

**SENATE**

*Wednesday, January 25, 2023*

The Senate met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]



**SENATORS' APPOINTMENT**

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne and Sen. Damian Lyder, both of whom are out of the country, and to Sen. Deeroop Teemal who is ill.

Hon. Senators I have received the following correspondence from Her Excellency the President Paula-Mae Weekes, ORTT.

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes

President.

TO: MR. MICHAEL SEALES

WHEREAS Senator the Honourable Dr. Amery Browne is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, do hereby

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appoint you, MICHAEL SEALES to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2023 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of Senator the Honourable Dr. Amery Browne.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the  
President of the Republic of Trinidad and  
Tobago at the Office of the President, St.  
Ann's, this 24<sup>th</sup> day of January, 2023.”

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes

President.

TO: MR. DOMINIC SMITH

WHEREAS Senator Damian Lyder is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, do hereby appoint you, DOMINIC SMITH, to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2023 and continuing during the absence of Senator Damian Lyder by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago.

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Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 24<sup>th</sup> day of January, 2023.”

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Paula-Mae Weekes

President.

TO: MR. JOSH DRAYTON

WHEREAS Senator Deeroop Teemal is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

NOW THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section 44(4)(c) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, JOSH DRAYTON to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from the 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2023 and continuing during the absence of Senator Deeroop Teemal by reason of illness.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 24<sup>th</sup> day of January, 2023.”

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**OATH OF ALLEGIANCE**

*The following Senators took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law:*

Michael Seales, Dominic Smith and Josh Drayton.

**CONDOLENCES****(MR. RAWLE TITUS)**

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, former Senator and Vice-President of the Senate Mr. Rawle Titus passed away on Monday, January the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023. I now invite Members to offer tributes. Sen. Hislop.

**Sen. Lawrence Hislop:** Mr. President, it gives me great privilege and honour to stand on behalf of the Government Bench, and join in paying tribute to Rawle Winston “Axeback” Titus. A well-known scholar, teacher, musician, choreographer, politician. A true leader and a fellow Tobagonian. He was a multifaceted man who was born in the village of L’Anse Fourmi to humble beginnings, but through passion, hard work and dedication he rose to be a well-known figure throughout the island and country. Rawle was fondly known in the Tobago space as “Axeback”, and his own words would have given a most interesting account as to just how he came by that name, and, Mr. President, though humorous, it is not one I want to repeat in this honourable House.

Mr. Titus was a primary school teacher, principal, acting school supervisor, co-founded the Buccoo Theatre, founded the Tobago Folk Performing Company; vice-president of the Tobago Calypsonian Association; president of the Tobago Football Association; vice-chairman, subsequently chairman, of the Tobago Heritage Festival; chairman of the Tobago Carnival Development Committee and a six-time calypso monarch as well as a 19-time National Calypso Monarch semi-finalist, amongst many other accolades. He was a strong advocate for the

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preservation of Tobago's culture and heritage, and as a true cultural icon he worked tirelessly to promote the island's culture and to raise the awareness of its importance. He played a key role in the development of several cultural initiatives on the island. He was instrumental in the formation of the North-Side Combined Community, and has been a driving force behind its success, and in 2000 he led the villages of L'Anse Fourmi, Bloody Bay, Parlatuvier and Castara to the Tobago Heritage Festival, and Best Village from 2001 to 2003.

He held a passion for all things cultural in Tobago, and was particularly proud of our local Tamarind band and worked assiduously towards the continued development of the art form. He was a master at his craft. His work was known, loved and respected by many. He was a true pioneer in the world of calypso music, and his work has had a lasting impact on the genre. He will be remembered as a true legend as his works continue to inspire and delight audiences for many years to come. And he was a stalwart of the Tobago carnival scene and won many awards for his costumes. He was an active member of the People's National Movement Tobago Council and was always working to promote the party's values. He was a true leader and was always working to help his fellow Tobagonians. He was a strong advocate for education and often spoke out about the importance of education for the people of Tobago. It is not surprising then that throughout his illustrious career he exhibited as much humility as professional dignity.

The People's National Movement Tobago Council recognized these sterling qualities and had the privilege of appointing him to the national Parliament as a Senator during the years 2002 to 2004. He served as Vice-President, the second highest position in this place, and his brilliance was obvious. His decisions laudable, and his overall demeanour one that earned him the respect of his colleagues. He was a strong leader, a fair and impartial presiding officer, and was

well-liked by all who knew him. He was a man of integrity and principle, and was indeed a credit to the Senate. His amazing ability, Mr. President, to connect with people and his ability to inspire others made him a great role model to the younger generation, and one who made a positive impact on everyone he met. The People's National Movement is proud to have had Mr. Rawle Titus as a part of its team, and is grateful for the contributions he has made to the party and to the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Rawle transitioned on Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 2023, but his memory still lives on.

Mr. President, we on the Government Bench salute Rawle Winston "Axeback" Titus, and a life well lived.

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

**1.45 p.m.**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, on behalf of the Opposition, United National Congress Senate Bench, we would like to extend to the family, friends and associates of the late former Sen. Rawle Titus. A cultural guru has fallen. He now belongs to the ages.

Mr. President, I had the distinct pleasure, honour and opportunity of serving under the distinguished former Vice-President and Senator in our Parliament, in the Senate. And I can say without any equivocation or ambiguity that Rawle Titus was a very decent, dignified, civilized individual. We got from him a fierce sense of independence in whatever he embarked upon. In any Parliament there will be exchanges, there will be clashes and, of course, when you occupy the Chair that you are now occupying, Mr. President, you have to do what you have to do. But one can say without a doubt that former Vice-President Rawle Titus played his role, contributed enormously to our country. And I dare say Rawle was literally the repository of rich cultural knowledge and experience.

As my colleague from Tobago, Sen. Hislop, said earlier, he was a writer but not a publisher, and I hope that the people of Tobago would gather his writings on many aspects of culture in that island called Tobago and, by extension, Trinidad and Tobago, so that the young ones who are emerging would learn from his rich experience. In the document I received from the Parliament, it talks about a pioneering anthropologist and cultural icon. And I think those words really sum up this illustrious son of the soil.

He served on committees in this honourable Parliament, he served with distinction as Vice-President in spite, as I said, of whatever differences we would have had, and I think Trinidad and Tobago has lost a truly cultural giant and hero. And I really would like on behalf—you know, Mr. President, you know, he reminded me of persons who have passed through our Chambers. He was in politics but not a politician, because when you dealt with him there was a certain balance that you met when you dealt with him. And he was so fiercely independent, which he guarded that independence, he guarded jealously, that in his latter days he parted ways with the party that he was associated with for all these years because of that fierceness of independence and thinking and thought.

So, Mr. President, on behalf of our Bench, we would like to extend to his family, once again, our sincerest condolences and may the Almighty God permit his soul to be rested in peace or to allow his soul to rest in peace and rise in glory. I thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy:** Thank you, Mr. President, for allowing me to pay tribute to Mr. Rawle Titus, a former Vice-President of the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago, who departed this life on January 02, 2023, at the age of 80 years. How can I do justice in this short time to a man who had done so much in so many

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy (cont'd)

spheres of influence in Trinidad and Tobago? But I will pick a few areas. At the level of the Trinidad and Tobago Parliament, as it was already said, he served as a Government Senator in the 7<sup>th</sup> Republican Parliament from April 5<sup>th</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> of August, 2002. In the 8<sup>th</sup> Republican Parliament, he was Vice-President of the Senate from October 17, 2002 to 28 September, 2007. During this period he performed the functions of President of the Senate in the absence of the hon. Dr. Linda Baboolal on many occasions.

During his terms as Senator, he served on several committees, including the Joint Select Committee of Parliament appointed to consider and report on Government Ministries, Statutory Authorities and State Enterprises. He was also on the Statutory Instruments Committee of the Senate. But before he came to serve at the level of the Parliament, I can only describe him as a consummate community man who loved the island of his birth and served his people in several spheres of influence. In the areas of culture, as already mentioned by Sen. Hislop, he co-founded the Buccoo Folk Theatre in 1971. He founded the Tobago Folk Performing Company in 1983. He was Vice-President of the Tobago Calypso Association from 1985 to 1996; Vice Chairman of the Tobago Heritage Festival and Chairman of the Tobago Heritage Festival, 2001 and 2002; Chairman of the Carnival Development Committee, 2002 to 2003 and, already mentioned, Calypso Monarch and appeared at the national semi-finals on 19 occasions but never appeared in the national finals. But where did this all start?

It started, he was born on January 24, 1942, to parents Benjamin and Gertrude Titus. He was the father of Carol Small, Andre Titus, Aneesa Grant and Randy Titus. Educated at Bishops High School, then moved to Port of Spain Teachers College where he obtained his teachers diploma. Pursued further education at Drew University where he obtained a BA in Anthropology with a



Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy (cont'd)

minor in sociology. He also contributed to the formal education system, training young Tobagonians as a primary school teacher for 20 years between '63 and '83 and principal and then Acting School Supervisor I, and he was awarded National Teacher of the Year in 1974 and 1975. This cultural icon, teacher, calypsonian, arranger, pianist, choreographer was also an author. His anthropological publication, *Wake People Wake: The Scared and the Profane*, explored the funeral rights and traditions of Tobago.

I quote an article by the Devonne Miggins titled, “Groundbreaking Georgia”, and it states:

Rawle “Axeback” Titus is a Mount St. George native who grew up in the village in the 50s. He is a multitalented teacher, calypsonian, musician and sportsman. Noel Hector who grew up in Georgia at the same time—and by the way Georgia is the name that Tobagonians called Mount St. George.

He is a multitalented teacher, calypsonian, musician and sportsman. Noel Hector who grew up in Georgia in the 60s recalls looking up to Titus as a youth. He stated, “Rawle was the only man in the village who had a degree”. Hector admired Titus’ ability to excel in so many different spheres yet be such a contributive force in the Georgia community.

Mr. Titus continued to be a nurturer and protector of the Mount St. George history, talent and culture, and as recently as 2009 was one of the driving forces behind the magazine produced by Mount St. George Village Council called, *Mt. St. George in Focus*. The magazine was a collection of the best of the village, the theme of which was “Connecting and Identifying”.

As Secretary of Tourism of the Tobago House of Assembly, Councillor Tashia Burris says:

“...Titus’ commitment to the island’s cultural fraternity spanned more than

six (6) decades and was certainly revered throughout Tobago.”

As a result of this, in 2019, he was honoured by the Division of Tourism for his contributions to the Tobago Heritage Festival in the fields of composition, dance, choreography and playwright. His name is forever immortalized in the history and is currently mounted among other cultural giants at the Tobago Icons Museum.

So, yes, he told the story about how he got his name “Axeback”. When he was a teenager he refused to participate in a particular activity with some of his male friends and they told him, “yuh dull like the back of an axe”. And as a result he was called “Axeback”.

Today, on behalf of the Independent Senators, I wish to offer condolences to his loved ones and his community. Our nation has lost a cultural icon. May his family be comforted by the legacy he has left. Farewell, Sir Titus. Thank you.

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

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, a life of that lived by former Vice-President of the Senate Rawle Titus is not easy to capture in just a few words. Indeed, it is a life worthy of being celebrated and so, I am grateful for the tributes that have been delivered here today offering reflections on the life of this great son of the soil. As a proud Tobagonian, Rawle Titus served Tobago and Trinidad for his entire life with love, with pride and with unwavering commitment. In his role as a lifelong educator, he was awarded the National Teacher of the year in 1974 and 1975. And in his role as a cultural ambassador, he was celebrated as a calypsonian known by the unforgettable calypso sobriquet “Axeback”, which Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy just told us how he became.

By the turn of the century, Rawle Titus’ work expanded to his selfless service in the Senate in the 7<sup>th</sup> Republican Parliament. He began his electoral service as a Government Senator and by the 8<sup>th</sup> Parliament was later elected the

Condolences  
Mr. President (cont'd)

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Vice-President of the Senate. Such was his devotion to the country, to culture and to the youth. His work and service to this country will never be forgotten and he has the nation's fullest gratitude.

Hon. Senators, I will ask you to please stand so that we can observe a minute of silence in honour of both former Senator and Vice-President of the Senate, Rawle Titus.

*The Senate stood.*

**Mr. President:** May his soul rest in peace. Thank you, hon. Senators. I now instruct the Clerk to convey to the family of Mr. Rawle Titus the sentiments expressed today.

**2.00 p.m.**

**Finance (Supplementary Appropriation)  
(Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2023**

Bill to provide for a further supplementary appropriation for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2022 [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

**PAPERS LAID**

1. Annual Administrative Report of the National Helicopter Services Limited for fiscal year 2019 – 2020. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon)*]
2. Audited Unconsolidated Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission for the year ended December 31, 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]

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3. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Finance for fiscal year 2019/2020. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
4. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Princes Town Regional Corporation for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
5. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Princes Town Regional Corporation – Chairman’s Fund Account for the financial year ended September 30, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
6. Annual Report of the Financial Intelligence Unit of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
7. Response of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to the Sixth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination into the internal controls expenditure and the accessibility and availability of diagnostic imaging services at Public Health Institutions with specific reference to the Tobago Regional Health Authority. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
8. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to the Seventh Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination into the implementation of the Public Sector Investment Programme for fiscal year 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
9. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of National Security to the Seventh Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination into the implementation of the Public Sector Investment Programme for fiscal year 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]

10. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Seventh Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination into the implementation of the Public Sector Investment Programme for fiscal year 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
11. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Planning and Development to the Seventh Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination into the implementation of the Public Sector Investment Programme for fiscal year 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
12. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service to the Seventh Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination into the implementation of the Public Sector Investment Programme for fiscal year 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
13. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to the Seventh Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the examination into the implementation of the Public Sector Investment Programme for fiscal year 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]  
*Papers 1 to 3 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.*
14. Annual Administrative Report of the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee for the period October 2012 to September 2013. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
15. Annual Administrative Report of the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee for the period October 2018 to September 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]

16. The Annual Administrative Report of the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee for the period October 2012 to September 2013. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
17. Annual Administrative Report of the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee for the period October 2018 to September 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]

## **JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT**

### **Social Services and Public Administration**

#### **(Presentation)**

**Sen. Paul Richards:** Thank you, Mr. President. Good afternoon colleagues. I have the honour to present the following the report:

Fourth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament on an Inquiry into the Mental Health and Psychosocial Services available to the Population during the COVID-19 Pandemic (with a specific focus on measures to curb substance abuse and suicide).

## **URGENT QUESTIONS**

### **Construction of the North Stand Halted**

#### **(Measures Taken)**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Mr. President. To the hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts: Given reports that the construction of the North Stand at the Queen's Park Savannah has been halted due to stolen steel beams, can the Minister indicate what measures are being taken to ensure the completion of work for Carnival 2023?

**The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell):** Thank you, Mr. President. The NCC has advised that the replacement

beams have been purchased, fabricated and the North Stand will be completed on or before the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, 2023.

**Sen. Mark:** Can I ask the hon. Minister if any efforts have been made, as far as he is aware, to apprehend those who were responsible for the removal of those steel beams?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Mr. President, an internal investigation has commenced as well as a report has been made to the police and the police are conducting enquiries.

**Sen. Mark:** Can the Minister indicate whether the NCC has attached any value in terms of quantity of moneys lost temporarily until those steel beams are retrieved?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Mr. President, I am not armed with that information but I am sure if he poses the question in the appropriate way, I will get that answer for him.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark, next Urgent Question.

### **Residents of Arima and Environs**

#### **(Restoration of Water Supply)**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** To the Minister of Public Utilities: Given reports that a damaged 42-inch transmission line in Santa Rosa has caused over 75,000 residents of Arima and environs to be without a potable water supply, can the Minister advise when will the water supply be restored?

