Ministers, three separate expenditures, we were able to cut the expenditure significantly.

Another thing that I want to make reference to, and I would not get into too much detail because I would leave it for my honourable and esteemed Attorney General to get into detail, was the talk about in the Office of the Attorney General, making reference to the point that we do not win cases and we do not win matters. Of course, depending on the nature of a matter. I have been an advocate in the court—and, you know, I always hear my friend coming here and talking about the criminal court, criminal court, and I often wonder, what really kind of experience that she alludes to about having in the criminal court, eh? One who practises the law and really goes to court and practises criminal law, you understand that matters can go anywhere based on the evidence that you have.

So, if you lose a matter in the criminal court, maybe it is just a very astute defence counsel on the other side, maybe evidence was not presented in a particular way. But notwithstanding that statement, what I want to read into the record, which also came out of that report that was laid on the 2nd of July, 2021 by the then Attorney General—and this is just to remind the members of the public, because I am reminding myself as well that I am speaking to you, the good people of Trinidad and Tobago.

In respect of the pursuit of matters in relation to the construction of the highway to Point Fortin, the Office of the Attorney General and the state
enterprise secured recovery of approximately US $1 billion, and that is one matter with a cross-claim of approximately TT $1.4 billion while defending claims against the State close to $250 million in other matters relating to the same project.

All of these matters relate to events occurring prior to 2015.

In respect of one claim for breach of constitutional rights commenced in 2015, relating to matters prior thereto, the State involving damages over $80 million, the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs achieved a savings of TT $30 million in damages.

And that particular report—of course, I have a lot to report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and that report, I read it into the Hansard—that report of the 2nd of July, 2021. It is a report in which the then Attorney General, of course, would have explained to this country and to this honourable Senate—and not this honourable Senate, sorry, this honourable Parliament, what was happening as it relates to expenditure and as it relates to legal fees and all of that.

So, you know, just piggybacking, again, on what Sen. Lutchmedial would have said, you know, in her political speech where she reminded the people of this country, “Every time yuh stand by the fuel pump”—she spoke about what kind of fees we spend. I want to remind the people of Trinidad—and I am borrowing from her speech—“Every time yuh stand by the fuel pump, remember the $11.9 million one of the Ram make”. “Every time yuh children have to drive on a half-way road, remember the $137 million in 2015 that we, as a government, inherited and had to deal with those fees.”

So, Mr. Vice-President, that is the extent to which I would deal with those issues, because I appreciate that I have to report and I have a responsibility now to
report, as we in the Upper House and Senators would do, to have a conversation
with the people of Trinidad and Tobago, so that they have a sense as to what their
government has been doing.

You know, Mr. Vice-President, let me take the opportunity to make
reference to a very—in preparation for this debate, I came across a quote and it said:

“…leaders must be courageous enough this make tough decisions and ensure
that the relevant people understand why the decisions are being made….As
more tough decisions need to be taken in the future, please ensure that the
implications are explained clearly to the population, so that they could buy-
in and support.”

And, believe it or not, Mr. Vice-President, this quote was taken from—it is
page 39 of the *Hansard* of a 2020 debate of an Appropriation Financial Bill, 2021
by our very own Independent Senator, Dr. Dillon-Remy. And when I came across
that particular quote, Mr. Vice-President, it reminded me of my responsibility of
being a part of the Government so, therefore, being a part of the leadership of this
country, it reminded me of my responsibility to engage in a conversation with the
people of this country, this beloved country, so that they understand exactly what
has been happening in the Ministry.

Using that quote and spring-boarding off of that quote by the hon. Sen. Dr.
Dillon-Remy, to that effect, I must express that the Prime Minister, as a leader of
this nation, is courageous to make those tough decisions to ensure the stability of
our beautiful country. Piggybacking, again, out of that quote made by Dr. Dillon-
Remy, where leaders must be courageous enough, I must acknowledge the
Minister of Finance for making those tough decisions and being courageous
enough to take the licks from different quarters in order to ensure that we could secure a future for this country. So, it would have been remiss of me, if before I jump into my contribution, I did not acknowledge our Prime Minister and I did not acknowledge our hon. Minister of Finance.

You know, Mr. Vice-President, in preparation for this particular debate as well, it brought me to a statement that was made on the 30th of November, 2008, and it was a statement by our previous political leader, Mr. Manning. And Mr. Manning said:

Government has a special responsibility to ensure that our economy is kept in motion, the people kept employed and the social fabric kept strong.

And now, in preparing for this contribution, I decided that I was going to look at the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, and how is it or how have we, over the years, or within the last fiscal, how we have been able there to ensure that our economy is kept in motion, the people kept employed and social fabric kept strong. Now, of course, if we go through the length and breadth of the different Ministries, you would find that okay, for example, what happens in the Ministry of Trade and Industry may be more relevant to Mr. Manning’s quote—God bless his soul—as it relates to Government’s responsibility to ensure that our economy is kept in motion.

But, believe it or not, even at the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs which, again, I am so blessed and privileged, at this stage in my life to have the opportunity to serve the good people of this country in, even in the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, some of the policies and measures we have implemented, I can say also, in some way or the other, contribute to keeping that economy in motion and, more so, in keeping our
people employed.

