LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne who is out of the country.

SENATOR’S APPOINTMENT

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, I have received the following correspondence from Her Excellency the President Christine Carla Kangaloo, O.R.T.T.

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By Her Excellency CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, O.R.T.T., President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. NDALE YOUNG

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, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, 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 acting Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you,
NDALE YOUNG to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 16TH May, 2023 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said 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 16th day of May, 2023.”

REVOCATION OF APPOINTMENT

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By Her Excellency CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, O.R.T.T., President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

/s/Christine Kangaloo
President.

TO: MS. KARUNAA J. BISRAMSINGH

WHEREAS by Instrument dated 11th May, 2023, I, acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, appointed you as a temporary Senator, with effect from 12th May, 2023 and continuing during the absence of Senator Anil Roberts by reason of illness.

In exercise of the power vested in me by section 44 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, do hereby revoke, with immediate effect, your appointment as a temporary Senator.
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 16th day of May, 2023.”

SENATOR’S APPOINTMENT

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By Her Excellency CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, O.R.T.T., President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

/s/Christine Kangaloo
President.

TO: MR. DOMINIC SMITH

WHEREAS Senator Anil Roberts is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section 44(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, do hereby appoint you, DOMINIC SMITH to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 16th May, 2023 and continuing during the absence of Senator Anil Roberts 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 16th day of May, 2023.”

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AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Ndale Young took and subscribed the Affirmation of Allegiance as required by law.

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Dominic Smith took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

PAPERS LAID

1. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service to the Seventh Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the National Entrepreneurship Development Company Limited (NEDCO) for the financial year 2017 and follow up on the implementation of recommendations in the Committee’s Tenth Report from the 11th Parliament. [The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon)]

URGENT QUESTION

Heritage Petroleum Ruptured Oil Pipeline

(Measures being taken)

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Mr. President. To the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries: Given reports of a ruptured Heritage Petroleum oil pipeline resulting in a major oil spill and the emergency evacuation of four (4) families in Fyzabad, what measures are being taken to treat with the oil spill and prevent future incidents?

Mr. President: Acting Prime Minister.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Also filling in for the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. Mr. President, I
am advised that around 6.40p.m. on Sunday the 14th of May, 2023, Heritage responded to an oil leak observed on the heritage pipeline right of way in Massahood Village, Fyzabad. The leaks were emanating from the 16 inch trunk oil pipeline. This is an in-service pipeline. The leak was located below a garage that was constructed by the owner between two houses over the pipelines on the right of way. The leaks were isolated and repaired within hours. The families that were impacted, approximately 20 persons, have all been relocated to the Paria Suites Hotel.

The intention is for Heritage to provide for all aspects of their accommodation and care until the clean-up activities have been completed and the environment is safe. It is noteworthy that the family which was affected the most was repeatedly contacted by Heritage during 2022 to desist from constructing a structure over the pipeline along the pipelines clearly demarcated right of way. To treat the oil spill, Heritage has pumped the line and repaired the leaks. The line will be subsequently hydro-tested to determine fitness for service. This cross-island pipeline network is approximately 30 years old, over 80,000 kilometres in length.

A full pipeline inspection and replacement programme has been ongoing for the last two years, and will continue until completed. Eight hundred thousand feet of pipeline has already been inspected, and over 50,000 feet of pipeline has been replaced. Inspection of the above ground pipeline is much easier to execute, and very advanced using non-destructive testing techniques, but underground pipelines can only be inspected by excavation. This is particularly difficult when persons have built structures over the pipeline. The Heritage Incident Management Team remains on site, continues to manage the response, and there are several crews on-site dealing with the clean-up. The EMA and the Ministry have been informed and
will continue to provide updates as required.

**Sen. Mark:** Mr. President, can I ask the hon. Acting Prime Minister and holding on for the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, whether he can share with us what measures or steps will be taken in the future by Heritage to avoid, through inspection and audit, a recurrence of such an incident?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Mr. President, as I indicated in this particular case, the residents constructed a garage on top of the pipeline. In all of these situations one has to balance the rule of law with the effect on the community, but I would urge Heritage in the future to do their best to stop any person who is building a property or a structure on top of a pipeline in an unlawful manner.

**Sen. Mark:** Can I ask, through you, to the hon. Minister, the hon. Minister indicated—well let me just put the question. Can the hon. Minister indicate whether as far as he is aware Heritage Petroleum has conducted an audit of their pipelines given the age of said pipelines to ensure that what the hon. Minister has defined as persons constructing homes over these pipelines, has an audit or is an audit being conducted by Heritage Petroleum to address this issue?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you, Mr. President. Sen. Mark is famous for asking questions already asked and answered. Let me repeat, over 800,000 feet of pipeline has already been inspected and 50,000 feet of pipeline has been replaced. And I repeat again, a full pipeline inspection and replacement programme has been ongoing for the last two years and will continue until completed. A full pipeline inspection and replacement programme.

10.15 a.m.

**ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

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

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

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

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

**ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

**UN Climate Change Conference (COP27) Egypt**

**(Details of T&T Delegation)**

52. **Sen. Wade Mark** asked the hon. Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs:

   Can the Minister provide the names of the Cabinet Ministers and public officials who represented Trinidad and Tobago as part of the delegation that attended the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Egypt?

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

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

Thank you very much, Mr. President. Mr. President, the names of the Cabinet Ministers and public officials who represented Trinidad and Tobago as part of the delegation that attended the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Egypt are as follows: The hon. Pennelope Beckles, Minister of Planning and Development, head of delegation; Ms. Sandra Fraser, Acting Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries; Mr. Terrance Ali, Chemical Engineer II, Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries; Mr. Kishan Kumarsingh, head, Multilateral Environmental Agreements Unit, Environmental Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Planning and Development; Mr. Danielle Sookram, Research Analyst, Multilateral Environmental Agreements Unit, Environmental Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Planning and Development; Ms. Crystal Lawrence, Environmental

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Officer II, Division of Food Security, Natural Resources, the Environment and Sustainable Development, Tobago House of Assembly. Thank you.

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

**Sen. Mark:** Hon. President, can I ask the hon. Minister of—the acting Leader of Government Business, whether a report was generated out of this conference as far as the Minister is aware?

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Yes, a report was generated and submitted to the Cabinet.

**Sen. Mark:** Can the hon. Minister indicate whether such a report will be made available to the public through the Parliament?

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** That is not the standard practice.

**Sen. Mark:** Can I ask the Minister whether consideration will be given for such a report to be tabled in the both Houses of Parliament?

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Consideration can be given but at the same time perhaps the question can be put for a written answer.

**Sen. Mark:** Can I proceed?

**Flood Gates for Orange Grove Farmers**

(Measures to Address)

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

Given the November 2022 reports which highlighted the need for better flood gates to protect the crops of Orange Grove Farmers, can the Minister advise as to the measures being taken to address this issue?

**Mr. President:** Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Avinash Singh): Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, there are three flood gates within the Orange Grove project. The first is installed on the Caroni River, the second is on the Arouca River and the third is on the Densley River. The sluice gate on the Caroni River at the southwestern end of the project has been breached and during periods of heavy rainfall when the levels of the Caroni River rise, the water enters the lands at this end of the project. The other two sluice gates are functional at this time.

Given the issues at this location and the unprecedented rainfall being experienced within recent times, the focus in fiscal 2023 will be on the part of the project which connects to the Caroni River. The issues that need to be addressed are as follows:

1. Repair of the leaking sluice gate on the Caroni River;
2. Accelerating the rate of removal of water from the project area;
3. Repair of the broken cylinder across the road that leads to the sluice gate; and
4. Addressing the overtopping of the Caroni River embankment in certain areas.

Mr. President, under the 2023 PSIP we are replacing the single sluice gate that discharges into the Caroni River with a double four feet wide sluice gate system. The new system will also contain flap gates to restrict flow of water into the project from the Caroni River. It is also proposed to install a mobile pump to mitigate against flooding within the area.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has also sought technical assistance from the Drainage Division of the Ministry of Works and Transport,
particularly with respect to the low lying areas in the Caroni River embankment. A technical assessment on the other two sluice gates will also be undertaken. Thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the hon. Minister, through you, as to when the sluice gate as he has indicated will be implemented, particularly, Mr. President, given the dire warnings we have gotten from the Meteorological Office.

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

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, invitation to tender is expected to be sent out by the 16th of May, 2023, and closed on 06, June, 2023. The award of this tender is expected to be completed by the 16th of June, 2023. Thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the Minister, in light of what he has revealed, what measures are being taken to mitigate the possibility of heavy flooding and the consequential destruction of crops of farmers given the dates that the Minister has outlined?

Mr. President: Minister in the Ministry.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Thank you, Mr. President. As indicated in my previous answer, during this time, Mr. President, it is proposed to install a mobile pump to mitigate against flooding within the area while the award and the tender process is ongoing. Thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: May I ask the Minister through you, when will this mobile pump be effected given the fact that the rainy season is upon us?

Mr. President: Minister in the Ministry.
Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, within the Engineering Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries we have a cadre of mobile pumps already but for this particular project a new pump is also being sought. So in the event that a pump is required in the shortest possible time we have pumps at the Ministry that can be redirected to this location. Thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the hon. Minister through you, Mr. President, is there a timeframe for the acquisition of the new pump, Mr. President?

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

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Thank you, Mr. President. As Sen. Mark would know the proclamation of the procurement legislation has taken effect so that would be the guiding tool for the acquisition of this pump.

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

National Drainage Study

(Details of)

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

Given the excessive flooding experienced in November 2022, which caused significant infrastructural damage throughout this country, can the Minister indicate whether it is the Government’s intention to conduct a national drainage study involving all stakeholders?

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, the Ministry of Works and Transport has been pursuing a strategic drainage plan with the Andean Development Bank focused on the review and update of the existing studies and the development of

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studies in new areas. As part of this process, stakeholders are consulted and feedback analyzed in the development of proposals. I thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask through you to the hon. Minister, what is the status of this particular study that he has outlined?

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Thank you. Mr. President, this plan is an ongoing plan with certain aspects of it having already been delivered. Several projects have also been identified and are being scoped for tendering coming out of this process. As I said, the process is made up—is an ongoing process. It has started. We already have boots on the ground in several areas coming out of this study. Thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can the hon. Minister share with this Senate the areas where projects have been completed consistent with this particular drainage plan? Can you share with this hon. Senate?

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Thank you. Mr. President, over the last two years I have indicated on several occasions to the Parliament here and the other House that the process for this plan was a study being done on all the existing plans that we had at the Ministry. Over the last couple of years we spent millions of dollars on plans, none of which had an operational plan. This programme with the Andean Development Bank was to take all these plans, come up with an operational plan and also continue the studies in the areas where no study was ever done, like the Western Peninsula and deep south.

So while those processes are ongoing, projects coming out of all the other
plans that we did, things like the pumps and gate upgrade, those have started. There are several areas where we have new pumps, upgraded gates and this programme continues. Work on the Caroni River bank continues. Now, these projects came out of previous studies but they were never analyzed in a way that we can have an operational plan to get boots on the ground. So, yes, there are several, there are things coming out of the last study, there are 41 projects that have been identified and are being dealt with as we speak. Thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Mr. President, through you to the hon. Minister, given the dire warning given by the Meteorological Office of impending extremely bad weather in the coming weeks, can the Minister share with this House what urgent measures in the context of those areas that are open to major flooding in this country, would this drainage project be effected to mitigate? Can you share with us?

Mr. President: That question does not arise, Sen. Mark. Next question.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the Minister out of the 41 projects that he has indicated to us, how many of them have been completed and how many are ongoing?

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. President, I tried to simplify the answer for easy understanding. Let me try and make it a little simpler. Under the Ministry of Works, Drainage Division we have several projects ongoing. Coming out of this plan we have identified several more projects to be done and this will continue over the years to come. We got early warning of above average rainy season and that is why we are here today to debate the Variation of Appropriation for fiscal 2022/2023 where the Ministry has been allocated funding especially in the area of drainage. And the reason for that additional funding is to take care of the identified projects to help with the reduction in flooding in several areas. And as
part of the debate today, you will hear from the Ministry of Works and Transport
that we have targeted over 500 desilting programmes. That is most desilting
programmes ever attempted in the history probably of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We are also continuing work on the upgrades of
pumps and gates where we have—if you look in terms of the deep south area, new
pumps with capacity of close to 40,000 gallons per minute. So we have—the work
continues, it is an ongoing process. We have work, the river banking and the
upgrading of the river banks continuing on the Caroni River and several other
rivers. So when you put everything together you see that there is a total upgrade of
the drainage infrastructure taking place in Trinidad. Everything cannot happen
overnight, but finally we have a plan to go forward for the country.

And I hear some of my colleagues saying eight years. I just want to remind
my colleagues that some of the plans that were spent millions of dollars on, right—

**Mr. Imbert:** Hundreds of millions.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—and when I say—the Minister of Finance is
correct—hundreds of millions, those were just talk plans with nothing to put boots
on the ground. What we have finally decided to do is to come up with an
operational plan to get boots on the ground to finally deal with this flooding
problem. Thank you.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Deonarine.

**Hon. Senators:** [Crosstalk]

**Trinidad and Tobago Special Economic Zones Act, 2022**

**(Timeline for Proclamation and Implementation)**

104. **Sen. Amrita Deonarine** asked the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry:
Can the Minister advise as to the timeline for the proclamation and implementation of The Trinidad and Tobago Special Economic Zones Act, 2022?

Mr. President: One second, Sen. Deonarine. Members, Sen. Deonarine has a question to ask, for questions on notice. So Sen. Deonarine, could you ask the question again.

Sen. A. Deonarine: Thank you, Mr. President, Question No. 104 to the Minister of Trade and Industry.

Mr. President: Minister of Trade and Industry.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much, Mr. President. On 31st of January, 2022 the Special Economic Zones Bill was assented to by the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Parts I, II, III, IV, and V of the SEZ Act were proclaimed by Legal Notice No. 16 of 2022. The proclamation of these parts facilitated the establishment of the SEZ Authority, which is the first step in the implementation of the SEZ legislation. The remaining parts of the Act, which include those treating with the designation and licensing aspects of the regime, will be proclaimed once all the administrative and regulatory steps are taken to ensure that the SEZ Authority can fully carryout its statutory functions in keeping with the provisions of the SEZ Act.

10.30 a.m.

Work is therefore being undertaken towards the proclamation and the implementation of the SEZ legislation as it relates to:

1. The development of the SEZ regulations to accompany the SEZ Act 2022; and

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2. The operationalization of the Trinidad and Tobago SEZ Authority.

With regard to the policy and legislative brief on SEZ regulations, on March 21, 2023, the Chief Parliamentary Counsel and the Ministry of Trade and Industry completed the revised draft SEZ regulations. These regulations, together with a policy and legislative brief, was subsequently submitted to Cabinet on March 23rd, 2023, and following review by the Legislative Review Committee, this should take place in early May and part of it has happened already. The regulations would subsequently be laid in Parliament subject to negative resolution.

With regard to the SEZ Authority, on July 25th, 2022, the board of directors of the Trinidad and Tobago SEZ Authority was appointed. And through a consultant, the board is working to develop an operational framework and supporting organizational structure for the Authority. This includes, in the first instance, the recruitment of a Chief Executive Officer and other key staff, as well as the development of an organizational structure and a strategic framework for the Trinidad and Tobago Special Economic Zones Authority.

The strategic framework includes the overall strategic direction. They mandate the vision, the mission and the strategic goals of the Authority, the best practices for the special economic zones, and guidelines that are necessary to operationalize the TTSEZ Authority as a regulator of the SEZ regime. The SEZ Authority is expected to be operationalized by September 2023.

**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTATION AND VARIATION OF APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2023) BILL, 2023**

*Order for second reading read.*

**Mr. President:** Acting Prime Minister.

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

The Ministry of Finance and Acting Prime Minister (Hon. Colm Imbert):
Thank you very much, Mr. President. I beg to move that a Bill entitled:

An Act to supplement and vary the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2023) Act, 2022 be now read a second time.

Mr. President, how much time do I have?

**Mr. President:** Forty-five minutes.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you. This is a Finance Bill and it has been passed without amendment in the other place. The Bill provides for two proposals with respect to the 2023 appropriation. Firstly, a supplementation of the appropriation for the financial year 2023 by $3,852,055,829 and, secondly, a variation of the appropriation in the sum of $100 million.

The purpose of the appropriation, the supplementation, is to fund urgent and critical recurrent and capital needs to the end of September 2023. The details of the proposed changes were circulated to all Senators and it is anticipated that during the course of the debate, proposals contained within Bill will be addressed by various Members of the Government. The supplementary appropriation affects 22 Heads of Expenditure, comprises Recurrent Expenditure of $3,496,694,796 and Development Programme expenditure of $355,361,033. The variation affects just one Head of Recurrent Expenditure and involves an increase to one Head of—sorry. The variation affects recurrent expenditure only and comprises of an increase to one Head of Expenditure and a decrease to another Head of Expenditure.