**The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales):** Thank you very much, Mr. President. Last Thursday, January the 19<sup>th</sup>, a rupture was discovered on the Water and Sewerage 42-inch diameter transmission line which transmits water from the North Oropouche water treatment plant located in Valencia. The ruptured transmission line runs cross-country through parts of Valencia along the Churchill Roosevelt Highway to Piarco. Along the route, there are different oftakes which

serve communities such as Brazil, Maloney, La Horquetta, O'Meara, Tumpuna and Malabar.

Immediately on the discovery of the rupture, an emergency WASA crew was mobilized and dispatched to repair the ruptured main so as to ensure an early restoration of the supply of water to some 120,000 customers affected in the communities identified. Mr. President, the repair work proved to be extremely difficult. The damaged section of the pipeline which was partially submerged by Mausica River, had to be removed and be replaced by a section of steel main. During repair works, a masonry rubble wall on the eastern side of the river collapsed onto the work area further dislodging the 42-inch transmission main. Additional heavy equipment had to be mobilized on site to assist with additional works with such sloped stabilization and removal of reinforced concrete footing to access the main. Mr. President, the restoration work was completed on Tuesday, January 24<sup>th</sup> at around 8.30 p.m. and the water supply has been restored to the affected communities.

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

**Sen. Mark:** Yeah, Mr. President, can the Minister indicate whether this damaged 42-inch transmission line was damaged or was the subject of deliberate sabotage or was it a natural occurrence through aged pipelines?

**Hon. M. Gonzales:** Mr. President, I wish to dispel any notion that this ruptured transmission line was damaged as a result of any sabotage by external parties. It is as a result of the shifting earth in that area on the river bank and the movement of the pipeline over a period of time. The investigation would have resulted in the fact that this transmission line was dislodged as a result of the earth movement taking place in the area.

**Sen. Mark:** Thank you, Mr. President. I will go on to the next question.



**Increase in COVID-19 Deaths  
(Public Education Measures Implemented)**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** To the Minister of Health: In light of the increase in COVID-19 deaths in recent days, can the Minister indicate what public education measures are being implemented during this Carnival period?

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you very much, Mr. President and may I offer my heartiest congratulations to you on your appointment and may I say a very Happy New Year to all Members of this Chamber.

The question, as posed, is a little bit misleading about increase in deaths. We look at trends over time. For the past four reporting periods, 3<sup>rd</sup> January, deaths are per day by week, one: 10<sup>th</sup> January, one; 17<sup>th</sup> January, 2 and for the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, back to one. There is no sustainable trend of increase in deaths. Two: our seven-day rolling-day average of cases hovers between 54 and 74 for the same four-week reporting period. Our hospital numbers oscillate between 65 and 75, that is, 70 plus or minus five for the same period. So the numbers are basically static and there is no increase in trend over time.

However, in an effort to be proactive, we continue to advise of the public health measures of masking, washing hands and social distancing are still highly recommended for the vulnerable and the immunocompromised, especially those with comorbidities, those who are obese, the elderly, the unvaccinated. You would see ticker tape messages on both national channels. We have maintained the masking at all health facilities, public and private. The Ministry of Health's website continues to publish all the necessary guidelines and we relaunched an aggressive vaccination drive for 2023 for both COVID and influenza because both of them have the capacity to overwhelm a health care system. To date, in that

period, over 7,000 doses of both COVID and influenza vaccines have been administered. Unlike other countries, we have never deescalated or stopped advising people to wearing masking. Additionally—

**Mr. President:** Minister, time is up.

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** Thank you.

**2.15 p.m.**

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** Mr. President, may I ask the Hon. Minister whether the recent report of 11 deaths was clearly a misleading statement coming out from a bulletin issued by the Ministry of Health? I am just trying to get guidance.

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** It was not a misleading statement. The numbers of deaths per week hover between one for 3<sup>rd</sup> January; one, 10<sup>th</sup> January; two for 17<sup>th</sup> January, obviously we reported it; and the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, one. So there is no prolonged increase. One week does not a trend make.

Additionally, Mr. President, specifically for carnival, we are partnering with Boom Champions at the Eddie Hart grounds to do screening. And at all our screening activities, at the Great Pap Smear Initiative, we screen people for their comorbidities so they could be advised to get vaccinated. At the Eddie Hart grounds we actually got five people who were screened for hypertension and were stopped from taking part in the physical activity because of their high blood pressure. This is the value of screening and knowing your numbers, and then they are advised.

So Mr. President, in closing, we urge all unvaccinated to simply get vaccinated. Thank you.

**Mr. President:** Thank you very much. Hon. Senators, the time for Urgent Questions has ended.

**ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

**The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):** Mr. President, the Government is in a position to answer all three oral questions on the Order Paper today.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** Question No.26 to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

**Mr. President:** You are not asking Question No. 25, Sen. Mark?

**Sen. Mark:** Sorry, Mr. President.

**School Nutrition Programme****(Steps to be taken for additional funding)**

**25. Sen. Wade Mark** asked the hon. Minister of Education:

Can the Minister state what steps will be taken to provide additional funding to the School Nutrition Programme to satisfy the increasing demand for meals?

**Mr. President:** Acting Leader of Government Business.

**The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):** Thank you, Mr. President. As part of the Government's social safety net, a total of \$270,746,800 has been allocated to the National Schools Dietary Services Limited for fiscal 2023. This sum has been determined to be sufficient to supply meals in this academic year for all students in all schools who have been identified as requiring this free service. Should additional funding be required, the Ministry of Education will approach the Ministry of Finance.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** Is the Minister is in a position to inform the Senate how many students and pupils will be able to access these meals, given the sum outlined?

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Thank you, whilst I do not have the exact numbers, what I can say is that all requests for school feeding are being fulfilled at this time.

**Sen. Mark:** Thank you very much, Mr. President. I go on now to the question that I posed a short while ago to agriculture. Should I restate it, Mr. President?

**Mr. President:** You can, for procedural purposes.

### **Praedial Larceny Squad**

#### **(Measures taken to strengthen)**

**26. Sen. Wade Mark** asked the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries:

Can the Minister state what measures will be taken to strengthen the Praedial Larceny Squad given reports of the large scale looting of farmers' crops and livestock?

**Mr. President:** Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein):** Thank you very much, Mr. President. Mr. President, as a result of reports with respect to large-scale looting of farmers' crops, and livestock, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has been actively assessing the operations of the praedial larceny squad. Currently, the unit operates with a total of 33 officers in various positions. Due to the heightening illegal activity impacting our farmers, the praedial larceny squad has been utilizing its connection with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, that is the TTPS; the Trinidad and Tobago Municipal Police Service; and the Estate Management and Business Development Company Limited Police in order to respond and assist.

The unit has been making adjustments in order to realign with the current needs, based on reports received. This is to facilitate an adequate response utilizing the officers we have in the short term. The Ministry is seeking to engage

more officers in the medium term, through recruitment. While the Ministry awaits the full complement of staff for the squad, the officers have also established communication lines with the various farmers groups throughout the country. So they are aware of the affected farmers or areas where praedial larceny is taking place. In this way, we can respond utilizing the support system previously mentioned with the TTPS, the municipal police and the EMBD police.

Mr. President, it should also be noted that the Ministry is in the process of procuring three new fully-equipped vehicles at this stage of evaluation and an award of contract is expected by 2023, February next month; that is it. It is anticipated that this would improve the ability of officers to conduct patrols.

In closing, I would like to reaffirm that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is committed to address the concerns of the praedial larceny squad and all personnel under this remit.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** Mr. President, based on what the Hon. Minister has said, that there are some 33 personnel on the establishment of the praedial larceny unit, can the Minister advise this honourable Senate how many personnel are actually on the job, as we speak, within the praedial larceny unit?

**Mr. President:** Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:** Thank you, Mr. President. There are 33 employees employed right now. We are in the process, with the Ministry of Public Administration, to add an additional 40 officers. Based on the availability of funding, we will employ more, but we are in the process right now, 33 plus the 40. So, I am—as I said last week, I am on top of this and I am in connection with the praedial larceny squad. I had two meetings with them and I intend to continue having meetings with them until we solve this problem.

**Sen. Mark:** Mr. President, through you, to the Hon. Minister. Hon. Minister, can you share with us whether the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, which you head, has done any audit of the losses experienced thus far, by farmers through brazen looting by criminal elements who invade these farmers' private spaces? Has the Ministry done an audit of the losses experienced by farmers thus far?

**Mr. President:** Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:** I will have to get that information to you. But in light of that question, I would like to appeal to the public, when you want to do these looting with animals and crops, and so on, plant your own crops and mind your own animals.

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

**Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:** And then we would know what we are getting. Because right now, people are taking months and years to mind an animal and sell it and take some time to plant these crops and they are just coming and looting it. So, I believe, I am making an appeal to the public who are doing these illegal activities. Because we at the Ministry, the staff at the Ministry, we are working feverishly. Since I came in there, I want to get this praedial larceny squad going. So that is why I appeal to the public out there.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** Mr. President, can I ask the Hon. Minister whether, once a proper audit is conducted on the losses experienced by farmers, would the Minister be in a position, through the Ministry to facilitate some element of compensation to the farmers for losses experienced? Is that a consideration under your particular review at this time?

**Mr. President:** Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:** Thank you, Mr. President. Sen. Mark, I do not act on

my own at the Ministry. I will have consultation done with the Permanent Secretary and the relevant staff and if the need arises, we would look into it.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** And the final question, Mr. President, is this: can the Minister indicate to this honourable Senate a possible time frame for the beefing up of the praedial larceny unit from the 33 to that additional 40, which would bring them to 73? Is there a timeline, given the sufferation that farmers are now experiencing through looting of their crops? Is there a time frame you have put down as a red line in the sand for those recruitments?

**Mr. President:** Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:** Thank you, Mr. President. Sen, Mark, I want to assure you and assure the public, as I said before, the process is ongoing. Right now, we are awaiting a response, as I said, from the Ministry of Public Administration, to get the recruitment process going. So I say in a couple months' time, because there is a process. You know, it is stringent measures. We are dealing with the public service. Nothing happens overnight in the public service. I have been in the public service for years. So, we will get this going and I assure you and the public, the farmers out there, rest assured we have an all of Government approach which is the TTPS, the municipal police and the strengthening of the praedial larceny. We will try to assist farmers as far as possible.

But not forgetting, I am making an appeal to the public, Sen. Mark and Mr. President, you want to steal an animal; mind your own animals. You want to interfere with "the people" crops who take their time and months to plant; plant your own, because everybody needs to plant. This is a time when food is very important in this country and all over the world. So plant your own crops and mind your own animals and leave the people's stock alone.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark, next question on the Order Paper.

**Sen. Mark:** Thank you, Mr. President.

**NIDCO and China Railway Construction (Caribbean) Ltd.**

**(Displacement of Residents of Silk Cotton Trace Ext.)**

**27. Sen. Wade Mark** asked the hon. Prime Minister:

Can the Prime Minister state what is being done to address public concerns that efforts are being made by NIDCO and China Railway Construction (Caribbean) Ltd. to displace residents of Silk Cotton Trace Ext, Bon Accord, Tobago without compensation?

**Mr. President:** Minister of Finance.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Mr. President. This question is misleading, since no efforts are being made by NIDCO or China Railway Construction (Caribbean) Ltd to displace residents of Silk Cotton Trace Extension, in Bon Accord Tobago without compensation.

It is a matter of public record that lands in the vicinity of Silk Cotton Trace Extension need to be acquired for the construction of the new airport terminal at the ANR Robinson International Airport.

**2.30 p.m.**

It should also be noted that the client Ministry for this particular construction project is the Ministry of Finance, the project manager is the National Infrastructure Development Company, and the design-build contractor is China Railway Construction Caribbean Company Ltd. Land acquisition for the new airport terminal is being pursued in accordance with the law in four zones which have been established based on the project's priorities. To date, 95 per cent of zone A, 85 per cent of zone B, 91 per cent of zone C, and 25 per cent of zone D have been acquired and handed over to the contractor to commence construction.



A total of 133 properties are required to be acquired and so far, approximately 90 per cent of these properties have been acquired.

Further, the estimated cost of land acquisition for the new airport terminal and associated works at the ANR Robinson International Airport is \$300 million. And to date, the total payments for land acquisition for the project amount to \$237,791,954. It is a fallacy, therefore, to say or even insinuate that residents are being displaced without compensation.

It should be noted that it is the intention of NIDCO to complete all land acquisition required to facilitate the construction of the new airport terminal, and to treat all affected residents and/or landowners fairly and equitably. Residents are assured that all payments for compensation that are due and payable under the Land Acquisition Act, Chap. 58:01 will be made in accordance with the law.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** Yeah. Mr. President, having regard to the timeline that the Government has set for the construction of the airport, extension of that airport in Tobago, can the Minister indicate whether the Government has given itself an estimated time for the completion of land acquisition so that the project can be completed on time and within budget?

**Mr. President:** I would not allow that question, Sen. Mark, next question.

**Sen. Mark:** Can the Minister indicate how many of the 133 property owners are still engaged and is there any time frame for concluding those arrangements as it relates to final compensation?

**Mr. President:** Minister of Finance.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** As I indicated, about 90 per cent of the 133 properties to be acquired have been acquired. The balance is in various stages of acquisition.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** Can the Minister indicate what are some of the factors or issues that might be holding up this process from its ultimate completion? What are some of the challenges, in other words?

**Mr. President:** I would not allow that question, Sen. Mark. Last question.

**Sen. Mark:** I pause at this time. Thank you very much.

**Mr. President:** Minister of Finance.

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

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

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Mr. President. I beg to move:

That a Bill to provide for further supplementary appropriation for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending 30th of September 2022 be now read a second time.

Mr. President, the matter before the Senate is a Bill which has two clauses and a Schedule. And in these two clauses, the first clause is the title and the second clause requests a further issue from the Consolidated Fund in the sum of \$815,567,165 to meet expenditure for fiscal 2022 that was not originally appropriated. There are just two Heads to be increased, Head 40, which we are asking be increased by \$800 million and that is the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and Head 65, Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, for which we are asking the Head be increased by \$15,567,165. So that is how you get the \$815,567,165.

With respect to the details of just those two Heads—because Mr. President, I am staying in my section. I am dealing only with the Bill before the House. I am dealing only with the supplementary appropriation, the request for a supplementary

appropriation for these two Heads of Expenditure, and I am not dealing with the transfers which were given—the explanations and so on that were given to the Senate because those do not form any part of this Bill or of this debate.

Now, the \$800 million for the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries is being sought to retire two advances from Treasury deposits that facilitated payments of fuel subsidy owed to Trinidad and Tobago National Petroleum Marketing Company, NP, and the United Independent Petroleum Marketing Company, Unipet. By way of explanation, in accordance with section 17(1)(b) of the Exchequer and Audit Act, Chap. 69:01, advances made from Treasury deposits: “...are recoverable within...twelve months after the close of the financial year in which the advances are made.”

However, the accounts must be closed within four months of the end of the financial year. And since our financial year ends on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September, it is a requirement that the accounts for any fiscal year be closed by January 31<sup>st</sup> of the following year.

The purpose of the \$800 million was to deal with unforeseen expenditure on the fuel subsidy that arose from the exponential increase in the price of oil over the period, I would say, January to September 2022. We had pegged the budget on an oil price of \$65 and there was an assumption based on that price, and based on the fuel prices prevailing at the time of the 2022 budget which would have been read in October 2021, there was an assumption based on the budget price of \$65 per barrel for oil that the subsidy would be somewhere in the vicinity of \$300/\$400 million. And it would have been in that range if oil prices had remained within the \$65 range. But following the invasion of Ukraine in the first quarter of 2022, that is calendar 2022 I am speaking about, we saw huge increases in the price of oil going as high as \$130 at one point in time.

Now, the price of oil is, as I have said in the other place, a double-edged sword because even though you will get additional revenue from an increased oil price, motor fuels, gasoline, diesel, et cetera, are based on the price of oil, because gasoline and diesel is a processed product derived from crude oil. So as the price of crude oil goes up the price of gasoline, the price of fuel oil, the price of diesel, et cetera, goes up. So that while you get additional revenue, you also find yourself having to pay a huge additional subsidy that you never expected.