Beyond keeping our people employed, what I can also say, we have implemented policies at the Ministry that also keep our people employable, because we have a relatively young legal staff throughout the length and breadth of the Ministry. To this end, Mr. Vice-President, what I want to turn to is the human resource aspect as it exists in the Ministry in the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. Mr. Vice-President, and of course, for the benefit of the viewing and listening public, the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, we employ a total of 2,036 persons and the figure comprises, of course, contract employment, short-term contract employment and, of course, public servants as well.

Now, in this Ministry, Mr. Vice-President, again, for the benefit—because, again, we are accounting to the taxpayers as to where your money is spent—throughout the length and breadth, especially, the Office of the Attorney General, that part of the Ministry, we are looking at a total of 15 legal units and departments and 12 non-legal units and departments. So, therefore, we have a significant amount of people that are under our remit.

Now, in turning to what—because I did mention at the Office of the Attorney General, one of the policy positions we have taken is to ensure that our people are employable. And what we do is that we do considerably believe in investing in our people through training and continuous training mechanisms. So, what you would find, Mr. Vice-President, over the last fiscal—and this is definitely a policy that we intend to continue—is the development of our young professionals and our administrative and legal.

Now, at the Office of the Attorney General, Mr. Vice-President, we
understand the importance of training and development of our human resource as well as offering opportunities for other professionals to learn and, of course, you know, to develop themselves. Opportunities, for example, Mr. Vice-President, the Undergraduate and Graduate Internship Programme, where on a yearly basis, almost 28 undergraduate students participate in and they have an opportunity to learn from, of course, legal luminaries within the parameters of the Ministry.

Mr. Vice-President, the Ministry continues, the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, as we continue to build our human resources, the Ministry partnered with the Scholarships and Advanced Training Division of the Ministry of Education to employ associate professionals. Now, associate professionals, to the members of the listening public, may be those young persons who win scholarships and then, of course, they require a place to do their in-service. We open our arms to these young professionals, these bright young professionals, who work throughout the length and breadth of the Ministry. And what we also believe, it engenders that culture within our young people of giving back and serving their country as well. Because you got a scholarship from the country, it is important for you to understand what it is now to give back to your country. And we are so pleased to have been partnering with the Ministry of Education as we bring these young professionals, again, recognizing at the Office of the Attorney General, the importance in developing our young people who are ultimately the future of this country.

Mr. Vice-President, well, there is a continuous partnership with the Hugh Wooding Law School as well, where on a continuous basis for in-service training, we would have approximately 23 or more in-service trainees from the law school who, again, have the opportunity to come into the Ministry. And they do not learn
from me, because I am a politician—I am in a revolving door. “So, I here today, I gone tomorrow”—but who they learn from are the long-standing public servants and legal officers who work in the Ministry. And, of course, they have an opportunity, in my respectful submission, to learn from some of the best lawyers that exist at that Ministry. Again, apolitical lawyers, who are not politically associated with any party, but simply officers or public officers who are lawyers who continue to contribute to the development of laws in this country.

What we also have is training programmes, Mr. Vice-President. That is where some of our expenditure goes into—training programmes offered to, this year alone I believe, 155 staff members in the areas ranging, but not limited to competition law, training in research for legal staff. We even do Spanish as a foreign language, Spanish training. Because, of course, there are certain matters, especially immigration and those matters related to same, where you may need your lawyers to also have that training in Spanish, strategic facility management. So, Mr. Vice-President, I am happy to report to Trinidad and Tobago that, as a part of our expenditure, we have been investing in our people, we have been investing in our human—of course, there is a lot more to be done.

I can also speak to having assumed office as the Minister in that Ministry, I was given the full blessings by the previous Attorney General and, of course, I know I have the blessings of the current Attorney General, where I would work with different departments throughout the length and breadth of the Ministry and collaborate with the Judicial Education Institute, the JEI, to ensure that we can get further training for our lawyers, further training in areas of advocacy, training in legal drafting.

I am pleased to also, for the record, place on the record that I am currently in
conversation with the Chief State Solicitor, where he has presented to me a proposal with areas of further development that he wants for his staff recognizing, again, his staff is sometimes fresh out of Hugh Wooding Law School. I was a young lawyer once and I understand what it is, the learning of the law—Mr. Vieira is a lawyer. We have so many lawyers in here—who understand the real practise of the law is really not on the books and it is not in law school, it is the first day that you step out of school and you start practising, that is where learning really begins. And in recognizing that being, of course, having gone through the process and, of course, coming from a background where I was a teacher myself, I understand the importance of investing in our young people, working with our young people and, of course, giving them an opportunity to develop themselves.

So, I am pleased—and I am sure I will get the blessings of the AG—to work with other departments as we expand our collaboration with the Judicial Education Institute to ensure that we continue that training and building our human resource—and, you know because, again, the Office of the AG is the watchdog of the State—and you know, building our lawyers so that they can, indeed, grow and prosper, and certainly develop and go along the path that we want them to go.

So, Mr. Vice-President, that is one of the areas that I quickly wanted to report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago in accounting to you, where your moneys have been spent in the Office of the Attorney General because, of course, human resource, that development, especially of our younger lawyers is very dear to my heart.