The source of the funds for the supplementary appropriation at this time it is contemplated that the source will be met from the Consolidated Fund as well as from loan financing if required. I just want to stress that we have no plans at this point in time to make any withdrawals from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund to
Hon. C. Imbert (cont’d)

Hon. C. Imbert:

In fact, I wish to remind hon. Senators that the Government deposited in excess of US $300 million, or TT $2 billion, into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in 2022.

So the fund was augmented by that amount and I am also pleased to inform the Senate that the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, despite uncertainty in the global economy, despite extreme volatility in commodity prices, despite the belief that there will be a recession in some of the advanced economies, despite banking problems in the United States, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund is quite stable and is currently a little over US $5.4 billion. The supplementary appropriation of $3,852,000,000 is required to cover liabilities on hand and meet expenditure as follows:

- For the Office of the President—I will just summarize, Mr. President—$10.8 billion;
- For the Auditor General, $1.5 billion;
- For the Parliament, $14.6 billion;
- Service Commissions, $3.6 billion;
- Statutory Authorities, Service Commissions, $444,000;
- Office of the Prime Minister, $125 million;
- Tobago House of Assembly, $100 million;
- Ministry of Finance, $313 million.

And I want to make it clear that that supplementation to the Ministry of Finance is not money for the Ministry of Finance. That is to supplement the Infrastructure
Development Fund, and the Infrastructure Development Fund is the way that the Government finances state enterprises. When the Infrastructure Development Fund was set up years ago—15 or so years ago, or more—it was set up in a way that it is to be used to finance a development programme being implemented by the various statutory authorities and state enterprises.

And just to give a little breakdown of the $313 million that will be going to the Infrastructure Development Fund: the Ministry of Education will be getting $105 million for construction of early childhood centres, primary schools, secondary schools, and also refurbishment, extensions and so on. The Ministry of Health will be getting $78 million for amounts owed to contractors for construction work in various hospitals and for the new admin building for the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Trade and Industry will be getting $98 million to deal with some costs incurred on the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate. The Ministry of Sport and Community Development will be getting $103 million for refurbishment works at the Hasely Crawford Stadium, now ongoing, in preparation for the Commonwealth Youth Games later this year; upgrade of the Dwight Yorke Stadium and so on; redevelopment of Skinner Park, and also for the construction of community centres. The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts will get $16.5 million for payments due to UDeCOTT for the construction of the Desperadoes Pan Theatre and the Ariapita Avenue Enhancement Project.

So I just wanted to make that crystal clear that this is not money for the benefit of the Ministry of Finance. The Ministry of Finance is simply a conduit by which money is deposited into the Infrastructure Development Fund and then transferred to various Ministries for our development programme—the country’s development programme.
Finance Bill, 2023
Hon. C. Imbert (cont’d)

- Pension and Gratuities, $1.6 million;
- Ministry of National Security, $128 million;
- Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, $280 million;
- Ministry of Education; $69 million;
- Ministry of Health, $692 million;
- Ministry of Public Utilities, $508 million;
- Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, $600 million;
- Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, $160 million;
- Ministry of Works and Transport

You would have heard the Minister talk about the purpose of some of these funds just now—$300 million;

- Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, $40 million;
- Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, $100 million;

And that is for repairs to existing vehicles, replacement of existing vehicles and purchase of new vehicles by the police.

- Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, $49 million;
- Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, $348 million;

And that money is to supplement expenditure on existing social grants, Senior Citizens’ Pension, public assistance, et cetera. And:

- The Ministry of Sport and Community Development will get $2 million.

But as I indicated earlier, the Ministry of Finance is also getting a substantial sum of $100 million to send to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development for its development programme.

The various supplementations are in different amounts, but I will just
highlight some of them. Senators have received all of the information. I looked at the Senate document before I approved it to go here and I was quite satisfied there was sufficient information there. So I have already spoken the Ministry of Finance. As I said, those funds are not for us. That is for onward transfer to other Ministries for our 2023 development programme.

The Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs is going to receive, once this Bill is approved by this honourable Senate, $280 million, comprising $266 million under Recurrent Expenditure and $13 million under Development Programme, and the purpose of this $280 million is all spelt out. It includes dealing with vacant positions; paying arrears to T&TEC, TSTT; paying for Internet services; paying for rental accommodation; and also to hire persons on a short-term basis and so on; and also to settle outstanding fees to local and foreign attorneys.

With respect again to the Attorney General’s Office, I want to highlight that supplementary funding in the sum $14.2 million is being given to that Ministry for the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority to meet the cost of filling positions of public defenders, among other things. For persons unable to afford their own legal representation, the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority is getting $14 million from this supplementation. We are also providing an additional $1.5 million for the Police Complaints Authority. The Property Business Registration System, we are providing $8 million for that, to complete the business registration system. And various other items of expenditure, it is in the detail sent to Senators.

With respect to the Ministry of Health, $692 million, of which $497 million is for Recurrent Expenditure, part of the funding is to make a payment for the new administration building. You can see it around the savannah. Almost complete. And then there is outstanding payments due to UDeCOTT for building repairs at
the Couva hospital and $71 million is required to pay outstanding bills for global medical response, that is, the ambulance service. And then, in particular, we are providing funding to the regional health authorities who spend a lot of money, Mr. President, I must say. The expenditure on health by this Government is substantial, billions, over $5 billion. So we are providing $321 million to deal with outstanding payments due—for trade parables at the four regional health authorities: $54 million for persons who have supplied goods and services to the North West RHA; $25 million for persons, similarly, who have supplied goods and services to the Eastern RHA.

$162 million for the North Central Regional Health Authority where the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex Hospital is located and I think, if my memory serves me right, the Couva hospital is also within the North Central Regional Health Authority and $79 million for the South West Regional Health Authority.

10.45 a.m.

Under the Development Programme, we are giving the Ministry of Health $195 million to deal with a number of different items, again, payments to suppliers and so on, execution of a number of projects, and also to bring to account an advanced payment provided by the World Bank in a World Bank loan.

The Ministry of Public Utilities is getting $508 million to facilitate Personnel Expenditure related with WASA: $79 million for salaries, $41 million for wages, $6 million for overtime for daily paid, $15 million for overtime for monthly paid, NIS payments and so on and $328 million contract employment. In fact, there are many contract workers at WASA. I do hope that at some point in time, we would be able to reduce the annual transfers to the Water and Sewerage Authority. It is in the region of $2 billion and we are also saddled with a huge bill from Desalcott every year which does not pay for itself.
With respect to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, additional funds of $600 million are being provided to continue the payment of the subsidy due to the National Petroleum Marketing Company and the Unipet. And I can advise hon. Senators that last year we paid over 1.5 billion in fuel subsidy, in other words, $500 million more than we budgeted for. And this year, we also expect to pay around $1.5 billion because we put a billion into the original appropriation and now we have to supplement it with another $600 million and that is for—in part for payment of arrears from previous years and this has nothing to do with the Petroleum Fund which is in addition to. So that the total subsidy is actually that $1.5 billion which is the direct subsidy by the Government, plus hundreds of millions of dollars which come out of the Petroleum Fund which is a fund created for oil companies to part of their income to subsidize fuel. So if one looks at it in context, the fuel subsidy payments for last year, close to $2 billion and this year, quite similar.

With respect to the Ministry of Works and Transport, we are supplementing that Ministry—and I want to emphasize that this year for the fuel subsidy we are paying arrears for last year. Supplementary funds in the sum of $300 million for Ministry of Works and Transport, and this would be to deal with the filling of vacancies and, as the Minister mentioned, the sum of $167 million is required to meet the cost of projects related to drainage, bridge repair, slope stabilisation, road rehabilitation and so on and all of this is separate and apart from other funding that has been provided to the Ministry of Works and Transport. We are also providing almost $20 million towards the deficit on the operation of the coastal steamers, the sea bridge and in fact, the last time I checked the cost of the travel to Tobago on the sea bridge is close to $400 per person and the actual fee is far less than that.

With respect to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, we
are providing additional funding of $314 million for senior citizens’ grant, $14 million additional for social assistance and $18 million additional for disability grants and we are one of the few countries in the world, and I want to emphasize that, that provides senior citizens with unfunded pension where senior citizens do not have to make direct contributions.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: There are very few countries in the world that do this, Trinidad and Tobago stands out in that way. Our contribution for disability grants is also one of the highest in the world per capita. The other supplementations are much less than the $200 million and the $600 million so on and everything is there.

Before I go into some other matters, Mr. President, I would like to simply look at another large one, $125 million for the Office of the Prime Minister, and this is to deal with the costs of Commission of Enquiry and also the 60th anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, also for the recently concluded regional symposium on crime and in particular. And, this is based on a meeting that I held with the Minister responsible for the Children’s Authority, the hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy, and staff of the Children’s Authority. We agreed, the Ministry of Finance agreed after listening to them that we would come to Parliament in the mid-year and give them an additional $62 million and when you look at what is already appropriated for the Children’s Authority, it is in range of $90 million. So the total appropriation for the Children’s Authority in 2023 will be in the range of $150 million and when I look at what was provided previously under another administration, it was one-third of that.

We are also providing some money for various aspects of that Ministry, Office of the Prime Minister to pay arrears. We are providing $100 million to the House of Assembly to deal with the cost of ongoing works caused by bad weather.
in 2022, mainly in eastern—north eastern Tobago and also for major road works being executed by the Assembly in Tobago, a total of $100 million.

National Security is going to be given $128 million and when one looked through what this is for, in addition to dealing with arrears to various public utilities, there is funding for the acquisition of firefighting equipment, medical supplies, safety helmets and so on for the Fire Service. There is also money provided for the purchase of parts and the servicing of emergency fire tenders and so on and $7 million for prisoner transportation.

We know as the public health restrictions are being relaxed and court is opening up—in fact, I have discovered that the new accommodation for the High Court in terms of civil matter at the Waterfront is now meeting in open court, something that had not been done before. Prior to that, there were online virtual court hearings and so on but it is now taking place in open court. That is the civil side of High Court proceedings and one expects that the criminal side, where required, will also take place in open court, person to person. So that $7 million is needed to meet the cost of prisoner transportation and $76 million is being provided for the SSA to facilitate the upgrade of security software and for installation training and operation of a dedicated data connectivity solution for the CCTV network in the country.

The Ministry of Education is getting $69 million and in this $69 million, this is for a number of routine items: payments of gratuities, payments for personal allowances and tuition fees for scholars, national scholars and so on.

The Ministry of Rural Development is getting $160 million and I must say the total appropriation for the Ministry of Rural Development, not only in the original 2023 budget but with this appropriation, it is now far more than it was in previous years and under previous administrations.
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: And in particular, I want to highlight that money is being given to the Port of Spain City Corporation to deal with the recent wage increase of 4 per cent and the back pay that flows from that. But the allocation are distributed among the various corporations and the explanations are there. And I have some additional explanations which I can give during my wrap up.

For the police, we are giving $100 million for vehicles, $72 million for the upkeep and maintenance and for the purchase of replacement vehicles and new vehicles and a further $27 million for fleet expansion under the Development Programme.

With respect to the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, there were a number of issues at our various Missions around the world in particular because of winter storms and other problems, refurbishment work was urgently required at a number of our Missions and this is to replenish funds that had already been expended and so on.

With respect to the variation, this is required because of the realignment of portfolios with the transfer of responsibility to the Ministry of Works and Transport for the Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company.

Now, hon. Senators will remember that the 2023 budget originally projected an overall fiscal deficit of $1.5 billion or just about 0.8 per cent of GDP. Overall surplus was projected for the period October 1st to March 31st but we actually achieved a surplus of $766 million compared to our projected outcome for the first six months of the year. However, there was also decreased expenditure for one reason or another of approximately $500 million. So that the outcome for the first six months is more or less what we expected it to be when you balance those two things.
Because of the decrease in commodity prices, I mean we can all go on the Internet, I can do that right now, and I can tell you that the price of Brent today is $75 and the Henry Hub is $2.44. Because of that, we have experienced a reduced revenue collection, particularly from royalties which is based on volume and price. So we have lower revenue collection as compared to our estimated revenue collection for the six months of the year of about a billion dollars, 1,074,000,000, is what it comes out at. It could have been much worse.

And the reason why it is not that bad even though the price of oil is now averaging in the ’70s, ’90s, is because—and I need to reemphasize this. It is because of agreements reached between the Government and the major oil and gas companies, gas producers in particular, with respect to how Trinidad and Tobago gets its revenue from natural gas and it is a fallacy for people to believe that we get our revenue based on the Henry Hub price, the American price of natural gas. That is simply not correct. Because of a series of visits travelled around the world by the hon. Prime Minister in particular going to the energy capitals of Houston—

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:**—Amsterdam, London to meet with Shell, to meet with BP and so on together with the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the substantive Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, we have been able now to achieve revenue based on three natural gas benchmarks. In the past, before we came into office, the revenue was based on the Henry Hub primarily, I can now report which I have already reported but it bears repeating, that we have an arrangement where revenue from natural gas is based two ways: from LNG and also from the domestic petrochemical sector.

**11:00 am**

And it is based on three benchmarks, the Henry Hub benchmark, a European
benchmark called MBP and a far East benchmark called JKM, which is Japan Korea. And in October of 2022, believe it or not, the netback price for gas, because the gas price that I quote in the budget, is a netback price after you take account of transportation of natural gas, sometimes regasification as well. The netback price for LNG in the month of October ’22 was a staggering $17.45 as opposed to the budget netback price of $6.

In November 2022—and that is just because we were very fortunate in that month—in November 2022, the netback price for LNG was $7, similar in December, $7; January of ’23, $6.29; February of ’23, $5.07; March, $4.15, and the average for the first six months of the fiscal, for the netback price from LNG was $8.83. The domestic petrochemical price for October ’22, $7.19; November ’22, $6.71; December ’22, $6.60; January, $6.10; February, $5.23, and March, $4.15, for an average for the first six months of US$6 per MMBtu. The monthly country weighted average netback price, taking into account LNG and petrochemicals, was $6.98 for the first six months of the year.

So even though there has been a softening of oil prices, because of the formula negotiated by the hon. Prime Minister, and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, we are still receiving significant revenue from the natural gas sector. As I said, I want to repeat, Members should not be looking at only the Henry Hub prices, it is very misleading. We have also received significant revenue from areas not anticipated. We got lower than expected revenue from royalties as I indicated. We have lower than expected revenue from value added tax, and that needs to be explained.

The value added tax revenue figure is a net figure, so the more refunds we pay, the less VAT is recorded as being collected. So if we collected 10 billion gross VAT, we pay out 8 billion in refunds, the net figure would only be two. So
unless you understand what is going on, again you could be misled. We have higher than expected profits on taxes on incomes and profits from other companies, $1.6 billion more than expected, as a result of higher than anticipated petrochemical crisis in the first quarter of the year.

So that, when you balance everything out, the shortfall in royalties, the increase in taxes on incomes and profits, the decrease in value added tax because of accelerated refunds, we have a revenue decrease of approximately $1 billion for the first six months of the year. I also want to repeat, because these things need to be repeated, that the Government has agreed, the cabinet has agreed, to issue VAT bonds in the amount of $3 billion.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** And these VAT bonds are priced at an interest rate of 3.15 per cent with a three-year tenure. And even though the debt management unit of the Ministry of Finance advised me, they had consulted with the commercial banks to make sure that this was an appropriate rate, I called them myself. Based on my own feedback, and the feedback from the Debt Management Unit, I am satisfied as occurred with the previous set of VAT bonds, that these bonds can be immediately cashed in by anybody who wants to, at a rate of 100 cents on the dollar, at par.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Those who want to keep them will get a return that exceeds anything they would get on a deposit account in the commercial banks. And that is for refunds in excess of $250 million, those persons who are owed money of $250,000, more than $250,000, as a VAT refund, they are eligible for the bonds, and anything below that will be paid in cash and we have already started to pay that. We are going to clear off all the refunds of below $250,000—

**Hon. Senators:** [Desk thumping]
Hon. C. Imbert:—this month and next month in cash. And applications for these VAT bonds are available online. I am also happy to announce that based on matters that arose during a careful examination of the public procurement Act, I have some information to advise Hon. Senators that in the public procurement Act which is now fully proclaimed, section 29(1)(d) of that Act states as follows:

“29. (1) A procuring entity shall ensure that suppliers and contractors—
(d) have fulfilled their obligations to pay all required taxes and contributions in Trinidad and Tobago;”

Now, this was discretionary before. It was followed mainly, most entities, state enterprises, et cetera, would require persons to provide a tax clearance certificate, but sometimes there was some discretion applied. There is no longer any discretion. So any supplier or contractor who wants to provide goods and services to Trinidad, to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, or a state enterprise, or a statutory authority, public bodies, needs to take note of this fact. They need to take note of this:

“29. (1) A procuring entity shall ensure that suppliers and contractors—
(d) have fulfilled their obligations to pay all required taxes and contributions in Trinidad and Tobago;”

Having proclaimed the Act, and being aware of that, the Cabinet decided that to allow businesses, especially small businesses, who are always having trouble with their accounts and so on, a further extension of the tax amnesty, I signed the orders this morning, and the tax amnesty is now extended to the 30th of June but the particular purpose—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]
Hon. C. Imbert:—particular purpose is for persons who will be supplying goods and services to the Government or public bodies to make sure that their taxes are paid, and they are up to date in terms of payment of their taxes, or they have made—the law allows that—suitable arrangements to clear off any outstanding taxes that they owe. I also observe that the Central Bank has published the annual economic survey for 2022, I noticed a newspaper article that referred to that this morning, and just to give you some highlights from what the Central Bank has said. And the Central Bank is an independent body—so independent that they did it in yellow—so when one looks at the Central Bank report for 2022, that if I go to the executive summary, the Central Bank has made the following statement:

“The Trinidad and Tobago economy was on a recovery path over the course of 2022, following two years of economic contraction. Official data from the Central Statistical Office (CSO) indicate”—

And this is online, I have checked it myself, not Central Bank online, CSO online—

“…indicate that Gross Domestic Product…(real GDP) grew by 3.0 per cent during the first three quarters of 2022…”

And that is calendar 2022, by the way—

“…compared to the…previous year.”

