

SENATE

Thursday October 13, 2022

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Madam President: Hon. Senators, Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial has requested leave of absence from today's sitting. The leave the Member seeks is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Annual Administrative Report of the National Flour Mills for the year ended December 31, 2020. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula-Gopee-Scoon)*]
2. Annual Report of the Public Service Commission for the year 2020. [*The Vice-President (Sen. Dr. Muhammad Yunus Ibrahim)*]
3. Annual Report of the Police Service Commission for the year 2020. [*Sen. Dr. M. Yunus Ibrahim*]
4. Annual Report of the Teaching Service Commission for the year 2020. [*Sen. Dr. M. Yunus Ibrahim*]
5. Annual Report of the Teaching Service Commission for the year 2021. [*Sen. Dr. M. Yunus Ibrahim*]
6. Annual Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Civil Aviation Authority for the financial year ended September 30, 2021. [*The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne)*]
7. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Fair Trading Commission for the year ended September 30, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]

UNREVISED

8. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Fair Trading Commission for the year ended September 30, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
9. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Fair Trading Commission for the year ended September 30, 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
10. Annual Report of the First Citizens Investment Services Limited and its Subsidiaries for the year 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
11. Annual Report of First Citizens Bank Limited for the financial year ending September 30, 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
12. Eleventh Annual Report of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board for the period October 2020 to September 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
13. Annual Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Solid Waste Management Company Limited for the period October 01, 2015 to September 30, 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
14. Annual Report of the Registration, Recognition and Certification Board for the year 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
15. Annual Report of the Registration, Recognition and Certification Board for the year 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2023) BILL, 2022

[Second Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 12, 2022]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Madam President: Thus far, there have been 11 speakers on this Bill including the Minister of Finance who moved the Motion. Minister of Public

Administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, let me start by apologizing on behalf of my colleague from the Office of the Attorney General whose was attacked yesterday obviously caused on of our colleagues on the other side to be unwell this morning.

As I rise to contribute to the debate on the national budget I must add my sincere appreciation to the hon. Minister of Finance and to congratulate him for his steady-handed stewardship in guiding the country's finances over the past seven years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: I also wish to thank the Minister of Planning and Development for assisting in securing us across the Government a PSIP budget that is \$2 billion more than it was last year. This will allow us the opportunity to really focus on our development programme which should go a long in stimulating the economy and assisting Trinidad and Tobago to continue its road to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and other disasters impacting us and the rest of the world.

As a Government, our frame of reference is that our country, that like virtually every other country in the family of nations, is facing increasingly complex challenges in governance. The exact manifestation of these challenges may vary from country to country but there are certain underlying characteristics and I venture to suggest that for small countries like ours these have an intensity and an urgency that is not as immediate in bigger countries with more resources, of space, population and wealth. The key manifestations of this complexity is that

citizens in every country have rising expectations of their governments and are making increasing demands on them.

As the population is exposed to more information as it sees the threats in the modern world, crime, climate change, international insecurity, food shortages, rising prices, the need for answers and for a greater sense as personal security and for the security of their families is increasing.

Madam President, in this environment people want quick answers and immediate solutions to their problems and this is very understandable. In this regard, it bears repeating that the vision that Prime Minister Rowley has articulated, and that those of us who have the honour to serve in this Cabinet share, is that we cannot be distracted by the shiny flashy objects by the fad of the day. Governance in this time of increasing complexity requires astute, level-headed visionary focus and we all know who is better able to provide that focus.

Madam President, an important factor that we must always bear in mind is the enduring reality that as a small open country we are subject to forces that we do not control, supply-chain interruptions, underproduction of basic foods and other necessities, increasing global demand as the world continues to emerge from COVID, to name a few. These lead to scarcities and inflation.

Another such challenge which we face now is the Russian aggression in Ukraine which has fuelled an increase in energy prices that has given us a bit of fiscal breathing space. But that sword cuts both ways, Madam President, because as quickly as the energy prices rose, they can fall. That is why we recognize that we cannot fall into the trap and squander this modest windfall. Rather we have to balance relief with policies that speak to and contribute to sustainability. So some of the questions that we have to address are: how can we balance satisfying our

needs with the limited resources that we possess? How do we ensure that we manage our expenditure but at the same time remain mindful of those at and below the poverty line? How do we limit our debt as a country while satisfying the needs of our citizens? How do we protect and secure our future while seeking to meet present needs?

One of the hard lessons of economics and of life is that unless one has unlimited resources, it is impossible to satisfy all needs and there are a slew of factors limiting our resources in Trinidad and Tobago. This confluence of circumstances requires us to prioritize, to have a plan to successfully implement that plan and to make and enforce tough and often unpopular decisions.

Our approach to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates this administration's fundamental approach. We clearly demonstrated that our priorities were and continue to be first protecting lives and livelihoods while at the same time charting a course for a sustainable future.

Post-pandemic, we continue to seek to provide relieve to our most vulnerable members, while at the same time seeking to create opportunities for our youth and for the future. We have a plan. It was Vision 2020. It is now Vision 2020 as enhanced by the Roadmap to Recovery and the community reports. We are implementing that plan, a significant part of it being digitalization of the public service and the country. And while many Governments avoid making tough decisions as it impacts their popularity and therefore puts the next election at risk, this Government has demonstrated that its first priority is not about winning elections but about securing the future of Trinidad and Tobago. So where there are tough decisions to be made for the preservation of the country's future, we are prepared to make them.

Sen. Mark is still bleating about the Petrotrin. It is like he cannot get over the fact that we dealt with Petrotrin.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: We dealt with the debt in a way that did not cripple the economy. We provided for workers. We dealt with the debt in a way that did not threaten our credit rating and now we have two profit-making entities that are not a drain on the State—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West:—but contribute to the country's income. So this Government is not afraid to make tough decisions and face the bleating of the likes of Sen. Mark and his cohorts because we know that the right-thinking citizens of this great land which God has blessed with so much will listen to and understand the rationale of those decisions. So what tough decisions were we obliged to make in respect of the 2023 Budget? We had to reduce the gas subsidy and as well the subsidy on air and sea fares to Tobago. My colleague from Tobago yesterday dealt very comprehensively with why and how we see that working.

So in the context of limited resources, the question of balance comes into sharp focus. In seeking to balance our income and expenditure, we will always have to answer the question, what is the opportunity cost of doing X over Y? Some economic purists say that subsidies and transfers are a drain on the economy and should be avoided at all cost. We are not of that view. We recognize that some subsidies and transfers are desirable, however, they have to be manageable in the context of the economic circumstances of the country. Economics sustainability and viability in the medium to long term must always be borne in mind and that is why we were forced to introduce those tough measures.

In the case of the fuel subsidy, we recognized the need to slowly transition our citizens to other forms of transportation that do not require as much fuel, such as hybrid and electric cars. To facilitate this transition, we have removed taxes on hybrid vehicles and electric cars. Over time we should see the movement to such vehicles.

At one point let us remember the subsidies for fuel amounted to \$7 billion. What is the opportunity cost of spending that kind of money on subsidies for fuels? Perhaps we can use that money to further invest in the young people or in health care or in fixing roads and so on.

Sen. Vieira spoke about the lack of hope. And, yes, I am positive that some people in particular are still reeling from the effects of the pandemic and are suffering. I am of the view that a large reason for the lack of hope is not because the Government is not doing anything because we are—and providing relief, because we are but because the naysayers keep telling the country that things are falling, that the country is crashing, that we have a failed state, that we have depleting foreign resources that will disappear in days. Like “Chicken Little”, every day the sky is falling. But rest assured, Madam President, that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago continues to rally to work in the best interest of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and to take the country forward.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Even in the face of having to make the tough decisions in respect of the reduction in the subsidies, and it is a reduction not a removal, we have sought to provide relief from these adjustments to the most vulnerable. We have the \$1,000 grant to the people who participate in the social security programmes. We have an increase in the personal allowance that will benefit

every individual who pay taxes in Trinidad and Tobago. We have the school-to-work apprenticeship allowance. We have an increase in the VAT registration threshold that will benefit small businesses and their owners. We have the housing and village improvement programme to put more people in houses. We have the GATE adjustment to get more of our students into tertiary education. We have other incentives to stimulate the economy and this is all in this year's budget. We have the manufacturing tax credit. We have the energy investment tax credit. We have reduced rates of supplemental petroleum tax which the energy companies have said will allow them to explore more, to invest and hopefully produce more natural gas and oil. We have the electronic payment providers and e-money issuers a tax credit. We have a tax rate reduction on the deepwater petroleum profit tax which, again, will inspire more investment in that area. We have extended the tax exemption period for small companies. We have renewable energy VAT waiver for manufacturers. So not only are we providing relief on the one hand, but we are also seeking to stimulate the economy on the other. Our citizens remain our top priority and the allocation in this year's budget demonstrates that. If you look at the budgets for education, for health, for national security, for social grants and transportation, works and transport, we recognize that these investments are critical to provide relief for and for the advancement of our people. So we are making those investments.

Even as we currently benefit from higher oil and gas prices, we must recognize that nothing lasts forever. Therefore, we must invest in the future and we are doing so in various ways, not the least of which being the allocation being provided to the Ministry of Youth and Development and National Service—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West:—and their slew of excellent programmes for the benefit mainly of the youth of the nation. In this regard, permit me to raise an issue—to address an issue raised by Sen. Seepersad when she said that the Government is doing little or nothing to address students with special needs and that this important cohort of the population is being ignored by the Government of the day.

Madam President, let me disabuse the Senator of this misconception. We are very mindful of our students and citizens with special needs and the relevant Ministers have programmes and plans in place to treat with them. Let me outline some of the things we are doing and plan to do in this regard.

We have set aside a significant budget to treat especially with this cohort. We have money for school repairs. We have funds identified for private special schools. We have the student support services programme. We have staff, 700 officers, including clinical psychologists, special education instructors, developmental specialists, student aides, partnering with the OJT in respect of those. We have planned expansion of the Wharton Patrick School in this fiscal. Can more be done? Undoubtedly. But rest assured that our special needs children are in our sights and are receiving our attention and we are determined to continue to put things in place to ensure that they are not left behind.

It is in light of all of this, Madam President, that my team and I at the Ministry of Public Administration have been approaching our work in transforming the public service to meet the growing needs and expectations of our citizens in a dynamic and rapidly changing operating environment. An environment in which, while we control some things, there are so many factors that we have absolutely no control over but which impact and affect our lives and which we have to cater for.

It is going about the required transformation of the public service. The objective cannot be to change things just for the sake of changing them. The ultimate goal has to be the provision of an improved service to the public. The citizens deserve no less. This cannot be achieved by running helter-skelter after shiny objects. An example of this is the much touted work-from-home policy. If you listen to some of the commentators, it appears that this can be done by the wave of a magic wand or by wishing it to be so. While we recognize that work from home has the potential to positively impact on public service productivity, citizen engagement and satisfaction and other factors, we are also aware that if not properly executed, given due consideration to all the relevant factors, the unintended consequences could be nothing short of disastrous. But, Madam President, we are not just talking about consequences here. We are also talking about processes, defined and fixed legal and regulatory issues.

Madam President, in this place last year speaking on the Appropriation Bill for 2022, I had cause to refer to the fundamental constraints that we face in addressing serious public service transformation in Trinidad and Tobago. I really must remind this House and the wider national community that we have a constitutionally divided public service governance system. And let me remind the public of the import and implications of these arrangements. As Minister of Public Administration I have a gazetted mandate and responsibility for the transformation and modernization of the public service. But even in respect of that overarching objective, the Service Commissions and the Personnel Department have responsibilities and I as Minister have only indirect influence over these agencies. More specifically for issues related to recruitment and selection and performance management, no Minister has any direct control. This divided governance

structure will impact the structure and implementation of all terms and conditions of public officers including a work-from-home policy. Last year I quoted from a very timely judgment of the hon. Justice Frank Seepersad which had been delivered a few days before my contribution at the time. It bears repeating today. The learned judge says:

“The court appreciates that the”—Public Service Commission—“may be inundated with paperwork and constrained by the lack of human and financial resources. However, given the current size of the public service and the plethora of issues in relation to promotions and disciplinary matters which fall to be determined in 2021, the antiquated post-independence supervisory structure which defines service commissions and their fitness for purpose, may require re-evaluation.

...concerns to the inefficiency and lack of effectiveness of service commissions...”

—have and continue to engage the attention of the court. And within the recent past issues in relation to these bodies have garnered significant national attention. It may well be that as a developing society there is need—

And this Justice Seepersad still speaking:

It may well be that there is “...need to re-evaluate and assess”—the—
 “...utility and relevance”—of the service commissions and—“more modern management systems may be required...”

Madam President, I have no doubt that this particular Justice is a Justice who is embraced by Members on the other side, who is respected by Members on the other side. He has indicted the need for constitutional—

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Yes.

Madam President: I have to remind you of the Standing Order about reference to persons involved in the administration of justice. So you have made reference to the judgment but I think we have to stop it at that. Okay?

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Yes, Madam President. Despite the provisions in the judgment, besides the statements in the judgment, Members on the other side are insistent that they will not support the Government in any measure. So we cannot rely on their support in relation to the constitutional reform which Justice Seepersad has indicated is necessary in 2021. So we have to work within the constraints of the Constitution.

So, Madam President, in that regard I will now turn to what we have done in the last year to get maximum movement at this important moment when the need to transform our public service is urgent. We have divided our transformation work programme in the public service into two broad categories. Those areas over which the Government—as a Government we have full control and those for which we have shared responsibility with constitutional restraints. We have taken an overarching approach to strategic human resource management. We have asked ourselves, what is the best way that the Government can deliver the services that our citizens expect and so rightly deserve?

Madam President, we recognize that there is a life cycle for a public officer. So there is a life cycle for every employee. We recognize too that if we want to get maximum benefit from the investment that the country makes in its public servants, all the components that affect the life cycle must be operating optimally. At the same time we realize that it is not possible to address all of them simultaneously. Accordingly it is necessary to make strategic decisions about what

we will tackle and in what sequence. And that is what we have been doing at the Ministry.

In the last year, whilst scrupulously observing constitutional propriety, we have engaged the Service Commissions to determine where the responsibilities intersect and how the work of transforming the public service can be advanced without encroaching on the prerogatives of the respective institutions. This is probably one of the areas that you are damned if you do and damned if you do not because I will expect that the uninformed and mischievous will try to accuse us of violating the provisions of the Constitution.

In pursuing this path for effectiveness we have reactivated the national strategic human resource management council. The council is made up of the Ministry of Public Administration, the Personnel Department and the Service Commissions Department. These three, you will recall, are the core agencies that are responsible for the governance of the public service in Trinidad and Tobago.

In addition to these, the council will call upon other government entities to be involved as the need arises. We have examined the mandate of the council as originally proposed. The proposed objectives of council are:

- To achieve cohesion and alignment for human resource management across the public service;
- To provide the strategic and policy direction for a more coordinated and effective human resource function.
- To guide the human resource meta-strata by prioritizing and appropriately sequencing the initiatives and projects as guided by the defined road map.
- To monitor the human resource management function to ensure desired

results.

- To provide accountability and transparency of human resource management function through timely and frequent reporting.

Within this framework all the components of the system will be aware of what the others are doing and how it all fits together.

It will also give us the opportunity to respond to changes in this very dynamic environment. For the Ministry of Public Administration we have identified some priorities that we will be focusing on in the immediate future and I will now like to touch on these. These are:

- performance management with particular focus on performance management at the most senior levels of leadership in the public service;
- workforce planning, citizen engagement and accountability;
- capacity development.

Madam President, repeatedly we hear about the unacceptable number of vacancies in the public service. We know that this as a result in large part of the way the system is structured. All first-time appointments in the public service must be made by the Public Service Commission. But the Public Service Commission is a part-time body. And this is not a criticism of that body. It meets once a week to consider applications for every position in the public service. A back log is inevitable.

Efforts were made, Madam President, to delegate some of the responsibilities for recruitment to Permanent Secretaries and heads of departments. But if you look at the performance in this regard, we will observe that the responsibilities of delegation have not been taken up in a satisfactory manner and the fault lies on both sides of the spectrum.

10.30 a.m.

I venture to suggest this is a reflection in part of the leadership culture that has developed in the public service over the years. A part of any leadership position is risk-taking, but for whatever reason there seems to be an abundance of caution among our public service leaders. One of the changes I am trying to bring about is the creation of a culture of risk assessment and responsible risk-taking in our public service leadership. No business can thrive and progress without it. But note that I say risk-taking not recklessness. Yes, a Permanent Secretary may make a wrong decision in an HR matter, and yes the court may decide against that Permanent Secretary when a decision is challenged. But, did the Permanent Secretary follow all relevant procedures? Did you do it for the benefit of the organization and the clientele it serves? Did the performance of the organization improve as a result of the action? Then in my humble view you have done your job

Madam President, in January of this year, with the assistance of the Inter-American Development Bank the Ministry of Public Administration held a seminar for Permanent Secretaries focusing on the leadership required for the Transformation of Trinidad and Tobago. At that seminar the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley shared with Permanent Secretaries his vision for the public service. Permit me to quote from the Prime Minister's address to that audience:

Today I want us to envision a transformed digitalized public service. A service in which the duty of care our citizens deserve constitutes its very design and defines every aspect of our work. A harmonized service which acknowledges the challenges our citizens and country face, and responds with relevant impactful and sustainably coherent solutions. A service where

its institutions are designed and driven to develop the capacity of its workers to not only be effective leaders and technocrats within the service, but to give them the opportunities to excel in academia, and the local and global private sectors. We have the very resources and challenges to create a crucible of continuous learning and development, to create a cadre of elite professionals in every respective field. A service where it is possible, where it is a source of privilege and pride to be a part of rather than an object of scorn in the eye of the public.

The Prime Minister ended his address by providing Permanent Secretaries with the assurance, and I quote:

As Prime Minister I want to reaffirm my commitment to partner with you the leaders of the public service to achieve our digital transformation and national development goals.

Madam President, at the core of effectiveness and efficiency in any organization is the monitoring and evaluating of the performance of the institution and the individual. Performance management in the public service is not an easy task. With the constraints of the Government arrangements in mind we are determined to address the design of a robust performance management system. We propose to start with the senior leadership of the public service because we believe that this will be the most impactful approach as making the leadership tier more accountable will propel them to better manage the troops that they lead, and on whom they rely to deliver. It is important to note that there are structural and logistics issues involved in assessing the performance of public service leadership, especially Permanent Secretaries. On a day-to-day basis Permanent Secretaries report to and work with Ministers.

However, in what is really an artificial and illogical reality, there is no role for Ministers in the present performance management system, if you can call it that. The only position that has an input in the performance, for the record, are Permanent Secretaries, the Chief Personnel Officer and the Director of Personnel Administration is the Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister. But, Madam President, it is even more intriguing that the Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister conducts his exercise in his capacity as “Head of the Public Service”. However, there is no position called “Head of the Public Service”. In collaboration with the Public Service Commission and the Personnel Department we intend to address these anomalies. We are targeting the design and implementation of a robust performance management system for senior public officers before the end of this fiscal year, including, rationalizing the situation of Head of the Public Service, subject, of course, to Cabinet approval. In the first meeting of the National Strategic Human Resource Management council, we had a preliminary discussion on this important issue and we agreed in principle that the performance management system must be multi-layered with input from the respective Minister and the Head of the Public Service.

Madam President, in the last fiscal year we also partnered with the Inter-American Development Bank to conduct a Training Needs Assessment or TNA of the public service. Some 6,000 public officers participated in this survey. This has provided us with a robust data set that will inform evidence-based demand-driven training. We will supplement the results of the TNA with a survey of Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Department to gather their perspective from a more institutional standpoint. Madam President, the information gathered from these exercises will allow us to design new curricula for developing the capacity of

public officers to deliver a higher quality of service to our citizens. Moreover, it is our intention to use information technology as a force multiplier in both the design and delivery of training for the public service. We have also embarked on a programme for the modernization of the Public Service Academy, which is the principle vehicle for in-service training in the public service. The intention being to provide a more effective platform for training interventions.

Let me look now, Madam President, to accountability to citizens. Madam President, we are all aware that our citizens very often have concerns about the delivery of public services in the country. As we would recall Theme two of the *National Development Strategy Vision 2030* emphasizes the imperative of excellence in service delivery. We believe that citizens' frustrations are multiplied when they conclude that no one is listening and that they have no voice, and their opinions do not matter. So the Ministry of Public Administration is currently working to implement a citizens' engagement system. This system will allow citizens to share their concerns with and challenges in interacting with government Ministries and departments. This system will enable citizens to file reports anonymously, if they choose, and will have a back end in investigative capacity. But the system will be concerned with more than just receiving complaints. It is our intention to tie it back to accountability at the Ministry and at the individual levels. The system will also inform improvements in the design and execution of public services in the country.

Moving on to workforce planning. In a review of "Workforce Planning in the Irish Public Sector" it was noted that strategic workforce planning is fundamental to capacity building in organizations. It facilitates the development of competencies in public servants and it promotes greater efficiency and quality in

the delivery of services. To this end, Madam President, it is our intention to mainstream strategic workforce planning as a discipline within the public service, to ensure the value proposition of strategic workforce planning is understood across the public service, and to work with the appropriate institutions in the public sector, and in academia to assess workforce challenges in the public sector, and to design shared approaches across institutions to common problems.

Moving on to productivity management. Madam President, almost everybody in the country is a productivity expert. Everybody can tell you what is wrong, especially with regard to public sector productivity. As usual, Madam President, the answer is more complicated than those that are usually spewed. An author called Dallas Willard has said in essence, when an organization is functioning poorly it is usually functioning exactly as it was designed to. It is my view that the public service was not designed to promote productivity, and that we are seeing the results of that. So I must agree with Sen. Vieira who said that our regulations are not designed for efficiency. Our processes are inefficient, and that there is unnecessary red tape. I agree even more that our regulations, processes and policies must exist to serve the citizens and not the other way around. That has been my mantra since I was appointed to this portfolio. That is why I keep saying to the staff at the Ministry of Public Admin, that the work we are doing must be citizen-centric, not change for change's sake, but change to improve the service to our people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: As I mentioned previously, we are treading carefully because we do not have all the leeway to address these important matters. As a government consistent with the vision for digital transformation, we are engaging

in business process reviews in the public service, and then we will IT-enable the reengineered processes to see improvements in productivity. In much the same vein we understand the loss of productivity as a result of long commutes in traffic jams that could be debilitating and depressing from a workforce point.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Madam President. Early in this contribution I referred to the cause for a work-from-home policy. The passion is understandable but the zeal must be tempered with wisdom. There are multiple moving parts for a work-from-home policy. The first is the process by which it has to be introduced. It requires the consultation with workers' representatives as it will affect terms and conditions of employment. There is a nature of the work to be addressed, because we have to be sure that the work can indeed be performed remotely. And there is a flip side to this concern which is, would a worker whose work is determined not to be appropriate to be performed remotely be able to claim unequal treatment? This is part of the reason why workers' representatives have to be involved in the process.

There are infrastructural and resource implications. Who will bear the responsibility of ensuring that the worker who wants to work remotely has the relevant resource, the computer, the broadband, the software to perform his or her duties? The fourth, what would be the safeguards for confidentiality and security in related issues? What are the processes for accountability and performance management?

These are just some of the issues that are involved in developing a work-from-home policy, and I suggest that it has to be more than a policy. It has to be an agreement to ensure that the interest of the employer, the employee, and

very significantly the citizens who we serve, are protected. But, these issues are firmly in mind and the Ministry of Public Admin is working on devising a policy that will ascertain the issues and come up with solutions to address them all.

Other PSIP projects which we will tackle this year are full rollout of the Human Resource Management Programme, continued digitalization of the Ministry, creation of Arima and Point Fortin Admin complexes, change management, process reengineering. So as I run out of time and seek to wrap up, Madam President I have sought to share with this House and by extension the national community, the challenges of and responses to Human Resource Management in the public service. We at the Ministry of Public Admin are committing to effecting real positive and enduring changes to the performance of the public service for the benefit of all citizens and residents, and others who accept this service.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: And once again, Madam President, I would like to implore the public to know that this Government is working for you for our present relief and our future development. And I urge you to not listen to the cries of the alternative government who are alternative for that reason that say otherwise. I thank you, Madam President.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy: Thank you, Madam President, for the privilege to be able to contribute to this Appropriation (Financial Year 2023) Bill, 2022, budget. I am pleased to hear the contribution from the Minister of Public Administration, because I have noted that one of the things the Government talks about is that it has kept public servants employed during the COVID pandemic.

Not one public servant was sent home is the mantra. My concern has always been, not one public servant sent home, but how efficiently are they working, and who is taking that into consideration as the persons who access care within the public service, as they come for their services, who is concerned about the quality of services they are getting.

So I am happy to hear the Minister talk about efficiency, because working in the public service for 30-plus years, I know it has been not very easy, and from what I understand, things are not necessarily getting better. But I would just like to add, that one of the key things that has to happen is for the discussion with the unions. And I am saying not just discussion but meaningful discussion with the unions, so that at the end of the day when we look at what we would have done and what moneys would have been spent, we would be happy. Because we are the ones who are receiving those services from the public, and when we go, we hear all this money being spent on public servants, and that is good, and when we go there to get the services we cannot get it. It is not good, Madam President.

So I am happy to hear about the programmes that are being done in the Public Sector Investment Programme for this year that will help with the delivery of services from the public sector, making it more efficient. So Minister, I wish us all the best. I know it is not easy, but I wish us all the best. Because at the end of the day, we are the ones who are going to be getting the improved service.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: Madam President, this Bill is crafted at a time when our country is trying to navigate and pivot in a post pandemic setting, and the aim of it is—the theme of the budget is Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges. The Budget Statement presented by Minister Imbert on September 26,

2022, requested authorization from the Consolidated Fund to spend \$48,543,241,359 from the Consolidated Fund for the fiscal year 2022, with the estimated revenues for this year being \$56.175 billion, and the expenditure being \$57.685 billion, and a budget deficit of \$1.5 billion.

Madam President, before I press in I want to make it clear that I note the efforts made by the Government to try to make good decisions in terms of balancing the budget with the increased revenue that the country has received as a result of what is going on with the rising oil prices. And I understand that the balancing act is not easy. But, Madam President, there is a saying that the surgery was successful but the patient died. I want to see successful surgery and living patients, and as far as I am concerned, some of the measures that have been taken, well-intentioned as they are, have fallen short of rendering live patients, as I think it is disproportionate in its impact. The people who are being asked to use coal pots, ride bicycles, show restraint, are for the most already doing that, Madam President. They are stretched beyond their limit. And if we were like those people in the Ukraine in a war where everyone was being asked to tighten their belts, I could understand. But that is very different from what exists in Trinidad and Tobago. It appears more and more that the matter of concern and contention is that the people giving the advice are not feeling the impact in the same way that those who are on the ground, and therefore I think that it may be that they are out of touch with the daily reality faced by the average citizen. And I could understand, as I said, that there is need for restraint.

Madam President, I heard the Minister speak about *Vision 2030* plan. I heard about all the things that are being done for the public. Being done to try to keep things in line. And one of my concerns is that when the message is being sent

to the public. It is not necessary that it is only the naysayers are not listening to the Government. And I am saying that because there is a saying that says “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care”. And when I am saying that it is—so you balance the budget, and that is great, but while the budget is being balanced I am here and I am feeling it and I am not necessarily, I do not think you are understanding how much I am feeling it and as a result, how many insensitive statements have been made. Madam President, I say no more about that.

There has been much clamouring in the streets in response to the budget, and one of the main issues being the rise in gas prices, and I would say in my understanding, the impact is greater on the people of Tobago. And I am saying that because of the fact that Tobago has to deal with the rise in prices of gas while at the same time dealing with the increase in airfare and the increase in sea fare. And I heard my good compatriot Sen. Hislop talk about the fact that this is something that is absolutely necessary. And I am not saying no. My concern, Madam President, is the timing of it and whether people do understand that this is—there is a differential, there is a difference. And if it is a difference, did you really consider it as you were compiling the measures for the budget? As I said again, I understand the global context in which the decision was made. And the issue with high gas prices is one we have to grapple with, and it is happening in many parts of the world, so I am not going against that at all. In an article in *Trinidad Newsday* dated August 23rd and entitled “Airline economics made simple”, by Ramesh Lutchmedial, he explained that:

“Whenever fuel prices are high, some airlines”—tend to—“impose a fuel surcharge on the passenger ticket.”

Now, we know that the Government has been subsidizing the cost of this, and Caribbean Airlines has been talking for a long time that they need to have more—they need people to pay more so that they can be more—that they are feeling the pinch because the prices are too low.

Madam President, my concern therefore is simply whether the adjustment of fuel prices and the ancillary fare changes are rightly timed, as I said. Keeping in mind our country is now making an effort to breathe and live again after the past two decades of devastation of COVID. And particularly I am saying in Tobago because as you know the tourism economy and the THA, the tourism private sector and the THA are the two main employers of people in Tobago. There has been no tourism product over the last two years, and the THA has been doing what it has been doing. It means that people in Tobago are suffering as a result of the COVID pandemic.

And now immediately after, and I really was very pleased to hear the Minister of Finance in his speech talk about how well the economy is doing, and how much they are doing, and how much we should not waste, et cetera. I get all of that. I get all of that. But while this is happening you have people who are on the ground already and trying to breathe to get up to live again and they have this coming at them. As I said, triple whammy for Tobago. There is already a 30 per cent cost differential for persons living in Tobago. In addition to that, people of Tobago do not traverse the sister islands for the same reason as people of Trinidad do. As we know, business activity, medical reasons is what people come to Trinidad for, for the most times. But when Trinidadians come to Tobago for the most part it is discretionary. They come to lime, and we love that. We want them to come, because right now it is the main source of our tourism income. The

domestic tourism. That is where most of the funding is coming from. The tourists coming from abroad, the numbers are very small because of the, as I said, the impact of COVID. Even though other Caribbean countries have got their act together much more than we have, it is not so in Tobago. Our tourism product is mainly dependent on Tobago.

So I just wonder whether that was considered too as the prices were raised. How would that affect the persons coming from Trinidad to Tobago, even though it is discretionary. Some of them may say, “okay, well, I cannot afford to pay that, I will go somewhere else”. I do not know, but I am just saying, I have to put it on the table that the impact of this budget for Tobago has to be taken in a more serious manner. I would recommend that the Government seriously consider the recommendation again of Mr. Ramesh Lutchmedial, in an article dated 8th of August, entitled, “Each Tobago flight loses \$40,800.” Here was one of the recommendations that a new two-tier pricing system may see Tobago residents alone pay a subsidized fare. I know that may be very difficult. I would hear that. But it is something that I would really think should be considered.

Madam President, is it this another time for the discussion about the type of aircrafts used to facilitate the travel between Trinidad and Tobago? And I am saying that because they have talked about the cost of a seat on an ATR, which is the flight travelling between Trinidad and Tobago. Apparently it costs some \$1,790 or something like that for one seat to travel between Trinidad and Tobago. Is that the only option that we have? If travel between Trinidad and Tobago is considered essential, would you consider using a more efficient craft that is less costly? My understanding is that the Dash 8’s that we used to have before still functioning, and apparently the cost per seat for a craft like that is something like

\$600 and something, which means that, yes, you still have to pay a subsidy but it will be far less. I am just asking, if travel between Trinidad and Tobago is considered essential—at least it is for Tobagonians—would you consider the air bridge differently?

Madam President, I will ask one further question about that. The subsidy between Trinidad, it was talked about a \$100 million in subsidy for the airfare between—for the air bridge, but there was a \$700 million subsidy for the rest of the travel for CAL. What is happening with that? Was it a plan for reducing the subsidy for international travel? Just asking that as a question. CAL should be efficient, CAL should be productive. I am not saying anything other than that, but I am saying, we have a situation where for Tobago at this time it is difficult. Madam President—

Sen. de Freitas: Senator, would you give way just for a “lil” bit, to shed a little bit of light on the question you were just asking in relation to CAL? I was not going to deal with it in my contribution, but as we are talking about it now what I would just say is that the problem with the air bridge, as I understand it and have been told over the years, is the technology and the fact that to do a 20 minute flight and burn gas taking off and burn gas landing is just not economical from a fuel standpoint. And so when you saying we could use a more fuel efficient aircraft, we might be pressed to find one because of the technology that we have right now.

I know in the aeronautical airspace we are talking about moving from gas engines to electric engines, and at that particular point in time we may do better. But the problem is not so much the aircraft itself, but how we use the aircraft. And what is happening is that all these seats on the aircraft are subsidized, and what that basically means is that the richest man in Trinidad and Tobago is getting the seat

on the aircraft for cheap and the poorest man who actually needs the subsidy is also getting the seat on the aircraft for cheap. So you really have to look at how we use those seats on the aircraft to make it more economical, because I am absolutely sure that the businessman who has to go to Tobago would have no problem paying the \$700 or \$800, which is the full price of the seat, whilst the poorer individual may be able to use other seats on the aircraft that are subsidized, and that is just my comment on that, and I hope it sheds some light.

11.00 a.m.

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: Thank you, thank you very much, Mr. Minister. But, Madam President, I hear that and I would say that I understand. Right now there are discussions with CAL and the Tobago House of Assembly, and I know that these discussions have gone on and on and on. And there was a time, Madam President, when I used to be going from Trinidad to Tobago to provide services there, very efficient year with those smaller aircrafts. As I said, my understanding is that the type of crafts that are travelling now between Trinidad and Tobago is one of the issues. And therefore, I am asking, whether another type of craft would not work. So, I hear you, Sen. de Freitas but I put the case on the table.

Madam President, I really do not wish to talk about, in detail, about what the allocation to the Tobago House of Assembly is. At this point, I know I sound like a broken record, but my contribution regarding the allocation to Tobago is that there should be a debate in the House of Representatives and in the Senate about the autonomy Bill. If there was such a Bill that was passed, we would not have to be discussing line Item for Tobago and what they do for this and what they do for that. The only thing that will be discussed is, what is apportioned to Tobago is this per cent of the budget, and this is given to Tobago, and then Tobago goes and

discusses its budget as to how exactly it is going to spend the money that has been allocated to it. Madam President, that is what we should be discussing now.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: We want a vote of confidence in the Bill and in order to do that, it has to be passed in the House—

Madam President: May I just remind Members, please, that I am trying to listen to Sen. Dillon-Remy's contribution and I am getting a little disturbance. You can continue.

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: Thank you, Madam President. There is a need for the passing of the Bill in the House, it needs the Opposition support. There is a need for passing of the Bill in the Senate, it needs the particular majority that has to come from the Senate. So, in other words, Government and Opposition, or Government and Independent Senators. And I am saying this, Madam President, because there is a view in Tobago that people in Trinidad really do not want to give Tobago autonomy. And that is because it is seen that Tobago is the kind of island that they could talk as being an albatross around the neck. That is what we hear about CAL. Tobago, the air bridge, is seen like an albatross because it is drawing, drawing money. Tobago wants to be able to perform in the manner that they can, notwithstanding what is going on right now in terms of the—at the leadership level, notwithstanding that. That happening at the leadership level is one thing, the people from Tobago want to be able to do their thing appropriately.

So, Madam President, I am not going to talk in any detail, I am just saying the resounding vote of confidence is needed for the Tobago House of Assembly—the internal self-government Bill, and I am putting the—so, we need the people—the Tobago House of Assembly elected representatives now to push it. We need

the persons who were there before, like the other persons, the other parties that were there when they came to Trinidad with the Bill, we also need the House and the Senate to pass that. Please, give Tobago a break.

The island needs to be developed and we are saying that what is happening right now and what has happened over the years is not appropriate. So, the allocation for the THA for this fiscal year, great, it is given an increase of \$185 million over last year's allocation for the recurrent and the allocation for this year is \$2.521 billion. And for the development programme, \$300 million, plus the other millions that are obtained through the Ministries that work in Tobago. I am not saying that there has not been an effort, but I am saying that we need better than this. And I know the persons within the PNM are going to say, "But we passed the Bill, we brought the Bill," this is why I am saying, PNM, UNC, Independent, we have to consider that Bill so that Tobago can get its self-government.

Madam President, I looked at the allocation for healthcare, which was the second largest in the fiscal year of \$6.892 billion, and I welcome the allocation. The Finance Minister in the budget speech said and I quote:

"We are ensuring that our citizens have equitable access to quality healthcare through our network of modern...facilities, which are either in place or in advanced stages of being rolled out."

He then went on to name some of the new facilities like the Central Block at Port of Spain General Hospital as well at Sangre Grande Hospital.

Madam President, I have said this before but I think it is important to say it again, it is apparent to me that we as people like to build buildings, and actually I was told that politicians like to put up a building and have their name on it. It is

not the same as when you are looking for soft development, the quality of care, the PPU developed, they do not get as much mileage from that, so this is why building buildings is important.