You know, Mr. Manning—and I started off by making reference to that quotation made by Mr. Manning, our then Prime Minister—Mr. Manning also spoke about the responsibility of leaders in ensuring that our social fabric is kept
strong. And I think in looking at this part, the social fabric kept strong, this is a part, here we can see significant roles played by the Office of the Attorney General. Mr. Vice-President, the social fabric, as we know of Trinidad and Tobago, touches and concerns every single citizens from our elderly to our adults to our children. Mr. Vice-President, when I think about the social fabric of this nation, I think of all our interactions, our structures, our laws, our belief systems and how we as a people come together and I think, more so, about our laws and governance, And this area, in keeping our social fabric strong, I believe that this is one of areas that the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs plays a very, very, critical role. And in looking at the role that we play and, of course, the investment that we are continuing to make as it relates to our expenditure, what I will now turn to is certain legal departments in the Office of the AG and speak to the work and their achievements and some of our work plans for the future.

If I may now turn to the Criminal Justice Unit. You know, we often, even Sen. Lutchmedial spoke about, you know, the criminal justice system being critical to her. And, of course, it is critical and it is important to every single citizen of this country, and I am pleased and I know so too is the Attorney General. And I know in his contribution, he will make reference to what his observances have been in the Criminal Justice Unit. But I want to personally recognize, Mr. Vice-President, Mrs. Farzana Nazir-Mohammed, who is the head of the Criminal Justice Unit at the Office of the Attorney General, who has the responsibility of leading a team, again, of very young lawyers, who have given and continue to give their time and service to this country in whichever way they can in order to ensure that we really revamp our criminal justice system.

**UNREVISIED**
Now, Mr. Vice-President, this Criminal Justice Unit, as a part of our expenditure and achievements, what this unit has done is, they have collaborated with the Law Reform Commission and the Chief Parliamentary Counsel Department. And, Mr. Vice-President, I am happy to report to this country, they have accomplished the introduction and the passage of a significant number of laws over the past two years, working on policy—well, at least the two years that I have been there, because I could only report for the period that I have actually been in the Ministry—and legislation such as the Anti-Gang legislation, decriminalization of marijuana, improved sexual offences law and pepper spray.

4.35 p.m.

The parliamentary period, 2021 to 2022, this unit, Mr. Vice-President, has been instrumental in working on legislation that abolishes the year and a day rule. And we also came out recently of a special select committee that deals with amendments to the Sexual Offences Act; voyeurism in particular, this unit was very instrumental in the orchestrating, creating the policy and the law as it relates to that area. Mr. Vice-President, anything criminal justice, this unit occupies all its time and resources towards. For example, they have coordinated several implantation projects, for example, a member of the Nightingale Committee for the implementation of Anti-Terrorism Bill, 2022, which facilitates the return of nationals, which are women and children from conflict zones. This particular unit, I am pleased to report to the country, also sits as a member of the roundtable drafting committee for the national action plan of the Caribbean Firearms Roadmap, which attempts to reduce the flow of illicit firearms and ammunition within the Caribbean region.

The CJU unit, I am pleased to report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago,
has also tabled several Bills for discussion at the Legislative Review Committee. And, of course, I will not speak out of turn, I will leave that for the most distinguished AG to speak to when he does his contribution as to what his plans for our legislative agenda would look like. Mr. Vice-President, if I may now, in having a conversation with the people of Trinidad and Tobago, report on the role and function of our Anti-Terrorism Unit at the Office of the AG, so the people of Trinidad and Tobago could again understand where your moneys and your resources, your taxpayers’—because I am a taxpayer too so I understand why the people of Trinidad and Tobago would want that level of accountability. And I am pleased to account to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that your Anti-Terrorism Unit at the Office of the AG is alive and well. And, again, I must recognize Ms. Vyana Sharma, a young lady again who is spearheading that Anti-Terrorism Unit and is doing a remarkable work with her team in ensuring that, you know, that our fight against white-collar crime and ensuring that we are compliant with international obligations, are up to par.

The Anti-Terrorism Unit, Mr. Vice-President, I am pleased to report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, carried out training with several entities over the period of 2018 to 2022. Entities that received training, Mr. Vice-President, ranged from Financial Investigation Branch, TTPS; Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs; SSA; University of the Southern Caribbean; Immigration Division, to name a few. So, what we have been doing and what we have been encouraging amongst these units is once laws are placed on the books, we are encouraging our units to now go out there and lend the training because we understand the law in a book is one thing, operationalization is another part of it and in recognizing that a lot of effort and time is allotted by these units and now after critical pieces of
legislation are passed, with working with other stakeholders to ensure that they understand, they are sensitized. So, once the law becomes operational, they have a full understanding, and I would have already identified some of the partner stakeholders that this unit particularly works with.

Mr. Vice-President, there are also several legislative accomplishments that are coming from this unit at the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, such as the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, Trinidad and Tobago Special Economic Zones Act, the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Regulations; all of those are things. Of course, there are some areas that require some further attention for operationalization but I must commend this unit for the hard work that they continue to do in ensuring that the laws and the social fabric of our nation is kept together. This unit, Mr. Vice-President, works consistently to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago’s international obligations, pursuant to the Financial Action Task Force, FATF, you know, standards are also met. So, again, that is me, just simply in a nutshell, because there is so much to report on but such a limited time, just flagging some of the general areas that these units are responsible for and, of course, I must commend them.

