

SENATE*Friday, October 14, 2022*

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2023) BILL, 2022**

[Third Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 13, 2022]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, thus far, there have been 23 contributions to the debate, including that of the mover of the Motion. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell): Thank you very much, Madam President. And I thank you for recognizing me to contribute to this my eighth budget contribution, five in the other place, and my third in this honourable House.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: But I have to tell you, Madam President, and you may not believe it, but this year I had absolutely no intention of being combative at all in this debate, especially coming out of a pandemic. 2023—fiscal year 2023 is incredibly important for the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts with respect to getting people back into employment and back into jobs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: But more than that, Madam President, the Opposition

simply has absolutely nothing to add in this year's budget debate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And even Sen. Mark, over the crosstalk, was wondering why I had been so quiet, why I had not been raising Standing Orders in this budget debate, and it is simply because there is absolutely nothing to object to. They have contributed absolutely nothing to this budget debate. And we have seen that, Madam President, in the debate in the House of Representatives. I have cut my teeth in the House of Representatives. And in the House of Representatives, with this UNC Opposition, here is how it goes. The Minister of Finance moves his budget—he produces his budget presentation and it is generally accepted, especially by the right-thinking people of Trinidad and Tobago. We wait until the response from the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Opposition, while we have to listen to the Leader of the Opposition, the Leader of the Opposition generally offers nothing but recycled rhetoric.

So, what we have learned in the House of Representatives is that you really generally have to listen to one person, the one person who is the strongest speaker on the Opposition Bench, the Member for Oropouche East. And when you listen to the Member for Oropouche East in the budget debate and you hear absolutely nothing of substance, no “buss mark”, no allegation of corruption, nothing at all that he could put to the stain of this Government—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:—then you know that the Opposition has lost the plot. Not one headline, not one headline. If you take, Madam President, everything that the Opposition had to say in this budget, everything that the Opposition had to object to, it comes down to one thing. Over the last two years, the Government

could not effectively spread the resources across all the sectors of Trinidad and Tobago. But, of course, the right-thinking people in Trinidad and Tobago understand that we have just gone through and are now coming out of a COVID-19 pandemic that has brutalized and affected the world, far less Trinidad and Tobago, and that the majority of the resources had to go to saving lives and livelihoods.

So, there are some potholes and there are some things that have to be fixed, and those will be addressed in fiscal year 2023, and we are prepared to do that. But that is all the Opposition's arguments come down to. But the right-thinking people of Trinidad and Tobago know and understand that the bulk of the resources—people are not working, people need sustenance, you need medical supplies for the healthcare sector, most of the money, most of the resources had to be put into the health sector. The right-thinking people understand that. So, we know that the Opposition, UNC, has lost it had plot.

So Madam President, I did not come here to be combative, to talk about them but, of course, it would be remiss of me not to make a few comments.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Lyder: Careful.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: I heard “meh” name call during the contribution from Sen. Nakhid. And, Madam President, I have to say that the contribution came across with great emotional instability. I have to say that on this side of the House, we have some outstanding practitioners of the Muslim faith.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: So, through you, to Sen. Nakhid, we understand the sensitivities of the Muslim faith, but it is not the PNM's fault that the United National Congress was kicked out of Rienzi Complex.

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: It is not the PNM's fault that you found yourself upstairs a grocery in Central and it is certainly not the PNM's fault that the headquarters for the United National Congress is upstairs a rum shop.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: But if it offends the hon. Senator, we will describe it as a restaurant and bar.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And if the hon. Senator objects to the word "rum", we will describe it as liquid elixirs that contain propanol and ethanol—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:—that regularly, when consumed, can cause one to become inebriated. It is not our fault.

Sen. Mark: "Buh you does drink beer?"

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: The hon. Senator went down a vitriolic diatribe and notwithstanding his claims at credibility, he said he reads Nietzsche and all of that, he demonstrated that he knew absolutely nothing about how the macro-economy works. So, he complained that Sen. Vieira's comments seemed elitist, but anywhere you look—and I am extremely proud of Trinidad and Tobago—any student seeking to do research, anybody embarking upon a business plan, you do a PESTLE analysis. And one of the things that is most outstanding about Trinidad and Tobago is the stability of the political environment, the stability of the economic environment, the stability of its institutions.

But with great misunderstanding of how the macro-economy works, the Senator sought to make reference to some situation that he went to the bank and he

could not get foreign exchange. Of course, within the story, very confusingly, he said that the people in the bank called him and gave him 24 hours to come and get his allotment. So, it means that it was available to him but he is confusing, in a small island developing State, an imbalance in the balance of payments with general stability of the political environment and the economic environment.

We are extremely proud of Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago has far outperformed and outshined, not just right here in the region, but worldwide, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. And on that side, all they try to do is to castigate and “bad talk” mother Trinidad and Tobago. That is all they try to do.

Sen. Roberts spoke—not Sen. Roberts, I am sorry. Sen. Nakhid, the hon. Sen. Nakhid spoke about a calypso, spoke about the Mighty Shadow. Madam President, when the hon. Senator was speaking, Sen. Nakhid, a calypso came to my mind one by David Rudder. The name slips me a little bit but I know within there he sings, “Vote for we and we go set you free”—“Madman’s Rant”. That is what came to mind.

Then he went on to say that the Prime Minister is being investigated for something or the other. Of course, what he would not say is that every single day he has been writing the Commissioner of Police, harassing the Commissioner of Police, engaging in something that I could only describe as pestilential. So, the Commissioner of Police say, “All right, all right, all right, all right, all right, go ahead, go ahead, go ahead, go ahead. Just call him and question him,” not understanding the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, not understanding the powers of the Prime Minister, the powers of the head of state in the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago.

And that brings me back to Sen. Mark. Sen. Mark, I saw it as envious

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petulance, kept talking about Balisier House and referring to Balisier House as this tower of Babylon. Of course, empty rhetoric. It is no tower of Babylon, through you, Madam President, to Sen. Mark. It is a tower of strength.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: It is a tower of intellectual capacity and prowess. It is a tower of moral rectitude.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And when you, as a Member of the United National Congress, you go there and you stand in its shadow, you must think to yourself—

Hon. Senator: And wonder where the money came from.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:—think to yourself, why does the United National Congress not even have “ah” home.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Sen. Jearlean John, as we touch on the matter of intellectual capacity, Sen. Jearlean John, of course, it is all popular politics and popular rhetoric, sought to argue that with regard to these inflationary pressures, all of it coming from external forces, with regard to the inflationary pressures, with regard to the rises in the cost of living, Sen. John’s bright idea was to raise the minimum wage to \$20. A Sixth Form student of economics knows, they know about inflationary spirals. But even more basic than that, your policy is to increase the money supply where there are already inflationary pressures. Where there is a lot of money chasing behind a limited number of goods, your policy is to increase the money supply. It sounds good to the person who wants a little raise in the minimum wage; it sounds good. But, of course, what we all know, the educated ones on this side, is if you increase the money supply, you give a raise, then the

inflation is going to get out of control, more and more out of control, and it is only going to cause more and more hardship onto the people of Trinidad and Tobago. How could that be your policy position? But, Madam President, that is all the attention I would will pay to the Opposition. We have very serious business to do Sen. Mark; very, very serious business to do in fiscal 2023.

And, Madam President, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, and all the agencies under its remit and responsibility, we have been working diligently over the last two years and we will continue working for the stakeholder as things normalize to ensure that everybody goes back to earning and goes back to jobs. That is our mandate. Very simply. We have been fighting very hard. So, naturally or focus in 2023 is on ensuring that every single activity that the Ministry undertakes will impact the lives and livelihoods of all of our stakeholders, whether the initiatives are in the accommodation sector, the creative sector, the tourism transportation sector, the sporting tourism sector, the cruise sector, every single place, we must extract value.

So, Madam President, we start with airlift. And I could report on airlift. In the last budget presentation, I was able to report that, together with the Airports Authority, we had opened a new route and we had gotten the flight, a new flight, KLM had returned to these shores over the last—for about 20 years. They returned to these shores and we have a flight to Amsterdam. That was supposed to be a winter flight when I had announced it in the last budget, but I can happily report, Madam President, that it has been extended all year round and that flight has outperformed all expectations and flies with 75 per cent load capacity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And they continue to bring a number of visitors here

from Europe. We have seen visitors from Mumbai, from Delhi, because Amsterdam, where it flies from, is a major, major hub. And we will continue to ensure that that route is sustainable and we will continue to market, we will continue to meet the executives, we will continue to meet some of the tour operators in Amsterdam and in Europe to ensure that that route is sustainable for the long term.

Notwithstanding the disruptions that a number of airlines in the industry—of course, the travel and tourism industry being the hardest hit in this pandemic—but not notwithstanding those disruptions, quite a number of airlines have returned, I can report, to flying in to Trinidad and Tobago. British Airways, they have returned from Gatwick and they fly into Trinidad, they fly into Tobago and from next year, I believe from second quarter next year, they would fly directly to Trinidad not stopping in St. Lucia. So that as well is good news.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: American Airlines, United, Copa, JetBlue, Air Canada, they have all continued their flights from the major source markets into Trinidad. And we are extremely—Trinidad and Tobago—and we are extremely happy about that.

And I could report here—of course, I will speak, you know—we hope that it comes to fruition, but we also have reports that another airline will be flying from Toronto into Trinidad. So, we will be able to report, hopefully, fingers crossed, in short order that we will win another airline, another carrier into Trinidad and Tobago. And we continue to work—of course, Caribbean Airlines has been kept whole throughout the pandemic and Caribbean Airlines as well is getting back up to their 100 per cent operational capacity. We are very proud of our national

carrier and Caribbean Airlines as well has started flying.

So, the Airports Authority, Madam President, along with Tourism Trinidad Limited, will continue to speak to airline executives. We will continue to visit the conferences to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago—we work as well with the Tobago Tourism Agency, to ensure that we can attract airlift into Trinidad and Tobago in 2023 and in the years to come as airlines get back up to 100 per cent capacity.

With respect to Piarco—and I have to pay my commendation here to the Minister of Works and Transport. Now, Sen. Paul Richards made a point yesterday that PTSC absolutely needs some addressing. There are some deficiencies there that need to be corrected. I am sure the Minister of Works and Transport is very focused on that. But I have to commend him because the Piarco International Airport has once again been voted as the best airport in the Caribbean.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And the third best in Central America and the Caribbean.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: So, notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruptions, the Ministry of Works and Transport, the Airports Authority have maintained the operations and it can once again be voted as the best in the Caribbean.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: You know, the sub judice rule prevents me from talking about the Piarco Airport case. But I will stop there. Madam President,

with respect to visitor arrivals, visitor arrivals have been slowly but steadily returning to pre-pandemic levels. And we have been increasing month on month since the reopening of the borders and since January'22, and it is projected that we will end—when considering the 2019 figures, we will experience 65 per cent of those figures. So, we are getting there and we are seeing a number of advanced pre-bookings, especially for the carnival season, especially for the Christmas seasons. We are seeing advanced bookings with respect to flights and with respect to hotels. So, we are getting back up there with respect to our arrival figures.

With respect to our occupancy rates for 2022, we have also been slowly returning, steadily returning to the pre-pandemic levels of around 65 to 75 per cent for Trinidad and Tobago. At present, there are around 45 per cent. So, we are getting up there, pre-pandemic levels being 70 per cent occupancy levels. We are getting back up there and we expect that to drastically increase in December 2022 and in January and February of 2023.

And only today, Madam President, in scanning the newspapers, we see in Tobago because of the festival, because of the Tobago Carnival, the Tobago hoteliers and accommodation providers are reporting full occupancy and full capacity. And we support the THA; we support the THA. We have supported the THA in making the announcement, in making the move, and we have supported the THA throughout. And I commend the THA, I commend the Secretary for Tourism, Culture, Antiquities and Transportation, Tashia Burris. And we commend the Chief Secretary, Farley Augustine, for making this move. Tobago will understand the power of festivals with respect to the tourism sector and we hope that they can only build upon this Tobago Carnival. We wish them all the success and we hope they can only build upon it, and that the Tobago hoteliers will

continue to see full occupancy rates.

Madam President, Sen. Nakhid spoke about sporting events and that the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development only gave two lines about sporting tourism and so on. So, I could report on sporting events today. We are not sitting back and simply waiting for the arrival figures, and the occupancy level, and the tourism numbers to return to pre-pandemic level. We are actively working at winning sporting activities, sporting tourism activities here in Trinidad and Tobago. And we have been working, through Tourism Trinidad Limited and SPORTT, we have been working to win a number of these major events.

Of course, we have the Brian Lara Cricket Academy, world class. We also have the Aquatic Centre, the National Cycling Velodrome, the Queen's Park Oval, and, of course, Madam President, happy to announce, we also have the newest, the newest to emerge the first class sporting facility in Diego Martin, the Diego Martin Sporting Complex.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And we continue to the use these sporting facilities to build, to build our sport tourism product. We understand the economic impact of sporting tourism. We understand that tourism is labour intensive. The tourism sector is labour intensive, and tourism arrivals, the subsequent visitor spend, that money gets into the pockets of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. That foreign exchange that we receive is what the bank will use to provide Sen. Nakhid with his allotment when he goes to the bank.

So, Madam President, in 2022, even while we were still observing the strict public health restrictions, we were able to safely host the leg of the ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup. So, approximately 11 teams were here, there were

approximately 16 matches. And when you think about that, you think about the economic impact that something like that, a tournament like that would have, we had expected close to about 1,000 people when considering the sporting teams, their families, when you consider the camera crews, and all these persons who have arrived here for these games, it is about \$1,000. And every one of those persons would be responsible for some part of visitor spend, whether it be US \$400, US \$500, so we think of those things in economic impact. The taxi drivers would have received work. The hotels would have received, you know, their room fees and, of course, Government would have received the room taxes, the same taxes that would have gone back into the healthcare system.

So, we successfully hosted the Under-19 Cricket World Cup. It came off successfully and, of course, the ICC approved, what I just mentioned, the Diego Martin Sporting Complex as one of the venues to host the international cricket competition.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Cricketing games were held there in the Diego Martin Sporting Complex.

Madam President, we also hosted the PanAm Age Group Swimming Championships here in Trinidad and Tobago. In June, I believe it was over four days, approximately 400 athletes; 400 athletes, their parents and all the accompanying persons would have come here where we hosted the PanAm Games. You have Google, look it up. The PanAm Games Age Group Swimming Championships held right here this year. You probably did not read papers during that period but it was here. And the economic impact, again, with respect to hotel rooms, with respect to the taxi services and all the other services that went into

tourism, we had that here.

10.30 a.m.

Also, Madam President, the West Indies vs. India tour we had four games here, it was well attended—it was well attended. Madam President, we also, of course, had the CPL. The CPL extremely successful, extremely vibrant, we hosted some preliminary games here—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:—well attended, people from all over Trinidad came up and we had visitors here. We had a number of visitors here coming, the games were electrifying. And we have shown once again that Trinidad and Tobago—we did not get to the finals this year but Trinidad and Tobago is the premier destination for the CPL, there is no more exciting games anywhere else in the region but in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: So, Madam President going forward, we will continue to work with SportTT through Tourism Trinidad Limited, we will continue to work with the national governing bodies to market Trinidad and Tobago as a sporting destination, where we can have—we can win and attract the international sporting events here. We will continue to work with them, we will continue to market our venues, we will continue to market the events and we will continue to develop a very, very strong sporting tourism calendar. And in 2023, Madam President, apart from the CPL which we expect to host in August, we expect to host the Commonwealth Youth Games in August of 2023.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And together with the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, we will prepare to host that—now that sporting tourism. If Sen. Nakhid has Google he can go and check what sporting tourism is. That is sporting tourism. Of course, sporting tourism is also attracting teams down here to train and we are also working on that—we are also working on that. But the larger events are what you will extract the most amount of value from. The larger events like CPL, like the Pan Am Swimming Championships, we have the Pan Am Masters Championships next year as well, Madam President. The larger events are what you will attract most of the value from—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:—the CPL, yes, we will go to universities and invite them down here to come and train in warm weather and they could go and take a dip in the beach. Of course, we will do that. That is Sport and Tourism as well.

Hon. Senator: Commonwealth Games [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Madam President, we in the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts over the last two years, we saw and we understood how difficult those years were on the creative sector and on the creatives. And we have worked with, we have consulted with them, we have looked at the science, we have looked at the infection rates, we have looked at the vaccination numbers, and we continued to advocate for the return of the entertainment sector, the cultural sector. And in January—in December and January, December 2021, January 2022, we had several deep consultations and we came up with a proposal and we advocated and Government gave the approval to host the “Taste of Carnival”. And Madam

President, the “Taste of Carnival”, with a \$20 million injection, was extremely successful, extremely successful.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: You see, those there who do not understand what sporting tourism is, and those there who do not understand the festival tourism or the festival sector, expected that Government would make some sort of profit; it was not about profit. It was about injecting some stimulus, having some safe zone-type events having a return to events and allowing the persons who are involved in the event sector, from the artists, the musicians, the persons who provide stage, the persons who provided security, the persons who provided janitorial cleaning, marketing, everybody could have gotten back into that events economy and begun to earn a little bit and it was extremely successful. And the doomsday sayers, the doomsday predictors on that side, felt as though—well, the infection rate will explode. What are you doing? You are going to kill us, and it did not happen. It was held safely, the infection rates did not spike. And as a matter of fact, Madam President, the safe zone Carnival was such a success and such a studied event that that was what had motivated the health officials to take a closer look and to begin to ease the restrictions. And that is what it did. It was extremely successful. And we will continue to fight for them as the creatives and persons involved in the event sector come out of the COVID-19 pandemic, come out of that very disruptive period and they returned to normal work and they have been doing extremely well—they have been doing extremely well.

Our creatives have been flying the flag abroad to all the different carnivals and people are preparing, from all the indications Madam President, Carnival 2023, is almost sold out. People cannot wait to get back and it is really not getting

back into the wine and jam or as Sen. Nakhid describes it, as he castigates it, as “the stink and dutty”, it is an entire economy of people, who can create, who can earn money from this creative sector. This is our lifeblood, this is our culture.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And we will return to that in 2023. The airlines are already, as I said before, describing advanced bookings. They are almost booked out. So, Madam President, I will not apologize you know. There are people outside of there, a lot of them on that side, saying the Minister only like Carnival—the Minister only like Carnival, but Carnival is our biggest tourism festival. Carnival is what brings \$350 million into this economy.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Thank you very much. So we will continue doing that. Madam President, I think I really spent a little too much time on the Opposition, because I have so much more to say but let me move quickly along.

The hotel sector, Madam President. We have focused on incentivizing capital investment into the accommodation sector. We have done that because we understand what the accommodation sector means to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago—I know Sen. Lyder will get up and say a lot of things, but it has a lot to do with the creation of jobs during the construction phase of these accommodation projects and during the operational phase—during the construction phase, at least 100 jobs are created and during the operational phase depending on the size on average 100 jobs are created. But if you look at the supply chain, the spin-off of the accommodation sector, you have manufacturing the people who give the cleaning chemicals, the people who provide the food. You have the farmers, the people who provide the eggs and the foodstuffs for these hotels, you have the taxi

drivers, the tour operators, the—so, Madam President, over last year, the last fiscal year, we were happy to see the opening as Government had supported, the Brix Hotel, 159 rooms in Port of Spain, Trinidad and in Tobago, the opening of the Comfort Inn Suites, a 74 room hotel. Madam President, 300 persons were employed and over 200 persons will be employed during the operational phase. The Radisson Blu, Madam President, is still under construction and we expect that in the second quarter of the next fiscal year.

Madam President, I am happy to report—we would soon be doing the sod turning for another hotel \$159 million investment at the Sheraton at Piarco. The Asa Wright accommodation property, just received a \$10 million investment, they are doing refurbishments and renovations are right now.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: The Maracas Bay Hotel has just been purchased and they are soon to a sod turning for a major redevelopment of the Maracas Bay Hotel, \$35 million investment, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: This redounds to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. It means jobs, it means employment, it means increased productivity. That is what it means. In Tobago, we have the Marriott Hotel, a 200 room hotel, \$500 million capital investment: in Argyle, Tobago, we have another, Madam President.

So Madam President, things are bright for fiscal 2023. We have no time to waste on the Opposition because we have work to do.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: We have to get down to work in causing employment, in causing jobs and in causing people to get some money in the

pockets—in their pockets coming out of a COVID-19 pandemic with massive lockdowns.

So, Madam President, let me just take 10 seconds to announce—the Ministry also, in recognizing that people were in need of jobs, entered into an MOU with Royal Caribbean and ensured that people were able to access jobs—well-paying jobs on cruise ships and, Madam President, I am very, very happy to announce that close to 1,000 people have already received assignments onto the cruise ships and the minimum pay is about US\$850, Madam President. So I am very, very happy to announce that and we will continue until we reach the 2,000 figure. Madam President, I know you are looking at me, and I thank you for giving me this opportunity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Lyder.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Damian Lyder: Thank you, Madam President, and Madam President, thank you for this opportunity in recognizing me to join in this debate to contribute to the Appropriation Bill for fiscal 2023. And let me start off firstly, Madam President, by congratulating the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Leader of the Opposition, for her stellar response to what is a wicked budget, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: I wish to also congratulate my colleagues on the Senate Bench, on my side for all their contributions. And Madam President, after listening to the Minister of Finance, and those on the other side who are trying to defend the indefensible here today, let me say unequivocally that this country through this visionless and insensitive budget has now been plunged over the edge. They are

not standing on the edge, they are over the edge, over into the precipice and crashing to the ground, Madam President.

This is a Government that comes to a nation in blatant disrespect, in replying and responding to the public outcry regarding the measures in this budget. And the disconnect from the suffering of the masses was so palpable, that we now hear senior Government Ministers making statements to citizens that can only be deemed as disrespectful, Madam President. And it is within this context and with a very heavy heart that I respond to this budget yesterday. And in listening to the Members on the Government Bench in their contributions in this Senate, and in a futile attempt to defend this wicked budget, a wicked anti-people budget, of what was presented here by them today is nothing more—and for the last two days is nothing more than political rhetoric to try to defend themselves. It amounts to political and political immaturity in their defense. The delivery from the Government side, displayed complete and utter disconnection with the concerns of citizens in this nation, and to the real issues impacting the quality of their lives, and their livelihoods. And it is because of this level of hubris, Madam President, that I refuse to rebut them today, I will not give them that level of dignity today. I will not respond to the emperors on that side that wear no clothing, Madam President, I will not respond to them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: The response from most sectors, however, and the populace is that this budget does not bode well for the economy. One popular response that stands out to me Madam President, is coming from this lady Diane Hadad, a very well respected business lady in Tobago, and it is Diane Hadad, that said that this was a lousy, a wicked, and an evil budget Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: Even—Madam President, even the now embattled Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, Faris Al-Rawi, on that same TV6 programme, when they stormed that programme by Fazeer Mohammed—he indeed said and confirmed that the budget will cause discomfort for the people. I hope you all heard that. Madam President, and in addition, I wish to quote from a Curtis Williams article in *The Guardian* Newspaper of Thursday, the 6th of October, 2022, and this was only a couple of days after the budget presentation, Madam President, and I quote:

“If there is anything we learnt over the last week and a half of the Budget debate, it is how arrogance and hubris can damage any government’s messaging and the extent to which the Keith Rowley administration has lost touch with the ordinary citizens and is now in need of someone to follow them around and whisper in their ears, ‘You’re just a man. You’re just a man.’”

And this is why we say on this Bench that this Government is disrespectful, this Government is disconnected, and this Government has lost touch with the average citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: When citizens are crying out from these draconian measures, in the budget, what is the Government tells them?

Everybody wants everything for nothing.

Disrespect to the citizens. When persons have lost their jobs and struggle to afford the basics, what they tell them:

Ride a bicycle, go back to the coal pot.

Disrespect, I say. And when Ministers come and say to stop eating macaroni, the cheapest form of food, disrespect to the highest order.

And who could forget when a Minister came and said it was not his job to make you feel safe? Well, that was high class disrespect, Madam President.

Madam President, we knew the UNC will not stand idly by and allow this disrespectful PNM to run roughshod over the citizens.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: The United National Congress is a people-centered party and we have respect for the average citizen, the everyday man, which this Government has gone against.

Madam President, when I woke up in the morning of Wednesday, the 5th of October and read the *Newsday* article by Andrew Gioannetti, on the Minister of Labour, the article was headline as follows:

McClashie,—and I quote—“It’s not my job to give you a job.”

This is the Minister of Labour, you know. So I, I felt it had to be a misprint, Madam President. The question follows—well, then whose job is it to help create jobs?—and I put it to him, I will correct him. That it is not his job alone, to create jobs but it is the job of every single Member on that Government side, to create the opportunity and the landscape for jobs to be created. It is your job to do so.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: And in layman terms, the Minister of Labour basically threw his Cabinet under the bus, you know, Madam President, because he went on to say that:

“To create jobs...”—the Government has to do an all Government approach, specifically—“Government policies”—need to be there—“legislation, the

execution of fiscal incentives and plans in...education”—and—“training, business expansion, direct investment, job placement, productivity...(digitization) and national security.”

All of which we know they have failed at, and therefore, this Minister has indicted them of their failure.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: And no wonder, Madam President, that the Minister of Labour’s own constituency, there were protest this week when the Minister of Labour, who is also the MP who is there, responded to a Guardian newspaper, where he said:

There is not a whole lot of work going on, you know.

An admission of complete failure.

So Madam President, so to set the foundation of my contribution in this budget debate it is important to assess where we are as an economy. I must state that I listened to the Minister of Finance intently during the presentation of the budget, as well as the subsequent media reports. And the most striking thing that comes out in the Minister of Finance is that he seems to have presented some alternative facts on the state of the economy. And we all know we cannot—we are not entitled to our own facts. My colleagues present know that when it comes to the state of economy, the first and most significant measure in assessing economic performance for the year is real GDP, Madam President. So, the Minister of Finance presented what was the most ridiculous assertion by stating that the economy, in 2022, has reached the highest per capita GDP since independence, of course, citing nominal GDP. But the facts speak differently Madam President. The fact is that real GDP has declined by \$36 billion from 2015 when this Government came into power, to 2021. Real GDP fell from 185.69 billion in 2015

down to 149.6 billion by 2021. And this, Madam President, is according to the Central Statistical Office eh, right? So, far from being the highest GDP since independence, it is the worst GDP of the last 12 years. In fact, Madam President, according to data from the IMF, when it concerns economic growth, Trinidad and Tobago's economy was such that it was the ninth worst in the world from the period between 2016 and 2021. So, let me submit that there is no economist in mankind, who will support the Minister's outlandish claims about growth using nominal GDP.

Madam President, on the question of fiscal deficits, the Minister of Finance made the claim that the Government has stabilized the fiscal balance, however, Madam President, this statement cannot be any further from the truth. The reality is that the extra revenue this fiscal came by virtue of a war in Ukraine—"all yuh must thank Putin for that". And they still did not manage to balance the economy, Madam President—balance the budget.

The Government has accumulated \$59 billion in deficits in seven years in office. This equates Madam President, to an average of about 8.5 billion per annum in deficits. A very stark contrast for when the United National Congress was in power, where we had an average of \$3 billion budget deficit. So, therefore, the PNM Government has actually presided over the highest recorded budget deficit in recent time. I know Sen. Hislop spoke about record lows. I am just explaining to Sen. Hislop, what the record is—the highest budget deficits, since we are an independent nation. So, there is no position to make the claim that they have stabilized the fiscal balance, and of course, manifested fiscal deficits fueled—continue to be fueled by significant borrowing, massive borrowing carrying our debt to levels up to 127 billion and increase of 45 billion in just six years, between

2015 and 2021. And these are just a few of the inaccuracies, eh. But if we are to believe the Minister of Finance, that all is well in this economy, then we should not be surprised today—or we should actually be surprised today, when we see draconian taxes, the removal of fuel subsidies. They even pressured the old people, the elderly. They have to pay now to go in between Tobago and Trinidad, Sen. Hislop. And of course, the punitive fiscal measures contained in this red book of fairy tales that I have been reading from.

Madam President, you listened to a Minister of Finance speak about revenue, about the \$8.3 billion courtesy a war on Ukraine, added revenue, painting the picture that things are okay, even though we have heard from many Senators here today, now, when that war stops, we will see the oil price and the gas price reduce. But why do we see punitive measures today? Why do we see such draconian taxes? But what do we see? We saw a Government that instead of putting incentives in place for the middle-income and low-income, we see our Government bringing property tax as a burden to further inflict pain on the citizens of this country. What the Minister tells you, Madam President, what the Minister tells you is that in the same budget statement, is that the tax on commercial and industrial properties will not be implemented at this time, at some time in the future—if that time ever comes. But what this Government does not seem to understand is dotted through the landscape of the 14 regional corporations, towns and villages, are commercial and industrial properties that coexist with residential properties. And we know that these commercial and industrial properties contribute towards the wear and tear of the infrastructure as well as a contribution towards pollution in the environment in these communities. Yet you are only asking the already heavily taxed households to contribute towards development

and maintenance, while big industry gets away scotch free, once again, proving the PNM's ideology that the rich will get richer, while the average citizens suffer under mounted taxes in silence, Madam President.

You know, it was a debate earlier this year in a local government reform Bill, that the Government indicated that 100 per cent of the property tax collected from residential properties shall be allocated to the 14 regional corporations in which they exist. And I scoured through the Bill Madam President, when I was nearing completion, and I saw where it states and I quote:

Clause 10 of the Bill would seek to amend the Property Tax Act, Chap. 76:04. New subsection 3 would provide that the Minister of Finance may, by Order, declare if agriculture, industrial, commercial taxes may be collected by the Municipal Corporation and what percentage may be retained.

Now, Madam President, by this legislation the Minister of Finance, a politician, a Member of the executive arm of the State, can decide at his whim and fancy what percentage would be distributed to the corporation in which these entities exist, and which portion will go towards the Consolidated Fund. Madam President, it opens up the door for the possibility, and I make no aspersions on any Minister of Finance, but it opens up the possibility of political victimization. And I say this because any Minister of Finance could now come and decide that corporations that do not fall under the control of his political party may only get 20 per cent and then corporations that fall under his PNM party may get 80 per cent, Madam President.