Madam President, quality healthcare services require more than buildings and I am reminded of the significant amount of work that was involved with the clinicians in Tobago in the plans for Scarborough General Hospital, which came at a significant cost to taxpayers. Madam President, all that planning was trashed by the then THA administration and the board of directors of the TRHA. And now the service that is being provided leaves a lot to be desired. I am not saying that it is not better than before, but there is a lot that should be done that is not being done right now. I do not think it is necessarily a fault to the current service providers, I think they are doing their best, but I am saying that poor planning was involved in the provision of service and, as a result, we get a poor outcome.

So, Madam President, I get very nervous when I hear about buildings being built as an achievement for provision of healthcare, especially when I know that these buildings are not going to be well maintained and there is insufficient planning as to how the people would benefit. Where is the plan that would reduce the burden of cancer on our population? Where is the plan to have people screened on a regular basis for breast, colon, cervical and prostate cancer?

I was at a conference not too long ago and we were talking about what happens to a person in terms of prostate cancer screening, the ordinary man. Where does that person go for their screening for cancer? Okay, they go to a health centre. What happens after that? Where do they go? What is the pathway? And we are saying there is nothing like that, as far I am aware, for these important areas of care. I want to hear about those services because they cost. And the end

of not having a proper service is that you have endless people dying from breast cancer, dying from cervical cancer, dying from prostate cancer, when they could have been caught early and managed by a proper screening programme. And I am saying population now screening, I am saying the things that happen in each region. Each regional health authority should know what their plan is; what number of patients they have; how many females; how many males; what is the age and, as a result, what programmes they are going to be putting into place. I am saying that that is necessary.

I also note that the Finance Minister's statement, that we have been making significant strides in the achievement of SDGs and he talked about:

“We have achieved both the global and regional 2030 targets for maternal child health and neonatal mortality.”

I heard the contribution of the Minister in the House and the MP for Fyzabad, they made reference to this. And I am so happy that this has happened because, as we know, it is important that our mothers and children get the right care.

But, Madam President, I said it here before and I am saying it again, the achievement of this target for maternal and neonatal mortality came about as a result of this Minister putting into action a plan that was commissioned by a previous Minister of Health in 2011. That plan was created by a multidisciplinary group of competent persons. The report was handed over to the Minister of Health who preceded this Minister but no action was taken since it was just before the elections. This Minister took action, he appointed competent persons and here we are clapping about the benefits. And we have a right to clap for the benefits, but we have to know what went into place for this to happen. Too often plans that are made and initiated by one administration are disregarded once a new

administration comes into place and, as a result, our money gets spent and we do not get the results.

Madam President, the Finance Minister also mentioned about the refurbishment of the San Fernando General Hospital to provide cardiac surgeries at an upgraded catheterization lab. In a similar vein, I must highlight a plan that was initiated by a previous PNM administration to implement a comprehensive cardiac care programme known as the Trinidad and Tobago Health Sciences Initiative. This plan was later rubbished by the Partnership Government after millions of dollars were paid and considerable work done by John Hopkins International. Here we are again, in 2022, talking about trying to get a cardiac catheterization lab and cardiac surgery at San Fernando General Hospital.

Madam President, when that team was here, they were talking about what would happen if a patient gets a chest pain and they are in some remote place, where would they go; what is the kind of treatment they would get there; how quickly they should get to the Centre of Excellence so that they can get their angiogram and their cardiac care, that is what they were talking about. All that was rubbished. Why? I do not know. All I know, it is not here now; all I know, significant planning went into that. And what happens now if you have a chest pain, if you do not have the money, you are going to die and that is it. We should not be happy with that. That is all I am saying. If you do not have thousands of dollars required for private care, you are dead and that is after billions have been spent, all because we as administrators are not responsible enough to do what is required with the resources that we have been given that does not belong to us. If that plan from John Hopkins was in place, we would have had a lot of stuff going on right now, Madam President. We would have been building on it right now.

The team also worked on diabetes management and I know that some of that is happening, particularly in the South-West Regional Health Authority.

Madam President, one thing I would say again in terms of health care is that, post the COVID pandemic, there is need for the assessment of what has happened as a result of those delays in time. As the time passed, people would have not had their—non-urgent surgeries were put off, so people who would have had cancer or something growing and they would have had to wait, what is that backlog like? We would need to know what that is because a system will have to be put into place to address those. It is not our problem alone. I was looking at a British Medical Association article which talked about that in—it was updated this month in October and they are talking about millions of people waiting for treatment. So, it is not our problem alone, it is happening worldwide. It is just that we have to address our issues here and it requires a coordinated approach.

The World Health Organization in an article that they had, they talked about what countries should be doing now to reduce their backlogs, it cannot be what you did pre-pandemic level. You have to consider things like possibly hiring more healthcare workers, health staff, flexible recruitment and training, et cetera. So, something put in place during this year so that we can handle that backlog.

Madam President, I will go now, I think, to my final point and—no, I will talk about mental health. The Minister of Health did talk about what was happening, because the pandemic has significantly affected our mental health, and the Minister of Health did talk about the implementation of a programme, FindCareTT, during his contribution. I do welcome the programme that talked about encompassing websites so people could get access to 24/7 care and the data used to derive that, they will be able to pinpoint further decisions, et cetera. So, in

other words, they are trying to do something as far as the mental health is concerned and I am very happy with that. I am also—I will just mention here that this model of integrating mental health into primary care that is talked about now exists in Tobago. It was pioneered by a retired psychiatrist Dr. Helene Marceau-Crooks, it was endorsed by the national mental health committee and executed by appropriate funding by the TRHA. So, you needed everything to be put in place.

Madam President, I would talk about national security. It is not an area I normally focus on but I would just want to make a few points in this area because we all understand that crime is a problem, both white-collar and blue-collar. White-collar and blue-collar, white-collar—crime is crime, Madam President, put in nice terms, it is crime. The Ministry of National Security was allocated \$5.798 billion, the third largest for this fiscal year. We heard, again, enough about which government could fight crime better. There was a time when you talked about crime, people talked, “We needed a Commissioner of Police and that will solve the problem.” It has not solved the problem. We have had a Commissioner of Police for a period and then now we are still having issues. We have heard that we are having crime because the passage of the Anti-Gang Bill was there and you locked up persons, et cetera, et cetera. Madam President, we have had enough of that.

Yesterday, instead of lamenting the possibility that there was a lost opportunity to handle a blue-collar crime, we were entertained by “which Ram you are talking about”. When I saw TikTok with that thing, I said, “This is what we are talking about?” While we are fighting here, and as the calypsonian said, “we are kicksin, Rome is burning”, is it because the people who are being murdered are of a certain demographic, Madam President? I have to ask that, otherwise we would not be—it would require a more urgent response from us.

Is it that when the Treasury is raided and people are not brought to justice, it is not taken seriously because it is not our personal money? If it was our personal money, we would have wanted to do something about it. I am not happy, the people are not happy. We need to do better than this, Madam President. It bothers me that at this level how we operate in these august Chambers, we need to stop. I noted that when we had been asked to reflect our behaviour by the President at the opening of this Parliament, the responses from our leaders went like this, “We are not bad as other places,” and another said, “Let her look in the mirror.” So, I expect to be asked, “Who do you think you are”—me—“to talk about that?”

Madam President, I am not better than any of us. However, I am a frustrated citizen seeking to take our reflection and action to a higher ground. All I am asking is for us to examine ourselves. Crime is out of control. There needs to be a comprehensive response that would include the parents, the schools, the communities, the businesses, faith leaders, Parliament, Government, research institutions, Judiciary, prison, all are needed to fight this crime, not the kinds of things that we are seeing here. I would love to have an opportunity to hear that kind of discussion.

Madam President, I would just talk about one thing I have heard about in the Carenage area. I have had interactions with the Carenage Police Youth Club. That youth club is staffed by caring police officers. They are working and providing support for the community like providing a homework centre—

Madam President: Senator, you have five more minutes.

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: Thank you, Madam President—homework centre for the children, providing opportunities for mothers to learn to sew, they are providing opportunities for employment for youth through entrepreneurial

activities. They are getting support from churches and businesses in the area. They are showing those young people that they have potential and they helping them live out their potential. I understand that this is happening in other areas in Trinidad and Tobago also but wherever it is not, Madam President, that model should be multiplied. This helps to deal with the issue of crime at root cause, not just waiting for them to get bad to build more prisons. And talking about prisons, we need models also for prison reform. I know Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye is always talking about reform of the criminal justice system and Sen. Paul Richards also talks about those things. We need models for those, Madam President, if we are to deal with—we are talking about a fiscal budget, we are talking about spending \$57 billion. We need to be seeing progress in these areas.

In conclusion, Madam President, I wish to borrow two noteworthy statements as I close. The first is from John Maxwell that says—actually one noteworthy statement:

You cannot deliver what you do not develop.

And I wish to make three points on this statement. The first is that, for too long we have been talking about diversification of resources without the real fruit. However, if we are to deliver a future that offers more security in our income and revenue and our job market, one that delivers more and a greater level of infrastructure, a more educated population, a healthier society then we need to start developing. I know I would be told that we have started already, well, we need to make the developmental process more robust. I am accepting that.

The second is that, for Tobago to start delivering at a new level, development must take place. I believe that this development looks like the passage of the self-government Bill. It is time to start developing.

The third relates to the quality of human beings that are delivered into this society. If we wish to deliver human beings that are purpose-driven, principle-centered and value-based, then parents must develop their children, teachers develop their students and leaders must develop themselves. It is time to start developing.

Bear in mind that we never—it is not the case that we wake up one morning all of a sudden and the state of things are worse. These things are caused by incremental steps, seen and unseen. The effects of every natural disaster has taught me that one can start from any point to build again. I say that where we are now is a good starting point as any. So, I ask us as a country, what are we developing and what will we deliver? Madam President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. John.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Jearlean John: Thank you, Madam President, for this opportunity. Madam President, yesterday I noted with some level of amazement that some speakers from the Government Bench had been quoting the former Prime Minister, Mr. Manning. I really hope they were doing that with the permission of their current leader who really exhibits none of the positive attributes associated with the hon. Mr. Manning. But I thank them for that, because just as the previous speaker, Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy, just said, we need to stop. Because in Mr. Manning's time, it was a different time in politics when you could have disagreed without being disagreeable and still get to some level of consensus. There were opportunities for consensus, Madam President, and I can say so because I sat opposite him. He was in Opposition in 2001 and I was one of the three persons who negotiated—me,

with Mr. Panday and Ganga Singh, negotiated with Mr. Manning and Ms. Joan Yuille Williams and Dr. Lenny Saith the handover of the government at the time. And, Madam President, what took us through and very likely saved our democracy was the patriotism and grace of the outgoing Prime Minister, Basdeo Panday—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John:—and the incoming Prime Minister, Mr. Manning. So, there can be consensus but given the kind of environment the Minister of Public Administration says that the Opposition does not support her Government's, well, for us, anti-government and the rich-will-get-richer policies, and this will continue so until they actually leave the compound, we cannot support those policies. Madam President, Sen. Sagramsingh-Sooklal in her reflections when Mr. Manning said he was interested in ensuring that our social fabric is strong—and I know that to be true and it was also true of the Prime Minister who succeeded him.

We talked about, very glibly, about people not working and not wanting to sacrifice but, again, I think Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy said it, spoke about it, we do not know what people are feeling. People are not asking to get nothing and I want to associate myself with what she spoke about, the people from Tobago and for me, particularly the people from Charlottesville, because when the price of fuel goes up by a dollar in Port of Spain, it goes up by \$5 in Charlottesville. It is pain. Charlottesville people are very hard working and they are very proud, but they are rural people. Just like the people of Mayaro and Toco, they will have it extremely hard. So much so I called my friend from Charlottesville when the price of fuel went up, very hard-working fisherman, and I said, how is this affecting you? And he said, "I was getting three barrels for \$440 and now I am paying \$620." That is a 40 per cent increase. It means that impacts the people of Charlottesville. So, I

said, “Has your price of fish gone up?” He said, “No, because I have so much credit outstanding, so much money—the people have so much money outstanding for me.”

So, the policies of the Government, they are not pie in the sky, they impact real people. It is not just about balancing a budget, it impacts real people. And that is what we want the Government to understand, to balance the social impact on the population, not just to come here and brag and say, “Well, we cannot give you this, eat less macaroni pie.” But in Charlottesville, the people cannot buy fish to eat, which is a staple, for them to eat and that, Madam President, is the real issue when we come in here to debate: How does it impact the people of Charlottesville or Mayaro or Toco as the case might be?

Madam President, I paraphrase, not having benefit of the *Hansard*, you know, Sen. Vieira—and I am saying, I am loosely paraphrasing, you know, kind of indicated we had it very good here. But good is relative, when he compared Trinidad and Tobago, I think, to what is happening in the UK. The UK is the fifth or sixth largest economy in the world depending on which data you are looking at; a \$3.2 trillion economy, very well-diversified, very competitive, global economy. I mean, we are a smaller economy and we are opened to all the shocks that are taking place and that is why this budget particularly should have been a step, an urgent step, in the right direction in terms of trying. Because, I mean, the lights are on, the fire brigade is in the building, we should have been looking—these are not exogenous shocks, these are shocks that are coming, that we cannot sit down and wait on the mood Mr. Putin get up in or whomever.

Inflation is out of control, not only here, I agree, across the world. But there are leaders in these countries taking a stand. I mean, this morning the breaking

news when I was getting dressed was that in the US, they have raised the price of the social—what we probably do as old age pension. They said what they are giving their retirees, they have raised that contribution by, I think, 8.2 per cent—I am trying to find my notes on it. Just this morning, they raised it in keeping with inflation because they know that people are under pressure and they said it is the biggest increase in 40 years.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Madam President: May I remind Members that I am trying to listen to Sen. John, please.

Sen. J. John: Thank you, Madam President, Yes, Madam President, they said it is the largest in 40 years, why?—because they know that people are under pressure. When this Government says, “I am going to give you a—I have raised fuel and I am going to give you an extra \$1,000,” they are doing as if it is a gift to you, this is something we are giving to you. No, people are really suffering. This is something that is really happening, Madam President, and I want the Government to be more conscious of what is happening in this country and not just go about this thing very arbitrarily.

Again, in the UK, using Sen. Vieira’s example, they are contemplating, it is whether we eat or there is heat. But then unlike this Government, which they use what they call the Treasury, they capped the fuel subsidy by \$1 billion. So that is at the national level, not at the individual level. In the UK, they capped it at the individual level, where they say for every individual you get about £2,500 worth of subsidy or—no, they capped it at £2,500, your eating bill, and anything above that, the government is going to subsidize.

11.30 a.m.

Now one wonders whether that billion dollar cap that the Government has put in place, if it is that the price goes higher in that, what is going to happen? Is it that the fuel price is going to be raised the eighth time, the ninth time, the tenth time? What is going to happen then, if this is insufficient which it most likely is?

So, Madam President, it not just a question of we have capped and we are doing well. Doing well is not what the 31 of us in here are saying. Doing well is what the people out there are saying and they are saying resoundingly they are not doing well, and this is something we have to take into consideration when this debate is being debated to see if we can ask the Government, through Minister of Finance, to change course. Because again, in using the UK example, a couple weeks ago the Prime Minister and her new Chancellor, the equivalent of the Minister of Finance, they would have lauded the top rate of income tax, the 45 per cent rate, and it was not unlike what is happening here in term of the disquiet. And what happened?

The Prime Minister and her Chancellor, they did something what they called—in England they say made a U Turn. In Trinidad and Tobago we will say “they back, back”. But what the Prime Minister said, she said:

“...we get it...we have listened.

The abolition of the 45...”—per cent—“...rate has become a distraction from our mission to get Britain moving.”

And then she laid out their vision about boasting wages, creating opportunities across the country because that is what we have to do. We have to create jobs, boost wages and so on. And then the Chancellor say, “we get it and we have listened”.

This Government, “like stick break in their ears”. They do not listen to

anybody. And as one commentator describes the Government as relentlessly insulting the public whilst they pose the question, have you heard the comments targeted at citizens in the Parliament? Whenever you think they cannot get worse, they do and that continues. This arrogant look down and just talking whatever comes to their mouth and that is not good enough. People are not saying they are not willing sacrifice, but they want to understand what I am sacrificing for.

So basically the budget is not really a cohesive plan that you could wrap yourself around. As Dr. Terrence Farrell calls it, he say:

“The truth of the matter is we do not have...”—any plan. “What we have is bits and pieces of initiatives.”

And what it is what it is. He said:

“...the time has run out for the energy transition and now, not only do we not have a plan, but needs to move post haste to implement that plan.”

And I that is thing we need to hear and you cannot rough up people because they are not hearing it and they are asking: Where is the plan? Yes, the piece of initiative, where does it fit within the plan?

So, Madam President, this foreign direct investment that we need so badly, so urgently, I mean it will not help in our—we are not getting it because one commentator from the other place said capital is coward. And what it means, as he said, is that it goes where it is welcomed. So basically, if it is our crime remains out of control, capital will not come to these shores. Because as I said crime is totally out of control, and as Sen. Vieira describes it, the criminals are blood thirsty monsters.

So, Madam President, in the Minister’s budget statement at page 126, he states:

I am—“...improving service to our citizens and solving serious crime, in particular murders and violent crimes is central to the mandate of the Trinidad and Tobago Police...”

But this is not only a matter for the TTPS. To make a dent in crime, there must be an all of government approach, an all of Trinidad and Tobago approach. There is nothing in this budget which fires up the country to feel hope and optimism and to rally them around the Government. Because it does not matter how high the price and how much we get, if it is you cannot eat a meal in peace and your home is subject to being invaded, which is happening too often now, you cannot be at peace.

Just last week Junior Walker parked up waiting for his wife to buy a meal and he was killed. You know, people are setting their house on fire with their children inside of it, and it just goes on and on, the sheer brutality, particularly of a 15-year-old that just happened recently. A commentator said, he said:

These don't appear to be drug and gang-related killings, but revenge for some stupidity. What can a 15-year-old boy do to deserve this? The fight for drug turf and the gangs established to do it. So it just some kind of war logic.

And so, these are the things we have to get. So we have to get to the fundamentals. What is causing people to behave the way in which they are behaving? Because, again, never mind how buoyant the economy, if it is our people cannot live in peace and cannot enjoy it, then it really does not matter.

Just last week as you know, Madam President, the US State Department, they gave a warning, a travel advisory to their citizens because they care about their citizens, and the highest level of the advisory read, Level 4 say:

“Don’t travel into Port of Spain.”

Of course, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, instead of trying to get to the root of it, they argue with everybody as if everybody must be up some department of Balisier House, but that is not good enough. It is the truth. People know there is crime, just out of control crime, and never mind what is in the budget it is not going to work. So again, Madam President, under the heading Sport and Youth:

“...we are ensuring that our youth population”—this is what is stated—
“particularly in the age group 15—34 years, which accounts for 25 per cent of the population...”—that they—“...achieve their full potential, and become productive members of society” and to make sure no one anywhere in this country is held back by their circumstances.

I looked to the Investment Programme, the other books that support this high ideal which is a good idea, because too many—again in another newspaper report, *Newsday*, 9th, we saw where “1,771 children are in court for criminal offences over the last four years”, and these offences are five of the most common, are possession of ammunition, possession of firearm, robbery with aggravation, shooting with intent. These are young men and women, certainly in the prime of their lives, Madam President, but I am not seeing how we are building the building blocks to ensure that we start to get at the root of this problem. You know there is nothing in the Government’s policy—I mean coming out of their one shot one kill, one has not seen where they are saying, okay, fine. That has not worked.

So the issue of crime has to shift towards a prevention first policy. Because early intervention, Madam President, saves lives and it saves money. You know you do not have to throw all this money at having more policemen, or more boats, or what have you. This money, the opportunity cost—this is where the opportunity

cost of the money has to—we have to look at the opportunity cost. That can go into more social programmes, more community centres, more laptops, more stadiums, more everything else, the money that we are spending to just have maybe a ratio of one policeman to one member of the population. Because, Madam President, everybody knows that talent, and energy, and enthusiasm, and flair, it is all over Trinidad and Tobago. This is not ascribed to one group, but it is the opportunity that is not.

And again using that UK model, last week I was looking at the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer, making his presentation to their convention, and he was a former Director of Public Prosecutions, and he said:

Early intervention would stop “another life that could have gone in a different direction had someone stepped in earlier.”

He said:

“It’s that kind of injustice that must drive us to think differently about our public services.” Whether it is—“...in health...moving treatment towards community...

“In education it means not just imparting knowledge but developing creativity, the resilience....”

These things take work, and:

“In crime, it means a model of policing that can focus on prevention and give victims that faith in...”—the—“...system that will not let violence go unpunished.”

So, Madam President, what the Government has to come to term with is what is the new policy; what is the new set of work, the operation; what operational are they going to do? Because 21-year-olds, Madam President,

believe that there is nothing to live for, and that there is glory in dying young with a gun in your hand. So, Madam President, our problems does not end there, and what we are finding out is that the most dangerous person in the world is a young and alone male and we are producing just too many of them. Young men who are attached to nothing, not to work, not to home, not to school, not to church, not to communities. They are just adrift, and, Madam President, we need to invest in these young men for them to go to school, for them to get a job, to be responsible.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: Madam President, we cannot shoot our way out of crime. It cannot only be what has been advocated by the US National Rifle Association, the Vice-President Wayne LaPierre, when he announced during a press conference that:

“The only...”—way to stop—“...a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”

That is not good enough for us.

So when Dr. Marlene Attz of UWI said—she is an economist, Madam President—she said:

“Covid-19 showed the soft underbelly of...”—Trinidad and Tobago—
 “...regarding our vulnerable population...”

She said:

“...there is need to consolidate social protection programmes and make targetted efforts to reach the most vulnerable in our society.”

Right? And that is what again—this is about the vision, how are we— Because around all the dollars, all the spreadsheets that came to us in terms of—because what the Government is saying, we are spending more this year than we spent last year on crime. We are spending more this year, but then what is the value, what

are we getting? Where is gap analysis? Because in the private sector you cannot just come and deliver a budget. You have to say what did—you have to do the gap analysis, what did I come to get approved in 2022 and what did I do with what I received. That is a gap analysis. We never got that.

As a matter of fact, data is something that we need. Reliable data is something we need so desperately, and I looked at the Budget Statement of 2021 I think, no 2020, 2021, 2022, or maybe it was '23, '22, '21 something like that, but the last three, and they were all talking about that same institute of statistics which we do not have up to now. And if it is we do not have that, the National Statistical Institute, how do we know how many of these young men are out there running crazy? How do we know if they want to do agriculture? How do we know how many old people from Charlotteville or wherever in Tobago need to travel on the plane or whether they prefer to travel on the boat? We do not know. So what we are doing is not a quantitative scientific kind of projection. It is qualitative. We do not know what is happening, why all of these people are falling into gangs and what have you.

So, Madam President, we really need that because I can sit predictively and I think every Friday of a succeeding month by 8.00 a.m. you get from the US what they called the job report. You just see that coming up. Everybody when you get up on that morning the networks talking about that job report, and that job report will tell you how many jobs were created in the US, what kind of jobs were created in the US, what the jobs are paying, who else need jobs, the rate of inflation. It just tells you. So without that all we are doing here is guessing and people are just getting to their sweet spot and deciding I feel I could do this, I could build a hospital or somebody. We do not know for sure and, Madam President, we are

missing the boat and we are missing the point. We need proper scientific measurable data that we can use to put into our model, so that we can make proper plans and spend our money to get the best value at this time when the Government is saying it is very scarce. I cannot believe it is scarce if we are not getting this statistical institute going.

So, Madam President, in coming back to this describing terms of framing a plan for crime, because I think it is the biggest problem we have. It is not money. I mean we still have dollars, what we need is cents. Last year just prior to Mr. Boris Johnson leaving his post, he had a speech called “Levelling up”. So everybody is concerned. They are all targeting you know with a needle gaze on what is needed in their particular community or country. We have got to begin by getting the basis right. Everybody, you know—begin with fighting crime because we will never level up our country while our kids face the misery of dealing with the borderline drug gangs. And this is something, if you leave here and walk to east Port of Spain, upper to Duncan Street cannot walk to lower Duncan Street. That is not natural, and this is not something that we must continue to accept. It is just not natural. And more than that, Madam President, people can lose their life.

Somebody from—and I am just saying upper Duncan Street and lower Duncan Street. I mean, people could lose their life for crossing those borderlines. So there are very serious issues you know. We may just be talking, but these are serious issues affecting serious people outside. So there this former Prime Minister was saying you know, he understood that you have to deal with it. So you get down into the micro people issues. He said and some kids do not—well they cannot cross the borderline and that is why he said:

“...we are putting rings of steel around towns that are plagued by these

gangs.”

Something very practical.

“...and steadily driving them out.”

That is measurable. He is saying “steadily driving them out”. We do not know. We do not know in the money allocated to gangs, well for prevention or suppression, how many gangs we got rid of or what have you, or how many communities we would have restored. And then he spoke about recruiting 20,000 policemen, and he say:

“...we will be ruthless in fighting crime because it is the poorest...”—the poorest, Madam President—“...and most vulnerable who suffer the most, and to give kids alternative to these gangs we will invest in grassroots sports of all kinds.”

So that is vision, and hence the reason we really need the vision. The only way things will change, as this change that Sen. Remy is calling for, is if there is a vision and people buy in to that vision and everyone can rally around that vision. That is the only time things are going to change, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: So, Madam President, which gives us the opportunity to focus on the micro small and medium enterprises. Because what I think the Minister had said in his statement is that these SMEs, that sector, he said they employed—the Minister said—women, youth and groups in vulnerable situations. And if they do that—and you could find these micro, small, medium enterprises in just about every nook and cranny across the country. And here is where, again, focus should come into play because they employ women, and youth, and groups in vulnerable situations, there is where you put your money. But many SMEs are saying we

cannot get forex and these are folks without any access to, really, the banking sector. They have no fancy overdraft and so on. They have no friendship with any bank manager because the banks of course are tripping over themselves in declaring supernormal profits. It is not their business to treat with the vulnerable in our community.

So some of the measures the Government took during COVID exacerbated the problems within, I say, the MSME sector, and mainly they have no extensive credit facilities with the banks. Many are unbanked and that even affected their ability to access the grants during the COVID because they pay no NIS and all of these things. So they could not even access the relief it seems. So, Madam President, it is just pain on top of pain, but the—sorry? They accessed it? Oh, sorry.

Madam President, so a vibrant SME sector is advantageous to the Government because these people are mainly self-employed and, therefore, not a burden on the Treasury. Yet they face many challenges in Trinidad and Tobago and which brings us to the ease of their doing business, and we have spoken ad nauseam about this ease. In 2019, I think it was 105 and that is really far, far away from home, Madam President, when you are at 105. And there is a metric that you could follow and certainly, I mean I saw them in another place to me making light of it, but the people are facing serious issues whether with the Registrar General's Department, the Board of Inland Revenue, National Insurance Board, Town and Country Planning.

What I am being told is that it is a nightmare to register a business and registering post incorporation documents. Some of these documents such as annual returns and beneficial ownership declarations are needed by the banks to

approve financial facilities; facilities such as overdraft and loans to get loans. And in some instances because of the lengthy delays in obtaining these documents, the small companies they get loss or probably did not get the approval of the facilities and it puts severe financial pressure on the business, and in many instances they have had to close their door. They have cash flow issues because the banks are very risk averse in terms of these kind of businesses coming up to their doors and asking for relief or some kind of credit facilities. These are the things to me that the Government has to use its influence in looking at, and I am saying because we, the Government—well I mean the Government owns banks in terms of a portion of their business should be written for this sector.

It cannot just be NEDCO, which again I have been told people have to literally jump hoops to access these facilities. I do not think people are not asking for something for something for nothing. They are just asking for a fair chance. Trinidad people are very entrepreneurial. They will be a public servant and they have a suitcase in the trunk of the car, they selling clothes, or they are selling some lotion and potion and what have you. Sometimes something they are doing in their own home, et cetera. People are entrepreneurial and they are willing to—they are selling cakes. So we must not count out our population or bet against them. People want to do better. They just want a chance.

So, Madam President, the financial sector regulation especially the banks, they are very onerous. So in many instances to provide the requirements, the SME has to retain a financial professional and that is costly. So, they have to just do without because some of the requirements are audited financial statements, projected cash flows, all company incorporated documents, business plans, VAT and tax certificate clearances, and NIB clearances. So they are asking if the

Government can have serious focus discussions with these banking institutions to encourage them to be receptive to the SME sector. Drop or amend some of the requirements needed by these institutions and treat the sector differently than the large businesses.

To provide incentives for businesses to invest and reinvest capital on profits into the economy. And I know they have had the Venture Capital scheme that is very sluggish, or even our stock exchange where you have a lot of the family-owned businesses. They are not willing to be listed because they are saying the pre-listing requirements are very onerous. So it might mean one by one or two by two, as it were, to kind of encourage these businesses to get listed. Because then they will find money, well a cheaper money anyway, in order for them to turn over and create well hopefully good paying jobs that we so desperately need, Madam President.

The SMEs are asking that maybe seek out Government funding institutions that provide grants and training. They are asking for training and to be able to access whatever facilities that can be accessed to grow and sustain businesses, and contact with the on-the-job training institutions which can provide trainees which are subsidized by the Government. So in exchange these trainees will get good quality training which again can be managed, and mapped out, and standardized by the Government, and after, of course, the trainee finishes their stint based on the initiative and the fact that they are showing up for work, they are excited, and interested, the company might very well consider hiring them. Because we really—weaning yourself of the Treasury, it cannot just be shoo, wean yourself off the Treasury you know. People must have an alternative.

I think in Tobago the THA probably employs about 75 per cent of the

working population. That is unsustainable. That makes no sense. But since I am growing up in Tobago, in Charlotteville, under every house you have a little parlour, a little something. People are doing something. People are willing to work. All they need is an opportunity. So, Madam President, the Government has instituted tax measures that have literally caused business to stagnate or even close their doors. Once such tax is the business levy liability and the Green Fund liability. Both of these taxes are taxes on gross sales of a business, and pre-2015 these taxes were .2 and 1 per cent respectively. From 2016 to date, these taxes have increased to 6 per cent and 3 per cent respectively, and it is really a financial burden they say particularly in low margin businesses such as supermarkets and gas stations, and the increase has cost some businesses even to shut their doors.

So they have said that many representations have been made from several business associations to address these onerous and unfair taxes, but today they have had no favourable response. And you hear about what goes on in the Customs. Even when as a private citizen you order something, you pay for it to come via DHL—the little extra, et cetera—it comes and it sits at the point of entry for two weeks. Small businesses, they depend. Time is money. They have ordered some little part to fix a washing machine, a television, a computer, as we say in accounts some kind of “lil” widget stuff, and they need that to turn over the money they have, the capital they have employed. It might look little to some people, but for them it is the difference between their children eating or maybe them paying rents or their mortgages.

These things are very, very important in terms of looking at these—sometimes maybe just something simple in terms of these annoyances and the issues that caused people not to be able to maximize their effort properly. What

AMCHAM is recommending also is that there is what is called a de minimis allowance. So these goods are not subject to the search and the time spent at the border. You see, sometimes when you check the man-hours, the time spent dribbling over it and what have you, it does not make sense. What we have to have is the controls at the border to ensure that guns and drugs are not floating in, but certainly a “lil” package, a “lil” tee-shirt or 10 tee-shirt people bringing to get painted up for Carnival and so on, you cannot keep that there for two weeks. Carnival come and gone and they are still waiting on it. I think I heard somebody from the other place was saying they bought in school bags to give out as donation with school supplies, and it came and school opened and they had not gotten it because it was stuck at some point of the border for about three weeks, and that really is unconscionable, Madam President.

So the micro, small and medium enterprise is an integral part of our economic development. Businesses at that level, they are faced with lack of economy of scale or economies of scale, and quality standards to enable such businesses to access export market. So again, it is about grouping maybe to have them scale up, consolidation, and the Government continues to preach diversification but are not putting any effort in place to ensure that the SMEs have a shot at being able to earn foreign exchange.

They are talking about the increase in the VAT registration threshold to be registered from 500,000 to 600,000 limit. The comments were: VAT is not supposed to be an expense to the registrant. By increasing the limit does not help the registrant as all purchases by the registrant will be VAT inclusive, and since this business is not registered he will have to include the input VAT in the cost of the goods because everything is passed on to the customer and it just results in

higher prices. I have been asked, through this House, to address to the Minister willingness of the tax authority to register taxpayers below that threshold and that it is very bureaucratic and inefficient, this registration process, and of course, we have heard about the ongoing challenges with the VAT refunds.

Madam President, the personal deductions in the fiscal measures which were increased from 84,000, now it is to 90,000 which gives an additional \$6,000 in disposal income in the hands of the taxpayers. This measure affects individuals who are working for \$7,500 per month. So the relief is needed at the lower end of the working population, but again maybe it might have been a little more beneficial to raise the minimum wage from 17.50 per hour to \$20.00. This will result in an additional \$400 in the pockets of the most vulnerable in the society. One of the other measures was the national insurance pursuing raising the retirement age to 65—

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

Sen. J. John: Thank you, Madam President. This has implication. To raise that retirement age to 65 has implications for those coming in. Because if someone sits down in that job from 60 to 65, it means the younger people at 18 and 20 and so, they are delayed in terms of getting in. So, Madam President, it means all the young graduates from universities will become disenfranchised and have to wait another five years.

So there is just a small group of people as far as I am concerned who support this budget because it is really about and maybe those who subscribed to the rich getting richer. Because for the average income earner, this budget increased the price of gas, diesel, and kerosene by \$1 a litre and, of course, this is all passed on to the people, Madam President. So it is very, very difficult for people to make it.

It is not that, as I said, they do not want to do better or they want to just sit back.

Madam President, very quickly there is an issue that is affecting the insurance industry, not unlike what is happening with the banks, and very soon they may be blacklisted, well they are already—because Trinidad and Tobago remained on the blacklist quite frankly and Germany has—but they improved or they have instituted a new law which has a 15 per cent withholding tax. So if there is a disaster to really cut a long story short, a real disaster and we are saying with this climate change, et cetera, the reinsurers are in Germany—Hannover and Munich Re are domiciled in Germany—it means any settlement will have to be net of 15 per cent and, therefore, our local insurers will not be able to settle.

12.00 p.m.

So just in this little summarized version, I am hoping that all of the Ministers concerned will be aware of this and basically they will do something about it because I am being told that this will move from insurance agencies to the energy company and to the banks. So Madam President, as economist Dr. Keston Perry summed up this budget perfectly, he said it is a mediocre budget for the rich by a callous Government. Right, that is what he said.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: And he said this is one of the most callous and one of the most neo-liberal governments that the country has ever seen. So he said he said he does not know what philosophy the Government is following. So basically this budget really should have been jobs, jobs, jobs but with the Government that we have, what people are saying is that it is forward never, backwards ever with this Government, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Hon. Senators, before I call on the next speaker, permit me to welcome, on your behalf and on mine, the students of the El Socorro Regional Life Centre who are sitting in our public gallery.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: I now call on the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein): Thank you, Madam President, and it is indeed an honour and privilege for me to present to this Senate and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago an account of the performance of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries as we debate the 2022/2023 Budget.

Madam President, I would like to start by offering my congratulations to the Minister of Finance Hon. Colm Imbert—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—for his efficient delivery of the 2022/2023 Budget, his eighth for this PNM administration geared towards Tenacity and Stability in the face of the Global Challenges. I would like also to extend my gratitude to the Minister of Planning and Development Minister Penelope Beckles.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: And whilst Sen. John was speaking, she brought back some memories to me about former Prime Minister Patrick Manning, may his soul rest in peace, and I came from a background where my father served under two Prime Ministers, Prime Minister Dr. Eric Williams and Prime Minister Chambers and I had the opportunity to serve under former Patrick Manning, may his soul rest in peace, and our dynamic new Prime Minister Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. I want to say that Mr. Manning has served for 44 years as a parliamentarian and our

Sen. the Hon. K. Hosein (cont'd)

present Prime Minister is presently serving his 35th year as a parliamentarian and he should be given a round of applause for that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam President, I served—well before I move to me, my father served as a councillor, as a deputy mayor and also a mayor of the Borough of San Fernando. I myself served as a councillor, a mayor, a Minister of Local Government and now the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: The first part as a councillor in 2003 to 2009 was under former Prime Minister Patrick Manning and from being a mayor to being in this present position under the distinguished privilege of the Hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. And I remember going to the San Fernando East constituency office, a young person and hearing Ms. Jearlean John name calling, not in “ah bad way”.