And we expect when the fourth quarter 2022 data is in, our estimate of economic growth, real growth for 2022 of two per cent will be met or exceeded and the IMF has also—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert:—projected that. And the Central Bank has highlighted which is also obvious if you go and look at the statistics, the data provided by the CSO, on the CSO website they give you production figures for every sector of the economy,
whether it is construction, manufacturing, oil and gas, it is all there, everything is there, food and beverages, and so on.

And what we found in Trinidad and Tobago, in 2022, was that there was a significant increase in output from the non-energy sector of 4.7 per cent. And in the five minutes or so left for me—Mr. President, how much do I have?

11.10 a.m.

Mr. President: Seven minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Seven, okay. I just wanted to go into some of the data that is available on the CSO’s website. The manufacturing industry, in 2022, expanded by 16.5 per cent. Let me repeat that. This is real GDP, eh. This is not nominal. Expanded by 16.5 per cent. The driver of this outturn was the food and beverages subindustry, which surged by 27.6 per cent during the first nine months of 2022.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: The textile sector also expanded.

Also contributing to this very positive performance of the non-energy sector, in the first nine months of ’22, as measured by the Central Statistical Office, was professional and technical services, which grew by 61 per cent; transport and storage grew by 27 per cent; accommodation and food services grew by 20 per cent; and trade and repairs also grew.

So, based on the data, what we are seeing is that our economy has fully recovered from COVID-19.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: And in fact, our GDP today, nominal GDP, is higher than it was in 2015.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: Our GDP today, and if I convert it to US dollars, is US $28
billion, as compared to less than $26 billion in 2015. And, you know, when people try to throw cold water on things, they are very selective. You know we have commentators in Trinidad and Tobago. Firstly, when they see something good they cannot believe it, so that they pretend it does not exist. You have commentators like that. A particular commentator said, on reading the IMF report which came out in May, that he saw in the IMF report, a decline of 4 per cent in the economy in 2023. But if you go into the IMF report and you look at the data tables, you actually see an estimated growth of 3 per cent in 2023. But he saw a decline of 4 per cent. We have people like that.

Then you have people who just want to be negative. So if our nominal GDP is growing by leaps and bounds, and our nominal GDP has in fact increased by 25 per cent since 2020, Mr. President; 25 per cent increase in our nominal GDP. They say, “Oh, that is irrelevant. We should be looking at real GDP,” forgetting completely that your debt-to-GDP ratio is measured by nominal GDP. So as our nominal GDP goes up, our debt-to-GDP ratio goes down. And our debt to GDP ratio is a measure of our capacity to repay debt and to incur new debt; a very, very important indicator.

In addition, our nominal GDP is the indicator used to measure per capita income. It is also the indicator used to measure money supply. Because the nominal GDP of US $28 billion, or close to TT $200 billion, in 2023, as I speak, is a measure of the amount of money circulating in our economy, which is far more than it used to be. So that when commentators see these things, some of them, it upsets them. Too bad for them. Because we on this side have been very forthright.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** When we get a bad report, we publish it. When we get a good report, we publish it.
So, Mr. President, one of the other issues with these debates in the Parliament is that some of the observers do not understand that I only have 45 minutes. Somehow it is believed that these mid-year review debates are similar to a budget, where the Minister of Finance has unlimited time and can talk for four hours, if he pleases, and touch every topic under the sun. But in 45 minutes it is my duty, firstly, to go through the supplementation of appropriation that we are asking hon. Senators to approve, to explain the various supplementations in the various Heads of Expenditure, and to do justice to the Bill before the House.

And having been done that, and I must do that, it is my duty, there is only a few minutes left to talk about other matters and therefore, I have to be very selective in the few minutes that remain for me to speak about other matters.

But I want to give hon. Senators assurance, as usual, my staff is taking notes, will send me summaries of the combinations of every Senator, and I will do my best to respond to any queries raised and points raised by hon. Senators in this debate. I beg to move.

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

**Question proposed.**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, this is the eighth consecutive mid-year review debate presented by the hon. Minister of Finance in the form of an Act titled the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2023) for this mid-term review.

Mr. President, when this Act is approved, the Government would have spent close to 400 and maybe 15, but to be a little more approximate, over $400 billion in the last eight years. Mr. President, by next year, we would be rushing towards close to half a trillion dollars that this Government has spent in its ninth year when that document is presented. And what do we have to count? What do we have to
show for close to half a trillion dollars if we go into next year’s budget, or over 400 billion, if we take fiscal 2023?

Are the people happy? The people are living in mortal fear in this country.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: So the question, Mr. President, is that spending and spending and spending, without realizing positive outcomes and results, for the people who matter, the ordinary working class man and woman, that is the issue. Who benefits? This Bill is about paying bills and arrears. A little amount is going towards development, just about $300 million. And there is where you are going to get development. There is where you are going to get growth. There is where you are going to get, Mr. President, employment creation and generation in our nation.

But, Mr. President, the Minister has come here for an additional $3.952 billion, round it off to $4 billion, under 22 Heads of Expenditure, to deal with what? Arrears to suppliers and contractors, to pay outstanding gratuity and pensions, to pay and to organize salaries that they ought to have budgeted for, for WASA workers. So it is almost 98 per cent recurrent expenditure because the Minister deliberately understated, underbudgeted the 2023 fiscal package.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: So, Mr. President, the Minister sometimes speaks from both sides of his mouth. Mr. President, we are talking about $4 billion, which will take total expenditure for 2023 to approximately $61.5 billion. Mr. President, how will this increase in expenditure affect the fundamental issues confronting Trinidad and Tobago? How will it address unemployment and underemployment, Mr. President?

Mr. President, the reality is that close to 70,000 jobs have been lost under
this regime over the last seven and a half years. If we take NIB contributions and the fall-off of contributors, it is over 113,000 workers who have stopped contributing to the NIB. That is what we are dealing with. But the Minister comes here and says what? The Central Bank has produced a report telling us today, we are on the road to recovery. The train has been wrecked. The economy has crashed, and the people, Mr. President, are crying blood in Trinidad and Tobago. Only a few are benefiting.

Mr. President, when we look at what is presented here under the various Heads of Expenditure, the question has to be asked: Will the $128 million allocated to national security and the $100 million allocated to the police service, how will this sum, Mr. President, help to reduce the murder level in our country?

11.25 a.m.

The Minister has not told us that. How will it reduce home invasions? The Minister has not shared with us how this $4 billion will address these matters. Mr. President, as we speak if you do a linear extrapolation given where we are today with crime in Trinidad and Tobago, at the end of December 31, 2023, we will have over 630—

Sen. Mitchell: 46(1) on a point of order. This is not a crime debate.

Sen. W. Mark: —deaths, murders, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Members, Members. Sen. Mark, continue.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President, I am dealing with the allocation to the Ministry of National Security that deals with law and order. I am dealing with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service with $100 million allocated, and I am asking, Mr. President, through you to the Minister, who is the Acting Prime Minister, how will this sum of money allocated to these agencies help to reduce the number of
murders in Trinidad and Tobago?

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** That is what I am asking. How will it stop, Mr. President? As I said, home invasions, where mothers are being raped, children are being murdered, and not a word from the Minister on this matter. As if they are living in coo-coo land. They are living in a fantasy island. They are disconnected from reality, Mr. President. These are the real issues and how will this $4 billion from the “Lord of the Treasury” help Trinidad and Tobago and the people of this country, Mr. President?

Mr. President, people are living in fear. What about the people’s safety? It is as if the Government does not care. They do not care, Mr. President, and people are dying every second of the day. And Mr. President, we have to deal with these things before us. My heart goes out the parents Andy and Alana—Neil and Alana Knights, whose young daughter Shantel Knights left home April of this year, never returned. Her hand, a part of her body was discovered recently in Tunapuna, 25 years of age. That is where our country has reached. She lived in Chaguanas, went to Curepe and she disappeared. What are we doing, Mr. President?

But instead, the Minister comes here and gives the impression everything is hunky-dory, everything is okay, because he is okay, because his billionaire friends are okay, but the people are not okay.

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

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Point of order.

**Sen. W. Mark:** The people are not okay, Mr. President.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark, there is a point of order.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Point of order 46(1), whilst I acknowledge that there is a line Item for particular matters which deal with crime I think that the hon. Senator is
going beyond. This is not a crime debate.

**Mr. President:** So Sen. Mark, the point of order as it relates to relevance has been raised. As much as it is relevant because there is the Ministry of National Security receiving funds in this Bill, what I would rule upon is tedious repetition, in that you have been on that crime topic now for a few minutes into your contribution, so I would ask you to move on to another point if you do have it?

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President, thank you.

**Mr. President:** But the Standing Order on relevance does not hold.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Yes, I thank you very much.

**Mr. President:** Continue.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President, the question is, the Government has to pay attention to a very important matter that is impacting on output in our economy. And what is that matter? It is the decline, the decline, Mr. President, in the labour force participation rate. The labour force participation rate is standing according to my figures, at just under 55 per cent. We are the second worst in Caricom when it comes to labour force participation rate. That is essential for output, that is essential for employment. The higher the rate of labour force participation, is the higher “yuh” have employment, and the greater the output of production in our nation. How will this additional $4 billion improve the labour force participation rate, Mr. President? That is the issue that we are dealing with. Mr. President, these are the real challenges that we have to confront.

Of course, Mr. President, I want to remind you that the Parliament approved a fiscal package where the revenue that was forecasted was some $56.2 billion. Mr. President, we are now in a situation where the Minister informed us that he
collected for the first six months some $27.4 billion in revenues.

Now we have to pay attention to a matter I brought to this House on the 28th of February, when I raised the matter of falling gas and oil prices, and my matter was dismissed by the Minister. Shortly thereafter, I recall, it was on March 11th the Minister confessed at a meeting at the Hyatt that things were not rosy. He admitted, Mr. President, and I quote:

“Commodity prices have gone down.

It is not as rosy as 2022…”

So Mr. President, we need the Minister to tell this Senate what is the estimated final revenue figure that he anticipates for 2023? He needs to tell us because the fiscal gap seems to be expanding given the low revenue levels that we have, and we may end up with a fiscal deficit of between $8 to $14 billion. The Minister must come and tell this Parliament what is the projected estimated revenues for the end of fiscal 2023, and then level with this Parliament and the people as to how much the fiscal deficit would be for 2023. We need to get information on that.

The Minister, of course, over-budgeted in terms of his assumption. He overestimated the price of a barrel of oil at US $92.50 per barrel and $6 per MMBtu. Today, he is crying because those figures have not been realized. But you know, Mr. President, who is hurting most? The people because the rainy day fund called the HSF will not be provided with any injection of the revenues, because the Government went so high and the price has come down that there is a gap. So where are we going to put money into the HSF?

And the Minister must come clean on the HSF because Credit Suisse has collapsed and we want to know if the HSF, our moneys was dancing up in Credit Suisse. We need to know, tell us. Tell us what the reality is. That is a matter that the Government needs to clear the air on. And Mr. President, all this talk about
Japanese, East Asia, European, BNP, American, Henry Hub, all of that with the average basket for gas prices made no fundamental difference. The reality is that there are lower oil prices and there are lower gas prices, and the revenues are down, and the expenditure is up. “We gone” from $57 billion to $61.5 billion, Mr. President. That is where we are today. And thanks to Vladimir Putin that we were able to get higher prices for oil and gas and petrochemicals. Without him invading Ukraine, I “doh” know where this country’s economy would have been.

So let us be serious, Mr. President, when we are talking about the real issues affecting the country. Inflation, at the end of December, close to 9 per cent. Economic Survey Report is now saying inflation is close to 6 per cent. Purchasing power of the ordinary man declining. Fixed and lower income people, pensioners, “dey bawling” because they are on fixed income, fixed pensions.

And Mr. President, as you know, when you come from the lower and fixed income categories in our country and classes, your first call on your salary or your wage, or your fixed income is food, food. And food inflation is close to 20 per cent in Trinidad and Tobago. That is where we are today. The people’s quality of life and standard of living have collapsed under this Government.

Mr. President, would you believe that the reckless and irresponsible borrowings of this Government has led to debt interest charges at the end of fiscal 2023 of close to TT$10 billion? Would you believe that? Just in interest charges on loans that we have borrowed, we have to put aside $10 billion just to service interest. And it is projected that at the end of 2024 we will be paying some $15 billion in interest charges. You know what impact that is having on our health care system, on our education system, on generated employment opportunities for our people, because of the reckless and irresponsible borrowings of this Government, Mr. President?
11.40 a.m.

Our external debt is over US$5 billion, the highest it has ever been, and Mr. President, whilst we are at that, our foreign exchange reserve, is what? Down to 6.5, 6.7, the equivalent of seven to eight months coverage. When the UNC and Kamla Persad-Bissessar were in office, we had the foreign exchange reserve standing, Mr. President, at close to $12 billion.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: We had a coverage of close to 12 months import cover. Today, we are down to about 7.5 months. That is where we are today because of this Government. And Mr. President, may I remind you, this Minister of Finance, who is not here, the acting Prime Minister, he tends to play footsie with serious matters, you know. So, he is here talking about nominal GDP to mamaguy you and me. So, he is saying $200 billion is nominal GDP.

Mr. President, “leh we deal with reality nah, man”. Reality tells us that Trinidad and Tobago deals with real GDP and the real GDP of our country is not $200 billion. At the end of 2023, it is projected to be US$158 billion. You know, when we left office in 2015, you know what GDP was at? US$189 billion.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: US$189 billion—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: [Inaudible]—loud.

Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President—yes, “ah want you to hear, dais why ah loud”. Mr. President, let me tell this Government that engages in innuendos and half truths, about our reality in T&T. When the UNC was in office in 2011, our GDP, real GDP was $166 billion; in 2012, it went to $174 billion; in 2013, it went $181 billion; in 2014, 187 and at the end of 2015, Mr. President, I said $189? It is $185/$186 billion. The PNM and their misguided policies and regime came on the
compound—you know what happened in 2016? We collapsed from 185 to $173 billion; in 2017, to US$164 billion; 2018, 163; 2019, 163; 2020, $151 billion; 2021, Mr. President, 149; 2022, $153 billion. It is projected 158 at the end of 2023.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** So when you are talking about UNC-led PP, and this Government called PNM, they will have to—we will have to wait until 2034 to reach where we left this country at the end of 2015.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** It will take the PNM another 20 years—

**Sen. Lyder:** [Inaudible]

**Sen. W. Mark:**—to reach where we were. So, Mr. President, when they are talking about performance and they are talking about our performance, the data is telling you that when you talk about performance, performance beats old talk anytime.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** It beats old talk anytime, because the data is telling you that the UNC produced the highest real GDP in Trinidad and Tobago for the last—from 2010 to 2023. The last 13 years.

**Sen. Lyder:** [Inaudible]

**Sen. W. Mark:** So let us be serious man, “doh come here and mamaguy people”. Mr. President, I want to tell you that when we are speaking about real development in our country, let us focus on real data. Let us focus on real GDP, “doh” come and tell us about nominal GDP. That is to mamaguy the population.

So, Mr. President, let us look at where the Government has taken Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. President, do you know that since we left office the average daily
production of natural gas was just under 4.1 billion cubic feet? You know what it is today? Struggling at 2.8/2.7 billion cubic feet of natural gas. Plants are closing down, plants are operating at 60 per cent capacity, 70 per cent capacity at Point Lisas. The country is losing vital foreign exchange because of a shortfall in gas supply in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Sen. Lyder:** Let these figures come out.