Mr. Vice-President, there is also a unit known as the International Office of Child Rights that operates out of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, where Trinidad and Tobago, your taxpayers’ dollars are spent in, of course, developing this unit. They have played a critical role in legislative reform to seek the amendments to the Act and drafting supporting regulations as it relates to children. Just a few days ago, as a matter of fact, I saw that the International Office of Child Rights, they would have also engaged in some training sessions again; training sessions which they partnered with persons from
The Hague as it relates to again training on critical issues as it relates to international child—you know, international obligations on the rights of a child. So that is also another area.

Mr. Vice-President, if I now respectfully turn to the Environmental Commission. The Environment Commission also falls in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. In this particular Commission, Mr. Vice-President, work is in progress at the Commission as it relates to the law, analyzing the Environmental Management Act, Chap. 33:05, and proposing amendments that are in alignment with the international best practices for environmental courts that are targeted at maximizing the use and efficiency of the court. And, of course, the weather that is blazing all of us nearing every single day, we understand how critical climate change is and addressing those issues are. So, of course, kudos to the Environmental Commission that also forms part of our Ministry. And to you, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, this is where your taxpayers’ dollars are going in, developing these units and ensuring that they are provided with the resources so that they can, you know, ensure that proper litigation laws are passed that could, of course, enhance our experiences as citizens in this country, going back again to what Mr. Manning would have said, ensuring that our social fabric is kept strong.

Mr. Vice-President, there are so many units but the last unit that I would perhaps—two last units I would look at is the Central Authority, for example. Reporting to you, the people of Trinidad and Tobago again, this Central Authority Unit is also presently engaged in looking into further legislation and administrative reforms under the Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Act, to refine and to bring the scheme of mutual legal assistance to the forefront of contemporary
international corporation practices. So, again, to you, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the Central Authority, it is alive, it is kicking, it is doing well, and it is a unit that operates out of the Office of the Attorney General which focuses again on critical pieces of legislation to keep our social fabric strong.

And then, of course, it would be remiss of me if I do not recognize the Human Rights Unit. The Human Rights Unit, of course, critical to the implementation of critical human rights. That unit—just about six days ago, Mr. Vice-President, the unit would have partnered and was a part—this unit and members of our unit, just about six days ago, were invited to speak at a Model UN, United Nations forum in which we would have worked with students—that unit would have worked with students, training them on the critical areas of human rights. Again, that is as the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs continues—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Sagramsingh-Sooklal, you have five minutes remaining.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President—as we continue our outward reach to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, in looking at—so, as I would have indicated, those are the units—from the get-go, before I jumped into the units, I would have indicated those are some of the units and what they have been able to achieve and where the taxpayers’ dollars are going.

In the Office of the AG’s side, if I may now turn to the Ministry of Legal Affairs side, on the Ministry of Legal Affairs side, I have to recognize our very hard working Registrar General, Ms. Karen Bridgewater. Notwithstanding the
trepidation of the pandemic and all of the challenges that she has faced, she continues to do her endeavour best to steer that Department, the Registrar General’s Department, in the right direction. Notwithstanding, Mr. Vice-President, the challenges that the pandemic had created, this lady, the Registrar General, and the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, I am pleased to report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, is also in the final stages of full digitization of a number of services at the Registrar General’s Department. The Registrar General’s Department, for example, Mr. Vice-President, has, in the last few years, built out three integrated registries which is the land, companies and civil registries, with the replacement and upgrade of its processes and systems, at both hardware and software levels.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, the Ministry has already launched, and members of the public, I am sure, are aware of, the PBRS system, which is the Property Business Registration System, as well as its new Companies Registry Online System, the CROS system, which both offer a seamless and user-friendly access. Now, I will admit that, of course, like with any technology—I mean, I will bat in my crease and I do not ever pretend to understand technology, at least at this level, but of course we would have had our challenges once these systems went live. And as you understand and as the country, I am hoping, will understand, that once these new systems go live, it is only then our technocrats may be able to fully appreciate what difficulties or challenges, you know, they may have to now address their minds to.

So, certainly, I would not pretend that these systems have gone live without, you know, issues, but the people of Trinidad and Tobago can rest assured that the Registrar General’s Department continues its work in upgrading these systems to
ensure that, you know, we continue on the path of proper service delivery to, of course, you, the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And there are so much other—I am pleased to also report that we have had shipments of our polymer paper, and I am making reference to this in particular because I have my social media pages and I know members of the public will often reach out to me with complaints about, you go to a particular office and you may not have paper. This is something that is said to them. I want to place on the public record that we do have in our possession, the polymer paper and no citizen should have the cause to complain that they are unable to complete their transaction. A considerable amount of expenditure has been spent on securing this paper to ensure that the office of the Registrar General operates at its full capacity. And I am very, very pleased to report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago about, you know, at least what has been happening in a nutshell. And that is very much a nutshell, because again, Mr. Vice-President, there is so much more I wish I had the time to speak to. But I must, again, as I close off on the Registrar General’s Department, of course commend the Registrar General for the work that she continues to do.

Mr. Vice-President, you know, I—again, time will not permit me but, you know, I do want to place on the record that I did hear Sen. Deonarine when she would have spoken about, you know, with such passion about certain things in previous budgets debates she would have asked for. I, in particular, I know Sen. Deonarine—I am sure she would have been pleased when she noted that at least—and I am sure Minister Gopee-Scoon will deal with that, with the forex. I would have noted in previous budget debates she would have asked for forex and more forex to be available. So while I know the Senator may be upset about certain things that this budget probably did not satisfy, I am asking every single Senator in
this honourable Chamber to look at this budget with an open mind.