Sen. John: Of course not.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: In “ah good way”—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—because you were Mr. Manning’s close friend. I remember that because Mr. Manning was a very serious man and he chose his friends wisely. I know for a fact that “he never stand any nonsense” because I served under him and he was a very serious man. All leaders are not the same, every leader have a different way to govern; because I have experienced four different leaders in my time, two under my father and two under me and to get a privilege to serve is a real privilege. And I want to remind myself and all of you here and all of you all who are listening on the Parliament Channel that this is a

temporary position that we have. This is not a lifetime position. So “nobody doh go away” with the idea that we are here for life and while we are here, we are to serve the people that we were put here to do.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: And that is a privilege that people want. I consider myself “ah nobody and look where I reach”. I was a cleaner cleaning Patrick Manning office, I have said many times before and I will say it again because the young children listening and if I could reach where I reach, anybody could reach where I reach, anybody. I served in local government with passion and I am here now in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries given the directive by Dr. Rowley, our Prime Minister, to serve and I intend to serve to the best of my ability.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I have two distinguished young gentlemen working with me: Minister Avinash Singh and Minister Nigel de Freitas.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: And we are as a team going to make a difference in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. I may look very quiet, I am very quiet, but I am a very serious person when coming to serving the community and we as a team are going to take agriculture to a next level. But the people who actually put foods on our table, the fishermen, the livestock, the sawmill, the farmers, these are people that are very simple people.

You know, I went to the farmer’s market in Macoya week before Friday and I was killing some time after I went to the Nestle opening to go across by the farmer’s market in Macoya which is the wholesale market. I did not carry no media with me because I am not that type of person, looking for no fame and

fortune. That was for Christopher Columbus and these people. So I went down there by myself and I am speaking to some people there and a gentleman was talking to me and “he telling me he like what happening here” in the new farmer’s wholesale market. And you know this gentleman “tell me” he has two daughters who are two doctors and I said to myself, “Look where education has reached. He is ah farmer, two children who is two doctors” and this is a truth, eh, because I usually speak the truth. When I walked down a little further, they were happy with the accommodation and I am going to extend that farmer’s market because all the people talking about farming and farming and farming and farming, “yuh cyah even get” enough space in the market to sell your produce.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: A gentleman tell me he looking at me on television and he want his son to come out like me. I saying to myself well he really doh know me. He tell meh his son coming out to be a lawyer just now, an attorney and he wants ah job for it. So do not underestimate the fishermen and the farmers, the people that selling in the market and when we go to the market, somebody selling something for \$15 and we want to beat them down to \$10 and \$8. Let us do not do that. They work hard, they make a sacrifice and it is our duty to pay the price that they have to offer.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam President, I have been serving in this capacity as the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and I must say I served in local government for 40 years and I am serving in this capacity going close to seven months and I love this job, I love what I am doing, I want to interact with the farmers. I was just waiting on the budget to finish to hit the road with my two

colleagues, go to every farm, go to every community, every fishing depot and listen to the people, listen to what they have to say and how we could help them. I am going to make sure that whatever the people want, we have competent staff at the Ministry and the staff have to get serious because I am a very serious person when coming to work. The staff has to be very serious. As I said it is just over six months I am there and I intend to work with my colleagues and everyone there at the Ministry.

I want to say a special, special, special thank you to my former colleague who has made way for me to come in here and he has laid a strong foundation in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and I want to recognize—we both came from Rio Claro. Although I was born in San Fernando, my father came from Rio Claro and I spent most of my life there. I want to recognize the former Senator, my colleague, and a gentleman who I call upon for advice Clarence Rambharat.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: He served with distinction, he laid a foundation for me and I am going to carry on where he left off. It is the same with my former position as Minister of Local Government. I have an excellent relationship with the Minister Faris Al-Rawi and whenever he calls upon me, I will always try to assist or give him advice and he is someone who is on the ground now because this is what local government is about.

Madam President, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, similar to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, plays a critical role in bringing much needed goods and services to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Since my appointment in March of this year 2022, I have gained a greater

appreciation for farmers, fisherfolk across the length and breadth of our country, not to mention this phrase that I picked up some time ago and it is all over the Caribbean: Grow what you eat and eat what you grow.

Madam President, I want to also take this opportunity to commend the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. I took up this appointment as I said close to six months, she was acting as the Deputy Permanent Secretary. She is working with me now since I came in as the Permanent Secretary and she has given me the full fullest support at the Ministry presently. I want to thank her, her administrative staff who includes the Deputy Permanent Secretary, the technical officers and all the people who work at the Ministry. I intend to express my gratitude towards her for her continued support.

Madam President, under this Ministry which is a very very large Ministry, there are a lot of state boards and I want to point out a few. One is the Agricultural Development Bank, the ADB and they assist with funding for the agriculture agro-industrial and rural sectors in Trinidad and Tobago and this bank, if you cannot go to them, they go to you. They go to Point, they go to Rio Claro, they go to Cedros, they go to Toco so this bank is working for us.

One of the another agencies is the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago which is called the ASTT, the only national organization representing farmers, a statutory body within the Ministry of, the ASTT represents every sector of agriculture. The third State board is the Cocoa Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago. This agency is the vehicle to make cocoa production in Trinidad and Tobago a financially viable activity contributing to economic diversification and growth of the economy by integration and sustainable development in the cocoa value chain. And in the next couple of weeks and

months coming, we will see a further development under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries pertaining to cocoa in Trinidad and Tobago.

We have also the Caribbean Fisheries Training and Development Institute. This institute deals with training and development demands specifically with reference to the fisheries sector. We have also the Estate Management and Business Development Company Limited, EMBD. This company is responsible for the development and distribution of all State agriculture lands including lands formerly owned by Caroni (1975) Limited. We have number six and I am pointing it out to the public because the public does not know everything that is happening in the Ministry, all these State agencies, all the incentives and I intend, as this budget is finished on Friday, to hit the road where we will have an education drive to ensure that the public—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—and the young farmers, people who are interested in farming know everything that is happening in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. They need to know about all the incentives, of all the state boards and I want to engage to ensure that the staff we have at the Ministry is very friendly towards the public. They must be friendly towards the public.

We have, this is number seven, the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation, which is NAMDEVCO. A statutory body responsible for the agricultural marketing function and I would really like to commend NAMDEVCO because what they have been doing is ensuring that all produce reach to the consumer at the price that is affordable. And you have different things that affect prices and we all know it. When rain falls, prices go up, something happen, prices go down and there is really no control. People try to play politics

with the prices and so on but it is not really about politics, it is about what actually happens.

We have also the Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprise Limited, the PSAEL. It is statutory body with responsibility for leasing lands for agricultural purposes and the management and surveillance of non-oil lands, assets of Petrotrin and other state agencies.

We have also the ninth and last one—is the Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago who owns and oversees the operations of the Emperor Valley Zoo and provide support to the Forestry Division and its wildlife enforcement efforts. So I would like to thank all the presidents, the chairmen, the vice-chairmen, the deputy chairmen and all the board members for giving service to these boards.

Madam President, before I get into my contribution, I would like to say that during my few months at the Ministry, I have been interacted with many, many stakeholders across the agricultural sector. I have started to interact with farmers, fishermen, university graduates, exporters in cocoa, in rice, in poultry, in coconut, honey and many others. And I want to say that I will continue to have an open-door policy. In fact, everywhere I go, I give persons my personal number and I will give it here to the public because I want to know what is happening. I do not know if it is right for me to say, Madam President but I give my phone number to everybody and my phone is 683-2020.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I would appreciate that if you whatsapp me whatever information you have, whatever guidance you have for me, I will take it and I will work with you all.

Madam President, my job will become easier with advice and guidance from

persons who are directly impacted by the challenges and gaps in the sector. My goal is simple and I never forgot, never and I will never forget it, in 2003 when I became a councillor, Mr. Manning tell me, he said, former Prime Minister, he said “young Kazim”, “first day eh, first day I gone”, talking to everybody who won the election, he say “God give yuh two ears and one mouth and he said that is for a reason” and as a politician, I took it all my life. I am in politics over 40 years now, I listen more and I talk less. As a matter of fact, I got a name from former Leader of this House here who have passed away, may his soul rest in peace, Mr. Franklin Khan, he used to call me “the action man” and I will live up to that name.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam President, agriculture impacts on every citizen. I now want to speak a little about the TT Agri-Investment Forum and Expo II. I now want to say a little bit about the TT Agri-Investment Forum and Expo II which was recently held in August 19th to the 21st. The TT Agri-Investment Forum and Expo II “Transforming Agriculture through Innovation and Investment” was highly praised and appreciated by our farmers, fishermen, agro-processors as a great opportunity for networking and business development. This event followed Guyana successful instalment in May of this year. Madam President, I am very pleased to inform this House that in just under two months, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, through the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries led by the hon. Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley, we were able to have a successful plan and execute a three-day event, one that was attended by close to over 60,000 people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam President, in attendance of this Caricom-led

event were over 50 persons from Governments across the region. This included eight Heads of Government and I want to name them because we were blessed and we had the opportunity for them to come and take part in this. First, His Excellency Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali, President of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, the Hon. Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, His Excellency Chandrikapersad Santokhi, President of Suriname, the Hon. Ralph E. Gonzales, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the Hon. Philip J. Pierre, Prime Minister of Saint Lucia, and the Hon. Dr. Terrance Drew, Prime Minister of St. Kitts and the Nevis, Hon. Dr. Keith Mitchell, Prime Minister of Grenada and His Excellency Jovenel Moïse, President of Haiti. We had 10 Ministers of Agriculture, the Hon. Zulfikar Mustapha, Guyana, the Hon. Parmanand Sewdien, Republic of Suriname, the Hon. Pearnel Charles, Jamaica, the Hon. Samantha Marshall, Antigua and Barbuda, the Hon. Ian Douglas, Dominica, Sen. The Hon. Adrian Thomas, Grenada, Hon. Joanas Gué, Republic of Haiti, Hon. Alfred Prospere, St. Lucia and the Hon. Saboto Caesar, St. Vincent and the Grenadines as well as a lot of participants from Caricom Secretariat and Caricom private organization.

The forum segment, Madam President, was attended by over 800 persons and included discussions from experts both locally and regionally on topics such as food and nutrition, agriculture innovation technology, agriculture financing and marketing, agriculture trade and investment. It served to stimulate conversation among key stakeholders such as policymakers, potential foreign and local investors, financial partners and donor agencies to explore gaps, opportunities and investments to achieve the vision set by the Caricom Heads of Government to reduce the food importation bill by 20, 25 per cent by 2025.

Madam President, let me speak about the Agri Expo segment quickly.

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Approximately 150 farmers participated at the farmer's market over the period 19th to 21st.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Close to 350 exhibitors, let me repeat it, 350—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—from every sector in agriculture on display. We are very proud of this because it shows that primary producers and agro-processors saw the benefit of this Expo. Madam President, each day I walked through the Expo, I was greeted by appreciative exhibitors, all of whom were very grateful for the opportunity to gain knowledge on avenues by expanding their small business as well as to increase demand in their respective subsector.

Madam President, I want to at this point appreciate all my colleagues led by the Prime Minister for this initiative and I got full support from all my colleagues. I had especially a young team working with me, about 10 people and they put this whole Agri Expo together. At this juncture, I would like to show my appreciation to one of my colleagues who stood with me, among my other colleagues, but who stood out with me and I want to show my appreciation to Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: —for her overwhelming support and comradery as both Ministries work very closely to ensure the tremendous success of this event. Once again, thank you, Minister and I really appreciate working with you.

Madam President, year after year, we at the Ministry continue to provide training, virtual and in-person, grants and incentives support to farmers and fishermen. We did a lot of training in fiscal 2021 to 2022. The Extension Training

and Information Services (ETIS) division hosted 122 online training courses on crop production.

12.30 p.m.

These sessions had engaged 80,403 persons. These courses are posted monthly at the Ministry's website and are available to the public. A total of 22 outreach training sessions were also facilitated. So what I want to say here, the Ministry is involved in a lot of training. So, we just want to make sure that the personnel who work at the Ministry keep bettering themselves. And we intend to continue to do this at the Ministry.

Incentives. Madam President, there are a lot of incentive that the Ministry has to offer the public, and the public does not know fully what we have to offer. But this education drive, we will ensure that it reaches to the public and the young people.

Madam President, I am aware that this is a sore point for all our agricultural stakeholders. However, over the course of the past five years, the Ministry paid a total of \$112,508,964 under the Agricultural Incentive Programme. In fiscal 2021, \$18,753,919 was disbursed. I want to commit to all our farmers and fisher folk that I will examine closely the challenges in this area, in efforts to improve the system that currently obtained for persons seeking to access these incentives.

Madam President, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has over 92 different incentives to offer the public.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: And while we have all these incentives, the public does not know how to access it. And that is where we come in now, me and my two colleagues, where we are going to inform across the board, from the schools to

the universities, to the farmers, to the fishermen, every one, that we are going to bring this incentive, so you all could know what you can apply for and how much money you could get off, and so on. I could just name a few: machinery and equipment, you get 50 per cent of the cost off, whatever the cost is, which is around \$50,000 for machinery and equipment. You are buying a trailer, you are getting 50 per cent off whatever the cost is. It could be around \$40,000. For soil conservation, we have 100 per cent off, that is \$150,000; livestock, which is cattle, buffalo, pasture establishment, you get over 50 per cent off. And I have this. I intend to send it to the media. We have livestock incentives with rabbits, poultry, waste management, livestock. We have three crops incentives. We have fisheries incentives. We have vehicles incentives, you buy tractors, you buy pickups. We have post-harvesting operation and marketing incentives, new farmers and youth incentives, security incentives, which you all know that praedial larceny is a very important issue now. And I will talk a little on it before I finish. So, you could get security cameras. You can put up fences. You get back a 50 per cent rebate on these things; agro-processing commodity, and the list goes on.

I am sure many of you all sitting here and who are listening in the public did not know about all these incentives offered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. But we are not going to keep it a secret. We are going to share it with the public. The public has to know what the Ministry has to offer.

We had another grant. Since assuming office in March, I have seen the impact of both the Agro-incentive Grant and the Youth “Fast Track” Programme. I can recall conversations with these agricultural entrepreneurs who were truly elated to get the support of Government to expand their current operations. Approximately \$14 million were given in grants and these were taken from every

location in the country. It did not come from one area. It came from Rio Claro, it came from Cedros, it came from Tobago, it came from Diego Martin, from Sangre Grande. And they were so appreciative of it. Twenty-six young persons were presented with this youth track investment.

Madam President, we intend to digitize the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. And this is so important now as the world is going in that direction of technology. We do not want somebody calling the Ministry and “it going to a PBX and you trying whole day to get on to the Ministry, and you can get them”. And I know how it is, because I have been trying to reach certain people in certain places and it is difficult to get through. So, we are going to be assisted by Minister Bacchus, who has offered to come and help the Ministry, myself, my colleagues and the entire Ministry. And he has set aside a day. “I doh waste time”. I tell him I want him as early as possible and he said he would be there by Tuesday or Wednesday. So, we will get this going and the Ministry will have this as an advantage so the public can access all these.

We have also—NAMDEVCO has an online market to facilitate both buyers and sellers electronically. I was just told by one of my colleagues—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Thank you, Madam President. I was told by one of my colleagues last week or week before that there are certain—somebody who sells pizza. They import pineapples, at least a container or two containers every month. We want to ensure that these pineapples come from within Trinidad and Tobago, and we will work together with these people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam President, let me set out the key

elements of the budget statement and supporting documents concerning the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. My colleagues and members of the public may notice that while the allocation for the Ministry for recurrent expenditure in 2023 is 7 per cent more than the original allocation, but it is around 20 per cent or \$125 million. Madam President, I have two colleagues. We have a lot—the Ministry is so big—to speak about. My colleagues will take over where I left off, but there is a problem in the country right now with the giant African snail. I spoke to the Minister of Planning and Development and she has given me more money to deal with the giant African snail and we intend to go around this country and deal with the giant African snail, which is a pest.

Also, a big issue was the Praedial Larceny Squad. I asked for more money and we got the money because we want to deal with the Praedial Larceny Squad to ensure that we have less pilferage, and so on, among the farmers, because these farmers work very hard.

And I also want to say that we have an all of government approach where we are going to include the TTPS and the municipal police, because I spoke to the Minister of Local Government already and the Minister of National Security, where there would be a combined effort. We would be able to help the community. So, it is not just—we have a small team. We intend to recruit more praedial larceny officers, and we intend to assist the farmers out there. Because people really—and I want to make a special appeal, you know. What does not belong to you, do not interfere with people, what they plant and their animals. Try and plant your own and do not interfere.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: And what does not belong to you. Do you know

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how long it “does take to mine a cattle” and to grow melongene and caraili? “And you just come and you gone in de people’s field and just steal it?” Have a conscience. These people are putting food on our tables. We intend to use drones.

Madam President, there is so much. And I really want to thank you, Madam President, and all my colleagues for giving me this opportunity to spread the word. By the time I come back here in the mid-year review, I will give you a better detail on all that we have done, and to we intend to work very hard and we intend to satisfy all farmers, fishermen, and fisher folk.

May Almighty God bless all of us in this Chamber with good health and long life. Thank you, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

SENATOR’S APPOINTMENT

Madam President: Hon. Senators, permit me to revert to an earlier item of business on the Order Paper. I am now in receipt of an Instrument of Appointment.

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By Her Excellency PAULA-MAE WEEKES,
 O.R.T.T., President of the Republic of
 Trinidad and Tobago and Commander-in-
 Chief of the Armed Forces.

/s/Paula-Mae Weekes

President.

TO: DR. TIM GOPEESINGH

WHEREAS Senator Jyanti Lutchmedial is incapable of performing her duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

UNREVISED

NOW THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section 44(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, do hereby appoint you, TIM GOPEESINGH to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 13th October, 2022 and continuing during the absence of Senator Jyanti Lutchmedial by reason of illness.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the
President of the Republic of Trinidad and
Tobago at the Office of the President, St.
Ann's, this 13th day of October, 2022.”

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

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

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2023) BILL, 2022

Madam President: Minister of Works and Transport.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan):
Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, thank you for allowing me to stand and to contribute to the debate on the budget 2023. However, Madam President, before I start on the reporting from the Ministry of Works and Transport, I would like to just respond to two statements, one coming from Sen. Mark and one to add to the sentiments of some of my colleagues where we paid tribute to some of our former leaders. And in the PNM we recognize our leaders. The leaders of the PNM, in the past, the history of Trinidad is written and it cannot be changed. It is only in the PNM that Prime Ministers were able to swear in, on at least two occasions, only in the PNM.

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: It started with Dr. Williams, who I think it was about five times, Mr. Chambers, twice; Mr. Manning, about four times; and Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, who is the only Prime Minister since 1981, who will have two consecutive terms, two consecutive five years as a Prime Minister in Trinidad and Tobago, only in the PNM. No other Prime Minister from any other party could boast of that. And that is why in the PNM the country feels confident and comfortable. And that is why the PNM leaders always get a second term. No other political party got that in the history of this country. And that is the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Also, Sen. Mark spoke about the PNM Head Office, Balisier House. That seems to be a focus of the Opposition. They have a problem with that. Well, let me clear that up for Sen. Mark and for Members of the UNC. Again, the People's National Movement is the only political party in Trinidad and Tobago that can boast of owning their head office. And that did not happen yesterday. From the late '50s the PNM owned the property at Balisier House. It was donated, and the PNM went on, subsequent to that in the '70s, to buy the property next door. So, the PNM can boast of having a headquarters owned by the membership of the PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: The PNM have started the rebuilding of the new headquarters. Yes, it is a donation project, and that is why it started in 2017. We are in 2022. The project is ongoing. It will take some time, because again it is a donation. But we can boast, when that project is completed, for the next 200 years,

if you want to find the PNM, you know where to go on Tranquility Street.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Compare that to the people who are criticizing the project. Right now, my information is that if you want to locate them, you have to google a rum shop and go upstairs. We, the PNM, we built this country and 200 years from now, the PNM will still be around at Tranquility Street in Port of Spain to save this country.

Madam President, as I start, I wish to take a moment to state that in this critical time as a country for us, we are operating in a global environment. As we stand here today, we are working our way out of a pandemic situation. We have conflicts occurring globally that are affecting many facets of our daily lives, even if we do not see it directly. We have flooding in countries and areas not seen in the recent past, as climate change continues to impact the very fabric of civilization. Trinidad and Tobago is not immune to these phenomena.

It is important that in this esteemed Upper House, we do not get locked into cycles of politicking for the sake of effects and soundbites. Let us try to focus on the welfare and well-being of the country. I have been here listening to contributions, many of which have provided valuable insights. At the same time, some have included certain statements, sometimes in disguise of questions that are not in the best interest of this country. As a country, we must be able to take the hard decisions required for our long-term stability. In another place, I have spoken to the insights of the guidance of the Ministry of Finance assessment and forecast, “Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges”, as well as the Ministry of Works and Transport theme: Bridging the Gap to Trinidad and Tobago’s Sustainable Future.

In this respect, I will seek to give this House an overview of the Ministry of Works and Transport activities in certain key areas such as roads, drains, transportation infrastructure, which continues to prevail as issues of major concerns to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, in fiscal 2021/2022, the Ministry invested over \$250 million on road rehabilitation, drainage, slope stabilization, bridge reconstruction work across communities. This funding translated into the execution of over 300 road rehabilitation projects, over half of which have been completed with the rest ongoing.

A major focus for 2023 in the area of road reconstruction will be ensuring proper regulations and quality of our hot mix. The Ministry will also be reviewing the existing road maintenance strategies, with the assistance of the IDB. In other words, Madam President, we are working with the IDB now to ensure that going forward, all our road maintenance strategies and mix are in keeping with what is really required at this point in time, based on the changes in the weather pattern, and so.

In the short-term, a spot-patching programme has been developed to engage small contractors to undertake small patching across Trinidad. The contracts involve labour and equipment only, and not hot mix. Asphalt concrete cement is supplied to the various contractors by the Ministry of Works and Transport. This allows the Ministry to control the quality of hot mix being supplied, thereby improving the durability of spot patching. This arrangement also promotes the development of small contractors, while addressing a real problem facing certain roads.

Phase II will engage an additional 25 contractors that have been procured.

Upon completion of this exercise, members of the public can expect a vast improvement in the driving experience. The Ministry is anticipating the continuation of this project in 2023.

Madam President, by bringing these small contractors on board, this will assist the Ministry. The Ministry has eight patching crews at this point in time, which is really insufficient for the amount of work on the roads under the Ministry of Works and Transport. So this programme is to bring on at least 25 to 50 small contractors to assist the Ministry of Works. We will be giving them the mix and they will just have to go out and assist us in repairing the infringements on the roads, while we work with the bigger contractors to do major road rehabilitation.

In many areas, the issue of WASA's ageing infrastructure has contributed to the deterioration of our road network. The Ministry will continue to work with WASA in order to further forge proper alliances that will enhance road maintenance. Madam President, again, this has nothing to do with the fact that—the problem with WASA is that WASA infrastructure is aged. In some areas there are some lines that are over 100 years old. Whenever these lines pop a leak, WASA has to go in and repair the leak. So, the challenge we have is really the age of WASA infrastructure, and we are working with WASA to try to solve that. The Ministry does—if we have to do major rehabilitation on a road, we will communicate with WASA. And before we go in, WASA will tell us there is no project on that road. However, if the lines that are there pop leaks and so, we cannot expect WASA to leave it like that. What we are working with WASA to do is to have a quicker response time, so that at least we could bring back the road to normalcy in the shortest possible time.

To ensure our roads last longer, the Ministry is currently reviewing the

design and specifications of road rehabilitation and construction material. Madam President, again a lot of our roads would have evolved over time. And basically, there is no foundation in these roads. What we are looking at now is, rather than just going and repaving roads, before we repave the roads we want to ensure that the foundation on the road could withstand the amount of vehicles now traversing on the road. So it is a whole comprehensive review of how we actually repair roads, going forward.

Trinidad Lake Asphalt now falls under the purview of the Ministry of Works and Transport. And the previous policy adopted was to use TLA on all main roads and highways exclusively. However, going forward, it is the Ministry's intention to expand our policy to utilize TLA on secondary and tertiary roads for rehabilitation and paving projects. It is anticipated that this approach will ensure a more durable road surface. The Ministry intends to work closely with Lake Asphalt to ensure that this product of a high quality will be produced and we will have a constant supply at a competitive price.

Madam President, a lot of people do not understand what Lake Asphalt produces. Recently, when I spoke about this in the other House, I saw some posts saying that the Minister is going to use cement to build roads. TLA is an asphalt-based cement produced by Lake Asphalt. Normally you use it at airports or on highways, because it is a very strong product. But it is very costly. However, the Ministry, working with Lake Asphalt now, has been able to reduce the price and we are working to get a constant supply. The intention is to use that TLA now on most of the roads under the Ministry of Works and Transport. What that will do, it will give us a much more solid product and we feel that is the way to go.

So, we are working with Lake Asphalt. We were able to bring the price down with them. Lake Asphalt came under the Ministry about three or four months ago, and a lot of work has been going on behind the scenes to try to get the Lake Asphalt product used on all the roads in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, Lake Asphalt is also collaborating with the University of the West Indies to develop a training programme on spot paving for small contractors, with the intent of improving the quality of the final product, thereby ensuring a more durable road surface. In other words, Madam President, we are not only just working with the bigger contractors, we are working with the smaller contractors because road maintenance has to be a constant work programme. So, in order to have good quality work done, we are working with the smaller contractors now, to ensure that once they do road repairs, that the repairs that they are doing, we can get value for money on that.

The Ministry also proposes to continue using recycled aggregate products or RAP, which is a high-quality recycled green technology for road maintenance activities. This will help to reduce the burden on our local quarries, which have depleted a great deal over the years. Again, Madam President, what this is, you would see the Ministry milling a lot of roads before they pave. This material, we have found a way to recycle this material, because we have this material piled up at different stockpiles. And then you have people, they want five loads of this. And this was just discarded in the past.

What we are going to do now, is to reuse this. We have found the technology to recycle this material and use it on the road network. What it will do, rather than we have to put four inches of asphalt, once we use this, this stabilizes the road and you just use two inches of the asphalt after that. So it will reduce the

cost and we would get a much stronger road surface. What this means is that the material required from the quarries will be significantly reduced as well. So these are the areas that the Ministry is really looking at.

1.00 p.m.

The Highways Division is working towards achieving ISO 9001 certification in design, construction and project management procedures. By achieving this internationally recognized status, the Ministry will have the ability to provide consistent high-quality service, use effective processes and well-trained staff.

The Ministry is also working to implement data-driven software solutions to update the inventory of all roads across Trinidad. The tools are expected to improve the efficiency, accountability and effectiveness of our road maintenance team during the inspection, planning and execution phase of work. This will allow the Ministry to generate an objective and unbiased road condition survey, thereby reducing subjective methods and user error.

The Ministry intends to work closely with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government; the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries; and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development in completing this exercise. This project will allow us to identify and confirm the roads that fall under the various maintenance organizations in Trinidad and classify roads based on usage. The Ministry will be able to identify the main roads which are most traversed and prioritize these roads for maintenance purposes, and identify orphan roads that do not fall under the purview of any of the road maintenance organizations in Trinidad. This exercise, when completed in accordance with the—[Inaudible]—will make provisions for any road maintenance organizations to

legally adopt these roads once they are upgraded by the owners or developers to acceptable standard.

Madam President, for too long our population have been given excuses about, “This road do not fall under me, that road doh fall under me, go to the local government, go to agriculture, dais ah orphan road because the developer”—this exercise will allow us to identify exactly who these roads fall under. It will also create a maintenance schedule for roads and one of the technologies that we are using now, I think we are working with the IDB on that, where you use technology to observe any infringements on road safety and things like that. This is computerized equipment positioned in vehicles that will just be driving on the road and actually picking up infringements. That way we can go back to look at the road supervisors and so, to ensure they are doing their work, we could check the records and everything. And it will take off this idea of somebody saying, “No that road is good, we need to fix this road.” This information will give us the roads that are most traversed and the roads are in definite need of fixing and help us to prioritize the repairs.

Madam President, it is not only about the repairing of the existing roads. To demonstrate further how the Ministry of Works and Transport is pursuing a sustainable future through strategic infrastructure and enhanced mobility, I will highlight our ongoing highway projects, in addition to making travel easier and more efficient. Highway contributes greatly to reduce traffic congestions. An extensive and well-maintained arterial system connects major cities like Port of Spain, San Fernando, Chaguanas and Arima, as well as smaller, less urbanized communities such as Wallerfield, Cumuto, Mon Desir, Penal. Our highway facilitates the removal of transportation barriers, providing jobs, market, goods,

social interaction, education and other services essential for a healthy and fulfilling life.

I can assure you that the Ministry of Works and Transport will continue its priority projects. Under the new and major infrastructure initiative efforts, we will continue the construction of the vehicle and pedestrian bridge in Diego Martin; Port of Spain East-West Corridor Transportation Project, which is now at the phase of the Macoya Interchange; the Churchill Roosevelt Highway extension to Sangre Grande; upgrade of the Valencia to Toco Road; extension of the Solomon Hochoy extension to Point Fortin; the La Brea Dry Docking and associated facilities; and the Gran Chemin fishing port in Moruga.

Madam President, these are some of the major projects that we are doing and the Government has to balance repairing existing road network with improving the connectivity, the highway connectivity because a lot of people will ask why are we building highways. Just try to imagine going from Port of Spain to San Fernando without a highway.

The Government's intention is to continue the highway network so that at least some time in the future you can drive all the way from Port of Spain to Toco on a highway, Port of Spain to Point Fortin, and you can drive from Port of Spain to Mayaro on a highway.

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

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. Vice-President, bridges are critical to maintenance connectivity along the road network. Under the Bridge Reconstruction Programme, the Ministry of Works and Transport has identified 92 structures and scheduled designs and repair work where intervention is required. To date, 37 bridges have been rebuilt in phase one and two of this programme.

Under phase three, A and B, we will pursue the repair of 24 bridges in 2023. And phase four will deal with the remaining 27.

Mr. Vice-President, it is no surprise that with the climate change and so some of our bridges just cannot withstand the volume of water. And that is why in this last couple days we saw at least two bridges where the volume of water actually damaged the abutments of the bridges. What we are doing now—in the past, we designed bridges for one in, I think it would have been 25-year storm, then we went to one in 50-year storm. At the Ministry now, we have to look at bridges for one in 100-year storm. Because we do not want to the build bridges now and five years from now you realize the capacity in these bridges are, you know—we have gone past that capacity. Because when you do a bridge now, you do that bridge for 20 years down the road.

So, this is a very costly exercise because if you build a bridge for a 125-year storm and you have to build that same bridge for one in a 100-year storm, it is about three times the price. But the Ministry continues to—in this bridges programme, the aim is to upgrade every single bridge in Trinidad, to remove all the wooden bridges across the island, especially on the major road network. And we are on course to do that.

Under the landslips, which also pose a threat to efficient connectivity, the Ministry remains committed to a successful implementation of the Landslip Repair Programme. Currently, to address this, there is a total of 328 landslips, and I am sure after this rainy season that figure will go up considerably.

Unfortunately, landslips take some time, because you have to go in and do soil tests, then you have to do designs and so, before you could actually put boots on the grounds. To date, we have completed over 25 and we have 21 at this point

in time at different stages of implementation. Going forward, the Ministry will continue to treat with this prevailing problem across Trinidad by implementing interventions at an earlier stage of infractions under a combination of natural solutions and new technology.

In other words—sorry, Mr. Vice-President, what we are doing now is looking at landslips at an early point. Once you allow a landslip to continue to develop, the cost of redoing that landslip is significantly more. So, the Ministry has actually formulated a programme to identify areas of landslips long before they actually happen and start to take precautionary measures.

We also looking at natural solutions, rather than just going—not everywhere you could use natural solutions, but where ever we could use natural solutions, looking at replanting at the areas and so, geotechnical surveys will show us that we could actually use different materials and so to do the landslip. The Ministry is actually looking at all those methods going forward because the landslips in Trinidad are posing a major problem for the Ministry.

The programme for works under the Ministry of Drainage Division has focused on ensuring that major rivers, and tributaries, and outfalls, are addressed to facilitate an increased capacity and faster run-off. To this end, the Division has completed over 400 desilting projects across the nation. It should be noted that we have had an earlier and above active rainy season. However, while flooding has occurred in the main, there has been relatively quick run-off of water. In other words, Mr. Vice-President, this year, because of the early rainy season, some of the capital projects in the watercourses would have been pushed for next year. The Ministry went on to do more desilting programmes and that is why, with the amount of rainfall that we are getting, in most instances, the water is running off

within 10, 15, to half an hour after the rain stops. So that is one area that the Ministry continues to do a lot of work on and going forward, the Ministry is working with the Andean Development Bank for more major drainage programmes.

We also continue our work on the upgrade of the sluice gate across the country. For example, the Tulsa Trace Pump House and the Trinidad point sluice gate system, which have been giving some problem for quite a while, new pumps, new pump house, new gates, and that project is about the 95 per cent completed.

In fiscal 2022/2023, this pump and gate programme will shift now to the Caroni catchment area. What we are doing in this fiscal year is we are going to be putting a lot of emphasis on the Caroni River where we are actually redoing all the gates, looking at rebuilding all the banks and actually widening the Caroni River anywhere that land is available. Because we must appreciate that the Caroni River takes almost all the water out of the East-West Corridor and even in central to some extent.

Twenty-two projects have been executed in the last fiscal year, seven are currently being implemented. In addition, the Ministry has been undertaking work with the strategic drainage plan. Focus has been on the following river basins where drainage studies have recently been completed: in the Caroni River basin, the North Oropouche River basin, the South Oropouche River basin, the Ortoire River basin, the Caparo River basin and Port of Spain. Additional structural and nonstructural measures are prioritized for short, medium, and long-term execution. It is expected that projects from this plan will continue to be implemented in January 2023 with the onset of the dry season.

Mr. Vice-President, we have had several drainage studies in Trinidad and

Tobago. None of them came up with an actual operational plan. So, we paid people to do the studies but nothing about implementing. We engaged the Andean Development Bank and they took all the studies for us and they are now giving us projects to implement. And that is why you have all these gates and pumps coming out, the expansion of the Caroni River and we are actually looking at areas where we can, you know, look at ponds and so, where we can retain water and then release it into the channels. So, we are looking at all the plans that we had before and we are actually now starting to get the operational programmes coming out of it.

Mr. Vice-President, there has been a lot of talk about this Government not doing enough work this the southern part of the island. Today, I wish to categorically deny that. The Ministry has done over 60 projects in the south and I would not call the projects out, but the Ministry has been, from time to time, accused of not doing work in the southland. The programme for desilting comes up where each division will submit to the Director of Drainage all the projects that they want done and that scope of work is formulated by the Drainage Division. Because we recognize that in concern areas, you have to do desilting because of the geography of the area. And the southland is one area like that and that is why a lot of emphasis goes in to the southland.

But no matter what you do in certain areas you will get water ponding because the land is designed like that. There are certain areas that once the rain falls, the water has to pond in certain areas. And it will take time, especially when you have high tides and so, for this water to go back into the water channel, then to go into the ocean. But I give the assurance throughout Trinidad and Tobago that the drainage programme takes into consideration every part of the island.

Mr. Vice-President, one of the areas that I am very concerned about is the malicious attacks from members of the public on our infrastructure. It is truly unfortunate that there is a growing trend of vandalism and theft throughout the country towards equipment and other measures meant to reduce the risk of flooding. All of this mischief comes to a significant cost to the State, and moneys that can be spent on sustainable measures for the public must now be allocated for repairs and replacement.

Mr. Vice-President, just a few days ago, I had to deal with an incident where one of our flap gates was stolen at the Sea Lots Pump House, Port of Spain. To replace this critical piece of equipment, the estimate could run us close to \$200,000. These actions are unlawful and they go against the current of our national progress and they need to stop.

Mr. Vice-President, we have lost, right in Port of Spain alone, two pumps, now the gate. The cost of replacing those things is close to \$1 million. We have brought in temporary pumps but they do not have the capacity that the original pumps had. We recently lost, at the Licensing Office in Caroni, an entire steel structure. Fortunately, we were able to recover that and that has been installed in Port of Spain. We have lost manhole covers, street signs, parts of our bridges have been cut off, and what—we are pleading that, please, do not interfere with our infrastructure because that can cause major harm to our citizens going forward. We have lost manhole covers and then two days after we got claims, people falling into the manhole. That really is something that we are grappling with and it is something that we urge whoever is interfering with, especially our pumps and gates and so, please do not do that because the cost of flooding is expensive; very expensive.