And, in fact, if the prices had kept at that \$130 level, we might have found ourselves paying a fuel subsidy in 2022 of \$3 billion. As it was, when you average out the price from October 2021 to September 2022, we found the actual requirement for a fuel subsidy was in excess of \$2.4 billion, \$2.45 billion, somewhere around there.

So that, as the year went along, we found it necessary to find ways and means of sending money to Paria, the ultimate recipient, because even though the money goes to NP and it goes to Unipet, it is for onward payment to Paria because they are buying fuel at world market prices. So Paria has to pay whatever the world market price is, usually the East Coast United States ex-refinery price and they sell the fuel to NP and Unipet at the scheduled price at the gas station, and then the Government makes up the difference by way of the fuel subsidy. So even though the money went to NP and Unipet, it was simply passing through on its way to Paria, to reimburse Paria for the fuel it had purchased at very, very high prices.

The whole situation is extremely volatile. It could not have been budgeted for and therefore, we used a mechanism which is to use Treasury deposits, which you can. You are allowed to use Treasury deposits in unforeseen circumstances or extraordinary circumstances. When you are in an emergency, you are allowed to

use Treasury deposits but once you do that, you have to bring them to account and this is what we are doing here.

The actual money spent by September 30<sup>th</sup>—and I explained this in the other place as well, that Government operates on a cash basis. So if you have a payment that you make on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, it goes to the next financial year and it is not counted under the previous financial year, which would have ended a day before. So that the money that we actually put out is close to \$1.7 billion in cash that we sent to NP and Unipet to give to Paria, which was at least \$800 million more. It was, in fact, a little more than we had allocated but we were able to make some other adjustments to make up the difference after we sent that \$800 million through the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to the companies, and then the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries also used its allocation for fuel subsidy, and then we got funds from the petroleum levy to assist in paying that subsidy. So that is what was occurred and it is now necessary to bring to account that \$800 million which was not foreseen.

The other item, which is the second Head that we are dealing with here, Head 65, Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, and we are asking for an increase in the appropriation to the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs in the amount of \$15,567,165. Of this, \$4,877,843 is needed to make up a shortfall in the allocation for the Repairs and Maintenance of Buildings.

The 2022 allocation for the Repairs and Maintenance of Buildings under Head 65, Sub-Head 02, 002, 21 was \$5,000,325. But, again, because of unforeseen circumstances this Head is required to be increased to \$10,202,843. And in the main, the additional expenditure required to cater for critical repairs to chanceries and residences abroad.

**2.45 p.m.**

The severe winter storms at the end of 2021, affected three Missions in North America, the Embassy in Washington DC, the Consulate General in New York, and the Consulate General in Toronto. Money was required for snow removal, plumbing inspection and repair, removal of material from affected areas, cleanup fees, mould assessment, purchase of materials, disinfecting sanitization, removal of water-soaked carpets, and so on. And in addition, because all of these buildings suffered damage and loss because of the severe winter storm, the common user charges that were imposed by the landlords also increased during fiscal 2022, again, something that could not possibly have been foreseen. I gave further breakdowns. For the Embassy in Washington, the winter storm damage cost TT \$303,077,081 or US \$439,583. And money was spent on elevator maintenance, grounds maintenance, snow removal, plumbing, repairs, installations, pest control, and so on, and that came up to the total there \$3,077,081. In the Consulate General in New York, there were repairs to the patio at the official residence, repairs to the service room, the air conditioning control and so on and that came up to US \$72,505 or TT \$507,535. So, when you add everything up, you get the \$4,877,000.

Again, because of all sorts of volatility in the international environment, there was a requirement for increased expenditure on security and an increase in the 2022 allocation for security services at various embassies and missions is required from \$2,413,000 to \$6,471,110 and I can give some details. At the High Commission in London the additional expenditure is just around \$230,000; the Embassy in Brasilia, \$460,000; the High Commission in Pretoria, \$851,000; the Embassy in Caracas, \$460,000; the High Commission in Georgetown, \$585,000; the High Commission in Abuja, \$125,000; High Commission Jamaica, \$927,000;

the Embassy in Washington, \$237,000; the Consulate General in Toronto, \$167,000; and the Consulate General in Miami, \$10,000; making a total new allocation of \$6,471,000. And again, Mr. President, none of this is easily predicted, one does not know what the security situation will be in all of these countries. It is always in flux and these security expenses were not foreseen at the budget time and also, security agencies all over the world are increasing their fees and charging more and therefore, that is why we are requesting an additional sum for security for all of those missions and embassies I just mentioned.

With respect to housing, we are asking for an additional \$4,656,702 to meet additional expenditure. Heads of Mission assumed duty in the 2022 fiscal year in Venezuela, Caracas; Miami, USA; China; United Kingdom and South Africa. A Consul, Public Affairs and Culture also assume duty at the Consulate General in Miami during the period. The costs involved include temporary hotel accommodation, where government-owned property was not ready for occupancy including the areas where government-owned property had been damaged by the winter storms, and the following is a breakdown by Mission. US \$189,000 in Caracas; US \$24,000 in Georgetown; US \$63,000 in Miami; US \$41,000 in Beijing; and then in Ottawa, US \$77,000; in New Delhi, US \$206,000; in Washington, US \$44,000; in Brussels, US \$18,000; making a total request for additional expenditure for accommodation in all of these Missions, about nine of them, of \$4,654,000. And again, Mr. President, one cannot predict when a country will be ready to receive an Ambassador or High Commissioner because it is quite a detailed process, I am no expert in this area but I do know that there is something called an agrément which must be settled and signed by the two countries and then there is quite a lot of process that takes place before the High Commissioner or Ambassador can take up residence in the particular country. And therefore, again,

it is very difficult to predict when these things will happen and therefore, in the budget process estimates are made and then supplemented in this way.

With respect to medical expenses, again, due to COVID, which has affected the cost of medical treatment all over the world, we are asking for an additional \$1,974,510 for the four Missions in the United States of America and the Embassy in Beijing and this is for the medical plan. And what we are told, is the health plan—the cost of the health plan in the four Missions in the USA, and the Embassy in China increased by 20 per cent in fiscal 2022 and that would have happened during the year and therefore, very difficult to predict. And this medical plan deals with both home-based and locally recruited staff and to give some details, the increased costs for the medical plan in Washington, US \$51,000; in Beijing, US \$92,000; in the Permanent Mission to the United Nations, US \$50,000; the Consulate General, New York, US \$40,000; and the Consulate General, Miami, US \$47,000—total of US \$282,000 or \$1,974,511.

So, those are all the details for the additional expenditure of \$15,567,165. And I want to make the point because Opposition Members made heavy weather of a point in the other place, of course, they were totally wrong. And we have insurance for all of our buildings, in all of our missions in all of the countries in which Trinidad and Tobago has representation. But when you have a winter storm and the roof is destroyed, the carpet is flooded, the windows are gone, the pipes have burst, the driveway is destroyed, one cannot wait for the insurance adjusters to do their inspections, to negotiate with the insurance broker or directly with the mission itself and then eventually after quite a long period of time, a payment is made, one cannot wait until the process of negotiation, inspection, evaluation of damage to a mission is completed and you get the payment from the insurance company and then you start to fix the roof. Because while all of that is going on,



your mission will be shut down. So, what the various missions did very wisely, is that they sought and obtained approval to receive this additional money, they went ahead, they did the repairs to make sure the staff were comfortable, to make sure that the missions could function, to make sure we had proper representation and then made a claim against the insurance company, because there was a big song and dance in the other place that why are we not insuring the buildings—of course the buildings are insured but anybody who has any knowledge of property insurance, will know that it takes quite a while to reach a settlement with an insurance company with respect to a claim for loss and damage. And it would have been foolhardy of the Government to just sit down there and wait for that process to be completed before doing things as important as fixing the roof and the electrical and the plumbing, critical elements of the various buildings.

Now, the uninitiated may be tempted to believe that because we are supplementing the appropriation in the sum of \$815,000,000, that somehow, the expenditure in 2022 went up by \$815,000,000; that is not so. We are simply getting parliamentary approval for the appropriation but there would have been savings elsewhere in other Heads of expenditure and therefore, to avoid best as I can—because one never knows what hon. Members on the lower bench will say. But in an attempt to avoid, I want to make it crystal clear that this additional \$815 million did not affect the expenditure or revenue already announced by my good self in terms of the outturn for fiscal 2022. And I want to confirm that after we received all the reports from permanent secretaries and other accounting officers in various government agencies, Ministries and departments, the revenue for 2022 came in at \$54.2 billion and the expenditure came in at 53.1—sorry, \$54.2 billion and the expenditure came in at \$53.1 billion resulting in a surplus of \$1.08 billion. So our expenditure for the first time in 14 years since 2008, for the first time in 14

years, our expenditure was less than our revenue. And with those words, Mr. President, having stuck to my script and stayed far away from extraneous matters and dealt only with the two Heads of expenditure we are seeking to supplement in this Bill, I beg to move.

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

*Question proposed.*

**3.00 p.m.**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, like the hon. Minister of Finance I, too, intend to stick to the boundaries that we have before us as manifested in the Bill called the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2022) Bill, 2023. And, in doing so, I want to begin by saying, open and accountable government is the best cornerstone for any genuine democracy. I say further, the best disinfectant for secrecy is the sunshine of transparency. I intend to ask a series of questions arising out of the very items that the hon. Minister addressed in his presentation, to allow the population to have an understanding or a better understanding of why we are here today.

Mr. President, we are told by the hon. Minister that because of unforeseen circumstances, coupled with volatility in the international global energy market, several matters could not have been anticipated and, therefore, certain steps had to be taken. And what were these steps, Mr. President? The Government, using the Treasury deposits, went into the people's Consolidated Fund to extract, in advance, \$815 million. To deal with what, Mr. President? Two items: One, subsidies amounting to \$800 million to be paid to National Petroleum and Unipet. The Minister did not tell us—or I think he did—I beg your pardon—it came in two tranches; in the month of July, \$400 million and coming to the close of the fiscal year, September 30<sup>th</sup>, another \$400 million. Both went to NP and Unipet.

The Minister also took us on a brief journey to his 2022 budgetary statement, because it is the books for 2022 that we are seeking to close, because the 31<sup>st</sup> of January is the deadline, that is why we are here today. So, what are we told by the Minister in an effort to rationalize his going into the Consolidated Fund using Treasury Deposits to extract \$800 million—and we are now being called upon by the Government, through the Minister of Finance, to lend our approval for this expenditure which happened in July and which happened in September. Now, we were told—and it is a fact—in the 2022 budget, the Minister projected oil prices at US \$65 a barrel. But in February of 2022, as he rightly stated, there was an invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The rest is history. However, the price of oil went sky-high, as we were advised. But, Mr. President, did the Minister not have a mid-year review? Yes, the evidence is here. There was a mid-year review in 2022—in May of 2022—where he came and appropriated \$3,081,000,000 in additional expenditure, out of an \$11 billion, this Parliament was told, Trinidad and Tobago realized as a result of higher oil prices.

Mr. President, when I looked at the midterm review, 29 Heads of expenditure got some allocation under recurrent expenditure, amounting to close to \$3 billion with capital expenditure being just about \$104 million. At that time, Mr. President, what did the Minister do in terms of subsidies reallocation to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries? It is here in the midterm review. He allocated, the hon. Minister, Mr. Vice-President—Mr. President, rather, allocated \$300 million. That was the allocation in the mid-year review, when the Minister himself admitted, Mr. President, that the price of oil went up into the \$124 region per barrel. But we are being advised today, by the hon. Minister, that because of unforeseen circumstances and the volatility of the global energy marketplace, the Government was unable to properly project, properly plan the allocation needed

for subsidies to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries that would ultimately have to go to NP and Unipet, because they are the ones who are collecting VAT. They are the ones who are collecting subsidy, and have to retrieve and direct same to the Ministry of Finance who then, Mr. President, have to give Paria moneys; a long convoluted bureaucratic arrangement. This Government has to start thinking outside of the box, and I will give you some ideas, if you do not have any. You seem to be in a state of gridlock when it comes to intellectual depth.

So, Mr. President, I want to share with this honourable Senate, the 2023 budget. And you know what is nice about the 2023 budget, Mr. President? It is that the Minister of Finance, in the 2023 budget admitted, he confessed, that he the hon. Minister that is, and his technocrats, from the month of February when the invasion took place in Ukraine, they had oil prices under constant review and supervision. So, if you had oil prices under constant review and supervision, Mr. President, the Government must explain to the nation, how come the Government was caught flatfooted? How come the Government could not have projected the kind of subsidy that they would have needed? And, therefore, if they missed it in the budget, they could have taken it up in the midterm review. And the midterm review showed that only \$300 million was allocated to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries insofar as subsidies were concerned, and that was in the month of May 2022.

Mr. President, the Minister could have come and told us in the Parliament, in the month of September before the budget was presented in October or in September—I think it was presented in late September, if I am not mistaken. We could have been told by the Minister either through a statement—our Minister of Finance is always on Twitter, “twitting”, giving information and all kinds of things. How come the Minister of Finance, Mr. President, did not find himself on

Twitter telling the country, “hear what is going on”. We have allocated, in two tranches, through the Consolidated Fund, that you got no formal authorization to access.

Yes, Mr. President, under the Exchequer and Audit Act, section 17(1)(b), gives the Minister of Finance the authority to access the Consolidated Fund, through the Treasury deposits. Yes, you have that legal authority; yes the Cabinet can give you the authority, Mr. President, to get into that Consolidated Fund, through Treasury deposits, as they did with the \$815 million that we are now debating and they are seeking our approval for. Why did the Minister not use Twitter to tell Trinidad and Tobago \$815 million was being taken out of the Consolidated Fund? Not at all. We were never advised.

**3.15 p.m.**

There was no transparency. There was no accountability. There was no scrutiny. There was no probity. There was no debate. We are now debating \$815 million. Out of that, \$800 million went to subsidies, but we are now debating, Mr. President, after the fact. Stable closed, horse bolted, rubber stamped. So we are being asked today to debate a matter that has already been concluded. It is only because, Mr. President, the financial year is about to close in a few days from now, the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, Mr. President, that we are being asked to approve \$815 million. Mr. President, is it fair to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? I am saying it is allowable, it is legal. I am not arguing the legality, Mr. President, I am asking whether it was necessary.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Was it necessary?

Is the Government hoodwinking this Parliament by telling us because of unforeseen circumstances we could not have been alerted through a formal debate

in this Parliament for \$815 million in the month of June or in the mid-year review? Why? Mr. President, I ask you to join me—if you do not have a copy, join me. I take you to page—I think it is 173, if I am not mistaken—no, 151 of the 2023 budget, and, Mr. President, if you will bear with me for a few moments, you will understand why you, as President—when I say, “you”, why this honourable Senate is being taken for a ride. You will understand on these two Items that we are dealing with here today. Hear what we were told in the 2023 budget. The same Minister of Finance who is telling us that because of unforeseen circumstances and because of the volatility of global energy prices, they could not predict, and therefore they could not allocate, and therefore they had to go in the Treasury in the Consolidated Fund to extract \$815 million and they are now coming to retire it by seeking our approval when it is already a done deal, hear what we were told, and I quote on page 151:

“Madam Speaker, I...”—

I want to go slowly with the language, you know, so you could understand the implications of what we are dealing with here today.

“Madam Speaker, I have kept under review the changing oil prices in 2022...”

The Minister of Finance is confessing in his 2023 budget that he kept under constant review the global oil prices that were changing and were in a state of volatility. He goes on, or this quotation goes on, rather, Mr. President:

“US \$100 per barrel in February 2022 following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia;”

This is what the Minister is saying, eh, in February the price was US \$100. It does not stop there, Mr. President. We are further informed:

“US \$125”—million—“per barrel in March 2022, in response to the ban by

the United States on Russian fuel exports;”

Mr. President, the Minister is outlining in budget 2023 how he kept under constant review the volatility of oil prices that we had budgeted at US \$65 per barrel. It goes on, that is the budget statement, on page 151:

“US \$125 per barrel in June 2022 as concerns about supply emerged again;”

Mr. President, this is in the month of June, the Minister is telling Trinidad and Tobago that he had the price of oil under review and at that time it was US \$125 per barrel.