There are several other Senators that I planned to make reference to, previous budget debates where they had asked for particular things and identify how this budget, in some way or the other, attempted to satisfy it, I do not have the time, but I am just asking all of our Senators to look with an open mind at the budget and, of course, listen to the Government Bench as we attempt to defend, not a budget, but to defend, Mr. Vice-President, making good decisions, making right decisions, making the best decisions for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senators, as we observe Standing Order 51(1), for the last contribution, I call to the mike, Sen. Hislop.

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

**Sen. Laurence Hislop:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Coming after, what I would consider a boxing match, Mr. Vice-President, and being seated in very prime seats in the stands, I must say that Sen. Lutchmedial had to raise her hand in defeat and cry, “No mas, no mas.”

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** Because “pong for pong”, Mr. Vice-President, I want to score it unanimously in favour of Sen. Renuka.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** I could still feel the heat, Mr. Vice-President, inside the booth.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** I could still feel the heat. I almost wondered if the podium was melting, Mr. Vice-President.
Sen. Mark: [Inaudible]—the podium to break down.

Sen. L. Hislop: But before I continue, Mr. Vice-President, I want to—it is late in the evening but I think we need to address something that was said very early in the day and I personally take umbrage, if that is parliamentary language, Mr. Vice-President, for a clear attack by Sen. Mark on the Prime Minister of this country. He made the allegations very open, very wide but, Mr. Vice-President, there is no need for that. We—listen, but we know what the problem is, you know, Mr. Vice-President, you see, they are not accustomed to a Prime Minister who could stand scrutiny.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Hislop: They have tried so many times, even when he was in Opposition, they tried so many times to get rid of him but he is still there. And if I want to invoke—I want to invoke another—a former leader of this great movement, one by the name of Patrick Manning, and he says, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Hislop: He says, “Do you know why I am still standing?”—and I believe that Dr. Rowley has the same mantra, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” And so, that is the challenge, Mr. Vice-President, that is the challenge they have with Dr. Rowley.

Hon. Senators: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Vice-President: Senators, Senators, not the crosstalk, you know, the volume of the crosstalk and the pointing of fingers, let us keep it senatorial for the rest of the evening, please.

Sen. L. Hislop: You see, it is not only Dr. Rowley, but for some reason the UNC,
Mr. Vice-President, has an affinity with Tobago people and successful Tobago people. So, it is not only Dr. Rowley they are coming after, but they are coming after the Warner family. And for what reason? They alone know; they alone know.

So, he does not sleep at anybody’s house except the Prime Minister’s residence—

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:**—nor can they find anything in—you know, his declarations are always on point. Every time they come with something, Mr. Vice-President, about an issue in his declaration, it is dealt with and so the Opposition is going to continue trying to attack the Prime Minister but we on this side stand in defence, not only of Trinidad and Tobago, but we stand in complete defence of our leader and the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** So, if you want to find out if there is a residence, ask him. Pick up the phone and call him, Sen. Mark, through you, Mr. Vice-President, and he may answer you whether or not your allegations are founded.

**Sen. Mark:** You answer—[Inaudible]—you answer for him.

**Sen. L. Hislop:** But, Mr. Vice-President, I want to thank you for the privilege to contribute to this important document before us. I want to congratulate the Minister of Finance and the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, and all the technocrats, the Ministry of Planning and Development, who put together a complete and comprehensive piece of work. But, Mr. Vice-President, not only for this work I want to compliment them, but I want to compliment them for guiding the country through this perilous period.

You know, Sen. Vieira mentioned that we ought to be grateful or we ought
to be thankful of where we stand as a country in Trinidad and Tobago, because truth be told, you look around the world and our circumstances, Mr. Vice-President, could have been vastly different. When other countries are sadly amputating limbs of their economies, Trinidad and Tobago is administering medication, and that is done through responsible management of a difficult situation. This PNM Government has been able to face the storm head on, sail through it, and we are looking to come out on the other side, a bit bruised, but we are not dead. So, contrary to what some may be saying, the ship has not sunk, neither is it sinking, Mr. Vice-President.

You see, I am a proud citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, a proud Member of the People’s National Movement and I am a proud Member of this esteemed House, I am a proud Tobagonian, and I make no apologies for either of them. Before I came into this House, Mr. Vice-President, I was, what you may consider, the average citizen, keeping my nose down, going to work every day, making my living and living on what the good Lord blessed me with, working hard for my family and my community. And I worked in several industries. I worked in the banking sector, worked in tourism, and presently enjoying my work in construction, and I was given an opportunity to serve and I embraced the opportunity wholeheartedly, Mr. Vice-President. You see, we can never fully understand what every individual is experiencing because every individual’s case is different and every family’s circumstance is unique.