Mr. Vice-President, coastal erosion has the power to divide large areas of land, split islands, erode cliff size and invite the sea to spaces where there was once dry land. The erosion of coastal areas has always occurred but the effects of climate change, among many issues, have led to the melting of the icecaps resulting in an increase in sea levels. Additionally, during volatile weather events such areas, which are on the rise, all these factors intensify coastal dynamics putting our sea communities at great risk.

Mr. Vice-President, right now, I am dealing with an issue on the Paria Main Road, where the road is actually collapsing because of coastal erosion hitting at the bottom of the hill and actually pulling the road. Coastal erosion is real and the Coastal Protection Unit at the Ministry will continue to intensify the programmes. This year, we have about 11 projects to start. And that is something that we will have to continue to monitor because coastal projects are very expensive. However, it is something that we have to do as a country because we must remember we are an island and we have to protect our land mass.

Towards the diversification of our national economy, Mr. Vice-President, the Government is poised to develop the maritime sector as it holds the potential to create far more jobs, business opportunities and bolster the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. Moving forward in this area would require robust legislation and policy to facilitate the growth that is expected. Towards this end, the Ministry of Works and Transport made significant advancement to repeal and replace the 1987 Shipping Act to optimize aspects of the law and remain responsive to the industrial development needs. This is now at a joint select committee of Parliament.

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

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Yeah. Further, the Maritime Services Division

continues to make considerable progress on the following initiatives: upgrades of the navigational aids; disposals of wrecks and derelict ships at sea; development of a small boat and jet ski regulations; an amendment to the Harbours Act to improve maritime security; enhance collection of maritime fees; and reduce the effects of illegal and unreported fishing.

Mr. Vice-President, the Port of Port of Spain: the port continues to carry out the Cabinet's instruction of actually getting a public-private partner and we expecting to have in the first quarter of 2023 an international tender out for a partner for the port. The port development is very important to the Ministry and that is why at this time work on the Moruga port continues through NIDCO and the Coastal Protection Unit, while we continue to do the conceptual designs for the La Brea Dry Docking Facility.

Under public transport, Mr. Vice-President, the PTSC continues on the tender process for the new electric buses to enhance the fleet. We see public transportation through PTSC as being the preferred mode of transportation in the upcoming future, and that is why PTSC has actually embraced technology using new apps and so to create the atmosphere where the population will be very comfortable using the PTSC. But first, we have to ensure that we can get the required amount of buses and so, and to have the service running a lot more reliable where people can feel comfortable using this service. That is where the Ministry is actually going.

Mr. Vice-President, in conclusion, I would like to point out that the Ministry continues on its drive to deliver first class infrastructure. If we look at the Curepe Interchange, one of the projects we were able to deliver on; the work continues again in the east on the Valencia to Toco highway; the Wallerfield to Sangre

Grande in the east; in the West, the overpass in Diego Martin; and in the south, the San Fernando to Point Fortin highway, work continues.

The licensing office continues to improve using technology and reducing the time that people have to wait at the licensing office. This year, we will see a significant improvement in the amount of online services offered at the licensing office. The aim at the licensing office is that you should only go to licensing office if you have a problem. You should be able to access all of the services from home. And we are on course to do that.

Mr. Vice-President, I know my time is running out. The Ministry has 14 units and 16 state enterprises under the Ministry of Works and Transport. So, we can go on and we can speak for days on the amount of work. But I know our time is short today and as we go forward, we will continue to inform the population on the progress at the Ministry of Works and Transport. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. David Nakhid: [*Arabic spoken*] In the name of God, the most gracious most merciful. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you for this opportunity to join this most crucial debate at this most critical of times. I would like to extend greetings to the resilient, hard-working, but battle-weary constituents of Tunapuna who have been faced with a multitude of challenges, some caused by nature, most caused by the most inept PNM Government this country has ever seen.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: And were it not for their faith in God, and the hope, and the sincere hope that the UNC will soon assume the reins of government, they would

be in much, much more dire straits.

Mr. Vice-President, it was in my junior year of university, very hectic year, and I was in a class called global foreign policy and I was asked, much to my horror, to put together in a group project a budget that would work towards alleviating the problem of the Palestinians in that unfortunate conflict with the Zionist entity. That was the first part of the question. The second part was to suggest who would be the appropriate diplomat to see that budget through. The class was not particularly a hard class, academically, but the professor was a very hard professor and he had no interest in hearing about my exploits with the soccer team, the football team, that we on our way to the final against UCLA.

So, the night before we were due to travel to play that game against UCLA in the championship final, my paper was due that morning, that very morning. So, I was up at two o'clock. I had a couple very nice friends who helped type. At that time, it was the typewriter and they were typing the paper. And I put all the financials and everything, and I thought I had it right. And just at the end for the second part of the question, a bit facetious but in a more or less almost cynical way, I put who I thought would be able to complete that budget, see that budget through. I have to say that I received a C minus for the first part of my paper and an A minus for the second part.

I never forgot what the professor said to me on the review of my budget. He said, your budget was the ultimate perversion of what a budget should be, all the financials in place without any plan to address the needs of the people on the ground in Palestine. He said, this ultimate perversion is what economists, who do not represent the human side of economics, that is what they propose. And this is what we have in the budget presented before us. There are some financials, a lot of

speculation, but if we note quite clearly, what we have is a budget, as the youths on the ground say, sells a lot of dreams, “We will do that, we will do this, there is this in the works,” but only when it relates to the people on the ground, the grassroots communities; when it relates to the people that do not need the benefits of such a budget, the people who are well off, everything has been done for them, everything has already been completed. This is well and truly a budget that represents only the one per cent friends and financiers of this PNM Government.

And, Mr. Vice-President, it is sad to say that even the economics of this budget—because I heard Sen. Mark comment that in such a budget nominal GDP should never be used, which is correct. Real GDP should be used which accounts for inflation, cost of living. And I do not think that we need to ask why the Minister of Finance does that. And I will answer Sen. Mark. It is a nominal economist and a nominal Minister of Finance that will use nominal figures.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: A real economist, a real Minister of Finance would use the figures that he knows will affect the people on the ground, the most vulnerable, the most poor and hard-working communities of Trinidad and Tobago. Because put aside all the rhetoric and banter that you hear between the two sides, one of the realest debates that we have had, and that I have heard the submissions, was the one that Sen. Jearlean John alluded to from the Independent side. And Senator, I think, Dillon-Remy she was emphatic in saying and in stating that this budget really for the first time, I would say—and that is why I call it the ultimate perversion of what a budget should be.

1.30 p.m.

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It is the first time that, clearly, the PNM Government made no attempt to disguise who they really are. They made no attempt at all. It is a budget full of mendacity. It is a budget full of contradictions. It is a budget full of—as I think it was Sen. West alluded to—flashy things. There is no more flashy things than this budget, no more, it is all about events—tell them about agriculture, they talk about Agri Expo—how sustainable is that? How sustainable is an expo? You tell us 30,000 people passed through.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: 30,000 people passed through—so what?

Sen. Lyder: Lights and glamour.

Sen. D. Nakhid: All of that, just flash. This is a Government who not only has lost their plot, they have lost their minds.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: This is a Government—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of order 46 (1)—(4) sorry, 46 (4).

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Roberts: [*Laughs*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid, 46 (4) upheld, based on insulting language.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Mr. Vice-President, I have sat here and heard that side refer to our side—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. D. Nakhid: —as been over a rum shop and drinking rum and you upheld that?

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid, I have made my—Sen. Nakhid,

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Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: —you are going good in your contribution—Senators—I have made my ruling. Can you please proceed?

Sen. D. Nakhid: All right, thank you very much, well then you take me to my point. I heard—and this is not for the first time, and I take offense to it—referred to the Opposition, as being for rum and being above a rum shop. I am a Muslim, and I practicing one, I have never touched a drink in my life. You all stay in your crease, you all bat in your crease, however wide it may be and know your place—know your place. If I hear any comments like that, I will respond in kind.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid, your role today is to make a contribution—

Sen. D. Nakhid: I am responding, Mr. Vice-President—

Mr. Vice-President: —is to make a contribution—

Sen. D. Nakhid: I am responding.

Mr. Vice-President: Pause for a moment Sen. Nakhid and understand the difference between contribution and chastisement. Can you continue your contribution please. The ruling has passed.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Well, thank you but I thought I would respond and let them know, that side, that it is an affront to the Islamic community to continuously refer to alcohol and the like when we have Muslims as part of the United National Congress.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: So, Mr. Vice-President, when one delivers an honest budget, the most critical and honest variable should be that of the cost of living, not the GDP. The GDP could be as high as you want, for example, a country like America, very, very high GDP but we have so many homeless people, because that is not an

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accurate indication. So, when this Government, this PNM Government, comes with 4 per cent to the hard workers, hardest working people who went through COVID and comes and offers them 4 per cent, based on 2013 salaries—what are you telling them? You are basically telling them we do not care about you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: We do not care about the contribution you have made in sustaining this country through the most difficult of times. And that is their words, Mr. Vice-President—that is their claim. They tout these were the workers on the frontline. They tout these were the essential workers. They tout that these were the workers we could not live without. But what did they do? They treat them like garbage. How is that acceptable? How is that acceptable to a country where we are faced with the most trying of times for us not to accept that in this time, in a portfolio like agriculture, and I cast no aspersions on the new Minister—that we have a budget of 1.3 billion, I do not care about after. From the time you tell me the budget, that agriculture which you purport and which has been recommended by the World Health Organization should be the primal focus—primary focus in our time in recovering from the pandemic, you allocate \$1.3 billion? Who you fooling—who you fooling? Right now the farmers of this country should be treated like kings. There should be an overarching agricultural policy to make sure everything is allocated in the right direction.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: They have done nothing of the sort. Same as what I said Mr. Vice-President, old talk, glitz, glamour, narrative, and everything about this PNM Government, is shallow governance, shallow governance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Mr. Vice-President, we are faced with a decline and here is where I come into the contradictions that are contained in this budget. We know there has been a decline in economic growth—which basically means that economic activity has declined. We received a windfall, one would assume that a government that serves its purpose of helping the people who have the most challenges would have reacted to that. How then, if we received a windfall and we have people faced with the most challenging of times, at that time you increase gas prices, at that time you increase the cost of living, prices go up because from the time you increase gas prices, everything goes up. I mean, the people on the ground feel it, not that they have to be—they feel it. There is no amount of rhetoric narrative that any one of them on that side could come and bring to this House that will change the reality on the ground. People are suffering Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: And you know, Mr. Vice-President, I grew up with a partner of mine. He was in St. Mary's with me, but he was from behind the bridge—he went South East Port of Spain, but brilliant boy, brilliant boy—I mean, talk about bright, not in an academic sense, just a sense of the world bright I am talking about. But he is my adversary. He like All Stars, I like Desperadoes, you know the thing. He asked me the other day—he say Nakhid—I always hearing you talking about pan but you do not really talk about calypso—I told him I do not really talk about calypso, because in my opinion, the calypsos that I like are the most—are so reflective of our country's suffering.

I mean, there is no other genre, none, you will find that so reflects the inhumanity of such a PNM Government. So he tell me—which song is the one that that really sets you off—because I do not get emotional and cry—I get

emotional and angry. And I talked to him about Shadow, the Mighty Shadow—may he rest in strength—and his song “Poverty is Hell”. For me if you do not just breeze through the lyrics and listen to the music—because you know everything is a wine and a “stink and dutty”—but if you really look at the lyrics, they are the most, “I eh had to come here and talk about no spider and no fly”. I talking about “Poverty is Hell”, you know what that means? Poverty is hell means—just those words—whoever is poor, it is like they are living in hell. “All yuh cah get that in all yuh head”?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: It have nothing to say after that—poverty is hell. And all yuh want to come and tell me all yuh went through that. But you are the exception, even my brother Kazim Hosein, he is the exception, he come from poor circumstances and make—he is the exception to the rule.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: All of you all talking coal pot and crap, or you are the exception to the rule. The truth is 99 per cent of you all in your circumstances will not make it, especially under the policies of the PNM Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Mr. Vice-President, listen to him. And he was a “Despers” fan—I only learnt today from my Uncle—Uncle Rudolph’s brother, Uncle Kenneth, that he was a Desperadoes fan too. Listen to Mighty Shadow—listen to him—

“Poverty is hell and the angels are in Paradise”

I cannot tell you one philosopher and I know all of them because I am a well-read person from Rousseau to Nietzsche to anybody who could give me that—

“Poverty is hell and the angels are in Paradise”

So we can hear and I cast no aspersions, an elitist submission. I cast no aspersions on the man, an elitist submission by Sen. Vieira, not him but the submission was elitist. Listen to it:

“Despite the criticisms, despite the gloomy...”

—“prognostations”, but that is a wrong word it should be prognostications.

“...I do not agree that this budget is wicked and brutal. It should not be demonized as a betrayal of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Yes, yes, there are dark clouds. And yes, the country is going through rough waters—. . . But on balance...to me...there is still much for us to be thankful.

The economy is stable.

The currency is stable.

And we live in a diverse, free and stable democracy.”

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*] PNM [*Inaudible*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Wow—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: —wow, no wonder—no wonder those on that side, Mr. Vice-President, would thump their desks at that. I could dissect that in a million ways. The currency is stable—well let me address that family. We actually have a currency—and I will give my own personal anecdote.

My son, in his last year of university, I have to be begging the bank—and this is not anything to do with the employees, they are wonderful, as a matter of fact, that bank where I bank, the manager is—she is wonderful—but the policy is, I have to make a request, I have to wait three weeks, sometimes four weeks, because

I am not connected and have no desire to be, I want no favours. When that request come—and listen to this, Mr. Vice-President, we talking about a stable currency:

Mr. Nakhid, you have 24 hours to get that allotment to you, if you do not, it is gone.

—that is from the traders. That is a fact. So, if I do not have that cash there I cannot get that allotment. I say:

What about the allotment for my family? I have a son, he has a mother.

As a matter of fact, I have four sons and they have mothers.

No, we deal with your tuition—

Okay, no problem.

If I decide, as a Senator, on that side once said, if I cannot organize, as he said—if I cannot organize, as he said, the foreign exchange for my son in university, I am among the stupid.

Mr. Vice-President: Senators, on the Opposition Bench you are not allowing your colleague to give his contribution.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: I would like—no, it was not. I was listening—

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Yeah, Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Thank you Mr. Vice-President. So I have to run through rings, and then to hear the Minister for Tourism and Culture and the Arts, who once said:

That those who have their children outside in university and cannot arrange the foreign exchange they are an unintelligent.

You believe that? Unintelligent, because we cannot arrange foreign exchange for our kids and if not, we should send them to UWI—was it UWI or UTT? UWI?

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We should send them to UWI. So my son who was born in Dubai, who lived his life between Beirut and Spain and now lives in America, I have to bring him to UWI to please the Minister because this PNM Government does not know how to handle their affairs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: But you can bet Mr. Vice-President, that their children not in UWI—you can bet that Mr. Vice-President, as a matter of fact, even when we try to send them to UWI with \$500,000 grants, we do not hear anything about it.

So Mr. Vice-President, I will use during the course of my contribution as I go on, words from that bard, that philosopher, I call him, the Mighty Shadow. But first, I already spoke about that very frenetic, frantic, erratic whatever you term it contribution by the Senator in her response to Sen. Lutchmedial. I would like to go into—okay. I would just like to remind the good Sen. Vieira, he mentioned about the country being stable. I spoke about the currency, I would like to talk about his—I would not say assessment his—well yeah, I would say his assessment that the country was stable, it is a democracy. Well, Mr. Vice-President, let us look at that and let us challenge that for a bit.

Can we say that we are in a democracy that is stable, when clearly many of our independent institutions have been compromised?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: By my last look and my last look at the United Nations, the Declaration on what is really a democratic country, so called stable, it would be that the independent institutions are pretty much insulated from political influence. Clearly, Mr. Vice-President, this has not been the case, not only by the recent Vincent Nelson revelations, but when we look at what happened in the selection of

a commissioner of police. I would like to declare here, Mr. Vice-President, to the public of Trinidad and Tobago, that I have been brought before the Anti-Corruption Investigation Bureau to question the Prime Minister, Keith Christopher Rowley, for his misbehaviour in public office. He is now under official investigation.

Hon. Senator: Oh goood, what?

Sen. D. Nakhid: That is correct, Mr. Vice-President. I know too from them, that they have also questioned other witnesses and if they would like to speak, that is up to them. So, we have a sitting Prime Minister who the Anti-Corruption Investigation Bureau is looking into his misbehaviour in public office. We have a former Attorney General who it seems is at sea to explain who signed off on that indemnity agreement. And by the way, we hope that Sen. Sooklal will give us some—since she has been named—she will give us some insight into who was in that room.

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Watch your mouth.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Yes—no, no, no, no, no, you watch yours.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Hopefully Sen, Sagrarsingh-Sooklal—

Hon. Senators: [*Sustained desk thumping*] [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. Roberts: Watch it my friend.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I was responding to the—

Mr. Vice-President: —no, Sen. Nakhid, as you proceed, for the debate there is no need for this pointed level of crosstalk, without baiting—without baiting. And

while we are on the matter, the disclosure that you just made may be in full confidence, please be reminded of Standing Order 47.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Thank you Mr. Vice-President, I checked, and I asked the people who investigate—who came and questioned me about that misbehaviour in public office by the Prime Minister, I asked them and they said yes, an investigation has been launched and I am one of the witnesses. So I do not know, it is not—as sub judice I think I can reveal that.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Lyder: He is not before the Court.

Sen. D. Nakhid: So my point is, Mr. Vice-President—

Sen. Mark: Going to be arrested.

Sen. D. Nakhid: —we have, Mr. Vice-President, a couple of our most salient institutions, supposedly independent, who not compromised, seems to be overrun. Then I would like to ask Sen. Vieira, how fair and stable then is our democracy?

So, we have to be careful when people who inhabit a certain space, people who live a certain lifestyle, can make claims about the country, that we have a stable currency, we have a stable economy, we have a stable democracy. When we— [*Laughs*] And I mean all of us in this room, we know it to be differently so. Now, I understand the Opposition has their agenda and I understand those on that side have their agenda but then there is always the reality on the ground, and I think Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy accurately depicted that. And the ground is saying and they have heard it—and it reminds me—it is a quote from a philosopher as well and it is stuck with me—that he said:

You have to be careful when you try to control the damage to your reputation, what you do to control the damage to your reputation, sometimes inflicts more damage.

And that is clearly so, because what the Minister of Finance came and I will refer now to his Budget Statement. He said:

“In areas where I do not go into detail, my ministerial colleagues will elaborate in their contributions.”

You all have failed them badly.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: It is among the worst contributions that we have seen. And I am not talking about only here, but also in the other place. I will give you an example, Mr. Vice-President, I could give you so many, but I will go to this. Mr. Vice-President, how much time do I have?

Sen. Roberts: Take an hour.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid, you have until 2.03, you have roughly 7 to 10 more minutes again.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Mr. Vice-President, is it possible to get time from anybody on that side since they do not seem to be using wisely?

Hon. Senators: [*Loud shouting and desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid, if you would just try to get into your message at this point—

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

Mr. Vice-President: —maybe you need to utilize your time more effectively.

Hon. Senators: [*Loud talking*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Thank you, thank you. Mr. Vice-President, yes—so, I go to what the Minister of Finance was looking for. He knew that the budget was basically skeleton, he knew that, we could see from his demeanor, he seemed very unsure. But he was looking to his colleagues to perhaps beef it up a bit, you know, put some skin on it—some muscle on it. And this is what we have from the Minister of Sport and Community Development. She said, when talking about sports tourism, she said:

And we will pay attention to sport tourism.

And that was the contribution, Mr. Vice-President, in full—that was her contribution to sport tourism—speaking about sport tourism in the budget:

We will pay attention to sport tourism.

I kid you not Mr. Vice-President. Let me tell you what the UNC under Sen. Roberts had in mind for sport tourism. What we would have done and what we will do is to make sure that all those in university abroad, the US, Canada, wherever they will be on a list, a database, they will be included, because this lends itself to community development. What we will do, encourage them to have teams from universities bought here. I know I could have done that when I was in university, I could have bought several teams here. Everybody now with their programmes, NCAA, division one, division two, they are interested in going somewhere that they can have sports.

We are here to talk about Tobago. Tobago is primarily a place for such a venture—primarily place—when you go, teams go abroad for sports tourism, Mr. Vice-President, you know what they want to go and do? They want to go and train and they do not want a beach more than five minutes away. That is Tobago. That is Tobago. And what the Minister of Sport from Tobago, say about sport tourism:

We would pay attention to sport tourism.

And that is it. What we will do and let me give you the numbers to back it up. For every 10,000 people that come into sports tourism, it lends itself a billion dollars to the economy—a billion dollars. You know how many people we have in universities abroad? We have at least—I am talking on the football side of things—I am not talking about volleyball, I am not talking about tennis, I am not talking about swimming. Sen. Roberts, who in my opinion, was the best sports Minister this country has ever seen.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: And I know they will want to come and talk—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: —I know they will want to come and talk,

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Mr. Vice-President, and I will address it frontally because I know he does not like to but I will adjust it frontally. They like to talk and when they talk—they come up—only here, not outside—LifeSport—

Hon. Senator: Yeah

Sen. D. Nakhid: —LifeSport. Nowhere in that audit is the name of Sen. Roberts mentioned.

Sen. Lyder: Yeah.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Nowhere. So they will come here and say it and they will get resonance. But you know what is funny, Mr. Vice-President, it seems that when the UNC places money in the hands of the poor and working class people, that side has a problem with.

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Sen. Lyder: Yeah.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: But when they giving money so Kall Co and Amal Co can rebuild Balisier House they have no problem with that—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: I only hope—I only hope because it has been brought up by that side, Mr. Vice-President, I only hope that your consciousness—your consciences are assuaged when that Balisier House is built, I want the penthouse suite to be named the Ken Valley Penthouse Suite—Ken Valley, put it big and bold—Ken Valley, and maybe some of the other floors could be named Simeon Daniel and Antonio Francois—boys who were used and abused. Yes, it is in the public domain, nothing I say—I will say this outside of the Parliament as well—outside—“alyuh doh like to tell people in meeting outside, I will meet all ah alyuh outside”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Sen. D. Nakhid: Thank you Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, we adding

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Lyder: I would [*Inaudible*] the budget. He talking the truth.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, allow you colleague to complete his—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

2.00 p.m.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Mr. Vice-President, so in wrapping up, for me, I would like to leave for those—because there must be good people, not matter how they display themselves, there must be some iota of decency over there, there must be. I will leave them. But, for me, the most heart-wrenching lines of a Calypso, of a

sobriquet, of any philosophical clause are these lines, and it relates directly to what the people of Trinidad and Tobago are facing right now.

“Ten little children, four dumplings
 Mummy got to slice them thin, thin, thin
 A piece for a boy and a piece for a girl”

And look at the compassion and empathy poor people still maintain:

“A piece for the neighbour daughter Merle”

You all on that side should be ashamed of that budget. Mr. Vice-President, they should take this budget and put it where “de monkeys put de nuts”. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

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

Mr. Vice-President: Before I call the next speaker, can I ask the Opposition Bench, especially, to recompose yourself as we try to refocus on the debate at hand? I am hearing this side, and I am seeing this side and both of my ears work. Yes. Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh.

Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for allowing me to partake in this discussion. And, I must say, before this budget, we were already faced, as a nation, with a crisis, a cost of living crisis. The pandemic, the lock downs, persons said their personal savings had dried up, persons were unemployed, the stress of losing loved ones and the stress of—the fear “had given persons” of going back into the community. Some people were not able to get jobs. Some people, their savings had dried up, they were not able to buy things, and the cost of living—the goods, the services—all that increased, no fault of ours. We know the supply chain had given us some challenges. So persons were distressed.

I had persons coming to me asking me for loans. I had a doctor coming to

me, a young doctor, begging me actually, to lend him some money. So, it had reached a stage where I realized we were in dire straits. Something, you know, what is going on? I understood what was going on. The global economic slowdown was there before the pandemic, then the effects of the pandemic and the disruption of the supply chain. So, we had that. And now, Mr. Vice-President, this budget that was presented, this budget has the potential of fuelling a mental health crisis in our country. It has that potential.

And I point out to the fact that, in the United Kingdom, they are also undergoing great economic distress. There is the high inflation, weak economic growth. The inflation rate has been relentlessly moving upwards for the past 18 months, and I think it had reached a height of about 9.9 per cent in August and in July it was 10.1 per cent. One of the Senators mentioned here, the challenges that the new Chancellor of the Exchequer has. And, in fact, the citizens in the United Kingdom, they are crying out for help. It is winter, they cannot afford their fuel, their power, so they are in desperate need. And, at this time, I must say, I am thankful to be living in Trinidad and not in the United Kingdom. It is better to be a citizen here than in the UK. They are suffering.

And what I would like to quote, Mr. Vice-President, is the British Psychological Society, the BPS. There was a communication published on the 3rd of October 2020, and it has warned and I quote:

“...of a potential mental health crisis...”—in the UK—“...this winter, as it publishes new figures that reveal one in two people are experiencing anxiety about being able to pay their bills as a result of the cost of living crisis.”

Well the news I have is that a similar scenario could take place here, and that scenario could take place here if we do not handle this social network adequately.

So, it is very vital that we understand what is happening in the UK, and the burden of mental health is there, and we have to understand we have to take that burden that mental health can put on the society and added economic stress. And we have to realize that if we do not ease the burden of the people in terms of their distress, we could also end up with a mental health crisis.

And, before COVID, we had the idea that we are the global scenario that we were heading into a tsunami of depression globally. Before the pandemic, you know, we already had association that there was an economic burden attached to this, and the mental health caregivers were already working towards this. The COVID came now and pushed this now and escalated it. It acted as an accelerant, and we realize now that we have a greater degree of mental health problems going to be coming our way.

The Minister of Health knew this. He has made other clinics available. He knew that the adolescent population had problems, he knew that the elderly population—right through that spectrum. He has given us adolescent clinics, he has given us—recently, I heard the CDAP Programme would have a drug now for Alzheimer. So, it is not to say the Ministry of Health is not aware of this, but we are now facing a greater degree of stress. And, usually, out of the health budget, we may have been allocated about 4 per cent, in terms for mental health. This has to increase. Other countries may have 6 per cent, 10 per cent.

And you see, what I want to gather—the point I want to bring across to the Minister of Finance is, a Lancet Commission Report had given that the global cost of the economy of mental health and said:

“...mental disorders are on the rise in every country in the world and will cost the global economy \$16 trillion by 2030”—and it—“is primarily due to

early onset of mental illness and loss productivity.”

And we have no choice but to realize that we have to address this. Addressing the cost of living, addressing the stress it is going to bring and addressing the fallout that we are going to get from the cost of living, we have to be prepared for it, because it would be an added burden next year, the following year and the few years to come. And, you see, the thing we have to appreciate is that it is not just this economic burden that we are now facing with the cost of living. We had it here before that somehow the lifestyles of persons would have been affected.

What I want to do, if time permits me, just to say some things which I think that could add to this burden of people, the burden of stress that could lead to mental illness which could actually cause a greater degree of stress in our country with the economic fallout. Because even after the COVID, research from the World Health Organization mentioned that there was a 25 per cent increase in anxiety and depression globally. So, we now have to realize that whatever we were targeting before, we now have to target a greater degree of care and money towards this. So, what do we do?

I want to look at certain things that I think I need to mention. Look crime: I believe crime has now added to our stress. Crime has now invaded our sanctuaries. People who stay at home avoiding the jungle out there are not safe. Three cars filled with eight men coming into your house seems to be the new scenario. A businesswoman in Rio Claro—a family in Rio Claro, a teenager was gang raped in front of her family, all these seem to be the trend. So, what I am saying, we have to defend ourselves and our families. People may stay at home to get away from the world, thinking they are safe in their homes in their sanctuaries and they are no longer safe there.

A caring government would allow persons to get Firearm User's Licence to protect themselves as daily reports say we are sitting ducks. The Commission of Police mentioned that home invasions are increasing. So, I am saying, give persons the access with the proper checks and balances. I am saying give us tax rebates on security cameras where we dedicate one camera to the police, so we can now follow criminals all over Trinidad. I am saying give persons VAT off on steel to build burglar proof, allow YTEPP persons to come and give their service free of charge to put burglar proofing in some people's windows. We have to invent things where we keep our people's home safe.

And, I am saying, give concessions, tax concessions, VAT off on pepper spray, which I am yet to see, regrettably, and give the FUL to farmers and fish folk. We have always been hearing of the problems of praedial larceny. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries mentioned it. I have been hearing this talk all the time about road access, giving this. Let them defend themselves. Fisher folks are victims of piracy. Deploy army personnel also in towns to work with the municipal police so they can actually go into Tunapuna, they can go into the streets. Utilize the army. They have gotten an increase in food allowance in this budget. So utilize the army also so their presence will certainly deter people.

And, I am saying, I saw an activity in public relations recently, when the Minister of National Security, a big chop saw, cutting up guns. I looked and I smiled. Mr. Vice-President, those guns could have been sold to the farmers at a reduced price to defend themselves. Those guns could have been sold on the international market to gun collectors. Those guns could have been given to other Caricom nations so they can defend themselves if they cannot afford to buy ammunition for their army or their police service. And, you see, the fact is, those

guns, if they were involved in a crime in the United States and found its way down here, by destroying them, you would now have destroyed evidence. Because if somehow they realize that it came out from this—the bullets used in some crime was used by one of these weapons, we should have had the Interpol getting all ballistic testing given to them so we can track where these guns are coming from.

The United States embarrassed our country when they said that we are a terrorist nation and trying to, you know, put things out there with, you are not safe anywhere. But in Port of Spain you are not safe, but why is the Embassy in Port of Spain? Move it to central, move it to somewhere else. The United States have always said we, you know are in the transshipment zone and drugs come from South America into America, but the guns come from North America down here. The Mexican border on the United States side has gun shops—guns tracked down to Mexico and reach their way here. So, we are not just the perpetrators of dealing with these guns, it goes two ways.

But I am saying, let us call out the Americans to help us now, because if their travel advisory is such that it embarrasses us, I had already suggested that we call in the DEA to set up a base to deal with the drug, gun and human trafficking problem. Call them in. You see, if we had somehow with the new boats we got to protect our borders, if I was seeing that there was an improvement there, I would say, well we are doing our own business, we are up to mark, but there are still some deficiencies, there are still loopholes. People are still coming in, there is still human trafficking. What harm it is to ask the DEA to come in there? Give us that.

And, again, to help—why I mentioning crime is because if we do fix crime, we may be deterring tourists to come down here. If we do not fix crime, I may not want to open a little shop if I know I am going to get robbed. If we do not fix

crime, that has an effect on the whole community. And, again, crime, as somebody mentioned, it was not just a blue or white collar crime, but I think we need to still give teeth to the procurement legislation.

Health: I want to just touch on health. Now, we are privileged in this country to get free health care. This is something that other countries, United States, you find citizens they are crying out for this. So, we have to know there are good things happening here. And the thing I want to get through there is, we have free health service, but there is improvement. There would always be need for improvement.

And, recently, when Tobago had advertised for persons to come in for cataract surgery, my phone was going off. People were asking me: How could we go to Tobago to do this free cataract surgery which some organization was coming Tobago to do? So, there is improvements that, you know, we have to get improvements in prostate surgery, chronic waiting list surgeries, people with hernias, people with cataracts. These are things we have to now start working on. We have to get something else that we could do. Around the clock operating theatres: Why have doctors scattered—San Fernando, Port of Spain and Sangre Grande and different hospitals in Arima? Put all in one unit in Mount Hope and say look, this surgical list, let us bring everybody from Trinidad to come in here and we can clear up the cataracts, we can clear up the hernias, we can clear up hysterectomies with people with fibroids. These are things that I think we have to work towards.

I also would like to mention that I think knowing that we might be in for a mental health crisis, the Government has both a moral and a fiscal obligation to use our tax dollars to avert this. The finances of the country are the people's money

and the Government of the day was elected to manage those funds on behalf of the population. So, I think we have to allocate more money to the mental health section, and a responsible government has to manage the economy, reduce national debt, increase savings and stimulate the economy without causing undue hardships to its people and attempt to improve their quality of life.

So, I think the Government with some of its social programmes have attempted to meet this, and this balancing act can sometimes prove challenging to the best economic pundits in the Ministry of Finance. And the biggest criticism of this budget was the increase at the pump, and we all know, we all will be affected, it would trickle down. But, you see, the thing is, there are those who feel the impact of the budget more than others. It depends on where they stand financially and their present income. Those at the lower end of the financial ladder will be the hardest hit, especially with the increase in goods and services as well as thousands who may not have had an increase in their pay package for years, yet have to face the ever growing cost of living.

Finally, the unemployed, who also have to eat, to send children to school to take transportation. They would be most affected. Our social network has to reach out to these individuals. Some persons are on the brink of starvation, regrettably. We were such an oil rich country and we have this reality facing in, and we may miss these people in remote areas. So, we need social workers to link with councillors in each area, to go into these areas, remote areas and we need, again—the thrust has to be more mental health officers. So we work with the councillors who know the terrain. We go into these areas and we reach out to those people: Do they need help? Do they need food? Do they need a mental sort of psychotherapy? So, we did good things in health. We have a vaccination

programme that we should be proud of, and I am hoping we could continue it. Because right now in the United States, there is a problem with polio. We have had polio vaccines for years. Our immunization programme is excellent, and it is something we have to be proud of.

When I look at tourism and arts, I think there is something good in the budget where the IT upgrade is something good, where we could link up to persons all over coming into the country. Now, that is excellent that we are getting a hotel upgrade. I saw our indigenous Member of Parliament in the Senate mentioned an Amerindian village that is being set up. This could be a tourist attraction. I went to a Mayan Village in Mexico. I also mentioned in a past budget we should have a Spanish village, where the population that is in here, the immigrant population, so when tourist come we can go into village, you get Spanish food. Now you go into the Amerindian village, all these are things we have to look forward to.

Education: Depression testing, online testing, Students Support Services need to step up a bit. And I also say, looking at the elderly, this budget was criticized by TTARP where they said certain persons were not—you know, they were disappointed that certain benefits were taken from individuals; they are not allowed to travel as freely as before. So this was one group which criticized the budget. But I am saying the elderly is something that we have to look at very carefully, and politicians have to realize soon the elderly population would be 30 per cent of the population. That is an excellent voting bloc. So if a voting bloc motivates you, treat your elderly good. Right? There were plans to have tai chi community centres, pick them up in our mobile units and carry them on the beach. It helps their memory, continue that. There were plans, and I even recommended raised the retirement age to 65 years ago, where you do not keep them on that post.

Move them parallel, so the young persons could move up. In St. Ann's Hospital, we did that.

I also want the national housing authority to think about giving areas designated as elderly homes. In the United States, there are elderly homes where you can go—elderly areas where you could go, pay your money. Your relatives now, have to be looking for little hole in the wall places in different residences. We do not know the quality of these homes, how it is inspected, but relatives are scampering calling me: “Where should I put Mummy? Where should I put Daddy?” How can I recommend homes that I do not know the quality? I know there is a body that has to check them. If we can have the national house authority build areas as what we call “old age areas” where people could come in, you pay and you put your parents there. There is pool therapy, there is therapy for mental stipulation and activities. We need homes like that scattered in the country, and probably in another budget, we may have to think, you know, let that get going, there is a need for that.

Public service: I heard the Minister of Public Administration mentioned the public service is not geared for actually getting us in that productive level, but it is there, so we have to work with it. I was disappointed when I heard the Prime Minister mention that work from home may not be on the cards. But we have to realize that this option for even, we can work from home, scatter working hours. This is the thing for the future. These are things that will help individuals. It will help against travelling, wasting your fuel and help against pollution, because the exhaust from these things are cancer causes, so it will help that too. It will also help against the traffic that people have to face.

I know the Minister of Public Administration mentioned the fact that, you

know, there is a lot of other parameters which we have to check and I agree with her, but I am thinking we can get it done, because in the private sector, they are getting it done and she came from the private sector, so we know she has the ability to do it. So, something in the future where you can have those persons from the public service also being able to work from home.

Why I mention this also is the fact that travelling in traffic, it is a major problem. Travelling in traffic is something that we have to realize that it causes problems. There are medical journals out there, which also mention that it increases the risk of getting diabetes, it increases the risk of strokes. Travelling in traffic, and they actually give figures, and those figures are remarkable. If you use that, we would realize, if we can prevent people from travelling due to work-at-home arrangements, it may be beneficial in the long run for the country. And I say that because I will quote the figures, if I am allowed time.

But we have to appreciate the fact that our diabetic status here is around 14 per cent of our population and diabetes gives us a great medical burden in the sense that a study done shows about US \$85 million per year to treat hospitalized diabetic foot complications, amputations, et cetera. That can be saved, not just by the Minister of Health. We are moving, starting from schools, not by just education, but by the fact that if traffic can contribute to this, 85 million, and that is not looking at eye problems and what not. This was a 2014 study done by Prof. Vijay Naraynsingh and Dr. Cawich. Costs have gone up, so this is something that we have to realize, these figures are underestimated.