**Sen. W. Mark:** So let us be serious. The energy chamber is quiet. When we were there they were loud. So, Mr. President, not only is natural gas production under 2.7 or 2.8 billion cubic feet a day, crude oil production has collapsed. The lowest it has been for 50 years. You know much crude oil we are producing, Mr. President? 56,000 barrels. In 1978, we were producing close to 300,000 barrels of crude oil a day. Close to it, I think it was about 278 to 280. Look where we have reached. Mr. President, after eight years of mismanagement, after eight years of incompetence, after eight years of corruption, here is where we have reached. Look at where we have reached. And then the Government says, what? The country’s economy is growing and we are better off—who is it growing for? It is growing for their billion-dollar legal club.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Your legal club that you refuse to incorporate into the procurement law. They got $1.2 billion dollars, so the economy “wuking” for them, it is working for them, not for the people. The procurement law that you refuse to proclaim, Mr. President, for almost eight years. Mr. President, you know how much money we lost every year through “tiefing”, or stealing, or fraud, or corruption under your Government, the PNM?

**Hon. Senators:** [Desk thumping]
Sen. W. Mark: We lost over $40 billion, we lost $40 billion because of the Government’s failure to implement and operationalize the procurement law. Financiers we are able to get away scot-free.

Hon. Senator: What?

Sen. W. Mark: You know why? There was no proper tendering and when they believe that they are in a good place, they say, “you know wha happenin, we will proclaim”.

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

Sen. W. Mark: So they now proclaim the law—

Mr. President: Sen. Mark, there is a point of order.

Sen. W. Mark:—when the law itself is toothless.

Mr. President: There is a point of order, Sen. Mark.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: 46(1), there is no—I do not know what he is talking about now, but not related to the supplementation—

Hon. Senators: [Crosstalk]

Mr. President: Okay, Senators, point of order has been raised and the point of order is on relevance. So, Sen. Mark as much as you are responding to the mover of the Motion, again, you are just reminded to keep it as tight as possible.

Sen. W. Mark: So Mr. President, we are very convinced that this Government is working for the big man. This Government is working for the minority, this Government is working for the few, this Government is interested in the rich and the powerful, not the ordinary man—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark:—not the working man, not the working woman. They are not concerned about them.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]
Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President, it will take a UNC Government—

Hon. Senators: [Continuous desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark:—to bring sunshine—to bring sunshine back into the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The UNC Government did it once. Mr. President, may I remind you, when we were there for five years, we created 56,000 jobs, they—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: We have lost 67,000 jobs under the PNM. That is what we have done. When we were in Government we attracted close to 50 billion in foreign direct investment—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: You know what happened? We have a minus figure of 10 billion—people are leaving here—

Sen. Lyder: Minus.

Sen. W. Mark:—minus 10 per cent. So, this Government is really like, you know, it is like—you have something around your neck called the PNM and it is weighing down the country like George Floyd, “we cah breathe”—

Sen. Lyder: “We cah breathe.”

Sen. W. Mark: “We cah breathe under PNM, we cah breathe.”

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President, I want to tell you something, if what the PNM is saying that the economy is good, and things are going nice, why not pay the public unions, whether it is PSA, the fire, the prisons, whether is NUGFW, why “yuh doh” pay them 12 per cent? Why “yuh” giving them 4 per cent? The economy is good? Everything nice? Everything nice?

Hon. Senators: [Crosstalk]
Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President.

Mr. President: Okay, Senators, again, for the third time there is a point of order being raised and the precedence is that when that is being done, it will be done in silence so it can be heard and then ruled upon. Acting Leader of Government Business.

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

Mr. President: Okay, so Sen. Mark, continue.

Hon. Senators: Yeah! [Desk thumping]

Sen. W. Mark: What the Government does not want to admit is that they have presided over almost nine consecutive years of what is called negative economic growth. And they are now seeing something like a little light, Mr. President, at the end of the tunnel. We welcome economic growth. Mr. President, when we have economic growth, as the economists tell us, it is like a rising tide. When the tide rises, if you do not have leaks in your boat like the PNM, it will all float. So, we welcome economic growth but the sputtering kinda economic growth of 2 and 1 and 3 per cent—what we are talking about if you want real growth, you have to talk about 5 and 7 per cent to make sense.

11.55 a.m.

Mr. President, do you know that we have close to 6,900 university graduates who are unemployed under PNM? You know many of them are leaving our country to go to other foreign lands to work and those who remain here, they are underemployed. They are selling gas at the pump. That is what a university graduate with an engineering degree and a management degree is doing under this criminal Government. This Government has created and promoted inequalities in our country. The rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer under them. And, Mr. President, I want to tell you that under this regime, our economy
between 2015 and 2021 declined by over 19.5 per cent—19.5 per cent, and that is why some professor in some other universe says to the world that under the Prime Minister of this country, this economy has grown. Where is this professor living? Is he on Mars? Where is he? He is not real.

Let us look at the real story. The economy has contracted. Mr. Professor, wherever you are, let me repeat, the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, under the “fella” who you gave the Doctor of Letters to, contracted by 20 per cent.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** So how you could come and say that this man is the best thing after sliced bread?

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President, let us be serious, man, who is misleading who? Who is misleading who? I think this Howard is a coward. So, Mr. President, we would like our economy to grow but it cannot grow. For this economy to grow—for this economy to grow, the PNM has to go.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Let me repeat, for this economy to grow, the PNM must go.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** That is what this thing is about.

Mr. President, we need to focus on our young people and, Mr. President, when you look at the unemployment statistics, when you look at unemployment, the average—the youth unemployment is above the national average. We are told by the Central Bank that the unemployment rate is about 4.5 per cent. You know how much youth unemployment is right now? Over 17 per cent, or near 17 per cent. Young people, between 15 and 24, “dey cyah find wuk. “Dey cyah” find meaningful, productive employment. They are being recruited by gangs because of who?
Mr. President: Senator, you have five more minutes.

Sen. W. Mark: A failed government, Mr. President. This Government has failed the people. They have given to the few in our country, lamb, jam, wine, honey, whilst the majority of people are eating salt in this land, Mr. President.

So we ask the question, this $4billion that the Minister has come here for approval, Mr. President, who will that create—I would have liked the Minister, Mr. President, to tell us, how many jobs will be generated as a result of this money? Mr. President, do you know that in 2015, we had an—the unemployment—the amount of jobs generated by the manufacturing sector was close to 50,000 to 52,000? You know what it is now? Just under 39,000.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Where is your source of that?

Sen. W. Mark: I will give you just now.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Give it to me.

Sen. W. Mark: Yeah. You—Mr. President, let me talk to you. I am putting it to this House that when—the manufacturing sector, under the People’s Partnership in 2015, they generated close to 50,000 jobs. Under the PNM, it is under 39,500 jobs at this time; just under 40,000. So this expansion that we are talking about, which we welcome, how is it manifested or translated into jobs for our young people? How, Mr. President?

So we are concerned, Mr. President, and we are saying to this Government, help the small and medium-sized businessman. And this trick that the Minister is on to extend the tax amnesty for the fourth time in less than a few months and using the pretext of encouraging small businesses to pay, the Minister does not have money, Mr. President. The Minister and the Government are suffering from a crisis of cash, so they need the money like Max Senhouse. So they have extended the amnesty for yet another time to get money. That is what it is about. “Doh come
and mamagu we” about you are helping small and medium-sized business people. Mr. President, we believe that the Government can do more if it is so inclined. But you know what is the issue, Mr. President? Their priorities are not in keeping with people-focused development. It is not being kept in line with the needs of the people. If it was being kept in line with the needs of the people, Mr. President, we would have had a better country. We would have had more employment for our young people. The prices of goods and services would have been lowered, agriculture would have expanded.

Mr. President, the PNM has turned Trinidad and Tobago into a virtual hell house. As the Prime Minister used to tell us, that is the current Prime Minister, Trinidad and Tobago under the PNM is fast going to hell in a handbasket. That is what the Prime Minister told us, the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. So, Mr. President, the repo rate is good, it remains as it is, although all interest rates in America—the interest rate, rather, the federal interest rate has increased for the tenth consecutive month in the United States, or period. That is having, obviously, an impact to some extent on capital flight.

So, Mr. President, we want to say to Trinidad and Tobago, as I seek to bring my contribution to a close, I want to indicate, Mr. President, the Government in 2022, according to the Auditor General’s report, borrowed $7.3 billion. Mr. President, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this matter.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Seepersad.

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

**Sen. Cherrise Seepersad:** Mr. President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Bill, the Finance (Supplementary and Appropriation
(Financial Year 2023) Bill, 2023, and other related matters. We are debating the Bill which seeks to authorize the Government to access $3.852 billion from the Consolidated Fund to fund urgent and critical recurrent and capital expenditure to September 30, 2023. The targeted areas are those where insufficient funds or no allocation of funds were provided in the budget 2022/2023. Accruals are in fact debt incurred in the past to many suppliers of goods and services to public organizations, like the withholding of VAT refunds with the debilitating effect on those suppliers to conduct business, a going concern. As I approach this debate, I must mention the exorbitant murder rate, frightening home invasions, increasing prices generally, and declining living standards. Our citizens on the ground are experiencing many hardships, notwithstanding the optimism expressed in the recovery and growth of the economy.

The supplemental appropriation of $3.852 billion comprises of loan payments, 97.63 million or 2.53 per cent; PSIP expenditure, $355 million, 9.22 per cent; and other recurrent expenditure, $3.399 billion or 88.25 per cent. These funds are required for expenditure in 22 areas. From a historic perspective, the supplementation Bills were: 2019, $1.839 billion for expenditure in 18 areas; 2020, $2.686 billion for expenditure in 15 areas; 2021, $2.928 billion for expenditure in 14 areas; and in 2022, $3.082 billion for expenditure in 28 areas. Comparatively, most projects in 2023 are saddled with similar cost overruns and accruals for unplanned and unforeseen expenditure as in the previous years.

An analysis of the details revealed that major cost items are payments for salaries; wages; cost of living; travel allowances and gratuities; contract employment payments; maintenance; insurance and rental cost for buildings, vehicles and equipment; janitorial and security services; loan payments; office supplies; subsidy payments for fuel, LPG, housing grants, water, electricity, et
cetera; payments to construction project contractors; and payments for services from utility companies.

Trinidad and Tobago’s economic performance improved because of windfall gains in 2021 and 2022 from increased energy prices which resulted in higher tax receipts. It is uncertain whether any policy changes or economic initiatives impacted this performance. Oil and gas prices are currently declining. The Minister of Finance confirmed that the average wellhead price for natural gas declined by 64.51 per cent from US $11.61 per MMBtu in October 2022, to US $4.12 per MMBtu at the end of March 2023. These average wellhead prices are based on the weighted average natural gas prices of the following indices: Henry Hub, NBP and JKM. The average realized oil price declined by 21.35 per cent from US $93.26 per barrel in October 2022, to US $73.375 at the end of March 2023.

12.10 p.m.

Further, the trend continues to be negative, as prices have steadily declined in April and May 2023. The world price of ammonia, which is Trinidad and Tobago’s largest petrochemical export, declined from US $1,100 per metric tonne in 2022 to between US $335 and $345 per metric tonne on the spot and contract market, according to S&P Global Commodity Insights, May 4, 2023. This is approximately 70 per cent decline.

The estimated 2022/2023 revenue is projected to be $1 billion less than originally budgeted. The revised budgeted revenue is $55.176 billion. The revised budgeted expenditure is $61.37 billion, and the revised deficit is $6.362 billion.

The additional $3.852 billion is only about 7 per cent of the overall budget presented for this fiscal year, and in the overall scheme of things it is really not exorbitant. However, it will increase the overall deficit accordingly. Mr.
President, this means that the deficit must be funded by additional borrowing from the Central Bank overdraft and/or commercial banks. Applicable interest costs will be incurred, and in addition to an increasing debt obligation, must be repaid from the shrinking public purse.

At the same time, revenues from various sources are not increasing proportionately, hence the need for supplemental appropriation. At some point, sooner rather than later, expenditure must be managed with a view to reducing the overall imbalance and not passing the spectre of a growing financial burden to future generations.

Natural gas petrochemicals and oil contribute 80 per cent of Trinidad and Tobago’s foreign exchange holdings. While the domestic manufacturing sector is showing growth, it is insufficient to fill the foreign exchange void created by the shortfall from the energy sector. Declining prices mean foreign exchange declines, which affect all sectors of the economy.

Natural gas production is declining as there have been no new gas finds, and the level of exploration has been reduced by the major energy companies. BP’s infill drilling programme continues to fail, therefore there is no additional gas production to be exported to compensate for declining prices. Lower energy prices, coupled with declining production, means that plant closures are real possibilities as happened in 2018 to 2022.

Trinidad and Tobago is struggling to maintain economic stability in a volatile and uncertain global environment of unstable oil and gas prices, widespread disruption in the global supply chain, higher inflation, instability in the financial markets, unprecedented world conflict and tension and shocks yet to be seen. The country is also contending with many systemic issues, including foreign exchange shortages, food security, spiralling crime, which threatens economic and
social stability, the rate of recovery, and the standard of living enjoyed by citizens. Even First World countries with fiscal resources and strong currencies must be sensible, as the United Kingdom has come to realize. What differentiates countries is how they adapt and respond to internal and external shocks, and most importantly, chart a realistic course forward. One example is Norway, where petroleum and gas account for 20 per cent of the economy.

Mr. President, it is evident that many, if not all, of our services require repair or reengineering. For instance utilities, including water and sewerage, electricity, telecommunications, the transport network and health, to name a few. Social support systems and services also require rethinking and rebuilding. Education is another example.

Mr. President, while the present must be taken care of, and diversification and development for the future is on the lips of everyone, the voice of urgency must be in structural reforms to diversify the economy, continue reducing the public debt, increase competitiveness, attract investment, institute measures to make Trinidad and Tobago resilient to regional and global shocks, promote the ease of doing business.

Mr. President, the Government currently owes businesses $7.8 billion in VAT refunds. The Minister of Finance announced that the Government would issue cash refunds between May and June 2023 to businesses that are owed $250,000 and less—the projected total refunds are between $1 billion and $2 billion—between June and August 2023, issue $3 billion, tradable and transferable VAT bonds with a coupon rate of 3.15 per cent, to repay VAT arrears on businesses who are owed $250,000 or more. These bonds are redeemable at 100 per cent of face value.

Under the law if the Government does not pay the VAT refund due within
six months, interest is accrued at 1 per cent per month. Based on the projected refunds, there will still be a hard call between 2.8 and $3.8 billion still owed to businesses, together with the accrual of refunds that will continue to be submitted. While the initiative to deal with VAT refunds is always welcomed by the debtor, the fact is a substantial amount is still owed and must be made good at an accelerated pace, so that a real difference in business activity, including investment and growth, can be realized. The small and medium-sized businesses will be most affected, since larger businesses can withstand a longer waiting period. These businesses which are compliant entities, which are compliant entities, are being penalized.

Mr. President, in fact, in addition to the sums they are owed, businesses must also pay income tax of 30 per cent on profits, and are therefore funding a significant portion of Government expenditure. I recommend that companies be allowed to net-off VAT refunds against VAT payments due, instead of the present system of accruals.

Mr. President, the Supplemental Appropriation Bill, 2023, include payments of subsidies. Fiscal subsidies include the GATE programme, which has now been restructured—while it is now being restructured, previously saving for tertiary education was unnecessary for parents, and left graduates with little or no student debt. Parents are now required to fund their children’s tertiary education through savings and/or debt.

Health care—the shortage of medicine highlights the subsidized health care system, even if the subsidized service is less than desirable—public housing, water, electricity.

Central Bank policies have facilitated low interest rates in Trinidad and Tobago. This enabled the population to access cheaper and more credit facilities.

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Consumption, for example, of motor vehicle loans have resulted in an increase in motor vehicle sales.

World food shortages are projected because of war, famine and pestilence. The heatwave in India and other parts of the world present growing climatic challenges and hardships for citizens.

The allocation for draining and desilting works, from $143.96 million to $211.43 million, an increase of $67.47 million is essential, especially with the rainy season on our doorsteps. One must only remember the flooding that took place last year and a few weeks ago, when we had a heavy rainfall for a few days. Data from the CSO shows that headline inflation decreased from 8.7 per cent in December 2022 to 8.3 per cent in January 2023. Food inflation remained unchanged at 17.3 per cent, largely because of shipping costs and global supply chain disruptions.

Predicated on the rising Cost of Living Index, families will continue to be hard-pressed to afford basic living necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, education, medical expenses, and savings for retirement and so on. The burning issue of an aging population, and the associated vulnerabilities of the country’s social security systems, are ever present.