You see, even though I have achieved this position, Mr. Vice-President, I still shop at the same grocery as I did before, buy my gas, and I was shocked, the last time I went to the grocery and the last time I had to fill up my tank, for what I had to pay for what I got, Mr. Vice-President. You see, there are persons on the
ground who lament the discomfort and the hardship. However, they also understand the reasons for the measures taken. We cannot and we shall not ignore these cries. The effects of reduced subsidies are real and that is why, Mr. Vice-President, the social safety net of all social assistance grants to assist the most vulnerable was expanded. Even though it was expanded on a temporary basis, that travel grant is going to go to benefit somebody. It is going to benefit 175,000 citizens and would cost this country $175million. The reality for us, Mr. Vice-President, is that all of those social grants are still available to citizens of this country.

You see, in my beloved island of Tobago, it pains me to receive calls from families who were in receipt of food cards before the PNM demitted office and are now struggling to get food. And as often as I can, I do whatever is in my ability to assist without hesitation, because that is who I am, and it was who I am before I became a Senator and I will continue to be that way until or even after, as long as God gives me the strength and the ability to do so.

You see, Mr. Vice-President, the Finance Minister in his budget statement opened by saying that over the last seven years—

“…the last seven years have been particularly challenging for us financially as a country…”

And there is a recognition that it has been challenging financially for the man and the woman on the street. Any increase on the fuel or on the food can be detrimental to a family’s budget and the Government is tasked with making the decisions for the benefit of the whole, not one or two sectors, but the whole. And sometimes in doing that, Mr. Vice-President, a sector may feel left out, but the Government has to look at the whole picture.
You see, even in our own families, we are faced with changes to income and hard decisions, sometimes painful decisions are made, not to the benefit of one but to the whole. You see, as someone directly involved in the construction sector, as I said before, Mr. Vice-President, the effects are really felt. You see, a diesel bill of $700 every two days to refill equipment is now $1,800, and that hits at the bottom line. But, you see, we understand the realities that we face globally. And I want the country to imagine, if that bill—what that bill would be if we used the $8 per litre price that the market demands. What would that bill be? But this Government in its management of the economy found a way that even if the subsidy had to be reduced to an extent, it was not fully reduced so that it would create shocks throughout the economy.

You see, from the moment the PNM took over governance of this country in 2015, we have been on a mission, led by our leader, a mission of stabilization and growth. You see, because we experienced, Mr. Vice-President, a spending spree in this country during 2010 to 2015, with record budgets and expenditure which were compounded by record deficits. In order to meet these record deficits, in order to have this wanton spending, the deficits kept growing and growing. And we have to ask ourselves the question, when we are now faced with a tight situation, not primarily of our doing but compounded by external factors, what do we do? Do we forge ahead with decisions that are unsustainable or do we pivot? Do we change direction? Mr. Vice-President, I am proud that I belong to a Government that sees the challenge, understands the challenge and pivots to face this said challenge.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Hislop: You see, the budget affects real people in real ways, for better or
for worse, but I believe that the budget is corrective and not punitive. In other words, Mr. Vice-President, the budget seeks to create an environment for growth and stability coming out of a difficult time. It is not about inflicting punishment because what is to gain by inflicting punishment?

I want to mention some of the positives in the budget that may have been overlooked and I believe some of them were touched. But there are a couple of things that are close to my heart, Mr. Vice-President, and one of them being the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme, and I know we are privileged to have three Ministers of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries on our bench, so they will delve more in depth into these things.

4.05 p.m.

But this programme says that we are not only talking the talk, but we are walking the walk. We are about making agriculture attractive, because when you look at it, when you have 150 young persons between the ages 18 to 35 being given an opportunity to contribute positively to the development of this country, to contribute by putting food on the tables of citizens and money in their pockets. Mr. Vice-President, that is 150 young people, young men and women, who are charting a different path, who are doing something positive.

As Minister Cummings was quoted as saying, it is not a hit or miss arrangement. We are not just getting you land and say, “Go plant”. We are getting you the training to empower you to get on these lands in an informed position, so that you will be a 21st Century farmer. You see, we are not just creating farmers. We are creating businessmen and businesswomen in the agricultural sector.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Hislop: This 150 comes out of a 1,600-cohort application. So this tells
me, this tells the country, that there is a large number of young persons who are tuned into the opportunities that this Government is presenting. So when we feel that persons are not paying attention to what we are doing, this small demographic says to us that there are people who are aware, there are young people who are interested and there are young people who are taking the opportunities.

We spoke about the Shade House initiative as well. These are significant factors that will not only benefit individuals, but will benefit the country.

The change in the GATE policy, Mr. Vice-President, this creates a huge opportunity for our young people, and more so our underprivileged youth—

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:**—who have the acumen and a desire for further education, but not the financial means. The criteria for accessing GATE have been adjusted to permit students in good standing enrolled in accredited institutions and programmes to qualify if they have completed an initial programme of study such as a diploma or an associate degree. You see, even in these difficult financial times, the Government is still attempting to create avenues for growth and development.