I want to say that the fact that I was a bit disappointed here yesterday, when I heard—well, I was home, I was not well, but I heard what went on between the two speakers talking about Ram and the activities. And I just had to say “Ram,

Ram” when I was home. But the whole idea was the fact that two Hindu females Senators were arguing about this, and the problem is not what went on here, the problem is the bigger picture. They were arguing . It came to the list of attorneys that were hired by the Attorney General. And we have seen this talk over and over again, that attorneys—not this Attorney General, the other Attorney General. So, we have always had a tit-for-tat from both sides saying this Attorney General hired his friends that one hired his friends and we get that. And, to the public out there, it seems that some attorneys may be considered parasites of the State, and I do not want this noble profession to have that, you know, certain members if they are hired by the State, because of their acumen that they are now labelled like that.

So, I am suggesting why can we not have an independent body, and independent service body, procure out the services of attorneys, so this talk would not come up again, it would not embarrass the attorneys involved and it would not put the Attorney General under any sort of scrutiny where he has to be defending all these things.

So, I think, again, what I might say, Mr. Vice-President, poverty is something that we have to look at. The United Nations has designated October the 17th as the International Day of the Eradication of Poverty, but I am saying this budget will produce more poor persons, And Father Joseph Wresinski, who championed this day said:

“Whenever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure these rights be respected is our solemn duty.”

So, my solemn duty is to see somehow if I can support the social service in this budget to support our citizens. I think it is a duty of the more fortunate ones to

come together. Things may get worse. Things will get worst, because oil would not be up all the time, and our increased revenue from property tax, the gambling industry, and our growing export market, we do not know it will be able to support, you know, a lifestyle that is already difficult or is making it worse. So, we may have to consider, and I support a wealth tax to the top 1 per cent. Just as how in the UK it is now being proposed that, you know, those fortunes above a certain figure that you take that wealth tax to help the economy.

The cost of recovery cannot fall on the young or those with lower incomes. As the cost of living crisis deepens and hits even the UK poorest households, you find the combined fortunes of the ones at the top with the greatest money may help and this is not something new. Because you see, we have seen in the United States, which is the capitalist centre of the world, we are seeing Bernie Sanders—and I think there was another—Warren also in the Democratic Party proposing this. So, this is not something new, but it is something we may have to look at.

We have to look also now that if I am saying that we have to give more social service, more social grants, what do we do? We are putting out this dole to people, but I am suggesting that we have a situation where we give some sort of grants to people who do not have their jobs, but let them give a community service. There are persons out there who may be able to work. Attach a community service to any social welfare given, so it is not just taxpayers's moneys going there. Let us say you want to clean up the beach, you send a vehicle for them, you give them lunch from the food box, you say: "Come you guys, we are carrying you there. Let us go and clean up this community, let us go and do something, let us go and cut some grass." Those who can do it with social welfare who are healthy and fit. So we have to now try to think out of the box and say, social welfare with a

community service attached to it.

We also need to mention that, you know, some persons apply for social welfare and the Minister of Social Development and Family Services must be thanked for trying to weed out the culture of corruption that existed in this. Since 2018, we knew there were 18,000 removed from food card corruption, but it continues, and we need to know those persons who are, according to the Auditor General's Report, those persons who are coming in now without ID cards and are getting these grants, whoever put them in that system, should be punished. We have to start setting examples if there are corrupt workers within that department.

2.30 p.m.

I also suggest that migrant workers should also be—I am happy to hear in the budget the migrant workers would have their females now have a safety home, which is good, but what I am saying, there are migrant workers here who are coming in, getting jobs, and some of our own local persons do not seem to be interested and they may go out to check for social welfare. So let us ensure that we offer them jobs first; if they cannot get the jobs then you go on to get the—*[Inaudible]* from us. And I also want to say, migrant workers should also be put into a system where they can pay NIS, so in case they decide to stay here they would have already been making contributions.

I must say, I was disappointed when I saw the closure of the socially displaced car park in, you know, in Riverside, where that building to me—you know, we are hearing that we are going to build a new building for the homeless, but you closed down the place; you put those people—wherever they went—some may be back on the streets, and why could we not just, with this hard economic times, instead of building a new building, revamp that building? I remember when

mayor Lee Sing was there before, he was looking at NBN building some time ago and the thing is, it is shameful that sometimes the organizations, the NGOs who we give to help these socially displaced persons, may be under question, because a JSC report, 2020, on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity questioned how the St. Vincent de Paul actually handles their allocations.

I also would like to make mention that with property tax, Mr. Vice-President, 2018, I mentioned those homes that are being flooded out, you should not let them pay property tax; 2018 I posed a question here. I also said that persons who are bringing in flood damages like—flood relief damages equipment, like pumps and barriers, do not tax them; let it come in free. I also suggested that persons who have their land covered by a quarter of greenery, be it on their roof or whatnot, let them have a reduced property tax because they will be now contributing to less carbon in the atmosphere and we will be giving them an incentive to plant trees, plant lawn, plant something on the roof, et cetera. So this is something—but I also want to suggest, those persons who are paying mortgages, those young individuals, do not give them property tax until the property is in their names. Some of them might abuse it but most of them may not be able to afford it. So this is something we have to look at.

Mentioning on property taxes also, I mentioned flooding. So in my area where I live in Real Spring, we have flooding. The MP for the area made mention and begged the Minister of Works and Transport to please consider giving us retention ponds, giving us sluice gates because [*Indiscernible*], which is now being occupied by the Government, allocating persons there, if more persons occupy there, this whole area will be flooded. Real Spring, where I live was, was totally flooded out. People were trapped for four days in the flood, four feet of water.

There is an old age home there, persons could not come out in case of emergency. And sometimes the neglect may be—you find neglect sometimes, maybe the grass trucks not picking up the “cuttage”, any sort of debris they get from the road. They put it on the side of the road and after a while, a week or two, that washes back in the drain. So that to me is a sort of neglect by certain people in the corporations, but I am thinking we may have to “big them up” on social media.

Community Development, I think each community could try to feed itself with grow boxes, hydroponics, get the community together, but we need, again, armies, army personnel to be attached to these community centres. We need places of safety, but to get those places safe—I would not go in my community centre if I think that I would be robbed or my car will be broken into. Fixed army personnel there; two army personnel all over. Even the lovely lookout we have in Paramin, have a presence there all the time, so you can park your car and you would feel safe. Excellent initiatives but crime will be catching us; crime is catching us.

I also heard that—it made mention that, you know, we would be getting \$12 million—\$12 million would be saved in rent by the Ministry of Health head office being built. Mr. Vice-President, the traffic and the congestion for people to come to Port of Spain, that should have been decentralized. That should have been somewhere—even Mount Hope complex has land you could have put up that headquarters. So sometimes, yes, we save one way but on the other way, you are creating a greater degree of problems. Since I was a teenager we heard that we could no longer rely on oil and gas to fill our coffers, we need to diversify; successive governments attempted to put things in place, downstream industries, Point Lisas mega farms, in Carenage; UTT to building our human capital, and after all the billions of dollars which has passed through our twin islands, we still have

the yoke of growing debt around our necks. Thankfully, the Minister of Finance has tried to fill up that hole and we are getting there—we are getting there and I have to thank him for some of the measures he is using.

So again, we put money to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, which I am pleased. Now, I remember when the Prime Minister, ANR Robinson, then was in power, he had to take unpopular stringent measures to rescue our country and it was during this period we saw the advent of Dr. Keith Rowley and our Minister of Finance in Parliament. And the then PNM Members in Opposition criticized some of Robinson's tough economic decisions. Now, today, they are faced with making the same tough decisions. So it is ironic after all these years another Tobagonian is once again faced with making harsh economic decisions to keep our State afloat. Some good points from the budget, I love that the Housing and Village Improvement, you know—there were angry reports from the taxi and TTARP but there were satisfying reports from the Energy Chamber, the TT chambers, the San Juan Business Association, the petroleum dealers.

So to be fair to the Minister of Finance, the writing was already on the wall that some tough decisions were going to be made and the indicators were very clear that one would have to be very naive not to expect this. Overall, the budget was filled with optimism and laid out plans in each sector. So the plans were there but we need the realization of those plans, because I have heard plans before that I have heard today and I have not seen it acted out. So somehow we may have to see—the challenge really for government is to get their plans activated and not just something in paper that people may hear rehashed some time ago.

You remember PM Manning's 2020 plan did not materialize, you know, his goal of having a financial centre here was excellent and we now decide, let us go to

a 2030 plan; again, we have to keep pushing at it. We have to keep different administrations to have the same goal. And the Government diversification policy is still tied a bit to the energy sector—we cannot help it—with future projects, like methanol to polyethylene project, the aluminum ingot processing, you know, and the alternative marine fuel projects. So we still have the time, we cannot just “diss” what we have even though we are now in a sort of position where we are pushing a green environment but we still have to depend, but that is the reality of it.

In fact, the present war in Ukraine showed us that a lot of the European countries who were beating their chests, like Germany, and saying, “We are a green person”, they have a green party; they were highly dependent on oil. It was a big farce. You are highly dependent on oil from Russia. And in fact, this increase that we are getting from the oil and gas, you know, and this buffer to our budget, this sort of, you know—it is really to me not really the activity—we cannot just thank the Prime Minister for that or the Minister of Finance, we have to thank the Russian President, Putin, for this because he instituted a war which led, indirectly, to our having this increase in our fuel subsidies and whatnot, and in our fuel output and export and prices. So we have to thank him more than our local persons. And I wonder, if it was not for the war, where would we have been?

Mr. Vice-President: Senator, you have just under five minutes remaining.

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Sir. So I would like to say that we have to get things going. I see small business and exports are stimulated and actually I think that we are doing good in that, thanks to the Minister of Trade and Industry. And I just want to say, the Minister of Works and Transport might consider putting some bike racks downstairs for some of his colleagues who may decide they want

to ride to work, and I hope I do not see less macaroni downstairs now. So I am just joking, but as I say, we all need to try to see how we are going. Are we failing as a nation, no, because UK, USA, China all facing the same sort of problems with inflation and all have taken similar policies in their recovery efforts. I am saying that, I want to make a plug also for the elderly persons, just as how we have OJTs, we have somebody called a retired trainer that we could put an elderly person to go and work in a place where they can retrain the young persons where they want work. This is a field, like the OJT, we could bring out those persons. As I mentioned, it is a good voting bloc.

We need translators for our clinics because we are seeing more Spanish individuals and we do not know—I do not know Spanish as such. We need to develop infertility treatments at our hospital; costly, yes, but we are now saying we do not have young people. There are a lot of persons out there who are distressed, they cannot have children, so we may have to consider that. We will buffer our— increase our young population. We have to get lodgings for patients coming from Tobago for treatment here, free lodgings and I think we should centralize medical service. I want to say that, all in all, I think that we have come a good way and I am saying that, you know, even though decentralization would have to be a thrust I would want, I am saying that we have different avenues that we have seen improvement. We have seen—as Sen. Vieira mentioned, we are in a good place; we have to move further. We have to—not get coal pots, I might say, we have to get solar cookers now. So if you are on it you would get a solar cooker just costed the same as a coal pot.

So, we now need to move to another stage. We now need to move to the other stage. We now need to realize that we all need to move together as

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individuals to help our country. And I have to thank the Government for the \$210 million that they were giving out to the 20,000 health workers, heroes into this field. I have to thank them for the apprenticeship allowance that would now help the young people. And a lot of the things given to young people, it sounds good in paper but we want to actualize it. YTEPP sounds good, MiLAT sounds good; right now, you know, the Homestead Programme sounds good. The Ministry of Youth Development and National Service has something going, but, you see, we still will be missing youth who do not come to those programmes, and I think what we have to do, the young persons who are not coming to these programmes and are on the streets, we have to have a mandatory way where we legislate against idle youth; we take you and we put you in—not like a youth camp, because if you leave those children there, they may not come forward.

So I thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I thank you also, Minister of Finance, for giving us this budget and giving some people hope, but we need to work together as a population. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Thank you, Senator. Sen. Donna Cox, Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox): Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2023) Bill, 2022. I must start by congratulating the Minister of Finance for presenting yet another successful budget, 2023, “Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges”.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2023)
Bill, 2022
Sen. the Hon. D. Cox (cont'd)

2022.10.13

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Mr. Vice-President, before I respond to some points and some comments, good comments Sen. Deyalsingh, I will respond particularly with regard to the elderly a bit later. Every additional dollar that is placed in the pockets of the poor and vulnerable by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago deserves to be applauded; 175,000 persons who currently receive public assistance, senior citizens' pension, disability and food support grants would receive an additional \$1,000 one-off transport grant.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: And this is a good measure because it is a measure for seniors 60 and over who are already receiving free transportation on our PTSC buses, and that is covered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And for the year, for the fiscal year we have spent \$5.5 million at PTSC for persons to travel on the bus free of charge.

On the 1st of January, 2023, every—and I want to emphasize, every citizen whose take-home salary is \$7,500 will be exempted from income tax and this is an additional money in their pockets.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: So, Mr. Vice-President, 300,000 persons would be taking home more money to support their families; this too must be applauded.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Mr. Vice-President, you are well aware that almost every country has a social protection system that secures and protects those who either temporarily or permanently are unable to help themselves, and this is very important to maintain a stable and cohesive society. The Ministry of Social

Development and Family Services plays a leading role in protecting and supporting the vulnerable and marginalized in our midst, including women, children, widows, persons with disabilities, the elderly, the poor and indigent, the socially displaced, ex-prisoners, deportees and persons living with HIV/AIDS.

We work with other stakeholders to ensure that they receive the help that is necessary, so helping empowering and transforming lives is at the centre of what we do on a daily basis. Everything we do, we work to establish and secure families in Trinidad and Tobago. The family is considered the bedrock of society and it is through the family primary socialization occurs. Individuals learn about basic values such as love, honesty, forgiveness, et cetera. According to Jim Bunning, a former American politician, and I quote:

“A loving family provides the foundation children need to succeed...”

Mr. Vice-President, families contribute to the raising of law-abiding individuals who invest in the development of our country. The truth is there are many families who encounter challenges on a daily basis and as a result the social fabric of society has been affected by crime, gender-based violence, child abuse, homelessness, elder abuse, drug addiction, suicide or attempted suicide, and so many other social issues. And families who experience challenges need to be supported to heal, be empowered and redirected on a path that will result in positive outcomes.

It is in is this recognition that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services continues to implement several measures to support poor and vulnerable families in this country. *Vision 2030* tells us that our citizens, and in particular our families, are central to our development as a country and in fact are our greatest asset. As a result, we are seeking to create a society in which all the

basic needs are met and each individual, each family is valued and given the opportunity to contribute to its community. Mr. Vice-President, it is for this reason that the Government made an investment of approximately \$40 billion on the core grants offered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to assist the members of poor and vulnerable families over the past seven years.

These core grants are: the public assistance, senior citizens' pension, disability assistance grants for adults and minors and food support, and despite the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic, these core grants remained a stable source of income for many families. And I will now provide information on each grant and the investment that the Government has made to ensure family members receive the financial support to meet their basic needs.

The public assistance grant is provided to meet the needs of persons where the household income is deemed inadequate. As of September the 23rd, 16,993 persons are beneficiaries of this grant, and some of them include, persons who cannot actively participate in the labour force due to health issues; needy children whose father, mother or both parents are dead, incarcerated, disabled and unable to work or has deserted the family and cannot be found. And when we look at the categories of persons who receive assistance under this grant, we must all know that the moneys they receive from the State help them to meet the basic needs of their household. And the total expenditure on this grant, as of September 23, 2022, was \$373,605,000; and for the past seven-year period the Government spent \$3,240,983,155 on public assistance grants.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

We move to senior citizens' pension and as of the 23rd of September, the senior citizens' pension is provided to 108,613 senior citizens, age 65 years and

over. And the aim of this grant is to provide financial assistance to persons aged 65 years and over, who meet the qualifying criteria for the grant. Most of these senior citizens live with their families and contribute to the expenses of the household; \$4,316,675,000 was spent on the senior citizens' pension as of September the 23rd, 2022, and this adds up to, over the past seven years, \$30 billion over the last seven years. So I want to move, as I am talking about the senior citizens' pension, Sen. Deyalsingh spoke about the fact that he felt that we could do much more for senior citizens. I want to outline some of the areas on what we have been doing for senior citizens; one, the continuum of care; there is a continuum of care programme for elderly persons who have nowhere to go and the Government pays for these persons in elderly homes.

We have had to decant persons from the hospital, elderly persons from the hospital, some of those persons—Madam President, some of those persons, their family abandoned them in the hospital and these elderly persons we have had to take them in. We also established an information help hotline for the elderly and this is so that public—it is called OPIC—that the public can now, you know, call in. And if they have any concerns about the elderly or geriatric care, they can call in and they can also report elderly abuse. We have conducted grandparenting workshops and we have launched a grandparents programme and this is also for the elderly. There are also some other areas that we have been working on with regard to—and of course we have over 108,000 senior citizens in receipt of pension. We also would like to say that we inspect the elderly homes. Together with the Ministry of Health, there is an inspection which takes place at elderly homes. We also have elderly homes that we support that we give subvention and we also inspect those homes to ensure that they are compliant.

We also have senior activity centres that we operate in various areas. I believe we had about six or seven operational and this was closed because of COVID-19 and we hope to resume those senior activity centres. We have the Centenarian Programme that was established and that programme was established for persons 100 years and over. We have partnered with, not only the private sector but we have also partnered with state agencies, NAMDEVCO and Kiss Baking Company, and I think there are other companies, Ultra-Pharm, and therefore we have been seeing about our centenarians. The Ministry of Health, their part of the programme, is to visit the elderly at the homes once you are 100 and over. So, Mr. Deyalsingh, I want to tell you that we continue to do a lot for the elderly and there are more programmes that we have on stream.

I just want to refer immediately to a situation. There is a viral video at this point and the narrator is Mr. Phillip Alexander, and he refers to a situation at a home in Diego Martin, St. Finbar's home. I saw that video this morning and I just want to say that in response to that video, he also stated that it is because the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services withdrew our subvention to St. Vincent de Paul, that the home is in a state. I would like Mr. Phillip Alexander to please, you know, get—Madam President, you know, sometimes we need to get our facts before we talk, because many times we just go on social media, we go in the media, even come in this House and talk without getting facts, and I think people need to get their facts. In response to this social media post about the Finbar Ryan Geriatric Home, that is a privately-owned home. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has no dealings with that home. It is a privately-owned home. It is not subvented by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. I believe the home probably falls under St. Vincent de Paul

which is an NGO under the purview of the Catholic church.

The relationship between the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the St. Vincent de Paul society existed since 1991 through the management for the Centre for Socially Displaced Persons, which is located at No. 1, Council Street, Port of Spain, better known as the Riverside car park, and this agreement came to an end in August, 2022, which had nothing to do with any home, the Finbar Ryan Home. So I just want to make that very clear. The point is that this followed—the closure of this home for persons who are socially displaced follows the fact that that facility was supposed to be a temporary one when it was opened in 1991. And, Mr. Deyalsingh, I want to tell you that it cannot be retrofitted because that was a car park. It was highly a place that was unsuitable for humans to be in for that long space of—that was for a number of years, that is since 1991, therefore we had to close it.

We also had some accountability issues which you mentioned, which was in the Auditor General's Report and therefore we felt that it was time to move the persons out of that situation because it was unsuitable. It was all about caring for persons who live on the street. I also want to say that they were not thrown out on the street. We engaged each of them and some were placed in a community care programme, some were placed in training, on Vision on Mission training; others were taken for drug rehabilitation; some reconnected with their families; others got rental assistance because they decided that they will rent and we supported them for three months with their rent. There was others who—as a matter of fact, two persons were ill so we took them to the hospital, so two are currently hospitalized. I also want to say some, a few declined placement, and out of those, many of them were gainfully employed and were not even supposed to be in that home in the first

place. Others had alternative living arrangements and were using the facility as a hostel so therefore they were also getting free meals and accommodation and that was not supposed to be part of the agreement. So I want to make that clear because I heard Sen. Deyalsingh also spoke about that centre for displaced persons and I just wanted to clarify that we did not put them out on the street, we accommodated every one of them. There are those who decided they wanted to stay on the street and they were coaxed by the persons from our socially displaced unit. Some went with family members, others we placed in training, some we placed in homes, some went into elderly homes, and therefore we are now looking after them to ensure that everything is okay.

So I move on from there and I want to speak about our senior citizens' grant and I mentioned how much money we have been spending on the senior citizens' grant. I move on to our Disability Assistance Grant. The beneficiaries of these grants are individuals 18 to 64 years of age who are unable to work due to a disability and have been certified by a government medical officer. And I want to say that we recently found someone who has been working at the THA for 20-something years and has been on a disability grant, but yet also has been working, permanently employed and yet on disability. Now, you are supposed to be certified disabled by a doctor, so therefore I do not understand how come that individual—and we may have many other persons because in our review a lot—Madam President, in reviewing our grants we have been discovering so much—so much. The majority of the individuals who are on this disability grant, they live with families and the adults with disabilities access this grant at an expenditure of \$636 million.

3.00 p.m.

So, we have 22,055 persons, adults, on disability grants. We also have the Disability Assistance Grant (Minors), and this is for persons 18 years and under, and this disability grant is provided to another category of family, children who are under 18. A total of 2,956 children received disability grants, as of September 23, 2022. The total expenditure on this grant was \$4,670,750. So, over \$4,400,000 has been the overall total spent on the disability grants for adults and minors over the past seven years.

The public assistance, the senior citizens' pension, the disability grants for adults and minors are not the only type of support that is provided to poor and vulnerable families in Trinidad and Tobago. I will also like to speak about the Food Support Programme. This provides short-term food assistance to help with meeting nutritional needs of thousands of families in the programme. Many families are happy to have their food cards topped up by the Government monthly because it helps to put food on their tables. This measure acts as a buffer for 20,069 households in receipt of the food support grant as of September 23, 2022. So, on food support alone the Government spent \$181,539,521 as of September 23, 2022. So, overall, \$1,628,483,925 was spent in the last year seven years to ensure that the poor and vulnerable families are provided with financial relief for food support.

I move to our urgent temporary assistance. Families that are in need of special dietary support, help with funeral expenses, replacement of household items that may have been destroyed during a natural disaster such as flood or fire, medical equipment and rental assistance, regularly access the range of grants under our urgent temporary assistance. And up to September 23rd, 3,087 persons benefited from this grant at a cost of \$35,900,000. And the total expenditure over

the past seven years and nine months is over \$320,438,932. And I want to say that flood relief alone amounted to over \$4 million for the year.

Madam President, the investments by the Government on a monthly basis to consistently sustain these grants is a manifestation of our commitment to building resilient families and, of course, building a stronger Trinidad and Tobago. Then I heard Sen. Jearlean John made the comment about someone saying that the budget is a mediocre budget for the rich. Well, all this money I am talking about here, I do not know how come this is for the rich, because we are dealing with the vulnerable.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: I move on, there is still more expenditure. Our National Social Development Programme, which is an initiative to ensure that the vulnerable persons have access to house wiring, minor house repairs and sanitary plumbing—and these grants are administered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. The support families receive through this grant enhances their standard of living and help to protect them from the elements and from disease.

As of September 23, 2022, \$1,050,359 has been spent on 58 Minor House Repairs Assistance Grants; \$149,726.44 on 15 Sanitary Plumbing Assistance Grants; \$336,804.73 was spent on the 27 House Wiring Assistance Grant.

And more money again for the vulnerable: SEED, Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development. The Ministry's Sewing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development, which we call SEED, provides training as well as funding to vulnerable persons who wish to purchase equipment to start a small or micro business, or expand an existing one and transition it from the

informal sector to the formal mainstream economy.

So therefore, it is for persons who may not have the collateral to show to go to a bank or to go to a financial institution, and so on. They can access this grant through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Because the Ministry recognizes that they may not be able to get a start-up loan to start their business, as a result, the SEED grant is provided.

Madam President, the Ministry acknowledges that starting a micro or small enterprise business is one way families are able to support the monthly expenditure for their households and gradually come off of social welfare grants. Because, you see, the whole point about social welfare is not just about people getting grants or going on grants, but it is also how do we take them off. How do we move them from a sense of dependence to independence, and this SEED Programme, which is one of our step-up programmes, is one of the programmes that will do just that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: As of September 23, 2022, we have spent \$1,411,153. This was the investment, and 334 applicants benefited from this SEED grant funding. So, the overall investment for the past seven years was \$59,300,000.

So, Madam President, the increase in the level of support provided to targeted families resulted in \$5,539,096,918, for the fiscal year 2021/2022, being spent on grants. I repeat, the total spend on grants for the last fiscal year is \$5,539,096,918, for the fiscal year, spent on grants on vulnerable families.

The suicide prevention and crisis hotline: now this is something that we have heard that there have been some increases in persons having some mental issues and so on, which Sen. Deyalsingh also spoke about. We will soon be launching our 24-hour suicide prevention and crisis hotline. This hotline will be launched at

the end of this year. It is a new initiative of the Government and of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and it will add to our arsenal of support and protection of families. The service will provide prevention, rehabilitative and support interventions to address issues pertaining to suicide, gender-based violence and other crises persons may encounter and require intervention for. So, to date, the facility has been identified, refurbished, outfitted. The active listeners will be provided with training prior to the 24-hour service being launched. Citizens can be assured that they will be serviced by well-trained and competitive active listeners.

We also want to speak to the persons of Arima, to let them know that we will soon be opening an office in Arima. We are actually looking for a venue but we recognize that the Tunapuna board office, you know, there is a need for some expansion. We hear you. We understand that the people of Arima have been asking for an office and therefore, we are actively pursuing this.

Madam President, as we move forward diligently and with the determination to alleviate poverty and to ultimately transform the lives of our families, we have come to the sad realization that for some of our people, stealing from the poor is a reasonable and satisfactory occupation. It is never really a good time to talk about this, but I need to, because it is not okay to steal from the poor.

I have been personally distressed by the level of systemic fraud in the administration of our social welfare programmes, and both members of the public and some public officers may be complicit. In order to ensure that help gets to where it is most needed, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has been pursuing a vigorous fraud and corruption prevention strategy.

The Investigation and Compliance Unit is collaborating closely with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service on these matters, and they have been engaging

whistle-blowers, who have come forward, to support the move to root out corruption and fraud from these programmes. Madam President, corrupt actors will always look for ways to assault the public purse and we know that there are no quick wins in the fight against systemic corruption.

What is required is a strengthening of our internal controls in order to increase accountability, transparency and increase checks and balances, in order to root out the corruption. Part of our digitalization effort, this is what is going to help us as we firm up and tighten our internal controls. So, for too long corruption has been the elephant in the room in the social protection system of this country, and we are now tackling it head on.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: As I mentioned in the other place, we have identified some Ministry's employees as suspects of corrupt practices. Further, I indicated that whistle-blowers have come forward, and some Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' employees, who were identified as part of the corrupt practices, were terminated from the public service having been found guilty of misconduct. Several others are being investigated by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Madam President, the Investigation and Compliance Unit has exposed fault lines within the Ministry that we did not know existed, and some of the revelations are like an earthquake and shake the very core of decency and integrity we expect of public servants.

The Food Support Programme, which forms a crucial part of the social protection system operated under the Ministry, has been plagued by fraud from within and without. This programme seeks to reduce the incidence of poverty by

addressing food insecurity using a cash transfer in the form of a card or a cheque.

In September 2021, the Ministry conducted a sample survey and evaluation of the programme and the beneficiaries, and the findings reveal several irregularities within the Food Support Programme, including the following. There were persons on the Food Support Programme who were now gainfully employed and never reported their change of status to the Ministry, or indicated that they no longer required the support. There were food support clients who were also in receipt of other core grants, which already contained a food component. There were clients assigned to community care facilities, where the Ministry met the full cost of their upkeep, including all meals, who were also receiving food support. There were clients we had in elderly homes that we were totally paying for their upkeep, and were still receiving certain grants. There were clients on the Food Support Programme with balances of food cards between 2,000 and \$6,000, suggesting to us that the grants are not a necessity for them because this food support is for the food poor. So then, how come can we have this large accumulation of money on these food cards? Something has to be wrong.

There were persons on the Food Support Programme who resided abroad. There were persons who were also using the food cards to make purchases of alcohol and cigarettes, but not food. There were persons who were utilizing the food cards in exchange for cash. There were persons applying for cards and being assessed based on the need to feed the children in their households, but the children were not benefiting from the grant.

There was an apparent misinterpretation and/or non-compliance with the instructions and procedures regarding the administration of the grant, and this is internal now because this would have been by the staff members. There were

complaints of irregularities in the approval process, favouritism in the application process and irregular transactions related to food cards, and this, of course, internal. There was no assessment of the beneficiaries of food support being undertaken, even though they are required to be assessed every two years, and yet this was not taking place. So, people have been on food cards for years. So, even if their status changed, they continued to have a food card and used it.

Madam President, there are other irregularities that I must mention, and I must mention one more irregularity. In August this year, the Ministry discovered that 32 food cards were missing. And I am not too sure if I want to say “missing”, but I want to say “stolen”. The food cards were reportedly left in an unlocked drawer in an officer’s desk. The Permanent Secretary was advised of this incident almost two weeks after it occurred, and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service was called in. Parallel investigations are being undertaken within the Ministry as well as by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

I just want to talk about the activity on those 32 food cards. An examination of the activity report on the 32 cards that were reported missing leaves us with many questions. The report provided on the replacement cards—those were replacement cards—between October 2021 to August 2022, and I will tell you about 30 of the food cards, revealed there were balances being accrued for approximately six months and these balances ranged from between \$5,000 and \$39,000. So, we are talking about replacement food cards that were left in a drawer, were not supposed to be used, and this is the kind of money that was found on one of the cards, as much as \$39,000 was on that card.

The investigation of the accounts of the card showed that during the first month of 2022, the replacement cards received continuous monthly top-ups with

no spending activity, and that changed from June 2022 to August 2022 when significant top-ups were observed. It means that it is a ring. It is not just the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, because these cards were also being topped up. Seven persons had large balances over \$5,000, prior to their food card being updated. Six persons had large balances under \$5,000, prior to it being updated. During the month of June, 23 clients received top-ups to their food cards twice within the month; those same cards. One client received five top-ups within a two-month period, between June and July 2022. Five had multiple same-day purchases from same vendors at different locations.

It was noted that on occasions, the financial data for one client was transposed onto another. Similar activities were noted for others in different months of the year. There were five instances of large same-day expenditure by clients—we are talking about food cards here—during the month of October 2021 to August 2022, and these were as follows. So, for example, in one day someone would have spent over \$5,000 on a food card. Another day, another card for over \$4,009; \$4,815; \$4,500; \$2,987. While the cards were only reported as being stolen in August, there is evidence of their continuous use since 2021. Clearly, it appears to be an inside job.

It has been noted that there are vendors showing up in the reports that are not listed on the Ministry's list of food support merchants. Remember, Madam President, that is a food card for food, not for furniture, not for payment of insurance policies. This is what we have to deal with. It is for the food—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Thank you. The food is for the poor and the most vulnerable. Incompetence must not be allowed to facilitate corruption. Corruption

will flourish where there are weak internal controls, collusion and incompetence. This stealing from the poor undermines the growth and development of our social service delivery programme. In circumstances where we are already trying to do more with less, the pilferage is beyond unacceptable.

And I will move on because this is very emotional for me. I want to speak about our digitalization efforts, because of the fact that we know with our digitalization efforts, this will help us to weed out some of what is happening in the Ministry at this time, together with the assistance of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

So, Madam President, someone spoke about our digitalization efforts and I believe it was yesterday, Sen. Amrita Deonarine. I just want to assure her that these programmes that we have in place, we are moving fast-paced. Based on what you all would have been hearing happening here, we do not have a choice, we definitely had to move forward quickly and swiftly with our digitalization efforts.

We also just would like to let Sen. Deyalsingh know that we are in the process of creating a national register of vulnerable persons as a mechanism for improving and targeting timely response to the poor and the vulnerable, and this is on stream. This register will be a computerized database that will be used to collect, store and process vital information on vulnerable persons on a single platform. It is expected to improve the coordination of activities within the social sector and enhance the overall efficiency of the social protection system.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: So therefore, we will be easily able to identify the vulnerable and be able to plan suitable programmes to suit them. So, we are moving forward.

As I close, I wish to thank the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for continuing to serve the people of Trinidad. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will continue to make significant investments in the lives of the people of this country because we know that, without a shadow of a doubt, as we persist, we will see lives empowered and transformed.

We are building resilient individuals and families, building a better and stronger Trinidad and Tobago. We are building individuals and families. We are establishing standards. We are prioritizing the modernization of our policies and our programmes, projects and services in an effort to enhance the quality of life.

We are digitizing our systems and processes to ensure that we deliver efficient service to our clients. We will continue to advance the work of the Ministry for the benefit of the poor and indigent, the vulnerable women, the children, the widows, the persons with disabilities, the elderly, the socially displaced, ex-prisoners, deportees, and persons living with HIV/AIDS, to ensure that no one is left behind.

Madam President, I thank you and Members of this House for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I also thank God because he is the one worthy of our praise. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Avinash Singh): Thank you, Madam President. It is with a distinct sense of privilege that I rise to give my contribution to the 2022/2023 finance appropriation

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Bill. I want to start by immediately recognizing the sterling leadership of our nation's greatest supporter, salesman and spokesperson, in that of the hon. Prime Minister, hon. Dr. Keith Rowley—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—for his very focused, sober and serious approach to his oath of office; equally, the hon. Minister of Finance, who continues to manage this country's fiscal operations with precision and prudence.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: The Minister of Planning and Development also must be commended, together with all the public servants that contributed to the preparation of this budget.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: I also hasten to add that as I stand here today, I am most heartened by the opportunity I have been given to contribute to the development of the agricultural sector of Trinidad and Tobago, a sector which, through this astute Government, would continue to cultivate both an individual and national form of self-sustenance, individually through its capacity to facilitate sustainable self-employment and financial independence for the farmers represented nationally—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—through our collective optimism that the produce generated from our local farmlands will contribute to the overall reduction of our food import bill, and thus bringing us closer to realizing Caricom's commitment of reducing the region's food import bills by 25 per cent by 2025.

I am also honoured to report to this august Chamber, and more so to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, on the achievements of the Ministry of

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Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for the last fiscal year, and to share some of the plans entering fiscal 2023.

Madam President, for fiscal 2022, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries continued to implement projects geared towards supporting sectoral growth. And despite all the “ole talk” I continue to hear from the Benches opposite, I will continue to hold the view that agriculture is a verb. It is a doing word. It is not just about talk, but getting the work done.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: And trust me, Madam President, as a farmer myself, I know all too well about the rigours of farming and the real challenges practitioners within the sector grapple with from day to day. But these are challenges which this Government has committed itself to dealing with head on and with the support of the Ministry’s technocrats, under the astute direction of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. The Hon. Haji Kazim Hosein—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—bringing over 40 years of experience of putting people first at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, a step in the right direction, and also with my fellow colleague and expert in his own right in the agricultural fraternity, Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. The Hon. Nigel de Freitas.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: As Minister Hosein in his contribution emphasized, we will get the job done.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: While the future of Trinidad and Tobago lies in the

school bags of our children, it also lies in a farmer's work bag—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—in a farmer's tool shed and, of course, on a farmer's agricultural parcel. So, when I listened to my good friend, Sen. Vieira, speak and make recommendations where praedial larceny is concerned, it touches my core, because I shared a little story with Sen. Vieira downstairs in the tea room, I want to share it with everyone. I think I shared this already with Members, but I want to repeat it.

Madam President, growing up in a rural community in Felicity, my grandparents always maintained rearing cattle, of course, for the sustenance of our family and also, religious reasons. And I remember coming home one day from primary school and my grandfather, who would normally tend to the animals and milked the cows and whatnot—at the family level, these animals were not just commercial entities. They were actually part of the family. Because in our case my grandfather would come twice per day, religiously, to milk a cow we called “Mary”, because we had that emotional attachment to this animal. It was as though it was not just an animal, it was understanding, because my grandfather would come and call Mary, Mary would come with her tail “stick up” in the air, straight home to be milked.

And I remember vaguely, because this was when I was in primary school, quite a little while ago, my grandfather came home one evening and called Mary. Mary did not come home that day, and we went searching. The villagers came out, we went on a search party, looking. And it was late in the afternoon, almost dusk, when we noticed in the distance a coconut tree in the neighbour's plot missing all the coconut leaves. So, we were saying, “Well, a piper pass through and make

some brooms to sell.” So, we really did not take it seriously.