Undoubtedly, the influx of a migrant population will have a lasting effect on our social fabric, and must form part of the policy decisions of the country. To address this issue in part, the Bill allocates an increase of $315 million for senior citizens grants from $4.118 billion, to $4.433 billion, an increase of $14.21 million for social assistance payments, from $340 million to $354.21 million.

Subsidies, in general, transfer wealth to the wealthy and seldom adequately alleviate the long-term needs of those who it was intended to assist. In rationalizing subsidies, the impact on the broader society will be disproportionate.
The fuel subsidy, as the Minister mentioned, is approximately $2 billion. I believe now is as good a time as any to liberalize the Trinidad and Tobago fuel market, subject to, one, the Government should maintain some level of subsidies on diesel prices to limit the impact of a further increase in the cost of transportation, goods and services. Two, the fuel grant given to those already receiving Government assistance should be maintained. Therefore, the monies saved from subsidizing fuel prices at lower than market prices can be channelled to areas of greater need. Mr. President, we need long-term inclusive and adaptive planning for real growth.

Crime continues to threaten social and economic development and impacts all citizens. We are in the middle of a murder spiral projected to be 4,000 murders in eight years, and the country with the sixth highest murder rate in the world. Gangs are targeting businesses, homeowners and individuals. The demand for gun licences signals the public’s feeling of impotence against criminals, and belief that the time has come for them to take matters into their own hands. There is an urgent need for crime to be addressed from both social and economic fronts. Economic stability demands that this issue be aggressively and comprehensively tackled. How effective will the Ministry of National Security’s budget allocation of $3.325 billion, and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service allocation of $2.559 billion be in stemming the crime surge in Trinidad and Tobago?

The country does not need any more rhetoric. We require action, not plans on paper, of the Government within its constitutional powers. Crime fighting in the modern age requires sophisticated approaches and the intelligent score of personnel to anticipate and prevent the occurrence, rather than the reactionary approaches that continue. The objective is a moving target, and therefore many and varied prongs of attack must be deployed.
Mr. President, while it is not prudent to release security measures publicly, citizens have a right to protection and require some measure of assurance, and visible evidence that the protective services are winning the battle. Ironically, the evidence available in the public domain flies in the face of that reality.

Health services support programme—Increase in the budget allocation from $20.109 million to $60.35 million, an increased budget of $40.242 million.

Trinidad and Tobago is one of the countries in the region with the highest cases of hypertension. About 25.8 per cent of people in Trinidad and Tobago suffer from hypertension, and most do not know that they are suffering from this disease. This is 2.5 per cent higher than the Caribbean average.

Of the people who know, 60 per cent receive treatment, and only 30 per cent of them are controlled. This is because of the unhealthy lifestyles, physical inactivity, consumption of processed foods, including too much salt, high alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking and obesity. Diabetes is another non-communicable disease, which affects about 14.5 per cent of the population, with 88 to 90 per cent of patients having type 2 diabetes. Diabetics are about 30 per cent of all hospital cases.

This programme is aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles to reduce non-communicable diseases. The Ministry of Health should be partnering with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to expand the supply of locally grown, nutritious foods that constitute a healthy diet, and a shift in consumption towards them. We need to invest in agriculture.

Food systems transformation should be aimed at reducing the cost of nutritious foods and increasing the availability and affordability of healthy diets, with sustainability and leaving no one behind.

Thank you, Mr. President.
12.25 p.m.

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Mr. President. And, Mr. President, before I go into my contribution, based on the allocations to The Ministry of Works and Transport, in the supplementation of variation of appropriation for fiscal year, 2022/2023, I would just like to remind Sen. Mark, without having to delay the House on his statements, because I do not think there is much to respond to. Just to remind Sen. Mark, when he spoke about this Government and procurement and corruption and things like that, where he was heading, I want to remind Sen. Mark that the UNC lost the 2015 election, based on corruption.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: In 2020, the population told them never again, UNC. And I want to remind Sen. Mark that in the two incarnations of UNC in government, this Government was able to collect on two occasions, in excess of $1 billion from procurement under that regime. The UNC has no authority to talk about procurement or corruption.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: This population said enough of the UNC, you have mastered the art of corruption.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. President, thank you opportunity to present on the supplementation of variation of appropriation for fiscal year 2023. Mr. President, perhaps 30 years ago, we had the choice of viewing climate change as a slow moving catastrophe, but not today. In this age of record breaking storms,
intense hurricanes and excessive flooding that have devastated communities, it is plain to say that this global crisis is at our doorsteps and Trinidad and Tobago is no exception. The impact of change in weather patterns has contributed to excessive flooding, major landslips and collapse of roadways which require the Ministry to respond at short notice, resulting in unforeseen expenditure. In this context and emanating from the recent rainfall events of November 2022, the Ministry was required to undertake critical and emergency work which translated into the utilization of funds previously allocated to other areas. To achieve our deliverables, a supplementation of $300 million was identified for the Ministry under the recurrent estimates of expenditure. Additionally, with the recent reassignment of the Secondary Roads Rehabilitation and Improvement Company Limited, the allocation of $100 million which was originally placed under the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, was placed under the Ministry of Works and Transport via a variation.

While the portfolio of the Ministry is diverse, these moneys allocated by the midterm review would be primarily invested into improving our existing road infrastructure and drainage system across the country. Of the $300 million, 34 per cent has been identified for utilization by the Highways Division and 25 per cent for the Drainage Division.

Mr. President, 2023 has been a year of much activity as the Ministry has accelerated its road rehabilitation programme. Today, it is my intention to assure the nation that the Ministry of Works and Transport remains committed to bridging the current infrastructure gap. Through our planned programme of works we are strategically addressing infrastructure issues that have traditionally curtailed connectivity and advancement for many communities across the country. It is no secret that our roads are in need of urgent attention. While I have listened to the
concerns and the many criticisms of the public, the fact remains that the process of rehabilitating and rebuilding our roads is an expensive undertaking that cannot be completed overnight.

In fiscal 2023, the Ministry has identified an ambitious programme of implementation with approximately 100 projects completed, 81 ongoing, 29 in the procurement phase and 54 being developed. The allocation of the additional $100 million will be geared towards driving and implementation of the Ministry’s programme. As a Government committed to meeting the needs of the population, we focus on getting the job done and utilizing our limited resources in a fashion which maximizes the ability of funding while ensuring value for money.

This Government chooses to maintain its focus on investment in the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Such an investment translates into the improved standard of living and quality of life for all our citizens. As an example of this, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight the completion of Phase 1 of the Valencia to Toco highway which stands to directly impact thousands of residents along the north-eastern quadrant. This landmark project will yield numerous benefits for surrounding communities such as Matura, Salybia, Rampanalgas, Cumana, Sans Souci, Grande Riviere, Paria and Matelot, through improved accessibility. The highway also forms part of the Government’s vision to stimulate new industrial, residential and commercial development along the entire eastern region of Trinidad.

Additionally, with plans for the construction of a new fast ferry port in Toco, the Valencia to Toco highway will also support our vision for creating a new gateway to Tobago.

Mr. President, let me now turn my attention to the Cumuto to Sangre Grande highway which our political opponents have finally conceded is not a highway to
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont’d)

nowhere.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** It took some time for them to understand project planning and seeing the bigger picture, but recent statements led me to believe that they are moving away from what I could only summarize as a narrow view of development and embracing the need to plan for the future and not only the here and now. This highway entails the construction of approximately 34 kilometres of roadway, connecting the communities of Wallerfield, Cumuto and Sangre Grande. Permit me to highlight, that Package 1A and 1B of Phase 1 are approximately 90 per cent completed. The second phase of this project will include the construction of a connector road which will create a link from Cumuto Road to the Eastern Main Road in Guaico. The aim of this highway is to connect the Churchill Roosevelt Highway and the Cumuto Road intersection to the Eastern Main Road, Sangre Grande. The intention is to fulfil the mandate of directly linking major towns and travel time to under 30 minutes.

While I have discussed two major road infrastructure projects, it is expected that with the reassignment of the Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company and the expanded work programme of the entity under the Ministry, we will be able to have a greater reach and impact in rural and small communities. In this context, the Ministry in conjunction with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government is currently formulating a programme of work for implementation. As the Ministry continues to rehabilitate our roadways, considerable emphasis is also being placed on creating safer roads that are fully aligned to international standards. Through the traffic management branch, the Ministry will continue its road safety improvement initiatives in the areas of Port of Spain, Arima, San Fernando, Chaguanas and Point Fortin.

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Mr. President, the Ministry has three avenues for road restoration: one, rehabilitating the existing roadways; two, traffic alleviation, creating new bypass roads and widening existing roads; creating additional lanes and the building out of the new highway network.

12.35 p.m.

Mr. President, as I switch my focus to the Drainage Division of the Ministry, the Ministry has embarked on a major desilting and watercourse programme with over 500 projects being projected in this fiscal year. Under our pumps and gates inventory programme, we have completed four pump sites, four are ongoing, and four are in the process of preparing tender documents.

Under the construction and reinforcement of the concrete inverts, we have 31 watercourses being worked on. And under the rehabilitation along river courses, we have two major projects ongoing, including the Caroni River and the South Oropouche River. These projects and programmes are earmarked for implementation at various locations throughout Trinidad. In tandem with the aforementioned, the Ministry has identified approximately 80 projects to be undertaken with the identification supplementation funding, with 18 completed, 13 ongoing, 14 in the procurement phase, and 35 being developed for preparation to invite tenders.

Mr. President, I want to express my appreciation to the Ministry of Finance for supplementing the areas where these transfers were made to ensure that the Ministry, and by extension the State, will be able to continue to function and make necessary payments.

Mr. President, as I conclude my contribution, it is my hope that I have made clear the plans and activities carded for the utilization of the additional funding. The Ministry will continue to maintain its mandate to deliver quality infrastructure
projects all for the benefit of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you.

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

**VISITORS**

**Cowen Hamilton Secondary School**

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, before I call on the next Senator, permit me to welcome to the sitting today the Cowen Hamilton Secondary School, Form 3, from Moruga. Welcome to the Senate—[Inaudible]

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

**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTATION AND VARIATION OF APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2023) BILL, 2023**

**Mr. President:** Sen. John.

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

**Sen. Jearlean John:** Mr. President, thank you so much for the opportunity and again, welcome to the students of Cowen Hamilton Secondary School.

Thank you for allowing me to join this debate on the matter of the provision of the supplementary funds in sum of $3.8 billion to fund urgent and critical recurrent and capital expenditure to September 30, 2023. And the Minister took his time to spell out the areas that these funds are to be applied. Mr. President, the Minister of Finance presented the mid-year review as further—good news. He was very optimistic with regard to Trinidad and Tobago’s economy. But notwithstanding his optimism, and I suppose the Minister has to do what he has to do, according to the head of the IMF, 2023—he said, 2023 will be a tough year for many countries as the countries driving the world economic growth—the US, Europe, China—will all experience weakening economic activity.

Mr. President, just as my colleague, Sen. Mark, before, the Minister missed an opportunity with respect to applying this money, this funding, when it is

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Finance Bill, 2023

Sen. John (cont’d)

approved, which will regard to the real world issues facing the country. It is well and good for us to be talking about the real GDP and nominal GDP. And those of us who are minded will understand some of the concepts, but out there the folks, I think the money, this money, is being ascribed to or we are debating this money will go to, they really want to know what is in it for me and whether, if after eight years and just about $420 billion, whether they are better off.

Mr. President, you get the sense that all the Government is doing really is ensuring that they tick a box, and they are just engaging in arithmetic. For them, it is just arithmetic. How do I—well, not even balance the books, but how do I move money from here to there. Because by and large, when you look at the measures and you look at the line Items, these are not items that would have arrived just within the time we would have debated the last budget to this mid-year review. These obviously would have been outstanding bills on the books and maybe the Minister just chose to ignore them. So really it is arithmetic.

Mr. President, Republic Bank, in their review of the budget 2022 /’23, stated that the:

“…fiscal package”—well—“is based”—and this, I think, has been said before—“on the oil price of US $92.50 per barrel and a gas price of US $6 per million British thermal units…”

While this price outlook is in line with forecasts”—this is Republic Bank—“of globally respected agencies such as the U.S. Energy Information Administration, there was room”—Republic Bank said—“for a bit more conservatism, particularly considering the uncertainty pervading the global economy. In any case, the government will have the opportunity to make any necessary adjustments in the Mid-year Review.”

But I do not think we have seen that. We have not seen any conservatism. We
have not seen any—the Government really looking at our budget and our situation in line with what is happening internationally. There is, again, this vaulted optimism. And I am not saying we should be sad. But certainly we have to base our budget on the reality because Trinidad and Tobago is a price-taker. We are a very small economy.

So, Mr. President, we are at that mid-year review, which the Republic Bank referred to, and we are none the wiser as to the Government’s plans, their vision, their strategy, outcome, the successes, the pathways, because despite the $418 billion in expenditure, the economy remains substantially smaller. So the Minister is using some kind of—I think he made the point that the economy has expanded but he has not said how. But what the—lately has been having a spat with the people who like to refer to themselves as “third-party validators” and they have said—what has been said by economists, folks associated with the University of the West Indies, is that basically we have returned—the economy has returned to the size of 2015. So what the Government can take credit for is taking us back to the future, quite frankly.

What is being said, Mr. President, is that—what is being publically articulated by these opposing views is that—what is being portrayed by the Minister, the economists are telling us, the various economists are telling us, that from 2016 to 2023, the economy has shrunk by 20 per cent. And further, it will take 10 years to return to the 2015 levels of growth. And notwithstanding the boasts today that the economy is larger today, I do not know larger than what because basically it is just narrative without any sound numbers to back it up.

So if I could quote one of those persons seeking to put an opposing view in the public domain, Prof. Roger Hosein of the University of the West Indies: “He said it would take over a decade…”
And:

“‘The world economy on a whole is going through something of a decline in overall performance and overall growth,’ he said. ‘This is the environment that we all will have to subsist in the medium term. It is not going to be as buoyant as it was in years gone by and we have to make as much as we can of the new economic environment internationally…””

And, of course, he then repeated that:

“‘It will take us…’—up to—‘2034 to get back to 2015 level of economic activity.’”

And I think there is where we should have—that is the baseline and there is where maybe the review should have taken place, in terms of what we are going to do to get us out of this hole and not any false sense—any narrative that gives us this false sense of security. Because whether they argue about this IMF Article IV report, I say that the IMF puts you where they want. They do not live here. And after visiting, they return to a place where the private sector truly drives innovation, acts as a check and balance on any runaway government, where supply and demand really sets the equilibrium price. And it is not really who could get the forex based on favouritism, and those who have to fight up on the black market at a higher price which will in fact impact the cost that they will offer the goods for sale.

So, Mr. President, in scrutinizing the numbers, the supplemental of $3.9billion is primarily to clear arrears accrued by state enterprises and other arms of government. The Government intends to increase payments of VAT refunds to clear off long outstanding debts to business people, and to clear off long outstanding debts to contractors. So there are really no new opportunities—at least the Minister had not pointed that out, but he has an opportunity during the wind up
to point out where these new opportunities are going come from. Because really and truly, one of the critical or the most urgent issues facing us is really crime. We are overrun by crime. And if it is we are not seeking to urgently create opportunities for those who are so inclined, we are going to continue to be overrun, to be invaded, you know. And basically, as much as we could stand our ground, if we do not fix that problem at the core, at the root, nothing will come of all of these measures.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. John: So, Mr. President, in the breakdown provided, $2.1 billion is allocated to Current Transfers and Subsidies. So that means, that is money—that is meaning salaries and wages. So that is gone. That will not be put into the productive process to do anything to help us; $28 million—$28.4 million is to meet Personnel Expenditure. Good and Services are next, $661 million. And then you have some kind of Minor Equipment Purchases.

So, Mr. President, we are already in May. With the end of the financial year looming in its performance, where are the new jobs and opportunities coming from? The Minister has indicated that the payment of VAT refunds will be disbursed in the ceiling amount of $250,000—well, to what I hope will be to the small, medium, micro enterprises. The question is: How long have they been waiting for this money?

Mr. President, the BIR’s website states, where any amount that a person is required to pay to the board is not paid by the due date, it attracts a penalty of 8 per cent. And, of course, any amount outstanding, an interest rate of 2 per cent per month, or part thereof, from the due date to the date of payment. So it means, if you do not pay the Government, if you do not pay the BIR, you are going to pay an interest. This VAT refund will be sent you, will be given to you, whenever it is,
just, I suppose, with no interest. This is money that the Government would have been using and you would not—the businesses would not have had access to. Yet they will gain nothing from that money. So, Mr. President, businesses are paying a penalty of 8 per cent for outstanding amounts due to the Inland Revenue but the Government pays nothing, zero, for withholding this VAT for sometimes well over eight years.