So when we hear it said that the budget is—and, you know, I heard Sen. Vieira and I smiled. I said the Independent Bench adds to the debate in the Senate, Mr. Vice-President, because you can have sober reflection, and if I might say, there may be only two Benches who can give sober reflection.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** You see, I want to turn my attention to my island Tobago. As the folk song says: “Come leh we go, come leh we go, come leh go to Tobago”. Let me start by saying that any investment in the development of Tobago has always to be seen as an investment in the national development. There are some who would
like to see Tobago as a separate entity, but for me Tobago is a partner in the development and the growth of our Republic.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** I want to take this opportunity to thank the Prime Minister, and the Cabinet by extension, that even after the results of December 6th, the collaborative environment experienced on the island, between Central Government and the THA, has continued. You see, this PNM administration is about a whole of Government approach, and it has been proven that Tobago is a part of that plan. Even when our party is not in control, when we are no longer in control of the Tobago House of Assembly, we are still interested in Tobago’s development. So when you talk about a national party, in all essence of the phrase, you can only refer to the People’s National Movement as the only national party.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** You see, over the last 20 years the island’s GDP has more than doubled, and this period has been the period when PNM was in control of the THA. The significant investment in human capital development resulted in a marked increase in the number of persons with tertiary education, from 5 per cent of the population in 2001, to 20 per cent in 2020.

We can boast of an efficient, modern ferry service between the islands, and this was put in place by a PNM Government. You see, from the commissioning of the *T&T Express* in 2006 and the *T&T Spirit* in 2007 to at present, the modern and newly acquired *Buccoo Reef* and *APT James*, as well as the *Galleons Passage*, I cannot recall the last time I heard the chorus about issues on the sea bridge. We have excess capacity, but we will never be given the credit for rectifying that, but we will take it. Humbly we will take the credit. If you give us licks when things
go bad, give us credit when it is good.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** But you see, Mr. Vice-President, we do not—[Interuption] I am hearing, I am hearing—

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senators, kindly allow the Senator to make his contribution without disturbance.

**Sen. L. Hislop:** “Yuh” see truth is truth, Mr. Vice-President, and we do not govern for likes or for credit, we govern for what is best for the country.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** The island also achieved major strides in its social infrastructure to the extent that when you compare the island, not the country, but the island of Tobago, it is on par or above many other countries in the region: the number of schools, community centres, health centres, playing fields, and you name it, hospitals, health centres. Per capita we have—to some extent, we may have too much, but we have the best that you can get in Tobago.

The establishment of Cove Estate as an eco-industrial hub, all of these things are resident in Tobago, and for the benefit of not only Tobago, but for the nation.

Mr. Vice-President, 65.6 megawatts generation, that makes Tobago power independent. So when there was a blackout in Trinidad recently, Tobago was the shining beacon, still able to generate its own electricity. That is direct PNM policy at work.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** You see, over the past years, development in Tobago was not based on “vaps” and “vaille-que-vaille”, but on a comprehensive economic development plan. Mr. Vice-President, this formal planning process greatly
assisted in guiding the island’s development, because when you look at Tobago’s history, the five areas that we benefit—job creation, when the PNM came into office in THA in 2001, the unemployment rate was 13 per cent, by 2021, it was 2.5 per cent. My desire, and I am sure the desire of many Tobagonians, is that the good work that was done by previous PNM administrations will be continued.

The PNM has laid the foundation in Tobago and so the work just needs to be continued. The work of the former Chief Secretaries cannot be denied.

**Sen. Lyder:** [Inaudible]

**Sen. L. Hislop:** But, you see, all this good work could be lost in four short years. But, you know, Mr. Vice-President, I understand Sen. Lyder’s predicament this evening, because he is hearing clear facts, and he is unable to handle the facts. [Crosstalk]

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** Even my sister, Sen. John from Tobago, is also dealing with hearing the facts, and I will make it abundantly clear to Sen. Lyder, this was between 2001 to 2021.

**Madam President:** Senators, the level of crosstalk is a little unbearable, and it is not allowing the Senator to complete. This is my third warning within the same contribution. I kindly ask, within our last contribution for the evening—yes, that we keep our attention up and our respect.

**Sen. L. Hislop:** Mr. Vice-President, I continue. The great work done by two specific units in Tobago, BDU and Venture Capital, needs to be continued, but not only continued, expanded. You see, this will greatly assist in developing a true and vibrant private sector. It was through direct initiatives by these two units in the THA that fostered an environment that saw so many successful small businesses
Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)  
Bill, 2022  
Sen. Hislop (cont’d)  

over the years. I hope that when it is expanded, that these businesses can move from small to medium, to even large enterprises.

I want to move to the allocation. With a total allocation of $2.521 billion, my estimation, it is adequate. More is always welcome, but this is $185 million more than what was allocated last year. Over the years, previous administrations were able to do so much with its allocation. You see, all the good works that you see achieved in Tobago, was achieved with similar levels of allocation, but there was prudent management, and much was achieved with what some may call “little”.

But it will be remiss of me if I contributed today and not mention the lost opportunity that was the Sandals project. You see, it was not only to benefit Tobago, but it was supposed to benefit the entire country. You see, bell boys, housekeepers and service staff are very important to the tourism industry, but the industry does not stop there. The industry is about foreign exchange, sustainable employment and service. It is also about generating major income for spin-off industries: agriculture, light manufacturing, and the creative sector. Could you imagine the level of productivity that could have happened in Tobago simply in the agricultural sector, if Sandals was allowed to happen?

You see, a study done in February 2019 on the tourism sector, where conservative estimates suggested that the expansion of the tourism sector had the potential to expand Tobago’s economy by 25 per cent, or $500 million. This, Mr. Vice-President, meant the valuable foreign exchange and employment would have been a reality.

We have a second bite at the cherry with the Marriott. Even though it is at a smaller scale, but I am hoping now that those who would have run off Sandals,
because they are in governance now, would embrace Marriott.