We happened to walk through there and there the remains of Mary was staring us boldly in the ground. The head, the organs, the offals, all the commercial viable meat from Mary was stolen. Praedial larceny is real, and I am not here to sugar-coat any of it, and it is not to politicize. It is to understand that we all have to play a part in this.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Because when you see someone moving animals, and you know for a fact that person does not own an ant; when you see somebody transporting ducks, chickens, cattle, sheep, goat, whatever, even a bunch of plantain, and you know, you as a responsible citizen know that that is not from the sweat of that individual, we say nothing. We do nothing. We say it is only a bunch of plantain. It is only a pound of sweet potato, but it has severe implications on that family’s life and sustenance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

3.30 p.m.

Needless to say, Madam President, that story with my family, I think that was the last time we ever reared animals because from a devastation and an impact like that, it scars you for life and it did not stop there. Because in the garden level sometimes, I mean, just a couple weeks ago I was looking at this nice guava, waiting for it to ripe. And a couple days before I said, you know that, let me go and pick this guava before the real owners pass through. Sad to say, they did and that was the end of that guava.

But I want to applaud Sen. Vieira in making these recommendations here and it is something that I spoke to Minister Hosein and my colleague Minister de

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Freitas and Minister Hosein alluded to it. It has to be a all-of-national security and Government approach where the TTPS, municipal police, praedial larceny and us at the individual level, we must take responsibility because it does not make sense you pump money, you pump resources, ADB funds, exactly what Sen. Vieira said. I am in total support. So that is why Minister Hosein, upon coming to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the first meeting he had was with the praedial larceny team and the executives at the Ministry and he gave the employees of that squad the commitment that he is not going to just listen, he is going to act.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: And, Madam President, as reflected in the budget, Minister Hosein acted with urgency and we have received allocation of over \$9 million to assist us in the apparatus of fighting praedial larceny once and for all and we ask everybody, as Minister Hosein said, if it does not belong to you, leave it alone. I plead with people, Madam President. It affects persons deeply.

Madam President, before I dive a little bit deeper into my contribution, permit me to acknowledge every citizen that received national awards recently. A feeling of pride and patriotism ran through my emotions looking on at Dr. Roshan Parasram and Prof. Sterling Frost—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—being bestowed the Order of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the country's highest award awarded to persons who have rendered distinguished and outstanding service to Trinidad and Tobago. Notably one of the recipients being honoured with the country's second highest award, the Chaconia Medal (Gold) was bestowed to Mr. Ramdeo Boondoo, a farmer, a root crop pioneer and an elder in the sphere of agriculture.

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: And, Madam President, I must mention that long before Mr. Boondoo received this award, my colleague with the vision that he had at the Ministry upon entrance instructed me to initiate an agricultural multidisciplinary advisory voluntary committee. We call it AMVAC. First of its kind and it is voluntary committee with private sector persons where we have the luxury of Mr. Boondoo's expertise, free of charge, volunteering, giving back to Trinidad and Tobago, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: As the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries continues to service its major clients and stakeholders, it is important to hear from persons actually engaged in the sector. And this is critical in conducting assessments of cost benefit analysis, improving the ease of doing business, ascertaining and ensuring value for money and keeping up with the modern advancements in technology in agriculture and improving stakeholder engagement. The agricultural multidisciplinary advisory voluntary committee was established utilizing the greatest resources of our stakeholders and their expertise in the various subsectors within the agricultural sector that will advise the office of the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries of developments in real time related to the agriculture sector. And, Madam President, this committee comprises persons from the subsectors including vegetable production, root crop, rice production, ornamental cut flowers, nurseries, cocoa, coffee production, small ruminant dairy, beef, pig production, poultry, agro processing, value added, for example, chocolate making, apiary, modern agricultural technology, fisheries, forestry, hunting, marketing, agricultural economics, tree crops and the

Sen. the Hon. A. Singh (cont'd)

environment. And as the name suggests, it is voluntary and we thank all the distinguished persons, the subject matter experts, for giving of their time in contributing to the development of the agricultural sector. So it is not always about money. There are people out there willing to contribute and it does not involve money.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: People genuinely want to give advice and support this Government in achieving its goals in terms of food security for our nation.

Madam President, permit me to refer a former speaker, a former Senator in Sen. Nakhid's contribution who referred vaguely in terms of the agri expo. I do not intend to go into too much detail but Minister Hosein would have touched on it and simply to say, I beg to disagree with Sen. Nakhid's notion that this expo was a failure and it is not sustainable. Because, Madam President, just the mere fact that most heads of Government of Caricom attended this expo. That alone demonstrates unity and confidence in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: And demonstrates this confidence in Trinidad's efforts towards food security, food and nutrition security for our region. So tell that to the 60,000 people that passed through or the 350 participants of our exhibits, Madam President. It is a far cry and it is simply not true that it is a failure.

And I could tell you, coming from that agri expo and Minister Hosein's phone, and I know he was brave enough to give out his number and it is probably ringing out all now with messages from the same farmers who have called him to thank him, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Called him to thank him. Calling the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry to thank her for including them in this agri expo because what it did, Madam President, it gave us an opportunity to showcase the best that Trinidad and Tobago has offer.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Absolute best. You saw small, micro, medium large, all showcasing their products, demonstrating that they have the ability to compete on a national and international scale with their products. Madam President, world-class products from world-class persons right here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, this fiscal 2022 the Ministry continued to implement projects geared towards supporting sectoral growth, and when you look at the actual allocation which I am sure most speakers in the Opposition probably did not even refer to one line-Item or one figure of the budget, the actual budget. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries got in our IDF and Consolidated Fund this year, we got 38.61 per cent increase in allocations, Madam President. And this alone signifies our intention to give the relevant respect to our agricultural sector. But, Madam President, when you look at the international context and we must always be aware that what goes on, sometimes we argue, sometimes we quarrel that, you know, certain prices are high but we must understand we have no control in terms of some of the food prices that are available out there and sometimes it reaches down to the basic—the basics, Madam President. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the global food supply chain along with most of the economic activities. The World Bank noted that that COVID-19 reversed years of development in the agricultural sector and pushed food prices to an all-time high. So it is not only in Trinidad and Tobago. It is a worldwide situation. Food prices

soared globally and that was exacerbated by the Ukraine/Russian conflict, commodity prices globally including the energy and fertilizer markets were severely impacted by these events.

Madam President, a major goal of this Government remains that of food security and nutrition security. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the fragility of our agricultural food systems globally and it has brought to the fore the necessity of investing in the targeted development of agriculture and agriculture-support systems which I will get into shortly. When you look at what has happened in our finance and the credit side of the Ministry/sector, Madam President, just to touch on the Agricultural Development Bank for the period October 2021 to August 2022, ADB would have approved loans in the vicinity of \$111 million while the disbursements totalled \$122 million. And, Madam President, the ADB's contributions to the sector's development is evidenced by the fact it has been able to fund activities along the value chain with major areas of contribution and I will give a little breakdown. Agricultural services, \$43.7 million; food crops, \$30.5 million, and agro processing \$26.5 million. The bank also supported the fishing industry with \$14.3 million in disbursements.

The Agricultural Development Bank also continued to support and attract youths into the sector. As at August 2022 a total of 102 loans valued at \$29.2 million was approved for this client grouping. The Agricultural Development Bank also attracted a total of 287 new clients with a total of \$50 million in loans being approved. Madam President, also a point to note, the funding activities in this fiscal from the Agricultural Development Bank created 610 jobs over the fiscal period in the sector.

Madam President, when we look at the marketing opportunities and the local

markets that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has jurisdiction over via NAMDECO, I want to indicate that the National Agricultural Marketing Development Company remains committed to providing critical marketing services to stakeholders along the value chain and we maintain oversight of three packing houses, four wholesale markets and nine farmers' markets. And more importantly, these nine farmers' markets, Madam President, it is one of the most successful moves and initiatives by this Government to put the farmers close to their consumers, putting people first and a real farm-to-market initiative. Because it is there you see that level of conversation, that level of questioning by the consumers themselves, asking the farmers questions. What chemicals did you use? How did you grow this? And it is there they get to interact directly. So there is no middle man in the equation and hence the reasonable prices at all our farmers' markets, Madam President. And I encourage everyone to support and patronize directly from our farmers. Madam President.

NAMDEVCO also offered 53 agro processors with training and technical assistance in developing products up the value chain. And, Madam President, when you look at NAMDEVCO's operations even during the COVID-19 lockdown, NAMDEVCO expanded these markets. Two markets came on stream and though the Moruga farmers' market, as well as the La Horquetta farmers' market during the height of the COVID-19 period, Madam President, and they are all doing extremely well, very successful giving these farmers in these areas the opportunity to sell their products directly to the consumers.

Madam President, during the pandemic as well we all know because it was repeated here on occasions before, over 200,000 families would have benefited from the food box and the chicken packages that we distributed. And to say that

this programme has been so successful, Madam President, but I want to go one step further here in letting the population know where their taxpaying money went during that height of that COVID-19 period where this food box programme was concerned.

And, Madam President, you know, you often hear persons in the public domain complain that the Government “aint” doing nothing for “yuh”. Nothing is being done for the agricultural sector, farmers suffering and all of these nice catch phrases. But the reality, Madam President, the reality is a lot different because when you actually drill down into the numbers, the beneficiaries, the persons, the farmers, that market box programme, Madam President, benefited some persons in the tune and I would not call persons out but it is just for us to have an idea the actual cash where it went.

Thirty-two` farming families who supplied for that market box programme earned between \$200,000 and \$300,000 cash in their pockets during that period. Seventeen families received between \$300,000 and \$400,000; five families \$400,000, \$500,000; Seven families between \$500,000, \$600,000; six farming families received between \$600,000 and \$700.000; two families received between \$700,000 and \$800,000; two farming families between \$800,000 and \$900,000; one farming family—sorry. Three farming families received between \$1 million and \$2 million and one family, farming family, received between \$2 million and \$3 million.

Madam President, I want to congratulate these farmers from rural Trinidad and Tobago who have demonstrated their ability to produce and supply excellent quantities and quality of food that we all know our burgesses, our people benefited from—

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—because these food box were distributed to every Member of Parliament, all 41. And they had the opportunity to reach the most vulnerable. But why I took time to emphasize on this, Madam President, is to let the population know that the benefits of this programme have not only gone to the beneficiaries via the food box themselves but the farmers, Madam President, the farmers benefited from this programme—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—by putting hard-core cash in their pockets, Madam. So now we can say, we can boast, under this Government, Madam President, we have been able to make farmers businessmen. We have been able to give farmers the opportunity to supply with excellence and I congratulate all of those farmers who would have done that in terms of supplying.

And maybe, Madam President, MPs should really find out from their constituents the opportunities that were extended to them. Madam President, much of what is planned in this fiscal came out of our national dialogue on food systems in June 2021 where we were very fortunate to have Dr. Shakuntala Harracksingh Thilsted, the Trinidad and Tobago born global nutrition expert, as part of our national dialogue. Three things stood out at that dialogue, Madam President. The maximum attendance possible from a cross-section of local stakeholders, the strong representation and participation of young people including the youthful Dr. Ronald Roopnarine from UWI who chaired these proceedings and the very positive atmosphere of the dialogue and the evidence of significant collaboration and hope for the future.

Madam President, at the road map recovery and review, the Caricom

discussions, the national dialogue, the agri expo and various discussions with our partners ECA and FAO certain common themes outlined in this budget statement 2023 are evident. Rising and expensive cost of non-communicable diseases, high food import bill, lack of cohesive regional policies and legislation, turf wars among our manufacturers, insurmountable red tape, grey areas with respect to food safety, grey areas with respect to tariff codes and the application of concessions including duty concessions and duty free concessions, inconsistencies at high level in terms of Customs and different bodies. But all in all, Madam President, the circumstances are that Trinidad and Tobago has done well for our citizens and certainly we have paid the price. Because, Madam President, the Government remains committed to the Caricom agenda, as well as our road map for agriculture. This work focuses on the following as outlined in the budget statement 2023: Supporting Government's focus on boosting healthy local production geared towards agro processing, to reduce our reliance on highly-processed imported food and I dare say, Madam President, it is because of the agri expo that persons are now more educated and aware of some of the products, the alternative products that are available in the markets that our local producers, agri-entrepreneurs produce that are available at most markets. Building a more effective agricultural sector based on sustainable value chains using innovation, digitization and technology. Engagement of the private sector including small farmers, youth and women. This, Madam President, is important since there is a direct correlation between food consumption and food systems.

Madam President, the Government's agriculture homestead project and this is on the way. Training has started for 600 participants and land development projects also is on the way and the Government is moving ahead with addressing

the social issues of housing, food production, youth entrepreneurship via this programme.

Madam President, the youth fast track which Minister Hosein spoke to in terms of the grant \$2 million for this fiscal. And over here, Madam President, this youth and agro-incentive grant that the Government has given out, I want to just take two minutes to just identify by area some of the beneficiaries of these agro-incentive grants that the taxpayers continue to contribute in building resilience of our local agricultural sector.

Madam President, this programme, the history, the genesis of this programme is really for persons involved in the agricultural sector to expand, to offer imports substituted items, to produce alterative products, products that have the opportunity to compete worldwide, as we have seen via the agri expo. And when you look at some of the beneficiaries, Madam President, we have Glencoe. This person, crops in aeroponics, vertical agriculture received over \$66,000 in a grant; Diamond Vale agro processing received \$100,000 grant; Chaguanas, greenhouse production received \$100,000; Rio Claro, Ecclesville agro processing regarding cocoa tree, tree crops, cocoa dried, cocoa balls, nibs and mixed citrus. That person received the \$100,000 grant. Upper Carapichaima, crops and agro processing to produce dragon fruit to sell locally and for export. That person received \$100,000 in grant. Macoya/Tunapuna, this person used this opportunity to secure a \$100,000 grant to be use in ADB as collateral to expand their current production. Pepper Village, to expand dragon fruit production. This person received \$81,000. Trincity, a local livestock apiarist, \$100,000 received, Madam President. Wallerfield, post-harvest production facility to construct \$100,000 received. Palmiste Village, Longdenville, this gentleman received for root crop

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production, \$97,771. St. Augustine, this person received \$96,000 for a post-harvest facility. Penal, crops, hydroponics, this person received \$100,000 grant funding.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Rio Claro, Ecclesville, \$100,000; Maraval \$100,000; Carlsen Field \$100,000; Tabaquite \$100,000; Longdenville \$100,000.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Maracas St. Joseph \$100,000.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Santa Rosa Heights, \$100,000; Mamoral No. 2 \$100,000; Petit Bourg San Juan \$100,000.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Cushe Village, Rio Claro \$100,000; Talparo \$100,000;

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Rio Claro \$100,000.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Trincity, \$100,000. Siparia, \$100,000; Debe, \$100,000; Moruga \$100,000; Rio Claro South; South Oropouche, Rousillac, Caroni, Cunaripo, Toco, Tabaquite, Santa Cruz, Las Lomas, Chaguanas, Kelly Village, Carapichaima, Sangre Grande, Debe, Penal, Santa Cruz, Cunupia, San Fernando, Chaguanas, Arima.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Plum Mitan, Cunupia, Palo Seco, Caroni, San Juan, Valencia, Penal, Arima, Valencia, Valsayn, Sangre Grande; St. George, Tobago is in the house.

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Rio Claro. Madam President, I could stand here and call out every single beneficiary, of course, not by name. But these persons are registered farmers, some are in the agro processing industries and they have all—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—benefited from up to \$100,000 in grant funding from the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: And if that, Madam President, is not caring for our farming population, I “doh know” what is.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, MPs need to lobby for their constituents. I understand that. But when you look at the geographic spread of the recipients of these grants, Madam President, across the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago, and I was only able to call out just about 50. Madam President, there is about 100 more and I “doh think” I should stand here and just keep calling, calling, but you understand the contributions that this Government is making because these persons—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—and I must say this. Apart from these incentives and this grant funding to expand their operation in dragon fruit, in livestock, in duck, in cocoa, in chocolate, these persons are also entitled to access the 92 categories of grants and incentives that Minister Hosein spoke to.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

4.00 p.m.

Madam President, and I did not even get a chance to go into the grants and opportunities that are available under my colleague Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon's Ministry, because over there, Madam President—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—it demonstrates not just old talk. We are putting the money where our mouth is. We are giving it to the beneficiaries, the farmers. If one farmer could come out in public and say I am speaking untruth, Madam President, I will resign this position that I hold. If any of these farmers who benefited, Madam President, I will take my leave.

And to close, Madam President, I want to touch on something that I saw Members of the Opposition lobbying about, that nothing comes out of the travel that this Government make. I took offence because I accompanied the hon. Prime Minister to Guyana together with Minister Hosein, where we lobbied for our agricultural sector. I then accompanied Minister Cummings and Minister de Freitas, again in Guyana, where we signed an MOU with Guyana, and this MOU deals with aquaculture. Guyana to provide a technical team to evaluate and provide recommendations for aquaculture production in Trinidad and Tobago.

Rice, Madam President. Guyana to assist with seed and technical support for rice production for us to be able to reach 5,000 acres which will give us that 30 per cent of the amount of rice that we require here in Trinidad and Tobago. It will allow us to produce 30 per cent of what we consume. Human resources, exchange programmes for students, technical staff and farmers, agro-processing and food distribution network market integration. Guyana to be a hub for investors to establish processing facilities. Ground provision, peanuts, livestock production.

We talked about embryo genesis to introduce new and improved breeds into the country. Shade House Project, which is not just talk but has already started.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: As I am speaking to you now, Madam President, the launch of this programme is taking place at the Ministry of Youth Development. I could not go there, I am here. But I am here to say that it is not just old talk, and Guyana is assisting us with a technical support design layout building and planting material for these shade houses for our young people. A technical task force. Both countries to set up a technical working group. A corn and soya. Guyana to expand production to supply both countries; Trinidad and Tobago stands to benefit. Madam President, we do not just fly for flying sake. When we go out there it is to represent the interest of Trinidad and Tobago and the people of this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: And, Madam President, and that is why I am particularly pleased of the additional fiscal measures presented in the budget by the hon. Minister of Finance, the grant fund facility from 50 per cent to 75 per cent, and this is the increase in the maximum from \$250 to \$340,000 for all producers of alternatives to wheat flour, an additional \$300 million as a stimulus package. I support the increase in the fines of illegal state timbering from \$20,000 to \$100,000. Madam President, we all know the issues of the giant African snail, and I want to thank the Minister of Finance for making a provision for that \$3 million for pest control where the giant African snail is concern. Renewable energy, business rebate for agriculture.

In closing, Madam President, I am particularly pleased to be on this side of the Government, where responsible measures and policies are required without fear

Sen. the Hon. A. Singh (cont'd)

or favour in the interest of the majority of citizens who understand the global position. I support this budget, and may God continue to bless Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Gopeesingh.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Browne: Madam President, if I may?

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Madam President: Leader of Government Business.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Madam President, on a point of clarification, and I am addressing you. On behalf of the Government Bench, we have observed a practice and routine and an attempted strategy on the part of the UNC Opposition which we deemed to be not in the spirit of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. The Constitution, Madam President, provides the Opposition with six Senators, and—

Sen. Mark: How many Senators?

Sen. Dr. Browne: Six Senators. Madam President, may I address you please?

Sen. Mark: No, you cannot—[*Inaudible*]

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: Unless—Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Because I am asking—[*Inaudible*]

Madam President: Sen. Mark, are you Madam President? I do not think so! So the Leader of Government Business asked me for a point of clarification, I am listening to him.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Madam President, as I was saying, the Constitution provides the Opposition with six Senators to speak in a debate, but there is now an unconstitutional pattern where a UNC Senator would participate, would unfortunately fall ill overnight, and then the replacement is sworn in and then participates in the debate. With this pattern, Madam President, has the effect where six, seven, eight or more UNC Senators can speak in a debate, and that is not within the spirit of the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, they are not respectful of the Constitution. I bring this to your attention.

Hon. Senators: “Ooooh”.

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping and interruption*]

Sen. Lyder: That takes courage for you to say that. That takes courage.

Madam President: Sen. Lyder you seem to think it is proper be shouting at the top of your lungs across. Yeah?

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: Thank you. Leader of Government Business, I have noted what you have said, but I have to say to you that what you have raised is outside the remit of the Presiding Officer. The section 44(1) of the Constitution provides where someone may be acting, an instrument was given and the appointment was made and that is as far as the Presiding Officer can go. Sen. Gopeesingh.

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Madam President: Members. Sen. Mark and other Members on this bench I will ask you, please, please, let us have some decorum. Okay! Sen. Gopeesingh.

Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh: Thank you very much, Madam President. I would have liked to respond to the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and

Fisheries who spoke just a while ago. I would leave that for Sen. Lyder to deal with those issues, but I have very important issues to deal with, namely, I believe two very important and critical areas of governance in Trinidad and Tobago, and those are the health and education sectors. Because, they are the cornerstone and fundamental pillars of any developed and civilized society. And if you fail to get the health and education sectors going properly you are failing as a government, and this Government has failed miserably in these two areas.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Madam President, a very pleasant good day to you and all our hon. Members. I am a little disappointed in my colleague whom I taught, the Leader of Government Business. I am saddened to see what he has raised. He should be honoured to hear his teacher speaking here.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: You are hearing me again not in the classroom of Mt. Hope Hospital, but I love you. I love you Sen. Amery Browne. I love you from my heart. You have been an honourable person, and I accept what you stood there to challenge. But, we have to go on. Madam President, I am very pleased to be here in this esteemed Chamber where I actually started my parliamentary career in 2001.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Madam President, I am fond of reminding you that it was here that we first met so many years ago, albeit serving on opposite sides, and it is an honourable privilege and pleasure to be here once again and seeing you in the Chair. Now, Madam President, you may say that I am like the spirit of

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh (cont'd)

Christmas visiting these Chambers once a year now, but that is my honourable duty to come here when I am asked to do so bringing gifts of my experience, expertise and knowledge which I have gained over four decades of life in Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—to bring that to Members opposite in the hope that they will be inspired to simply become a humane, efficient and relevant government of the country that is sadly in a state of dangerous free fall on their disastrous tenure.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: You see, Madam President, the public is well aware that I have served my beloved country in public life since in the 1970s in various roles as a national and international cricketer, in medicine for 48 years—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—as a pioneering gynaecologic/oncologic surgeon, both in the public and private sector. In academia as an Associate Professor at the UWI Medical School where I had the privilege of teaching about two or three of the medical doctors here. I am very proud of their work; Independent Sen. Deyalsingh and Independent Sen. Maria Dillon-Remy. Very very fond of their competence and their capabilities, and of course my beloved friend on the opposite side, Sen. Amery Browne.

So, Madam President, in academia I served at the UWI for 22 years, and incidentally I was a younger member on part of the team which opened our medical school in 1987, now 35 years strong, with Prof. David Pique and deceased Profs. Bartholomew and Butler and Melville. God bless their souls. And I hail out to Prof. Pique, because he was the pioneer on opening the medical school at Mt.

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Hope in 1987. So to establish our school of medicine, but I was already at the Mt. Hope Women's Hospital in 1981.

I had the honour and privilege of doing the first gynaecologic procedure in 1981 at the Mt. Hope Women's Hospital. So I have served this country of ours as Chairman of the National Advisory Committee on Education, and Chairman of both the NWRHA and NCRHA in the late 90s; also Deputy Chairman of the National Training Agency. And in the 2000s I served as a Minister temporarily of Integrated Planning and Development, Senator, and then most recently Minister of Education from 2010 to 2015 under the great Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Why am I saying all of this? I often hear Ministers on the other side talking about patriotism, patriotism. We are not patriots. We in the United National Congress are not patriots. We on this side are born tremendous patriots of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And we the senior ones in the Opposition belong to that great generation who were born into colonialism, into systemic poverty and discrimination, and came of age as we attained Independence, knowing that we were born and bred to serve, and build our country with hard work, dedication and true patriotism in every possible way. And that is the creed and motto of the United National Congress.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And that is the creed and motto of our distinguished former Prime Minister and now Opposition Leader Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

So when you see that I decide to put on my political boots once more—I want to say that I see the Minister of Finance might have to come like me, because he might have to put on his political somewhere down the road because he is no longer chairman of the party and so on.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I speak out on the social, economic and general ills that are plaguing this country and moving fast in the state of chaos and destruction. It is because I recognize having lived, and living the history of Trinidad and Tobago, that our country is sadly on the brink of utter and complete collapse.

Madam President, I have to say, sometimes I cannot even recognize now the progressive advanced country that the People's Partnership government left behind in 2015. Where are we now? Where is this country now? Look at where we have reached under seven years of this Government of Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley. Destruction all around. Today the majority of the people in this country believe they are currently witnessing the last days of economic and social stability, the last days of freedom, the last days of tolerance and peace in Trinidad and Tobago.

The people of this country are terrified that they are now living in the last days of our democracy, and that they will soon be inhabitants and victims of a failed State forced to live in terror, poverty, repression and criminality, similar to what is happening in our regional neighbours of Venezuela and Haiti. Are we becoming another Venezuela and Haiti, Madam President? Thousands of our brightest citizens are fleeing this country with massive brain drain, selling their valuable properties. Some unable to get a sale, some homes locked up and people have just gone. People are unable to purchase these properties.

Madam President, I have lived for a few decades on this earth for which I thank God. I can say that I have never as a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago experience an onslaught of unprecedented crime, violence, poverty, joblessness, despair and overall ruin that this country is currently experiencing today. Today every single sector has failed and continues to fail. We are at the worse state we have ever been since Independence and almost every possible way. People are robbed, raped, kidnapped, murdered, brutalized, terrorized in the worse way, in droves in the broad daylight in their homes, at their work places, in the streets, at funerals and cemeteries where they go to bury their dead. In the groceries, in the schoolyards, at the churches and temples where they go to pray. In their favourite liming spots, at the beaches, at the nightclubs, on the highways they sit in traffic, and the response from your Government is to twiddle its thumbs while Trinidad and Tobago burns. And we hear their favourite statement, we are in charge. This is our time now from one of the Ministers who sit on that side.

We live in this country where poverty and joblessness is so pervasive and rampant that a new industry of organized begging by the highways and byways have now sprung up. It is painful to see these people on the highways with placards in front of them. This is what this PNM Government has brought to this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: A country of people begging on the streets now. That never occurred before, 120,000 have lost their jobs, gangs drugs and guns are now the industries that some young people feel that they can turn to. The roads are so deplorable that the people say in Trinidad and Tobago you can find caimans, and even the lost city of El Dorado on roads, but you cannot find the road.

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Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Food prices are so high that working class families now have to choose to eat one meal per day, and a research done recently showed that there are some families who have to skip a whole day of eating during the week. Government's corruption, nepotism and waste are rampant. The health and education sectors are in a state of near complete collapse.

So our once cherished independent-State institutions which protected our democratic rights and freedoms are being trampled on and destroyed by the leaders who dance with dictators on the ashes of our fast-burning democracy. We wake up to horrific incredulous news of children's bodies being found all over the country, mothers killing babies, children killing children. We are a nation and people under attack, denied our constitutionally enshrined freedoms, improvised, denigrated and disparaged by this Government, so desperate, broken, traumatized and brutalized, despairing and lost our people are.

Where once we proudly boasted that God was a Trini, where we boasted of living in paradise on earth, now we are simply resigned to living in the worst kind of hell understand this Government. So how then can someone like me who has dedicated—and I can proudly say so—my entire adult life, over four decades, to nation building in the field of sports, academia, medicine, and 28 years in politics, see our country in this frightening state of economic, social and political collapse, tyranny and dictatorship and not be compelled to speak out? I am compelled to speak out hence the reason for my presence here.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So at the behest of the hon. Opposition Leader and the absence of Sen. Lutchmedial, I have returned today to register my voice into the

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Hansard of what history would record as the worst Government in our beloved country. I am deeply grateful to the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar for asking me to substitute for her absence. I am proud to serve under her committed, compassionate and truly exemplary leadership. Our former Prime Minister and now Leader of the Opposition, and soon to be Prime Minister again.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I have seen her time and time again stand up and fight for our country's democracy, for our voiceless and oppressed citizens, for our very right to live in accordance with our democratic principles, for dignity and well-being of every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. She has fought for equality and justice with courage, and she continues to do so with compassion and resolve that is un-paralleled by any leader previously, with the exception of Mr. Basdeo Panday, in our nation's history. It is with tremendous pride and privilege that I therefore join her and the United National Congress team.

Mr. Imbert: Point of order.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: As she continues and we continue this battle—

Madam President: Sen. Gopeesingh, yes.

Mr. Imbert: I am hoping it is 48(1), but it could be 46(1). It is the relevant one that deals with relevance. I just would like to know which clause of the Bill that speech is all about, Madam President.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*] you are tired.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Sen. Gopeesingh—

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: I am sorry?

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Nobody will shut me up.

Madam President: Well could you just be—let me just make my ruling. Relevance has been invoked. I would ask you to continue, but I would ask you too to at least start delving into the budget. That is what we are here about. But you have given your context and I am hoping that you are going to be moving on now.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Thank you, Madam President, I am moving on to the two major issues. The first one is education. Madam President, the Minister of Finance—he wanted me to speak about him—began his budget presentation on education with a statement that, and I quote:

“...we have long recognized that developing and promoting human capital is a driver of sustainable growth and development.”

So hon. Minister of Finance, so you have recognized this, yet for seven years you systematically deliberately and painfully effected swift and precipitous reversal of all the significant gains we had professionally planned and executed in our People’s Partnership government. We spent about \$38 billion, you have spent about \$45 billion in your seven years, and let us compare what you are doing and what we have done. I can proudly say today that the outstanding performance of the People’s Partnership government during 2010 to 2015 with about \$38 billion was unsurpassed previously, and only another UNC government under the watch of Kamla Persad-Bissessar will better that performance. No PNM can ever better that performance ever in the history of Trinidad and Tobago again.

I am certain that you recognized that you have destroyed every important facet of our education system. Your Government has from within its first year 2015 to 2016 began wrecking our education. We are all aware that the People’s Partnership government had constructed 106 new schools, 66 Early Childhood

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Education, 32 primary schools and eight secondary schools. Never before in the history of Trinidad and Tobago—and we built 19 on the East-West corridor.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Gopeesingh, I have done this very rarely during a budget debate and during this particular budget debate, but I am going to ask you, please, to try and speak a little bit about budget '22/'23. Okay! You have given a lot of context, but I need you to be, you know—

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: Yeah, treat with the budget.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: '22/'23, the budget of nearly \$60 billion. And with a budget of \$7 billion for education compared to what we had in 2010 to 2015 and what we delivered. It is important for us, Madam President, to give an analysis and a comparison of the expenditure that is proposed for '22/'23 and what they have spent between 2015 and 2022, seven years approximately \$45 billion. And we built these schools. The Minister of Finance indicated that they built schools, and I want to quote him from the *Hansard*. He said—let me just find it here. In other words, he said during his statement that:

“We have built Early Childhood Care Centres, and primary and secondary schools.”

That is in the budget statement. Where are they, hon. Minister of Finance, and where are those schools, this Government? My understanding is that you built seven schools in seven years. We built 106 schools, in how many years? In five years. Five years. So you brought that up in your budget presentation so I am responding to that. But we left 72 schools at various levels of construction, Madam President, I am on the point, some near 95 per cent complete, 49 primary,

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10 ECCE and 13 secondary schools. But they had between 2016 and 2022 and they are now having in 2023, they had money under the Infrastructure Development Fund for years, almost \$500 million. For five, six years they would have had \$3 billion to spend to complete these schools but they failed to complete these schools, any of these, and they just built seven schools in seven years. So, the children have been left to suffer from seven years of deliberate neglect.

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, point of order. Point of order, 46(1) relevance. That is not in my budget speech so it is not relevant to this debate. Never said that.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Sen. Gopeesingh please continue. Please! But you heard my caution that I had given you before. Okay!

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I am listening to you, Madam President, I hear you loud and clear. So I want to show, I am continuing to show where they have destroyed almost every institution related to education in Trinidad and Tobago over the period of time.

Madam President, can I not speak about the thousands of children in '22/'23 who are going to still be left out of a school and have to be housed in mosques, temples and community centres crowded? And the hon. Minister of Finance has not addressed that in his budget statement whatsoever. There is money—you had a six-page hon. Minister of Finance, you spoke six pages on education and not one time you ever sought— For seven years these children had been suffering, for their parents have been begging you to do something about their schools, but your Government over seven years have done nothing and you have shown nothing within the '22/'23 budget how you are going to ameliorate the plight and difficulties of these children.

So you have destroyed everything, technical and vocational education. And then you spoke hon. Minister of Finance of the World Bank ranking of 157 countries in respect of the Human Capital Index. Do you know that that World Bank measure only began in 2018? It is only four years ago the World Bank measure—that Human Capital Index came on and we are at number 78. But, Madam President, everyone in Trinidad and Tobago is aware that Trinidad and Tobago was—and the rest of the world, that the first country in the world to achieve universal early childhood education was Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: We were ranked number one not number 78. We were ahead of the United States and Great Britain, ranking parallel to leading countries like South Korea, Hong Kong, Finland and Singapore. We were elected to be the centre of a virtual education amongst the GRULAC group of Latin American Caribbean countries by the OAS, leading in information communication technology. That is where we were. After seven years where has PNM taken us to? Seventy-eight on the World Bank in the Human Capital Development Index. What a shame and a disgrace from where we were at number one in the world leading with the rest of the world we are now relegated to number 78.

At that time President Obama was seeking to get support from the communications giants of AT&T and Sprint, 10 of them each giving a \$100 million for laptops to students in less privileged schools. And even President Putin in Russia was starting the laptop programme with 3,000 schools at that time. And I can go on to tell you, you have destroyed all the secondary schools' computer rooms, 50 computers in each lab which was introduced in the 21st Century smart classroom with Samsung. You destroyed that. You moved away the 100 ICT

technicians to service the ICT department.

When teachers were winning global awards for their distinction in knowledge in ICT in education, we no longer have that. Where in '22/'23 in your budget to come, where are you speaking about development of the Human Capital Index? Where are the teachers going to be able to come to the forefront and show their knowledge and capability in ICT? You destroyed all of that and you are talking about digitization. Where is your digitization? If your Government for seven years, and to come, had decided to purchase a laptop for every child entering Standard 1, seven years would be 126,000 more laptops in addition to the 95. We would have had, and we can still possibly do it, but you have made no decision. You buying 7,000 laptops and you feel is a big thing. For the first time in seven years you buy 7,000 laptops and you say is a big thing; 126,000 students now would have had laptops, plus the 96,000. So we would have had 200,000 plus students in this country with laptops.

And the Minister of Public Administration spoke this morning about digitization and so on. That is digitization if you continue to pursue this in the future. Not lip service and with no implementation. Only talk, ever-lasting promises, and you are talking about a transformed digitalized service to improve academia. I heard the Minister this morning, the Minister of Public Administration, I was in my medical practice office this morning and I turned on the TV and saw the Minister speaking about that. What can you say in this budget that gives rise to the Ministry of Education with organization restructuring and transformation?

I heard the Minister of Public Administration this morning also spoke about the Student Support Services Division. You reduced that from 700 which we had

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in 2015 back down to 350 over the five years that you had been there, and it is even worse now. We had clinical psychologists, behavioural psychologists, guidance officers, guidance counsellors, school social workers, psychiatrist, over 50 partnering in education, workshops with thousands of parents. Parents play an important role in the education of children. You destroyed that. Where is it in the budget to come? And your budget of '22/'23 not one thing being written about that. Over 90,000 parents had—they appreciate it and we were enthusiastic in providing support to their children then.

4.30 p.m.

Have you mentioned—I see no mention about any funding or anything for improving our education. Where is the STREAM that we can speak about? We introduced STREAM education in a unique holistic and educational approach into our reform primary and secondary schools curriculum which we modernized, integrating science, technology, reading, arts and mathematics; 12 years ago we introduced STREAM in education. Now, seven years of your education, nothing about STREAM.

We are still searching for an answer to the SEA. We produced an answer by the Continuous Assessment Component aspect of the primary school education where children would have 30 per cent of the marks before they do the SEA exam, you scrapped that. You scrapped it and this is the reason why you have this very unsatisfactory result that you have today. Are you all not ashamed of your performance in education, eh? And the Minister of Public Administration this morning also spoke about Government looking to help these students who have difficulties, challenged students. But we, during our time, ensured education to students in 25 special needs schools and provided assistance for challenged

students, near 2,000 students then. You are now coming seven years later to talk about trying to help special needs students.