And then, of course, I just want to correct for the record, Sen. Ibrahim, is, you know, he is a well-respected medical professional. But unfortunately, he may be following some misleading comments from his colleagues when it comes to

property tax. Because Madam President, a basic scrutiny of the Estimates of Revenue will show that the property tax is only anticipated to generate \$50 million in fiscal year 2023, and not the 300 million, as the goodly Senator mentioned. Madam President, this \$50 million will amount about three—roughly about 3 per cent of the local Government budget, that the body spend, therefore, 3 per cent cannot be sufficient to account to really be supporting local Government bodies, yet this 3 per cent will bring pain and hardship to the households that are being called to pay on it now, Madam President, And this is why we say when a Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the United National Congress takes back the reins of power it is in the not-too-distant future, we will be removing that dreaded property tax.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: Madam President, I would now like to take the opportunity to move on my focus to trade and industry development. Madam President, in listening to the Minister of Trade and Industry, again, attempting to defend the indefensible, I noted one of the things that she said in another place while I was looking at her on television, with regard to the Government that she stated, and I quote:

We will “...work with...stakeholders to create an enabling environment...”

The Minister went further to state:

We will continue “...to implement and to advance our trade policies, and the nation’s national development strategy at full pace and the success of these initiatives and programmes implemented by the Government overall is demonstrated in the positive performance on the non-energy side, in particular, of the economy.”

Madam President, honestly, I respect the Minister, but this has to be a joke. This claim by the Minister is laughable, especially when you look to the *Guardian* Newspaper article of the 28th of September, 2022, which was headlined, and I quote:

“Amcham T&T, disappointed by lack of ‘broad transformative initiatives’ in the budget.”

So, I asked what trade policies, exactly what trade policies and what national development strategy is the Minister speaking about? Because it most certainly cannot be the policy on the ease of doing business. It certainly—it definitely cannot be the timely repayment of VAT refunds. And I think the majority of businesses in this country with the exception of a chosen few would agree that it is now impossible and is now difficult with this unequitable supply of foreign exchange across the business sector in general and SMEs in particular. And I will go further in detail later, Madam President, but the Minister of Trade and Industry is not the Minister of manufacturing alone. Let me repeat, the Minister of Trade and Industry is not the Minister of manufacturing alone. Therefore, let us look at the performance and other key non-energy sectors from 2015 to date. So, in terms of real GDP, as reported by Appendix I, of the Review of the Economy of the Ministry of Finance—mining and quarrying, a major sector declined by 10.76 billion from 2015 to 2020, and a decline of 6.6 billion pre-pandemic from 2015 to 2019.

11.00 a.m.

Construction, another key sector that drives this economy, fell by 3.3 billion over seven years from 2015 to 2020, and even pre-pandemic it was down by \$1.5 billion. Financial and insurance services, another major economic sector, fell by

1.63 billion over that period, and that is just to name a few.

But as the Minister of Trade and Industry likes to zero-in on manufacturing, let us focus on this sector now. The Minister of Trade and Industry makes an idle boast on a supposed increase in manufacturing. The Minister of Finance, in the budget presentation, chose to cherry-pick certain industries that showed growth over the last year in terms of manufacturing. But let us talk about the overall manufacturing sector decline here, Madam President. Here are the facts.

In 2015, manufacturing GDP at constant 2012 prices stood at 30.9 billion and fell to 28.1 billion by 2022. Even before the pandemic, it had fallen to 29.4 billion. This means that manufacturing GDP fell by 9 per cent over the seven-year period, a total of \$2.8 billion in decline. The sector has not grown, Madam President, and it has shrunk, but no amount of cherry-picking of data will fix this. But what the Minister of Finance also did not tell you is that the sectors that they cherry-picked did not grow as a result of any gifts or policies emanating out of this Government. Rather the growth came as a result of the private sector investment. Because, Madam President, it is from the hardworking business persons in this country who continue to fight to grow business in a less than desirable conditions, Madam President.

And, it is obvious that we do not need an expert to tell us that, obviously coming out of a pandemic, when the world was shut down—I mean they like to blame the fall or the decline in the years on the pandemic, but want to take praise for growing manufacturing but, obviously, if everything was shut down and you reopen after a pandemic as the world has, you will see manufacturing increase, you will see exports increase. But the selected areas he cherry-picked grew on the backs of the private sector. And the Government must thank God that we have a

resilient private sector in this country today, because the private sector and their appetite to take risks is the only thing that is keeping this Government and this economy from complete collapse. The point is, should the private sector be operating under more favourable conditions, the Government would not have to come here today to cherry-pick. They would not be reporting a 9 per cent decline in manufacturing over the seven years of their administration, rather they would be able to report an overall manufacturing sector growth.

So what are these unfavourable conditions, I am talking about, Madam President? Conditions that not only the United National Congress, but many in the private sector are speaking about today. They are the ease of doing business, timely repayment of VAT refunds and access to US dollars. Madam President, in terms of the ease of doing business, it has continued to worsen under this PNM administration. Our last check from the World Bank, we were rated at 105 in the world in 2020 down from 79th in the world in 2015 when the People's Partnership demitted office. Everything, almost everything under the ease of doing business has declined. Starting a business, steeped in bureaucracy; getting electricity, long-winded; paying taxes, pressure; resolving insolvency, pressure; getting credit a nightmare and dealing with construction permits a headache. Oh God, and trading across borders, pull your hair out as a businessman, Madam President. And so, we do not need the World Bank rankings to know the problems that are facing the domestic business environment.

We continue to hear their cries from the business people. Businesses and many of the different chambers, many of whom we consulted with prior to this budget and earlier in the year. So when we read the comments coming from the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Commerce, when we consulted with the Couva

Chamber, the Arima Chamber, the Chaguanas Chamber and, most recently, the American Chamber of Commerce, they all agreed that the worsening of the ease of doing business was a major barrier to success.

In fact, Madam President, one of the major issues singled out by Amcham and other chambers is the port and the unnecessary delays causing businesses to incur charges such as demurrage and rent. These contribute, Madam President, to out of stock situations that fuel loss of profit to the manufacturers and importers but, most of all, Madam President, it further dries up the price of food, building materials, clothing and other basic necessities, and this inflicts further pain on an already frustrated citizenry, Madam President.

Madam President, another major issue in the ease of doing business was the unavailability of foreign exchange. With the exception of the Exim Bank initiative meant to benefit a small number of importers and a select group of importers, the Government has done little or nothing to mitigate against the difficulty and, in most cases, the impossible task of accessing foreign exchange by the private sector in this country. But, particularly, Madam President, the small and medium businesses in this economy are struggling. This major factor along with the Government's mismanagement of the economy has contributed to the estimated, by the Confederation of Regional Business Chambers, that more than 6,000 SMEs shut their doors last year and with thousands more holding on for their life. And, by extension, this has contributed to the more than 112,000 persons that are no longer contributing to the NIS. But every business owner in this country can attest to it being a nightmare to access foreign exchange to survive, Madam President. And I, as a businessman, have to open accounts with five different banking institutions just to get a supply of foreign exchange. Even that is inefficient,

Madam President.

There are many businesses that have to resort to buying foreign exchange on the black market at exorbitant prices, and this further raises the cost of food and clothing and basic necessities. And let me remind you that this also places persons at the risk of breaking the law. As we know, it is illegal to purchase foreign exchange from an unauthorized dealer and, as such, I put it to this House that the majority of business persons in this country are breaking the law just to get forex to survive.

Madam President, the Government boasts about foreign exchange through the Exim Bank and, in this year, in the Minister's speech, the Minister made a submission about Exim bank, where he stated some 136 manufacturers with 114 or 84 per cent of these manufacturers fall within the SMEs. But what he did not tell us is how much or what percentage of the US \$395 million was given to these SMEs? And it takes me back earlier this year to a Private Members' debate in March in the Senate where the Minister had presented these numbers—spoke about 82 per cent getting access from the Exim Bank—but when he read out the details of the distribution of US, we found that only 28.7 per cent actually got to the small businesses, Madam President. So the big boys getting the lion share. So, Madam President, we understand what is going on here. There is not an equitable—SMEs do not have an equitable supply of foreign exchange in this country.

And then, Madam President, VAT refunds now remain a major problem for the private sector, and this is despite the protestations and the self-praise of this Government about some \$4 billion that they have paid in VAT refunds. How much is still owing, Madam President? Is it 3 billion? Is it four? Is it two? But on September the 22nd 2022, the day after the Minister of Finance read the budget,

none other than Arthur Lok Jack complained bitterly about VAT refunds owed to his company. And the article was headlined, Madam President, and I quote: “Lok Jack slams Gov’t slow VAT refund payout”. Lok Jack stated and I quote:

“...we are paying VAT and we need to get those refunds back because, basically, we cost our export prices without VAT but we pay the VAT, We are paying VAT and we need to get those refunds back because basically we cost our export prices without VAT, but we pay the VAT.”

And, of course, Lok Jack further when on the state that:

“...this was a tremendous blow on the cash flow of manufacturers.”

And then, Madam President, he said:

“I think in my group alone, the Government has over tens of millions of dollars in VAT refunds long time now outstanding.”

And, of course, speaking on the fiscal measures in the budget, targeting manufacturers Lok Jack finally said:

“You cannot incentivise us to get into exports and then penalise us with VAT.”

That is what came from a respected businessman and a business icon in this country, Mr. Lok Jack.

And, as a potential solution, Amcham is recommending a netback or a net-off, but I do not know if the Government is prepared to listen to that. Bottom line, the Government must pay back the VAT refunds on a timely basis. This money does not belong to the Government, it belongs to the business owners. You are hurting the business owners’ liquidity, preventing them from expanding and, in the end, what does it appears? It appears as though this Government is using VAT refunds as an interest-free loan to the Government, not even paying interest back to

the business people when you are holding back their VAT. But when the UNC government returns to office, we will ensure a timely repayment of VAT refunds, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: So, Madam President, everything that the Minister of Trade and Industry and the Minister of Finance mentioned is otherwise in the budget debate, is pie in the sky. If you cannot fix the ease of doing business, if you cannot find the VAT refunds to pay back the manufacturers their money and if you cannot ensure an equitable distribution of foreign exchange to the small and medium players so that they could survive and eventually come like the big boys too—come on—then every measure in this budget is of no consequence, and it provides little support to the businesses in trade and, particularly, SMEs.

Madam President, I move on now to agriculture, and agriculture under this Government has been an absolute and colossal failure. One only has to look at the performance since they came into office to see a tale of abandonment of this sector. In 2015—and I hope all three Ministers of agriculture listening—agriculture GDP stood at \$1.47 billion. Agriculture GDP in comparison to 2015 fell by 530 million by 2021, representing a decline by 36 per cent from 2015 to 2021. So, Madam President, this Government has presided over a perennial recession in the agricultural sector. But despite the abysmal record in the agricultural sector GDP under the Government, they have taken no opportunity to make any meaningful change unless, of course, hiring a third Minister of agriculture is their bombshell strategy.

But, the three-year *Public Sector Investment Programme* between 2013 and 2025 booklet the Government included with the budget documents, it shows it is

anaemic on the sector. So when we look at what is in store for the next three years, we see just one page and a paragraph on agricultural sector output in the write-up as well as some pittance projects in the appendix that do not amount to even \$8 million for agriculture in the current fiscal period. Let me give you a few: \$1 million for the rehabilitation of cocoa industry. Is that for real? 800,000 niche products, hill rice, honey, forestry and diversification; \$1 million for local food production for strategic crops; 800,000 for farm to agro-processing and 1 million for artificial intelligence. That is a shame, Madam President. These are poor allocations, and I cry out shame on this. Madam President, the combination of all three Ministers' salaries here today is more per year than any one of these allocations, Madam President.

But under the last three years of the UNC government, we spent no less no less than \$1.3 billion a year in agriculture, but when this PNM Government, came into office, one would be shocked to see how the PNM slashed and burn \$500 million from the agriculture budget, only giving them 831 million in 2016. They then cut it further to 766 million by 2017 and, by 2018, they went to the lowest it has ever been, in recent memory, down to \$545 million Madam President. And it was in fiscal 2021 that the Government came with what would be the biggest mamaguy, which is this so-called \$500 million to support the sector that never materialized in what was called the Fiscal Incentive Programme for Farmers. This is where the Government boasted that they would be taking agriculture expenditure up to 1.198 billion in fiscal 2021, and what followed by 1.2 billion—

Sen. Mark: Madam President, on a point of order, 51(1), (e), (f) and (g) respectively.

Madam President: Members, Sen. Mark is having a lil difficulty in hearing Sen.

Lyder. I remind you that we are supposed to be silent when contributions are being made. Sen. Lyder, continue.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Madam President, this was, again, followed by 1.2 billion in 2022 and this year 1.33 billion. This is a mamaguy embedded in this figure, which is this fiscal incentive that never reached the farmers. In the first year since returning to office in fiscal 2021, instead of the 500 million, you know what they spend, Madam President? They spent a paltry \$14.97 million. This is not mamaguy, Madam President, this deception. I do not know what else to say. Then in fiscal 2022, they reduced the 500 million, though it was not even spent, they reduced it to 300 million. Then we look at the Revised Estimates in fiscal 2022, and we see a further reduction to \$225 million. That is where the question is. Where was this \$225 million spent? Because we have not seen more agricultural access roads being built, we have not seen packing houses constructed across the country. We certainly have not seen the agricultural sector GDP grow. In fact, as I outlined, Madam President, it declined by 36 per cent in real terms from 2015 to 2021. So, tell us the details to this 225 million spent.

There are three Ministers here, we want to hear from them, but what we did hear is from Minister Singh, go on a sort of a rant about: “I give 100,000 to Chaguanas and 100,000 to Couva and 100,000 to Diego Martin.” Well, I have a rant to for Minister Singh. There is praedial larceny in Sangre Grande, there is praedial larceny in Mayaro, praedial larceny in Princes Town, no access roads in Couva and no access roads in Chin Chin. It is flooding in Chaguanas, flooding in Caroni, flooding in Barrackpore, flooding in Chaguaramas and flooding in Goodwood Park, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: And why do I say flooding in Goodwood Park that might confuse some of the Members on that side, because that is where the number one farmer lives, and he has been farming a set of goats in Cabinet, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: And, Madam Speaker, let me clarify that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: It is an acronym. I do not mean the animal goat, Madam President. It is an acronym.

Madam President: Sen. Lyder? Sen. Lyder?

Sen. D. Lyder: Yes.

Madam President: Please, you will try and reign yourself in a little bit and, if I could tell you, you have five more minutes.

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Madam President. And let me put it to you, Madam President, I understand where you are going, it is not—

Madam President: Do not put anything to me. Sen. Lyder, you just move on and edit yourself. Okay? **Sen. D. Lyder:** Let me move on and say the acronym: Greatest failures of all time in Cabinet; G-the “f” is silent, right? O-A-T, the greatest failures of all time. The “f” is silent there, but the “f” is not silent outside. Madam President—

Madam President: Sen. Lyder, please. I would ask you to please raise the level in a dignify manner. Okay?

Sen. D. Lyder: Yes. Thank you, Madam President. Before I close Madam President, I listened with great anticipation and intently to the new Minister of State in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Minister de Freitas and, I must say, Madam President, I was deeply disappointed. I really had high

expectations. I felt that this Minister would have been the game changer, seeing that the two Ministers before did not work. And I was disappointed because for almost 25 minutes of the Minister's 40-minute debate on agriculture, was spent on political rhetoric and the balance with very little content. So, in fact, I was surprised that the junior Minister Avinash Singh outshined him. He outshined him that day. Minister Singh actually made a full contribution on agriculture. So I would like to give congratulations, congratulations to those who wrote the Minister's speech, Minister Singh speech. Congratulations to those who wrote that speech. Madam President, and then, of course, I listened to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the hon. Kazim Hosein, and I heard everything my colleague and friend said.

The Minister said that after the budget he intends to hit the road and meet with the stakeholders, the farmers. The Minister said he will listen more and talk less. And while I cannot blame my good friend, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, for the absolutely failure that agriculture is today, because he just come, I must give him a chance. But I want to say to my friend, the hon. Minister, that we in the United National Congress, previous to this budget and for the last seven years, have been consulting with the farmers and while this Government has been in power and, most recently, before the budget, and I want to prepare the Minister for what the farmers are going to tell him. Because when the expo that this Government spent millions of dollars on, when the lights go off in the expo, when the pomp and pageantry is over, and when the foreigners and the big shots leave the country, and when the agro processors who are on displayed had to continue importing the raw materials, the farmers will still be complaining about access roads, praedial larceny, lack of fertilizers, flooding, no technical

veterinarian support and land tenure needed to secure loans for development. That is what the Minister will be hearing when we goes out there. And I happy that this Minister is prepared to listen to them, because it is painfully and woefully obvious that the past Minister did not, Madam President.

Madam President, I have a lot to say on praedial larceny, but the time is not permitting me to do so, except to say, Madam President, that just last month, the Praedial Larceny Squad issued a public statement calling for among other things the regularization of their tenure as many of them are on short-term contracts. Many of them cannot take sick leave and I am calling on the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to rectify these issues. You are talking about expanding the Praedial Larceny Unit and your investment in it, but deal with the praedial larceny officers that you have now. Give them security of tenure, Madam President. The Minister has told me they are going to the CPO, they intend to go to the CPO, I take him on his word and let us see what happens, Madam President.

So, Madam President, as I close, my time would not permit me to talk about tourism, maybe Sen. Roberts will talk about that, but this sector is also suffering from of consultation and neglect and the only bright spot, Madam President, is that Tobago and tourism in Tobago is under new management by the PDP, Madam President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: So, Madam President, unfortunately, what we see is a financial package that falls woefully short when it comes to signal to the private sector where to invest. We do not see where this Government is diversifying the economy and so, therefore, in the words of Dianne Hadad, this is a lousy, a wicked and an evil budget, and that is why I cannot, I shall not and I will not support this

budget, Madam President, and I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Evans Welch: Madam President, thank you for affording me the opportunity to speak to the Appropriation Bill for the year 2023. Madam President, the Minister of Finance began his budget statement, and one can understand the context in which he began it, by referring to the difficulty of the past seven years, and referring to the fact that, notwithstanding the difficulty which involved in the more recent two years, the pandemic, matters such as the plunge in oil prices, et cetera, nevertheless, we have survived and we have come out shining, comparatively speaking. Because in such difficult times, he has pointed out that the IMF was avoided, even though there were pressures to do so; devaluation was avoided with its consequent possible increased inflationary consequence; there were no public sector job cuts, no slash in salaries. Had any of these things been done, I would have joined in heaping criticism on the Minister. And, therefore, conversely, I applaud the fact that we were able to come through without any such measures.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. E. Welch: But if I may draw a cricketing analogy, when a batsman comes to the crease for a new innings, he begins on zero. He is not permitted to draw runs from his past seven years and borrow runs and add to his present innings. Therefore, there comes a time when we must assess the situation by looking at it from the present point forward, and not constantly drawing back. Our eyes, when we are looking at the future, we must not be looking at the future with our eyes, but seeing the past. Therefore, any assessment of this budget must begin, not by reference to the past, but by looking at it from this point onwards and assessing its

merits.

So, having said that, Madam President, broadly speaking, when I look at the structure of the budget, it can be broken down into the fiscal measures, which were presented towards the end of the budget statement but, at the beginning, there was some broader macro measures that was spoken of. I would like to begin, because I do have some concerns about some of the fiscal measures, so I would like to begin by chronologically going through the end aspect of the Minister's presentation, and looking at the fiscal measures and then with whatever time that is afforded, looking at the broader macro policies and pictures he presented at the start. So I would do it in reverse order.

One of the matters mentioned as one of the fiscal measures for 2023 is the personal income tax allowance, the increase from 84,000 to 90,000. Madam President, 6,000 sounds like a big figure, et cetera, but any fiscal measure must have meaning and significance in its net effect. And why 84,000 to 90,000 is \$6,000, when one looks at the actual net effect of it and its significance, my calculation—and I have confirmed this calculation with others—is that what is really being put into the pockets of persons falling within that category is about \$135 more per month. And if I am wrong about that, my calculations, I would invite the Minister to correct me.

Madam President, \$135 per month, when broken down into a week really, Madam President, amounts to about roughly \$31 per week. Madam President, \$31 per week is negligible. It has no impact on anyone as far as I am concerned, and even though the Minister has indicated it involves a loss of revenue by about 450 million, then my suggestion is, that 450 million could have been channelled elsewhere, use more effectively as opposed to a personal allowance, which results

in \$31 more in the hand of a person per week.

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

When one takes into account the price of fuel going up, when one takes into account inflation that amounts to nothing. And what really drove it home to me, is that I was in one of those mini-marts attached to a gas station in the area in which I live. While waiting to approach the cashier, the gentleman behind me was adding up the cost of his goods, and he says in adding, calculating the cost of his goods, he mentions: “Okay, so \$20 for this loaf of bread.” I am thinking, I did not know a loaf of bread, a sliced loaf of bread had increased to that type of price. If he has a family of five that is, perhaps, about two loaves of bread per week, and then along with it other expenses.

11.30p.m.

So I know the Minister of Finance, in justifying this, referred back to the fact that this is the cumulative effect of other rises in the threshold that have taken place within recent years and that is why I began my contribution by saying, when we are judging this budget we must not be drawing on the past. We must not be doing what a cricketer is prohibited from doing, trying to take 50 runs from his previous innings and add it to the now. This is insignificant as a measure and it should have been channeled elsewhere.

Mr. Vice-President, the other matter, which in my view is another bit of tinkering without much significance, is the increase of the VAT threshold from \$500,000 to \$600,000. The Minister speaks of the fact that this is going to impact the growth and development of small and medium enterprises but there is no explanation as to how this increase is actually going to achieve that from the Minister’s presentation. My concern with the VAT system is that ultimately one

should not be tinkering with it. It has given rise to a number of problems, some of which have been identified by the last speaker, Mr. Lyder, with respect to the issue of refunds and ultimately it may be a bold suggestion, but ultimately, Mr. Vice-President, I am going to suggest that we have come to the time where we need to contemplate sometime in the future, not immediately, but the gradual replacement of the system because it is not working for the reasons which I would point out.

Mr. Vice-President, the ordinary human being would be forgiven for thinking, “If VAT is supposed to be a revenue raiser by way of taxes flowing into the Government, how does one reconcile that with talking about the Government having paid out millions in VAT refunds and owing \$4 billion in VAT refunds”? On the face it, it sounds like an outflow rather than an inflow of tax revenue, but what is more unsatisfactory about this, and as the Minister himself would appreciate, I speak from a position of knowledge and not hearsay, so to speak. Mr. Vice-President, I have been the legal consultant to a unit of the Board of Inland Revenue which is concerned with such measures, so I speak from first-hand knowledge, and the reason why I can say there are problems with VAT refunds is because there is a lot of fraud on the system.

It is one thing to say, “A number of companies are owed their VAT refunds”, and that masks the fact that a significant amount of VAT so-called “refunds”, have been paid out when they are not actually due and as a result of fraud being perpetrated. For instance, I will give you instances. There are companies which have charged VAT without being VAT registered. The consequence of that is that what they have collected, they do not pay to Government because they are not VAT registered, but the persons from whom they

have collected it can claim refunds. So this is an instance of funds going out rather than moneys coming in. That is an instance of what is happening with VAT refunds and how it is turning out to be a fraud on the system and counter-productive. There have been examples of companies being registered which have no intention of any kind of business operations but simply to submit refunds, claims for refunds, and the experience has shown that such refunds have been paid; not because of negligence or any such thing from within the revenue department but because under the VAT system, once your refund claim is less than \$10,000, it is treated almost as honest and automatic and a refund is automatically generated. So, no scrutiny is involved where such a company is not really operating but submitting refunds, submitting claims for refunds.

There have been companies which have submitted false information to become registered, pretending that they are in business and that they are supplying up to \$500,000, when they are in fact supplying nothing and submitting false invoices to become registered so that they can claim refunds. There are situations where many companies are constantly in a refundable position. If you are operating in a business, how come you are constantly in a refundable position? So when we speak about businesses—and do not get me wrong, Mr. Vice-President, I am sure the vast majority of businesses are in fact genuine, but there is a significant amount that are not and VAT refunds have become a fraud on the system, which explains some of the reasons for why we are talking about millions in VAT refunds.

So I suggest, as a result of what I have just pointed out—it perhaps cannot be immediate, but let us do like in the United States and replace this whole business of VAT and the difference between how much you paid out and how

much you collected in VAT, you claim as a refund; replace it with a point-of-sale tax system whereby Government can raise revenue, every transaction you exempt whichever items you think of exempting from tax. But Government can raise revenue as in the US, you purchase from a merchandiser; they add a tax to it and that tax is remitted to Government, all merchandisers. There is no issue of VAT and VAT refunds, however, in those circumstances you would have to reduce the level of tax to perhaps, maybe 4 per cent of 5 per cent, but it is a far better system whereby the Government is owed and not the Government is owing. So I suggest to deal with that issue, that is what ultimately we would need to do, and if we need a model we can look at what pertains in the United States or some other jurisdictions. It is not only in the US has this system.

Going on now to another fiscal measure for which I wholeheartedly commend the Minister of Finance on this initiative; again, it appears in the closing stages of his budget presentation, the School to Work Apprenticeship Allowance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. E. Welch: It is something which I am impressed with. It shows initiative and it shows a consciousness of the fact that you have quite a number of young persons unemployed, some educated, some not so educated, and I think an allowance which allows a company to claim remuneration to take on apprenticeships and claim the remuneration they pay them as some sort of allowance against their taxes, is going to encourage employment among the youth—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. E. Welch:—because lack of employment feeds into the criminal justice system. And even where it does not feed into the criminal justice system, it feeds into frustration and anxiety and a sense of uselessness and stress, and therefore I

have a feeling that this will work. Perhaps you can tweak it a bit by saying, “Before the allowance is paid out, the company should be required, perhaps, to take on at least two persons or three persons”. You can tweak it further by perhaps categorizing and saying, “One should be a university graduate, one should be someone just out of O Levels, one should be someone in-between with a degree, with a diploma”, or something of that nature, because we have quite a few educated people who are unemployed.

I have heard of engineers “pulling bull”. I have heard of doctors working in geriatric homes and it applies to different skill levels. Although those are the two examples I used, it applies to different skill levels and I have a feeling it will not just be an apprenticeship programme, but I have a feeling that once a company is satisfied with a youth that that person has taken on, it would be hard to let that person go and that will blossom into permanent employment—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. E. Welch:—what has begun as an apprenticeship. So I applaud this initiative. My criticism of this initiative, however, is not so much as criticism of it, but I am disappointed that it is the only measure I have seen in the fiscal measures to promote employment. The same level of initiative that went into it, I believe, could be used in other ways, but this is the most direct and the most obvious; I commend the Government for it but I wish to see more.

In that regard, it seems a bit top-heavy in that there are several initiatives and incentives towards companies. As I said, this is the only one which I have seen to create youth employment, and I could be corrected if I am wrong about that, but there is a top-heavy incentive towards companies. And I am not saying not to give companies that incentive; all I am saying is that the same measures and the same

level at which has been done towards corporations could have been—the same imagination could have been used as well towards youth. For instance, I see there is a supplemental petroleum tax credit, energy investment tax credit, manufacturing tax credit, exemption from corporation tax, and about two more; about six measures aimed at incentivizing companies. I am not saying do not; I am just saying, the level which has been applied to the corporations, the same level of measures, I encourage the Government to find ways as they did with the allowance. I do not know if this is an example of what is called trickle-down economics. I am not an economist, but it is often said that if you benefit the larger corporations somethings will trickle down to the small man, et cetera, by way of increase in wages or increase in employment. But if that is the philosophy—I am not saying that it is, we need a better philosophy than the small man standing up at, figuratively, the corporate cup of coffee waiting for spill-overs or the corporate plate when it is full, waiting for spill-overs.

Mr. Vice-President, while I go to the other fiscal measure referred to, which is the tax amnesty, the hon. Minister of Finance says that this is going to raise \$300 to \$500 million in revenue. I have a difficulty with regarding moneys raised through a tax amnesty as raising revenue. This is not really raising revenue; this is paying late without interest what you owe. We have to find a better means of enforcing taxpayers and corporations to pay on time than having to resort to a tax amnesty, because tax amnesties have been used quite often in the past and if they become predictable, if they are over-utilized, persons are going to say, as I have heard persons say, “I am waiting. I am sure the Minister will give another tax amnesty so I am waiting, one year or two years down the line to pay”. We have to find means, as such as operate in other jurisdictions, of enforcing tax compliance

on a current basis and not unwittingly encouraging delayed payments when the expectation that an amnesty would come. My criticism therefore is not so much that there is an amnesty, because it is a viable measure to resort to, my criticism is that it has been too often used and has become predictable and it encourages a taxpayer not to comply immediately. I know, Mr. Vice-President, I have spent a bit of time on this tax issue but you would appreciate, I have declared my interest and my involvement in tax issues, and this would be going into some 15 years; next year would make it 15 years now.

Mr. Vice-President, the other fiscal measure which has caused a lot of debate is the one regarding fuel subsidies, and before I make any comment on this issue, if I may begin by looking at it through the eyes of the hon. Minister of Finance and how he perceives this fuel subsidy to be. According to his statements—and I am not quoting verbatim, I am just paraphrasing and quoting the effect of it. At one point in time during the budget presentation, and it appears in the budget statement:

If it were not for this fuel subsidy we would have had a balanced budget. The money could be spent otherwise to improve lives. It needs to be limited. It is not productive. That could be used to deal with other situations that need to be addressed in terms of health care, in terms of education, in terms of social grants, et cetera.

So in other words, the fuel subsidy—and I commend the Minister for explaining because previously, apparently, there has not been much of an explanation of this fuel subsidy. There has just been an assumption that we understand it, but the man on the street who may not be so educated, he needs to understand exactly what it is; if pain is inflicted, explain it. And I commend the Minister because it is clearly

set out at, I believe, page 55 of the budget presentation, as to what it means and how it operates. So if fuel is costing \$8, in reality that is the price of it, and the consumer, the citizen pays \$5, the Government is putting \$3. However, my divergence of view with the Minister is when this fuel subsidy is treated almost like, what they call in astronomy, a black hole, a vacuum with high levels of gravity into which money is poured and it is just—it is going to waste. It is eating up money, moneys that can be used elsewhere.