You see, what is critical is for the island to be taken to the other level—and that is via Tobago’s autonomy, another missed opportunity that would have seen us in Tobago automatically receive from the budget, not 4.3, but 6.8 per cent of the budget, in excess of $3 billion, a difference of $1.4 billion, in addition to negotiating for revenue sharing of resources within what would have been Tobago’s territorial waters. But Tobago, we did not speak with one voice, and because we did not speak with one voice, we allowed the UNC to use that as an opportunity to prevent us from getting an allocation that would have significantly accelerated our development goal for the island. The present administration now has to evaluate its priorities and get down to work because, Mr. Vice-President, truth be told, the economic climate in Tobago is stagnant.

How much more time do I have, Mr. Vice-President?

Mr. Vice-President: You have 10 more minutes.

Sen. L. Hislop: Thank you, Sir. The environment in Tobago is stagnant. We should take note that when the PDP administration got into power, they said that there was no money, which was far from the reality, because the PDP came into power in December, which is at the end of the first quarter of the financial year, and was fully in office by January, which means that the administration in Tobago has been in receipt of the larger percentage of the allocation for fiscal 2022. They were responsible for approximately 10 out of 12 months of the fiscal allocation. So the question ought to be asked, in that period, in that 10-month, why are we stagnated in Tobago? It cannot be because of allocation, it has to be because of management.

Because you see, the Minister informed the nation in his budget presentation
that the THA was in receipt of 96.9 per cent of its fiscal 2022 allocation, and before the end of the financial year, they would be in receipt of 100 per cent of their allocation. So it cannot be allocation issues. It has to be management, Mr. Vice-President.

I want to wrap up with just the highlight of something interesting. You see, there is work happening in Tobago. There is work happening. The truth is, who is benefiting from the work? The construction projects, the work projects are now largely being done by companies from central and south Trinidad. I have no issue with companies from Trinidad getting work in Tobago, because over the years that has happened. But when you ostracize Tobago-based contractors, what does that say to you? We have Tobago-based contractors, indigenous Tobago, with the capacity, the skill and the expertise.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Hislop: Contractors who have a track record of quality works, who have been side-lined, blacklisted or been downright victimized. You see, when the contractor who is based in Trinidad comes to Tobago with everything, workers included, how does that benefit the Tobago economy? You see, when you engage the local contractors, there is a ripple effect. The employees who live in the communities, shop in the communities, thereby boosting the economy of Tobago.

But, Mr. Vice-President, we have contracts given out for six roads that have virtually used up the entire development budget for Tobago, six roads, six contractors, all from south and central Trinidad. [Interruption] In one instance, a roofing company has been awarded a contract to undertake a major road development that require approvals from no less than six state agencies, and consultation with no less than five stakeholders. I am not sure if any of these
approvals or consultations have been completed, but the project is estimated to cost upwards of $54 million. What I find interesting though, Mr. Vice-President, is that the proposal from the contractor was submitted to the THA on the 30th of August, but the contractor received the letter of award on the 7th of September.

**Hon. Members:** What!

**Sen. L. Hislop:** So we are allocated $300 million from Trinidad, as some like to say, but we send the entire 300 million back to Trinidad via a few preferred contractors. [Crosstalk]

**Madam President:** Senators, kindly allow the good Senator to complete his contribution. Senator you have seven more minutes.

**Sen. L. Hislop:** I am almost finished, Mr. Vice-President.

But what is more interesting is that the projects are at 34 per cent higher than if the same works were being done by our locally-based contractors—34 per cent higher.

**Hon. Senators:** Nah!

**Sen. L. Hislop:** I want to touch quickly on the sea bridge and the air-bridge. I wish we did not have to increase the fare—$25. I wish that that did not have to happen, but any adjustment at this time, it may be difficult for persons, but it is almost necessary, because in the case of the air bridge, the air bridge is still subsidized to the tune of $50 million per year. In the case of the sea bridge, it is subsidized to the tune of 170 million per year. I wish the senior citizens did not have to pay, but interestingly, in conversation with some senior ladies at my church over the weekend, “dey rough me up “lit’l” bit for the increase, and den dey turn and say, but de $50 is really small thing. We go handle de $50”, because we just like to ride the boat.
So on the one hand, we wish we did not have to do it, but interestingly, one of them said to me, “but just doh touch de bus”. So I am saying to the Finance Minister, the old ladies in Tobago are saying, “Just doh touch de subsidy on the bus”.

There is no doubt that Trinidad and Tobago is not the only country that is facing difficult times. The Government’s management of our economy during these difficult times have been successful. All public servants have remained employed.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Hislop: The energy sector has remained our mainstay, and all other sectors are rebounding, some slower than others, but nonetheless rebounding.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Hislop: I ask all of us, Mr. Vice-President—all of us—to continue to play our part for the whole—for the whole of Trinidad and Tobago. We are all important to the success of this beautiful country. No individual is more important than the other. No village is more important than the other, no town, no borough, no island. We all are important, each and every one of us.

Mr. Vice-President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Madam President: Leader of Government Business.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Mr. Vice-President, on that emphatic note, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Thursday, October 13, 2022, at 10.00 a.m., when the debate on the Appropriation Bill 2022, will continue.

UNREvised
Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 5.27 p.m.