Where is your training programme for education? And I would like somebody on that side to come up subsequent to my speaking here to speak about what they have done in education and what have been their successes. Every teacher in every primary school had a bachelor's degree. We ensured 17 sport activities in school; we were creating, hon. Minister of Finance, we the United National Congress had created the knowledge-based society with people centered development and human capital development; we had even constructed 40 gymnasiums in schools; we had over 200 physical education teachers becoming coaches, appointed 87 school boards and so on; we introduced neuro-diagnostic testing of students; we ensured hearing and visual testing of approximately 15,000 students annually; we held several career paths, development fora for students across all schools incorporating the guidance of the tertiary institutions of UWI, COSTAATT, UTT. Where can the PNM and your government speak anything close to that? You are far distance from that, total non-performance over your seven years.

We strengthened literacy and numeracy training and hence that was the reason for our tremendous achievements. We expanded the CVQ, TVET 1 and 2, widespread teacher training and development, human resource management, all of these contributed scientifically to the Ministry of Education achieving the best academic performance in 2014 in all three examinations, SEA, CSEC and CAPE and bettered in 2015. When can you say that? Which one of your budget presentations can you say that you have done that? Absolutely none for seven years. We became a world leader in education. We were praised by the United

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Nation's Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon for achieving universal early childhood education. We were praised by then USA presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton for our seamless education system. We were awarded a medal of distinction by the Global Education Forum; we became the Latin American and Caribbean leader with the Virtual Education Centre and at a Ministers of Education meeting in London, 102 Ministers, we were congratulated for our distinguished education programmes and policies.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Where have you purchased textbooks for students? We purchased two million textbooks for students during our five years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Every child in every school, in every subject, in every class received their textbook from our government. You have failed to purchase any textbook for any child when the book purchase came up for review in 2017. And what have you gotten, what have you in the 2022-2023 budget saying that you are going to be purchasing books for the children. The children "cyah" go to school, they "doh" have books, they "doh" have clothes, they "doh" have transportation, they "doh" have food and children are suffering. It pains me, I have been an educator all my life, I have taught over 3,500 young doctors, I have trained over 50 postgraduates. My life has been teaching, and it pains me to see that a child's future development and career path is thwarted by an inefficient and incompetent government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So, Madam President, I have to end my contribution on education to say that this Government has failed the students of this country. They

have thrown them into the wastepaper bin. Generations of students have lost their future careers. They have lost their education. You have thrown them to the waste and it is only these criminal gangs now waiting to pick them up.

I remember when I was Minister I went to one of the schools in Port of Spain, secondary schools. And one of the principals told me, “Dr. Gopeesingh, I am sorry to tell you that but you see from this school, over 100 students who left this school have been murdered within the last few years”. That is painful, painful, education is your priority but your two former Ministers of Education between 2015 and 2020 destroyed the education sector. I have a great deal of respect for your present Minister of Education, Minister Dr. Gasby-Dolly. I wish her well, I wish her success she may have a good heart but she is not getting the support that she needs to move forward. After two years you cannot be having the type of performance in the SEA examination that you had when 9,000 students failed to get 50 per cent pass rates and almost, thousands more getting less than 30 per cent. We had about 70 per cent of our students getting more than 66 per cent in the SEA. It was remarkable. But when you destroy a child’s life from the primary school as happened—and do not use the COVID pandemic as an excuse. The destruction in education began long before the COVID pandemic, so you all must be aware of that.

There is much more that I can say. You destroyed the Caribbean Vocational Qualification, political interference ensued, that learning institution of UTT and COSTAATT, several lecturers were dismissed, no textbook, no laptops. There was no meaningful stakeholder consultation. You deliberately shutdown the 400 after school homework centres which were established to support students who required individual attention and you scrapped the internationally proven continuous

assessment programme and disbanded it in a highly irresponsible move. The number of Student Support Services officers became less.

So, Madam President, there is a lot more for me to say, the hon. Leader of the Opposition addressed in the other place, the GATE and the UWI funding which resulted in less students participating in tertiary education. How could you say, hon. Minister of Finance, that you want to have a society that is driven with distinction in education and so on, when you stopped the undergraduate programme? Less students are doing undergraduate programmes. You stopped the postgraduate programmes of PhD and Masters. There was a time when those who got First Class Honours would go on to do the PhD, free.

The other thing, why have you reduced the amount of scholarships from 500 to 50? Is there a reason for it? I ask, what is the reason? Is there a political issue inside there that you have decided that you are going to reduce the amount of scholarships? I know the answer. And all of you know the answer. Why are you afraid to say what you have done? Political intrusion into meritocracy in this country. You have destroyed meritocracy—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—so children who fought for a scholarship, who came into secondary schools wanting a scholarship and aspiring to get the 500, being one of the 500, you have to fight to get one of the 50. You are carrying us back down the road when Dr. Eric Williams was one of the island-schol winners; 50 you are giving. You said the performance in the SEA reflected the absence from classrooms. No, it was a reflection of your dangerously unmitigated disaster for seven years of your Government's incompetence and mismanagement of the online IT system which you needed to urgently address for early intervention. But your

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government failed.

Mr. Imbert: Madam President—

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: But even now after two years—

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, again 46(1). All of these things have nothing to do with the budget, not in the budget statement, not in the Estimates not in the Bill and not in this year.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: That is why I am saying it—*[Inaudible]*

Hon. Senators: *[Laughter and continuous desk thumping]*

Madam President: Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh, continue.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Are you all right there, Madam President?

Hon. Senators: *[Crosstalk]*

Madam President: Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh, you have five more minutes.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I just want to raise a few issues on the health sector. I can speak for days on the health sector. But when we have patients dying in overcrowded emergency departments, you said that you promised to start the Central Block at Port of Spain Hospital when you came into office in 2015. You are now saying in your budget presentation that it is going to be completed in 2024, nine years later. We had a master plan for the whole complex in Port of Spain and that we would have completed in two or three years just as we completed the Couva Hospital in two or three years.

Hon. Senators: *[Desk thumping]*

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And what is happening there. I want to invite any one of you, my colleagues who were tremendous doctors and the Leader of Government Business take a walk, go into Port of Spain Hospital Emergency Department, now, and see what is happening there. Seventeen trolleys with

patients lying side by side, one with gangrene, one with a heart attack, begging for water, the doctors cannot even identify which patient is which patient, which patient has this problem. Hon. Minister, Dr. Amery Browne, I plead with you and your colleagues, take a walk in Port of Spain Hospital, take a walk in Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex in the emergency department and see what you see. It is shameful, it is unacceptable, it is painful for us as doctors to see patients suffering like that. This is what you have reduced this country to. This is what you have reduced our population to. They are unable to get a bed for two days, they sit on a wheelchair and they lie down in trolleys dying on the trolleys. They cannot get drugs to help them, we cannot get chemotherapeutic drugs to assist those cancer patients, it is worsening, it is worsening all the time. You promised a national health insurance since 2015, hon. Minister of Finance, in your manifesto and your various budget. Where is that national health insurance? Seven years now you are promising and that remains a promise.

Presently there is the worsening of the CDAP programme. Where is the money that you have, supposed to put in for more drugs under the CDAP programme? You have lack of essential medicine, medical and surgical supplies for major operative procedures are not available. You all are not paying the people who are providing the hospitals with these. Major surgical procedures are postponed so regularly because of the lack of these supplies. Thousands of delayed surgeries for cardiac, cancer, kidney and orthopedic patients. Why do you not pay for a certain amount of these operative procedures to be done by doctors on a basis where you can have contractual work with them? Hundreds are dying awaiting renal dialysis. The renal dialysis systems in the private sector are not working efficiently and patients are dying as a result of the complications.

Uncontrolled and worsening NCDs resulting in premature deaths. Why do you not pay more of the doctors to go into the community health centres and open the community health centres up to nine o'clock, weekends and public holidays, which you closed down when you came into office? Acute shortage of nursing and medical and paramedical personnel.

Over a thousand nurses are short in the system and over 1,300 nurses are waiting for jobs. Hundreds of doctors are unemployed and why can you not employ them? That will improve your health service. Children are dying awaiting assistance from the Children's Life Fund which still required a promised legislative changes which was supposed to be many years ago.

I have addressed on numerous occasions in the public the issue of COVID mismanagement and I can go on and you would have heard me and this is the report, the Seemungal Report, 121 pages, with damning evidence against this Government on their management of the COVID. It is the most graceful management ever in the history of any country, we are the worst in the world in terms of deaths per population, for one million population. At one time they were saying that we are the best, we are best. Oxford University, one student at Oxford University did some research and said that based on what she provided to her professor—but we are the best in the world. We are the worst; 4,200 patients have died as a result of negligence.

The Intensive Care Unit when we were asking the questions, what is the death rate? The intensive care unit, 99 per cent of patients in the Intensive Care Unit died. And they died, why did they die? There were less nurses, there were less doctors, there were less top doctors in the system, there were no drugs. The drugs of Tocilizumab, Remdesivir which would have cost over \$20,000 would

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have possibly saved a life; \$20,000 to save one life; \$200,000 to save 10 lives; \$2 million to save 100 lives; 1,000 would be \$20 million. You could not spend \$20 million to save 1,000 lives? That is your carelessness, man, COVID mismanagement and totally under prepared to try—and you did things to try to fool the population.

So this Seemungal Report has 19 major recommendations with major findings. Have you tried to address it in your budget statement, hon. Minister of Finance? Some of the major findings in the Seemungal Report:

We had a lot of difficulty in accessing data and patients records because they were deliberately hidden.

[*Mr. Imbert stands*]

There is an urgent need for electronic medical records—

Madam President: Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh, your time has expired.

Mr. Imbert: Lovely.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Minister of Health.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam President. Good afternoon to you, good afternoon to all Members of this honourable Chamber. It is an absolute honour and privilege for me as a former Opposition Senator to be in these hallowed Chambers to make my second contribution to the budget presentation, first in the Lower House and now it is my, as I said, honour and privilege to be in the Upper House.

First of all I would like to recognize two gentlemen, the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley—

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—who has the unenviable task of managing a diverse country, diverse by race, religion, geography and all that goes with that, managing a country in an era coming out of a global pandemic, it could not be easy. And if coming out of a global pandemic could not challenge a leader more, then we had to deal with issues of the Ukraine/Russia war which has led to all sorts of collateral damage to small island states like us. So Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley in my humble view deserves a lot of credit for keeping Trinidad and Tobago on an even keel.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: The second person I would like to single out for praise and commendation is the hon. Minister of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: The Minister of Finance when we first came into Government in September, I believe, September of 2015, the cries and advice to him then, was to go to the IMF, devalue the dollar. We resisted that and the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister together said we will formulate our own bitter medicine for Trinidad and Tobago and that medicine is better for us than the IMF. Because if we had listened to the so-called experts today, 30, 40,000 civil servants would be out of a job. We escaped that. And the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister get no credit for that but they deserve a lot of credit.

If we had listened to the experts and devalued the dollar, the same poor disadvantaged persons we are all speaking about, are concerned about, devaluation hits them the most. Not the business person, not the professionals, they have

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buffers. But those who do not have an economic buffer will face the ravages of devaluation and Minister Imbert and the hon. Prime Minister have to be congratulated for steering a course in the face of a criticism that is second to none in any part of the world. And it is because of that we are here today after this face of COVID, Ukraine/Russia war, a global financial situation with a coming together of these forces that all countries are grappling with and we are no different. So I want to congratulate those two gentlemen, my political leader whom I love, my Minister of Finance who I admire and love—[*Laughter*—and I want to say it has been an absolute pleasure and privilege to be part of a Cabinet with these two gentlemen.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I am here today, Madam President, because as predicted someone on the Opposition Bench would have fallen ill. That is expected. It happened before on the legislation to child marriage where two people fell ill, surprisingly, and two people came in to talk against that Bill. Another time, predictably, a casino worker came in because a UNC Senator fell ill predictably, to talk about the casino legislation. So this is no surprise. But it is par for the course, because some people do not regard the Constitution as something sacred.

Madam President, I want to thank the Independent Senators, I have listened to them, Sen. Vieira, thank you very much. I listened to my colleague, Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh today, and I want to thank him for his very balanced report on the budget. And also I listened to Sen. Nakhid and unfortunately the last speaker. And I will now seek to give Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh some comfort because he spoke at length about mental health and so on. So, Madam President—could I ask someone to just bring the papers I left across there please. Right. So I thank Sen.

Deyalsingh for being a champion for mental health and to let him know that I have also been a Minister of Health who has championed mental health. I do not think any other Minister of Health has championed mental health as much as I have and supported by the Prime Minister because many of our initiatives needed Cabinet approval.

I want to, and I would make this available to Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh, report—because he spoke a lot about mental health, Report of the Committee Appointed to Examine the Integration—and listen to the words, the Integration of Basic Mental Health Care Services into the Regional Health Authorities. And the date is September 08, 2022. I just want to put on record what the terms of reference for this report are because it speaks directly to what Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh was speaking about. Terms of reference:

1. To conduct a rapid assessment of the existing health care delivery model as it relates to the provision of mental health services in the public health care system.
2. To identify the specific clinical mental health services to be provided at health centres within the RHA.

And this ties in to the budget, because there is funding in the 2023 fiscal measures to do this;

3. To define the clinical criteria and clear pathway for referral, treatment and escalation of care.
4. To explore the concerns and challenges from both public health, physicians, primary health care physicians and nurses as well as patients and develop an appropriate organization strategy and interventions for mitigating same.

5. To identify the requirements of health centres eligible to participate in this pilot.

And again, Madam President, this ties into the budget because you need funding to bring the health centres up to where we want them to be to treat with this.

6. To identify the resources required to facilitate this new integrated model of care, including but not limited to—and again the budget has to provide this—infrastructure, human resources, training, medicines, et cetera.
7. To develop a pathway for the supply, distribution and accountability of all relevant medicines—again, to be provided in the budget—for the success of the initiative; and.
8. To establish a pathway for the continuation of clinical training of doctors and nurses, including the WHO (mhGAP), Mental Health Gap Action Programme.

So all of this is now going to be implemented in fiscal 2023 with our budgetary allocation of roughly \$6.9 billion.

Madam President, to show and to comfort Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh and all of us who work in mental health, I just want to quote one paragraph from the executive summary:

By terms of reference dated April 20, 2022—so we started to work on this six months ago—the Minister of Health—that is myself—established a Committee to enquire into the status of decentralization of basic mental health and behavioural health services in the Trinidad and Tobago health system, exploring the breadth and depth of penetration of mental health services across the national health landscape.

I would stop quoting from this document because now, as Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh said, it is time for implementation. And this is what is going to be occupying myself, as Minister, in fiscal 2023, using the budgetary allocations so kindly given to us by the Minister of Finance. So we have an over 100-page document, I would not go into much more detail but the plan is there. We started planning for this in April, this is the final report and we are now moving to implementation phase.

Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh and also the last speaker also spoke about NCDs and diabetic foot disease. And we heard the last speaker say, hire doctors, send them out. Hire doctors to do what, to do what? Before you hire boots on the ground you must have a plan, you must have a policy you must have data. I want to read from the—put on to the *Hansard* to give again Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh the comfort that he needs, that we have started our data collection on prevalence of disease. We have started the development of standardized data entry tools, developed our NCD registries and surveillance, because I always say, I always tell people you cannot manage what you cannot measure. So we need the information, not anecdotal, and as far as humanly possible, empirical, about the prevalence of diabetes, hypertension and so on. Advance the preparation and kick off of the second run of the STEPS survey which is WHO/PAHOs Risk-Factor Survey to help countries begin to develop their own surveillance system, and that is what we are doing. And revamp and launch the TT Moves initiative. And again, it has to be based on policy before you put boots on the ground.

And the issue of diabetic foot infection which Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh raised is close to my heart also, and coincidentally tomorrow at the Radisson we have the last of a three part series of meetings which we started off way back in April with

Dr. Ian Hosein from King's College Hospital, London, visiting professor. And tomorrow at 9.00 a.m. at Radisson we have the last of that three part symposium on diabetic foot infection, moving forward in prevention and management. We kick it off tomorrow at 9.00 a.m. Let me just put on record some of the issues. One, presentation, Diabetes Foot Infection Task Force, because we did that for the past few months by Dr. Anushka Bissoon-Pustam. A presentation roll out of Diabetic Foot Screening Programme using the DATT model. That is the Diabetes Association of Trinidad and Tobago to be presented by Ms. Zanisha Jaimungal. Then we have a presentation, Implementation of the Diabetic Bone Clinic using the North Central Regional Health Authority model by Dr. Melissa Bachan. Then we move on, Antimicrobial Resistance in Diabetic Wound Infections by Dr. Rajeev Nagessar. We move on, clinical guideline for the prevention and management of diabetic foot infections and so we go on.

Diabetic foot infections is one of the major avenues of expenditure morbidity and mortality in Trinidad and Tobago. We estimate that currently over 30 per cent of our hospital beds, and we have just over 3,000 hospital beds, are taken up by people suffering from diabetes and diabetic foot problems, 30 per cent, that is 900 beds.

5.00 p.m.

Our objective is to decrease the incidents of amputations, whether it is above the knee, below the knee, ankle, digit toes, by about 25 per cent within two years. That is the kind of targets we are looking at. So, I hope I have given my colleague, Sen. Deyalsingh, some comfort on the two issues he raised, mental health, diabetes. Sen. Deyalsingh also said, and I hope I am quoting him here now—because if we want to develop as a country, he said, and I think I quote right,

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different administrations need to have the same goals, or words to that effect. In other words, with the five-year cycle of elections, if you get a government today for five years, a government tomorrow for five years, and you do not have a cohesive plan for national development, then you are not going to achieve the objectives.

But it was the People's National Movement, under Mr. Patrick Manning, that developed—not developed—used a tool developed by the private sector, Mr. Arthur Lok Jack, called *Vision 2020*. What was the *Vison 2020* about? It was developed as a long-term national development plan that would guide short and medium-term strategies for the achievement of national aspirations come the year 2020. It was not, Madam President, a PNM thing. Here are some of the names that served on that *Vision 2020* committee: Bhoendradatt Tewarie, David Abdullah, Nan Ramgoolam, Robin Maraj of SBCS. None of these people are PNM people. Arthur Lok Jack was the author and the convener, and PNM adopted that as policy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: However, when 2010 came and the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the UNC came into office, do you know what was the outcome of *Vision 2020*, to which Bhoendradatt Tewarie, David Abdullah, Nan Rargoolam, Robin Maraj and others, et al., contributed to? The UNC Government dumped it in the “labasse”. They collected all the copies at the Ministry of Public Administration; all the copies, CDs, hard copies. Somebody called the then Chairman of the party, Franklin Khan—God rest his soul—and he was able to salvage some from the “labasse”. And this is why, Sen. Deyalsingh, I agree with you. You need to have commonality of purpose across administrations, and we

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had that blueprint.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We had that blueprint and we are suffering today between the lost years of 2010—2015, and that is why you cannot have national development.

Madam President, I now want to respond to my colleague who spoke before me, and there is lot to say on that. Madam President, how much more time do I have, please?

Madam President: You finish at 5.26. So, you have 23 minutes.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Oh, lovely. Thank you. Madam President, the speaker before me spoke about loss of freedoms. Could you imagine that? Loss of freedoms. You would think that we are locking up people left, right and centre. Let us talk about loss of freedoms. When the UNC came into office, they fired all the URP workers because they were deemed to be PNM; fired them. They are now suing the State for hundreds of millions of dollars.

Let us talk about loss of the freedoms, responding to the speaker before me. They had a state of emergency because 12 people died over an Easter weekend. Eight thousand young black men in this country lost their freedom and now they are suing the State for hundreds of millions of dollars. They just rounded up young black men in this country, corralled them, threw in dry hay and threw a match, and I have to listen to the UNC talk about loss of freedoms?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I have to listen to that today in 2022? And they are suing the State. Madam President, I am so glad that the speaker before me spoke because at the behest of his political leader, the most vicious attack was launched

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against public servants in this country, Dr. Roshan Parasram, Dr Maryam Abdool-Richards, Dr Avery Hinds. But we should not be surprised, Madam President, because it is the same UNC that launched an attack, an ad hominem attack, against the head of state, against the Chief Justice and against the Independent Bench, collectively and individually. So, who is the poor public servant to launch an attack against?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Who? But that is the UNC. And I want to warn this country; I want to warn this country, these ad hominem attacks—there was a poem that was written by Martin Niemöller after World War II, “An Admission of Guilt”. May I put it on the record, Madam President?

“First they came for the Communists
 And I did not speak out
 Because I was not a Communist
 Then they came for the Socialists
 And I did not speak out
 Because I was not a Socialist
 Then they came the trade unionists
 And I did not speak out
 Because I was not trade unionist
 Then they came for the Jews
 And I did not speak out
 Because I was not a Jew”

And, Madam President, when good men do nothing in the face of tyranny, they came for me. They came for Dr. Roshan Parasram in the most obscene way, they

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came for Dr. Maryam Abdool-Richards in the most obscene way, and Dr Avery Hinds in the most obscene way. And:

“Then they came for me
 And there was no one left
 To speak out for me.”

History has a way of repeating itself. And you know what galls me about that launch of that attack on those public servants? And I am saying this here for the first time. I have been waiting for the opportunity to say this, shame on every professional organization in Trinidad and Tobago for not standing up for those doctors. Shame!

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Not one professional organization said, that is not the way to behave. So, I leave that there, Madam President.

The speaker before me spoke about COVID. The hon. Prime Minister acknowledged that he needed the input of the Opposition when COVID first started, and a team led by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar and including the speaker before me, went to see Dr. Rowley. Do you know what the speaker before me recommended? Hydroxychloroquine.

Hon. Senator: What?

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Madam President, I stand on 48(6).

Hon. Senator: You wrong, you wrong.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: 48(6)—

Hon. Senator: No, you are wrong.

Hon. Senator: 46—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: 46, yes. He is imputing—

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Hon. Senator: 46(6)

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: 46(6). He is imputing improper motives. I never said that to the hon. Prime Minister. It was not me who said to use hydroxychloroquine.

Hon. Senator: Who it was?

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: That is something had been bandied around for a long time.

Madam President: Senator—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: It was not me.

Madam President: Thank you very much. Minister, continue please.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you. And then I had to hear—

Hon. Senator: Must retract that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—Sen. Nakhid today—because I am now responding to Sen. Nakhid who took offence about the correlation between rum and the UNC, that that is not their modus operandi.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: But hear the COVID response. Sen. Mark is on the *Hansard* as saying puncheon and lime is good for COVID.

Hon. Senator: “Woahhh”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Puncheon and lime. How many people died in this country because they took punching and lime and hydroxychloroquine? How many people died in this country because the Leader of the Opposition said it is sunshine that saved us in 2020 and 2021? How many people died in this country because the UNC said, “Do not be vaccinated because you are guinea pigs?” How many people died in this country because Sen. Nakhid said he will not be vaccinated

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because he does not want to live in a communist state?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: How many people died in this country—

Madam President: Minister. Members, please. Sen. Lyder, you are giving a running commentary while the Minister is speaking. Please. Minister continue.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: How many people died in this country, able-bodied people, because Sen. Lyder is on record as saying he is young and fit and healthy, he will not be vaccinated. Yeah. And you want to talk to me about the COVID response?

Sen. Lyder: Madam President, 46(6); 46(6), that is not true. Once again, he is misquoting. I said I gave way to the elderly first. Except, of course, you know “dem” on that side, they went before the elderly.

Madam President: Sen. Lyder—

Sen. Lyder: 46(6).

Madam President:—that is not the way to invoke the Standing Order; 46(6) is enough.

Sen. Lyder: Thank you, Madam.

Madam President: Minister, continue.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you very much. So that is their COVID response and taking us to court 56 times and losing all. The speaker before me spoke about his sterling contribution as Chairman of this and Chairman of that. You know what is the Senator’s biggest accomplishment as Chairman of North West Regional Health Authority? The disappearance of \$1.6 million, \$400,000 each into the bank accounts of his friends.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Mark: Madam President, 46(6) and I think 46(4) as well.

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Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Mark: (4) and (6).

Madam President: I have listened, I am the only person in here paying attention to every word that is being uttered, and I am saying to the Minister, continue.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam President. That is my friend biggest accomplishment in health, the misappropriation of \$1.6 million into four bank accounts.

Sen. Mark: Hence 46(8); 46(8).

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Minister, continue.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you very much.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: The speaker before me said everything is collapsing, health is collapsing. Let me give the evidence. He spoke about his eruditeness about being an OB-GYN Oncologist. Why when the hon. Member was a Chairman of two RHAs, was in Government, he did not lend his expertise in the field of maternal mortality to drop it?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Under their stewardship mothers were dying at the rate of 1 to 1.5 per month in this country. You know how many have died this year so far? One.

Hon. Senator: Excellent.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We have dropped maternal mortality from 2015—when I came into office, when I took on the role of Directorate of Women's Health, I took it on and started to drop it in 2016 by half. In 2019, it was 25.7, half—

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Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Would you give way, Minister?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: No, Sir.

Sen. Mark: All right, “doh” give way.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: 2020, 26.7 and, yes, last year we had a rise because of COVID. But that year so far, only one women has died being pregnant, COVID complications. But to hear them, “Everything has collapsed.”

Infant mortality rate. In coming into office children, babies, newborns were dying at the rate of 12 per 1,000 live births. You know what it is now?— 5.7, less than half. We did that. We did that. We did that.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: Please.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Sorry, Madam President. My apologies.

Madam President: Continue, Minister.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you. And now I have to hear about COVID, and you know what is the saviour of the UNC? The Seemungal Report. Let me tell this country what the UNC said about the Seemungal Report when they come into— before. They said the Seemungal Report is a farce.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Who said that?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Look at the *Newsday* and I have the quote here. See if it is on my desk, please. I walked with it. There are two newspaper reports in the *Newsday*, where the Seemungal Report was rubbished even before it came out; even before, but now they are using as their saviour. They said things like the Seemungal Report is a “pappyshow”, that nothing will come of it. But you see they cherry-picked the Seemungal Report.

Let me quote a part of the Seemungal Report. It is on page 95, I believe,

where they spoke about—I will get it very soon, Madam President. And talking about the drug, tocilizumab, that drug was only qualified to be used on severe patients, which we did. It was not to be used across the board on everybody else. I quote on page 42 of the Seemungal Report:

“The more populations are unhealthy...”—which we are—“...the more severe are the outcomes due to COVID-19.”

It stands to reason.

“When this situation occurs, health services become overwhelmed and the mortality impact will at its greatest.”

But to hear them speak you will think that our case fatality ratio is the highest in the world. The highest in the world is Yemen at 19.1, but let us take Yemen out as an outlier. The averages start to come down 7, 6. You know where we are?—2.3. We are within global standards. Unfortunately, people have died; unfortunately. And it boggles the mind that an issue like COVID, a one in a hundred occurrence, is so politicized by the UNC. I found the references.

“Opposition refers to COVID care review committee as ‘pappy show’.”
 News Room, January 17, 2022, and I quote:

“Opposition Leader Kamla Persad-Bissessar has dismissed the recently announced review of COVID-19 care as a ‘pappy show’.”

But today, they rely on it.

“She believes they are being set up to fail, and to serve no other function than to rubber-stamp the...COVID-19 management policies.”

Loop:

“UNC MP slams ‘sham’ probe into healthcare system, COVID-19 care”.

And I quote:

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“Former Member of Parliament...under the United National Congress...Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, has suggested that the five-member committee created to probe the parallel healthcare system and the various aspects of COVID-19 care in Trinidad and Tobago is a sham.”

Hon. Senator: What!

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: That is the hon. Member:

“...is a sham.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: But today, he relies on it. Imagine that? Badeo Panday has a word for that—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: You give them one week.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—“nemakaram”. They got a month. They got a three-week extension. Let me repeat.

“The ex-MP raised even more concerns, implying that the findings may not be authentic.”

But today, he is the big exponent of the Seemungal Report. Right?

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Madam President: Could I just—let me just make a little interjection here. Sen. Gopeesingh, you have already made your contribution. This is a debate, but you do not get to make a contribution, then sit down and then debate with the person who is presenting. Okay? So, can you please allow the Minister to finish? And, Minister, I know you are getting excited, but can I ask you please to just—

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Tone it down.

Madam President: Yes.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you. I will go back to my old senatorial days. Thank

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you very much. But when you hear these blatant untruths, it is difficult to retain your composure—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—because the new society is about the big untruth. You say the big untruth often enough, people believe it. Right? So that puts to rest my colleagues reliance on the Seemungal Report.

I now want to come to respond to my colleague on Central Block. Madam President, I cannot believe that the UNC has the unmitigated gall to even breathe and mention the words “Central Block”. They sat on a 2009 PAHO Report when oil was \$100-plus a barrel and did absolutely nothing. People could have died in Central Block. Could you imagine if you have 400 patients in Central Block during opening hours, during visitation hours; 400 patients. Let us say each one has two visitors, that is 800 and 400, 1,200. Then you have health care workers, another three—let us say you have 1,500 people between patients, healthcare workers and visitors in Central Block and an earthquake struck and that thing came down and 1,500 people died, and the UNC watched that report and built Couva.

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

How did you make that decision to prioritized Couva over Central Block? And now you have the unmitigated gall to ask about Central Block. After the hiccups, it is going fine, thank you very much.

Hon. Senator: Shame on the UNC.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: The UNC talks about CDAP. We spend about \$45 million a year on CDAP. There is no shortage of CDAP drugs. Again, you say something untrue long enough, people believe it. As I keep saying, the problem is getting pharmacies to order on time and in cycle. But let me see what they did with CDAP

when they were in office.

They increased the dispensing fee for CDAP per item to the pharmacies from \$8 to \$12 per item. That is what they did. We dropped that back down and took that savings and put it into CDAP. We continue to provide dialysis free of charge for over 1,000 patients. They would not admit that. And as for the A&E at Port of Spain, once the new Central Block is finish sometime in 2024, as I have said before, we move to expand and modernize the A&E. Because for those of you who know Port of Spain General Hospital, we have A&E. North of A&E—and I think all the doctors who work there, Sen. Dillon-Remy, Sen. Deyalsingh will know—north of the A&E you have all your outpatient clinics, orthopaedics and so on.

The plan is once the new Central Block is finished, we move all those outpatients' clinics out of there and then we take over that space, north of the A&E, and expand the A&E going north. But Port of Spain General Hospital right now is stressed. It is stressed because we had to decant, because the UNC did not build a new Central Block. It is stressed now because we are demolishing the old Central Block. So it is under stress. Right? But we are taking every reasonable measure to decrease that stress as much as possible.

So, Mr. Deputy President—

Sen. Mark: Vice.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Vice-President, sorry. I forgot which House I was in. I want to refer lastly to COVID-19. You know, it is so easy to criticize any country's COVID response from an amateur critic's point of view—

Mr. Vice-President: Minister, you have four minutes remaining.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes. Thanks. I have been looking at the clock. Thanks—

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but you know this country never reached the stage as in Italy, where people were dying so fast. They had to have hearses lined up, and they have a priest standing up there and just saying the “Hail Mary” for 15 seconds, hearse goes, deceased goes, another one comes. That was Italy.

In the United States, you had people being stored in refrigerated trucks and the refrigeration would break down. In other countries, you had COVID patients being taken in the ambulance from hospital, to hospital, to hospital. Mothers were dying because they could not get care in the regular healthcare system. We never reached that stage. Was everything perfect? Of course not, it is a pandemic. No country in the world was prepared for this, but we did well. We did very well—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—and I am proud. I am proud, proud, proud, proud to have been associated with my political leader and Prime Minister who led the national response from an economic, socioeconomic and health perspective. I am proud. And the country has rewarded Dr. Roshan Parasram with the ORTT, well-deserved—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—Dr. Maryam Abdool-Richards, Dr. Avery Hinds and Prof. Christine Carrington for their sterling service. That is how a grateful country responds. Not like our friend opposite who denigrate and make life a living hell for those who did nothing else but serve this country.

Mr. Vice-President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Richards.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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Sen. Paul Richards: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for recognizing me and allowing me to enter this debate on the budget 2023—

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. P. Richards:—which is titled, Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark—

Sen. Mark: I apologize, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President:—kindly allow the good Senator on the Independent Bench to make his contribution in decorum and peace, please. Thank you.

Sen. P. Richards: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I want to start on a sombre but at same time a celebratory note, by paying tribute to a patriot of Trinidad and Tobago who recently passed away, in the person of Hazel Brown, who I think—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. P. Richards:—many will agree was a champion and a patriot, and certainly championed the causes of those who were most vulnerable in society and also women. So, condolences to her family and her colleagues.

I think to start, regardless of where you sit, either in this place or the other place, we can all or should all agree that a large percentage of the population is under duress, stressed out, struggling, in pain. Some even say the population is on edge. Well, they are on edge because they are struggling, and in pain, anxious, uncertain. Many may argue that we have seen in some instances over the last 20 years arguably tougher budgets in the past, but what is different this time around? Why such a strong reaction from many to the rebuke of a call for sacrifice? Because sacrifice is not new to this population. Sacrifice in principle is not necessarily a bad thing, but there are segments in this society that have been

sacrificing for decades and without anything to show for it in some instances.

Mr. Vice-President, people are in pain, social pain, emotional pain, economic pain and, in some cases, physical pain because they are struggling to buy basic food items and, in some cases, unable to buy medicine. The pain is intensified even more for vulnerable groups where the poorer people and their families are living just below or on the poverty line. It is even more difficult when people are being asked to sacrifice and, as I said before, there is nothing wrong with the principle of sacrifice. But for sacrifice some is having a reduction of profits from 150 million to 130 million. That is sacrifice for them. While sacrifice for many others is having to choose between food or medicine, or to send Mary to school Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and Peter to school on Tuesday and Thursday. That, Mr. Vice-President, is the reality for many in Trinidad and Tobago.

So, when there is a call for sacrifice, as the younger people will say, it lashes different to different demographics. We are not at all a homogenous society. And, as I said before, the principle of sacrifice is not what is at debate here because we all know, in some way or the other, every one of us in this country is being called to make sacrifices on a daily basis.

Mr. Vice-President, it is a great segue to look at the basic allocations in the budget as presented by the hon. Minister of Finance. And I again congratulate the Minister of Finance because, to me, the allocation in large, not looking at the minutiae, is an indication of the focus of the Government. And I commend that education and training has received the lion's share of the budget which says to me that there is a philosophy and understanding that this is the way to prepare the country for the future, \$7.435 billion. Health is the second, \$6.892 billion, because if you are not alive or you are not healthy, you cannot enjoy any aspect of life. And

then we have National Security, \$5.453 billion; social grants, \$5.453 billion; Works and Transport, \$3.748 billion, and so on.

So, I commend the Government because I believe there is an understanding that education is the way to position the country to be competitive and viable into the future. And I think that it will deal with what I will describe as the education pandemic post the health pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago, because clearly the data is showing that we also had an education pandemic in many different ways.

5.30 p.m.

And I will make a statement here because in terms of education, we have allocated the third largest to National Security and we have been struggling with a significant crime issue in Trinidad and Tobago for many decades and the battle ground against crime begins in the classroom because if and when we fail in the classroom, we pay for it in national security and if we do not understand that, when children, learners, fall through the cracks of the education system, that is where we funnel them to the open arms of the gangs in Trinidad and Tobago. So we have to focus on classroom, we have to focus on the young learners, and in particular, we have to focus on those who are underperforming.

And if we look at this year's SEA and last year's SEA and quite frankly the year before that, we have not been doing quite well. Of course, this year is more profound because of what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic but I will proffer an argument that we were just doing okay before that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. P. Richards: In an article in the newspaper by Khamarie Rodriguez entitled:

“Only 37 per cent of SEA pupils scored more than 50 per cent...”

It quotes the Minister of Education Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly as announcing:

“...a reduction in overall achievement in this year’s exam scores.

Of the total of 19,079 students who wrote the exam, she said, the number of those who scored above 50 per cent totaled 37.06 per cent...”

That is 50 per cent, 50 per cent.

“...a decrease from the 2021 percentage of 52.49 per cent.

The percentage of those who were placed in secondary schools but scored under 50 per cent increased from 44.9 per cent in 2021 to 52.6 per cent...”—but those who were placed and those who scored—“under 30 rose...

The number of students”—who scored—“over 90 per cent...decreased...”

So all the way around when you look at it, there has been significant loss in terms of the education performance and yes, the COVID-19 pandemic was the most significant factor in that because we are not the only country in the world that has suffered that level of learning loss.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. P. Richards: Now, 9,000 students were placed into secondary school despite scoring under 50 and 30 per cent and I have a problem with even us not understanding in a really simplistic sense, scoring 50 per cent means that you really have only grasped a certain percentage of the curriculum and are not as ready as you should be to transition to the next level or to absorb what is coming next and we have to understand that.