I do not see it that way and perhaps I can invite the Minister to see it, to some extent, in the way I view it and then that would account for a more gradual reduction in the fuel subsidy than what we have seen over the past year. The reason I do not see it as this monstrosity that gobbles up revenue and finances is because, really and truly, it falls within the same category of other subsidies and other grants. It is an indirect contribution to the expense of a parent sending his child to school and having to pay \$200 to the driver who takes that child to school, because what that driver charges is going to be influenced by the price of fuel. So it is an indirect contribution to that expense. It is an indirect contribution to the expense to the transport expense of someone who has a car and who lives in an area which is not properly serviced by public transportation, a point which has been addressed in detail by my colleague on the Independent Bench, Sen. Richards, making it an inevitable inevitability that you need to use your own car if you can afford it; and for safety reasons as well, and if you are going to be using your own car, then a significant portion of your monthly expense and budget will be the price of fuel.

So when Government pays part of that fuel subsidy, it is not throwing money into a black hole that is gobbling it up, it is a contribution to the expense, to

a household expense; a necessary household expense. And therefore, while I recognize that there might be the need for some gradual reduction in the subsidy, I think what has occurred here is too drastic, and the reason why it is too drastic, too sudden and too consecutive in nature is perhaps because of the perspective through which the Minister sees it, and that is why I began my address on this by quoting from the Minister's perspective.

I can give my own example, for instance, October last year, I was paying \$300 to fill my car, for me; sometime, I believe it would have been in April or sometime shortly after October, I do not recall the exact time, that went up to \$355, and now, today, as a result of another consecutive increase, I filled up yesterday. I allowed my car to go to empty and filled up yesterday and it came up to \$410, and if I had pushed it, it would have reached about \$420. So that is \$110 increase, roughly speaking, in the price of fuel as a result of two consecutive increases. I did not criticize the first but the second one, coming so soon after, there has to be proportion. There has to be a measure of balance. There has to be a measure of sensitivity because that \$110, which it now costs me to fill my car, translated to \$440 per month. So you think of citizens who are more unfortunate than I am and you appreciate the effect. That is effectively withdrawing \$440 from the pocket of an individual and that is how the fuel subsidy is to be seen.

My last point on this fuel subsidy is that there is also a bit of inconsistency and irreconcilability in the argument, because the hon. Minister of Finance points out that when fuel prices increase it becomes more burdensome; the fuel subsidy goes up, but we also hear that when fuel prices increase the revenue of the Government goes up. So it is not so much out of accord, you are getting more revenue so that puts you in a position, to some extent, to continue with a level of

sustenance of the subsidy. It is a principle which is known in law but which I have not heard for a while, “He who gets the benefit takes the burden”. You are getting a benefit so you cannot complain about the burden. So I would urge, not that the Government should fully subsidize fuel or any such thing, but there has to be proportion in the approach to the removal and there was a lack of proportion; there was a lack of sensitivity in two consecutive such increases in such a short space of time.

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

Sen. E. Welch: Six more minutes; thank you, Mr. Vice-President. And, Mr. Vice-President, I know I will not cover all I need to cover in that six minutes so I will see if I can prioritize somehow and skip certain things.

Let me say, I will go straight from fiscal measures to some of the broad measures and policies that the Minister spoke of. The Minister, when he spoke of national security, safety and security, he spoke to computerization and improvement of governance and upgrading of the ballistic identification system to improve examination of firearms with respect to the Forensic Science Centre. I find that, while that statement sounds very nice about improving governance, updating firearm system and identification, I find it a startling measure. I find it a startling statement in this year, 2022, when for the past two decades and more, going into the 1990s, we have had this situation of increase in violent crime using firearms and the Forensic Science Centre existed since then. So why are we today, after the fact, 30 years, when things are out of control, speaking about improving the governance? The governance needed to be addressed a long time through various administrations and it is a disappointment that one still has to wait two and three years, or five years or six years to hear, “The gun has not come back from

forensics as yet”. “The ammunition still has not”, or some other form of exhibit.

12.00 noon

I appeared in a matter sometime last year, where the exhibits were submitted, DNA tested since 2005, and when the matter came up for trial, it still was not ready. And they had to remove it from the Government’s Forensic Science Centre and take it to a private lab that was recently established, and we got the results in about two weeks. So, governance needed to be addressed a long, long time ago because this Forensic Science Centre plays a very important part in the administration of the criminal justice system.

I am going to suggest, radically, since it has been inefficient in all the areas of forensic examination, my suggestion is, let us break it down into parts, with each separate head. A firearms unit, put it somewhere else if you can; a drug unit, put it somewhere else if you can; a pathology unit, put it somewhere else if you can. Let them each have their own head, and let them each be accountable to the Minister of National Security, not by reporting what your results are, but by at least accounting on an annual basis for how many exhibits were received, how many were tested and how many have been put out, so that they can be properly monitored. And replace them with heads who have three-year contracts so that they would know that the renewal of their contracts depend on the efficiency of the performance of their each individual unit. But that building which exists and that concept which exists at Federation Park is a huge inefficient edifice that needs, as I said, to be broken down into parts with its own heads. Call them different names if you wish, and let us start a new beginning, and let them be accountable. We cannot be doing the same thing over and over with the same results, with the same promises.

I have been signalled that I only have one minute again and rather than doing a disservice to any of the other important matters I wish to address by trying to squeeze it into a minute, I will now bring my contribution to an end. And I am sure opportunity would present itself during the course of the legislative agenda to get back into matters, such as the administration of justice, the Judiciary and the criminal justice system in far more detail. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: The Minister of Trade and Industry.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President, and I am very pleased to be able to contribute to this debate on the 2022/2023 fiscal Appropriation Bill. First off the bat, I would like to thank the hon. Minister of Finance for the medium-term policy framework, which unpins this Government's budget formulation. I would also like to extend my thanks to the Minister of Planning and Development for her involvement in the process, of course, and all their members of staff of both Ministries. And also to the hon. Prime Minister, always for his strategic guidance and for his involvement in this budget preparation as well.

Mr. Vice-President, I would have addressed many areas during my contribution in the lower House and therefore, I would like to focus this contribution on the strength of local, our engines of growth and our people.

Before I go any further, I would also like to recognize all of the voices of my colleagues who spoke over the last two days, many of them who are really new to the budget process. And I just want to say that this is evidence that the future of the People's National Movement really is in good hands.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

I listened to the—well, I listened to the rather worn out contribution of the Leader of Opposition Business in the Senate, and not anything different from his political leader. Coming from that, Sen. Lyder's very mangled contribution. He seems to have come here with his own agenda as a distributor, making a lot of noise about foreign exchange, instead of giving us a true appreciation of the budget, very disappointing and very disparaging remarks made about manufacturing. And I want to say to him, that he has called me the Minister of manufacturing, I am pleased to be called the Minister of manufacturing, but also the Minister who has responsibility for trade and business and investment.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I mean, it really shows that he is not forward-thinking at all and, as I said, unappreciative of the work that goes into manufacturing as against distribution. Mind you, we will all need to continue to import because we are not producing everything in this country. And we understand the cries and the concerns of the distributors, but one has to really appreciate the manufacturers. And though I did not intend to speak about manufacturing today and focus on more of the transformative agenda in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, which I did not get a chance to speak of earlier, I will still have to go back to the manufacturing to really, again, show to the Opposition and Sen. Lyder the value of it and the increasing performance of manufacturers in this country.

And really, he ought to be more forward-thinking and appreciative of the investment levels that are involved, the purchase of machinery, of equipment; the management of staff; the ability to be competitive; the ability to keep up with technology. I mean, it is not just straight buy and sell, and that is why I would

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

always have the time for the manufacturers who are, in fact, saving us foreign exchange by import substitution and earning us foreign exchange by exports.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And I will tell you something, they are the ones, and myself included as Minister, also the Minister of Works and Transport, and the then Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, we worked with our manufacturers and our distributors and our farmers to ensure that this country was fed and there was no shortage of food on our shelves during the two years of COVID—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—as we saw in many other territories, First World territories, Mr. Vice-President. And, of course, we fed the Caribbean as well, wherever we could have.

I mean, we were the ones—our manufacturers, I am talking about cement now, were the ones who got the construction industry going again. It was the first sector to be revived with the closure in many islands. It was the first sector to be revived, the construction sector, and it is our TCL who produced and got cement out to the rest of the region so that they could continue their construction and so on. So, again, it just shows the very narrow view and lack of foresight and so on, on the part of Sen. Lyder.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: But I would go on, and I want to remind—I would take five minutes just to remind the population about our economic fundamentals remaining strong, which Sen. Mark tried to deny. Again, I would repeat, per capita GDP has increased to US \$19,500 in September 2022, and it is

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

expected to reach US \$20,000 by the end of 2022. Real GDP, economic activity in Trinidad and Tobago, will grow by 2 per cent in 2022 and, of course, that is evidenced by the Central Bank's Monetary Policy Announcement post, just recently put out in September of this year, which cited that—and I am speaking about non-energy.

“...non-energy GDP increased by 2.2 per cent...”—in the first quarter of 2022.

“...driven by strong performances in the manufacturing...transport and storage sub-sectors.”

Not me, we are not saying that here politically, this is the Central Bank.

And, of course, again, continuing, the Central Bank also noted the:

“...encouraging signs...”—in the—“revival of credit in support of domestic business expansion.”

Sen. Lyder, I think you must read and try to understand what is going on in the economy.

The Central Bank also noted that:

“Credit to the private sector expanded by 6.6 per cent in July.”

And:

“This was driven by robust growth in business loans, a turnaround in consumer credit, and buoyant real estate mortgage lending. On the business side, there were notable increases in loans for construction, manufacturing and distribution.”

Think, read, expand your knowledge, Sen. Lyder.

So, I go on. Again, if you look, in the same place I looked, Sen. Lyder, the first Appendix in the *Review of the Economy 2022*, go to page 176, Appendix 2—I

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

am guiding you, I am guiding you—and I am talking about the examination of GDP at constant prices. Several sectors are expected to increase output in 2022. Specifically, I speak to some. Trade and repairs are forecasted to increase by 9 per cent. This is \$35 billion from \$32 billion in 2021. And, again, financial and insurance activities, a slight increase. As well, transport and storage is forecasted to increase by 15 per cent in 2022.

Again, let me go to the manufacturing sector and, again, give you some of the important figures. But, you know, there is one point that bothered me with Sen. Mark when he spoke about—he spent five minutes on loyalty. I am really appalled that Sen. Mark would seek to talk about loyalty, when they have actively sought to undermine this economy by constantly badmouthing Trinidad and Tobago, and spewing fake news on a daily basis. That is their activity. This is why I have to remind you.

You see, you all, I ask the question: Was the UNC government loyal when it ran up public expenditure in this country from \$47 billion to over \$63 billion in 2015? Is that loyalty to our country? Was the UNC government loyal when it siphoned \$14 billion from the National Gas Company's bank account? Was the UNC loyal when it left a \$5 billion back pay for the PNM Government to settle? That is loyalty to the population? Was the UNC loyal to the people of Trinidad and Tobago when it sought to pass a law, the section 34, to ensure that its Members escape criminal prosecution?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Was that loyalty to the population of Trinidad and Tobago? Sen. Mark, you are not disloyal, you people are just disconnected and detached from the truth of what is going on in this country.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: But again, let me get back to what I am here to talk about. This Ministry of Trade and Industry is making every effort to drive economic activity in this country, by working very closely with its stakeholders, including our small and medium-sized enterprises; our manufacturers, yes; and our distributors as well; our service providers, cannot forget them; all of our agencies; all our people. And it is about creating an enabling environment that facilitates trade, business and investment.

At the end of the day, that trickles down to providing jobs for our people. That is what it is about, jobs at every level. When I talk about boosting output and boosting exports and rebuilding and so on, at the end of the day, it is about our people, our people prospering, and that is what it comes down to, jobs, job creation, wealth creation. That is what it trickles down to, jobs at every level.

But I go back to the manufacturing sector, he has forced me to go there, and I will watch my time and just spend a few minutes on it to give an overview of the trade performance. So, again, the strength of the manufacturing sector is demonstrated in the statistics, being a major contributor to GDP at approximately 20 per cent, with real output at \$26.3 billion in 2021, employing more than 52,000 persons.

Total output: total output in manufacturing in 2022 is \$28 billion and of that, 40 per cent; 40 per cent represents what I will call core manufacturing, which is the traditional manufacturing, excluding petrochemicals, of which food and beverage is the largest component, 28 per cent. And I commend our food and beverage manufacturers, in particular, for the extensive work that they are doing. And that food and beverage and tobacco industries' real output in 2022 is forecasted at

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

\$7.98 billion, which is 19 per cent higher than 2021. I give you that, Sen. Lyder, it must be higher than 2021, but it is also 28 per cent higher than 2019, because it was then \$6.26 billion. But it is also 58 per cent higher than its value in 2015, when it was just \$5 billion. And, again, when reviewing the data from 2012 to 2022—2012, being the year that the CSO debased its GDP numbers—the output in the food and beverage sector, it is the highest it has ever been. Who could ever find fault with the manufacturers of food and beverage in this country?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And I thank them. Just recently, they donated, with the recent heavy rains, 350 hampers across the country at short notice. We thank them.

Again, with regard to our export performance—and I would have updated my figures to September 2022, for the entire fiscal period, using my SEW data. Again, the total exports increased by 54 per cent, from to \$51 billion to \$78.5 billion, that includes energy. Energy increased by 77 per cent, and we know why, because of energy prices. And non-energy exports increased by 1.8 per cent from \$15.65 billion to \$15.93 billion.

But I drill down a little bit further at the non-energy manufacturing sector exports. I hope that the population understands when I am talking about output as against exports, right? So that exports increased by 24 per cent—this is non-energy manufacturing exports—increased by 24 per cent, from \$10.2 billion to \$12.6 billion. Again, this was 46 per cent higher than—I am not measuring 2021, Sen. Lyder—that is 46 per cent higher than fiscal 2019. Again, I am talking about figures that exclude the energy sector as well.

I spoke about this in the Lower House but, again, export growth was seen in

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

several subsectors: in the iron and steel industry, in the food and beverage industry, in the basic chemicals and fertilizers subsectors, the plastic and rubber subsector, the paper and paper-related industry. I am not cherry-picking. I am speaking about the successes and the sweat and the hard work of manufacturers, and we are seeing the results.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And we will continue to see the results. Why? Because we are using the tools that we have, that we have come up with, to drive further growth and, in particular, to drive exports, and this is through our PSIP funding. And, of course, we will continue. One of the major initiative is the Export Booster Initiative. We will continue to do our export promotion, our capacity building and our institutional strengthening.

I am just cherry-picking now, looking at one example in terms of market intelligence. We would have done surveys. We had more time during the COVID period to do those kinds of activity. We would have conducted surveys in the Dominican Republic, in the UK, in the BVI islands, Canada, Curaçao, Miami, Panama and so on, and out of that information we were able to share with some 535 companies to help them to guide their export plans.

Then, of course, before, during the COVID period, we would have done largely virtual missions. Now we are expanding and we are now doing, whatchamacallit, physical missions. So, in 2022, we were only able to do six virtual missions, but when the economy opened up we did five physical meetings. I could tell you, more than 140 small and medium-sized enterprises, manufacturers, would have participated and benefited from these missions, not just participated, benefitted from these trade mission.

As a result of these business-to-business meetings at these trade missions, companies would have interacted with potential business partners and some of them have already sent their product samples and price lists to potential foreign buyers. The work is being done.

And you would have seen me, Sen. Lyder, step out of the Chamber for just a few minutes when you were on the floor, and it is because there was a delegation in from Panama and, of course, my staff was there, and I joined them for a few minutes. I excused myself, of course, I joined them, because we must grow our relations and the countries are interested in growing their relations with us as well. So that is what I was doing.

So, for fiscal 2023—we would move on. We intend to have 11 physical trade missions, beginning with Curaçao, which I hope to lead. And, of course, we would continue our market access negotiations with Chile and Curaçao as well. Again, we were set back by the pandemic but I can tell you even though—I think it was in October 2020 that we would have signed the general frame up agreement with Chile, so we would have had that delay and there would have been a change of administration as well. But the Chileans would be in Trinidad and Tobago in December of this year to do the third round of negotiations, and that is when we would really dig into the market access offers and so on.

And then, of course, I can tell you that although a small market, with regard to Curaçao, with a population of just 165,000 people, but with more than 1 million tourists, that we have been having discussions with them, exploratory discussions towards the possibility of a partial scope agreement. Therefore, when we participate in that trade mission in November of this year, we expect that we will be in a position to sign a general framework agreement for the negotiation of a

partial scope agreement. Again, that is to kick off another set of negotiations.

We continue doing other work with Caricom in terms of, let us say, the Caricom-Colombia free trade agreement and so on. But we are continuing to offer services to our small manufacturers, our medium-sized manufacturers. Translation and interpretation services will be provided to more than 65 countries this year, to make sure, again, the focus is not just on Caricom, it is outside of Caricom as well. We will continue all our in-market promotions. When I say so, assisting the SMEs with their in-market promotions, the export—training new exporters, assisting them with preparing their plans, getting them on to what we call an Export Accelerator Programme, so that they can then make market connections. This is why I am so involved in manufacturing because it takes more. You are nodding your head. It takes more than just scrolling the Internet to decide, “What do I import?” So, it is more than that.

Even Tobago, they cannot be left out. So, we continue to work with them with the Tobago capacity building programme. We are working with them on improving the packaging of their sweets and so on. Then we are going to hopefully move on to the phase where we can begin the culinary upgrade phase to help them develop new products.

Labelling: we would provide monetary assistance for labelling and product testing, Mr. Vice-President. Again, we are going to assist at least 25 companies with meeting the product testing requirements, so that they can enter into new markets and, of course, support them with packaging—of course, green packaging where possible.

We will continue with the International Certification Fund. I spoke about the successes in the Lower House. I want to tell you that we have—I gave all the

stories about the 11 successful companies that received funding towards attaining international certification. I want to say that in 2023, we are going to add another 10 companies, so that they too can begin to migrate their products to extraregional countries.

Again, how do we continue to grow our exports? I spoke about it in the Lower House. We will be promoting our commercial diplomacy and improving our export profile, and expanding market access by establishing our commercial offices and commercial attachés in various diplomatic missions. This is going to support and buffer the existing heads of missions in their commercial diplomacy. So that you would have seen the ad in the newspapers. So, the intention is that we would establish a commercial office in Panama, and also in the UK and also within the CG's office in Miami. And then, of course, we are intending to support that, in not just appointing commercial officers, we will be hiring deputy commercial officers from the particular countries. So that they are the ones who would have their feet on the ground and they are going to work closely with our commercial officers from home office.

But we are also intending to appoint commercial attachés in South Africa to look after the African market, and also in Guyana to deal with the southern market—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—and in Jamaica to deal with the northern Caribbean markets as well. We will also place an attaché in Beijing, in China. Again, these appointments that we are talking about, we are looking for results. The assignment is a very results-oriented one.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

And what we would want them to do, these offices and attachés, is to provide real-time information to exporters; to identify export opportunities for goods and services; to provide market intelligence; to provide timely and efficient logistical support to develop the existing trade and development synergies; to help them navigate through the regulatory and legal frameworks; and to also resolve any trade disputes that may arise in the course of doing work as well. All of these facets, all of these arrangements, it is really about boosting exports, diversifying export markets and also making a way for inward investments at all.

And, of course, what I am saying here, there will be absolutely no shortcuts in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, in terms of trying to achieve to achieve our access and our improvement in our exports and investments.

I want to also say that another—you talked about, Sen. Lyder, the fact that you are not hearing about transformative measures. One of the things that we also would spend some of the PSIP funding on is on technical studies. And why? It is really to bring extended manufacturing and therefore, create more jobs in Trinidad and Tobago. And I will tell you, what we want to make sure, and especially in the wake of the catastrophe that we would have had with COVID and the other incidents that would have followed, reshoring and nearshoring have really become necessary to ensure that you have an advantage in dealing with any future disruption. Therefore, it is important that the private sector is encouraged to remake and to diversify their supply chains; to be able to identify multiple sources of raw materials, multiple production locations, multiple warehouse hubs and distribution channels, and so on.

So, to support that, one of the first studies that we would be doing is strengthening the sectoral linkages in Trinidad and Tobago. And that is expected

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

to produce a report on the manufacturing inputs and outputs of Caricom suppliers of relevance to Trinidad and Tobago's manufacturing sector. And, of course, I can tell you that the consultant for this particular study on the strengthening of the sectoral linkages has already been procured and the consultant is expected to start work soon.

The other study will focus on the development of regional value chains for the manufacturing sector. Under this study, an analysis of the potential forward and backward linkages of the energy, the agriculture, the manufacturing, the maritime, the tourism sectors in Trinidad and Tobago will be all conducted. So, what will happen here is that the input needs of Trinidad and Tobago's manufacturing sector would be identified, and what we will be doing essentially is proposing a framework for a map of the regional value chains of the manufacturing sector in Caricom. So that is the kind of transformational work that we will be doing. In doing that, I want to speak just a little bit about the SMEs before I move on.

How is my time, Madam President?

Madam President: You finish at 12.42 and it is 12.28 now, so you have about 15 minutes.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Okay, good. Thank you. But, again, the other measure that I want to speak about, and I would have spoken again in the Lower House about it, about the many initiatives being implemented by the Government to support our SMEs. Again, I want to raise some of them because I think we are not looking at the big picture.

12.30 p.m.

For instance, the Minister of Finance would be making possible, and this is

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

alongside the expansion of the government, existing government-guaranteed loan programme—a new long-term loan guaranteed scheme for which \$500 million is being provided with a two-year moratorium, a 10-year repayment programme and 80 per cent guaranteed by the Government. And, of course, there is the one that is also attractive, the other incentive, is the widening of the VAT threshold from \$500,000 to \$600,000. And there is also the exemption from corporation tax, I am talking about for approved small company status. And all of these incentives and I am speaking here to Sen. Welch's point, all of these incentives are really about expanding manufacturers and giving the necessary incentives so to encourage new manufacturing and, again, for the small to graduate to the medium into the large, et cetera. All of this expansion, the end result of it, it is not just the manufacturer would have increased revenues. But by expanding he is—you are also taking about job creation. So it might be a seemingly provision, an incentive made possible to the manufactures. But at the end of the day it is about job creation because if you have expanded plant, you are talking about increased jobs and increased opportunities, so you have to look at the trickle down and that is the point that I wanted to point out to the Senator—the speaker before me.. That is the point I wanted to make to you.

We continue again in the Ministry with all of the grant facilities and so on. There was one that I wanted to talk about in particular. And why? Because the Leader of the Opposition keeps trumpeting about it every year about the steel pan manufacturing subsector. And I want to say, Madam President, that Trinidad and Tobago generally has—consists of small-scale operators utilizing both unskilled and skilled labour in terms of the manufacturing of the steel pan. So it is somewhat of an artisan type of manufacturing. However, we in the Government

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

and in the Ministry of Trade and Industry we are continuing to demonstrate our commitment to assisting our local steel pan manufacturers in becoming more globally competitive and productive and innovative. It is our role to promote the manufacturing of steel pan and the exports of the steel pan. And therefore, it is the reason why we have also extended the grant fund facility to them. And I can tell you that we have done thus far, we have assisted steel pan manufacturers with new product development, employment, production, production competitiveness exports and so on with grants up to \$1 million. In other words, \$250,000 tranches.

Madam President: So, Minister, you had asked me earlier how much time you have left. You actually have 10 minutes left.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you. Thank you, Madam President. So that \$250,000 which they can go up to a \$1 million is actually to fund the acquisition of new machinery, equipment, software, tools and raw materials and so on. And thus far we have approved nine steel pan manufacturing grants to the extent of \$2.3 million and many of them have utilized these, the funding, as again, to improve their manufacturing outputs, outfits and you can actually see, if you go on to Amazon there are several small Trinidadian manufacturing operators that are actually selling on Amazon. So that, if I give you a testimonial, one manufacturer also expressed that the grant fund facility assisted in continued export growth in markets worldwide through the launch of a range of new steel pan products including mini pans, petite pans and pan accessories. And these kinds of reports are indicative of the success of the facility.

Again, we are now going to move with the PSIP to expanding the facility so that we can assist these manufacturers with attendance at exhibitions and trade shows. We will also support them with the use—the adoption and the use of

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

e-commerce platforms and online payment systems. We will also support the production of steel pan accessories including the stands, the sticks, the cases. We are also thinking about developing a governance structure to ensure that the development of the steel pan production industry has a clear strategic direction with a focus on innovation and sustainability and exports. More jobs for those involved in it. And as I speak about the steel pan industry, I wish to congratulate Musical Instruments of Trinidad and Tobago Company Limited (MIDCO). Again, we, the Ministry, collaborate with the private sector—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—on the overall development of the steel pan industry. MIDCO has, in August of this year, gone into the manufacturing of steel pan and I think this is going to have a really revolutionary impact in terms of scale and, of course, the availability of steel pans across the world. So at this time we are also having discussions on facilitating the establishment of a chroming factory ensuring that every aspect of the steel pan value chain is totally local.

I want to just say that our time is—our focus in the Ministry is just not on manufacturing. It is also on services, particularly because the services sector is largest contributor to economic activity. You are talking about approximately contributing to 64 per cent of GDP in 2021 and 27 per cent in the quarter one of 2022 and employing more than 87 per cent of the labour force. Our focus would be on increasing the export of services. As it is, it is now at 4 per cent and therefore we continue to work with Caricom in their regional services sector strategy. We continue to work with the TTCSI and we have provided them with PSIP funding so that they can, again, employ the necessary project personnel so that they can continue with their Gateway to Trade programmes. And I can tell

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you that in September of 2021, 76 firms would have benefited from this Gateway to Trade Programme and I am talking about persons involved ICTs, not only manufacturing, ICTs and business events, professional services, energy services and so on. And, of course, in 2022 another 43 firms were selected for one-on-one coaching. In 2023, we expect to unroll—TTCSI expects to unroll another 80 firms. And you would note that TTCSI also launched their national services exporters' portal. Again, this is to address the issue of access to reliable services statistics and where necessary for the development of data-driven policy initiatives and incentives.

Again, we are working and we have prioritized the yachting facility as, Madam President, more than 50 persons would have benefited for Government's facility where we have dispersed more than \$1.4 million to all of those persons that MSMEs—sorry the micro businesses and small businesses engaged in ship building repair and maintenance, service of vessels, the hospitality services and travel agencies services and so on. So that we are assisting them and to further stimulate that sector we are going to spend another \$4 million in our PSIP to implement an international yachting campaign. Also, to implement yachting initiatives in the national maritime policy and strategy to host a regatta—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—host a regatta. And of course, to continue extending grant fund facilities. With regard to the improvement in the ease of doing business, I know you continue to harp on the 2019 figures but we have gone ahead of that, Sen. Lyder, and there a number of programmes that we have done. And the most important one that we—the most successful, I would think, would be the automated construction permitting system DevelopTT launched in March 2020

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

and which has progressed to where we are now in Trinidad where, not Tobago as yet, where in fact you can, in fact, when you can apply for your online permits electronically. To date where they have granted 210 building permits and 21 completion certificates across seven corporations, those are the completed ones. But on the system we have something like 4,330 applicants that have registered on to DevelopTT on to that platform. And of course, we are moving ahead with Tobago as well.

But what we are seeing is that we are having a reduction of time in the processing of these construction permits, both at the level of out—at final approval and at outline approval. So much is being done. Of course, we launched our trade and business information portal just in May of this year. We have had more than 120,000 visits on that platform. There is the enhancement of the TTBizLink platform. Madam President, I can tell you that by April of next year we would have and enhanced TTBizLink in addition to the 43 services, e-services now being offered, another 13 services will be offered on, involving five agencies on that enhanced TTBizLink platform. So we are working to ensure also that there is and alongside that, there is the implementation of online payments at all of our border agencies and for all services through the TTBizLink platform.

I would have liked to go in more to our trade—the more transformative measures, the trade and investment promotion agency, the institutional strengthening and modernization of the trade licensing unit of the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The modernization of the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards, the SEZ, the Special Economic Zones Agency, which should be up and running in another two quarters, Madam President. There is a lot of work going on in the Ministry in terms of transformation and modernization as well. So it is

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

not—we are looking down the road to ensure that we have a Ministry of Trade and Industry with capacity for the future. We are forward thinking, at the same time keeping our eyes on our investments, our inward investments, our exports and, of course, our employment, Madam President. More than ever despite the constant negativity and the naysaying that is orchestrated by the Opposition, I want to say that our non-energy sector today is more vibrant than it has ever been.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Our businesses, both in the manufacturing and services sectors, they continue to grow and they are major catalysts for economic transformation. Right? None of this would be possible without our people though. And this is why our Government continues to recognize that our citizens are key to the future of our country and we will remain committed to implementing programmes and initiatives aimed at providing our citizens with opportunities to self-actualize and to unlock their full potential.

So it is, Madam President, with tenacity in the face of global challenges, that this Government will continue to transform Trinidad and Tobago into new society and a new economy by harnessing the strength of local through our engines of growth and our people. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Thompson-Ahye.

Sen. Hazel Thompson Ahye: Madam President, I thank you for this opportunity to joint this debate on the Bill for:

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

In short, the Bill for the appropriation financial year 2023, Act 2022.

A witty gentleman said, before I got up to speak, only God and I knew what

I was going to say. Now, only God knows. No. You are not so lucky. I know what I am going to say.

Charles Dickens, in *David Copperfield* wrote:

“Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.”

With budget deficit, though less than the preceding years, we know that we are in for some misery. Misery loves company and this misery has attracted a lot of company. If the truth be told though, some of these companions live lives far removed from misery. They commiserate, they do not alleviate and cannot participate legitimately in the miserere nobis band. Maybe under another banner, nouveau riche, perhaps?

When my children were younger, they would say things like, “Mom you never let us have fun. Mom you always correcting my speech”. I used to tell them, “When you deal in absolutes, you will lose because I just have to bring one example to the contrary to destroy your argument”. So when I hear views expressed that this is the worst budget, that there is nothing in the budget to stimulate the economy, I wonder if the speaker has read the budget at all. But more of that anon.

I begin this debate by speaking to my fellow citizens. My mother bequeathed to her children many pearls of wisdom. She had some sayings I found puzzling but in time appreciated. One of the things she used to say was, “You must talk for yourself. Do not let the enemy talk for you”. That made no sense to me. As far as I was concerned, anytime I spoke I had formulated that thought in my own head and then uttered words. But after hearing some contributions during

the budget debate in the other place and here, I am now convinced that some parliamentarians did not talk themselves. Now that they have had time to reflect, I am sure that they are saying like Flip Wilson used to say, “The devil made me do it”.