Mr. President, I go on, on page 152 of the 2023 Budget Statement:

“US \$99 per barrel in August 2022...”

And:

“US \$87 on September 23, 2022, and US...”—

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark—

**Sen. W. Mark:** Yes, Ma’am?

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Mr. President, Standing Order 46(1), this is not a budget debate or a review of the budget commentary and so on. I think we need to get to the point of the appropriations.

**Sen. W. Mark:** This is not a review—[*Inaudible*]

**Mr. President:** Okay. So, Sen. Mark, in terms of the point of order raised, I think you have made your point in relation to going back to comments by the Minister of Finance in the budget presentation of last year and you have connected it to statements that were made in this particular proceedings today, so I would ask you now to move on from that. There is no need to go back to the budget presentation.

**Sen. W. Mark:** [*Inaudible*]—Mr. President, so I will move on. I will move on.

**Mr. President:** So, Sen. Mark, from what I have heard thus far from you, you

have made that point, there is no need to bring back up at the budget debate any further. So I would ask you to—

**Sen. W. Mark:** I—

**Mr. President:**—move on.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President—

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark—

**Sen. W. Mark:** I am guided. I am guided. So I am going to pause. I know that the Government came out—not you, the Government came out to curtail this debate.

**Sen. Mitchell:** No. No. No—[*Inaudible*]

**Sen. W. Mark:** They came out to curtail this debate.

**Mr. President:** So, Sen. Mark, again, you have to be aware of certain imputations—

**Sen. W. Mark:** Yes. Sorry—[*Inaudible*]

**Mr. President:**—as it relates to the statements that you are making. So, once again, I will ask you to move on to your next point.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President, the simple point I am making is that the Government, led by the Minister of Finance in this instance—I know he is the deputy Prime Minister because he is a deputy political leader. Right? The Minister of Finance told this Parliament today that because of circumstances, the Government did not and could not budget subsidies in 2022 and caused the Government to go into the Consolidated Fund through Treasury deposits. I am putting it to this honourable Senate that based on a confession by the Minister of Finance, on pages 151 and 152 of the budget, the Minister had adequate knowledge and the Minister therefore could have allocated from our budget, particularly when he came with the \$3 billion in the midterm review, to properly allocate the sum to



subsidies to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries.

The question, Mr. President, that we have to ask is, why did the Minister not allocate more money towards subsidies in the month of May, in the month of June, in the month of July? Could the Minister not indicate if he could not have allocated a statement to Trinidad and Tobago so that we would know what was taking place? So we reject completely that flawed argument being advanced by the hon. Minister, that no adequate time was given because of the volatility and the circumstances or unforeseen circumstances that we could not have budgeted properly.

Mr. President, let me say something, why can the Government not think, as I said earlier, outside of the box, instead of putting pressure on NP and Unipet who have to come and beg on their knees for moneys that they have collected and passed back on to the Minister? Why can the Government not pay the subsidies directly to Paria? Why are you going through NP and Unipet? It is a view, it is an idea the Government needs to consider and stop thinking in a fossilized way. Think outside of the box because these very owners of NP gas stations and Unipet are experiencing cash flow problems when they do not get their refund in time.

So, Mr. President, the subsidy was only given in the month of July and in the month of September. What was happening with these NP gas station owners, Unipet gas station owners between the months of February when Russia invaded Ukraine, right up to the money they got in the month of July? And what about August and September? What I am saying, Mr. President, is that there is need for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to think outside of the box.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Point of order, Mr. President, this point was made already; relevance, 46(1).

**Sen. W. Mark:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark—

**Sen. W. Mark:** I realize what I have just said—*[Inaudible]* You understand what I am saying, Mr. Vice-President? Sorry, Sir. I am sorry to—*[Inaudible]* But—

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark, if you allow me.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Okay.

**Mr. President:** So the point of order that was raised is in relation to relevance, but specifically what I would like to speak to is the repeating of the points that you are making and I would ask you, if you have any new points to bring up right now, please do so.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. Vice-President—and I do not know why I am calling you “Vice-President”. “Ah get so accustomed seeing you as Vice-President”, it will take me a little time for me to really recognize, but I do appreciate your elevation. So you must forgive me if I say, “Vice-President”, but it is really “Mr. President”. My apologies, Sir, to you.

**3.30 p.m.**

Mr. President, I know that this fossilized, intellectually bankrupt regime cannot see what is being advanced, so they have to rise. I know some of them take exercises because circulation is important, so that is critical.

Mr. President, let me go on to another point because I do not want to detain you or this honourable Senate any longer on this matter. As you have rightly said, Sir, you believe that I have made my point on the subsidy issue.

Let us go on now to another hocus-pocus, rubbish argument, that they sought to peddle this evening on an unsuspecting population. Hear what they are telling us here, Mr. Vice-President—Mr. President, you see winter storms, nobody could predict that. Mr. President, why do you think they have forecasters? Why do you think in America they have meteorologists? They forecast things that are

going to happen, and that is why people in California were ready for floods. So it is rubbish, nonsense for anybody to come and tell you and me in this Parliament that nobody could prepare and be prepared, and predict when “yuh getting winter storm”.

Mr. President, here in Trinidad and Tobago we know when “ah hurricane coming”, and everybody is told to batten down. So how can you go and tell Trinidad and Tobago that nobody knew about a winter storm? Further, Mr. President, security services, unpredictable—security services unpredictable. Well look, we have an hon. colleague here who was sworn in today as a temporary Senator. He was a very high-ranking police officer before he arrived on this compound, and this hon. Senator could tell you, you can predict events. That is why you have intelligence services. That is why the Government has acquired an intelligence software called “Pegasus”, or something close to “Pegasus”.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Mr. President, the relevance—I think we are straying.

**Mr. President:** Yes, Sen. Mark, that particular statement is not relevant to what is before today.

**Sen. W. Mark:** So, Mr. President, let us look at what they are trying to convince us of today. Selling dreams—literally selling us dreams. So let us go to this first Item under what? Head 65, Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs. You know what is sad about this debate today? The utter contempt, contumely, disrespect that has been demonstrated to this Senate. We got no information on a breakdown of these Items that we are about to debate. You know when we got it, or got them? When the Minister was speaking for the first time. Although the Minister had a hard copy, he refused to circulate that document for Members’ information, knowledge and consideration. I thought that would have been accompanied by the last bundle of documents that we got—never came. So, wants us to debate matters

without knowledge, without information. But, Mr. President, I am following what is going on.

Look at this one. Look at Sub-Item 21: Repairs and Maintenance of Buildings. We are being told that repairs and maintenance of buildings, which came about because of what we have been told, a winter storm in 2021, amounted to almost \$5 million. The correct figures that we have been given is \$4,877,843. We are being told, Mr. President, it went towards repairs to the chanceries and residences of our diplomats in Washington, in Toronto, and in Miami.

Mr. President, the Government accessed the 15 million and a couple of thousand dollars to advance to the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs to deal with this Item.

**Mr. President:** Senator, you have four more minutes.

**Sen. W. Mark:** To deal with this Item when, Mr. President? In the months of July to September. When did the Foreign Affairs Ministry get this money? When? Mr. President, we are saying that the Government has no policy, and I would like the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, now Minister of Trade and Industry, to rise at the appropriate time, rather than on Standing Orders, stand and speak on this issue today, and indicate to us whether there is a policy on building maintenance, or preventative maintenance of our embassies and missions. You will speak at the appropriate time.

I would like the hon. Minister to address the issue of security services. Is there a policy on security services? Is there a policy, Mr. President, on housing? Is there a policy on medical services? Because if there are policies on these matters, Mr. President, we would be able to address these issues when they arise, and not be caught flatfooted.

So we reject completely these spurious arguments being put forward by this

Government, to convince whom? To convince whom? That they could not take action because a winter storm “cyar” be predicted, security services cannot be predicted, housing accommodation cannot be predicted. If you have proper policies, those things will never happen. So we do not buy that, Mr. President.

So, Mr. President, I want to tell you in closing, under this Item, that foreign affairs, foreign relations is an extension of domestic affairs. That is an ABC argument in diplomacy, they are inextricably linked and bound. So if you have lack of maintenance in the foreign missions, what “yuh” going to have here? “Yuh eh see de state of our roads?” Because we do not have a culture of maintenance in Trinidad and Tobago. Whether you are in a foreign country or you are in local Trinidad and Tobago—none. That is why, Mr. President, this situation occurred in those embassies and missions abroad, because there was no anticipation, everything was a reaction, and then “dey coming to justify this ting” with some rationalization that is reprehensible in terms of what they are trying to advance.

So, Mr. President, I had a lot more to say. I needed two and a half hours minimum to expose this incompetent regime, but I cannot go on, because you have advised me I have one more minute.

Mr. President, I want to thank you for the opportunity to share with this very important Chamber these critical points, and I think I will take it on the public platform, not too far from now, to deal with other issues that the Government is trying to hoodwink the population all about.

I thank you.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Deyalsingh.

**Sen. Mark:** [*Gestures at Sen. Gopee-Scoon*] I needed two more hours, but you are only interrupting. You should be supporting me.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** Sorry, Sir. Welcome, Sir.

**Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh:** Good afternoon, and thank you, Mr. President, for allowing me to partake in this discussion, this Bill, and congratulations are due for you for occupying this Chair.

This Bill, it is really:

“An Act to provide for a further supplementary appropriation for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2022.”

So this really is the Finance Bill 2023, or supplementary appropriation for the financial year 2022.

“The Bill seeks to supplement the appropriation of the sum, the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2022) Act, 2021...as amended by the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2022) Act, 2022...by authorising a further issue from the Consolidated Fund in the sum of Eight Hundred and Fifteen Million, Five Hundred and Sixty-Seven Thousand, One Hundred and Sixty-Five Dollars...”

So it really seeks to increase the expenditure, the Head of expenditure given to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries and also the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs. The Minister of Finance actually went into details what the moneys would be given to.

I must say, it is really—we are here today because this Bill seeks this debate for us to give our blessings in saying what was saved in certain Ministries, and redistributing this to funds elsewhere. Blessings I must say that comes after the fact. However, the reasons for the savings were given in the Appendix II that we were afforded from the Minister of Finance, the explanation for the transfers.

I must say that the national budget which we had in September was, I think, a well thought of budget. It had given us the fact that we had difficulties ahead.

We saw that even after the budget there was a rise in fuel, the cost of living, but I saw the injection into the social services, which was an attempt to ease the burden of the vulnerable.

So while we were here discussing that budget, and we had certain discussions and certain recommendations made into that budget, I actually thought those recommendations would have materialized. However, some did not and some ended up into savings, and this is a little concern I have, because on the average, if we give a budget, which is a trajectory of what the Government wants to do with the moneys, how to address certain issues, well-thought-of plans, which could change—as the COVID did change that budget that year, when everything had to turn upside down, when the surprise pathogen caused us—that planned budget that came three years ago, had to totally change into how we restructure things. So certain “unexpectedness”—certain things that were unexpected would have raised its head.

**3.45 p.m.**

And the Minister said the volatile market would have caused some problems, you know, in him having now to determine where to put those moneys. However, Sir, what I may want to say is we had a budget, we had recommendations and even in our JSC meetings we keep hearing about the prevailing issues of staffing, running government departments, staffing which may lead to a failure of services because there were certain staff deficiencies, so we keep hearing this whole theme. And what disappointed me about the savings, I am glad we got savings but part of the savings actually came from not achieving proper staffing in a whole set of the Ministries, the Judiciary, the Industrial Court, Ministry of National Security. So it is about five, six Ministries where vacant positions were not filled. So, I just want to mention that yes, it was saved. I am

not going into that. But there is some concern that, you know, we are taking that money to put it into an important avenue as mentioned by the Minister of Finance but we might be failing the delivery of services by not having proper staffing as mentioned in this Appendix II.

And I just want to say again, I would like to welcome the new Senator on the Government side, a business person and he might be able to give some input why is there this sort of a problem in getting deliverables from the last budget. Why is it we were not able to get those staffing? So you in your capacity may be able to tell us.

**Mr. President:** Okay. So, Senator, as much as I have allowed you to get into your introduction from the contribution that you are making, at this point you are going a bit too broad outside of what is before us. So you have spoken to certain things in the last budget which we connect to here but I need you to be very tight because what is before us speaks to two things and two things only. So I would need you to get to that and what is occurring there.

**Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh:** Thank you, Mr. President. So, therefore, as I appreciate the saving and I have some concerns about how it was saved, I must now say that, what do we do with this saving? Is it, you know, we were told it was going into certain avenues.

And I must say, if I look at the explanation given by the Minister where it was stated that because oil prices were, you know, \$65 per barrel and then it went to \$130 per barrel and now we are in a position where we have to pay the prices that are offered in the international market, and it puts us in a sort of catch 22 position where, initially we were a bit happy that we were gaining something from when the price of oil and natural gas would have raised because of the war in Ukraine and Russia but now we have to pay out more moneys to buy that oil to



give it to NP, Unipet which will go to reimburse Paria. So it is a situation where we are gaining some, we are losing some and this is the dilemma we have.

So therefore, I realize the dilemma we have. I realize that—and I always try to figure, you know, if we are in this position, what is the light at the end of the rainbow? Is it that we are just stuck into this? I think the good news we have is that the Dragon field is now being able to develop. We are now dancing there again. The dragon is now allowed to dance. Sen. Mark spoke about the US banning Venezuela exports. But thankfully the changing geopolitics have now—probably would give us that avenue, would probably help us along that stream. So even though we have this concern, we have to be pumping that money now into NP and Unipet, we may now be able to gain in the future. From this dream, I think, Government had years ago. So changing geopolitics have certainly given us the ability to do business with Venezuela who was our friend before. Because if people remember, during 1970 the Venezuelans did provide us with a naval ship during that turmoil we had with the revolution. So I am saying, excellent, excellent initiative is there, that, I am thinking, we could have that investment. Some people may criticize it as a long-term investment but that is the future of the country.

**Mr. President:** So, Senator, again I am going to have to caution you. The Bill speaks to a very specific occurrence happening under two items to which the Minister of Finance would have spoken to as to the reasons why. It means that this particular debate is extremely tight and can only be engaged in terms of what has been said there. Anything outside of that will fall to irrelevance. So, I am going to ask you to bring it in and tighten it.

**Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh:** Thank you, Mr. President. So, thank you. So the second issue we noticed is that the Minister of Finance said he has to now look at the

allocation to actually fix our three, you know, the homes, the Ambassadors, our business places that we have there in foreign countries, the Missions in Washington, New York, Toronto. Moneys were needed for snow removal, plumbing repair, disinfecting, sanitizing. And I am saying that the level of repairs in those countries, in the First World countries it is a little more stringent than we have here. For instance, if there is a mould damage, they can actually close down our missions there. If there is any sort of complaint that there are certain health hazards. So definitely the Government needed to address these issues because I have seen homes in Florida closed down for moulds, business places. So therefore, moneys would have probably been needed to help that.

And the thing is, we have to look at the fact that a snow storm is not expected. Hurricanes might not be expected. I mean, we know it may come at certain times and usually buildings there are somehow equipped to prevent snow damage or hurricane damage. So on one hand I am thinking that, if those buildings were there and it is in an area where there is winter and there are storms, why were those buildings not more prepared? More equipped? You know, if it is a storm that came that was of such of an intensity, I could understand that sort of damage would have been something we could not predict.