Mr. President, there are people who have been using their credit cards and overdraft facilities just to hold on. We know the rate of interest on these credit cards and overdrafts that they attract. It is not easy. Because banks in Trinidad and Tobago, under this dispensation, exist to declare supernormal profits, not to ensure that anybody survive, they do not care, it is really about just their own reporting of bigger and bigger profits. So we do not know who has gone out of business whilst waiting, and I think that will be helpful, it means that we know where we have to start. Where is ground zero? How many citizens have given up and migrated? How many have lost everything because of a Government whose policies are anti-business and anti-people, a Government who pretends to be blissfully unaware and are indifferent to people’s plight? Because what we are debating here is not only about what goes from Ministry to the other, it is how it impacts people’s life.

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

**Sen. J. John:** How it betters their life. How it enables people to move out of poverty and depression and despair that they are in. And, I mean, I will like to get some of what they are drinking or eating. And before they talk about drinking, I am a teetotaller by the way, eh. So, I am simply saying that they are living, floating somewhere out there and pretending as if they do not know the depression that is—that has enveloped and engulfed the people of this country.

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So by way, Mr. President, the Minister of the VAT repayment. You would believe that this is some gift, some manna from heaven, but it is money which, by law, businesses would have paid and which, by law, they are supposed to be returned to them in good time.

As the former TTMA President, Tricia Coosal, and recently the new President would have said, quite in May 24, 2022—if I may quote the Guardian. Ms. Coosal said:

“‘I can say without reservation that it is becoming critical for the SMEs to receive their VAT payments…”’

And one of our Independent Senators also spoke about that, the urgency, the fierce urgency of now with respect to businesses, the small, micro enterprises. As was said before, maybe the big ones, they have a relationship with the bank. But a lot of these businesses are struggling. The bank “doh” not want to see them. They do not belong to the right social club. They are not in the right social circle, because that is what happens in this country.

12.50 p.m.

This is a serious country where it is who you know really and truly. So Ms. Coosal said:

“…up to December…”—of I supposed that was last year—“…$29.1 million was received in VAT refunds with…”—a—“…$140 million still outstanding…”

So the Government really paid only about 20 per cent, and you have another $140 million outstanding. What that means is that is working capital for small business. And, Mr. President, the small and micro enterprises they are the workhorses of any country, because they will hire the people that many large businesses will not hire. They would hire the young lady who at 24 have four and five children; they will
hire young boy who dropped out of school; they will hire the person to work in the scrap iron yard; they will hire the person who just maybe would have paid their debt to society and just come out of jail and nobody else will hire them. Those people in the small and micro enterprises they hire two and three people, you know some unskilled, and they really break the back of the unemployment. So they really, for those who are in the formal sector and have decided to run businesses that comply with the law, I cannot see how, with a straight face and a clear conscience, punish these people

So, Mr. President, it is fundamentally important for the outstanding VAT refunds owed to the manufacturing sector to be prioritized as their cash flow is significantly affected, and in order for the continued growth of the non-energy sector “having cash to facilitate transaction is imperative”. And that is, again, and I continue to quote Ms. Coosal. Now, she made another statement that is very important:

“‘Signalling a need for a reliable system of payments for VAT refunds’, Coosal added, ‘the payment of refunds is not being kept current.’”

So that is the next thing. So even if they are paid or they are brought up-to-date, what happens?—because, you know, it is not being kept current.

“‘In fact, when the backlog of payments begin to be disbursed new payments quickly start piling back given the inefficiencies that exist within the system.’”

So you know we are seeking to—we are saying we are starting some new system of payment, but really it is just to, well as far as I am concerned—to get at the person who is drawing fish in Mayaro or in Charlotteville, to bring them into the system because this Government will tax the—well, I mean I was going to make a—well they will tax everything, Mr. President. That is how the Government
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Sen. John (cont’d)

...intends to raise income, not by any creativity, not by any diversification, not by looking at the new economy, not by looking at all of the opportunities in front of our faces.

Mr. President, SMEs, as I said, are the work horses of the business communities. They are the small groceries, the vegetable mart, the barbershops, the hair dresser, the floweriest, the scrap iron dealer. So they really depend on these VAT refunds. And as someone in the other place, a Member of the Opposition was the only person who would have come up with that, they talked about the concept of the multiplier effect, and that the $7.8 billion that is now outstanding, really if it goes through the economy it will have the effect of almost $24 billion within this economy. because what it means, when you pay, whether you pay a farmer, or you pay a contractor, or whomever, that money does not stay in their hand, that money goes to the bookstore, it goes to the market, it goes to the doubles vendor, the bake and shark man, it goes to Massy Stores, and that is really the circular flow of income, and that multiplier effect that drives it through and ensure that the wealth passes through many hands.

So, it is very, very important that this VAT payment, the pay-out is paid, because it keeps thin margin operators afloat, and the employees on the payroll. Many, many businesses, thousands would have closed, Mr. President. The Minister touched on the procurement legislation and bringing it, now that it has been fully proclaimed, et cetera. Now what I noticed is that CAL airlines they were advertising, they had an advertisement in the papers on Sunday. Maybe that is just when I noticed it. So that was Sunday the 14th. But they were saying—they are saying where Caribbean Airlines is informing

“…the general public that effective Wednesday 26th April, 2023, and in accordance with the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act

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(2015)…”—and they talked about the amended section—“that any and all parties, groups and/or individuals with Caribbean Airlines Limited via the provision of goods, works and services must be registered with the Procurement Depository on the website of the Office of the Procurement Regulator…of Trinidad and Tobago.”

Now, the Minister just spoke about a tax amnesty, but that is not in alignment with what is happening now with these state agencies. Well I suppose they have to comply with the law. But what happens to businesses that have not yet registered? Because all of this time the Government was supposed to have proclaimed this Act, and they kept going around the mulberry bush, and now they just proclaimed it without even any indication. So people are not quite ready. As I said I have noticed the ad that which is dated 14th May, or which was placed on the 14th of May, but it is talking that since the 26th of April they would have stopped doing business with whomever suppliers. So I want to know—well I supposed the Parliament, it would be interesting to know how many of these SMEs would have been affected? Not only from doing business with CAL, but with other state agencies, you know, the plug is just being pulled from them, or is this a way where the Government is trying to create oligarchs, because some of the large suppliers are ready, and basically they can get a kind of unfair advantage?

So I did go on the site yesterday to see what time this Office of the Procurement Regulation, how long does it take? But you have to sign up and all of that, and I really did not have the time. So, I think that is something we need to look at. How long will it take any form, for that matter? How long will it take them to from the beginning of the process to completion in terms of signing up with the procurement regulator? Because it means if this is affecting—I mean I do not know how many firms this is affecting, but I am sure it is many in terms of

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suppliers, it means there will be a bottleneck, you know.

[MR. VICE-PRESIDENT in the Chair]

Sen. J. John: We are going to suffer because of that. So basically this is something we have to approach with some common sense. Now that we have the legislation, and the Government is saying green light, we ready to go, maybe in the same way that the Minister has announced an amnesty with respect to the taxes, businesses paying of their taxes, maybe there can be an amnesty with respect to signing up with the procurement regulator, because we are going to suffer on both ends.

Mr. Vice-President, there is Head 13, Office of the Prime Minister, in that there is $9,000—I think maybe Sub-Head 02/001/65, Expenses of Cabinet Appointed Bodies, and there is $9 million appointed in supplementary funding required to meet expenditure incurred by the commission of the enquiry established to examine and enquire into the incidents which occurred on February on 25th, 2022 at facilities owned by the Paria Fuel Trading Company. Mr. Vice-President, it is noted that—well of course it is only with good pressure that the Government would have decided to have this enquiry. But, you know, $9 million is budgeted, and it will be interesting to know, or to note or to find out how much of this is really to just pay legal fees to ensure that direct people’s reputation dead or alive, when up to now this Government has not shown any empathy for the families who were affected by this tragedy. It is not a tragedy they had planned for.

And a lot of these four divers they appeared to have been sole bread winners, and families have been really terribly negatively affected by the shocking, horrendous manner in which this whole incident took place. And it really will be in bad faith if this money is going to ensure that the state is void of accountability,
and it is just to taint the memories of these men who would have paid the highest price with their lives. Could some of the $9 million that we set aside for suffering dependent survivors? Because, I mean, a budget must cannot only be dollars, you know, it has to make sense, and basically it is about the people and how it applies to people’s life. How it intercepts with people’s life.

Mr. Vice-President, at Sub-Head 04, under the same Office of the Prime Minister, 04/007/03, Children Authority. There are $62,500,000, and this sum is required to meet cost associated with revision of the organizational structure of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. This revision will result in increased personnel cost, accommodation requirements, procurement of additional goods and services and items of minor equipment as well as the creation of an internal security department to provide oversight and security at all the children residences.

Now, the Opposition cannot be opposed to money being allocated to the care of children who are in state care. This is an area of grave concern, and really the tardiness of the Government means there should be concern also. Because there should be a laser focus on these homes, how they are supervised, managed, and the outcomes. Now it is understandable that all of this money is set aside, part of it is for what personnel, because there are some organisational restructuring.

But, Mr. Vice-President, what is in the public domain is that of the 942 members of staff, that requirement at this time, there are only 200. So there is a shortfall of about, what, 200 per cent or just over 200 per cent. So, I cannot understand how these vulnerable children, many of whom have faced unspeakable trauma, some with very special needs, how they are being managed? So, again it is good that moneys have been set aside at this late stage to help alleviate the chronic staff shortage. But within that four months is it enough time, are they ready with
respect to get going when this money is approved that they can at least make good use of it to alleviate some of these issues that are facing the children?

Again I reiterate that the sum are for, well, what is stated, for the creation of an internal security department to provide oversight and security to all the children residences. But that sounds good on paper, Mr. Vice-President, because in some instances the chronic staff shortage—because it appears as if the Children Authority and agencies associated with it, they are not really—they do not attract, they are not the popular choice or the first choice of a lot of people who are applying their—they want to exchange their services for an income. And therefore this staff shortage is chronic, and you have instances where security guards are doubling up as care givers. And what has happened in the past and what it appears continued to happen to this day is that these children are interfered with. So notwithstanding the Sabga report, the Justice Jones report, and the attendant public outrage, these vulnerable children remain at the mercy of predators who are being paid state salaries. Maybe they are there and they are very—people do not even suspect that these people are actually predators.

Mr. Vice-President, young girls are still running away from state care, so again I am saying it is good to know some of this money is going to look after security. But what kind of security? Because young girls are still running away to this day and returning pregnant to these homes, and these are not things that are actually in the public domain, and efforts should be made. There should be no stone unturned to find out who are these people who are impregnating these girls who are underage. Right now in another home in deep south there is a 16-year-old girl—a 15-year-old girl who is pregnant and she never left the home. How could that happen? How did that happen? You know, are these issues reported to—and this is going on right now, you know. A member of a family called me and that is
how I know. This is not hearsay, sent pictures and what have you. So these things are wrong and need to be reported to the TTPS immediately, and I so advise.

So, Mr. Vice-President, another issue is that the way in which, again in looking at this sum, will some of it be used to prepare the young people for transitioning into normal life, because a lot of them do not have any extended family, nowhere to go and basically, but the law says at the age 18 they must leave state care. What happens then? And there is no provision. From different homes you will have different arrangements. People are doing this out of the goodness of their heart, but this is too serious. It cannot just be out of the goodness of your heart, because these young people are taken advantage of when they find themselves outside of the regimentation and regulation and oversight of state care. As a matter of fact there is a statistic that 50 per cent of these young females, particularly, are pregnant within two years of leaving state care.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I mean I looked at some of that in their strategic plan and basically they are very dismal, dismal statistics, because these people, these young people are vulnerable, and really we should do better. The data presented is not encouraging, so how we are going to move from children who are abused sexually, there is neglect, physical abuse, how will this money help? It will be very interesting, and really, something like that, the country is very interested. I do not think there is any citizen who is not concerned about the care of these children. We should have gotten a little more information, and whether how much, $6.2 million will fix?

So, Mr. Vice-President, what we do here is not just an eye and a knee to additional funding, it is the reflection of Government’s policy expressed in money. But knowing this Government, I do not know how far it will go, and maybe that money will just be returned to the corporation sole, to the Ministry of Finance.
1.05 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President, Head 18: Ministry of Finance, the Infrastructure Development Fund. There is an allocation of $313.7 million and the Minister was very clear that it was not for the Ministry of Finance but it is for various Ministries, more money owed to contractors, et cetera. So what that means, this money is basically already spent. This money will—I do not know how much it will do for us, maybe the contractors would have to pay their banks, the banks might be holding them to ransom around the scruff of their necks as it is now, because this Government just takes people’s services and do not pay on time without really thinking about the ramification and the negative impact on the various businesses.

However, as I said, the money is really to pay for work already done. It does not appear as if any new jobs will be created. And in this time of runaway crime, when what is part of the panacea, it is not more guns, it is not the good guy with a gun to go against the bad guy with the gun, it is really about you start at the basis for this crime, and it is the social programmes and it is jobs and opportunities. And this $313 million, when it is passed, it does not appear as if it is going to be of any use to anybody out there because it appeared to have been already spent.

Because, Mr. Vice-President, what is happening here is that it appears the construction sector— notwithstanding what the Minister of Works and Transport said, it appears as if the construction sector is dead and lying down peacefully in Lapeyrouse Cemetry. And really in the Newsday of March 19th, an article by Mr. Corey Connelly said:

“Tobago contractors…”

—and I know you are concerned about Tobago contractors, as I am—no, sorry, Mr. Vice-President, I am talking about—well, the President that is, would have been very concerned about the Tobago contractors. Because that is one thing,
Tobagonians are always united in concern for Tobago, that there is no divide there. So we will not be bothered that:

“Tobago contractors”—they—“are not bothered or perturbed about the impending increase in cement prices...”

Because that is one of the metrics you can look at: how the sale of cement—how much cement is going to—well, not going to Tobago. Right now I think TCL is trending in the wrong direction, quite frankly. They are not getting no sales because there is no construction. And Tobago contractors are saying they:

“...are not bothered or perturbed about the impending increase in cement prices – because they say construction on the island is dead.”

This is in an article.

And on Wednesday, which would have been last week, Trinidad Cement Limited, the country’s sole cement supplier—because that is the other thing, the Government made sure that there is no competition. So never mind, they are doing all kinds of “simi-dimi” to make sure there is no competition but now it has no—they are not buying any cement. Right? So they are there with all their cement because this Government has not stimulated the economy, and there is nothing like construction to stimulate an economy in the short and medium term and it creates good paying jobs. What it does, it helps the skilled and the unskilled to earn a good living. How many people you will give CEPEP and URP to? It just does not work. We need to get the construction sector going. Well, I am giving a plug for TCL, they need to sell cement, right? So just that tells you when Tobagonian said, it does not matter to them where the price of cement goes, the construction sector is dead.

So, Mr. Vice-President, the Government, it appears, you know—all of these lovely, what do you call it?—optimistic statements, it is really about the man on
the Movant bus, or the Marabella bus, or the Toco bus, and whether they feel that they are better off today. And I am telling you, for those of us who walk the streets, we know that that is a resounding no, that they are not better off at all because this Government has lost total control of the economy. Nobody believes we are better off at this time than from when the Government took office in 2015.

And all of this is kind of—we can see it reflecting poignantly in the viciousness of the crimes. Just recently, we had a 24-year-old—you just could call so many names and it is so sad that every day you just have a crime that is more vicious. Sen. Mark spoke about some young lady, they almost had put a puzzle—her arm was found, Mr. Vice-President, which brings me to Ministry of National Security, Head 20, Sub-Head 04/009/02: Strategic Services Agency. This young lady, Gabrielle Raphael, 24 years old, was left for four days because I do not think she was important enough for them to find—well, to identify her, because at 24 she had five children.

**Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing:** That is misleading.

**Sen. J. John:** Why do you all not like the truth? What is wrong with you all? That is the truth. This is not a Government who cares about anybody. She was there for four days, Mr. Vice-President. I walk around that savannah. I am from town, eh. I live in Port of Spain—I mean, I am from Charlotteville, but when I am not from Charlotteville, I live in St. Ann’s, so I know.

**Hon. Senators:** [Crosstalk]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senators on both sides kindly allow the Senator to continue with her contribution.

**Hon. Senators:** [Crosstalk]

**Sen. Nakhid:** [Inaudible]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator, Senators, please refrain from crosstalk. Sen. **UNREVISED**
Nakhid, I am asking you kindly, allow your colleague to continue her contribution.