I asked my fellow citizens, forgive my fellow parliamentarians for any ill-chosen words that have hurt you. They did not speak for themselves. It can happen to anyone, even me. I delivered a feature address at the Separation and Reunion Forum at London Metropolitan University. That forum comprised children who had been brought to England after separated from their parents, sometimes forcibly, or had been left behind when their parents emigrated and had now been reunited with their parents. The forum was to heal the psychological hurt that resulted.

The illustrious Sir Hilary Beckles had delivered the address the previous year, so I knew I had a hard act to follow. The organizer knew I had once received a standing ovation at the Royal Holloway Hall of London University and expected much from me. I worked hard on my address. A Trini nun told me I had made her proud to be a Trinidadian. Then the enemy came. In answering a question, I used the term “half caste”. I had never used that term before and cannot for the life me say where it had come from. I had not spoken for myself.

A young woman in the audience expressed her hurt and anger. My apology did not appease her. I felt mortified. Pride came before a fall. So do forgive parliamentarians who have hurt you. Say, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do”. And if I have hurt you when I did not intend, forgive me too. Mea culpa. The older ones should remember when as children we were given that awful purge medicine, that a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down in a

most delightful way. So we need to remember to sweeten our words in a bitter environment.

Being a representative is often a thankless occupation. People have short memories. Today a representative may distribute packages to children in his constituency who passed the SEA exam and he is thanked. A few weeks later he is careless in his speech and he is vilified as being uncaring.

Now to the 2023 Budget. I must say the Minister of Finance always delivers a good looking budget. I refer to the cover of the documents, eh, not the contents. And it always has a catchy title. Last year it was “Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic”. This year it is “Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges”. It is a title that is designed to inspire hope and confidence in the future. It falls trippingly off the tongue but reviews of the budget in the media tell a tale of anxiety, vulnerability and fear for the future. So which is it? Do we have faith in the Government’s ability to stabilize the economy or do we conclude like Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, said in response to Polonius, that all the hon. Minister of Finance spoke was merely words, words, words?

Madam President, I begin with one of my pet subjects, education. As in former years, rightly so, education got the lion’s share of the budget \$7.453 billion. It deserves every cent. It is an incontrovertible fact that education is central to building the economy. The hon. Minister of Finance in his budget statement describes the education system thus. Our education system is now modern, inclusive, accessible and relevant and broadly meets the development needs of our country. Truth or fiction?

In the executive summary to the Social Sector Investment Programme table one summary of initiatives achievements across various Ministries, agencies and

institutions number five with regard to the Ministry of Education it reads:

“Trinidad and Tobago will have a seamless, reformed, high quality education and training system.”

Before I discuss the education and training system, I will speak of the link between education and training and the economy. Anna Sudderth in an article published in *XQ Xtra Newsletter* on April 07, 2022—all of the references will be made available to *Hansard* as I have explained to them before.

“How important is education for economic growth?”

At data from the United States.

“The Alliance for Excellent for Education found that increasing high school graduation rates would lead to dramatic increases in:

- Gross domestic product
- Annual earning
- Annual spending”—and
- “• Federal tax revenue”

The writer poses that:

“To succeed in the 21st century job market, high school students need to graduate with more than academic knowledge. They need the skills, the confidence and creativity to meet the challenges of a changing world.”

There has been an increasing attention to STEM, that is, Science, Technology, Engineering and Math especially as it relates to the education of girls. Sudderth recommends instead, an innovative, career-minded approach to learning, namely, the STEAM curriculum. So this acronym STEM is expanded to include A for the arts. She states:

Through STEAM learning, students combine hard skills with learning to

think critically and creatively, just as they will need to do in real-world professional situations.

A great deal of time and money are wasted and frustration of citizens engendered through having to deal with people who cannot think critically and creatively. I have intervened for many people trying to access services from Government Departments including some court registries and private entities including banks. It is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. I often wonder why common sense is not more common. And I have really tried to steal myself not to ask the person in front of me, “Did you go to school in August”? As we spend more and more money on education, I urge that STEAM be included in the curriculum. The University of the West Indies had a seminar in critical thinking in the 1990s and I thought then that more people should have been trained and I hope that my plea will be heeded.

A good high school education will prepare students to pursue and succeed at tertiary education to the benefit of themselves and the society. And that is what we want to do, to build a society.

Brent Radcliffe in an article titled “How Education and Training Affect the Economy” published in Investopedia in June 2022 stated:

“•Differences in training levels are a significant factor that separates developed and developing countries.

•An economy’s productivity rises as the number of educated workers increases since skilled workers can perform tasks more and economy more value weapon equal education and efficiently.

•An economy is more valuable when equal education and labour opportunities are available across gender, race, age and ethnicities.”

The budgeted sum is for education and training. And thank the Government for that.

Radcliffe explains how job training influences the economy thus. A successful economy has a workforce capable of operating industries at a level where it holds a competitive advantage over the economies of other countries and we are competing so that is why that is so important. Nations may try incentivizing training through tax breaks. And you heard today that this one of the things that the Government is doing, providing facilities to train workers. That is ongoing or a variety of other means designed to create a more skilled workforce. While it is unlikely that an economy will hold a competitive advantage in all industries, it can focus on several industries in which skilled professionals are more readily trained.

Difference in training levels are a significant factor that separates developed and developing countries. So the education Ministry has responsibility not only for high school and tertiary education but also for primary and early childhood education. It has been proven time and again that school is a protective factor in preventing criminality so we have to keep children in school. But when we have criminality occurring within the schools we have an extremely challenging state of affairs and we see what has been happening lately.

Regarding early childhood education, I note Government's intention to invest the sum of \$5 million for the construction, the completion of five early childhood care centres and \$2 million for the procurement of furniture and equipment to outfit completing and existing ECCE Centres. And \$5 million for improvement, refurbishment and extensions to ECCE Centres for outstanding commitments and contractors for the newly launched inclusively school project to

improve the safety and well-being of disabled students.

Now, I am disappointed that no one saw it fit to correct the term “disabled students” to the more acceptable description “students with disabilities”. Since I entered the Parliament in 2018 I have been advocating for special needs students. Today, in 2022, almost 2023, I am still hearing the cries of parents and professionals engaged in the care of children with autism. They speak of the lack of teachers’ aides which debar their children from entering into mainstream schools. They speak of expensive therapy which many cannot afford. They consider that their autistic children are the forgotten ones and we need to do more in this area.

Madam President, we can pump as much money into the education system as we can afford. But if we do not make schools a happy place for children, a place where they can get some measure of success, they will not want to learn or cannot learn and will drop out from school.

A study by Dr. Vena Jules titled “Students’ Experience of Secondary Schooling in Trinidad and Tobago”: The first three years found that 12.8 per cent of students dropped out of school by year two. And in year three this rose to 15.5 per and that more males than females dropped out of schools. Reasons were transportation, inability to cope with school work and other things. I dare say, we can easily add to those two the shame experienced by children within the classroom. Children are insulted by teachers. They are ignored by them on a daily basis and they complained of that. The Tranquillity rant that we heard of last year is not a unique situation.

I found my daughter crying in bed one night. She was about 10-plus years. I asked reason. She told me Miss told her that she was too aggressive. No man will

ever marry her. I was shocked. The teacher admitted to me that she had indeed said those words to my daughter. The teacher also said, my daughter was rude. She had given the children ice cream cones and my daughter had expressed a preference for one other than what she had given her. The teacher had refused to exchange the ice cream cone and my daughter exchanged with a friend. When I asked my daughter about it she explained. The first cone had peanuts on it. She is violently allergic and could have ended up in the emergency ward. I had a senior teacher walk into my classroom and say to me in front of my entire class, “I do not know why you are killing out yourself with those duncy head children. They can’t pass no Common Entrance”. I cried that day.

The self-fulfilling prophecy is alive and very real in this land where we sing lustily, “Here every creed and race find an equal place and may God bless our nation”. Children who come from poor disadvantaged communities, particularly children of African descent are too frequently told they will not amount to anything. That certain careers and occupations and positions are out of their reach. They have nothing to aspire to but banditry. I have told you before, I am sure about the child who came into his classroom and excitedly told his teacher with pride, “Miss you read the papers? Miss, about the daring robbery, Miss? That is my brother, you know, Miss”. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs apply to every human being. The needs are the same from the top to the bottom of the pyramid. While the State may satisfy some of the lower order needs such as water, food, shelter and clothing, other needs such as love and belonging, esteem, respect, recognition and desire for self-actualization may remain unfulfilled and the gang leader positions himself to fulfil those needs.

Our children need heroes and “sheroes”, especially those that look like them.

We are very good at destroying our heroes but fail miserably at creating them. People who are highly regarded are pulled down and made to feel—in the hope that they will feel less than they are. And we have seen it in this very Parliament.

1.00 p.m.

Shortly after I was awarded the Humming Bird Gold I attended a church function. The lady who collected my ticket said to me, “Congratulations, you went to school with Paula-Mae?” I was speechless. She then say, “Anyway I know you work very hard.” The irony is that 16 years before, that same parish church had awarded me a gold medal for outstanding service to the parish. On another occasion a lawyer whose work I had been asked to critique, I did it without any charge. She was upset because I pointed out several errors and she phoned me and say, “You know, it have certain jobs you will not get because of your background”. I went home and I laughed. She might have heard that I once lived in East Port of Spain and attended Bethlehem Girls RC, but did not know I was not born there, that the land which the Anglican church in San Juan was located once belonged to daddy’s family, and he was supposed to get that land inside of Thompson Street, and that the bell that was stolen that had been donated to the church, San Juan church, was donated by my great aunt who had been the organist there. The person could not have known I had been specially invited by the British Government to be their guest at the first World Women’s Lawyers Conference, and to have tea at the House of Lords.

Youth needs mentors who guide them. I was fortunate to have available to me certain persons who always believed in me and love me until their death. Justice Telford George, Chief Justice Clinton Bernard, Selwyn Richardson, to name a few. During the 14 years I spent as Director of the Legal Aid Clinic at the

Hugh Wooding Law School, and the 10 years I spent at the Eugene Dupuch Law School in the Bahamas training law students, I have tried to mentor them. I have kept all the letters they have written to me over the years. We have to build the next generation. And I have been thinking, how I can help Minister Cummings with his important Ministry starting in 2023? I am determined to help him succeed. We who have benefited from others must pay it forward, help others who need that help. We should weed out from the Teaching Service Commission teachers who do not love children. The Teaching Service Commission will have a teacher on suspension for years, even those who commit sexual offences against children, and will not act decisively.

We must also consider the plight of children who are mentally ill. Neither the budget statement nor the Social Sector Investment programme mentioned plans for this area of health. This week the manager of a children's home shared with me her frustration. She has in her care a 9-year-old child who suffers from schizophrenia. She is at her wits end and ready to shut down one of the best children's homes in the country. She told me appeals to the Children's Authority produce very limited relief. Children with psychiatric problems are still housed at St. Ann's Hospital and adult facilities, with the attendant risk, despite the High Court having ordered that the State cease and desist from this practice. Appointments with child guidance clinics are not readily available. You can count on one hand the number of qualified child psychiatrists in this country, so children in need cannot get urgent care.

Finance, revenue authority. Madam President, a number of people are happy that the revenue authority is finally coming on stream. As I said before in this Chamber, there are some good people in Inland Revenue who over the years

have been distressed at the high level of corruption in their workplace. Many of them are retired and are active members of the Towers of Strength Prayer group, and they feel that their prayers are finally being answered. Taxpayers assistance, amnesty, increase in personal allowances. There is an urgent need for re-institution of the taxpayers' assistance desk. Even with the amnesty some people are still outside the net but are willing to comply if given the necessary assistance. Most people welcome the increase in personal allowance. It does not benefit only those who are well off. I do not think that many people realize that at times there are several family members of different generation dependant on that one family who has a fairly good job. Customs Division: During a joint select committee meeting we learn that some scanners were not operational. In these times when we have a serious problem of illegal guns entering our country one would have imagined that a matter as important as non-functioning scanners would be top priority. Cashless transactions and fintech. I welcome the cashless transactions as a forward step, bringing us into the 21st Century. I am also very happy with the advances we are making with fintech, although we seem to be lagging behind other Caribbean countries, such as the Bahamas.

Safety and security: Undoubtedly the issue of safety and security of our citizens is a grave concern, and my pun is intended. We do not feel safe in the streets, our homes, our workplaces and recreation places. The comfort patrol in my area brought a measure of comfort, but it was discontinued without notice or consultation. Who said we would not have been willing to contribute financially to the continuation of this service? Nobody asked us. But it was just unceremoniously removed. Crime seems out of control, and we feel helpless. Guns are everywhere. This did not happen overnight. I recall being in an armed

robbery case about 1989. Two brothers were involved. I was representing the elder of the two boys. The younger who was age 18 gave a confession statement in which he said he had rented a gun from a man in Tunapuna for \$5, and the man had said he did not like to rent them guns because they like to waste bullets and do not bring profits. After the case ended I enquired of the police if they had investigated the man who was renting guns. They had not. I complained to the then head of the community police, Mr. Cooper, if you remember him, a very energetic and hardworking gentleman, now deceased, and he told me he was fed up of the police.

Last week I read in the newspaper of a man in Tunapuna who was renting guns, I think for \$15. Maybe it is the same man. What is sad and indeed frightening is that ironically many arms of the protective services seem complicit in the illegal arms trade and the drug trade that goes along with it. Many years ago I was representing someone in a civil matter, my client gave me a statement. It sounded so fantastic that I thought my client might be certifiable. Over a year later I was sitting in the assizes and my blood ran cold. Some of the very words spoken to me by my then client were repeated at the criminal trial of a former Commissioner of Police. A couple of years ago some criminal law attorneys shared that coast guards men had complained that at times they were given orders not to patrol in certain areas at particular times. We have lost our innocence. Young people have a strong sense of justice than older people. The disparities or perceived inequities in the legal system affects them. Our failure to punish big time criminals and our readiness to punish severely for petty crime causes disrespect and a lack of trust in the legal system. Who looks out for the poor in our society? Remember the egnog food poisoning case of patients at St. Ann's

Hospital? There was no recovery. Nobody got anything. The whole thing happened in a particular way so that they would get nothing.

The effect of the budget on the poor. I could not attend the ceremonial opening of Parliament as we had a prearranged annual vacation on Paradise Island. Trinidad is nice. Trinidad is a paradise. But we thought Paradise Island was the real deal. I normally will carry bus-up-shut and cook curry for the staff the day before I leave. This time I left the curry behind in Trinidad. I decided to buy some curry and pick up some soft drinks, juice, eggs, et cetera. I was stunned by the prices. The eggs were more than twice time the price \$7.49 US for 12, and the curry more than three times. If you live abroad and you pay utility bills you may sing Trinidad is nice, Trinidad is a paradise. And I have lived in two other countries. I heard a tale of woe from a sales clerk about the high prices of food, school books and utilities and her small minimum wage. My heart went out to her. Comparisons are odious yes, but sometimes they are useful.

The removal of the gas subsidy. This has been a gradual process but it has now hit hard because of loss of income from COVID. On my way to work I pass many homes with three and four cars in the garage. If they are going the same direction, family members may have to sacrifice the convenience of being able to move when they want to move and accommodate one another. Now that COVID has abated consider giving a lift to someone, especially a school child. We are called upon to be our brothers' keeper and our sisters' keeper, and we must play that role. Is Government doing enough? Has the Government explored all the possibilities for decreasing the budget deficit? Have they renegotiated the cost of rental of properties? I have not heard anything about that. What about lawyers' fees? The present principal of UWI, in delivering the distinguished lecture for the

Judicial Education Institute at the Hall of Justice a few years ago, said that lawyers' fees in Trinidad and Tobago were exorbitant. She did not make herself popular but she spoke the truth.

State attorneys are grossly underpaid. At times they have seen experienced junior lawyers doing shoddy work, which they then have to correct. One was paid over 15 times the state's lawyers' monthly salary for an affidavit that was severely defective. They could not even put it in court. Has Government explored, in addition to building buying existing buildings and renovating them? Government must continue to explore ways and means to alleviate the hardship on the disadvantaged. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Service is trying its best, but must work harder to alleviate the corruption that has existed for years. For too long the warning signs have been there, suspicions have been raised, and thank God I see that there is a fresh wind blowing in the Ministry and things are happening. What about the banks? Is there anything that we can do about the banks that make obscene profits every year and extract every ounce of flesh?

Madam President: Can I be allowed to listen to Sen. Thompson-Ahye please, without being distracted?

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: We are quick to come down on the credit unions, but the banks are allowed free rein. What can we do when you have a little money in the bank and they extract some of that money every month, and a poor widow may be left with nothing, or a school child may be left with nothing at the end of the day for the profits of the bank? The former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries encouraged us to plant the land, and I did. Many people in the Chamber saw evidence of my ochros and yam and limes, but the African snail is driving me up a wall.

When we think we have gotten rid of them another one appears. Every Corpus Christi I will go down and buy plants—fruit trees from Hazel Brown, now all of them are dead. All my chadon benny gone, all the pigeon peas. Please, help us? For those who could buy flour and flour substitute, I recommend homemade bread. It is the best, and its aroma frequently fills my house with its delicious scent. My baked chicken tastes better than Kentucky. Now more than ever we need to be our brothers and sisters' keeper. I have lots of recipe books I am willing to share. We are called to do what we can to help others.

Caribbean Airlines, the air bridge, organizing a conference in Tobago revealed to me how much more difficult it is for international travellers to get to Tobago than to Barbados. The demise of LIAT and the difficulties being experienced by judges in Trinidad and Barbados and elsewhere to get to St. Lucia for the CAJO conference, the judges conferences made me wonder why our Caribbean Airlines have not been able to fill the gap left by LIAT? Is there something that we can do? There are opportunities to be explored as we seek to increase our market share of the tourism market. Once judge told me she had to leave Barbados, go somewhere, I think, Dominica, no Guyana, spend the night there and then travel to St. Lucia. Two days, that never happened before. What can we do to take up some of that market? Agriculture fair and marketing: The agriculture fair opened my eyes to so many industries that have sprung off from agriculture. I felt a sense of pride and made important links for the future. When I was invited by Pakistan to deliver a paper on their south-to-south initiative, I discovered by liaising with the Minister of Trade and Industry's staff how much trade we have with the south. It is a well-kept secret. And I hear all the time nothing is happening in Trinidad and Tobago, the Minister of Trade and Industry is

not doing anything. That is not true. I congratulated her then and I congratulate her again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: I should like to know from the Ministry of National Security how many qualified forensic pathologists we have employed. I have raised this question before. I have brought to the Chamber the fact of the availability of scholarships. Do we have qualified forensic pathologist now employed, or doctors qualified in forensic medicine who cannot be considered forensic pathologist in the UK, Canada or the United States because they do not have the sub-speciality of anatomical pathology? This has serious implications for prosecution. Remember the Brad Boyce case.

I admit, this is not a happy budget, but it is not the worse of the worst. I agree that Government needs to explore ways and means to bring relief where it is most needed. I see improvement with new roads over the last few years. We see the Interchange. We see what is happening in Morvant junction. But I also see deterioration in the roadway and in the water supply. These situations produce frustration and anger and contribute to frail nerves, and may even result in violence in the home and in the society.

Stress: Despite the existence of the Domestic Violence Unit the police are still not performing as they should. I have had to make complaints to the head of the unit whom I must say has always responded readily to my complaints. I thank her publicly for hard work and commitment. But it is so strange that when I report to her what I have heard, the complaints that have been brought to me, and I am really not a consumer of society but people report to me a lot, and when you hear what the police are saying the stories are so divergent. One was told to me by a

Senior Counsel, reached out to me one night and I immediately intervened, and what the police said was plain lies, pure lies.

And I have had direct experience with someone going to report domestic violence, and when you see the certificate, the receipt, you see the name of the person, and I have said it here before, and you see what is happening, but there is no other party. Why? Because the other party is a police officer. We just have to stop doing that nonsense. We have not yet seen the legislative agenda, but I hope that a sexual harassment Bill will be included. Too many women are suffering in the workplace through the actions of macho men who cannot understand that their attentions are unwelcome, and they are not God's gift to women. I could say more, but I would not say right now.

We need to have an honest conversation about race in this country. Some years ago my good friend from India who had no daughters at the time decided that she would be close to my daughters, and she gave them shalwar to wear. When Divali time was coming up, my daughter could not wait to put it on. She said, "Mummy, ah wearing meh shalwar today". And she dressed and she went out in the shalwar. She said mummy this is to honour my Indian heritage because her daddy's grandfather is an Indian man, you know, a Hindu and he wore kapra all his life. So she said I want to honour that heritage, and she went to class, and the lecturer told her, "Why yuh wearing dat?" She cried that day because she was waiting for Divali to come. We have to be careful what we do. We have to be careful.

Madam President: Sen. Thompson-Ahye you have five more minutes.

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: One of the things I would like to see is more work put into the development of the culture. We are sitting on a gold mine. I always say

we have more talented people per square mile in Trinidad and Tobago than anywhere else in the world. I heard just now about the steelband factory and so on. I remember being in Bern in Switzerland and with our honorary counsel, the best honorary counsel you could find anywhere. I had gone there because my nephew had drowned in Bern, in the river Aare, and he said, “I have to go and pick up my daughter from school so I will take you with me”. When I went to that school in Bern I saw dozens of shiny chrome steel pans, and he said his daughter is actually learning to play steelband in Switzerland. And when the people who were taking me around, they had a bus, and when we were driving along the roadway the people were coming out and peeping through their windows and clapping us. They were so happy to see Trinidadians.

And in terms of our culture in drama and music, we have so many people out there who are very very talented. We need to harness that. We ought to see what can we do to make it work for us? What can we export? Can we not write our own soap operas? We have done it before. But these people are always pleading and begging for help. We have just had a poetry slam last week. So there is an abundance of talent that we need to harness to build our society for those people who are in the creative arts to build themselves. So please consider that and see what we can do, because, as I say, that is a way that we can bring money into the economy. So, we have not done too badly. There is more than we can do. There is much more. There is always more to be done, and I thank you for the opportunity, Madam President, and I will always say that I am always willing to build my country, and I am sure most of you all are as well. Thank you Mr.—oh, he is not here—Minister of Finance for trying your best with the budget. We know it was not easy, but you have tried.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Madam President, it truly is an honour and a privilege to join this budget debate. Much has already been presented and exchanged, and I want to join Sen. Thompson-Ahye in warmly and sincerely congratulating the Minister of Finance of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—for doing an excellent job, not just in the difficult task of preparing the budget documents and delivering the budget, but also in steering our economy over the last few years through a very difficult period in our national development. Madam President, I think it is worth summarizing that we had—we faced a general collapse in global energy prices. We faced that. We also faced a global pandemic which started very quietly and slowly in China and then affected every region and country of this planet, and Trinidad and Tobago was no exception. And then we faced, through no fault of our own, earlier this year, a devastating war in Ukraine that has affected every nation of the world, particularly small-island developing States like our own. And therefore the Minister of Finance has not had an easy task at all. But I also want to congratulate a sector that sometimes is a bit neglected, and that is the Ministry of Planning and Development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Very ably managed by the current Minister Beckles, Penelope Beckles. But I want to reach back a little bit in time to the former Minister of Planning and Development, Camille Robinson-Regis. Because it was she who coordinated an exercise, Madam President, that culminated in the Road Map for Recovery Project. The Road Map for Recovery document. And,

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

Madam President, the question should be asked, because we are now emerging from COVID-19, have we seen results from this Road Map to Recovery?

Madam President, right in this budget statement I see data which I would like to offer to this Senate as a response to that question. Madam President, what I see, and I am delighted to see it, is that in the first half of 2022 Trinidad and Tobago's non-energy manufacturing sector expanded by 17 per cent, 17 per cent in just half of a year. But, Madam President, the food and beverage industry expanded by 28 per cent in Trinidad and Tobago. The chemicals and fertilisers industry expanded by 103 per cent; the paper and paper products related industries expanded by 29 per cent; the glass and glass products industry expanded by 45 per cent; furniture and light fittings industry in this country expanded by 12 per cent; wood and wood related products expanded by 55 per cent. All of these non-energy related industries in our little country in half a year that have been growing and growing, Madam President. The answer to the question is, yes. The Road Map to Recovery process is a success, and there is valid ground for great hope for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Yes, we have come through a very difficult period. The society, the economy, our citizens and families right across our twin islands have come through a very difficult period. But, Madam President, I look at this budget and I see great hope for the future.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Madam President, I want to just pause a moment as we talk about recovery to offer my sincere and heartfelt congratulations to my dear colleague Sen. Lutchmedial for her own recovery and return to the Senate

today. Congratulations to her.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Madam President, I listened closely to all heads of state across the world, and our own head of state in Trinidad and Tobago, and we have had some very distinguished heads of state over the years. And, Madam President, I recall one admonition that remains with me and motivates me, and that was that we in this country need politicians and policy makers and parliamentarian who think less of the next election and more of the next generation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Madam President, and is it that thinking of the next generation that leads me to further commend the Minister of Finance, because he may not be measured as a youth himself. He may be youthful. But he certainly has born the next generation in mind. Madam President, one most outstanding features of the 2023 Budget has been a deliberate strategic focus on the next generation of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Madam President, just in the apprentice programmes alone, just in that sector alone I am seeing incentives and programming for apprenticeship programmes in mechanical engineering technology, electrical and electronic technology, industrial maintenance technology, mechatronics. Some people do not even know what that is, but we are talking about the future. Wood and wood related products, Agricultural Shade House programming. A slew of youth development programmes being managed by, ably managed under the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. Apprenticeship programmes in the agricultural sector, in local government, in

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

digital transformation, continued funding of the OJT programme, expansion of GATE, and the brilliant school-to-work apprentice allowance programme, boosting employment and uptake from school to work by 16 to 25 year-olds, right across Trinidad and Tobago, Madam President. And that to me is inspiring and encouraging of hope.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Madam President, I refer to apprentice as important, because I recall not too long ago my own days when emerging from secondary school. I went to Queen's Royal College, Madam President, and I did quite well in school. I won, let us not go through the résumé, but the national debating competition and chess competition and several other things. And I was emerging into the world of work. I had to go to work before I even considered university. I did not come from a wealthy family. A very humble family, and I remember sitting with my mother and preparing my résumé, Madam President, and applying. I applied to every single bank in this country. Me. I applied to every single bank, every single insurance company, and everywhere I thought I could get some office experience as a young person.

Madam President, every single one of those applications came back, "We will keep you on file, we have no spaces available". That was very discouraging to me, and I got one positive response that was from a hardware store in western Trinidad. And I turned to my mother for advice and she said, "Amery, a good and honest dollar is always worth your energy".

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.30p.m.

And, Madam President, I went to work in that hardware store and you know

what I remember to this day, turning up in my overalls and—I learned a lot by the way, because now I fix almost anything. I learned about plumbing fittings and electrical and all those other things. But I saw some of my peers who were in school with me, some of them who were breaking biche while I was studying; some who were smoking weed outside of the school; some who used to go Down the Islands during school time, passing by with long sleeve shirts and ties. You know why? Because their daddy and their mommy had contacts and they were working in those same banks and insurance companies that I had failed to get into, Madam President. And that was a bit of a crossroads in my life as young person, because it was telling me the system was not friendly to me, or to somebody like me.

But, the message to young persons is, sometimes you go through those seasons in your life and then you can look back and realize it all culminated in something and helped to produce the person that you are today. So it is a message of perseverance, Madam President. So when I see these apprenticeship programmes and I hear young people today saying that life is hard—and life is hard. It is difficult to be a young person in the modern world, here and all over the world. I am saying that this budget presents critical opportunities to you and it is now up to you to take advantage and seize those opportunities, to make something of yourself, make something of your family and contribute to your community.

So, Madam President, the budget is near and dear to my heart and I listened carefully to the submissions that have been made thus far and to me there were almost two debates taking place. There were submissions that were full of enlightenment. I heard a large number of positive recommendations and suggestions and I want to commend the Independent Bench here today—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—frankly and openly from the first to the last, frankly and openly, Madam President. I do not agree with everything they have said, but it was said in good faith, it was said respectfully, it was said with the intent to inform the policymakers of this country and we are obliged to listen. We are obliged to adjust where we can and in some cases we are obliged to respond. We are not able to adopt every recommendation. Madam President, and that is a message to us all, not every critic is an enemy, not every critic is an enemy and not every criticism is an attack.

But, Madam President, I said there were two debates because when I listened, and I do not know, I am always a man of hope, but when I listened to some of the submissions began by Sen. Mark and continued with a number of his colleagues, I have to feel a great sense of disappointment. Because where on one hand there was respectfulness; positivity; exchange of ideas; suggestions; specific recommendations; adjustments being advanced; on the other hand, all I was hearing were personal attacks, bile, venom, viciousness, negativity and sometimes it appeared a lack of belief in Trinidad and Tobago. And it would disappoint me if we have Members of the Senate of our country wearing T&T pins and not believing in the future of Trinidad and Tobago. That is a source of concern to me, Madam President. And I think that kind of mentality in my humble view, is unbecoming of the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, I had listened as well and I realized some in the UNC seemed to have fallen into adoration for the late Mr. Patrick Manning. And I wondered to myself, when did this occur, this adoration for Mr. Patrick Manning? And I heard one say that, in those days there were beautiful collaborations, almost

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

as if they used to vote for PNM budgets, to support PNM budgets. But history has a way of putting romantic glasses sometimes, because that is not what I recall at all in those days. And I recall ridicule, I recall personal attacks against Mr. Manning while in office. I recall them trying to make him look like Steve Urkel and all sorts of other means of denigration and worst of all, Madam President, I recall some of the most blistering and unfair personal attacks against the integrity of one of the greatest statesmen this country has ever produced. I remember that because I was there and I was paying attention. And, Madam President, for them to come now and pretend to be admirers of that same gentleman, it tempts me to say, to express myself a little bit differently, but I would say I am very disappointed in that rhetoric.