So, I looked at even the fact that when you are looking at the cost of repairing the buildings, the cost—Sen. Mark raised a point which I think was a little important. We should have probably been provided with a breakdown so we now would be able to compare—our missions there really are above board. Because, you know, by not having a breakdown, we might be opening the doorway where people may be pointing fingers and saying was proper procurement done? Were contracts really—three people got contracts. So, I am saying that, yes, we may have to—I would have been very appreciative if we had gotten that where we

would have been able to compare, make a comparison instead of trying to fish to ascertain the verity of some of these things which we are now hearing today. So here I am trying to figure out, trying to say, you know, I do not know the size of the missions. I do not know the layout of ground, so I cannot really make a judgment if the moneys spent were really spent to the benefit of the taxpayers to get our moneys' worth.

So, Sen. Mark's suggestion of having a policy in place might be something to guide missions worldwide so therefore they would know what is the ceiling that is acceptable to taxpayers if you are going to rent out some properties, if you are going to do some business that, you know, one mission in one country like Canada would not go above a certain amount than another one. So, I must agree with Sen. Mark's statement with that.

However, when I look again at one of the other aspects where the insurance as paid out—and the Minister said they definitely had to pay out this insurance to get the buildings up to mark because you cannot really leave it there for the insurance company to take a while to pay, and I agree with that. And right now there is, in fact, a major issue with insurance policies in the United States. FIU news, and I would like to quote the October 05, 2022 issue. An article by Shahid Hamid where he mentioned in Florida homeowners are being held at ransom and some homeowners now are without insurance because a very big company, Progressive, actually decided that they were not going to renew 60,000 Florida homeowner policies, that is homeowner and business polices for risk by hurricane, hail storm and property. So we may have to decide what are we going to do if we are not going to get adequate insurance to our missions abroad. Some places in the United States now have decided, even in flood areas, the government will pay an insurance for these individuals. We may have to decide how we are going to

address this, if we are not going to get insurance policies for our missions up there. And this is something that I am seeing a trend and I think that we may have to address this in future.

So then, besides insurance for the buildings, besides the fact that we needed quick action to prevent mould damage to get the missions going, I also would have—I had a little concern when the Minister said that there was a need to increase the security cost. I do not think Trinidad and Tobago is a targeted nation. It has me wondering, are we targeted? Are our missions under attack? Why should we now have to suddenly pay more security? Certain countries who may be at war like Russia, may have to do that if there is a set of persons against them who may go and—outside their Embassy causing problems. But Trinidad and Tobago to me is a friendly country. I mean, what is the need? And this is where I may need some clarity why there is a need.

Now, Washington with what went on in the America elections recently, if you have a mission there, you may need to protect it more in case there is any spillover. But the targeting of the mission is what I want to—are we targeted to justify that those persons who are there as Ambassadors and staff need extra security and this is where I am, you know, would like to get some clarity on that.

Now, coming to another issue, the Minister of Finance stated that medical expenses—and, you know, they had a medical plan. So, I am trying to figure out, all that money went to a medical plan, is it really feasible to pay all that money? But then I realized, I pay a plan called Best Doctors for myself and my wife and my three kids and it is almost \$11,000 a year we pay out to that plan, complete plan. So therefore the figures he quoted, when I try to calculate in my mind, if you have all the staff and the embassies, I think, a fair plan really is to really help your personnel who are abroad. If you are working there and you fall ill, it is good to

have that knowledge that you are being taken care of from your country. I mean, not all countries have the benefit of the free medical health care that we have. So our personnel there I would congratulate the, you know, the different missions for getting a plan. But I am just hoping it is a plan that if we compare it, we can actually see it is a plan that it is, again, appealing to the taxpayers that it is not overboard. But again, it is a good idea that you are paying out to, at least, ensure that if your staff gets ill, that there would be no sort of trauma in that timing to try and now hustle up to get a plan.

So what I might say is certain things had caused me a little concern in the explanation for transfers but, again, we are not allowed to speak on that today. But I am hoping that with the fact—with the input of this that, at least, we can continue the NP and Unipet going as they have been going and, at least, giving us some sort of benefit. And I am thinking that with the missions abroad, whatever money spent, again, I would like some more transparency but on the average, I think, if the Government has to ensure that their staff is safe, their buildings are safe, they need to do it but the population and the taxpayers need to just scrutinize it more to prevent any old talk after. Thank you. Mr. President.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Smith.

**4.00 p.m.**

**Sen. Dominic Smith:** Mr. President, let me first give my congratulations to you on your new appointment. Thank you once again. I want to begin my contribution by expressing great thanks and appreciation for an opportunity, once again, to grace these halls that have been a symbol of our democracy for so many years and, of course, present on behalf of my learned colleagues and brothers in arms in this honourable Senate a second time.

I am mindful that it is not a light accommodation when one is given the opportunity to serve in this capacity, as the service called upon is not for product or service provision in the capitalist sense, but the greatest type of service that we can aspire to engage in, that of human services. And so, comrades and colleagues, it is not lost on me the unique and rare privilege to lay words and share thoughts for discussion and discourse about matters that will no doubt have an indelible mark on the lives of so many of our nation's citizens presently and in the future, whether they are conscious of this representation on behalf of them. And so, Mr. President, following my colleagues' path to uncover elements of this Bill, I will make attempts to represent the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago with the highest levels of intellect and grace.

Now, to the meat of the matter, and the matter for consideration today is the supplementary appropriation for fiscal year 2022 in the sum of \$815,567,165. And as we all are aware, it was necessary to have this supplementary appropriation of the said sum to retire two advances from Treasury deposits in order to bring to account expenditure under the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries in the amount of \$800 million, and also to bring account expenditure incurred under the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs in the sum of \$15-plus million. And I want to begin my analysis of the above by impressing upon this honourable Senate the following which will have relevance as I advance my contribution, but for now permit me to use the words of Adam Smith, widely considered the "father of economics", because of his theories on capitalism, free markets and supply and demand. No doubt entrenched in these concept are elements of country management, which this Bill speaks to directly, and the success of such management made relevant by these appropriations. And if I were to gather the words of the book, *The Wealth of Nations*, it says, and I quote:

“No society can surely be flourishing and happy...”

And notice the words I am saying:

“...flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged.”

And one might think or be moved to think that this \$800-plus million being deliberated here is merely an accounting exercise. And sadly, in many respects, this holds truth. But the nature of accounts provides that an aggregate number must have a derived position and therefore, though we are being given the opportunity to consume the meal after the fact, we must also consider the ingredients of that meal.

And to go a bit further, Mr. President, these are not supplementations that we can simply gloss over without proper scrutinization and examination. It is important for us, not only for our own rights, the pursuance of these matters, but because it is incumbent on us to examine, shed light and to bring to bear the real material impact and understanding of what these appropriations mean, not only for those who bear the burden of tax, but also as a means of helping those of the working class understand and appreciate where they share in the burden of taxation woes. And might I say, these considerations are from the sweat and the blood of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And therefore, we cannot allow ourselves to simply gloss over such a large sum that comes from the public pockets.

You see, it is not sufficient to say we require \$800-plus million, but we must understand that each member of society requires us, as stewards of their investment via their labour, to give proper account of the where, the when, the how and the

why. It is not sufficient, Mr. President, to treat with these sums requested summarily, and to adrenalize and to make insignificant what is, in fact, significant in this regard.

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

**Sen. D. Smith:** And some would have us, and I say so some on the other side, because where they say to us, “nothing is behind these numbers, nothing is here to see, gentlemen and gentlewomen”, it is then we must adequately comb through the details, lest we find ourselves in agreement to things that we never agreed to. And so, I want to take this time and I want to take these items laid before us with great reverence, and not passing the matter in frivolity.

So, Mr. President, let us examine the real material impact of this money and what exactly the hon. Minister of Finance hastily is requesting we, as a nation, to sign off on. The sum is not a small sum, but let us consider the first element which relates to the fuel subsidy. And as discussed in the Standing Finance Committee, and I am quoting here from those facts stated, the hon. Minister Young was quoted as saying:

“...the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries...”—has the mandate—“to manage the fuel subsidy that has been provided to the people of Trinidad and Tobago for many years along with consultation with the Ministry of Finance, and that is what this whole movement of the \$800 million is about.”

And, might I say, that was said in quite a callus, dismissive way, but we move on.

Further details of the \$800 million suggested that two payments were made, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, 2022, and the second payment on September 2022. Further queries by my learned colleagues revealed that there was a separation of these payments, \$500 million in July and then an additional \$300 million in September. The total subsidy paid for fuel for fiscal 2022 was a total of \$1.67 billion. And the



importance of this is such: one, the public should note that this payment was below what the Government expected to pay in fiscal 2022. In fact, a statement by the hon. Minister Colm Imbert on April 8<sup>th</sup>, speaking to the adjustment to fuel prices, he said and I quote:

“There are many competing demands for scarce resources in Trinidad and Tobago at this time, and the Government is of the view that it is not productive, equitable or prudent to spend an unbudgeted \$1.69 billion or \$1.47...”—billion—“more than planned, subsidizing fuel...

This money could be far better utilised in the social services sector, in the health sector, in our capital development programme, on VAT refunds...on clearing off unpaid bills owed to contractors...”—et cetera, et cetera.

And the Minister goes on to say:

“However, the Government is cognisant of the effect of an increase in the price of fuel on consumers, notwithstanding the fact that a fuel subsidy is a regressive measure.”

And this gives an indication, Mr. President, to the thinking of the hon. Members across the table.

“Accordingly, the Government is of the view that liability for any fuel price adjustment should be shared more or less equally...”

And what they are saying here is that the public should take ownership of these costs. And that has been the history of this Government, in terms of passing on these costs to the public.

And it is relevant, Mr. President, because we are asking the public to take \$800 million-plus out of the Consolidated Fund, and as my colleague would have indicated, done so like a thief in the night. Nevertheless, nevertheless—

**Mr. President:** So, Senator, you just want to, when you are making your

contribution, be very careful of the phrases that you are using, lest you run into the Standing Order that speaks to the imputation of improper motives. Continue, but continue carefully in the choice of words that you are using.

**Sen. D. Smith:** I am guided, Mr. President. I will retract said statement and continue. And so, the point that I am trying to make is that the Government, our honourable Government, they are the ones who are suggesting a decrease in the subsidy values, and these values directly impact the consumer at the pump, and it is a historical fact that over successive periods this has become a trend. And as the hon. Minister of Health said, a trend is not made in one week. But this, my friends, has been a yearly trend. And so, based on observations of the facts, it is certainly something that we have to consider when embarking upon the scrutinization of this \$800-plus million.

And the second point I wanted to make, Mr. President, this Government, for the last seven-plus years, has been labouring over the fact that they must pay this subsidy on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, while the hon. Minister has consistently been aiming, as I said, to remove subsidies for fuel, successive years. But when we look at the details, you were expecting in 2022 to spend \$1.9 billion, you ended up spending \$1.67 billion, but the most important point here is that the public is not seeing the material benefit that you are promising. In fact, in an article in the *Trinidad Express* on November 02, 2022, the hon. Minister of Finance said, and I quote. I quote the article:

“Finance Minister Colm Imbert on Tuesday night promised benefits to the country from the Government’s \$11 billion revenue windfall from 2022 fiscal year.

Imbert said on Tuesday night that the Government will be doing more with the money to benefit all of Trinidad and Tobago, as he pledged support for

the Ministry of Housing's low-cost projects, community projects including social programmes, grants..."—et cetera, et cetera"

And he went on to say that:

"...the Government has not had to borrow since December 2021 and said"—such—"services...as a provision of housing was 'not cheap, you need a lot of money.'"

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Point of order, Mr. President, 36(1), I think all of this is irrelevant to the specific matters at hand today.

**Mr. President:** So, Senator, once again, as I did with Sen. Mark when he was going a bit too deeply into comments made before, especially as it relates to the budget statement, between the budget statement and now, what is before us is very, very tight because it speaks to two things and two activities taking place. So I am going to ask you to move on from the point that you are making and get back to what is before us, which is very specific.

**4.15 p.m.**

**Sen. D. Smith:** Thank you, Mr. President. Again, I am guided. Like Christ I am taking my cross up Calvary Hill and if you would allow it, once I reach to the top it will be finished. But thank you again, I am guided by you and your wisdom in dealing with these matters. And the point that I am trying to make and to emphasize is that we the public must understand the means by which the Government is dipping into our pockets. And so when we come to the accounting of the people's money, not the Government's money, we must look at the circumstantial evidence and the context of which this money is taken, whether it be lawful or not. And my colleague, Sen. Mark, he mentioned that, yes, it is legal to do so and it is allowable to do so, but many things in life are allowable but they are also unnecessary.

And so, I just want for the benefit of the public to highlight that some things, some practices, some policies being pursued by those on the other side are in fact lawful but are unnecessary and the real material impact is that they do not redound to the benefit of the man on the ground—

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

**Sen. D. Smith:**—the taxi man that has to now go by the pump and pay his portion in terms of fuel, et cetera, and this is a critical and important fact. And, yes, elements of relevance are important, but we must dive in to the context by which this \$800 million is being requested from the public.

And continuing, Mr. President, so we have a situation where the Government is using this \$800 million allocation via a transfer for a subsidy which as I mentioned before is much less than forecasted. And a subsidy whose nature is to benefit the people, but for the public and for those who may not know, subsidies are quite ticklish and there are direct and indirect subsidies. And I want to just give a brief definition for the public's benefit what exactly is this subsidy that we are engaging in. And if I were to quote from the economics text:

“Direct subsidies are those that involve an actual payment of funds toward a particular individual, group, or industry. Indirect subsidies are those that do not hold a predetermined monetary value or involve actual cash outlays.”

They can include—

**Mr. President:** Point of order.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Mr. President, 46(1), going into a lot of detail about policy and subsidy and this is not what we are debating here today.

**Mr. President:** So Senator, the point of order is upheld. There is really no need to go into what a subsidy is. Like I said, the Bill is very specific. It asks for a certain thing to happen. Minister of Finance would have spoken to some of the

reasons for such. Other Senators would have spoken in rebuttal of such, and I am asking you to focus on what is before us. You do not need to go too deeply into things like explanation of what a subsidy is. It is going to put you outside of the realm of relevance. Continue.

**Sen. D. Smith:** Mr. President, again I am guided. The only reason I am touching on these elements is because as you know there is a public viewing and the public may not be aware of these sort of technical terms. And so for the benefit of them I wanted to express—

**Mr. President:** And that is why, Senator, there are rules within the Chamber which all Senators must follow. And what you are doing in relation to what I have asked you to move on from would put you outside of those rules, irrespective of the fact that there is a public viewing. So I would ask you move on from that point. If you have any other new points to bring forward I invite you to do so now.

**Sen. D. Smith:** Thank you, Mr. President. Again I am guided by your wisdom and I will continue, all right, in a more strict and direct manner. So in looking at the material and in looking at, again, at this quite exorbitant sum, this appropriation, I was curious to see whether or not other countries like Trinidad have had the benefit of these subsidized items. Because this is what we are using \$800million for. Yes? And so, in doing so, my research reflected—in fact when looking at ECLAC and they did a study on petroleum product pricing, et cetera, in 65 developing countries which we are one of, and I quote from that particular article:

“All countries have been affected by sharply rising oil prices on the world market in the past decade...in real terms (after adjusting for local inflation and converting to local currency...), the annual world prices of gasoline...”—have almost—“...doubled...across 160 countries...”

Now, further down it speaks to:

“...as petroleum product prices...soar, many governments came under political pressure to shield consumers from price hikes. According to a recent survey of pricing policy for gasoline, diesel, kerosene, and cooking gas in 65 developing countries, two-thirds have kept domestic prices below market-based levels”—and—“...one or more fuels in the past three years, subsidizing”—again—“consumers. Two-fifths have frozen...retail prices of gasoline, diesel, or both, for months or even years...”—ahead.