Sen. J. John: Mr. Vice-President, when Andrea Bharath died, and there was a big outcry and people zeroed in on the cameras, where are the cameras?—maybe they would have given a fighting chance, or at least—she is dead. At least one could catch the killers, the murderers, you know, so she could rest in peace. Then we found out that of the 1,800 cameras, maybe 50 per cent were working, and it happened that the ones that would have been along the path that these murderers took her, they could not have—they were not working. You know, this Government that—now everybody is mumbling and grumbling. If they had any shame, any empathy—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. John:—every camera would have been working. So I do not want to hear any grumbling, you understand? Every camera in this country would have been working today. And maybe Gabrielle Raphael would have had a chance, because where she was killed or where the body was found, it is right where you have the White Hall. Because all the Prime Minister is studying is to fix up old buildings and talk about from Mason Hall to White Hall. Right?

This girl was found right there. So you see all kinds of tall poles but these cameras are not working on these poles, so you are just on your own. Maybe Gabrielle would have had a chance, because given where it was maybe somebody would have been monitoring it and seeing this girl being taken advantage of.

I mean, just last week I think they had some big coronation in England and before the—they have this facial recognition, so even if you have on a mask they know who you are. That is people who are concerned about people. This Government is concerned about nobody, about no one, and people are dying because this Government is not concerned about them.
Hon. Senators:  [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. John: Twenty-four years—

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

Sen. J. John: I thank you for the five minutes, Sir. Twenty-four years old, five children, she must have fallen through the cracks, right? Nobody cares about these things, you understand? I mean, you see, if there is a flood in “quito-quito”, Biden leaves Washington and he finds—that is the President of the United States, you know—350million people but he goes. Whether it is flood, it is fire, they shoot people, they shoot lil children, he goes. Nobody from this Government goes anywhere. And I say that an organization takes on the DNA of the leader, and their leader is heartless and cruel. And I am saying there is nobody on earth, if somebody dies, could stop me from going to see and going to help. And if the UNC was in government, I am telling you, every camera would have been working—every camera would have been working—

Hon. Senators:  [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. John: because we know the consequences of cameras not working. So I do not want to hear anybody who—[Inaudible]

Sen. Mitchell:  [Inaudible]

Sen. J. John:

“…lifeless body”—this thing means nothing to these people—“of an unidentified female of African descent…”—appeared to be—“approximately late teens/early twenties, dark brown in complexion, slim built…”

That is what she is reduced to. No cameras there are working. Four days later, they found out who she was. It meant, Mr. Vice-President she probably would have been—her first pregnancy would have been when she was 17.
Of the 1,796 cameras many—very visible, as I said, around that Queen’s Park Savannah—46 per cent are nonfunctional. And that was at that time, eh. I do not know what is happening now. As I said, there was an outpouring, furor, where Andrea Bharath, then 22 years old—22; Ashanti Riley, 18. In the papers they reported:

“…Ashanti Riley’s killers unsuccessfully tried to strangle her with a belt...”
You know what it is for somebody to take a lil child, 18 years old, and try to strangle her with a belt? And this Government still would not ensure that cameras are up, and they want to talk here today. “Doh talk, doh talk”.

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

**Sen. J. John:** The issue of nonfunctional cameras has been raised ad nauseam as an urgent matter to be addressed, because our young girls are being killed and their murderers are free to roam to kill again. Because not only that, they are not catching them, nothing, they are just out there roaming to kill again. You would have thought that a Government who took the mandate given by the people seriously—they bragged about they win in 2015 and they win 2020. That does not make any sense, any difference, because I am saying from 2015 to now, nobody feels they are better off. Because I mean, some of you all are floating up in the air somewhere out there, so you do not understand what is going on out in the real world, right? And you would have thought, as I said, that a Government who took the mandate given by the people seriously would have seen that as a priority but, no. If I am to quote former Senator and the imminent, a real Sir, Martin Daly SC, in the Sunday’s *Express* of yesterday, he said:

“…the test of legitimacy for prudent decision makers is captured in the question, how it go look? Nevertheless, as a friend observed to me, there is ‘anyhowness’ in abundance in much of what currently passes for
Sen. Amrita Deonarine: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this Act to supplement and vary the appropriation of the sum of $3.85 billion which was authorized in the budget via the Appropriation Act in 2022. Now, Mr. Vice-President, I too, like the Minister of Finance, Acting Prime Minister, in 40 minutes I could only do so much justice to this Bill and therefore, I too would be selective on the matters that I address. The perspective in which I have assessed this Bill is one in which where I assess the risks that I see and the consequences of these risks, which I would like to bring to light on this floor to give the Government some sort of insights into what we need to be looking at going forward from a fiscal perspective.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, this supplementation of $3.85 billion brings the total budgeted expenditure for fiscal 2023 to $61.5 billion. And even though the Minister of Finance did not state clearly—and I would ask him to verify this for me. He did not state the budget deficit, but with the $1 billion lost in revenue that he indicated, this shows that with this supplementation and the $1 billion lost in revenue we are looking at a $6.36 billion deficit in this fiscal year. Now—and that is, of course, taken into consideration, the $1 billion loss in revenue that the Minister of Finance alluded to during his pilot.

Mr. Vice-President, at $61.5 billion in revised budgetary expenditure, it takes us up to the second highest budgeted expenditure in a fiscal year ever recorded in this country since fiscal 2013/2014. And at that point in time, the
country recorded a budgetary expenditure of $62.8 billion. And as you heard, the Minister of Finance did indicate that this supplementation is to pay for expenses that we really cannot avoid. So immediately I will analyze this supplementation in budgetary expenditure from a sustainability perspective and I ask the question: Is the economy at a point where it can generate sufficient revenues to sustain this level of expenditure?

Based on my analysis, I do not think so, or I will be cautious to think so, and the rise in expenditure definitely shows that there is temptation to revert to a pattern of procyclical spending. And that is basically where we are have a tendency to increase expenditures when commodity prices have started to increase, and decrease them when commodity prices have declined.

1.20 p.m.

And this is exactly what the IMF in its Article IV Consultation Report alluded to. They stated very clearly that it is recommended that the Government continue to prudently manage the energy windfalls and avoid procyclical spending and focus on rebuilding fiscal buffers. Now, talking about the Article IV Report, in my humble opinion the report was neither positive nor negative. It was largely neutral.

Because we are here, Mr. Vice-President, with a supplementation of $3.5 billion in recurrent expenditure, which we cannot avoid, yet it brings total recurrent expenditure for this fiscal year to $55 billion. This is the highest allocation to recurrent expenditure in a fiscal year. So what I am saying is that this supplementation in this Bill, $3.49 billion of this supplementation goes to recurrent expenditure. When we add that to the original budgeted recurrent expenditure, we end up with a figure of $55 billion, and what I am saying, Mr. Vice-President, is that this is the highest level of recurrent expenditure we have ever recorded. My
question is, my concern rather is: Is this sustainable?

So, Mr. Vice-President, the increase in revenue from the energy windfalls in 2022 comes from a largely volatile global environment and it is difficult to assume that this increase in revenue will continue in the medium-term especially with energy production muted in oil and gas, and oil and gas prices forecasted to be 20 per cent lower—and 20 per cent oil prices, 20 per cent lower and 50 per cent less compared to 2022. Now, I know the Minister of Finance clearly indicated that the price at which we yield for oil and gas is a weighted average price of a basket of prices. I too calculated this weighted prices, and even those weighted prices are forecasted—are expected to declined by at least 20 per cent and 50 per cent respectively, both for oil and gas.

So, Mr. Vice-President, with risks to the global economy tilted to the downside, there is trouble brewing with financial institutions globally. The Fed continues—as in the Federal Reserve Bank—continues to increase interest rates. There is now a new risk within the last couple of weeks emerging—that is the risk concerning the US debt ceiling—and there is a real possibility for a sharper than expected global slowdown, and that coupled with a declining trend in upstream and downstream energy production, I expect further losses in revenue for the remainder of the fiscal year. Now, the Minister of Finance did not in his pilot explain to us where energy production is heading, nor did he explain to us or give us an overview of the level of production that we had for the first six months of the fiscal year. So I hope that the Minister can answer that in his wrap up.

With respect to revenues from the non-energy sector however, it is important to note here that Inland Revenue Division categorizes non-energy revenues by including revenues from the downstream energy sector which is petrochemicals production. Whereas, when we are calculating GDP, the CSO based on its
international standards classification of industries includes the manufacture of petrochemicals in the energy sector. So that is an important distinction to note when we are comparing and contrasting data. But with respect to petrochemicals, revenues have been largely elevated in the first six months of the fiscal year due to higher prices of ammonia, and ammonia prices have seen exorbitant increases in 2020. However, this windfall in ammonia prices is already dissipating and within the rest of the fiscal year prices have forecasted to be steadily decreasing.

So further production, even though we have yielded surplus revenues from the petrochemicals sector, production of ammonia and methanol, also urea, has been relatively stable. There have been no real increases in production of these commodities. So with a decline in prices for these commodities, even though its schedule is forecasted to be higher than pre pandemic levels, it is still declining and, therefore, we should not be expecting any significant revenues from taxes on incomes and profits from petrochemicals companies.

So when we look at this whole debate about whether energy GDP declined or whether non-energy GDP increased, I just wanted to lend my thoughts on this. It is important to note that when we are comparing and contrasting the growth performance of an economy over a period of time, it is very important that we look at real GDP figures. And when we look at the CSO data, quarterly data, what we could see happening is that, yes, the non-energy sector has increased in real terms, however a lot of the increase has to do with a decline in production or the volume of output coming out from exploration and extraction of oil and gas, and since 2018 there has been an almost 5 per cent decline in output from refining and that perhaps is due to the closure of the Petrotrin refinery. So it is important how we look at the data.

Now, there has been an increase in the non-energy sector in real terms. The
non-energy sector has rebounded but again, we need to look very closely at the data, and when we look very closely at the data and you compare the third quarter of 2019 to the third quarter of 2022, what you see happening is, yes, food and beverages have increased in production significantly. But when you go further into the specific industries within the manufacturing sector—and I requested a further breakdown from the Central Statistical Office. So if anybody would like to have the data I can share it with them. When you look at the breakdown of the manufacturing sector majority of the increases in the manufacturing sector is coming from the production of alcohol and wines.

There is also an increase in the processing of fruit—just give me one second, Mr. Vice-President, I have the data right here. So we have the processing and preserving of fruits and vegetables. That has increased by 114 per cent from the third quarter of 2019 to the third quarter of 2022. This is in real terms. This is constant price GDP that I am looking at. On the other hand, what has contributed to the majority of the increase in non-energy manufacturing output—this is excluding the petrochemical sector—it is distilling and blending of spirits and manufacture of wines, which is basically the manufacture of alcohol in Trinidad and Tobago. Right? So that has increased by 172 per cent compared to pre-pandemic levels and I am comparing quarter three of 2022 with quarter three of 2019. It is very important to compare the same quarters when you are comparing data over a period of time. So, yes, this increase in the manufacture of alcohols has contributed to the largest increase in non-energy manufacturing production. I am saying this, I am explaining this just to ensure that everyone understands that the increase in manufacturing has not come from the increase in petrochemicals manufacturing even though we have experienced large windfalls.

So, Mr. Vice-President, I do not have an optimistic expectation for revenues
from the non-oil sector, and I see it as only being really possible if we accelerate the implementation of reforms that we have already commenced. So that is the implementation of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority, the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill, implementation of property tax. That is where I see a lot of revenues would come from if it is we are to be hopeful within the next four months to expect any significant revenues, and also further rationalization of public expenditure.

So if we look at TTRA alone, Mr. Vice-President—because I want to be clear why I am saying this. If we look at the implementation of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority alone which is expected to come fully on board, I think, I believe it is in August of this year, there is a lot that has to be done before any real results can been seen in the efficiency of tax administration, such that we can see any real improvements in revenue collection. I mean, come on, when the TTRA comes on board staff is hired and it is fully operational, the first thing that the director general would have to do is engage in a review and revamp of the whole VAT refund management process, then they has to be redesign of administrative procedures, assessment and redesign of administrative procedures, there needs to be a revision of the antifraud strategy. All these things have to be done before you could see any real results in increase in revenues from the full implementation of the TTRA.

Now, I know the Minister of Finance is hopeful that the injection of $4.5 billion in VAT revenues will boost economic activity, however, whether this boost in economic activity will transpire into increasing non-energy revenues from VAT, I am not too sure—and not only from VAT, but also from taxes on incomes and profits from non-oil companies. I am not sure that—and why I say I am not sure is that, Mr. Vice-President, it has been years, prior to 2015, that the country’s
business community has been dealing with this whole long delays in receiving VAT refunds, and over that period of time what you have seen happening is that a lot of tax amnesties have been coming on board as well. And what this tends to do, you have a situation where, one, you are conducting your businesses, you are paying VAT on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and then when you have a claim to receive, what ends up happening is that you do not receive your claim on time. That is a fact. We all know that. You cannot depend on it because you do not know when you are going to get it.

The second thing that is happening as well is that over a period of time because of this, businesses generally just found ways to pay less VAT, and with the deficiencies in the tax administration system, it is impossible for the Board of Inland Revenue to identify and pinpoint these challenges.

1.35 p.m.

So automatically you have a tax compliance gap that is large and has widened and will continue to widen until tax administration is sorted out, the efficiency of tax administration is sorted out and until then, we will not be getting any real benefits from increased revenues from the TTRA.

And I want to pinpoint something here as well, after so many tax amnesties, I have looked at the Auditor General’s report for the last fiscal year, that is at September 2022 and what I saw there on page 54 of the report, there is a consolidated statement of arrears of revenue and in that consolidated statement of arrears of revenue, what we see is taxes on income and profits owed to the Government in the vicinity of $38 billion; taxes on goods and services; $6.3 billion in VAT alone owed to the Government; royalties on oil and gas, $3.56 billion owed. So while on one hand we are here trying to clean up tax administration and improve tax collection and whatnot, what is happening with this large bill? And
actually the Auditor General’s report alluded to the fact that these arrears on revenue have increased by $4.3 billion in just one year. So that just goes to prove my point that we are really in a situation where tax compliance has been worsening in the country. So I would like to hear from the Minister of Finance if after so many tax amnesties, how come we were not able to recuperate these large revenues, the large revenues that have been outstanding to the Government.

So, Mr. Vice-President, unfortunately I am not as optimistic like the Minister of Finance on revenue prospects being able to sustain expenditure levels of $61 billion. Remember, we are operating in an economy that is $30 billion smaller in real terms compared to 2014. Now, I choose 2014 as my comparative because 2014 was when the price of oil peaked in August and then it experienced a decline which was sustained straight up to 2019 before the onset of the pandemic. So I am very selective of choosing 2014 to compare with.

So the bottom line is that even though oil and gas prices remain elevated compared to pre-pandemic levels, after peaking in 2022, the real output of the economy is estimated to grow at 2.5 per cent but the economy is still 16 per cent smaller than it was in 2014. We are not producing at full capacity to ensure that we can bring revenues to sustain this kind of expenditure. Right now, this year, we are estimated to produce $153 billion in real GDP. This is real output and based on growth projections by the IMF in the Article IV Consultation Report, which went straight up to the year 2028, it will take us beyond 2030 to get back at a level of production, real production that we had in 2014. The projections up to 2028 with growth, with sustained positive growth as projected by the IMF, we are going to reach a real production or real GDP figure of $174 billion.

So, Mr. Vice-President, when I look at the line Items under the various Ministries, they are indeed necessary, many of them: wages, salaries, outstanding
moneys owed to contractors, arrears for utilities, senior citizens grant, maintenance for TTPS police vehicles, there is an expenditure there for maintenance of Fire Service vehicles and there is also expenditure for other operational expenses.

Now upon a closer look at these line Items, we have out of this $3.85 billion in supplementation, we have 21 per cent that is going towards moneys owed to suppliers and contractors. Contractors alone are owed $304 million from the Infrastructure Development Fund for works completed by Ministries of Health, Tourism, Education and Sport. Of the remaining moneys owed, $300 million are in recurrent expenses. Then we have wages and salaries. And when you include short-term employment and contract employment, you get a total of amount of $687 million in wages, salaries, short-term employment and contract employment. That is another 18 per cent of the supplementation. Then you have $291 million allocated for the payment of utilities, gratuities, fees, rent, security services, janitorial services, et cetera. So, Mr. Vice-President, almost 50 per cent of the supplementation, $1.8 billion are for expenditure that was already incurred or largely accrued to routine operations.

Mr. Vice-President, it is almost impossible to have not known that these expenses would be incurred. And I heard Members of the Opposition Bench making this point as well, but I too am wondering, and it is a serious question that I have and I would indulge this House to really listen because it cannot simply be bad budgeting to me but it seems to be that it was deliberate delays in expenditure that seem to be masked by prudent economic management. It is budgeting to cut expenditure allocations even when they continue to be incurred or to delay the expenditure later down the road when windfall energy revenues occur. To me, that is what it seems like. I could very well be incorrect because I am not very much integrated into the whole budgeting process within the Ministry of Finance but it

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definitely would make sense if I am a Minister of Finance and I ended up in a very difficult cash flow situation to postpone expenditure later down to take advantage of the smaller levels of revenue.