And, Madam President, I am hearing the same types of attacks and seeing the same types of attacks being advanced against the sitting Prime Minister of this country, Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley. And I saw Sen. Mark use his time, the precious time offered to address the citizens of the country, to bring some of the most awkward, and vague, and piecemeal insinuations and partial allegations against the Prime Minister of this country. And I want to tell Sen. Mark that he really needs to desist from that course and use his time in the Senate much more fruitfully than that. That is an abuse of his time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And if he has, if Sen. Mark has evidence of—and what is this, there seems to be an assertion that if you are from Tobago, you have done well in your career, you have become married to a prominent professional and they have worked hard as a family, that you are not supposed to own any property. Apparently that is the assertion of Sen. Mark, because he made no other

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

allegation except to talk about some five story apartment. My information is that there is no five story apartment to talk about and my advice to Sen. Mark is that if he has any evidence or proper allegation to offer, all he has to do is to step outside of the walls of this Parliament and put his mouth on the issue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: My further advice to him is that when he does so, walk with your cheque book, because it may very well cost you. I will leave that issue where it stands, Madam President.

And I see, I have heard in many of the submissions from Members opposite and I am referring specifically to the UNC Bench, of attempts to divide this country. They are operating on the illusion that there are two Trinidad and Tobagos and they operate along those lines, they profit along those lines of division, there are two Trinidad and Tobagos.

Madam President, it is my view that we have one united beautiful diverse country—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—which I am very, very, proud of.

Madam President, we have one country and we are characterized by warmth, hospitality, love, peacefulness, and regard for each other no matter race or religion. That is the Trinidad and Tobago I know. There are a few miscreants in the society but they should not characterize us.

Madam President, I remember when I returned with my family from Brazil, spent four years there, you know where we returned to live for 12 months?—it was not in Diego Martin, it was not in Port of Spain, it was in the heartland of central Trinidad in a little village called Carapichaima. A government Minister, because I

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

was sworn in right at the beginning of that period, living—from North Trinidad, I lived for one year in Carapichaima and, Madam President, those were some of the best times of my entire life. I found the people to be embracing and loving and warm and considerate. So there are no two Trinidad and Tobagos. And my own grandmother was born a Hindu woman, not from Carapichaima; Diego Martin, St. Lucien Road. And she grew up there and guess what, she also experienced a warm embrace by the people of that community. There is one Trinidad and Tobago, we will not allow the United National Congress to divide us—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Mitchell: Never.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—ever, and I am proud of my country. It is not just wearing a Trinidad and Tobago pin on our shoulders. And sometimes I listen to them talking about Guyana and Barbados. I am saying, well, you have two lapels, maybe you should pin another flag on the other. This is our country we should be proud of it. And, Madam President, that pride and patriotism characterizes the work being done by the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs. And I want to thank the staff, led by the Permanent Secretary and the officers and diplomats of this nation hard at work at headquarters and at 20 missions overseas—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—every day for the citizens of this country, always seeking the best interest of not one segment or sector but the entire nation, Madam President.

And it is that sense of pride that propelled me to speak on behalf of this nation at the United Nations General Assembly when I presented our national

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

statement, and I was able to represent, not the PNM, the T&T, the entire country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: That is the ethos that drives the Ministry. Trinidad and Tobago as it continues to punch above its weight class in the international arena and also in regional affairs. That is why we continue to have leadership roles at the United Nations on a range of UN committees, a powerful voice at the OAS, at CELAC, at the Association of Caribbean States, at the OACPS, the voice of Trinidad and Tobago is widely respected, the voice of Prime Minister, Dr. Rowley, I have seen it myself, Madam President. When I was in Brazil as Ambassador, the Prime Minister came to Chile on a mission focused largely on gas and I sat there in the meetings, on one side of the table was the then President of Chile, very distinguished, Michelle Bachelet, on the other side was Prime Minister Dr. Rowley and there was a very difficult and sensitive issue which I would not go into the specifics, which demanded gravitas and statesmanship. And I saw my Prime Minister standing toe to toe with a heavy weight of the globe, Michelle Bachelet, and stand his ground in the manner of a great statesman. And I applauded on that day.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And, Madam President, as Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs I have been privileged to see that statesmanship exercised many times subsequently. In the Caribbean community when Trinidad and Tobago speaks, its voice and opinion is regarded and respected by all across the board and that applies elsewhere. The Director General of the World Health Organization holds up Trinidad and Tobago and the leadership of this Government and this Prime Minister as an example of how to guide a small nation through a

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

devastating pandemic. That is the weight that we carry on the global scale, Madam President. I saw it at the Summit of the Americas, all of this taking place in this fiscal year where Trinidad and Tobago was considered, we carried a weight far above the size of our small nation. The voice of this country is respected.

Madam President, our foreign policy operates on very clear basis of principles which are widely known and regarded. Madam President, we operate on complete respect for international law on the basis of the UN Charter and on high regard for the sovereignty and sanctity of the borders of all member states of the United Nations. And that guides our relations with the United States of America, with China, with India, with Venezuela, with Caricom, with countries and regions far and wide.

Madam President, I can say without fear of contradiction that the international and regional footprint of Trinidad and Tobago, the stature of this country in regional and global affairs is as strong today as it has ever been in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I say that without fear of contradiction. And we are able to skilfully relate to international partners who themselves may not be getting along but the philosophy is we do not import and adopt their differences. We understand our role, we are guided by the philosophy of one of the founding fathers of the Caribbean community, Errol Barrow who said, friends of all but satellites of none. And that ethos propels us to maintain and build excellent relations with partners, and these are not relations for relation's sake, Madam President. I can keep you here for a very long time, just in the last fiscal year the results that we have been able to reap from the excellence of this nation's

diplomacy.

With the United States of America we are as close as we have ever been and we are looking forward to welcoming a new ambassador in a very short period of time. We have harvested COVID-19 vaccines for both adults and children, generously donated; field hospitals, generously donated; training across our national security sector; increased and occurring right as we speak, including the police service, the defence force, the coast guard as well as support to community organizations.

In this fiscal year the US is going to be putting down some major infrastructure. That project is going to increase employment and with major construction right here in this country demonstrating the value of the relationship between Trinidad and Tobago and the United States of America.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Same applies to Canada with donations of vaccines; excellent work across our security services; work with the Caribbean Public Health Agency; seasonal employment of workers in the agricultural sector; wide range of support to community based organizations. All built on the platform of strong diplomacy and strong connections. The same applies to every country with whom we have relations.

With Mexico, donations of ventilators during this fiscal period; training of staff and provision of technical expertise to our agricultural sector; provision of training to public servants in areas such as diplomacy. With Colombia, providing provision of training to our public servants in Spanish language training; disaster risk management; climate adaptation; security services under an agreement signed with Colombia for educational credit and technical studies abroad with the

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

University of the West Indies in our St. Augustine Campus; provision of an artistic mural at the national library; donation of books on prominent Colombian women to our national library; a positive balance of trade being maintained with that country for the last three years; cooperation between the coast guard and the Colombian Navy; all of that built on a foundation of excellent diplomatic work.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Same applies with Chile, Madam President. The Chilean Ambassador, the Dean of the Diplomatic Core, I work very closely with him; extensive training; extensive work with the Bocas Lit Fest; Latin nights at the national library; Spanish language training; continuing major imports of liquefied natural gas from Trinidad and Tobago; maintaining a trade surplus—congratulations to the Minister of Trade and Industry; language diplomacy; agriculture; trade policy; Spanish language and health care training being done with the Chileans.

Same with Argentina. And, again, these are countries that are not identical, Madam President, but we do not import their differences. What we do is seek the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Same with Peru. Astronomy Week 2022; memorandum of understanding signed in 2022 for collaboration in library and information systems; vibrant cultural exchanges. Well, do not even talk about Brazil. Donation of medication from Brazil during this fiscal period; extensive capacity building programmes; provision of scholarships on an ongoing basis; training the public servants in various areas of Spanish language; donation of personal protective equipment; all built on the foundation of strong and robust

diplomacy deployed by the hardworking staff and officers of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs.

Same applies to Panama, Madam President. Provision of vehicles to the Carbon Zero Institute of Trinidad and Tobago with proceeds towards a sustainable agricultural carbon sync project, 2022; continued implementation of a memorandum of understanding on air services allowing Copa Airlines to continue to operate between T&T and Panama; implementation of a visa waver agreement; cultural—the Ambassador is a cultural general and the people to people exchanges with Panama continue.

Venezuela, the same applies. A lot of work with repatriation, voluntary repatriation of Venezuelan citizens going back to Venezuela. We are contributing to that. Ongoing work on energy and security matters; collaboration between the Ministry of National Security involving our coast guard and Guardia Nacional; extensive cultural exchanges taking place; all built on a platform of strong diplomacy from Trinidad and Tobago.

Same applies with Nigeria; 30 course participants from Nigeria came here from the National Defence College of Nigeria to study in Trinidad and Tobago and build capacity in both directions.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: A range of Ministries are collaborating with Ministries in Nigeria at this time, opportunity for people to meet, interact and learn from each other with that particular country.

The record with China is strong, clear and something that we are very proud of. Extensive developmental across a number of administrations. I want to acknowledge that, consistent. China has been a good friend of this country,

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

continues to do so. You can see the infrastructure everywhere and, Madam President, we just had a donation of almost \$200,000 to the Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs, in the Office of the Prime Minister from the Chinese Government—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—focused on child welfare and children's homes. Range of important projects, such as the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate which will be a flagship for this entire hemisphere as it continues in its success.

“Ohh”, the Republic of India, excellent collaborations. They do not have a High Commissioner at this moment but the Charge d'affaires, I always tell him, if we could clone him we would save the world. Fantastic diplomats are here from India and we are working very well with them at this time. Wide range of training for our public officers, in law; auditing; renewable energy; public sector management, all through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme; scholarships for a range of our nationals; donation of vaccines; refurbishment done to the Mahatma Ghandi Statue in San Fernando by the High Commission. I was at the Mahatma Ghandi Cultural Institute just last week, very well hosted, and to admire the excellent people to people collaboration, training in yoga, training in the Hindi language, in Indian dance, et cetera, with great expertise being exchanged between India, and there is also expertise here, Madam President, in Trinidad and Tobago. All of this built on the foundation of excellent work and strong diplomacy by the people of this nation.

Same applies to the Republic of Korea, Madam President. Extensive work during this fiscal year, continued scholarships under the Global Korea Scholarship Programme. Trinidad and Tobago is an active participant in that. This year we had high technology inductees; young persons going to Korea to pursue futuristic

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

and innovative methodologies, artificial intelligence, robotics, that type of technology. Trinidad and Tobago preparing our next generation for the future—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—via collaboration with key partners and stakeholders.

Same applies with Japan, Madam President, extensive work taking place. The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme, ongoing and expanding; training in disaster risk management; training in waste management; support to CARPHA. The Government of Japan has provided technical and financial assistance to the Ministry of Planning and Development for sargassum seaweed management and a wide range.

The European Union, I cannot even begin. I know I do not have the time to go through the extent of benefits the citizens of this country are reaping from our diplomatic exchanges and collaboration with the European Union.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: What I can say is that their ambassador in this country is one of their best and brightest and sometimes I tell him I have trouble distinguishing him from a patriotic Trini. He really has settled well and serves as our advocate as well as the advocate for the European Union. Extensive benefits to our citizens, I have sheets and pages. And then when you breakdown in the countries into Spain, Germany, the UK—which is a European country, not a member of the UK—UK and Northern Ireland, France, Netherlands; Madam President, a wide range of projects, successes, initiatives, activities in the best interest of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: What I am demonstrating is this is a Ministry under the current Government of Trinidad and Tobago that continues to bring benefits to the ordinary citizens of this country with a focus on the next generation. What about the Caribbean community?

Madam President, what about the Caribbean community? What I can say is that Trinidad and Tobago was a founding member of Caricom and we continue to be a leading voice and the leading light in the progress and development of the Caribbean community. We have led our way.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: We brought successful legislation to this Parliament, supported in both Houses by most Members, where we are doing our part with the elaboration of a regional free market and economy. And I thank all who supported those particular measures, Trinidad and Tobago fulfilling its responsibilities. You would notice, Madam President, they used to talk about Guyana, Guyana, Guyana, and then when the Prime Minister Kamal Persad-Bissessar held office a lot of damage was done to our relations with Jamaica, Jamaica, Jamaica.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you. A lot of damage was done. If you observe closely in this last fiscal year, we hosted two very strategic high-level visits in this country. That was not done by accident. One was a state visit by the very distinguished President, His Excellency Dr. Irfaan Ali of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, well hosted here—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—in true statesman-like fashion by Prime Minister

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

Dr. Rowley, deliberate and strategic, well managed. Now, if you look across the region you will not find two nations closer than Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. So all the calls about Guyana, Guyana, Guyana, Guyana, and I told them that at the time, calm down, we know what we are doing. Now we have a memorandum of understanding—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—signed with the Guyanese Government, and our citizens and businesses are benefiting, they are working, they are expanding. You go there—well, I do not want to over-boast because there may be consequences, but you go into Guyana and you go across the region you will not find a shelf without Trinidad and Tobago products, you will not find a row of businesses without some entity from this country. Again, all built on the platform of excellent relations that we have been able to manage and ensure—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—on behalf of the people of this country. The other visit was the distinguished Prime Minister of Jamaica. Again, healing some of the scars created under a different administration, signing another memorandum of understanding. We signed an MOU with Suriname as well. These are not accidents, Madam President, we know where the future lies, we know where the pathways and the linkages that will benefit our energy sector as well as the regional agricultural food security initiative, and we are doing the work. We did the work in the last fiscal year we will continue the work in this fiscal year.

Madam President, we continued, we have had successful candidatures during this fiscal year. Election of Justice Alexis-Windsor to the International Criminal Court, until the year 2030; that was a major success.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Election of Helena Inniss, the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, until 2028. That was a success in this fiscal year. Re-election of Prof. Rhoda Reddock to CEDAW, until 2026.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Khalid Hassanali, until 2027 on the Legal and Technical Commission on the International Seabed Authority.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Trinidad and Tobago is doing its—and on that platform, Madam President, we have now offered ourselves to the world with great acclaim I must say, to be the President, for the first time, of the General Assembly of the United Nations, 2023 to 2024.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: We will succeed in this effort because we have one of our best and brightest, a most experienced diplomat, Ambassador Dennis Francis—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—who we wish to see in the Presidency. A man of great gravitas, leading a magnificent team. The future is bright for this nation, in this region and in the international arena. We have been modernizing and digitizing the Ministry in collaboration with the Ministry of Digital Transformation. That work is ongoing and results will continue to be rewarded to our citizens. Madam President, we also are going for the United Nations Security Council for a non-permanency. This is Trinidad and Tobago punching above its weight class, this is Trinidad and Tobago taking its rightful place, an important

voice in global affairs.

So, as I conclude, I just want to say that I looked across this budget debate and there is source for great hope and inspiration from a number of contributions. I look into the budget presentation done by the Minister of Finance. I am encouraged for the future of this country. I also heard key responses to so many concerns, concerns about roads, the budget has addressed that with major investment to solve the road infrastructure challenges.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: The water situation, WASA is being dealt with at this time; housing, the HDC completely transformed and redeveloped—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—with initiatives in this fiscal year; the Public Transport Service Corporation and the social safety net. Madam President, it is with great delight that I commend this budget to our citizens—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—and I thank you for this opportunity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Roberts.

2.00 p.m.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts. Yes, are you contributing to this debate?

Sen. Anil Roberts: Yes—[*Inaudible*] Thank you, Madam President. As I join this debate after the excited Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, I must remind him, hon. Minister, while you were playing schoolboy chess, I was representing this country at swimming in the Central American and Caribbean region, and football. So, please, come down from there with these attacks about

who is patriotic and who is not. It seemed that—you looked like you were in a national unity debate because you boasted that you lived in Carapichaima for one year, but we have people who lived in Carapichaima all their lives, in Barrackpore, in Princes Town, in Couva, in Naparima, who have never seen life so hard as it is now because of the geographic discrimination of your PNM Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: When you held open fire—when you banned open fire cremations without an iota of science, what were you talking about, unity? When you banned rivers but kept beaches open, when you attacked doubles and you talked about the Calcutta ship, you come here to pretend that you love one country, one people, because you lived in Carapichaima for a year? It sounds like Donald Trump saying that he has one black friend who comes to dinner once a year.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The most abhorrent personal attacks against former Prime Minister, Patrick Mervyn Augustus Manning, were made by your current Prime Minister, the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin West himself, Keith Christopher Rowley, not by the UNC. The UNC did not work obeah on Patrick Manning. The UNC did not take shame and say that—take pleasure in Patrick Manning's illness. That was the Member for Diego Martin West live on a political platform. So, do not tell us that the—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts.

Sen. A. Roberts: UNC—[*Inaudible*]—Patrick Manning—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, the Member for the Diego Martin West is a Member of the Parliament and you cannot impute improper motives, which is what you are doing. So, I will ask you to please, just move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: I will move on, Ma'am, but I am not. I am stating facts. The Member said that we attacked the gentleman. We never did and we never will attack a person who is ill or sick, no matter how we may disagree with policy. That was done by the Member for Diego Martin West and no one else.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: We are proud of our country. We are proud of Trinidad and Tobago. Do not lecture us about our country. "We shame" of the PNM. "We shame" of the Government. "We shame" of your performance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: "They are modernizing the Ministry," says the Minister. What are you modernizing it with it? Coal pot and a bike rack?

Then there was the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts who could not even differentiate between sport tourism and sporting tourism. I would not even bother to dignify his response as he read from something handed to him by another Minister, when this Government has just tendered out, after seven years, for a master plan in sport tourism. And I just remind him, and I correct the record for the children that are looking on on Parliament Channel, that the Prime Minister, Keith Christopher Rowley, the Member for Diego Martin West, hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, is not the head of state. Try to read a book.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, Head 23, the Minister went on to talk about the work with the international bodies on the rights of the child. That was fantastic to hear, but I would like to hear about the rights of the children in the Judith Jones report received by the PNM—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—since December 13, 2021, who are still in the hands of monsters, who are still being raped and abused and battered, without a decision from this Government. So, do not tell me about international children, tell me about my children right here who are in harm's way.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Tell me about—what about Yaelvis Sarabia? I am sure certain Members of the Government, all of you all do not even know who I am talking about. Yaelvis Sarabia was a baby in his mummy's arms on a boat in the Caribbean Sea, in the Gulf of Paria, who was shot in the head by our coast guard as they were fleeing Venezuela for a better life. What about him? Where is the justice? Where is the report? Tell us about that.

The hon. Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs quoted Patrick Manning about the protection of social fabric. That was a good quote. Patrick Manning is a brilliant speaker, very eloquent, intelligent. But I was also quote from the hon. Patrick Manning right in the *Hansard* in a different place where he also said:

“Mr. Speaker...I see hate...”—I see venom—“...I see a man...”—totally—
 “out of control...Mr. Speaker.”

“We do not tolerate bullying...”—Mr. Speaker, in our schools—“...and we...”— will not tolerate—“...bullying in the Cabinet.”

The way of my learned friend from Diego Martin West, when he does not get his way, Mr. Speaker—“...is to bully you.”

We will not tolerate—“...bullying in the Cabinet.”

If the Member wants to bully, he will have to form a Cabinet of his own.

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Well, you, my colleagues of the PNM, did not listen to the great Patrick Manning because you allowed the bully to form a Cabinet and now the entire country is being bullied.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: I noted—

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

Sen. A. Roberts: I withdraw, Ma'am. I noted the hon. Vice-President of the Senate saw it fit—

Mr. Imbert: On a point of order, 46(1)

Madam President: Minister of Finance.

Mr. Imbert: 46(1), relevance.

Madam President: Continue, Sen. Roberts.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am. Hon. Minister, you know, I am responding to your colleagues, Sir. I noted the hon. Vice-President of the Senate saw it fit to comment about the slip of her tongue by the Leader of the UNC where she said “earnest” instead of “Ernst”.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Well, I will ask him to explain to this Senate what exact—

Madam President: One second. Just one second. Sen. Mark, please, please remember where you are. Okay? Continue, Sen. Roberts.

Sen. A. Roberts: I would like the hon. Member to explain exactly what the Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs meant when she said, and I quote:

The expenditure being spent.

The Minister boasted of expenditure on staffing of the Ministry, while the DPP's Office in Trinidad and Tobago remains woefully understaffed, the DPP himself complaining that only 37 per cent of the attorneys on the HR have been fulfilled. High Court Justices are bringing and berating the DPP's Office because of the lack of resources given to the DPP's Office by this Government, by this Cabinet, and by this PNM Government. The hon. Minister boasted about even teaching Spanish to the lawyers at the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, which was very good, because the former Attorney General would have encouraged that programme as he is a frequent visitor to the house of Mr. Bullet and the owner of Copacabana. So, Spanish is necessary for him. The PNM is—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts. Sen. Roberts, please, please. While what you are saying might cause amusement to some, it is unbecoming an unparliamentary here. So, I will ask you, please, please, withdraw that last statement and move on. And please—

Sen. A. Roberts: Ma'am—

Madam Chairman:—as well, it was invoked—the Standing Order on relevance was invoked. As I said yesterday, I am reluctant to have to invoke relevance in a budget debate. Members have that leeway, but you are really going outside of everything now in your contribution. You need to be a little more focused.

Sen. A. Roberts: Madam President, thank you very much. The country knows the truth. It is just the truth. And I am responding all of my colleagues. I had to sit here for days and listen to my PNM colleagues, so I do not understand the irrelevance. It is very relevant—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, whether you understand or not, a ruling has been given. So, I will ask, please, I will ask you to just make your contribution.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am. "The PNM is educating young lawyers," said the hon. Minister. Well, this is a very scary thought. Module 1A: How to withdraw cases of political colleagues, Malcolm Jones, Ken Julien and "Mr. Fake Oil"; 1B, taught by the hon. Attorney General and the office to the young lawyers, how to sell a car without transferring it. Module 2: how to complete an affidavit replete with falsehood. Module 3: how to rent your—

Mr. Imbert: Point of Order.

Sen. A. Roberts:—rent your own building. Module 4—

Mr. Imbert: Point of Order.

Sen. A. Roberts:—how to recuse yourselves—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts—

Mr. Imbert: Point of order. Relevance.

Madam President: Continue, Sen. Roberts.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you. I think that the hon. Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs is very relevant, hon. Minister of Finance. She is extremely relevant, she debated powerfully, and I am responding. So, Module 5: how to negotiate an indemnity agreement in a criminal matter and overstep the bounds of the Constitution and separation of powers.

My colleague from Tobago, Sen. Hislop, "ah we boy", he came in and he said that his Prime Minister, Keith Christopher Rowley, the Member for Diego Martin West, can stand scrutiny. Well, I could not believe when I heard that. Let me be pellucid. The hon. Prime Minister could not stand the scrutiny of a blind man searching in the dark for contact lens in Lazy Lizard—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, listen, if you do not want to confine yourself to the Standing Orders and make a contribution within the parameters of the Standing

Orders, you are free to make your contribution elsewhere, but once you are here you have to confine yourself to the Standing Orders. Please, just move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am. I thought I was, Ma'am, because I am responding to my colleagues. If PNM can stand scrutiny—

Madam President: No. You know, Sen. Roberts, you can respond and there is a particular way to respond. Okay?

Sen. Anil Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am.

Madam President: There is a particular way to respond.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you. If the PNM can stand scrutiny, then why influence and control, or infiltrate, or try to take control of independent institutions? If you could stand scrutiny, let them operate without interference.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister of Public Administration, she admitted here that the increases in revenue were due to the war that Putin was waging on Ukraine. I think that her hon. colleagues in the Cabinet may have been a little upset with her for talking the truth here. So, I commend her for talking the truth. She says that the Government is boasting about a \$2 billion extra in PSIP and she boasted about the COVID-19 fight that the PNM put on. Well, that was kind of hard to listen to. I will deal with that in a little bit because it is not easy for people who lost loved ones.

The hon. Minister said it is not about winning elections. Well, clearly, I can agree with that because this budget has ensured that you will not win another election in Trinidad and Tobago again.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister said, we dealt with Petrotrin debt. How did

you deal with the debt? Your hon. Prime Minister also said that you paid off the bullet payment. The bullet payment of the Malcolm Jones US \$850 million has not been paid off. It has been refinanced and becomes due in 2028. So, please, tell the people the truth. She said that the opportunity cost of the subsidy is too great. What is that opportunity cost? The opportunity cost of the subsidy has to be greater than the benefits to each and every citizen of receiving cheaper gas, cheaper fuel, cheaper security, cheaper medicine, cheaper livelihoods and expanding the purchasing power of their dollar.

So, for the hon. Minister to believe that the Cabinet being able to spend money in a discretionary manner is a better, more pertinent, more important opportunity cost than serving all the people does not sit well with the rest of the nation. The hon. Minister said that there is no place for Ministers in HR and I totally agree. I think she should whisper to her colleague, the Minister of Finance, and tell him that he is not supposed to sit on an HR committee and decide who gets a position in the BIR.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Head 77: Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. The hon. Minister Kazim Hosein, he said that the Member for Diego Martin West was a parliamentarian for 45 years and Diego Martin North/East, 31 years and therefore, they were amazing and brilliant. Let me tell my hon. colleague, just staying in something long does not mean that you are good. Staying long and getting it wrong is not the way to go.

“I around kitchen since I was born and that doh mean I could cook”. The PM playing golf 50 years and he still cannot swing the club properly. But you I am proud of, Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. You are the exception to

the rule. You have come from, as you boast and you should, from humble beginnings to ascend to the heights of executive power, and I really commend you for that. But this budget ensures that no one else of that ilk, no one else from meagre circumstances, no one else will have that opportunity because this elitist budget for the rich would not allow it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services, Head 78, said—I believe from her contribution that she should be reshuffled in the Cabinet and become the Minister of National Security because she has done extensive, intensive investigations and gotten some results in corruption within the Ministry in food cards and grants and so on, and I commend her because the country requires that across the board in crime, and safety, and security, not two minutes in a four-hour and 12-minute budget. So, I commend Minister for that. And I ask her to advise the current Minister of National Security to get on board and work as passionately to keep our ladies safe, our mothers, our women, to keep us safe from AR-15s killing us in the groceries, robbery, rape and murder, so that we could feel safe in Trinidad and Tobago and be proud of our country as we are ashamed of the PNM.

Food cards: there were 32 food cards in the drawer, but I ask the hon. Minister to maybe give the Minister of Finance a little note on the 400 food cards that the candidate in Tobago had walking around, handing out, because 400 is more valuable than the 32. So, we would like to hear some information on that, or is it just selective fraud that we are investigating at the Ministry?

Independent Senator, hon. Dr. Dillon-Remy said, in her *Hansard*—and I was very interested because it was potent—

“While we were fighting here, and as the calypsonian said, ‘we...kicksin, Rome is burning’...

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 asked to reflect on our behaviour by the President at the opening of this Parliament, the responses from our leaders went like this, ‘We are not as 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...frustrated...”—said the hon. Independent Senator.

So are we and so is the country, Ma’am. But when the Government came to gut to procurement, we saw that they got one vote that they needed in order to do that, which—

Madam President: Senator—

Sen. A. Roberts:—I allowed them so to do.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts. Sen. Roberts, you are imputing improper motives. You are also attacking the way a Member of this Senate votes, and any Member is free to vote however he or she wants to. So, you should not be attacking how a Member votes. So, I will ask you, please, to withdraw that last statement.

Sen. A. Roberts: I withdraw and I would not attack anyone, but withdrawn. I was

just making a point.

Madam President: Well, Sen. Roberts, you know—

Sen. A. Roberts: I withdraw.

Madam President: No, but could you cut all the comments? You withdraw it and let us just move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am. And we heard the Minister of Health who came into the Senate and spoke about Head 28. And the hon. Minister of Health talked about the Seemungal Report and attacked the UNC, and attacked Kamla Persad-Bissessar, and attacked Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, the hon. Senator, by saying that they attacked the Seemungal Report and now it is their hero worship and so on. It was rather disingenuous of the Minister because if anyone would remember clearly, when the hon. Prime Minister announced the Seemungal committee being set up, he gave them but a mere week and the instantaneous, immediate response from the hon. Leader of the Opposition, and the Opposition, was that that was insufficient time to, at the time, to investigate 3,800 deaths, to investigate two years of a COVID-19—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—to go and interview 20,000 health workers, that one week was ridiculous. But we have a Minister who comes in here, brings quotes, plays games with the timeline in order to make a fake point just like fake oil. So, I just want to correct that and tell the Minister that when you are debating here, these little games are not really wanted. Talk the truth, speak the truth and give the facts.

The hon. Minister of Health also said we did not reach—their first mantra was, “We are number one in the world.” But now in the Senate yesterday I heard, “Well, we are not number one, but we are not the worse. We were not like Italy

because Italy had priests waiting to say prayers for you as you enter the hospital. And we are not like USA because dem had dead people in refrigerated trucks. So, we were all right.” Well, that is not good enough is it? So, we did well because we were not dead last. That is a mantra of the PNM when people were suffering and dying and every variant known to man was coming in here.

The Minister said he was proud. He is proud, proud, proud. “Minister proud” 4,300 people dead; 92 per cent death rate in the ICU. Specialists were ignored by the management and the Government. Every variant known to man on the planet entered our twin-island Republic. The country was in a state of chaos and panic. Vaccination rates were low, no vaccinations were forthcoming, vaccination discrepancies were made.

The country has rewarded, said the hon. Minister, the public servant team, Dr. Parasram and so on. It was not the country that rewarded these people, Sir. It is the PNM Cabinet of a PNM award. So, please take ownership of the award. The COVID-19 nightmare that we lived through, but somehow people feel you bury your head in the sand and just sing a mantra without statistics, without facts, without information. That is like a man coming 45th in the Olympics and telling himself and his country he came back with gold, and he repeats it over and over and then the country rewards him for winning a gold medal. The feign for support and love for health care workers, but reward them with a tin of biscuits and now the disrespect is complete with a total of 20,000 workers to divvy up TT \$210 million for risking their lives for 24 months in a pandemic which, by the way, seems to be over all over the world except here in Trinidad and Tobago because last week, in a four-day period, 17 citizens died. Just because it does not make the newspapers does not mean it did not happen.

The citizens keep falling. One hundred and sixty-nine fully vaccinated citizens are dead during this pandemic, all of them forced to take a vaccine that the Government said there was no difference in the efficacy of different brands. And all 169, the report has shown died who took that vaccine that was forced upon them. There was a mandatory vaccination policy putting people's livelihoods at risk and you had to "back-back" on that. You had to flip-flop. There was a mask in a car with a wife and children. You are finished eating doubles and drinking coffee at home and you have to put on a mask in your car with your wife and your child. No testing for months leading up to the general elections of 2020. Only 24,236 tests out of a four-month period and they said, "We are number one in the world," and called an election smack-bam in a pandemic.