And the reason I am making this point is because whether or not we have achieved, we have forecasted \$1.9 billion and we have actually, the actual item becomes \$1.67 billion, under this Government whether we perform well or not the result is the same for the public, a negative benefit. And even when there is room or allowance we are constantly hearing cries of doom and gloom as though we are not partakers in our own natural abundance. And it seems to me that this is the mentality of a backward-thinking government.

And if I were to look at, just the other day, a couple of days ago when we were looking at what was called “the bumpy road ahead”, our hon. Prime Minister again, even though on the backdrop of this relative savings comes to the public and says, “I do not want you for a minute to believe that this is going to be plain sailing in T&T”. “There are difficult times ahead.”

**Mr. President:** Senator, so once again, you are outside of the boundaries of relevance. I am going to have to caution you for the last time. This is very, very, specific. There is no need to go into a wider explanation of subsidies and the benefits thereof, because it would ensure that you are outside the boundaries of relevance. In a budget debate which occurs at a particular point in time, that is where you would get the wide berth in relation to what you are saying. This is

extremely specific. So I ask you at this point that if you have any points in relation to what the Bill is asking to do, bring them forward now. Thank you.

**Sen. D. Smith:** Thank you, Mr. President. And so if I were to consider the comments again made in this Chamber, and the hon. Minister would have mentioned—and this is why I am speaking to the benefit and lack of benefit to the public based on the changes as it relates to moneys that we have received via revenue and expenditure as the Minister rightly said in his presentation today, he said that revenue came in the amount of \$54 billion, that is revenue, and he said that, so I believe I can elaborate here. And in terms of expenditure he spoke to \$53.1 billion. And so we have experienced a one billion-plus as the Minister rightly said, a surplus.

And so the reason why I am bringing this up is because this appropriation, is the Government coming to the public and saying even though we have had this surplus, and even though this money has been allocated, we need to gather this money to again provide benefit via Unipet, via NPMC, Natural Petroleum Marketing Company, these payments. And again, as the Minister would have outlined, these payments go to those entities and then pass to Paria and then a level of arbitrage occurs by which the public then pays its share.

And so when I looked at the general and then the specific it seems to me, Mr. President, that whether there is an uptrend or a down trend it matters not. And that is the only point I wanted to make. And in my view when I look at the economics, to me that seems as though, and this is my phrase, it is an economics of nowhere, because up or down it matters not. But I will say no more on that.

And, Mr. President, I want us to consider this value given by the hon. Minister in the context of our existing circumstance. Because it is important to critically analyze, again, that appropriation in context. And so we have an

unemployment rate of around 4.5 per cent; we have a labour force participation rate of around 54 per cent; we have a business sector credit growth of around 12.2 per cent and a consumer sector credit growth of about 2.9 per cent. And the reason I speak to this and this data can be taken from the *Economic Bulletin, 2022* of the Central Bank, is because when we look at our general government debt outstanding—

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. President, point of order, 46(1), totally irrelevant.

**Mr. President:** So, Sen. Smith, I am attempting as best as I can to guide you in relation to this particular debate. You would understand that there are two clauses in this Bill and from what I have been hearing you spent quite a number of time on clause 1. And I have spent quite a number of times trying to get you to stay within the boundaries of relevance. Under normal circumstances you would have moved on to clause 2 to speak to any new points that you may have on that. I will give the final warning this time because you are far advanced in your contribution, that I am not going to raise relevance again in relation to the contribution thus far. As best as you can, stay within the boundaries of relevance. There is no need to talk about economics or broaden the scope of the debate.

**Sen. D. Smith:** Thank you for your guidance. Again, I do not want to labour this honourable House. I only mention it again because the hon. Minister would have itemized and highlighted the surplus and therefore I was treating with said surplus with a bit of an analysis.

And the second point is that, you know, for the benefit of the public this is an \$800 billion-plus Bill and quite frankly, there are probably 800 million questions to be asked as well—

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. President, 53(1) (b), point of order. Tedious repetition.

**Mr. President:** Continue, Senator.



**Sen. D. Smith:** Thank you, thank you, Mr. President. And I want to continue on the notes as it relates to Head 40 and I will guarantee the good Senate that I will move on in due time. So rest your legs there is no need for you to stand. I will swiftly move on to the other relevant points, rest assured.

**4.30 p.m.**

But I want to give, you know, context and I want to speak to Warren Buffett who said, and I quote:

“In the long run managements stressing...appearance over economic substance...”

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

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr.—sorry. [*Laughter*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator, on a point of relevance, can you kindly stick to the topics at hand? You have continued to quote way beyond what is needed today.

**Sen. D. Smith:** I am guided, Mr. Vice-President. Now, I have to be very careful in the things that I say and do not say. It seems to be quite a wave of opposition, no pun intended, with the contribution that I am making. Nevertheless, I will aspire to continue. May I ask, Mr. Vice-President, how much more time do I have?

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator, your official time ends at 4.40, however, I may curtail it based upon—

**Sen. Mark:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Mark. Based upon your persistent irrelevance on many matters.

**Sen. D. Smith:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

**Sen. Nahkid:** You cannot say that.

**Sen. Mark:** [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. D. Smith:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Again, I note the concern and it is only because I am a public servant in this regard that I want to deal and treat with matters pertaining to the public pockets—

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

**Sen. D. Smith:**—of which whether or not curtailed or otherwise—

**Sen. Nahkid:** Do not let anybody intimidate you.

**Sen. D. Smith:**—eventually when the bell rings, and the tower falls, the public is who decides that, but nevertheless, let us move on before I wax biblical on this Senate.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Laughter*]

**Sen. D. Smith:** I will continue to the other items as listed here that may be more comfortable for those on the other side.

And so if we look at Head 65, Mr. Vice-President, I have now reached the mark where comfort can be drawn, Head 65, and it deals with the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs and we are dealing again with a sum that must come out of the taxpayers' pockets and it is important for us to note that that is where this money is being derived.

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

**Sen. D. Smith:** And at the end of the day, this is the place by which these items are discussed and I believe that I am in the appropriate circumstance and setting to do so. And so with respect to Sub-Item 21 Repairs and Maintenance/Buildings, et cetera, I want to suggest to the Ministers, et cetera, that in the case of the United States, this is a temperate country and for those who might not know what a temperate country is, it means there will be a level of winter, by definition, there are also mild to warm summers but the cold winters, one can expect that there will be a level of storm. Now, the degree and the nature of those storms, obviously we

cannot predict and unfortunately, we do not have the foresight of God the Father.

But in contemplating this particular Head, I said to myself and I submit to the Government that when you plan for operations in countries that are temperate in nature, you can expect the possibility of adverse weather conditions and so sufficient and proper planning, operational planning would have sufficiently forecasted any residual or variance or gap and I would hope that a well-learned established, seven-plus years in office government would have had this well thought out, well planned, an executional arm, with great operational efficiency. And so it perplexes me that when I look at the Head Item, that these massive appropriations were being considered. Suffice it to say that though they are acts of God—

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

**Sen. D. Smith:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. That though they are acts of God, there are also acts of management and proper management would have easily dealt with these appropriations.

Now, I will move on again to the other item which is Sub-Item 50 Housing and Accommodation, and safe to say, again, proper management comes to mind here. I would like to understand what, if any, is the usual provision for existing funding of related services of the residents of the ambassador as well as the details of the security services and who in fact may have benefited from contracts related to upgrades and arrangements. Because we have again an aggregate figure—I know the Minister would have made attempts to give us more detail but still there is a question of procurement and process and whom on our end, in our sovereign nation of Trinidad and Tobago is vetting that process and what are the details of that vetting process. And so maybe in the wind up, the hon. Ministers, et cetera, can give greater clarification, as my learned colleague Sen. Mark said, shed more

light on these matters.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Point of order and I really do appreciate that you are close to the end but 46(1), this is not a debate on policy matters and therefore the discussion should be confined to the points raised by the hon. Minister of Finance. 46(1).

**Sen. Mark:** No, no, no, that is not for you to determine. That is not for you to determine. [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Standing Order upheld. Sen. Mark, kindly allow your colleague to finish his contribution.

**Sen. D. Smith:** Mr. Vice-President, again, I will not belabour the Senate further and I will make attempts now to wrap up my contribution to this very honourable Senate. And so comrades, we started here with a Bill that at first glance, may be considered to many a simple, cosmetic and administrative item but in reality, all Bills brought to this honourable Senate have great value to the democratic process.

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

**Sen. D. Smith:** The Government would have us dismiss, pass over these matters but we are here to reveal the truth behind these policies, actions taken as an affront to the people of this great nation. And so I will end my contribution with a quote by Henry Clay and it says the:

“Government is a trust”—a trust—“and the officers of the government are trustees. And both the trust and the trustees are created for the benefit of...”

Who? You might ask, Mr. Vice-President, and the resounding answer by Henry Clay would be:

“...of the people.”

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

**Sen. D. Smith:** I thank you for your indulgence and I bid you a good day.

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

**Sen. Mark:** Let Paula Gopee-Scoon—

**Hon. Senators:** [*Continuous crosstalk*]

**Sen. Mark:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Deonarine. Sen. Mark, your level of crosstalk is really disturbing the mood of the Chamber.

**Sen. Mark:** My apologies, Sir.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Right. And even if it is you have to do so, kindly address the Members on the other side by their proper title please. Thank you.

**Sen. Amrita Deonarine:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on a Bill to provide for further supplementary appropriation for the financial year ending 30<sup>th</sup> September of 2022. Mr. Vice-President, my contribution today will be very brief. I will comment on two matters at hand. One, the advances made to fulfil the fuel subsidy expenditure, and very briefly I would say a few words on the fiscal outturn as mentioned by the Minister of Finance.

So the Bill before us is seeking authorization for a sum of \$815 million to be issued from the Consolidated Fund to fulfil a liability that was incurred in fiscal 2022 of \$815 million via advances from Treasury deposits in accordance with section 17(1)(b) of the Exchequer and Audit Act. These advances were used to fulfil expenditure under two Heads, that is, one, under the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs of \$15 million which I will not be getting into, and the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to meet the shortfall in fuel subsidy of \$800 million to NP and Unipet. Now, this is where I would want to focus my contribution on, Mr. Vice-President.

So this further supplementation of \$800 million to Head 40 under Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, it may appear undebatable as it was a mandatory expense made in the public's interest but I would like to respectfully question the justification provided by the Minister of Finance on the need for these advances from the Treasury deposits. Now, even though the option of taking advances from Treasury deposits is available to meet expenditure in the public's interest, according to the Exchequer and Audit Act, I am not convinced it warranted advances being made from Treasury deposits.

From my understanding, there was ample information available to the Government via estimates from the Budget Division through the statement made by the Minister of Finance on April 08, 2022 prior to the supplementation being requested in the mid-year review. That was when \$300 million in supplementation was required for the shortfall of subsidy under the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries.

When the Minister of Finance made his statement in the House of Representatives in April, the public was made aware that with the adjustments of prices at the pump and application of the petroleum production levy, the Government will still be required to cover approximately \$840 million in 2022 to subsidize fuel. Then, we came on May 15, 2022, during the mid-year review where a supplementation \$300 million was requested. This was after statements were made giving a clear picture on how much the fuel subsidy was expected to cost for the rest of the fiscal year. So I ask why the supplementation was not requested then during the mid-year review?

Mr. Vice-President, by May 2022, we would have seen five months of consecutive increases in the price of oil. At that point, the price of oil averaged at approximately US \$90.08 per barrel.

**4.45 p.m.**

And the Government increased prices at the pump, based on their estimates that the price of oil will average at US \$95 per barrel for the rest of the year. And as a matter of fact, if we are looking at external estimate projections for the price of oil from that point, April and May, in April, the IMF World Economic Outlook, together with other international agencies, were forecasting the price of oil to be over \$100 per barrel for the rest of the year. So, Mr. Vice-President, with this information available to the Government, I am trying to understand why we chose to resort to advances from the Treasury deposits rather than just requesting it—requesting the supplementation at the mid-year review.

Now, according to the Minister of Finance, this supplementation brings the total fuel subsidy incurred for fiscal 2022 to \$2.49 billion, that is on an accrual basis, but \$1.67 billion on a cash basis, because the Government's accounting and budget system is done on a cash basis. But again, for me, the numbers are simply not adding up, based on the information that I have available to me. So, again, I am humbly seeking clarification from the Minister of Finance.

The details available to me present that in the Draft Estimates for fiscal 2022, it included an allocation, an initial allocation of \$20 million, that was when the budget was initially read and the price of oil was estimated at US \$65 a barrel. Then during the mid-year review, a supplementation was provided for \$300 million. This statement was made in April, as I already mentioned, explaining that if the prices are not adjusted at the pumps and the population shares the burden of the exponential increase in prices, then the subsidy would be estimated at \$2.12 billion, that is if the prices at the pumps were not increased.

Then, following the application of the petroleum production levy, this subsidy was estimated at \$1.6 billion. With the increase in the prices at the pumps,

the estimated cost to be borne by the Government should have been \$840 million for fiscal 2022. So I am not too sure how we arrived at the \$2.49 billion, Mr. Vice-President, total on an accrual basis for the cost of the fuel subsidy. Perhaps, the Minister of Finance could shed some light. Maybe this figure includes the petroleum production levy, together with what it would have cost by removing the subsidy. I am not sure so I am seeking clarification.

There are two areas as well—two additional areas that I would like to seek clarification on this \$2.49 billion. It will be interesting to know what was the final amount taken care by the petroleum production levy collected from oil companies that contributed to the payment of the fuel subsidy. I think initially the Minister of Finance would have estimated it at \$436 million. That would have been based on an average oil price of \$95 a barrel. So some final figures there. Because we are here, closing the accounting period for fiscal 2022, and it would be interesting to hear some of these figures.

Now, quickly I move on to the fiscal out-turn, Mr. Vice-President, and yes, I agree it is a significant achievement to record a surplus of \$1.08 billion on the books for the first time since fiscal 2009 and 2010. A small surplus of \$188 million was recorded then. Prior to that, we had five consecutive years of overall surpluses recorded between fiscal 2003 and 2008. So, yes, the books have balanced and it is in surplus for fiscal 2022. But, Mr. Vice-President, from a fiscal sustainability point of view, this may be largely temporary, as it is a derivative of energy windfalls. Sustaining surpluses continues to be dependent on higher energy prices.

If I recall correctly, when I would have spoken during the appropriation Bill in 2022, I cautioned the Minister of Finance on his optimism of attaining a surplus in fiscal 2023, indicating that it would only be possible if we earn additional revenue in the vicinity of around \$9 billion, which could only be possible from a



large energy windfall. Thankfully, we ended up earning \$10.88 billion in additional revenue, in a year we expected to record \$9 billion in deficit. This is the outcome of an upside scenario that is largely externally driven and derived primarily as a result of exponential increases in energy prices, which have spillovers to the prices of petrochemicals, which belong to the downstream energy sector which we are a significant exporter of as well.

So while we celebrate this surplus, we need to be cognizant of the fact that we have been recording non-energy fiscal deficits in the vicinity of around \$23 billion on an annual basis. This is according to the Central Bank data. And I would like to ask the Minister of Finance, if he has the information available, to present to this honourable House and the public with the non-energy fiscal balance recorded for fiscal 2022.

We have to remember, Mr. Vice-President, that growth performance has historically and continues to be characterized by a high degree of volatility, influenced largely by fluctuations in energy prices. It has been influenced largely by external conditions, particularly energy prices and by the growth performance of our major trading partners.

So my final point has to do with the unpredictability of the increasingly volatile global environment in which we are operating in as a small, open economy. Mr. Vice-President, increasing volatility of external conditions is becoming a norm all over the world and it is a factor that many governments, all governments, have to take into consideration with higher levels of probability going forward. And it is the main factor we must take into consideration when arriving at our forecast. As a result, the Ministry of Finance, the team at the Ministry of Finance, the team of forecasters, need to be extra vigilant in monitoring the global events in which we operate in and how it influences energy prices.