So the Ministry, in its wisdom, designed a project for July/August that made the 9,000 students eligible. Unfortunately, only 2,700, according to news reports, availed themselves of that. And I think that is because there was a lack of understanding of the dynamics of many of the families and what they face in

Trinidad and Tobago. While well-intentioned, one has to understand in these economic times, not everybody is going to have the facilities and the resources to send their children to school during July and August, even if transport is supplied because the centres were not as widely distributed as one would like because of course there were limited resources. But, I still commend the effort and unfortunately, we still have not had a report on how those 2,700 students did. So on one hand, we had 9,000 eligible, less than one-third participated and we still do not know how the 2,700 did in the context of \$10 million being spent on that. I think we need more clarity on that so we will know what worked and what did not work.

Mr. Vice-President, the Catholic Education Board also published an article in *The Catholic News* dated July 8th, 2022 and identified that there are 118 primary and one private and 6 assisted primary schools managed by the Catholic Board Education in Trinidad and Tobago and it contends that of their results, there was less significant learning loss and we have all known the denominational school boards or schools under the denominational boards in the country have performed better for a particular reason. One, the schools are smaller; generally the class sizes are smaller. They generally have better resources and there is more focus placed from PTAs and more support from families and communities for a lot of sociodemographic reasons and we have to understand what is working for those schools and what can be transferred to the State-run schools. This has been an evolving theme for many years without much success in us dealing with it effectively.

The Catholic Education Board contends that the main issue at hand here, the main issue at hand is inequality; inequality of resources, inequality of focus and

inequality of support systems. It is not that one set is brighter than one as we used to think long time. That is an archaic way of thinking. It is that one cadre or cohort has more support and resources. That all it is. So with the largest allocation being placed on education, I would presume that we do more to equalize the playing field in the interest of national development and sustainability because we all know that that State-run schools house the largest number of primary and secondary school students so we have to look at solutions which is where I intend to place much of my focus today.

Mr. Vice-President, my commendation to the Minister of Finance and the Government is that I am extremely happy with the fact that it has been announced that \$50 million has been put aside to deal with this remedial situation. Interestingly enough even before I heard the Minister of Finance present the budget, I was going to beg for \$150 million over the next three years. Because this cannot be a one year and stop because of the profundity of the issue we are dealing with. If we understand that remedial systems were put in place for the Standard 5 transitioning to Form 1 and that cost \$10 million, we have to also understand that the Standard 1, Standard 2, Standard 3 and those who transitioned to Standard 5 also suffered learning loss. So too Forms 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 and they also need urgent remediation. So I think when you think about it, it should be \$100 million because if one cohort got \$10 million, think of 10 cohorts but I guess I understand that we are in constrained economic times.

What is important now is how we use that money and how we map the progress and design the curriculum to make sure that they recover, not just in one year because they would not all recover in one year, some will take longer, some have deeper challenges that had not been addressed even before the pandemic and

once we understand these dynamics in education, we will make more progress. And we have to believe in these young people, we cannot see just them failing and call them failures and move on. That is not what a progressive country does.

So I am hoping that this \$50 million can be used for what I will call the real bridge to the future, not a physical bridge but the real bridge in not only returning the education sector, especially primary and secondary schools students, to pre-pandemic levels but going past that because I think this is an opportunity to jump up forward. It is not just about going to pre-pandemic levels because we were just okay there, we were doing all right. If you want to position the country in 10 to 15 to 20 years as competitive, intellectually and otherwise, we have to think of moving the learners forward to pass where they were.

So I am suggesting the following: We identify anyone who scored under 40 per cent. Anyone, not 30 per cent, we are raising the benchmark because we believe in the young people. Anyone who scored under 40 per cent is eligible for remedial services. We look at their grades, we do not have to do a scan because their grades are there, they would have had grades from the year before, before they moved up, they would have grades from the last year and we look at those grades and establish a standard. At that point, we set targets of at least a 10 per cent improvement in performance over the next year for the next three years. That way we have a target in mind for these students.

So if you score 20 per cent, we want you to move to 30 per cent in basic Math and English because a lot of the problems we are facing now is because those students who are underperforming did not get a proper foundation. So if you scored under 40 per cent, you are eligible and at that point, we focus on improving their grades by at least 10 per cent for the next three years.

If we hit that target, imagine a student who is scoring 30 per cent now, where they will be and what that means for the country. If a student scored 1 per cent, they will be at 29 per cent if they are remediated effectively. So it is win-win all the way around. And if we do enough in the first year, the second year is going to be easier because they have a foundation. A lot of the times students are moved up Form to Form, Standard to Standard without understanding most of the curriculum and every successive year, they struggle even more without being identified and remediated. So that is my suggestion.

I am also suggesting we adjust the school day so that these remedial classes are available three days a week for two hours a day. That way you do not have to bring them back into school so they have their normal classes and those who are eligible, stop the normal classes at 12 noon, get an hour's break and go into remedial classes from 1.00 p.m to 3.00 p.m. So you do not have to bring them back in school. Their parents do not have to pay more money or their whole lives are not as disrupted so they are getting the foundation while still trying to deal with their daily exercises.

And we also need to not burden the teachers in the system with these tasks because they are already overburdened and struggling. So we make a call for retired teachers, university students, private tutors to fill this gap. So we have a different approach and a different mindset to tutoring these learners who have these learning issues so we can actually get them to the point of performance that we want and we measure their progress. And those who are not progressing as we like, we dig deeper and find out why this is not happening. Because in many cases, it is not the student you know, they do not have the support at home for many reasons. We all had support, we all had somebody championing us, that is not the

case for everyone out there. We have to understand every family is different and the ones in particular in the lower socioeconomic groups are the ones who in many cases have less support.

I had the privilege, well the opportunity—let me not say the privilege—of doing a series in Maximum Security Prison in Golden Grove where I interviewed 17 lifers convicted of crimes that put them in there for the rest of their lives, mostly murder and there was one common theme. Out of the 17, 15 never finished primary school. Fifteen of the 17 who I interviewed never finished primary school and the other two were because of domestic situations they got involved with. Does it not tell you a lot? Does it not tell you what is funnelling young people from what could be otherwise very, very productive lives into the arms of gang and in jail? The education system—and this is not casting blame on this Government or the last—in general is failing those learners and opening them up in terms of vulnerabilities to elements of crime. We have to stymie that.

Mr. Vice-President, I think if we accomplish half of what I have proposed here, it would be worth every cent of the 150 million that I am proposing for the next three years and I think it will make a huge difference, in one, our performance academically in primary and secondary schools, national development and also in stymying the levels of crime 10, 15, 20 years down the road because we have to stop thinking in five-year cycles as the hon. Minister of Health said, as Sen. Deyalsingh said and as we all know when development trajectories change for whatever reasons, political parties enter and leave the Cabinet, so that is my proposal for that. As I said before, the fight against crime is in the classroom, that is where it starts, that is where we have to focus our attention and the others are symptoms that we deal with, with the criminal justice system.

Mr. Vice-President, we also need to place special emphasis on the issue of learning disabilities and special needs because the Student Support Services, with the greatest of respect, with the greatest of understanding of the effort the staff puts in, is under-sourced, underfinanced, under-resourced because the volume of work is becoming exponentially more and more every year with trying to diagnose learning disabilities, trying to diagnose and remediate and emotional behavioural problems and particularly post-pandemic because of the mental pressures on young people, they have gotten an exponentially increased amount of workload with less funding than three years ago. How is that going to work? How is it going to function effectively? Or is it just something we say we have there and we could say we have it but it is not being effective? And again, I am not casting blame or castigating, I am asking for us to look at where the issues are and try to fix them in the interest of development and sustainability of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, I want to move quickly to my other main issue that I want to deal with today and if I have time, the issues with disabilities and legislation related to disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. The next issue I will deal with is the issue of public transportation in the context of the fuel subsidy and the reduction in fuel subsidy. The reduction in fuel subsidy is hitting everyone hard but of course, those who have more, feel it less for obvious reasons, but I am sure people who have more are also driving less. “Nobody ent saying lemme geh yuh ah drop down de road” again. Those days done, because when “yuh go down the road, that quarter tank ah gas costing yuh more and yuh seeing it at the pump”.

And I say in the context of the fuel subsidy because we are highly dependent on a population that drives. We have about 700,000, 800,000 cars in the country, probably the most in the Caribbean, and that is because of several reasons. One,

because we have developed a tendency to want to drive because gas was cheap, heavily subsidized, public transport was poor and I will go into that more in a short while. The cost of preowned cars went down tremendously, meaning people could own more preowned cars and we call them “Roll on Roll off”, meaning everyone could have three, four cars in their garage, but that was all underscored by a buffer called a fuel subsidy.

To be fair, the Government has indicated from day one, this administration that is, that the philosophy is that this fuel subsidy is going to be reduced every year and it has so that should come as no surprise to any. It does not mean it hurts any less but it has been articulated, so it continues. Unfortunately, our public transportation system shows that—and I had the Parliament staff pull some *Hansard* for me, a question I asked of the hon. Minister of Works and Transport on the 16th of the 3rd, 2021 which was the total number of persons on a daily and weekly basis who use public transportation, what percentage of the commuting public is served by PTSC and what has been the trend in percentage over the past five years and at that time, the Minister indicated on average 1.55 per cent of the commuting public was serviced by PTSC on a daily basis, 1.55 per cent. I think the average allocation to PTSC is \$400 million, \$500 million a year. How does that make sense? How can that make sense? And there are several reasons why people do not take PTSC.

From 2015 to 2016, the average daily ridership was 3.9 per cent; 2016 to 2017, 3.9 per cent; 2017 to 2018, 3.57; 2018 to 2019, 2.91 per cent, and 2019 to 2021, 1.55 per cent. Now keep in mind, yes, we had a pandemic, we had lockdowns, people were not going out, but we never crossed 4 per cent. Did we? Even before the pandemic and that is for several reasons. One, an effective

transportation system is not just about buses coming and going on time. My colleague, and someone I have the greatest respect for, the hon. Minister of Trade, on a post-budget television panel, when asked a question, indicated that—it was her contention that PTSC runs an effective service, efficient service. In what country? Because even if I agree that the buses came on time and regularly, which they do not, an effective transportation system requires regularity, real-time information, where the bus is; infrastructure so people could go to a decent welcoming environment to wait for the bus and not stand up in “ah bus stop with ah vagrant next to yuh. Ah doh wanna” use the word “vagrant” but somebody who is homeless next to you who could be using there as a public convenience. Who is going to do that?

It needs to think through. When I leave my home, I should be able to park my car at Arima station because I may not want to—there may not be transportation from your house to the station, which happens in metropolises, park your car there, take the bus into Port of Spain—no, before that, get information on the bus on an app in 2022 where the bus is—because the 11 year olds are with apps now—take the bus into Port of Spain and have another source of transportation through an arrangement into Port of Spain and environs. Because if “it raining and it flood in South Quay, yuh cyah leave the terminus in South Quay and way yuh do”? Wait and go to work late?

So an effective transportation system must consider all of this as holistic, it is not just about buses running on time. It is about information technology being used to make the system efficient and we do not have that. So people are going to drive because it is more convenient to them and the more people who are driving is the more fuel burning in traffic is the bigger cost to the State in fuel subsidy. Does

it make sense to you what we are doing? Because it does not make sense to me. So I know the hon. Minister of Works and Transport has said that there is a national transportation policy afoot that we are yet to realize. Mr. Vice-President, how much more time do I have?

Mr. Vice-President: You have until 6.05 so that is 30 minutes.

Sen. P. Richards: Okay. Wonderful. So I did some research and New Zealand had a very similar problem to us and I do not want to leave out a very important part of this because very often “we lambaste maxi taxis, dey stopping everywhere, dey undisciplined” but imagine your day without maxi taxis. Not us, we drive to work, we have Bus Route passes, “we not stick in traffic”, we are the exception to the rule. Those of us who do not have drivers have Bus Route passes so we have less traffic to deal with, we have less fuel to burn. The subsidy is not affecting us in here or the other place as much at all and we have to admit that. It is the general public “ha ta” face that every day.

The quality of life of children getting up four o'clock in the morning to reach to school for seven and then leaving school three o'clock and “yuh end up home seven”. The quality of life their parents is being negatively affected because of transportation gaps in this country. “And we want to know why we on edge? All dais why we on edge” because we have endured years of this with no relief and it has to be fixed in terms of national development and quality of life, mental health care at that.

So New Zealand had a similar problem so they commissioned a study and the difference is “we commission lots of studies and end up on shelves”. They actually activated it. Their ways to deal with it was to improve the quality of infrastructure, replace infrastructural assets, accelerated replacements, economic

recessions and also buying multiple different forms of transport to supplement each other. So while they have trains, we do not have trains but we have buses, we have maxi taxis, we could devise a system that gets the person from home to the bus hub to the other bus hub and to their destination and back. There is also a safety issue involved in having a productive and efficient transportation system. Because if we have a safe, nationally-run transportation system, our young women are less vulnerable to predators because they have a system that is safe, reliable, and it has accountability built into it and of course, using information technology to ensure that people have the information they need and the system has redundancies in it.

So the link between transport and economic performance which also improved because New Zealand, because of their investment in national transportation, increased their GDP by 7 per cent in two years. Because guess what? There was less traffic on the road, businesses could have their goods and services moving more smoothly, they burnt less gas, the gas from their line item is reduced and there was a greater improvement in national security because less cars on the road mean the police could identify the criminals in cars.

Cost direct impact includes and the users included business travel, regular citizens, work force, non-work leisure and freight in terms of the categories of transportation that was impacted positively by having an improvement to national transportation. The direct cost includes cost of travel, travel time reliability, quality of life, comfort, safety and security, and the wider impact: business efficiency, business investment attraction, business innovation, clusters of conglomerates because people could move goods and services much more effectively and efficiently, labour market improvement because productivity improved because there was less time on the road, competition improved, domestic

and international trade improvement and globally mobile activity improved when you consider the wider parts of the transportation grid.

So, Mr. Vice-President, the possibilities and potential of dealing with this issue are immense for Trinidad and Tobago in so many different ways that we cannot even begin to fathom but we have accepted it as it is for some reason. I know there was talk about a rapid rail. I am not absent of the fact that there was a proposal for a rapid rail and it is unfeasible at this time but there is a lot of stuff we can do with PTSC because if we are honest with ourselves, “PTSC eh operating properly”, it is just not. No one is going to participate in that form of transportation when there are so many inadequacies along the continuum of the project.

I take some time, if I am servicing my car, “ah doh ask nobody tuh drop meh”, I take the opportunity to travel the public transportation because I am curious about what you experience and what people every day go through, and “dey look at me like ah crazy because some recognize meh and say wah you doing in ah maxi taxi boy”. But it is important for me to make that connection because it is real-time research and when you look at having to wait by “ah bus terminus” that may be dilapidated, that may have “ah homeless person livin’ in it”, that may not have lighting in the night in terms of safety, that has no signage that says the bus is coming, it is unappealing, it is unappealing and it is unsafe in many instances. So I think a lot more focus needs to be placed on PTSC.

And it is interesting that I pulled out a *Newsday* article that says the:

“PTSC chairman reveals new business model to generate income”

Thursday, May 19th, 2022 and:

“Commuters board a PTSC bus on the San Fernando to Port of Spain route

at King's Wharf terminal in San Fernando.”

And they have initiated multi-modal complexes which I think is moving in the right direction because the hub in Port of Spain to me is not at the standard that we would want it for anyone to be encouraged to travel from the various points in Trinidad into Port of Spain and back because it is just not up to standard. It may have been fit for purpose 25 years ago but it is certainly not now and some emphasis needs to be placed on that and upgrading that and these hubs are huge around the world in terms of real estate for businesses, leisure areas and education areas to commuters awaiting transfers to other forms of transportation, et cetera. So it can also be a revenue-generating initiative for the Public Transport Service Corporation if they see themselves in a wider context. They are making some steps here but you cannot be doing that and “yuh bus eh running on time”. Makes no sense. “Yuh putting the cart before the horse.” What is your primary core function? Efficient, effective, safe public transportation. Deal with that first or “yuh could walk and chew gum at the same time”.

6.00 p.m.

Mr. Vice President, let me move quickly to my last point, because I run out of time, because it would be remiss of me not to be able to deal with it.

Mr. Vice-President: You have five minutes.

Sen. P. Richards: Trinidad and Tobago—thank you—is way behind with disabilities legislation. And I know the Hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services is working on a Bill, she has assured me. And I commend her for that. But I am putting it on the record, because I think it is important.

In Guyana, the Persons with Disabilities Act became law in 2010. In Bahamas, the Persons with Disabilities Equal Opportunities Act was passed in

2014. In Jamaica, 2014. And we also have in several other Caribbean countries. I think it is time for us to really deal legislatively with persons with disability in this country, because they are a vulnerable group and they have been neglected for too long and are left at the behest of people applying policy arbitrarily without legal recourse, if they are not provided for in society. So, I am hoping that that Bill comes to the Parliament this Session because it is important for us to treat every citizen equally.

I think I want to also close by saying that we have to ask ourselves, Mr. Vice-President, in the Parliament, given what I have seen in the last two weeks, if we are ensuring individually and collectively, that this noble institution called the Parliament, is an instrument of ensuring citizens lives are improving; equality of treatment and opportunity is being championed; and providing a sense of hope and optimism? Or are we sometimes adding to the stress? Maybe unintentionally so, but are we adding to the stress?

Let us do some soul-searching. If we cannot honestly answer this, the public will answer it for us. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon.

Nigel de Freitas): Thank you Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to add my voice in support of the fiscal package presented by the Minister of Finance for the year 2022/2023.

Let me start off, Mr. Vice-President, by joining my colleagues in commending the Prime Minister of this country Dr. Keith Rowley; the Minister of Finance; and the Minister of Planning and Development for the immense amount

of work that they have done in keeping this economy of Trinidad and Tobago stable.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: A few short months ago we had a mid-year review and I contributed to that particular debate. And I made some statements specifically to those three individuals I just called out in relation to what they had to endure. Of course, at that particular point in time, a few short months later, we find out that there is more that they have been enduring, in relation to what needs to be done.

And that now leads me to add to the commendation I have just given, a short prayer for these individuals, because those three individuals would be under immense amount of stress as it relates to what needs to be done. And we have to understand that this particular Minister of Finance, Minister of Planning and Development, and Prime Minister of this country would be the most embattled individuals, as it relates to managing this economy in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. And for that I pray to God to give them the grace to continue, to guide their steps, to guide their minds, and to guide their hearts, to continue leading this country towards the path of prosperity. Amen.

Because, Mr. Vice-President, I have sat in quiet observance of what has been occurring globally. And I do not think anybody on any side in this particular Chamber has disagreed so far in this debate, or even in the other Chamber, as to what is occurring. We are in a very precarious time in human history. I think that is understood by everybody. And what you are hearing so far, from all of the contributors, is on our side we are indicating and we are putting to the population exactly what it is we are trying to do to keep things stable. On the opposing side,

they are trying to lay blame and put everything on us to say it is our fault why things are this way. And the Independent Senators, for the most part, are understanding exactly the situation that we are in. And they understand the message that we are in a transitional phase and balance is the key.

And so, Mr. Vice-President, as I sat and I thought, exactly how do you break down the circumstances that we are in so that the average man could understand? And I always listen to Sen. Deonarine when she contributes in the budget debates because she always gets it right in terms of the messaging and hits the nail on the head. And one of the first things that she did was that she puts it in the context of the last 20 to 30 years on what economically Trinidad and Tobago has been facing. And I want people to understand that this time around, and if you listen very carefully to the Minister of Finance, the narrative is ever so slightly different than what we have been accustomed to hearing.

If you go back to the 1980s period when we had our first economic shock coming out of a period of growth as the founding father decided that we are going to develop an oil sector to the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And, of course, we would have our increasing revenue coming in. And that first shock, which would have been the greater shock at that particular point in time, because what we had before was a lot of revenue and a lot of oil in the ground. Plenty resources, plenty money.

And so, even though we were treating with something that was an economic downturn at that particular point in time, the narrative at the time would have been that we need to ensure that we get through that period, however long it may have been, survive what is now facing us, until we can get over the hill and into economic growth again. And, of course, it happened, as we entered the 90s.

And then it would have occurred again in the early 2000s, another economic downturn. The narrative was the same. Who remembers the phrase “you need to tighten your belt”? Things are not the same anymore. We are experiencing an economic shock. All prices are fluctuating and, therefore, we need to tighten our belts and adjust how we spend so that we can get over that hurdle until things get better. And, of course, once again, they did.

And then, fast-forward to the 2014 to 2017/'18 period, another economic shock. And, of course, at that point in time our Minister of Finance was in place. And if we remember correctly, we started to indicate at that point in time that we have to spread the burden of adjustment until we can get back to a balanced budget, which was projected for 2019 at the particular point in time. And once we got over that hurdle, then we can begin the process of diversifying, because we started to understand that we could not keep going down this road of receiving economic shocks of which we have no control over, because we do not.

But then something happened, and Sen. Deonarine said it, and I said it before, COVID came. We did not expect it. And, of course, the Minister of Finance had to react. And react he did, and he kept us stable and he kept us going. But post-COVID, and it is not really post-COVID, because we are still in COVID. It has not been declared ended, in terms of the pandemic, but post-COVID in the context of the normalcy returning, you are now starting to understand that the narrative is changing, because all those other periods of economic downturn, the fundamental difference is that we had confidence in the resources that we had in the ground, and that the value that it would fetch, even if it was depressed at that particular point in time, that eventually it would bounce back.

And from that 2014 period coming forward, the first thing we started to hear

is the confidence in those resources in the ground is not as guaranteed as it used to be. To make matters worse, the oil and gas market started to have a certain level of volatility that came with it, so much so that the economic shocks kept coming faster and faster.

And so the narrative now, from mid-year review to now, and what the Minister of Finance has been saying over and over again, is as much as the prices are ticking up, and as much as we have had a windfall, we cannot stand up and say that things are over, that that windfall is temporary, because the situation that we are in globally is so precarious, and Sen. Deonarine hit the nail on the head, that we could wake up tomorrow morning and the war between Ukraine and Russia could be ended, and then we are experiencing another shock, and that we have to be extremely cautious as to how we move forward economically and begin the process of transitioning how we think about the future.

Because from the 1980s coming forward to the early 2000s, non-energy sector and the energy sector, and we had a heavy reliance on the energy sector, so much so that you all could remember the narrative. Once oil prices went up, things are good. We could start to spend again. And that was always the narrative. That is not the narrative now. Because the narrative now is that we must transition out of that dependency if it is we want to leave a future for our children.

And that is why I am saying that all of the commentary you are hearing from the Opposition is nothing more than them trying to capitalize on something that everybody in the world is going through. They only see a return to power. They do not see the future of this country. And if you listen carefully to what Sen. Mark said in his contribution, this is how he tries to fool you. When they were in power the refinery was open. When they were in power, all the trains were working.

Okay. When I was born Sen. Mark had an Afro. So what; you do not have one now. And there is a reason for that, just like there is a reason that the trains are not open and just like there is a reason the refinery is not open. And the Minister of Finance, ad nauseam, put that out into the public domain. So, to come and say that when you were in power these things were open makes no sense. That is not the circumstances under which we are right now.

And if you listened very carefully to what has been said by Members opposite, both in the other place and here, as to their plans if they were in power, you would understand that they have no plan. All of the economists in the country, all of the educated individuals, are indicating that we need to look towards the future. We need to diversify. We need to digitize. We need to transition. And your plan for the future of Trinidad and Tobago is oil and sugar.

So, we are moving forward and you are busy taking us backwards to 1975. And none of you all, you are answering now, but notice carefully to the population of Trinidad and Tobago, not one of them that have spoken so far have corroborated that plan by their political leader. Not one of them has repeated it. Because it never made sense when it was uttered in the first place. And it still does not make sense now.

And let me just, as I am on Sen. Mark, answer one time. I do not know what it is you have with Balisier House. I am a young member of this party. Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing is a young Member. Sen. Hislop is a young Member. Sen. Sagramsingh-Sooklal is a young Member. Sen. Singh is a young Member. And when we walk the halls of Balisier House, we walk in the wake of Dr. Eric Williams.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: We walk in the wake of ANR Robinson. We walk in the wake of George Chambers. We walk in the wake of Patrick Manning, and we walk in the wake of Dr. Keith Rowley.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: And that is a building that has been in the party for the last 60 years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: And the part that baffles me is that the party that you belong to, where are you all now? Not even in the building that you all founded the party in. Twenty-seven years they spent there, and do you know why they had to leave? They could not pay the rent. But you are coming to this Chamber to tell this country how to manage \$56 billion? That could make any sense? And the irony behind it, Mr. Vice-President, is the founder of their party is still in Rienza Complex and they are out.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: But you are coming to tell us about Balisier House. Well let me make this absolutely clear. As long as Balisier House stands in this country, we would provide shelter to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, when that rising sun starts to berth.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Of course, they would be jealous of Balisier House.

Mr. Vice-President: Senators, Senators, Senators. Sen. Lyder. Sen. Lyder, we appreciate. Now, we really appreciate the to and fro, but your volume is—

Sen. Lyder: Apologies.

Mr. Vice-President: Kindly allow the Minister to complete and continue his

contribution, please, all Members. All Members, kindly allow him to complete, please.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Thank you. Your management of your own affairs is questionable. And, therefore, we question your ability to manage the country's affairs.

Let me continue by responding to Sen. Gopeesingh, who spoke not too long before me. It is the second time I have heard Sen. Gopeesingh in this Chamber. And every time he comes, he comes to tell us about the laptop programme that they seem to be so proud of. I thought we dealt with this in 2015, and I did not really want to go back. But, since he brought it up, I am responding to him.

The laptop programme was nothing more than an ill-conceived PR stunt that was ineffective. No kind of planning went into the distribution of those laptops. No type of assessment as to the ability of the children to be able to use the laptop in a sustainable fashion. No type of checks as to whether all of the children had proper access to Internet. The purchase of cheap laptops just to hand out in the news, to say that you are doing something, in relation to helping education for children in this country, it could never work. And then coming to say that we did not hand out any laptops. Well, that is completely and utterly untrue. Because, the Ministry of Education, under our tenure, was able to hand out 63,000 devices to children in four years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: And it was not a PR stunt and it is not something that we need to go and wave a flag for, because we understood that you need to do the correct assessment. We understood that digitization needed to take place, and is still ongoing. So, that the use of those devices could be sustainable.

He comes again, Mr. Vice-President, to talk about 105 schools built.

Sen. Mark: Who is he?

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Sen. Gopeesingh. But Mr. Vice-President, in 2019, the statement by the same goodly Senator was that the former government to which he belonged built 106 schools. So, somehow between 2019 and 2022, we lost a school. And that leaves me to question, because they never come to say where the schools were built. They just come to beat their chest and say we built 105 schools. Four years ago it was 106. Next year it would be 104. The year after that could be 102. And it sounds to me just like the Couva Children's Hospital that you opened in 2015, without administrative staff and without the ability for it to be effectively operated. And that is the kind of management that we have come to expect from Members opposite. You cannot take anything they say at face value.

Mr. Vice-President: -Sen. Mark, we are on our last contribution for the day. It has been a long one and tomorrow is planning to be even longer. Let us allow the proceedings to happen, please.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Mr. Vice-President, to the textbook issue. Parents and teachers were highly incensed by the flood of textbooks entering the school system under Sen. Gopeesingh; no care as to accuracy. The number of textbooks as much as doubled, with new ones making it to the Ministry's list in record time and being purchased by the thousands. In addition to having multiple errors, the books were also a very poor quality, such was the rush to produce them. Again show over substance. Sen. Gopeesingh was glad to say we bought books, but no care as to the quality being offered to the students. Again, we cannot trust in their ability to manage anything.

Mr. Vice-President, I want to speak a little about why this is such a

precarious time in human history. When I sat down and I thought about what we are experiencing, every other period that we faced, we took it from an economic standpoint, and the measures put in place were done to treat with that. But when I thought about exactly what we are going through now, and why so many shocks are coming so fast, I came to the understanding of something. And this is the way I had to break it down.

When you're talking about a nation and how a nation is built, there are three layers built on three pillars. The first layer is population; a gathering of people in a particular place. The second is called society and culture. When you have several populations occupying a particular space, we interact with each other to form society and different cultural norms unique to them. On top of that, you have your economy. That is trade between these populations; how they perceive value in whatever it is that they produce. Those three layers, stand upon three pillars. These pillars are called the hierarchy of needs. What does the hierarchy of needs mean? It means that when you meet that hierarchy of needs, you then move up to your wants. So what are the needs I am referring to? The first is health. The second is food; and the third is shelter. So you have those three pillars holding up those three layers. And if at any particular point in time in history those three pillars fall, so does the layers above it.

And when I take a look at the last 20 to 30 years of human history, think about it, those three pillars have been rocked to their core. From the standpoint of health, we just came out of COVID-19. The whole entire world had to shut down. When the world shut down and everybody was locked indoors, no society, no, culture. We could not interact with each other we could not hug. We could not kiss each other. We could not even hold hands. And, of course, when society

went, so did the economy. You cannot sell. You cannot buy. You cannot trade.

In terms of shelter, for the last 25 years or so, as far as I could remember, we have been dealing, as Sen. Vieira rightly stated, with the climate change. We have had stronger storms. We have had floods. We have had stronger tornadoes. So the idea of a constant shelter is always influx. We just had Hurricane Ian passing through Florida. And now, as we are rolling into a certain level of normalcy, and because of a Ukraine/Russian war, we are experiencing pressures on the last pillar, food.

And that brings me to the Ministry that I belong to, and what we are doing to ensure we stabilize that third pillar. And before I begin, I joined with my senatorial colleagues to commend the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Minister Hosein, from the time I entered the Ministry, we all know him as a people's person and he has always said to both Minister, and the best way to serve people is to listen to the people. You heard him say it today again. And I could not agree with him more. He said it today that we work as a team in that Ministry. He said it today, that in Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries you are going to see a change in the way things operate.

You heard Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries speak to the fact that the issues that were in the public domain. As soon as he entered the Ministry he started to treat with those issues. And if you took a cursory look or a deeper look at the budget documents that were put in front of all of us, you would notice that there are line items in there specifically to deal with the issues that came to his knowledge in the seven months that he was there: line items to deal with praedial

larceny; line Items to deal with access roads and the development of such; line Items to deal with the pests and diseases that are affecting the agricultural community in Trinidad and Tobago.

You heard Minister in Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries speak to all of the incentive programmes. He called them out, 92 in total, to all of the grants that were given out to assist farmers. You heard him speak to the Food Box Programme, that has been restarted by the way, which is a direct answer to the Private Member's Motion moved in the other place just a few months ago. That is now under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And today, I am going to speak to the last part, which is digitization of the Ministry.

You see, Mr. Vice-President, you have to understand that when you are dealing with the agricultural sector, at this current particular point in time, where we are, it is starting to diverge. You have traditional farming done predominantly by those that have been in the sector for a number of years and you would find that the average age of those who are engaging in that is between 50 to 70. Then, you have the younger ones that want to get into the sector, but they cannot enter it in the traditional manner, because of its certain issues for example, like land tenure, but they are not discouraged, so they decided to enter the sector in a more technological way.

And so, as the Ministry goes forward, you need to be able to cater for those two groups. And one of the first things that we did, to ensure that continues in the developmental programme and I would just read it out Mr. Vice-President; that we decided to continue the smart agriculture programmes incorporating artificial intelligence that would speak specifically to the young people in the agricultural sector that is predominantly technological in nature.

So, it means that if it is that you are not growing on 50, 100, 10 acres of land, but you are utilizing a 40-foot container, and you are thinking, and you are going on YouTube and you are looking how to set up the light to grow your plants and you are looking how to create an app, so that you could sit down in the job, which is your main job, and watch your plants grow if you want, and that is where you want to enter the sector; the Ministry would be able to receive you and assist you under this developmental programme.

6.30 p.m.

But like I said, we did not end there, because we continued under another line Item called Promoting New and Emerging Technologies to the Agriculture Sector. And that is for the older farmers who may not be technologically savvy but still want to incorporate some level of technology into their farms, because we are in 2022, and we are moving towards a more digital world. And that is how we are dealing with those two categories of farmers in Trinidad and Tobago right now but we did not end there. Because at the end of the day the Ministry has to be able to receive these individuals.

And so, what the Ministry is engaging in right now from a digital—digitalization stand point, sorry, and you heard the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries speak to it in terms of the web portal that we are creating. And we are speaking to the various units in the Ministry right now to create what I call, a “know-your-farmer initiative” properly titled the Farmer Registration and Data Management System which we are revamping, so that no matter where you enter into the sector, whether you young, whether you are middle aged, or whether you are a little older, that we want to know everything about you so that we can know how best to serve you in keeping with the mantra that the Ministry of Agriculture,

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Land and Fisheries has laid out. So we would know what soil type you have, we would know what you have grown. We would know your cultivation levels. We would know what type of extension services you need. We will know what incentives to give you, and the best part of it all is that you can apply for all of this from the comfort of your house. [*Device goes off*] That is where the Ministry is moving.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: That is where the Ministry is moving. I have heard the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark, the phone was enough disturbance, yes.

Sen. Mark: Sorry.

Mr. Vice-President: Continue.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Thank you Mr. Vice-President. I have heard the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries lament about his farmers badge over and over again. And he said it today in his contribution too, that we work as a team in that Ministry, and immediately under the digitization programme, I looked into how we can upgrade that same farmers badge to make it easier for the farmers of this country to access, and to tie all of these things together.

And whereas the Farmer Registration and Data Management System speaks to ensuring we get all of the information, to ensuring that the work flow management systems in the Ministry are all digitized. We do not want to leave out the third pillar, which is monitoring and enforcement. And the three Ministers in the Ministry have already sat down and discussed as to how we can beef up the monitoring and enforcement in relation to agriculture in this country, whether it is

praedial larceny, or whether it is looking to see how the land itself is managed in Trinidad and Tobago. And one of the ideas that we have come up with, in understanding that the monitoring of land in this country, and the monitoring of farmers and the cultivation levels and what is going on is still predominantly two-dimensional. You still need a vehicle to go out there. You still need to walk the land, which quite frankly is very prohibitive if it is you need to go and monitor 100 acres of land. And so, one of the first things that we are going to be doing in this fiscal year is to implement a drone unit.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. N. de Freitas: Simple device. That certain trained individuals in the Ministry will be able to use to better execute their jobs in terms of monitoring farmers, whether it is praedial larceny and protection of their livestock. You heard the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries speak to what happens when it is you raise an animal from small to large and somebody comes and steals that animal. I do not know anybody that has the heart, and he is absolutely correct in what he said, to continue on in the livestock industry after becoming a victim of praedial larceny in that manner. And if it is that we can do the simple things in terms of getting drones for these individual to be able to faster and better and quickly monitor these farms, then it is a simple thing to do. And it is something that we are definitely going to get done. Because as the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has indicated, we are committed to the farmers in this country.

And I have not yet been able to sit with them because we entered the budget cycle before I could have a meeting with them in relation to what I am about to say next. But at the last appreciation function that the Ministry had which the Minister

of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries attended with myself, I was able to speak to a young female farmer. I really wished I got her name but I did not. But what she said to me resonated with me to the point where it is still stuck with me, and she came up to me and she asked me, what incentives and initiatives does the Ministry have for women in farming? And I looked at her, stumped, because when you really think about it, the incentives and the programmes and the incentives that we have are for all farmers whether you are female or you are male. But the fact is that for me at least, I would like to find out what are the issues that female farmers would have predominantly in terms of operating in the sector, and is there anything that the Ministry can do to alleviate these issues?

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

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. And I am confident that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and myself can sit down and take a look at that particular issue to assist the female farmers in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. N. de Freitas: So Mr. Vice-President, I have put forward some of the initiatives that we want to treat with. I have put forward the plans for the future in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. I have reiterated many times that along with my colleagues working as a team, the agriculture sector itself will go through a transition in this country to the betterment of all.

And so I want to close off by pulling it all together to say this to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the situation that we have found ourselves in is one that is precarious, we know that. We understand how far we have come. We understand the fatigue as Sen. Richards spoke to, that is now setting in. And the best way that

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I can explain it is that we are at the bottom of a mountain of hardship, and we begin our journey with resolve, resilience, and faith, and after a long arduous climb we have gotten to the top. And whilst we are at the top we have to stand our ground, we have to plant our feet because we are not yet over the hill, and as Sen. Deonarine rightly stated, the slightest breeze can put us back right where we started.

And so at this point in time, we have to be extremely cautious as to how we move forward, because under this Government, under this Minister of Finance, under this Prime Minister, we will make it over the hill towards the land of prosperity and economic sustainability. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you.

Mr. Vice-President: Leader of Government Business.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Mr. Vice-President, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday October 14, 2022, at which time we will continue this—

Mr. Vice-President: Time?

Sen. The Hon. A. Browne: At 10.00 a.m., at which time we will continue the debate on the Appropriation Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.41 p.m.