The chief of staff and specialists at COVID centre were forced to take instructions from a druggist and a playwright. Doctors were forced to decide where people were going to die, whether they are dying waiting for an ambulance or whether they would die in the ICU. We got every variant here; 4,300 dead, 51 per cent only vaccinated at this time, and yet the Government and the Minister celebrate—

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

Sen. Mark: He talking about COVID.

Sen. Mitchell: We are talking about the budget 2022.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]—so, what you want to do?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, is it that you are making the ruling on the—

Sen. Mark: Sorry, Madam President.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, continue.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am. Thank you. Like an SEA student getting

half a question correct or half marks, demanding applause, this is what the Minister of Health did in this budget debate, looking for pips. Mask, no mask, no vaccines, take what vaccine you get, NDA for vaccines. The Ministry of Health's mantra has morphed from, "We are number one," to, "Well, boy, we did not get as bad." We are not sure where he was for the last two and a half years, but citizens of this country had to go to the ICU in Trinidad and Tobago looking casket sharp because the death rate was the highest in the world. How could you applaud that? That is not even politics. That is just wrong and heartless.

At 1.92 per cent, at ICU, one ICU nurse for 50 patients. People are dying at home and then you come to give \$210 million for 20,000 workers, which works out \$457.38 per month that they worked to save lives in a war. They worked for \$14.58 per day. Nurses and doctors who had to be locked down in the health facility in Debe would spend 500 or \$600 for a two-week period. They were working two shifts and then you give them \$14.58 a day for the war that they fought. You are looking confused, do the maths. The "maths mathings". It works out to \$1.25 per hour. I cry, shame.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: But you give the man who was there doing a press conference, listening to you and changing the science every day, an Order of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Come on, man. The same man who looked on at the PM telling citizens at the height of the deadly pandemic, "Come to Tobago."

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, there have been numerous rulings about references to three parties, and I am going to ask you to not go down that path you are trying to go down.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma'am. To this PNM Government, this party that is

in power, this Government that has bought this fairy tale, storybook budget, the results simply do not matter to this Government. Facts and figures are relegated to mythical status. Merit is irrelevant.

This PNM celebrates in the face of failure, like a Senator receiving \$500,000 in a secret scholarship fund to fail all her exams, and spews ignorance and pieties from the pulpit as a former PNM PRO. The PNM health policy is to build—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, you are crossing the line again with respect to the Standing Orders. So, I will ask you, please, to withdraw that last statement—

Sen. A. Roberts: Withdrawn, Ma'am.

Madam President:—and move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: The PNM health policy is to build an administration building; to build an administration building for hundreds of millions of dollars and then the Minister comes here in the budget and says that we will save 12 million in rent to administer—a surgery—an open heart surgery last week could not be conducted because you did not have the sutures; the sutures to stitch up of the man's chest and you are talking about an administrative building.

The Central Block: the Minister boasted that the Central Block—the previous Government did nothing. But it is seven years, where is the Central Block? You want me to go and find it? Where to look for the Central Block? Seven years and \$200 million later, no Central Block, healthcare in a mess.

The Minister also—we went on to the hon. Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. de Freitas. I have to say his name because there are two Ministers in the Minister, so I have to distinguish. I hope I am not breaching any Standing Orders. When Sen. Mark said—Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries—when Sen. Mark was young, he had an afro,

now he is bald. Well, me too. When I was younger I had an afro, but now I am bald. But, Senator, that is due to genetics and heredity. That is hereditary. That is not due to any policy decision and poor decisions by Sen. Mark and myself. We could not do anything to stop becoming bald. But you, the PNM, has taken decisions to shatter this economy, shatter the energy sector, shatter the foreign exchange, shatter the job market—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—the infrastructure degradation. Those are your decisions. Those things did not happen by chance. They happened because of your incompetence. And then he said, Balisier House—that Sen. Mark is obsessed with Balisier House. Sen. Mark is not obsessed with Balisier House. Sen. Mark is obsessed with transparency, accountability and stamping out PNM corruption to the max.

I thought the Minister would have told us how much money was brought in by the raffle, how many curry-que tickets they sold. “Ah thought he would bring bills.”

2.30 p.m.

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, there is no line item in the budget for the construction of Balisier House. So I will ask you please to desist and move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: Well Ma'am, I am responding—two Ministers spoke about that, Ma'am.

Madam President: Yes and other persons spoke about it as well so enough has been said about something that was really not even in the budget. Okay?

Sen. A. Roberts: Minister de Freitas, the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, also went on and I was really disappointed. His hon. Prime Minister had asked Dr.

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Tim Gopeesingh, where the 106 schools? Dr. Tim Gopeesingh went in the place below and showed all 106.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: “Yuh could go on Facebook, yuh could go and watch it” and you come into the Senate to pretend that the Government under Kamla Persad-Bissessar was just as bad as you all and did not build any schools. Kamla Persad-Bissessar and Tim Gopeesingh under the UNC People’s Partnership Government built 106 schools—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—left 25 at different stages of construction and the PNM has only completed two in seven years. It looks like I know some psychologists talk about penis envy but I think the PNM has performance envy.

Parents are vex, says the Minister, that they got textbooks under the UNC. The parents are angry.

Mr. Imbert: I do not know how many standing—point of order. I will have to quote multiple points of order, Madam President, please.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: 46(4).

Mr. Imbert: Or, 46(4), 46(1)—the whole book.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Madam President: Listen, Sen. Roberts, what can I say, Sen. Roberts? I cannot say anything but just continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma’am. I think the Minister of Finance “doth protest too much”. The Minister also said that parents were vex to get textbooks under the UNC, they were angry. Well Minister, if they were angry to get

textbooks that you said had mistake in it, “how yuh feel they feel now that dey cyah get no text book?”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Sen. de Freitas, the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture also said he came here and he prayed down to the Amen for his Prime Minister because of the difficulty. He prayed here but the prayed for “ah man who boasted about practicing obeah from Les Coteaux on ah former PNM”. I will save my—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, I do not think that you have quite grasped the distinction between speaking in here and speaking outside and I would like you to please, in your last few minutes, I want you to grasp it. So please withdraw that last statement and move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Ma’am. I withdraw but I will save my prayers for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: I will save my prayers for them to succeed and to survive under this devastating, painful, heartless, wicked, evil budget.

The Minister of Finance says we will see, we shall see how it goes as he pegs the budget to US \$92.50 per barrel yet the price on Thursday was \$92.45 per barrel, yet the Minister tells us that the normal price that we should expect is US \$2 less than the 92.50, so really under his calculation, we are at 90.50 but he pegged the budget at 92.50. Why has the Minister come to take the budget so high to where it actually is?

Over the years, the convention and the practice of Ministers of Finance are to leave a cushion, a cushion there for any errors to ensure that you do not over-budget. For example, in 2004, the PNM got prices of oil up to \$150 per barrel but

only budgeted at \$78 per barrel, leaving a cushion. In the People's Partnership Government, prices of oil went up to \$125 per barrel but the Partnership Government budgeted at \$80 per barrel, leaving a gap there, safety net. So why did this hon. Minister of Finance do this? Why?

Let me just quote from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund regulations, the law of the land. It says in 13(1):

“Where petroleum revenues collected in each quarter of any financial year—

- (a) exceed the estimated petroleum revenues for that quarter of the financial year by more than ten per cent, the currency of the United States of America equivalent of the excess revenue shall be withdrawn from the Consolidated Fund and deposited to the Fund in accordance with section 14(1)...”

—which means that the Minister of Finance would be forced to save for those future generations that the Minister of Foreign Affairs was talking about but this Minister does not want to save. He pushed the number right up to the top so if you increase by 10 per cent, it means you have to go up to a price of US \$101.75 before any savings have to go to future generations. This is insipid, this is wrong, this is not in the best interest of the country and future generations.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you very much. My daughter Anaya lent me, I was reading books for her and I have a book there *Disney Fairy Tale Collection*, a collection of fairy tales which actually contains more facts and reality and truth than this “*Douen Storybook 2023*”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: This is the autonomic budget, the autopilot budget, the budget of “just leave it so” and just do what you have to do to get recusals and increase your PSIP and your discretionary spending without tendering with a gutted procurement legislation, with interlocking directorships, one person, one human being controlling nine state boards, this is the PNM and that is why Balisier House rises and the UNC has to rent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister of Finance is brilliant. He creates fabricated myths of people who whispered in his ears and told him about devaluation and he did not do that. He concocted stories of what should have happened and could have happened and then compares himself to that mirror image that created story and says “Ahhhh, I am proud of myself. Things could have been worse if I listened, worse if I listened to whoever told you to devalue the dollar”. Nobody told you that but the UNC told you do not shut the refinery, Mc Kenzie, Solomon and Lashley said do not shut down the refinery, restructure, refinance, keep the refinery open. How much money have we left on the table due to the war in Russia with Ukraine? How much money could we have made extra, had we been refining products?

So the Minister also said well people were telling him to. “Ah doh know who was telling him. They tell him ‘boy, go to the IMF’ and the PNM comes to say that “yuh did not go to the IMF” so they did not listen but they have been implementing IMF prescriptions from day one since they came in. They have been conducting price controls, they have cut down the public sector across the boards. Because they leave public servants on the establishment, they believe that the people do not know that job losses have occurred, 123,000 people off the NIB

rolls, they have been instituting—removing price controls on the fuel subsidy on T&TEC, on WASA. These are all IMF prescriptions. The only reason that the Government did not have to go to the IMF was one word: Kamla; \$12.26 billion in reserves 2015, US \$7.8 million in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, 14 months import cover, triple A plus investment rating.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: So the PNM could borrow 30 billion because Kamla left the economy strong. If she did not, you would have to go to the IMF. So you are giving the people IMF without being IMF. This budget is a fantasy. The Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance in the Spotlight said that the way they have budgeted was to delay payments, legitimate payments, they slowed it down and delayed it and they did not release legitimate requests for releases from Ministries and corporations. She said so on the Spotlight and that shows why the economic is struggling and all facets of this country, the people have gone over the edge into the precipice.

In her words, the Permanent Secretary in Ministry of Finance at the PNM Spotlight said “we doh pay. The PNM doh pay VAT, the PNM doh pay contractors, the PNM doh pay NGC, the PNM doh pay labour.” Now with this indemnity gate, it seems the PNM “doh even pay dey bribes”. I end with a quote that—

Madam President: Sen. Roberts, I will ask you to withdraw and apologize for that last statement.

Sen. A. Roberts: I withdraw and I humbly apologize, Ma’am and I end this short contribution with a quote that aptly describes this corrupt PNM Government by Paolo Kernahan. He says the Prime Minister says the UNC is searching for

scandal but with this PNM Government, that is like searching for “corbeau in de labase”. Thank you very much, Ma’am.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Teemal.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*] with the PNM. Good riddance.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, if you continue like that, be careful that the Senate might be saying good riddance because you may be out of the Chamber, so I ask you please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Deeroop Teemal: Madam President, thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Bill before us here today. Our national watchwords are “Discipline, Production and Tolerance” and in our 60 years of Independence, I am sure that a lot of us have reflected on these words during the relatively short period of our young nation. I have always wondered about one of these watchwords and that is tolerance in the context of the value it offers to nation building and the diverse and plural nation such as Trinidad and Tobago. “I am just tolerating you” does not seem to provide the synergy necessary to create the sense of belonging, identity, cooperative and common shared effort that lays the groundwork for patriotism. I am of the view that we need to transition beyond mere tolerance and imbibe the values of respect, understanding and inclusivity in our journey of nation building. In simple words, Madam President, we have to learn to treat each well in all spheres of national life. Despite our cultural, religious and ethnic diversity, to move forward, we have to appreciate and value each other despite the diversity. I am convinced, beyond a doubt, that there are significant commonalities and shared aspirations amongst us to bring this about

and foremost of these is our unbridled love for Trinidad and Tobago.

The basic question is: How does the nation State deal with or manage diversity so that we treat each other well? In my view, we have two key Ministries that have the ability through its institutions and projects that can contribute significantly to providing answers to this question. We really need to relook at the school curriculum to maximize the potential that is there to further develop respect and understanding through appropriate and relevant history, religious education and social studies.

With regard to culture, we have need to amplify and accelerate aspects of the multicultural model in Trinidad and Tobago. We have been more exposed to the mono-cultural model which aimed at assimilation taking place in the crucible, the melting pot, a question of social and cultural integration. A model that has the tendency to marginalize the collective of citizens and assume a common national culture that all participate in.

Madam President, however, this view is a bit abstract and ignores other salient features of the identities that exceed the category of citizens such as cultural identity, ethnicity, religion, class and gender. And in Trinidad and Tobago, from the time of independence and the formation of the nation State of Trinidad and Tobago, this monocultural model took the form of cultural nationalism. This became a hegemony under the rubric of a national culture and has commanded to date the vast resources of the State, corporations, private and public institutions and the media. To be a true Trinbagonian, everyone is expected to conform to this model.

Now multiculturalism challenges this model of monoculturalism. Groups outside of the monocultural model have persisted in retaining valued aspects of

their culture and to have these recognized and respected as valid inputs into a national culture which is more reflective of the diversity of our country. This cultural persistence has led to the underpinnings of multiculturalism working towards what would be more of a tossed salad rather than a melting pot of an assimilative, monocultural hegemony. The monocultural hegemonic melting pot model has denominated fully from since independence to present. Although we have seen a definite leaning towards a multicultural aspects for the past two decades, we need to amplify and accelerate aspects of the multicultural model in Trinidad and Tobago. Of course, I am not proposing multiculturalism as a salve for all our challenges because it also bring additional challenges but I view it as a step in the right direction. I do not see it as a full replacement for the monocultural model but see it as a vital factor in creating a hybrid model between both that will bring about the harmonious coexistence of the diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities whilst also importantly addressing class and gender issues.

At the same time, we have to guard against a multiculturalism that brings about compartmentalization amongst our citizens and leaning towards the adoption of a hybrid approach would ensure that common values shared by all cultures are sought and there is a desire amongst all to appreciate, respect, share and participate in aspects of the respective cultures. We need to search for what is common amongst us. We need to celebrate what is common amongst us and also make this part of our cultural life.

In this regard, we can learn from the model of other countries such as that of Singapore that places focus on the right to cultural, religious and gender identity, the right to social justice, right to economic equality for effective deliverance of talents and skills of all citizens and to accept the rights of others to express their

views and values.

Madam President, the National Policy on Culture and the Arts 2019-2024 titled “Celebrating National Identity: Maximising our Diversity” was laid in Parliament on February 12th, 2020 as a Green Paper for public comment and I would like to commend the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts for this step because I see it as a step in the right direction but at the same time, it is just a start and a lot more has to be done. And I see that no allocations have been budgeted for further development of this policy, at least not as a specific line Item in the draft expenditure. And I see this as a vital necessity and a more comprehensive multicultural agenda is needed that will also inform national policy accordingly across all sectors, including education, communications, social development and economic development.

Against a background of all that I have said thus far, I would like to refer to allocations for National Days and Festivals Fund under the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. This allocation supports projects and events associated with national days such as Emancipation Day, Indian Arrival Day, Independence Day and Republic Day and major religious and cultural commemorations including Phagwa, Shouter Baptist Liberation Day, Corpus Christi, Easter, Eid-ul-Fitr, Diwali, Ramleela, Hosay and Christmas. This is in fact the major multicultural support undertaken by the Ministry and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and these events have tremendous potential to further the objectives of building a multicultural nation.

In 2022, the moneys expended under this fund was just over \$2 million and I see in the *Draft Estimates of Expenditure* for 2023 that the sum of 4 million has been allocated. This small sum really does not do justice to the tremendous

potential of these events to enhance nation building. It is just a drop in the bucket and the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts has to really look at a paradigm shift in their approach and quantum of funding provided under this fund.

I must mention the allocation of 3 million for the establishment of the Amerindian Village under the development of the First Peoples. This is indeed a step in the right direction and our First Peoples deserve this and a lot more and I commend the Government of Trinidad and Tobago on this move. I trust that the Government will further this initiative in the years to come.

Madam President, from the estimates of expenditure and the Public Sector Investment Programme, it seems as though some of the pre-investment studies and planning that informs infrastructural development have been a casualty of this budget. In particular, I am referring to the Integrated Water Resources Management plan where I am not seeing any allocation of funds to continue the development of this policy and I am also referring to the national transportation plan in which a rather small allocation of \$500,000 has been put aside for this.

Madam President, in the absence of comprehensive strategic development plans, we continue to invest billions of dollars in infrastructural development. It is not about how much moneys we have spent, not only about that and how much we are spending or intend to spend, but to me the vital question is whether these have been spent in a sustainable manner and whether we are getting value for the moneys spent in this budget and if this extensive infrastructural spending is making a directional and meaningful dent in the problems and issue of infrastructural development that we have been trying to address for pardon me, I will use the words for “donkey years”.

Last year, I was greatly relieved to hear the Minister of Public Utilities in his

budget contribution state that the National Integrated Water Resources Management policy will be going to Cabinet in about a month's time. That was then and it appears that this troubled policy now seems to be dead.

The latest draft document regarding the Integrated Water Resources Management was prepared under the guidance of the Cabinet-appointed Technical Steering Committee for the review of that same policy in March of 2017 and then the Cabinet Committee Strategy Report on WASA's Transformation December 2022 in Appendix I under Strategic Pillar A: Restructuring of the water sector, identify the need for the approval of this policy.

Madam President, what is the most unfortunate is that we seem to associate water security with only WASA and the need to separate the water resources from WASA as the Minister of Finance mentioned in the budget presentation. For such a long time, we have been spending billions of taxpayers' dollars on WASA and we seem to be intent on continuing this practice without the benefit of an integrated approach to dealing with water security.

Other than WASA, there are several agencies and institutions involved in the planning, management and execution of water resources management functions and these include the EMA, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Tobago House of Assembly, Ministry of Planning and Development, Drainage Division, Ministry of Works and Transport, water resources agency and the Institute of Marine Affairs and several others and it is worth noting that in the absence of a coordinating agency and coordinating mechanism to facilitate effective water resource management and as a result, it is not surprising that Trinidad and Tobago currently lacks a coherent policy and institutional framework for water resources management.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

There is indeed a checkered history issue with regard to the development of this policy but time would not allow me to trace this history. But there have certainly been a lack in the pursuit of water security based on principles of integrated water resources management and what have seen over the years unfortunately is mainly a supply-driven sectoral approach to WASA to solve the nation's water woes. It seems as though we are proceeding on this same basis for the continued investment of billions of dollars in WASA and I really question whether the results will be any different from the past with regard to this continued investment.

Mr. Vice-President, in *Vision 2030* National Development Strategy 2016-2030, one of the goals for improved public utilities, Goal 3.2, it states the intention to:

“Adopt an integrated planning approach to flood mitigation”

And what is stated:

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

That is the statement in that *Vision 2030* National Development Strategy 2016-2030. So I was relieved to hear the hon. Minister of Works and Transport mention that drainage plans have been completed for some the major river basins in Trinidad and Tobago. This has been long outstanding and that is good news because for so many years, we have been spending billions of dollars, taxpayers'

dollars on flood mitigation without seeing results commensurate with the expenditure and we seem to be comfortable in continuing with this practice.

I have always asked whether we had lost the political will to deal with the issue of flooding in a comprehensive manner that is necessary and a sustainable manner that is necessary. And except for the allocation for the upgrade of existing pumps and gates and embankment rehabilitation over the past years, it seems that we are prepared to continue with the clearing of water courses and desilting unsustainable approach to solving our flooding problems. And this approach has had quite a popular run from successive governments over decades, again, consuming billions of taxpayers' dollars and seems to be now entrenched in our flood mitigation flooding culture. The question is asked whether the continuous desilting programmes and its considerable expenditure to date and what has been done to effectively prevent, manage and/or control the occurrence of erosion and siltation?

The country, we all know, has to literally shut down every time there is a tropical storm warning and economic loss to households, businesses and the country overall is mounting at exponential rates.

3.00 p.m.

Whilst climate change has impacted on rainfall intensities and patterns, I do not dispute this, we need to bear in mind that the spate of recent floodings that we are experiencing on a regular basis is not due to any extensive or extraordinary rainfall intensities, but is due to our cumulative lack of effective measures to deal with challenges that face us in this regard. The hon. Minister of Works and Transport spoke about 25 years, 50 years, 100-years storms. But I think we need to bear in mind that the flooding we are experiencing so regularly, every time,

almost every time rain falls, is arising out of storms of less frequency, even as low as one in one-year storm frequency.

Mr. Vice-President, Sen. Paul Richards in his contribution spoke extensively about the issue of transportation. And I would like to endorse everything that he said, because he did go into details about the aspects and particularly about the issue of public transport and mass transit system and the performance of the PTSC thus far. Now, *Vision 2030* speaks about a national transportation plan. And from the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme 2022*, there is mention of development of a national transportation plan. But what we are seeing is that no moneys were spent on this Item in 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022. But this here, a sum of \$1 million has been allocated.

Under the PSIP, we continue to see the pattern of again, I may be repeating myself, but we are seeing patterns of billions of dollars being spent on this transportation sector over the many years by successive governments without the benefits of sustainable and integrated transportation planning. And it is imperative as a nation we ensure that the billions of dollars that are being spent on this sector fall within a long-term sustainable transport development plan. Otherwise, we are spending in a vacuum.

The UN Commission for Sustainable Development identified six pillars for sustainable transport development. And one of these pillars is integrated land-use transportation planning. And whilst there is heavy emphasis, and necessary emphasis, on the road widening, road upgrades, interchanges, installation of roundabouts, these are very highly high capital-intensive and the lack of a transportation plan prevents us, thus far, from allocating any meaningful fund necessary to implement policies such as the development of a mass transit system.

Mr. Vice-President, there is no single institution responsible for the overall planning, management and regulation of the public transportation sector. Over the many years, reports submitted to successive governments recommended the establishment of a transit authority. *Vision 2030* also endorses the establishment of this transit authority. An integrated national transportation plan would address this. We have been talking about this transit authority for so long, and I am not seeing any provisions in the budget for even the initial work to start looking at the implementation of this transit authority.

Mr. Vice-President, we really need to allocate the funds necessary to get this transportation planning done in order to ensure sustainability and to bring into reality a mass transit system that can service the needs of our citizens, particularly in the context of our present situation, with the removal of the fuel subsidies and the burden that is being placed on the average citizen with regard to—

Mr. Vice-President: Senator, the Minister is asking to give way.

Sen. Sinanan: That is what the national transportation plan is all about. And you did indicate that there is a \$1 million in the budget. That is because we did get some grant funding from CARF. They are assisting us with this plan and the plan is underway. This is just for the legal fees, the consultants, and so, to actually prepare the tender documents. And so the national transportation plan is a plan that incorporates everything: land, sea, and air. And it also includes traffic alleviation and how we go forward for the next 20 years. It is a large project and a comprehensive project, and basically the 1 million you saw there, that is really for the consultants, and so on and we are working with the international financial institutions to have this problem. The tender should be out probably sometime early in this fiscal year.

Sen. D. Teemal: Okay, thank you very much Minister for that information. But I would still like to say that I have seen successive governments defer from the challenge of undertaking this plan.

Sen. Sinanan: One second. That is why the last plan we had, I think it was 1968, and you would recognize that in the Government's manifesto we did say once and for all we will implement the new transportation plan. That is why the Cabinet approved it, and it is on the way right now. The last one was in 1968.

Sen. D. Teemal: Okay, thank you. But I would also add that it is necessary for the Government to supplement that grant funding, that this plan is of such critical importance to ensure the sustainability of the billions of dollars that we are spending, that it should not only be grant funding. If the Government has to supplement the funding, as a matter of urgency, to get this done, to ensure that every dollar we spend is well spent for we are still faced with extensive traffic congestion and our citizens have to sit in traffic for hours to get to and from work and the resulting economic loss is due to this and it continues to mount. It is really, really affecting, not only citizens and businesses, but our school children.

Now, the hon. Minister of Works and Transport also spoke extensively about spot fixing and road rehabilitation. And we have heard about the allocation for road repairs to be done under the new secondary road repair and rehabilitation company. Now, again, welcome news. I trust that the intended efforts address the atrocious quality of road repair that we witnessed in this country. So it is not a question only of assigning moneys for repairs, but the quality of road repairs that we witness in this country. It appears as though the intention—I do not think I am being unfair in seeing this—is a quick fix shut-up-the-people surface reinstatement, rather than engineered road restoration that provides more lasting repairs and an

economic return on the moneys expended.

Another trend that has developed is to repair roads without addressing the concurrent need to fix roadside drainage that negatively impacts on the life of the road repairs that we conduct. It is a common sight to see roads repaired and the roadside drainage, nothing is done with it. And the lack of that roadside drainage comes and damages the roads that we are fixing. So we are just spinning top in mud literally, sometimes with the way we go about our road repairs. So, concurrent with the road repairs must be the drainage associated with the roads. And I trust that the recently formed road company would be addressing this trending deficiency and a lack of an integrated approach to road repairs.

Now, the hon. Minister of Works and Transport did mention training and utilization of small contractors in this exercise. It is a good move. But whilst this is indeed good, we need to ensure that the new road company is adequately resourced with a cadre of quality control technicians and staff to ensure that quality repairs are done. I see too many repairs being done and there is no quality control. The contractors may be trained, but we need that cadre of quality control technicians to assure that we are getting what we paid for and the works are being done in a quality manner.

Mr. Vice-President, for decades the issue of statutory approvals have been discussed ad nauseam, and several solutions identified, but we still seem to not be able to bring about the desired change, with regard to planning approvals. Each of the many statutory stakeholders continues to be a law unto themselves and seems to be accountable only to themselves. And what we have is a corrupt and inefficient system that cause citizens, businesses, and developers no end of heartache, headache, stress and financial loss.

I could be wrong, but I have not seen any allocations, or mention made for operationalization of the Planning and Facilitation of Development Act, 2014. Mr. Vice-President, it is almost eight years since this legislation was passed, and I cannot help but question whether the Government intends to get this Act proclaimed and operationalized. When? The operationalization of this Act is a vital cog in the wheel of expediting development approvals and curbing illegal developments that have the potential to have disastrous impacts on flooding and environmental degradation that we are seeing on an increasing frequency. It is also vital for the full proclamation and operationalization of a local government reform legislation that was recently passed in this Parliament.

Mr. Vice-President, if we are to stand a chance of achieving our sustainable development goals, we need to complete our multisectoral integrated planning with regard to water security, food security, transportation, and other aspects of integrated national development. There is no substitute for this. We continue to suffer from a cycle of changing governments and the resulting five-year syndrome that has come out of this. We have seen incoming governments simply discard all macro development planning done by the previous Government, and it has now become part of our political culture.

The mantra seems to be “they did not do anything right”. And this lack of continuity through the cyclical discarding and revamping of policy-based infrastructural development is costing us dearly as a nation and it is frightening even to think the tens of billions of dollars in abandoned studies and projects due to this cyclical change of government and the inability or all the lack of willingness to ensure any continuity in our macro planning and marco project implementation. This is, in my view, Mr. Vice-President, and immature political culture that has

developed in our country. And as a nation, we must find a way to deal with this. Otherwise, we would just be spinning top in mud and wasting taxpayers' money.

This Government has been given another term by the people and, therefore, some opportunity is there to break this practice. Despite the many challenges we may have in allocating the limited revenue that is available, we have to give the necessary priority and funding to advance and complete the preparation of the comprehensive multisectoral integrated plans and policies necessary for sustainable spending. This planning should never be the sacrificial lamb when we are looking to cut expenditure. And I would urge the Government to reconsider all allocations so that we can get this exercise done.

Mr. Vice-President, we have seen globally over the years the devastating effects of climate change with regard to floods, drought, forest fires, rising sea levels, and rising sea temperatures. We have heard extensively about renewable energy and green energy and the reduction of our carbon emission and footprint. But, Mr. Vice-President, we need to bear in mind that this is only one side of the coin regarding climate change.

The other side—and particularly for a small country like Trinidad and Tobago that contributes just a minuscule amount to global warming and carbon emissions in the world—of the coin is mitigating against the impact of climate change. We need to remind ourselves that the primary focus of the multilateral environmental agreements unit of the Ministry of Planning and Development is geared towards our compliance requirements regarding the reduction of our carbon footprint; carbon and greenhouse gas emissions.

Where are we with the identification and implementation of specific climate adaptation strategies, mitigation measures, and vulnerability studies with regard to

food securities—

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

Sen. D. Teemal: Thank you very much—with regard to food security, water security, flood defense, environmental degradation, and loss of biodiversity? I am asking: who has the primary responsibility for pulling all of this together, to ensure direction, consistency, and to ensure avoidance of duplication of effort by the respective Ministries and agencies?

I would like, again, to make an appeal for the revision of our national climate change policy which was done since 2011, with emphasis not just only on greenhouse gas emissions and reducing our carbon footprint, but on the other side of the coin that addresses sectoral vulnerability with regard to agriculture, human health, human settlements and infrastructure, coastal zones, water security, food security, and tourism. The policy should also guide the formation of clear climate change adaptation and mitigation measures; it is time. These vulnerabilities are seen from potential impacts of certain projected climate changes such as, of course, the temperature increases, extreme events and all that we see playing on the global scene, all of these fires, and droughts, and flooding, and everything; changes in rainfall precipitation. And given that climate change is a multifaceted and multisectoral issue, any climate change policy would, of necessity, have implications for the revision of other sectoral policies in the relevant sectoral policy.

We need to revisit. We need to revise that climate change policy of 2011 in the context of what is happening. It is a reality. It is on our doorstep. It is impacting on us. It would impact on all of our citizens, our infrastructure, everything, and I think it is imperative that we bring this onto the front burner.

I have done an examination of the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* for 2023, and what I am not seeing is any clear allocation for this; what I am talking about, dealing specifically with the impact of climate change under any Ministry. I am not seeing any specific allocation. Now, there may be possibilities that aspects of climate change are being addressed. But if so, they are not mentioned in the subject headings of the draft expenditures.

Vision 2030 states that climate vulnerability would be assessed and goes on to identify two action items, determine areas of greatest climate risk, design and implement adaptive actions for vulnerable sectors. And when are we going to tackle this in a substantive way? The sectoral approach to dealing with the devastated impacts of climate change has its limitations.