Because we are experiencing extreme volatility with energy prices, together with other commodity prices as it is becoming ever more important more now than before for estimating, not only our budget revenues, but the way in which we craft our public policy and we know how to implement our public policy and allocate our expenditures accordingly. With those few words, Mr. Vice-President, I thank you.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial.

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

**Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I promise to be very, very brief in my contribution. Mr. Vice-President, this Bill may be two clauses long but it represents \$815 million of taxpayers' money, and it is money that the taxpayer is now being asked to pay more at the fuel pump. And so, I believe that questions ought to be posed in a civilized manner, but simply to get answers on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago who have to pay these bills.

Mr. Vice-President, I want to focus only on the allocation or the additional expenditure brought to account under Head 65: The Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs. I think Sen. Deyalsingh touched a little bit on this matter and I will try my best not to be repetitive. But apart from the issues of management, and so on, of our buildings, Mr. Vice-President, I simply want to ask the question about the authorization of the expenditure. Because we are seeing some 15 million additional dollars being spent, in addition to large sums of money being allocated to our overseas missions, and I believe it raises questions. Because money simply cannot be spent for things which were not anticipated and then, occurred. And I am not saying they did not occur and the occasion did not arise for issues to be addressed, like damage to buildings and so on. But what is the process by which

we go through authorizing these expenditures? Because these are not simple routine day-to-day things, although some of the explanations given relate to significant increases in operational costs, inclusive of parking spaces. I do not know exactly what that means, operational cost, what other costs, apart from parking and so on, would be captured. But, Mr. Vice-President, when we are authorizing these payments or when we are authorizing repairs and maintenance to our overseas missions and the residences, what is the process of procuring contractors? Is it some sort of sole select type of tendering that happens? Do we go by some three quote system to provide how we do goods and services in the Ministries here? And is there a proper process of procurement when it comes to managing the overseas missions? So that is one thing.

The second thing is that, what is the system by which the works being carried out, the additional matters which are raised that result in this additional expenditure, what is the verification system? What is the check and balance? I know, for example, when work is carried out, I think I recall from Ministries and so on, when works are carried out at public buildings in Trinidad, that you have persons from the Ministry of Works and Transport who would visit and verify and—engineers and architects and all sorts of professionals who are based at that Ministry who would visit and conduct verification and, you know, all the project management stuff, and make sure the scope of works was adhered to and all of those things. Who—and I am asking, and if it was done, I would be happy if the details would be provided. But, Mr. Vice-President, it is important on these Bills, as simple and basic as they seem, where they represent this amount of money, that we pose these questions, if only to give the Government an opportunity to answer and to tell the population. And that is all we are here to ask. So, is there a proper process of verification being done when it is additional expenditure to the tune of

\$15 million is being—when expenditure to that is being incurred by our foreign overseas missions?

And finally, and as I said, I will be very brief, I would like to raise the issue of the Inspector of Missions. Because a lot of what I spoke about before are things which, I believe, fall under the purview of the Inspector of Missions, particularly if you have issues being raised at the different missions, which I think they are supposed to visit regularly. The purpose of that post-holder is twofold. One, problems could be detected beforehand, and that goes to the management issues that speakers before me would have spoken about. So we might be able to better manage—like we know the pipes are a little old, so we do not wait until a winter storm comes for them to get damaged and then we have to replace them. I think anybody who ever lived in a temperate country knows that you have to maintain your waterlines and so on, before the winter. But those little things could be picked up by the Inspector of Missions. But he is also—he or she could also be the check and balance on what is taking place and the expenditure, and so on.

**5.00 p.m.**

And I recall that in 20—I think it was 2018 or so, 2017 or 2018, but it was under this administration that one of their appointed diplomats resigned, because he raised a concern about excessive expenditure at an overseas Mission, and he asked the Prime Minister to respond and there was no response forthcoming, and you know, he eventually tendered his resignation, and it was accepted.

And I do recall as well, that a former diplomat himself and the head of the public service, Mr. Dumas, he came out in the public and he said very, very firmly that it was necessary to have the post of Inspector of Missions. As costly as it might be to go and visit missions all over the world, that post holder will serve a very important function because they could find out, you know, what is

happening there, have discussions with the staff, they do not just depend on the diplomat, the appointed person themselves, whether it is the Consular General or the High Commissioner, but they have discussions with the staff and they find out what is happening.

So, it was raised in the other place and I did not hear a response and I simply made a note of it and I just realized no one else raised it today. And I would simply like to ask the question, although I see the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs is not here today, hopefully, the Minister of Finance could tell us whether that post has been filled, whether it will if it is not, whether it will be filled in due course, and you know, tell us if it is that anybody is actually performing those functions right now, of checking in with our missions as a means of, you know, perhaps curtailing the expenditure from going over what is budgeted even though some things we cannot predict, but of having a better management of expenditure at our overseas missions, and also perhaps detecting problems and nipping them in the bud a little bit before they arise.

I would also look forward to getting some details just for my own knowledge and perhaps the knowledge of other people in the country, as to how we go about procuring service at our overseas missions in the most cost effective way to make sure we are getting value for money for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who are being asked to spend this 15 million additional dollars here today. Mr. Vice-President, with those few words, I thank you.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister of Finance.

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

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much, Mr. Vice- President. I listened carefully to points made. Points have been made by

Sen. Mark, Sen. Deyalsingh, Sen. Deonarine, the only point made by Sen. Mark that I think warrants a response is to deal with the hon. Senator's complaint that I did not post on social media about the use of Treasury deposits for the payment of the fuel subsidy. But unfortunately, Sen. Mark said I should have "twitted", and I looked in the dictionary for a definition of "twitted", or an act of "twitting" and I found that a "twit" is a silly or annoying person. I think what Sen. Mark really meant was not that; was that he meant I should have tweeted, which is a post made on a social media application called Twitter. So, I do not "twit", Mr. Vice-President. I also do not like to associate with twits. So that is all I have to say about what Sen. Mark said, because what I have noticed with Sen. Mark as I was telling my colleagues, it appears to me at least that when the goodly Senator is telling you, "Good morning, hello, have a nice day" or he is screaming at you about some contribution that you made, it all appears to be the same. So, that is all I have to say about Sen. Mark. His entire contribution was wholly irrelevant.

With respect to Sen. Deyalsingh, there were some questions about the policy that is utilized by overseas missions and the approach in terms of dealing with matters like building maintenance repairs, insurance, medical expenses, security, et cetera. And I want to put into the record some facts. And I am reading now from an article published in August of 2022, and this was published on CNBC in United States, and the article is entitled:

"As climate change threatens more homes, some properties are getting too costly to insure."

And this article went on to speak about the fact that over the 12-month period August 2021 to August 2022:

"Homeowner insurance premiums rose by 12.1 %..."

—in the United States. And that is just on average. But the increases in the

insurance premium cost for buildings and homes and so on was significantly higher in “disaster-prone states...” in the United States. And that is in the period under review.

And I would also like to refer to some other stories, articles. I go now to PBS and the article is in January of 2022 in the height of the winter of 2022, and this article headline is:

“2021’s deadliest, coldest, most expensive U.S. disasters, by the numbers”

And it goes on to say the following:

“In yet another year of extremes, the United States in 2021...”

And we are looking at fiscal 2022 which goes from October 21 to September 22—

“...the United States faced the ‘second highest number of billion-dollar weather and climate disasters on record...’”

And they would have been keeping records for a hundred years. So what we are being told that in this fiscal year where we have had to send money to overseas Missions to deal with severe damage caused by completely unprecedented winter storms, that in that year it was the “second highest number of billion-dollar weather and climate disasters on record”—in the United States. And in this fiscal year that we are looking at the United States:

“...suffered the largest number of disaster-related deaths...”—in a decade.

And this is from the:

“National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration...

Tropical cyclones racked up the highest...cost...adding...to a total of \$78...billion”— in damage in 2021.

So the fact of the matter is that fiscal 2022, the period between October 2021 and 2022 was an extremely bad year, impossible to predict. When estimates

are being prepared for a fiscal year, one looks at averages. So that, the Budget Division would have looked at the impact of damage of winter storms or other storms, hurricane, floods, whatever, and would have put a provision for repairs and emergency repairs to buildings and facilities in our overseas missions, but the Budget Division nor could I, ever predict that that winter would have been the second worst winter on record in the United States in 100 years.

So I think people need to understand that. It is easy to talk, you know. It is easy to say that people should plan, but one cannot plan for something like this. You have to use averaging.

In addition, when one looks—so that is the whole question of why this money was necessary. And it was necessary to send. And no Inspector of Missions will know that in December 2021 or January 2022 you are going to get the deadliest storm in the United States, the second deadliest series of storms in 100 years. Nobody would know that, so nobody can cater for that. There would be an appropriate appropriation, and there was, \$5 million. And that was thought based on averages, and based on previous trends, and based on expenditure for the last ten years, that \$5 million would have been deemed to be appropriate and quite responsible too. So these things happen.

Look at our own country. Look at the situation that we faced in the last couple of months in terms of devastating floods. These are not things that one can predict, one can provide but one cannot predict. As I said in the other place, we are not seer men. And, so that is the whole question of the damage to the buildings caused by those unprecedented winter storms, impossible to predict.

And I have another article dealing with the February 2022—because it did not end in December '21 or January '21, it went into February 2022. And the February 2022 North American winter storm affected a wide swathe of much of



the United States; spread from Texas all the way to Maine, 19 states in the United States were impacted by that February 2022 North American winter storm. More than 90 million people were affected.

And when one looks at the coverage with respect to that February 2022 North American winter storm, that was also one of the deadliest on record. So I am sorry, I cannot agree that any inspector of missions or any public servant for that matter would be able to predict that in fiscal 2022 you had some of the deadliest winter storms on record. One can only go on historical trends and on averages for a significant period, say for ten years.

The other thing I would like to point to if one goes into the literature as well, when one looks at the whole question of the cost of private security, because I made the point that there was a significant increase in the cost of private security services in all the capitals of the world that our Missions are in, and that occurred in fiscal 2022. And if one goes again into the literature you will see that there is a significant increase in security costs all over the world in fiscal 2022 for all sort of reasons: tensions, turmoil, protests, people becoming more radical, diplomats being put under pressure, subjected to new and emerging threats.

And this is just a fact of life, so that again, when one goes into the literature one will see there is a significant unprecedented increase in the cost of private security all over the world. The cost of personal security in fact, is increasing all over the world, and they expect that the cost is going to increase at an average of in excess of five per cent every year for the next several years.

Moving now to health care. I would like to draw Senators' attention to an article entitled:

“Eight reasons for rising healthcare costs”

Published in July of 2022, and:

“According to the Centres for Medicare and Medicaid Services, in 2021, healthcare costs...”—in United States—“...skyrocketed to \$4.3 trillion.”

**5.15 p.m.**

And the increase across the board in health care costs in the United States in fiscal 2022 was almost 10 per cent. And this, again, is a worldwide phenomenon, worldwide, coming out of COVID health care costs have increased exponentially all over the world and again, no public servant can anticipate that medical plans are going to increase by 20 per cent in any given fiscal year. Again, one has to go on averages, one has to go on historical trends and you have to remember we are coming out of COVID, this is a completely unpredictable period.

If I draw a parallel, Mr. President, look at the cost of transportation, look at the cost of a container coming out of China. The cost of a container from China to Trinidad and Tobago, pre COVID, might have been \$2,000. In the middle of COVID, it was \$20,000; a 1,000 per cent increase. So you have had all sorts of issues with respect to rising costs in health care, supply chain problems, the diversion of focus towards dealing with the global pandemic and so on and the evidence is there, significant increases across the world—I will give you another article.

“Global healthcare benefit costs projected to jump by 10 per cent in 2023.” Coming to this particular year, and this article was published in London in October of 2022. So, widespread inflation, and we must realize we are living in the real world. I mean, when you go into supermarkets, et cetera, you see the impact of global inflation and global inflation is not confined just to the cost of building materials, or the cost of transportation, or the cost of food but it is also driving global health care costs to the highest level—this is what this article is telling us—

in nearly 15 years, according to a survey of global medical insurers conducted by the WTW.

So, as I said, it is easy to talk but when you have to deal with the problem, these are the realities that we have to deal with. So, it is impossible to plan in a situation like that when health care cost going up by 20 per cent, security cost going up by 10 per cent, insurance cost going up by 20 per cent and all because of unprecedented global events—none of us can predict, and to deal with the whole question of prediction of oil prices.

You know what I find slightly humorous sometimes? When as Minister of Finance I predict that based on the best intelligence information available, from the US Energy Information Administration, for example, from the World Bank, from the IMF, from Standard & Poor's, from McKinsey, and from all of the entities that would give you a forecast for oil prices in the coming year—and you would look at 10 different forecasts from reputable global forecasters. And you say all right, you forecast your budget on \$60 oil, and oil is \$50, they say you are stupid. On the flip side, you forecast oil at \$65, oil hit \$120, they say you are still stupid. So it is easy for people to talk but we in this Government, “we doh operate by vaps”. Whenever we do a budget, we are very, very careful.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** And speaking for myself, I pay particular attention to the forecasts from the US Energy Information Administration. They are one of the most reliable in the world, but you also have energy organizations in the European Union and we also consult with the institutions that we have relationships with, the IDB, the World Bank, the IMF, and all of the reputable institutions that give us a forecast for oil and gas prices. And having done that, we average them out and we take account of various factors and we come up with our estimates, we do not

operate by “vaps”. So I just wanted to put that on the record. And as I said, if your estimate is too high, you are a waste of time. If your estimate is too low, you are a waste of time. So I do not take on these things. We use science and we speak to professionals.

Now, let me just explain because Sen. Deonarine did want to know why in the mid-year review we only came and asked for supplementation of \$300 million for the fuel subsidy. The reason was we had generated quite a significant surplus in the sale of petroleum products in previous years. And there was an expectation that in fiscal 2022, we would be able to bring that surplus to book because the petroleum marketing companies, NP and Unipet, the price at which they were selling the fuel at the gas station, a certain point in time was higher than the price that they were paying for it from Paria and that is when oil prices—one may recall, a particular year when oil prices went to zero. There was a particular day, I remember when West Texas Intermediate dropped to zero and then went negative and I mean, one has to try and wrap your mind around that. How on earth can an oil price become negative? But what was happening there is people just wanted to get the oil off their hands. So they were willing to pay people to take it away and that is how it was negative.

So, in that particular COVID period, when oil price went to zero and then crept back up to say, \$10, and then slowly went up to \$20, and \$30 and in fact, Heritage Petroleum had to store oil until the price got back up to about \$40. Because if they sold it at a price lower than say \$35, they would be losing money on every barrel of oil, because it was costing a little more than \$30 a barrel or so to lift the oil and when you add in other costs, say \$35—so, they had to wait until the price of oil went past 35, so they stored it, they kept it and then they sold it when the price went up.

So during that period, when oil was at \$10, \$20, \$25, \$30, et cetera, the price of fuel in Trinidad and Tobago would have been more than the price that Paria was paying for it. So, the NP and Unipet generated a significant surplus and the surplus was in fact \$500 million dollars. And we had expected during fiscal 2022, to be able to apply that surplus to the fuel subsidy, together with the \$300 million that we appropriated and at that time we felt that that would have been adequate. Unfortunately, the price of LPG skyrocketed during the COVID period 2020/2021 into 2022, the price at which we have to buy LPG skyrocketed, and therefore that \$500 million instead of being used for petroleum fuels, for motor fuels, for gasoline and diesel, we had to take that \$500 million and use it to subsidize cooking gas because people need to understand that when we speak about the fuel subsidy, we do not just speak about subsidies on gasoline and diesel, we also need to look at subsidies on cooking gas. And the price of a 25 pound cylinder of cooking gas in Trinidad and Tobago is one tenth of the price it is in many other countries in the region, in the Latin American and Caribbean region. There is a huge subsidy on cooking gas that the Government pays from its revenues, hundreds of millions of dollars. So that during that period, there was an exponential increase in the price of cooking gas, because the gases that these things are made from, the various elements that come out of natural gas that are used, butane, propane, and all these things that are used to make the cooking gas, the price skyrocketed. So, we with that \$500 million in surplus that we thought we could have used for motor fuels, we then had to apply it to cooking gas. So, that is the explanation and I hope that that will answer the question asked by Sen. Deonarine, and with those few words, I beg to move. Mr. President.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

**Mr. President:** Minister of Finance.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you Mr. President, in accordance with Standing Order 57(2) I beg to move that a Bill to provide for a further supplementary appropriation for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022 not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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

*Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.*

### **ADJOURNMENT**

**Mr. President:** Acting Leader of Government Business.

**The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):** Mr. President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Tuesday, January 31, 2023, at 1.30 p.m. which is Private Member's Day and perhaps Sen. Mark can give us some guidance as to which Motion we would be debating on that day.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Mark:** I would like with your indulgence to get back to the hon. Minister and by 8.00 in the morning to let her know what is the final position. So, I will contact you at around 8.00 in the morning to let you know around 8.00.