Mr. Vice-President, we need to stop working in silos so that a clear and definitive multisectoral policy on climate change is available. In some jurisdictions over the world we are seeing formations of Ministries dedicated just for climate change and government departments. I suggest the establishment of a multisectoral climate change task force to take up the pursuance of a national climate change policy that will encompass a multifaceted and multisectoral approach to establish clear measures to deal with and mitigate against the negative impact of climate change with regard to agriculture, human health, human sufferings and infrastructure, coastal zones, water security, food security, flooding, and tourism. And despite our very tight and difficult economic circumstances, Mr. Vice-President, I consider it imperative that we allocate moneys for this. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Reginald

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC (cont'd)

Armour SC): Mr. Vice-President, hon. Members, thank you very much for this opportunity this afternoon to contribute to this my first substantive budget debate in the Upper House.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: I am grateful to the Hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, for inviting me to serve the people in the capacity as Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs. I go on record also to say thank you to my predecessor in office, the hon. Faris Al-Rawi, for his seven years of service in this capacity. His well-documented accomplishments must not go unacknowledged. He has laid a platform from which the team of bright and enthusiastic public servants in the Ministry which I now lead can move forward.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Mr. Vice-President, I take the opportunity also to thank the hon. Minister of Finance and his staff for the well thought-out and robust financial platform laid out. The hon. Minister's presentation on Monday 26th September was measured and truly mindful of what is necessary for our current national efforts in the global landscape. I sincerely thank him.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: I acknowledge as well and thank the very able support of the Minister of Planning and Development in her contribution to that effort.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Madam President, the role of the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago comes with significant constitutional responsibilities, duties and obligations and is integral to the whole of government and of good governance. I must acknowledge

the various statutory bodies, departments and units under the remit of my office, all of who have underwritten my contribution today with the work that they devotedly undertake year round to ensure that this Parliament and this august House is adequately equipped with sound legislation for the overarching benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

And I wish to go on record to pay particular tribute to Permanent Secretary, Natasha Barrow for her leadership and dedication to this country, to the ministry which I now lead and for her unstinting support of this novice public servant now serving as Attorney General since I have assumed office. I sincerely thank her for her sterling support and her very able leadership of a very dedicated team of public servants in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs.

A significant body of the Ministry's work, Madam President, generated particularly from the Law Reform Commission headed by Mrs. Charlene Basso-Taylor and the Legislative Drafting Department, headed by Mr. Ian Macintyre SC, and whom I thank as well, driven by my office, other ministries and valued stakeholders and who on our behalf I am truly indebted.

Madam President, through my office and the Legislative Review Committee, this Government intends to introduce a suite of legislation targeting a cross-section of national, societal and civic issues, all for the betterment of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The Government places top priority, Madam President, on the need to drive economic activity—and as recognized and saluted by the Hon. Minister of Finance—to improve the ease of doing business for companies, entrepreneurs, small and medium enterprises, and artisans.

I will be bringing to Parliament as one of the first items of my legislative agenda and one of my top priorities, the Arbitration Bill, which provides for a

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC (cont'd)

modern legal framework to facilitate domestic and international trade and commerce by encouraging the internationally-accepted alternative dispute resolution process of arbitration as a means of resolving disputes, centered on the aim of assisting in turning Trinidad and Tobago into a genuine commerce destination.

Madam President, there are other participating elements of a country which is dedicated to doing business, ease of doing business, and in that capacity and in that context I also want to acknowledge and to declare to this hon. House that my Ministry is in active consultation with the hon. Minister of Labour, the hon. Stephen Mc Clashie, on proposed amendments to the Industrial Relations Act and the Trade Unions Act, which have emerged from a fulsome national consultation. And that too will be part of my legislative agenda to continue to ensure a stable, economic and workplace environment.

Our human environment, Madam President, in the context of a safe and secure citizenry, is also very important, and I will touch on a number of aspects of that. But I wish to place on record as a matter of priority the considerable amount of work which has gone before both Houses relative to the sensitive issue of protecting our women and children. The dignity of our women and girls is of paramount importance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: And permit me to remind the citizens of this country and of this House of the Sexual Offences (Amdt.) (No. 3) Bill, 2021, which was laid in the Senate on 11th January, 2022 and sent to a special select committee. The report from that committee was laid in the Senate on 14th June, 2022 and is a piece of legislation aimed at keeping pace with the need not only to

protect the vulnerable but to update laws to respond to novel methods of criminality.

The Bill, which I will be bringing to this House, creates the offence of voyeurism and the taking and sharing of intimate images. These are offences that are of a wide scope and anticipate types of behaviour by which someone is caught viewing or sharing images of a person or child who had a reasonable expectation of privacy and engaging in a private act. In our current technological and widespread accessibility and use of social media, it is the hope of this Government that following the consideration of this report, which is under active consideration in the Legislative Review Committee of my ministry, this Bill will come to this House for passage and debate.

And intended to join this Bill is the sexual harassment Bill, which seeks to provide for all measures to deal with sexual harassment and to provide redress for sexual harassment in the workplace. And I say that in particular answer to the remarks of my hon. colleague, Sen. Thompson-Ahye, who particularly worked on and called for that particular piece of legislation.

3.30 p.m.

Madam President, it is a reality that we have to face the fact that we have a level of criminality in our country which requires the collective and collaborative efforts of several state agencies, in respect of which my office is intent on ensuring that it does its part to counteract this issue.

The legislative agenda for the upcoming 2022/2023 year also encompasses a number of pieces of legislation, which will address the incidence of crime and criminality in this country, among which will be amendments to the Firearms Act. In the amendments under consideration, my office is actively looking at measures

to better provide for the safety and security of our citizenry, as we go about our normal lives in our homes to and from our work places, and for the better regulated use of firearms, including better protection to our protective services as they continue in the discharge of their duty to keep our citizenry safe.

The proposed amendment to the Firearms Act is in direct response to among other things, the recent and disturbing trend which sees the brutal public executions of serving prison officers. This Bill will empower the Commissioner of Prisons to grant permission to a prison officer to have in his possession a firearm or ammunition while off duty and in any public place where the Commissioner of Prisons considers that the life or safety of the officer is under threat by members of the public. The amendments will work with other regulatory improvements intended to be made to the Firearms Act, to increase the licensing fees, as well as to provide further regulation for the possession and ownership of assault weapons. These measures are ancillary to a wider exercise on firearms, which is always engaging the attention of my office.

Another tool intended to join the crime-fighting armory is the controlled deliveries Bill, 2022, which will provide for the authorization, conduct, and monitoring of controlled sting operations intended to form part of the arsenal of crime-fighting tools for the police. And also, under consideration are proposed amendments to the Interception of Communications Act. It remains my intention as I have undertaken to do in another place, and my office has scheduled a comprehensive review and reform of the bail system and bail legislation, which we will be bringing back to this Parliament, informed by consultation from a sociopsychological and criminological perspective and with other relevant stakeholders.

That is not to say, Madam President, that we must be inured to the plight of persons who run afoul of the law and who get incarcerated in our prisons. And it is the need in my respectful view and that of our Government, that we need to ensure that the hardened criminal elements are appropriately and proportionately targeted and balanced by the need to effectively prepare those persons who have served their time to be rehabilitated for reentry in to our society. Through the combined effect of the Administration of Justice (Parole) Bill, and the Probation of Offenders (Amdt.) Bill, it is envisaged that there will be improved options for convicted prisoners who have served their time. These options when worked in tandem with other rehabilitative efforts in Trinidad and Tobago's prisons services will see we expect a positive impact on the recidivism rate.

The criminal records Bill, 2022, governs the rehabilitation of offenders who have committed minor offences, and that Bill will provide for the expunging of an individual's criminal record once he or she has satisfied the prescribed criteria during the relevant rehabilitation programme. That rehabilitation conversation has been ongoing for decades, informed by the need to ensure that persons do not need to walk the rest of their lives with the stigma of a conviction for a minor offence, and it is my promise to give life to this Bill within the upcoming legislative year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Rehabilitation is not limited to nor circumscribed by only our national borders, and we have a very unfortunate reality that although outside of our borders is part of our recurring reality in this society. And I speak of the alarming trend which began around 2018 when several young Trinidadian men and their spouses departed these shores in support of ISIS. The harsh reality following from that is that there are now a significant number of men and

women—of children sorry, and women of Trinidadian decent and nationality who are left stranded abroad in unknown territories.

My office is working on what will be called the returnee Bill, 2022, which aims to provide a regulatory framework to facilitate the return and management of persons from areas of conflict, and that too is a piece of legislation that we will be bringing to this House.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: There are of course other Bills that have been in the last Parliament, what we refer to as the rollover Bills. There is the Miscellaneous Provisions (Criminal Proceedings) Bill, which we will be bringing back to effectively abolish the year and a day rule and double jeopardy. And we are also going to be bringing back the Miscellaneous Provisions (Testing and Identification) Bill, 2022, a critical Bill to ensure for the continued accountability and transparency of members of law enforcement, as it aims to introduce a regulatory framework for polygraph, drug testing, and biometric identification for members of the protective service. This is yet another tool of the Government continuously working to improve public confidence in the functioning of this country's systems.

The criminal justice system requires continued attention and improvement, and some the pieces of legislation which this Government will be bringing to this Parliament include, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Trial by Judge Alone) Bill, 2022, which would introduce as the default option for criminal trials the use of judge only trials for capital and noncapital indictable matters, the accused persons retaining of course, the option for judge and jury trial.

There will be proposed amendments to the Administration of Justice

(Indictable Proceedings) Act, and we will see the return to Parliament to have this law settled with some finality to allow for the abolition of preliminary inquiries, which will be replaced by sufficiency hearings.

The Justices of the Peace Bill, 2022, which would prescribe for the appointment, functions, duties and liabilities of Justice of the Peace and prescribe a code of conduct for which Justices of the Peace must adhere. Proposed amendments as well to the Evidence Act, which will allow for greater protection of witnesses as much needed adjustment in these times of increasing criminality.

But societal and legislative reform, Madam President, is not to be limited only to the criminality that unfortunately we have to address in our society. So we will with equal priority be bringing legislation to this House aimed at protecting the more vulnerable members of our society. Bills such as the Senior Citizens' Pension (Amdt.) Bill, intended to update and modernize the senior citizens' pension scheme, and to complement the proposed increase of the age of retirement from 60 to 65 years, giving our very knowledgeable and experienced senior citizens the opportunity to continue to contribute to our society.

Earlier this week, Sen. Paul Richards and today Sen. Thompson-Ahye expressed concern about persons with disabilities. And I am able to reassure our colleague Senators, that the International Law and Human Rights Unit of the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs is currently engaged with a joint project between PAHO and World Health, funded by United Nations Partnership on the Right of Persons with Disabilities and the Multi-Partner Trust Fund.

AGLA, that is to say the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, Mr. Ian Rampersad, head of our unit, sits as chair of the Legislative Review Sub-

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC (cont'd)

committee which is currently looking at the Equal Opportunity Act, the Mental Health Act, and Education Act, with a view to amendments to further protect the rights of persons with disabilities. And I am able to assure Sen. Richards and Sen. Thompson-Ahye, that my Ministry is in full support of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services which is currently examining working on draft disabilities legislation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Of course, Madam President, with the need to protect the elderly and the disabled is the equal need, the urgent need to ensure that we continue to promote and protect the youth of Trinidad and Tobago. The National Youth Development Agency of Trinidad and Tobago Bill, is intended to provide for the establishment of the agency which pairs with the efforts of the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, to ensure that the School to Work Apprenticeship Allowance Programme has a pivotal impact on the youth of Trinidad and Tobago and their assured future.

Ease of doing businesses, a central component of the hon. Minister of Finance's budget speech, includes the fact that consumers are key contributors to our economy and their protection is of the utmost importance to this Government. As such, the Consumer Protection and Safety Bill, is also included in the upcoming legislative agenda. This Bill intends to establish a framework that consolidates in one place, key consumer protection, rights exercisable in relation to the supply of goods and services. The legislation will also provide for duties and obligations of suppliers, and set out administrative and legal framework for the identification and violations involving the supply of goods or services, the physical and financial security of customers, unfair trade practices and transactions, and unfair contract

terms. It will see a complete overhaul and modernization of the current Consumer Protection and Safety Act, Chap. 82, No. 34.

Madam President, policies are currently being developed through the secure transactions Bill with the aim of an enabling environment for businesses in Trinidad and Tobago. Consideration is being given to policy recommendations aimed at developing a unified legislative governing scenario, with the creation of security interest and a centralized electronic registry.

Additionally and importantly, the National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago Bill, and regulations to accompany it are intended to provide for thorough reform and centralization of the collection of national statistical information, through the establishment of a national statistical institute. In this critical age of meta data, the introduction and passage of this Bill in the upcoming year is key to realizing among other things, the need to develop an independent management approach which fosters sound statistical methodologies, professional data compilation, and dissemination practices within the public sector and other state agencies as required under Theme II, "...Good Governance and Service Excellence", *National Development Strategy, Vision 2030*. This is one measure aimed at improving public confidence in government structures.

Madam President, these respective pieces of legislation are all to ensure that there is a marked improvement in the quality of life being experienced by our citizenry on a daily basis across the country. It is due to the need for concision that I cannot detail every legislative matter under the header of societal interest reform, but these that I have mentioned are certainly a top priority for the Government.

It is clear, Madam President, that the Government will be coming with a full legislative agenda carded for the upcoming session, and the proposed Bills which I

have referred to, cover an array of key areas of national interest. It remains for me to identify some of the areas in which my Ministry and the team of young committed professionals are already engaged in a significant exercise of improving the services available to this country and the citizen's lives of this country.

We can be proud as the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, to record as I announce today, that in May 2022 I received a call from the Attorney General of Belize, Sen. the hon. Magali Marin Young SC, who reached out to me to express keen interest and the priority of her government to visit Trinidad and Tobago in order to be familiarized with what she had heard of, in terms of our systems and procedures in the registry of the land, building, and property registry of Trinidad and Tobago, and in particular, the digitization of that registry, our Registrar General's Department under the leadership of Mrs. Karen Bridgewater, as well as the digitization of our intellectual property office under the leadership of Mr. Regan Asgarali.

Why? She explained that she wished to experience first-hand the evidence that she had heard of, of the workings of the excellent digitalization accomplishments which she understood had been completed within our RGD and IPU Departments of the Ministry. She arrived here on the 24th of July, 2022, spent a week and was taken through both the Registrar Generals department, by Mrs. Bridgewater and her team of very competent staff, and Mr. Asgarali our IPO Controller, and received real-time presentations of the talented, enthusiastic, and incredibly impressive members of staff of those departments.

I was with her in the Registrar General's Department at the counter on the ground floor of the tower of the Ministry of the Attorney General, when she witnessed the actual over the counter reality of members of the citizenry of our

beloved country, coming in the normal course of a day, applying for and receiving their birth and death certificates, real time, right there and then in front of her.

She left this country particularly impressed with the work of the registries under the remit of the Registrar General, and the Controller of the Intellectual Property Office. And to this day, continues to consult with the Ministry as she builds out improvements for the Attorney General's Chambers of Belize, patterned off of the working examples of the competence, talent, and build-out of the reality of our work in the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs of Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Thompson-Ahye: Attorney General.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: My colleague, Sen. Thompson-Ahye.

Sen. Thompson-Ahye: Yes. I heard you speak of a number of pieces of legislation you wanted to bring. But in respect of legislation that has already been passed in the House and not been implemented, and I speak specifically about the Homes for Older Persons Act of 2007, almost 16 years old. Do you have any plans to, you know, bring that on stream? This is the older persons, and many of them have died while we are waiting for the regulations

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Thank you for that, Sen. Thompson-Ahye, and that is certainly something that I am in discussions with the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, and no doubt you will be getting appropriate updates on that as we progress through this legislative agenda. Thank you.

Madam President, if I may continue and just to touch on some of the areas in which the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs continues to work. I have already mentioned the real-time example of the land registry. We have the Property Business Registration System of the Registrar General's Department,

which allows real-time digital access to land title documents. We have the land document e-filing application in that registry, digital certified copies being available to members of the public.

Within the first fortnight of my appointment as Attorney General, I was privileged to be taken on a tour of the land registry archives in the basement of the Attorney General's Ministry, and to see firsthand the remarkable work of the exceptionally competent staff of that department, the Registrar General's Department who have digitized records, some handwritten books, Madam President, dating back to the 1700s. I witnessed those books on shelves in the basement of the Attorney General, Registrar General's Department. Some as large as, as wide as, and as long as the desk at which Madam President sits, and eight to 10 inches in depth consisting of pieces of paper that date back to the 1700s that are incapable of being easily managed anymore, but contain the records of our land transactions which are so important for the search titles that have to assure the quality of ownership going into the future.

And I witnessed the young people, very proud, carefully scanning those pages of those pieces of paper, 1700 and coming forward, and creating digitized records which allow us now to do online searches to assure the quality, the impeccable quality of our land titles.

That allows me, Madam President, immediately to just, to use the colloquial expression, to segue to an important development that is also taking place supported by the digitization capability of the Registrar General's Department. That is to say, the work of the single point of authority.

In the period 2015 to 2017, three reports of this Parliament's Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure focused on state land management,

as well as a review of decades-old state land distribution policy. A system that has been in disarray for a considerable period of time.

In October 2020, Madam President, Cabinet appointed a steering committee comprising members from various Ministries and agencies with responsibility for land. The terms of reference of that steering committee are to develop a plan and report to the Cabinet on a single point of authority for the management and administration of state land owned and controlled by state agencies, using the existing human resources and infrastructure of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and other agencies of the State.

Madam President, the steering committee on the single point authority recommended to Cabinet in 2021, an IT-based single point of authority to be established within the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Land Management Division. And that single point authority is now working with the Ministry of the Attorney General, assisted and supported by the Registrar General's Department. And that single point authority is now looking to identify critical elements of AGLA's support for the work of that single point authority in three specific areas, legislative changes to support interoperability among state entities for data sharing, changes to the State Lands Act and other legislation to modernize the management and administrative functions of state land management, as well as enforcement mechanisms, and streamlining the relationships with the Chief State Solicitor's and Registrar General's Departments of the Ministry of the Attorney General, in line with the digital transformation work already under way at the Registrar General's Department. So we have a marriage of state agencies working together with that which is already in place at the Registrar General's Department to build out the work of that single point

authority.

Madam President, the work of the Companies Registry continues in the companies—in implementing provisions of the Companies Act and amendments to that legislation to allow for private companies on the register of companies to disclose the beneficial owners holding interest in the company. And that is something that is being worked on as we speak. There is also the ease of business approach, all information required for the incorporation of companies, as well as the registration of external companies and business names being submitted online using the TTBizLink e-company registration service which forms part of the single electronic window operated by the Ministry of Trade and Industry for accessing Trinidad and Tobago Government services.

What I am speaking of here, Madam President, is the whole-of-government approach, which the Ministry of the Attorney General is employing to partner with other Ministries to enable the citizenry of this country to benefit from enhanced services and more secure transactions. Madam President, CROS, that is to say, the Companies Registry Online System intended to replace TTBizLink platform so as to create a paperless system to provide for user-friendly, remote access, on a 24-hour basis. These are just examples of works in process that are moving forward as we speak.

The Intellectual Property Office, time will not permit me to be perfectly honest to detail the remarkable work that is being done by that office. My colleague Sen. Vieira on the other side of the Independent Bench will have an intimate working appreciation of that office, because it is an area that he does a lot of work in. And it is under the proud leadership of a young man by the name of Mr. Regan Asgarali to whom I pay tribute today for his very robust and stout

leadership.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Among the accomplishments of the Intellectual Property Office include: The granting of intellectual property rights; the determination of opposition hearings; making intellectual property information available to the public; receiving international applications under the Patent Cooperation Treaty; advising the Government on intellectual property matters; promoting public awareness; and of course, promoting inventiveness amongst the creative citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

In calendar year 2021, the unaudited gross revenue for the Intellectual Property Office amounted to \$6,263,700. A significant increase from 2020 in setting a new record high crossing of the \$6 million mark for the first time in the history of intellectual property in this country.

Madam President, the Solicitor General's Department is critical as we all know, to the administration of justice in Trinidad and Tobago. It provides legal services of the State in every area of criminal law—in every area of law except criminal law, I beg your pardon.

The Solicitor General's Department deals with several matters ranging from litigation matters; advisory matters; membership or negotiating teams and delegations on behalf of the Government; vetting and/or preparation of documents relating to international law; dealing with and briefing overseas counsel and solicitors in London and elsewhere, and counsel appearing on behalf of the State before the Privy Council, and in the original jurisdiction even of the Caribbean Court of Justice to which jurisdiction we will in due course be acceding at the appellate level, my enduring hope.

Time will not permit me, Madam President, to detail the work of the Solicitor General's Department, but I will want to acknowledge before I pass on, the considerable contribution of Solicitor General Ms. Carol Hernandez who is now on preretirement leave.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: And I look forward to the Judicial and Legal Service Commission moving swiftly to appoint her successor from within the ranks of the very competent members of staff of that department, several of whom are very deserving of being promoted to fill her very able shoes.

Madam President, the Chief State Solicitor's Department, led by the very competent senior attorney Mr. Sean Julien, who leads an equally experienced and competent team of attorneys, many of whom I know personally having worked with them when I was in private practice. Again, time will not permit me to detail the extent of the very invaluable service and work of these exceptionally competent and hardworking attorneys save to identify that that department includes: the Offices of the Public Trustee; the Administrator General, the official receiver whose remit we have only last legislative term increased the remit of; Custodian of Enemy Property, ex-officio member of the Central Tenders Board.

May I also acknowledge the positive impact of the Ministry's Digitization Unit under the very able leadership of Ms. Sandra Cachie and with whom I have had privilege to work since assuming office, and indeed the work that they have been doing on payment vouchers, payment record cards, registers, schedule of accounts, I could go on, Madam President, but I am not going to take up the limited time that I have left, other than to go on record to let Ms. Cachie and my very able Permanent Secretary who has been working with me on the digitization

exercise to know that very recent developments now make an imminent reality the outfitting of the 20th floor of the Attorney General's tower to completely outfit the work of that digitization unit.

Madam President: Attorney General, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, that takes me to acknowledge the work of the Attorney General Secretariat led by the exceptional Ms. Tenille Ramkissoon. Under her leadership, the secretariat provides an incredibly invaluable link, and supreme quality work output and driving force to the coordination of very complex and important litigation and advice in different units and departments of the Attorney General's Ministry, not least the Solicitor General and Chief State Solicitor's Department.

It is not my style to single out persons because that always involves the individual risk of failing publicly to acknowledge individuals who are equally deserving of mention, but I think it important to acknowledge some of those persons who I have just named. And I am happy to acknowledge the work of those members of the Attorney General's Ministry that have already been acknowledged by the hon. Minister Sagramsingh-Sooklal, Minister in the Ministry, who spoke before me and identified the very able and hard work of very important units, Antiterrorism, Criminal Justice Unit, International Law and Human Rights, Child Abduction, and Central Authority, and the leaders of those particular units.

Vision 2030, Madam President, is a central part of the whole-of-government digital transformation. And a key component of this Government's vision for Trinidad and Tobago is a digitally transformed society. We have heard from my colleague Sen. Hassel Bacchus on the collaborative and partnership role that his Ministry of Digital Transformation plays within the Government. And I am able to

tell the country that the whole-of-government approach of this Government, includes the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs working collaboratively with Minister Bacchus, so that areas which we are currently working on as part of the Attorney General's legislative agenda, include but are not limited to the Cybercrime Bill, Telecommunications Act amendments, broadcast code, electronic transaction, electronic signature regulations, draft national identity legislation, and proclamation of sections of the Data Protection Act, and proposals for amendments to that Act, and draft data protection regulations.

4.00 p.m.

Madam President, it has been a privilege for me to be able to stand here this afternoon to speak to the remarkable privilege which I have been given—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:—to lead what is a very competent, hard-working team of very abled, dedicated professionals, from the security staff who welcomes me every morning I arrive at the Ministry to when I leave in the evenings. And I am grateful for the opportunity to serve this country through that very accomplished Ministry.

And permit me to say one last bit, Madam President, in closing. I have accepted an invitation of the hon. Prime Minister to serve this country and I would use this opportunity to appeal to Members of this House and to Members of the other House, to join with me in an effort to better the people of this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: I will not pretend that I have not been taken aback by some of the remarkable, almost venom, that I have witnessed being

expressed in this House and in the other House. I personally think it is unnecessary, it is unfortunate—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:—and I think it betrays the hopes and aspirations of this Republic that we should come to this Chamber and to the other Chamber and do anything other than commit to the future generations of this country. And I invite all Members—I pay tribute to the Independent Bench—and I invite all Members on the other side not to see me as an enemy. I am not your enemy, I am here to work with you in collaboration for the betterment of the people of this country. Thank you very much.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Oh yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It was a long process.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

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

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: 45?

Madam President: Yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Madam President. We have now been at this exercise in the other place and this place for close on 13 days and I must say, a lot of the commentary, the contributions have been very interesting, very helpful. A lot of the commentary and contributions have not been

helpful at all. There are only two comments I wish to make on comments made by Members of the Opposition in this Senate and the first one is to correct the record with respect to the actual provisions of the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Act, Act No. 11 of 2022. Sen. Lyder misrepresented the truth with respect to this particular piece of legislation. And I quote now from page 48 of the Act, Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform), which was passed earlier this year, and I go to 78(1), and it reads as follows:

“A Municipal Corporation shall be responsible...”

So, there was no Minister here. I heard the Senator talk about the Minister of Finance may, you know, use his discretion to decide whether taxes can be retained by various bodies. That is not what this says. This says:

“78(1) A Municipal Corporation shall be responsible for the collection of property taxes in relation to residential land within its Municipality.”

That is 78(1). And 78(2):

“Where a Municipal Corporation collects property taxes on residential land in its Municipality, it shall retain such taxes in its Corporation Fund...”

That is the truth and that is the reality, as opposed to the fiction that Sen. Lyder put into the Senate.

What this means is that when this Act is proclaimed, and this particular clause is proclaimed and becomes—this section, sorry, it will make it law that for all residential properties within a municipality, the corporations will collect the taxes and keep them for their use in their corporation fund. There is no ministerial discretion here whatsoever. And that is the whole point behind local government reform, to give corporations a dedicated and reliable income stream to deal with all of the problems that all of us face in our neighbourhoods, problems with bad roads,

drains that are not cleared all of the problems that we have within our local areas. The whole point of this is to give municipal corporations, wherever they are, no discrimination whatsoever—completely opposite to what the hon. Senator said. It is impossible for the Minister to discriminate because the law says that all corporations will collect and retain residential tax and it will be put into their fund which they can use for the benefit of the residents of their particular corporations. So that is one.

And the reason why we put 50 million in the estimates is because we intend to start the collection in 2023; 2023 has already begun, Madam President, it began on the first of October, that is our fiscal year. So that we are hopeful that within the coming months we will get to the point where we can start the collection of residential property taxes and make that available to the regional corporations for their use. That is why we started with 50. We do not know what the actual number will be at the end of the fiscal year. But certainly, when it is in full swing, we expect to collect in excess of \$300 million, which will all be made available to corporations. So that is the fact with respect to that.

Sen. Roberts, in his usual style, shouting at the top of his voice—and I had to talk to Sen. Lyder the other day but I see he did not take my advice. I advise him not to become a clone of Sen. Mark or Sen. Roberts, in terms of screaming but, obviously, my advice fell on deaf ears. But let me go now to the Income Tax Act to correct something that has been put into the record is simply not true. In the Income Tax Act, section 3:

- “(1) For the purposes of this Act there is hereby established a Board of Inland Revenue.
- (2) The Board shall consist of five Commissioners...

(3) The President shall appoint one of the Commissioners to be Chairman...”

In this particular legislation, because there are no other words after the word “President”, the Interpretation Act tells us that that is the Cabinet and the Cabinet would appoint a Commissioner to be Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue on the advice of the Minister of Finance. And therefore, it is my responsibility, while I hold this office, to advise the Cabinet as to who I believe, and who I believe the Cabinet should select, as the Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue. It is not anybody else’s responsibility. That is just a product of the legislation. So, all of this “ole” talk about a Minister getting involved in human resource matters, it is nonsense. The law requires the Minister of Finance to make the recommendation to Cabinet. And how else would a Minister of Finance do such a thing unless he conducted investigations? A Minister of Finance cannot do it on a whim, on hearsay, on “ole” talk, on rumor, one has to follow some sort of procedure, which is exactly what occurred here. So, I thought I would deal with that. But let me move on to much more important matters. Those are the only issues in contributions of the hon. Members of the Opposition that I thought I needed to comment on.

With respect to the contributions of various Senators, I want to thank all Independent Senators for their contributions; all of them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I do not want to single out anybody because they all spoke in different ways about different things, but it was all very enlightening, very instructive.

I thought the media did a disservice to Sen. Vieira. In fact, I was reading the newspapers or somebody sent me a newspaper article and I contacted Sen. Vieira and I said, “Senator, how could you say my budget was hopeless?” He said, “I never said any such thing.” The hon. Senator told me that. So, I showed him the headline:

“Independent senator: Budget does not inspire hope”.

That was so unfair. So, I thought that I would read into the record some of the things that Sen. Vieira actually said, which somehow did not find their way into the record. This is Sen. Vieira:

“...on balance, it seems to me that there is still much for which we should be thankful. The economy is stable. Our currency is stable...we live in a diverse, free, stable democracy.”

He goes on to say:

“In cold hearted, profit driven societies where capitalism favours the few at the cost of the many, you can work very hard at two jobs and still not be able to make a decent living...Happily, in Trinidad and Tobago, as recognized in this budget, that is not who we are and it is not where we are.

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

Citizens should be grateful for Government’s very careful stewardship of the economy over the last couple of years. They should not be blind to the beneficial fiscal measures geared towards putting more disposable income in the hands of consumers and towards safeguarding our social protection

system and safety nets. Interventions for the socially displaced, social housing accommodation, access to education, the reopening of...GATE, access to free health care.”

And yet, the headline was Sen. Vieira said the:

“Budget does not inspire hope”.

So, I thought I would put that on the record, Madam President, and I want to thank Sen. Vieira for his very kind words.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I want thank all of the Independent Senators. Sen. Richards, being the experienced professional that he is, did not get caught in that trap. When you look at the newspaper headlines with respect to Sen. Richards, it says:

He lobbied—“for better Wi-Fi...”—and other services.