**Hon. Senator:** [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. Mark:** No, I cannot tell you now.

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

**5.30 p.m.**

**Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act**

**(Operationalization of)**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Mr. President, it is almost approaching eight years since the Government has been in office. And since this Government arrived, the Government has been tampering, tinkering and amending the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act, where today it has been completely watered down from its original status. Nevertheless, the Minister of Finance, sometime ago, brought regulations to effect this watered-down piece of legislation. These regulations were passed, they were approved, and one was looking forward to the Government implementing and operationalizing the public procurement law. That was not to be.

A new Attorney General arrived on the compound of the Government and one would have thought that this new Attorney General would have taken measures to give effect to this piece of legislation. But, instead, this new Attorney General, without being asked by the Judiciary, wrote to the Judiciary to get the Judiciary's response on its preparation for the implementation of the legislation.

I do not know if that was a cue given by the Attorney General, and I say this advisedly, but an epistle of 29 pages emerged out of the Judiciary. And all that the Judiciary did not say was to scrap the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act. And then, the Attorney General told Trinidad and Tobago, in essence, the comments from the Judiciary were literally traffic-stopping. And, Mr. President, the Attorney General was correct, because any attempt to implement this law has come to a screeching stop. So the question that has to be asked is that whether this Government has any intention of implementing and operationalizing the public procurement law or whether it has come to a screeching halt because of the statements issued by the Judiciary?

So, today, I have brought this Motion to get from the Government its

position on the way forward. And may I say from the outset that the United National Congress does not support these submissions made by the Judiciary. In fact, the Procurement Regulator has adequately responded to many of the concerns laid and made by the Judiciary, and the Procurement Regulator has asked that the Act, in its current form, be implemented and operationalized. And as we go along, Mr. President, there would be kinks in the armour and we can adjust, we can amend and we can make changes, but let us proceed to implement the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act.

Now, Mr. President, I do not know, I think the hon. Minister made a statement recently on the FIU, and I do not know if he understands the link between the statement he made and the inability of the Government to implement and operationalize the public procurement law.

I, therefore, would like to call on the Attorney General to indicate to Trinidad and Tobago, what is the Government's position on this very important piece of legislation? Is the Government going to proceed to have it implemented or is the Government going to delay because of comments made by the Judiciary? We need to know because this—and, Mr. President, I just want to indicate to you that the Judiciary was kind enough, according to information reaching me, to provide judges to the Procurement Regulator and regulation office to train the internal personnel back in 2019 and 2020, to give effect to this piece of legislation.

So the time for this kind of intervention and attempt to delay the operationalization of this legislation has passed. It has passed. And, Mr. President, I do not know if the Government understands the link between the lack of enforcement, implementation and operationalization of this legislation, and the kind of activities taking place in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Mr. President:** Senator, you have two more minutes.



**Sen. W. Mark:** We have been told by the Procurement Regulator that Trinidad and Tobago loses some \$5.3 billion on an annual basis since we have failed to implement that law. So, in the last seven years, Mr. President, Trinidad and Tobago, through fraud and through embezzlement and bribery, may have lost about 35 to \$40 billion in revenues because of the lack of implementation, and look at the results facing our country. Murders is a total—people are just under assault in this country.

So, Mr. President, in closing, I ask the hon. Attorney General to tell Trinidad and Tobago where are we with the implementation and the operationalization of our Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act? People need to know, and I am here seeking answers from the Government, and I hope the Attorney General would provide guidance on this matter as we go forward. I thank you very much, Mr. President.

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

**Mr. President:** Attorney General.

**The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC):** Thank you very much, Mr. President, and permit me the personal indulgence to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your ascension to a very significant constitutional office. My congratulations.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:** Mr. President, I make the following statement with respect to the Government's prioritization of the full proclamation of the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act, 2015, which I will refer to by the shorthand name, the public procurement Act. The hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley and this Government, have placed the highest priority on this important legislation. The Government is fully committed to take the final steps to

fully proclaim and to bring this legislation into operation. To this end, the Government has adopted a coordinated and wholesome approach with the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, operating in tandem with the work led by several divisions of the Ministry of Finance, various other Ministries and the Office of the Procurement Regulation.

Mr. President, permit me to provide a brief overview of the progression of the public procurement Act. The public procurement Act was amended three times, namely in 2016, 2017 and 2020. One, the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property (Amdt.) Act of No. 5 of 2016; two, the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property (Amdt.) Act, No. of 3 of 2017; and three, the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property (Amdt.) Act of No. 27 of 2020. The most recent amendment in 2020, included exemption of services provided to public bodies or state-controlled enterprises.

Mr. President, further to these amendments, there was the introduction of 10 public procurement regulations enacted by Parliament in February 2022. Quite notably, these pieces of legislation have collectively introduced additional material steps within the public procurement processes for public bodies which, in turn, would require the Government and the OPR and other key stakeholders to ensure that the requirements for full operationalization of the public procurement Act are comprehensively reviewed and the country made ready.

The concerns raised by the Judiciary, Mr. President, which were referred in my statement laid in Parliament dated June 22, 2022 have since been made public by the Judiciary. In this update, it is appropriate, however, without purporting to quote those concerns, that they be listed:

1. Issues relating to the scope of the Act, including services which are exempt, such as funeral agencies, psychologists and banks.

2. No separation of power.
3. Wide authority of the OPR.
4. Insufficient assurance of due process.
5. Issues of local content.
6. Reliance on policies with penalty for failure to adhere.
7. Power to assess and order damages.
8. Halting of the public bodies' procurement activity.
9. Framework and its adaptability to non-construction, infrastructure-type procurement.
10. The real potential of the Act to frustrate and hinder the functioning of the courts and other public bodies.
11. Increases in cost to be borne by the State.
12. The Judiciary being mindful of obligations as a public body but procurement units remain unstaffed.
13. The Judiciary using proper procurement procedures, but additional requirements and attraction of mischief are of real potential concern.
14. A great potential increase in public law litigation.
15. Increase in number of state attorneys available to support speedier hearings.
16. Small claims court with built-in mediation and agreements as to service.
17. A reversion to an unmanageable workload of the court system in Trinidad and Tobago.
18. Circumvention of the provisions of the Mediation Act, inclusive of standards and ethical standards.
19. Extensive effect on internal processes and operations, and the need for

dedicated legal focus.

I repeat those concerns, Mr. President, simply to underscore the fact that there are concerns which have substance and ought not to be referred to in terms which are either pejorative or otherwise disrespectful of the Judiciary.

Mr. President, as part of this update, I am able to state that since my statement in Parliament on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, 2022, along with legal officers of my Ministry, I have met and engaged with the Office of the Procurement Regulation and his team. Further to that, at my invitation, this was followed up by the OPR writing to me on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, 2022, enclosing a package of documents. This package has been and continues to be under review by legal officers of my Ministry.

Mr. President, I bring to your attention that the legal officers of my Ministry have been corresponding with other entities to ensure that there is robust engagement and cooperation among all stakeholders who play a key role in the implementation of the Act. In that process, we have examined and continue to examine the concerns raised by the Judiciary, the OPR and others so as to ensure that all issues are addressed for the full responsible operationalization of the public procurement Act. By way of further update, my office has also prepared a draft proclamation schedule for the proclamation of the public procurement Act which will be taken to the Cabinet in short order.

Mr. President, I wish to end by stating that the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago remains committed to the full proclamation of the public procurement Act, and will continue to work assiduously and responsibly towards that goal in order to be prepared for the transition of public bodies to implement the law. Mr. President, I thank you.

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

**5.45 p.m.**

**Increases in Fuel Prices**

**(Capping of)**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Mr. President, on my second matter where I am seeking the Government's consideration on looking at the possibility of capping further increases in fuel prices at the pump that would have negative impacts or effects on an already beleaguered population. I raise this issue, Mr. President, in the context of the price of oil being budgeted for 2023, fiscal year, at \$92.50, as well as the price of natural gas at \$6 per MMBtu. So far the forecast and the reality have not been promising. What we have witnessed is that, according to information reaching our desk, and the Minister can clarify these numbers, that the price of natural gas has been trading for about just under \$3.60 on the international market and we have seen a fluctuation of the price of crude oil from the \$92.50 to some \$80 per barrel. Now, Mr. President, if these figures turned out to be true, it means to say that the Government's revenue projections could be under some challenge and threats, and the question that is being raised here is that we have had almost six consecutive increases in fuel prices at the pump.

I think it may be five, it may be six, but I stand corrected. But the population cannot take any further increases in the price of fuel at the pump. Their backs are broken and they cannot take any further weight from the Government. I also wish to inform this honourable Senate that the Government has choices available to it and the Minister of Finance, two budgets ago, statements ago, did indicate that the Government was taking steps to liberalize and deregulate the fuel market. So that when the price of crude oil is high, we pay the higher price, and when it falls we benefit. Well, look, Mr. President, the price has fallen but we are paying more for premium gasoline than it is being charged in the United States,

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from research that I have been advised on; again, I stand to be corrected.

So the point that I wish to emphasize is that we need to pay attention to capping the fuel prices at the pump. It is the Government that closed down Petrotrin and because of the closure of Petrotrin we are experiencing these challenges. And we must never forget, before Petrotrin was closed, the Government decided to amend the Petroleum Production Levy and Subsidy Act from allowing the multinational corporations to pay the subsidies so that prices can remain low for the consumer. And I think they imposed a 2 per cent on gross revenues emanating from these oil corporations and energy companies and the Government took the decision to make up the difference. So here we are today where, because of this decision and the closure of Petrotrin, we are now subjected to the market forces as a result of those actions.

We are calling on the Government to take action to prevent any further increases at the pump. The Government said they were going to liberalize the market, it is almost two years now and we are awaiting the liberalization of the market. The Government also said they were going to sell NP gas stations; we are still awaiting the sale of NP gas stations. Now, it is not to say that we are in support of these things but the Government said that was their policy. So, Mr. President, I raise this matter of calling on the Government to put a cap on fuel prices, because we know when the price of oil goes down, when the price of gas goes down, then there are implications for revenues, and when there are implications for revenues somebody has to pay the price and sometimes it ends up being the consumers through higher gasoline prices as an example.

So, Mr. President, I would like the Government to share with Trinidad and Tobago how it intends to deal with what is taking place at the international global energy market, the constant fall in the average price of a barrel of oil, the

challenges that we are now seeing occurring on the gas market, and whether the Government is going to use those developments—

**Mr. President:** Senator, you have two more minutes.

**Sen. W. Mark:**—whether the Government will use those developments to further punish the population. And therefore, I call on the Government to place a cap or consider, I should say, placing a cap on any further increases in fuel prices at the pump. And if the Government wishes to implement its policy as it relates to liberalizing and deregulating the fuel market through the price mechanism apparatus so when the price of crude oil rises, the population pays higher prices, when the price falls, they are supposed to benefit.

Let the Government make up its mind as to what it wants to do, rather than have the population being in a state of “in betweenity” and uncertainty as it relates to future prices at the level of the pump in Trinidad and Tobago. So I look forward to the Government clearing the air on this matter and providing some assurances to the population on the way forward as it relates to fuel prices that can in fact result in a dislocation in our nation, and the people are saying, clearly, they cannot carry any further burdens at the pump. We need the Government to pay attention to the cries of the population. I thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Mr. President:** Minister of Finance.

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

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much, Mr. President. Mr. President, it is said, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but I am not sure what is the corollary when there is an absence of knowledge. Maybe very dangerous? So, I want to put on record for the benefit of Sen. Mark and his colleagues, our local crude is a mixture of what is called, Molo crude, produced by

Heritage Petroleum, and other crudes, primarily light sweet crude oil produced off the east coast of Trinidad. And when one looks at the prices that our crude—the weighted average prices of our crude because you have to look at production, you cannot look at prices in a vacuum; you also have to look at production. So when you look at the oil produced, for example, in the fields that used to be owned by BP, now being managed by other oil companies, and one looks at the price that Heritage is getting for its crude, the figures I have seen—and this has been made well known on numerous occasions since there was a fallacy propagated by the Opposition that we would be unable as a country to sell our crude oil because nobody would want it. That is so far from the truth it is not funny. The price we are getting for our oil is very close to Brent price, not West Texas Intermediate. So when you are looking at the price of oil, I ask Sen. Mark, please, do not just look at WTI, which is the US benchmark which is usually the price that is quoted for the uninformed.

Take a look at the price of Brent crude oil, we are just about \$1 below that, \$1.50, and so on. And in August of 2022, August 29<sup>th</sup>, the price of Brent was \$99.55. That price then dropped by September 26, 2022, budget day, to \$86.37. Very shortly thereafter, by October the 7<sup>th</sup>, just two weeks later, the price was \$95.98. So it dropped from \$100 down to \$86; jumped back up to \$96, just in a two-week period; dropped back down to \$89 on October the 19<sup>th</sup>; back up on November the 4<sup>th</sup> to \$96, and then declined to a price of \$76 on December the 8<sup>th</sup>. Then, just three weeks later, went back up to \$86 on December 29<sup>th</sup>; dropped back down to \$80 a few weeks later, and today it is \$86.36. So there is extreme volatility in the oil pricing market and it stands to reason. There are all sorts of factors that are being brought to bear on the price of oil at this point in time. Of course, you have the extended war in Ukraine. It was thought that that war would



be over in a month, at least Putin thought so, but he was wrong and the war has now been going on for almost a year.

**6.00 p.m.**

The price of oil has remained elevated because of those tensions in that part of Europe. But you also have issues with demand, because China went through a series of lockdowns which affected economic activity in China, which affected demand for Chinese goods, which affected Chinese demand for raw materials, because China is not a large producer of oil, so it has to import oil and natural gas. So that because of the uncertainties of China's approach to COVID and the fact that they were locking down major cities, Shanghai and various other of their major cities, and shutting everything down, the demand for oil went down, the price went up. As China started to ease its COVID policy and started to open up again, demand for oil goes back up, the price goes back up.

So the point I am making, over the last three to four months we have seen oil go from \$100 down to \$76, up to \$85, down to 80, and back up to \$86 today. Who knows where it will be tomorrow? In fact, it has jumped from \$76, just two weeks ago, to \$86 today. So we in the Government have to take a measured view, we cannot just jump. We have to monitor the oil price before we make any move at all.

With respect to natural gas, I would like to educate Sen. Gas—[*Laughter*]—Sen. Mark. That might have been a Freudian slip—a Freudian slip, Sen. Gas—well, Sen. Mark.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Laughter*]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I would like to educate the hon. Sen. Wade Mark. There is no component of natural gas that is used to produce gasoline. Gasoline is produced from oil and, therefore, the price of natural gas is wholly irrelevant when one is

looking at the price of gasoline and a fuel subsidy—wholly irrelevant. There is not one constituent element of natural gas that is used to make gasoline and, therefore, natural gas prices should not come into any discourse on this.

I simply want to say, in response to the point made by Sen. Mark, that there is no plan at this point in time for further increases in the price of fuel.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Senate adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 6.02 p.m.*