Experienced media professional that he is, he could not get caught being misquoted.

Sen. Deyalsingh, they picked everything—they went through Sen. Deyalsingh’s entire statement and said the:

“...Budget...”—will cause a—“mental health crisis.”

It was so interesting, the way the media reported on this budget was so, so interesting. But that is how it is. You have to learn from Sen. Richards. They could not catch him, he was lobbying for Wi-Fi.

So, let me go on to now some of the comments made by the hon. Senators. And Sen. Welch, Sen. Welch had an issue with the increase in fuel prices. Also, Sen. Welch had an issue with the increase in the personal income tax allowance. In his opinion, in the hon. Senator’s opinion, the relief—the tax relief was insignificant. I beg to differ, and that is the kind of thing that makes a headline. I

am waiting to see tomorrow's headline, "Sen. Welch: Income tax relief insignificant". I do not agree at all. You have to have perspective. For some people, \$125 a month in their pockets is significant, in fact, for many people. And I was also listening to Sen. Welch's calculations with respect to the cost of fuel, I did some quick mathematics. Sen. Welch told us that it costs him \$420 to fill his tank. If that is gasoline, that is 60 litres; if it is diesel, that is 95 litres; if you are doing that for every week, that is 420 litres for the month; and if you are getting 20 litres—20 kilometers for the litre, that means that person is driving 9,000 kilometers a month. So, let us use gas.

If you put 60 litres in your tank every time you fill up and you do that every week, then you are going to be consuming 260 litres of gasoline every month. If you were you using a small car, which gives you 6 litres for 100 kilometres, and you are an ordinary person, you would be doing 5,000 kilometres per month with that kind of expenditure on fuel. Your average person travels about 2,000 kilometres a month, not 5,000 or 8,000, as the case may be. And when you do the calculations on your average driver with a small car, the increase in the cost of fuel for the month is about \$100. That is how it works out. Because your average person doing 2,000 kilometres per month, at 6 litres for every 100 kilometres, that is 120 litres of fuel. The increase was \$1, \$120. So, your average driver, driving a small car—and that is not a hybrid. If it was a hybrid, you would be burning 3 litres of fuel for every 100 kilometres, and you would be buying 60 litres of fuel for the month. So, when you take the increase in the personal allowance of \$6,000 a year, that is \$1,500 a year more in disposable income, it works out at \$125 a month, that is equal to increase in your fuel bill for your average driver.

I also want to make the point that there is a lot of research and argument about subsidies, and whether subsidies are progressive and whether subsidies are regressive. The consensus is that subsidies are regressive because they do not target those who need it the most. And this is why it is the policy of this Government, and we do intend to introduce it, that we would be giving a fuel card to persons at the lowest end of the spectrum. Because when you subsidize fuel, the guy who is driving the big gas guzzler, driving 5,000, 8,000 kilometres a month—although I am not sure there are too many people like that—he benefits or she benefits more actually, because they burning more fuel than the person at the lower end with the small car.

So, the subsidy does not benefit the people at the lower end the way it benefits the people at the upper end. It is far better to give the person, the lower income person, a grant, which is what this Government intends to do, which is what we announced in the last budget. We will be giving people at the lower end of the spectrum a fuel card that they can use to offset the increase in the price of fuel. We would be doing that with electricity as well, for people—you see, the whole concept of subsidies, subsidies add no value, they produce no economic activity, if one thinks about it.

There was a government that spent \$7 billion in one year subsidizing fuel, 2014. Did we feel that \$7 billion? I dare say, no. Can you imagine if that \$7 billion was used instead to build schools, to build hospitals, to subsidize medication, to increase social grants, increase disability, senior citizens' pension and so on? That \$7 billion, instead of being put towards fuel, was put towards all of these other things to improving our infrastructure, improving our roads, and that is where you have to have a deep discussion about subsidies. How relevant are

subsidies? Do they really help the people at the lowest end? Is it not better to do away with subsidies and then give grants to the people, the poorer people and the people at the lower end of the spectrum? It is a conversation we need to have as a country.

And that is the consensus among economists, because they understand that subsidies add no value. They add no value to anybody. They do not stimulate economic activity. They do not—they are not counted in your GDP. When economists are looking at your economy, they do not look at subsidies at all, because they add no value. Now, they are very valuable in terms of keeping the price down. But do you want to keep the price down for everyone when we have subsidized electricity in Trinidad and Tobago, as we do?

The person living in Goodwood Park, they benefit from subsidized electricity. But should they? Should you not do as we have done? We have introduced a rebate for people whose electricity bill is below a certain amount. You get—we have increased that systematically from 25 per cent of your bill up to 35 per cent of your bill. We could even waive bills that are \$100 or less, or \$200 or less, and in that way, you are helping the people that need it most. But if the guy that lives—let me not use a northern example. Somebody living in Palmiste, why should they get a subsidy on their electricity bill? These are the kinds of discussions we need to have as a country, rather than looking at things in a very simplistic way.

So, I put that to Members opposite to think about. These are just my thoughts but I think it is a discussion we need to have. Because who are the people that really—you really want to benefit from Government expenditure? Who do you

really think should benefit from Government expenditure? Obviously, people at the lower end of the spectrum, not people at the upper end of the spectrum.

And, you know, it is interesting—it is an interesting parallel with what is happening in the UK right now. You know, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the equivalent of the Minister of Finance, has had to resign. Why? Because he delivered a mini budget which was considered to be reckless. Why was it considered to be reckless? Because—and I am looking at a report here from *The Guardian* in the UK—why? Because 65 per cent of the measures in that so-called mini budget favoured the very wealthy in the UK. He was cutting taxes for the superrich. We in Trinidad and Tobago have the reverse. We have a 30 per cent tax rate on persons who earn above a particular amount, and a 25 per cent tax rate for persons below a particular amount.

So, in the UK, the new Chancellor came in and he announced a series of measures, all designed to cut taxes for the superrich and it was an unfunded package. So, what happened when the Chancellor did that? He came up with this thing to assist the rich and he had no financing for it. The financial markets reacted immediately, interest rates rose, pension funds lost 50 per cent of their value right away. And the result of all of that that reckless, I am sorry to say this—I mean, I am sorry to say this about a politician in another country—but that reckless behaviour caused the pound to crash. The pound nearly dropped below the value of the US dollar. We are not doing that.

And Sen. Welch was asking, what is trickle-down economics? And I will tell the hon. Senator and hon. Senators. Trickle-down economics is a series of policies which favour persons in the higher income brackets and those with substantial wealth. And the theory behind trickle-down economics is that if you

favour the rich, they will use whatever additional income they get and it will trickle-down to the poor. It is a failed methodology. It is failed. And you cannot confuse tax cuts for the superrich with incentives for business. Because how our jobs created? Jobs are not created out of thin air. Even the particular example in the budget, which is the apprenticeship to employment programme, what is that? It is an incentive for business. Because what we are doing, we are giving 150 per cent uplift for tax deductions for businesses when they employ these apprentices to become employees. So, if you spend \$50,000 a month on employing apprentices—you might employ 10 of them at 5,000 a month, whatever—you can claim \$75,000 as tax relief. So you get an uplift on your actual expenditure. So, whereas that might look on the surface to be something geared at employing people, it is, in fact, an incentive to business to employ people.

And if you look in the budget, we have given an incentive for people to expand their production lines. What happens when you expand your production lines? You employ people. So, all of the incentives that we give to business are geared towards growing these businesses and growing the employment levels in Trinidad and Tobago, generating economic activity, creating the conditions for the creation of far more sustainable jobs.

So, I have heard this critique coming from Members of the Opposition, and it is unfortunate that some people would just buy into it, that this budget is about trickle-down economics, that is nonsense. If you stimulate small businesses, if you give a guaranteed loan programme designed to help small businesses, small and medium-sized businesses, if you give them guaranteed loans, which is what we are doing right now, which is going to be financed through this budget—because the budget is not just the fiscal measures, it is the appropriations as well. And one of

the appropriations, one of the financing issues in 2023, is the creation of a fund; \$500 million fund, where the Government will guarantee loans to small and medium enterprises only—not large ones, not the rich—small and medium enterprises. The Government will guarantee loans up to 80 per cent, the small and medium enterprise has to come up with the other 20 per cent. It will be a long period of repayment, 10 years. You get a two-year moratorium to repay and the interest rates will be subsidized, and that is how we are helping small businesses.

And why are we helping small businesses? If you take a good look at Europe, 90 per cent of businesses in Europe comprise of organizations that employ five people or less. Take a good look at Europe and you will see it; 90 per cent of businesses in Europe are small businesses.

4.30 p.m.

And, therefore, when you incentivize a small business or you help them—because this is really assistance. That guarantee loan programme is assistance. Why are we helping small businesses? Two reasons: They employ people—and you are employing five people, next year you will employ 10 people and next year after that you will employ 20 people and so on, as you grow—but, the biggest challenge that small businesses face is access to capital. Any person here who has any involvement in a small business will know that the biggest problem that small businesses have is, you cannot get a loan from the bank. You do not have any capital, because you are small, you start small.

You might have an ice-cream cart, you start off small, it might be just you and one person. You have no cash in the bank, you have no collateral and you have no assets. You go to the bank for a loan they say: “Well, what, how are you securing this loan? You have no assets, you cannot secure it. Let me see your cash

flow? You have no cash flow. You are a small business.” And, therefore, this Government, having recognized that the biggest problem that small businesses face is access to capital, not only during the COVID period. We had a COVID-19 relief programme to help them deal with their problems—their loss of income and so on during COVID. That was an even more generous programme, where we guaranteed up to 100 per cent of the loans, the COVID relief loans, to tide them through to deal with their issues. But now we are putting in place a long-term loan guarantee scheme—and these are things that we have had in Trinidad and Tobago many, many, years, you know, and somehow this process fell through the cracks. And I, as Minister of Finance, looking at this problem, looking at, how do we get our economy to grow, how do we get businesses to grow, I tasked a team at the Central Bank, look all over the world—look in developed countries, look in emerging economies and look in developing countries and see how they assist their small businesses and how they get their small businesses to grow, and this model has come out of that.

This is not vaps, this is something we studied it very carefully. There is a very similar model in Singapore and there is a very similar model in Hong Kong and it works, because we looked at not just the elements of it, how it is made up, we looked at the output. How does it work? And these models have been very, very successful, because you are dealing with the number one problem that small businesses have, and it also encourages discipline. That is the other problem that small businesses have. They do not keep proper accounts. They do not follow proper human relations, HR policies and they do not follow proper IR policies, and this gives them that discipline, because in order to qualify for the loan, they have to put their house in order. And it is in this way, by giving these incentives and this

support to these small and medium-sized enterprises that we see job creation in the future.

One of the Opposition Senators spoke disparagingly about our EximBank programme, but that is a fantastic programme.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And I am very happy, when the opportunity came to appoint a CEO in the EximBank, and the number one candidate was the son of Winston Dookeran—look at who we are talking about? Political opponent—Navin Dookeran, we took the chance to hire him and he has been a tremendous success.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I want to congratulate him and his team, because it is not a one-man show either. But when you look at what the EximBank is doing, this is not anything that people should disparage and make jokes about and spread fake news. I have seen what they are doing. The businesses that they are lending, well not lending, they are providing for foreign exchange too, because the way the system works, the Government makes available its foreign exchange to the EximBank, which then makes it available to these businesses once they qualify. You have to be in the export business or you have to be an importer of essential foods and so on, but let us deal with the export side.

When I look at the reports, after a couple years of this new system, the small and medium businesses who are getting the lion's share of this foreign exchange are repatriating more foreign exchange than we are giving them. That is what is happening, and they are growing their businesses.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: You heard the Minister of Trade and Industry, you heard the

Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs read out some of the data in the budget speech, but that is not my data. I got that from Trade, who is actually measuring what is happening in our manufacturing sector, and you are seeing tremendous increases—15 per cent, 20 per cent, 30 per cent. These are real things. So that I would ask hon. Senators, do not look at things in such a narrow context. When we give incentives and support to the small and medium enterprise sector, the ultimate objective is to create jobs and to create sustainable jobs, because the public service cannot employ everybody. That is another thing that is happening in Trinidad and Tobago, everybody wants a public service job. I can speak as an MP. Madam President, how much more time do I have?

Madam President: You have 13 more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. As an MP, for a long time, when people come to see me in my constituency office, most of them are looking for a job, some looking for a house and some have some other problem, but the vast majority, at least, 75 per cent, they want a job. What kind of job they want? A government job. What you mean by that? Well, a lil county council, something in a Ministry, attendant in the hospital. All they are interested in is a government job. That is what they want, that is their ambition. We have to try and move away from that. There is nothing wrong with a government job, but there are only so many government jobs that exist. And if you have thousands of persons outside there and all of them looking for a government job—they want to work on the road, they want to work in the hospital—there is not space for them. And the only way we can deal with this problem is, you create meaningful, well-paid sustainable jobs in the private sector. That is the only way. And how do you create jobs in the private sector? You simulate economic activity. And how do you stimulate economic activity? You

give support where it is required, which is to the small and medium enterprises—you help them with access to capital—and the other firms, the larger firms, you incentivize them to employ people.

So, I would ask people to look at it this way. The idea that this Government is engaging in trickle-down economics is just absurd. If that were true, how come when you are earning more than a \$1 million, we tax you at 30 per cent? How come we taxing the banks at 35 per cent? These are the truths that the Opposition does not want the public to know. Banks are taxed at 35 per cent in Trinidad and Tobago. People who earn over \$1 million are taxed at 30 per cent, everybody else is taxed at 25 per cent. That is the opposite of trickle-down economics and this is Trinidad and Tobago under this administration. I think it is important that people understand what is going on.

And I heard Sen. Teemal make a plea for us to work together. That is essentially the message I got from Sen. Teemal. I mean, he said a lot of other things, but that is the message I got, and that is the correct message. Because all of this fighting, continuous screaming and fighting, how does that help people? How? I cannot see it. I, myself, I cannot see how it helps people. If we all look at policies and see that they are beneficial and they are working, why do you have to tell untruths about it? But, anyway, that is just my point of view.

So, I want to thank Sen. Ahye as well. I mean, I have to thank all the Senators. I mean, I listened to Sen. Remy, very focused representing Tobago, representing Tobago's interest. I went through everything Sen. Remy said, Sen. Dillon-Remy. And, I mean, you may find I may have been critical of Sen. Welch, but he meant what he said. It was from the heart. I understood. I just do not agree. So, I just thought I would make that point. So every single one of the

Independent Senators spoke well, gave me a lot of food for thought, issues that one has to think about, different perspectives. That is what a debate is all about. All of us cannot be saying the same thing.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It is an exchange of views, exchange of ideas. Sen. Amrita Deonarine, I do not want to single her out either, but very good economic analysis for yet another time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And do not feel I am not seeing the critique inside the contributions too. I have a report on all of you, and I see where you said we were doing good things and we were doing bad things. I have it. I saw everything. I saw where you praised us and I saw where you criticized us. Nothing is wrong with that. It is balance. They call that balance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: But none of the Independents came out screaming at the Government, you know, that everything is wrong, everything is bad, everything is terrible and everything is horrible. So, I appreciated my time here in the Senate. I appreciated all of the comments of all Members opposite.

And let me talk about the tax amnesty. I made a point in the budget speech, I gave the reason. Of course, amnesties have their downside. If you keep doing amnesties, people will wait for the next amnesty. We know that. But amnesties are used all over the world. There are so many developed and developing countries that use amnesties, it is not funny. But the point is, the reason I gave in the budget was that during the COVID period, so many businesses, especially, small businesses, were so damaged by loss of income, because that COVID period was

not easy, you know. It was not easy.

In the construction sector, I remember when the lock down came, construction projects in full flight, lock down, the first lock down—I am talking in 2020—construction projects shut down for two months or more. Nobody could do anything. You had to close the site down. What do you do in a case like that? Some employers sent all their workers home, some paid them half pay, some who had a lot of resources may have kept their workers on, but most did not, and a company like that gets damaged in something like a pandemic.

So that when we the amnesty last year, a lot of companies came to me and said: “I really struggled during the pandemic. My books are in a mess, we are now doing the audit. We are now doing accounts, so I would not be able to finish on time, would you be able to extend the amnesty beyond a certain point?” But we took it as far as we could, but we have done our analysis and we realized that there are still many firms who just could not pay their taxes during that period, because you have to make a choice. You choose between paying your employees, you choose between paying your debt service to the bank, you choose between paying your utility bill or you choose between paying your taxes. This is real life I am talking about. And, therefore, recognizing that a lot of small businesses, in particular, found themselves in trouble not paying their taxes, this is why we are doing the amnesty this year. I said it in the budget, I gave a reason. It is not a whimsical thing. It is not a vaps, you wake up one morning—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. And with respect to the fuel subsidy, people need to understand, the Government does not just get up one morning and say: “Ah go raise the price ah gas.” It doh work so”. You think we do not know

that this is not a popular move? Of course we know that. But the fact of the matter is, you do these things after careful consideration of all the options, very, very careful consideration of all the options. The fuel subsidy this year is costing us \$1.4 billion, 1.4. That is doubled the amount of money we are spending on agriculture, for example. Think about that. Because it is all about choices. What you spend your money on. And we certainly are going to implement that policy we announced last year, that we will come up with a fuel card for those at the lowest end of the spectrum. But these things are not easy to do. So that when we were looking at how you balance the adverse impact of an increase in the price of fuel, because it is adverse, we came up with the increase in the personal allowance and then for those who do not earn any money, understand the thinking.

We have 175,000 persons who are recipients of social grants, 100,000 persons receiving Senior Citizens Pension and another 75,000 receiving a multiplicity of grants: food cards, disability assistance, social assistance and so on. They do not earn income. You cannot get a grant if you are earning income, so you cannot benefit from the income tax relief, because you have no income to get tax on. So, we decided, okay, there is a category persons who are not going to benefit from any increase in the personal allowance. So, we decided, let us look at the most vulnerable which is the people on social grants, and that is why we picked out that 175,000 persons.

So, you have 300,000-odd persons who may benefit from the tax relief—and that is on the whole amount. It is not on the last increment—and you have another 175,000 who will now benefit from the one-time fuel grant. So that is almost 500,000 people. But there is still another group of people we know, people who are not recipients of social grants and they are not in the formal system and,

therefore, we have to target that group, and that is where the fuel card comes in.

So that, I want to make the point that these decisions are not taken lightly. We are well aware of the consequences. We do care about how we deal with the people at the lowest end of the spectrum and the poor and vulnerable, and that is demonstrated by the fact that we are giving a grant to 175,000 people at the lowest end, and we will be introducing various systems to give benefits to the poor and the vulnerable to deal with the adverse effects. There are some things that Government can hardly deal with at all.

Food prices: How does one deal with that? Most basic foods, not most, all are exempt from duty and VAT already. So some people say reduce taxes on basic foods. There is no tax. But, you see, that is the kind of commentary, it sounds nice. You know, “why de Government doh reduce taxes on food”? It has no tax on it already. But the problem is that we are dealing with imported inflation. We have to come up with other ways and means of assisting people, and the way you deal with it is that you give assistance to those at the lowest end of the spectrum. But it is not simple, it is quite complicated. So, over the next couple months, we will be implementing the various promises we made with respect to helping those at the lowest end of the spectrum with a fuel card or utility rebates and so on. So, with those few words, Madam President, I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, Madam President, sorry. Hon. Senators, the question is—

Madam President: No, no, no.

Hon. C. Imbert: Oh, I am sorry.

Madam President: Just before it: “In accordance with”.

Hon. C. Imbert: Oh, I am so sorry, I am reading your—I deeply apologize, Madam President. Madam President, in accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2023, not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

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

Sen. Mark: Division.

The Senate divided: Ayes 23 Noes 6

AYES

Browne, Dr. Hon. A.

Armour SC, Hon. R.

Gopee-Scoon, Hon. P.

Sinanan, Hon. R.

Hosein, Hon. K.

West, Hon. A.

Mitchell, Hon. R.

Cox, Hon. D.

de Freitas, Hon. N.

Bacchus, Hon. H.

Singh, Hon. A.

Ibrahim, Dr. M.

Sagramsingh-Sooklal, Hon. R.

Lezama-Lee Sing, Mrs. L.

Hislop, L.

Richards, P.

Deyalsingh, Dr. V.

Deonarine, Ms. A.

Seepersad, Ms. C.

Teemal, D.

Thompson-Ahye, Mrs. H.

Dillon-Remy, Dr. M.

Welch, E.

NOES

Mark, W.

Sen. Mark: Nooo to the fuel hike.

John, Ms. J.

Lutchmedial, Ms. J.

Nakhid, D.

Lyder, D.

Roberts, A.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Madam President, I beg to move that the Senate do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, as you are all aware, Divali 2022 will be celebrated on Monday, October 24, 2022. I now invite Senators to bring greetings in observance of the occasion. Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Diwali Greetings

The Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal): Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity to bring Diwali greetings on behalf of the Government Bench. Trinidad and Tobago, as we approach the auspicious occasion of Diwali, I take this opportunity to bring greetings on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to members of the Hindu community and, by extension, the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago as a whole.

Madam President, many may know this festival as being the festival of light, but the story transcends to a meaning, which I believe a person of any faith or belief can relate. There are several teachings on the origins of Diwali, but one of the most popular comes from the Holy Ramayan. The lighting of deyas on Diwali is derived from the story of the Ramayan where Sri Ram returned to Ayodhya subsequent to his 14 years of exile, after he defeated the evil Rawan and brought his wife, Mother Sita, back to his side.

The villagers of Ayodhya lit deyas to welcome Sri Ram home. These deyas were lit on the darkest night of the Lunar Year. The lighting of the deya is to commemorate Sri Ram's triumphs over the evil Rawan and just like any other faith, it signifies good over evil, knowledge over ignorance and light over darkest. Diwali signifies new beginnings, light over darkest, the triumph of Dharma over Adharma or righteousness over unrighteousness. With Diwali being the darkest night of the Lunar Calendar, the flickering of the light of each deya lit is symbolic or eradicating the darkest around it.

During the pandemic, we would have experienced a period of global darkest. Madam President, the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly created fear and

Divali Greetings

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

grief. Many, including myself, have lost a loved one to this evil virus. So, now, as we gradually emerge from the crippling effects of the pandemic, we should take this opportunity to not only be thankful for life, but to also be thankful for those around us. This is a time for deep contemplation and prayer. Fighting this COVID-19 pandemic, I want to believe, has made us stronger as a people. I want to believe has made us stronger as a nation. Let us not forget that we as the people and we as a people must grow stronger together. I pray that we continue to be each other's keeper and show love and compassion and respect to each other as Sri Ram would have done for his people and for all around him even those who did him wrong and those he did not agree with.

As we clean our homes, let us also purify our thoughts and actions towards each other. Let that approach spill over into the way in which we live as we do our part to preserve our environment. Let us come together as a people to work together for the betterment of each other and our country as a whole. Year after year, Madam President, I continue to admire how the people of Trinidad and Tobago, as a multi-cultural society, come together as one people to celebrate each other's culture, recognizing the rich history of all of our ancestors and Divali is no different. Truth be told, Madam President, my Afro-Trini friend actually taught me to make barfi for my first Divali as a married woman.

As I close, I leave you, Trinidad and Tobago, with these few words. Let us celebrate the festival in the true sense by spreading joy and light. Let us light up the world of our fellow citizens. Let us be our brother's keeper. Happy and a safe Divali to you Trinidad and Tobago to you, Madam President and to you, my brothers and sisters of this Senate. May God bless Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

5.00 p.m.

Madam President: Sen. Lutchmedial.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial: Madam President, it is distinct pleasure to bring greetings to the Members of this honourable House and, by extension, the nation on the auspicious occasion of Divali. As the nation prepares to celebrate the festival of Divali, I will reflect particularly on its theme of light over darkness. I have to say that such an occasion is especially welcomed. In our daily lives we battle through the darkness shrouded over our nation and its people as for the past two years many of our lives have changed in ways that we could have never imagined possible. Not everyone made it through the pandemic and some are still battered, bruised, trying to return to a sense of normalcy. For me, personally, I see it in my own life in the life of my child, who between the critical ages of three and five did not have friends, go to a beach, a park, a mall, or even on an airplane.

We have been very busy trying to make up for the lost time and being able to spend Divali this year with her *aajee* and *aajaa* to attend multiple Divali celebrations and evenings of devotion with our friends and family is truly a welcomed development. Taking the time to illuminate our lives with worship, fellowship and charity can go a long way in diminishing the emotions of despair and fear that have crept into our individual lives and into our society as a whole. As we engage in preparations for our homes and our minds for Divali day to light deeyas in remembrance of the return of Shri Rama, we take time to be with our families, friends and neighbours from different religious and cultural backgrounds. In Trinidad and Tobago Divali is a national festival. It is a time when we all come together in fellowship and celebration. And coming from a mixed Presbyterian/Hindu background, I have lived that experience and it is one that I

cherish.

The beauty of the deeyas' flame is like the beauty of our multicultural society. It is warm and it inspires hope. The lights not only decorate our homes and communities but it also glows in our hearts providing hope that tomorrow will be a better day. I have only the fondest memories of Divali spent with my grandparents' home with extended family, delivering food and sweets to persons in the community who were less fortunate. The deep sense of community, the love and compassion was always present. Today, I look at the television of the news, I see people volunteering their time to help those who are flooded, search for missing persons and come together to comfort each other when there is a moment of grief that shocks the nation.

A week ago there were some terrible floods in the area that I live and I witnessed first-hand, the generosity and selflessness of our people; that to me is the spirit of Divali. We witness every day light all around us once we are willing to see it and in the spirit and in the resilience of our people, I see that light of the deeya. The light can come in various forms, particularly in service to those in our communities who need a little extra love and care during these difficult times.

On a personal note, Divali will be a little different for me this year, as earlier this year I lost my grandmother whose home was the central feature of all things Divali for all 40 years of my life, but I remember one of the favourite Divali songs that she taught me, and when you look at the meaning—I would not terrorize anyone with my singing but I know the English words of it, and it says:

Shri Rama bestows peace on and removes the sorrows of his dear devotees.

We salute at your feet, o Lord. Grant tender mercy and forgiveness onto us and dispel all the fears and afflictions that we face.

I think those are words that could bring comfort to many people in our country

today and I hope that everyone could reflect on that message this Divali, whether it is to bring comfort to themselves or to someone around them.

On behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, the political leader of the United National Congress, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the entire parliamentary arm of our party, I extend warm greetings to you, Madam President, the hardworking staff of the Parliament and colleagues on all benches and their respective families. May the light of deeyas fill your home with wealth, happiness, success and all things that can bring you joy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Deyalsingh.

Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh: Madam President, it is indeed a pleasure to be able bring Divali greetings on behalf of the Independent Bench. As I look around this Chamber, I am pleased and proud to be a Member of the Upper House. I see here representation of our rainbow country, our cultural mosaic, our multicultural, multi-religious nation. I see Muslim brothers on both sides of the House, Sen. Nakhid, Sen. Hosein and our Vice-President, Ibrahim; our Hindu *maharanis* who are looking like Bollywood screen stars. I saw Sen. Sagramsingh and Sen. Lutchmedial so impeccably dressed. We even have our own Priyanka Chopra in Tobagonian Senator, Jearlean John, looking so beautiful in her attire. We even have in this House, Amerindian representative in Sen. Lezama, and our Christian brothers and sisters. There is no Senate in the world which could boast of this mosaic representation. No Senate in the world with this cultural mosaic representing different geography, Tobago, Trinidad, people, cultures, festivals, holidays. And there is Tobago Blue Festival on Sunday, so I hope—I know I am seeing Avinash Singh there, so I am hoping—and Mr. Hislop there, so I am hoping to see some of those people in those festivals, some of us. So I am proud and

Divali Greetings
Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh (cont')

privileged to be a citizen of this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Divali came to this country through our Indian forefathers when they journeyed to this land started in 1845. In the barracks they continued the celebration of Divali and then later to the villages, to the communities.

The Hindu community was acknowledged when the late Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams, granted us a national holiday in 1966. Divali became a true national festival with many Hindus and non-Hindus alike celebrating the day, cleaning their homes, praying, preparing sweets, lighting deeyas. As a nation we are seeing some dark times, crime, the high cost of living, increase in mental illness and social distress. In this House we attempt to pass legislation to carry the nation forward, to protect human rights, to assist our citizens, to pass legislation to give citizens hope to light their lives, and we have a responsibility as leaders, as legislators, as patriotic citizens to spread this light; to spread the light and blessings of Mother Lakshmi and ensure that the benefits are distributed equitably to our country, to all in our country. Divali is celebrated to mark the triumph of good over evil and I pray Mother Lakshmi will give our nation peace, joy, unity.

On behalf of the Independent Bench, I would like to extend greetings and best wishes to all the staff allocated to Parliament, to fellow Members of Parliament, to the citizens of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on this auspicious occasion of Divali. Shubh Divali to all.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Hon. Senators, Divali is one of the most loved and celebrated religious festivals in Trinidad and Tobago. In the Hindu tradition, among other things, it remarks the return of Lord Rama, his wife Sita and her brother Latchman

to Ajodhya after Lord Rama's defeat of Ravana. It represents the victory of good over evil and preserving of the dignity of a women since it was Ravana who kidnapped Lord Rama's wife, Sita, which led to the battle between Lord Rama and Ravana. Among other things, Divali therefore represents the victorious emergence of positivity over negativity, happiness over sadness, and light over darkness.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we are blessed to be able to share in the celebration of Divali annually, that the entire country comes together to mark this inspirational festival is deeply symbolic of our innate ability to reach out to one another across religious and other divisions and embrace the central and immutable beauty of our shared humanity. Hon. Senators, my wish for you this Divali is that we might not take for granted either our freedom to celebrate our religions openly or the love and respect among and between the different religions in our nation that allow all of us to participate so fully and so unreservedly in one another's celebrations. May we always live the teachings of this festival and see manifested in our lives, the triumph of positivity over negativity, happiness over sadness and of light over darkness.

On behalf of the Parliament, the members of staff, and on my own behalf, I wish all Members of the Senate, and the Minister of Finance who is visiting with us, a very happy Divali, and I extend that to all of Trinidad and Tobago. Shubh Divali.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Hon. Members, the question is that this Senate do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

Divali Greetings
Madam President (cont')

2022.10.14

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 5.09 p.m.