And the same applies to VAT refunds. There is a backlog of VAT refunds but this backlog of VAT refunds, what it does is it inflates tax revenues from the non-energy sector and overstates genuine VAT collections. Let us just take this example, if this $3 billion in VAT bonds that are now going to be paid out was not treated as expenditure in the Draft Estimates, then our net revenue budgeted which is original budgeted of $7.7 billion, we would actually be recording net revenue or revenue from VAT at about $3.9 billion. So these strategies or approaches are similar to unauthorized borrowing and creates some level of uncertainty for budget credibility. And this is why I raised the point because where my concern is for budget credibility going forward and the whole budgeting process and the public financial management process—because it will influence negatively.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, I really do not want what I am saying to be misinterpreted as we should not fulfil this expenditure in this Bill. I know this Government was forced to adopt a strategy to align expenditure with available revenues but what I am saying is that the point of adopting such a strategy should have been to allow or should have been to create space for more prudent fiscal management and prevent excessive reliance on energy revenues and mitigate the risk of larger budget deficits, thus strengthening our resilience. By doing this, the ultimate aim should be to encourage efficiency in public expenditure and I have not seen that we have found ways to operate more efficiently. Rather what I am seeing is that we delay the expenditure until energy prices rebound.

Now, on the one hand, you have moneys that are rationalized via fuel subsidies because the fuel subsidies have reduced significantly. We have a review
of water and electricity tariffs taking place. There was staff reductions at WASA. The Petrotrin refinery was closed down because of large inefficiencies and a drain on our foreign reserves. But on the other hand, Mr. Vice-President, you are putting moneys into state-owned enterprises and public bodies that have fallen short on accounting to the public on how they have been using state funds and this here, I draw attention to UDeCoTT, NIDCO, CEPEP. These three entities in particular have outdated audited financial statements that they have not presented to this Parliament and to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. This cannot be sustainable because here we are with a $61 billion budget based on these supplementations and I am not sure whether after all those years of belt tightening, any real efficiency in public investment was achieved.

What I am seeing as a result is a reduced capability for Ministries to carry out their routine functions effectively. It has resulted in inadequate staffing, delays in service provision, a deterioration in public infrastructure, which is now going to cost significantly more to revert to its original state and there is also as a consequence, a decline in the quality of public services. All in all, all these things have resulted in one thing: a serious loss in productivity in the country at all levels. It has negatively impacted sectors such as education, health care, infrastructure, even limiting the capacity of the TTPS to save the public from this outrageous crime situation, delayed payment to contractors, habitual accumulation of VAT refunds, maintenance of public infrastructure.

I mean, Mr. Vice-President, when you look at the public infrastructure, it is in such a bad state that you look at VMCOTT and in the yard of VMCOTT, it is like a graveyard for all public assets, vehicles, that are no longer functional and operational. Our roads, even though I have seen a lot of improvements, our roads have become in such a dilapidated state as well. So, Mr. Vice-President, it is
evident that when you look under the various Heads of Expenditure, there is a 100 per cent increase under repairs and maintenance in the allocation from about $144 million to $295 million, almost $150 million increase.

1:50 p.m.

And just to single out some items, there is $10 million more going to the HSC Buccoo, to Tobago; there is $40 million more going towards the TTPS for police vehicle maintenance; $4 million more to the fire service. Mr. Vice President, I am almost certain that had we been conducting routine maintenance on an annual basis, we would not have been spending this much today. These prices would not have been be so inflated.

I think, Mr. Vice President, the time has come for us to shift away from the State-led model for maintenance of state assets, and this could come in the form of some sort of PPP arrangements. I know it is already under consideration in the Ministry of Works and Transport. But even though it seems as a plausible solution, I am hesitant to be optimistic about it because when we move in that direction, given the track record of the Government in late payments or outstanding payments to contractors, if this strategy to continuously delay payments to contractors is going to be adopted as the status quo—it should not—then it can have adverse effects on the viability and the effectiveness of PPP arrangements.

Further, we should have an accountability framework to ensure that public servants treat state assets with care. It establishes clear guidelines—it will establish clear guidelines, responsibilities and mechanisms to promote transparency, integrity, and accountability in the management of state assets. And I am not just talking about having an asset management log or register, or something like that. I am talking about a framework which would allow for sanctions and disciplinary measures that can articulate consequences on
non-compliance or negligence on managing states assets. We should establish mechanisms to encourage and promote whistle-blowers who report misconduct or irregularities related to state assets.

So, Mr. Vice President, let me move quickly to my final point, and that is the transfers to state enterprises in the supplementation. There is an increase of $258 million, at least $105 million of which has had no initial allocation. These transfers are to finance principal and interest payments for loans under UDeCOTT, NIDCO and MTS. Now, Mr. Vice President, this may seem like a small amount to supplementation but if we zero in on UDeCOTT, I have serious concerns about their transparency and accountability. They been receiving transfers from several Ministries as a state enterprise for financing of at least 35 loans. This is based on the original budgeted expenditure.

I remember when they came before us in a joint select committee, I think it was last year or year before, under the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee, there were so many flaws in their procurement processes and procedures. Now the procurement law is fully proclaimed so we may see some improvements there. But when you look at the accountability and transparency of resources committed to UDeCOTT, the last audited financial statement completed was in 2015. Audits have been outstanding since 2016. NIDCO’s last audited financial statement was in 2017. CEPEP, as a matter of fact, they cannot find records from before 2015.

So we have—and then we also have here regional corporations receiving supplementations. And even though when we came here through—when we debated local government reform and we raised this issue, still I asked for an updated on the submissions of audited financial statements and they have all been delayed. None of them have come up to date.

So during this period 2018 to 2023—so, let me wrap up quickly, Mr Vice-
President. It is billions of dollars that are being pumped into this state enterprise called UDeCOTT, who has not been accountable to the Parliament. As a result, the country, since 2015, has not been able to have a comprehensive review of any hidden liabilities and contingent risks. As a matter of fact, Mr. Vice-President, with this supplementation, it brings total transfers to state enterprises to $3.8 billion, the highest since fiscal 2011/2012. It also adds to our total expenditure of interest payments of $5.3 billion by $18 million. And, Mr. Vice-President, this not even taking into consideration transfers to statutory bodies. From a debit sustainability perspective, contingent liabilities have been ballooning and reaching to $30 billion, 17 per cent of GDP, and it poses a serious risk, fiscal risk, to our debt path.

The last thing I would say is that we need an overall reassessment and evaluation of the state enterprises sector in this country; a revamp and revision of the State Enterprises Performance Monitoring Manual in order to understand clearly how we need to go about rationalizing expenditure in these state-owned enterprises or else we would be at a risk for serious debt problems going forward. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox, Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

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

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox):** Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. I want to begin by thanking the Minister of Finance for his astute leadership in the financial sector.

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

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** I also want to congratulate the political leader of the
People’s National Movement and Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago for being conferred with an honorary doctorate

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

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** —by Howard University on Saturday.

Mr. Vice President, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, as we continue to fulfil our mission of helping empowering and transforming lives. Mr. Vice-President, only yesterday we celebrated United Nations’ International Day of Families, which is observed on May 15th each year. And one of our core mandates at the Ministry is protect and empower families, make them stronger and more resilient, provide for their basic needs, and be there for them in special circumstances. And we continue to take this mandate very seriously, and I am here today contributing to this debate in this honorable House to advocate on behalf of our families during their time of need.

I am sure everyone in this House was concerned of the unprecedented levels of flooding which occurred late last year, particularly between October and December. And we were all bewildered by the level of destruction, and concerned by the scale of the loss and distress of many of our brothers and sisters in many areas, such as in El Socorro South, Spring Village, Penal/Debe, Bamboo No. 2, Mafeking, Woodland, Sande Grande, Cumuto, and Barrackpore, to name a few of the hardest hit areas.

Mr. Vice President, as soon as we were given clearance by our first responder, which is the Disaster Management Unit of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, officers from the National Family Services Division of the Ministry, the National Social Development Programme, and our citizens engagement service, together with support from members of the Trinidad...
and Tobago Fire Services who deployed to support Members of Parliament, and Disaster Management Units of the regional municipal corporations on the ground, to take applications and to assess the needs of the residents who were negatively impacted by floods—altogether, at May 08, 2023, the Ministry undertook assessments of some 4,487 households in collaboration with the Disaster Management Unit. And this relief took the form of food support, the provision of household grants to replace household appliances and furniture that were destroyed, and clothing grants.

**2.00 p.m.**

So far, support to families for flood relief has been approximately $12,138,900 and these funds were taken from our social assistance Vote to assist affected residents and these resources allowed them to get back on their feet quickly by being able to acquire much-needed fridges, stoves and furniture that were lost, as well as books and school supplies for children who were affected.

With regard to the families, 1,775 families received assistance from the Ministry. Mr. Vice-President, 1549 received household items. School supplies were given to primary school students, 132 minors, and secondary, 94 minors.

Mr. Vice-President, at the same time the Ministry was once again called upon again to assist the vulnerable who would have been adversely affected by the removal of fuel subsidies, in keeping with the announcement by the Minister of Finance in his budget presentation. We were given the lead responsibility for disbursing the One-Off Transportation Grant to all our clients and these payments were made at the end of January 2023.

Mr. Vice-President, 165,751 of the Ministry’s clients who were already receiving Senior Citizens Grants, Social Assistance Grants, Disability Grants and Food Support received the additional $1,000 at an expenditure of $165,751,000.
This, of course, was a one-off short-term measure intended to cushion the impact of the increase in the fuel prices due to the removal of the fuel subsidy. So when we hear people saying the Government does not care, this is indeed a measure of a caring government to our vulnerable.

As a result, all three of the Ministry’s major grants: Senior Citizens Grant, Social Assistance, and Disability, experienced a shortfall. So, in addition, the Senior Citizens Grant was allocated $4,118,000,000, which is $182 million less than the total amount allocated the previous year. So, therefore, to cover the shortfall in allocation for the Senior Citizens Grant, as well as to reimburse the funds advanced from the other major grants for the flood relief and the One-off Transportation Grant, the Ministry requires an additional allocation of $348,172,814 to meet its commitments for 2023.

The Senior Citizens Grant was provided to 109,687 individuals at the cost of $359,960,836.92, as of March 2023. So the total number of recipients includes an additional 759 seniors who were added between January and March this year.

Mr. Vice-President, our Public Assistance Grant, which is provided to persons whose household income is deemed inadequate due to several factors, including ill health, death or imprisonment of a primary breadwinner. As of March this year, the Ministry provided public assistance support to 16,377 persons in the amount of $25,170,540.09, including with an additional 219 new recipients.

Support to persons with disabilities, beneficiaries of this grant are individuals 18-64 years of age who cannot work due to a disability and have been certified by a government medical officer to be permanently disabled. The Ministry continues to meet its obligation of supporting persons with disabilities through our ongoing provision of Disability Assistance Grants for adults and also for minors. As of March this year, 21,790 persons received the Disability Assistance Grant.
Assistance Grants amounting to $45,818,622.06. For the same period, 3,178 children received our Disability Assistance Grants for minors at a total of $5,020,201.00. And to fulfil its obligations, the Ministry required an additional $18,972,086.

So, Mr. Vice-President, apart from the support provided by our major grants, which I have just outlined, we continue to assist vulnerable families, consistent with our mandate. Of course, access to food support amounting to $11,159,226 has been provided to 18,851 recipients as of March this year. Since October 2022, 25 clients have benefitted from our Ministry’s National Social Development Programme at the cost of $338,296.75. Additionally, during this period eight clients benefited from our Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development programme at the cost $134,022.60.

So, I have presented here just a tiny snapshot of some of what the Ministry has been doing to help the vulnerable and discharge the responsibilities associated with our mandate. And we continue to assure this honourable House that the Government has not reduced the dollar value of a single grant disbursed by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, thus ensuring that every person who is eligible for a Senior Citizens Grant, Social Assistance Grant, a Disability Grant for minors or adults, flood relief or any other grant, will continue to receive it, as they have in the past, in the same amounts, and on time.

In closing, Mr. Vice-President, the Ministry takes its fiduciary responsibility seriously by ensuring the management of its limited resources in straitened economic times and we are committed to investing in the development of our most vulnerable citizens who require the Government’s assistance in their greatest time of need. I thank you.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Damien Lyder.
Sen. Damien Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, we are called here to the Senate to consider a Bill entitled the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2023) Bill, 2023. And, of course, the objective of this Bill, Mr. Vice-President, is firstly to further issue a whopping $3.85 billion from the Consolidated Fund and from loan financing to support expenditure for the service of the financial year ending September 2023. And also, Mr. Vice-President, in addition, to increase Heads of Expenditure by amounts listed, based on the supplemental allocation detailed in the notes that have been presented to all Senators here present.

Mr. Vice-President, to begin to deal with the supplementation of allocation of such a large sum of money as $3.85 billion, it is first imperative for us to get a true appreciation of the performance of the overall economy. Mr. Vice-President, we listened to the Minister of Finance speak in glowing terms about how great this economy is going. But we are not talking about any small sum of money. We are talking about taxpayers’ money that needs to be invested properly for our children and grandchildren. We see some of them were sitting in the bleachers here today, in the room, and they just left, Mr. Vice-President; for them. And this is because the money comes from somewhere, Mr. Vice-President. It comes as a result of the fundamentals of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago with respect to economic output, unemployment, investment, debt and price levels.

And we see an economy where the real GDP has declined by $22 billion. I heard Sen. Mark speak about every year the amounts it declined, but he did not sum it up by saying that real GDP declined by some $22 billion in the first six years of this Government’s tenure, this PNM Government’s tenure. At present, Mr. Vice-President, we see a continued low rate of GDP levels, despite the Minister Finance’s celebrations about the IMF report, where the IMF estimated
GDP for the year 2023.

Mr. Vice-President, I would echo the words of the Leader of the Opposition, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, when I listened to her on television in the other place. And I also examined the CSO data. And it shows, Mr. Vice-President, clearly, that we are still in pre-pandemic times, when it comes to the economy. And this is because in 2020 and in 2021, Mr. Vice-President, real GDP declined, according to the CSO, by some 7.7 per cent and 1 per cent respectively, meaning that even with the increases of 2.5 per cent and the estimated 3.5 per cent, last year and this year, it will not restore the economy to pre-COVID levels. So, I do not know if the Minister was giving some misleading numbers, but that is what we have gotten from the CSO.

Mr. Vice-President, I was listening to the Minister intently and I heard him refer to real GDP in his presentation, and I had some hope. I held out hope, Mr. Vice-President, that the Minister finally saw it his way to refer to real GDP. He quoted a few numbers in real GDP. I thought the Minister learned his lesson from the beating he would have taken back in the budget debate in September of 2022, when he was quoting nominal GDP to show the performance of the economy, when he was beaten from the Opposition, beaten from economists speaking outside, and I heard Sen. Deonarine here today speak at length about the use of nominal GDP. But the Minister’s usage of nominal GDP, this usage of nominal GDP, where he ought to use real GDP, is worrying for those in the know, in this economy, Mr. Vice-President. We need to understand this economic backdrop as we are asked to approve almost $4 billion more in spending.

Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance, and I listened to him, both here and in the other place, reverted again when I thought he was going with real GDP, he reverted back to nominal GDP as a measure of economic performance in this.
country. The Minister of Finance did the same thing, as I stated, back in the budget debate in September 2022. And again, I thought he would have learnt a lesson. When I listened here today, and it took me back, Mr. Vice-President, when I listened to this comment of nominal GDP, Mr. Vice-President, it took me back to last week, when I looked in the other place when the Minister was winding up. We have not had the opportunity to hear him wind up here today. But in the winding up in the other place, where he stated that in 2015, GDP was $160 million and claimed economic growth with 2022 GDP reaching $190 billion. The Minister quoted, this is what the Minister quoted, “When I went to school, 190 billion was always more than 160 billion”, in this usual tone.

But, Mr. Vice-President, this unrelenting use of nominal GDP by the Minister of Finance on the question of understanding economic growth shows, basically showcases, this moderate intellectual ability when it comes to the economy, Mr. Vice-President. So, I do not know what school the Minister of Finance went to when he was doing his Masters in Economics. But I would clearly call out to that school to check their textbook to see if they made a mistake in their textbook, if they made some misprint, Mr. Vice-President.

The Minister of Finance clearly did not study basic Economics. Because when I went to school, Mr. Vice-President, and I studied Economics in school, Mr. Vice-President, it was clear that we had to compare economic performance across different years and take into account inflation. You must take into account inflation. And that is when we consider the use of real GDP and not nominal GDP. But, you know what, Mr. Vice-President? Sen. Deonarine and Sen. Mark really beat this topic out. So, I will move on here, Mr. Vice-President. When we consider mass joblessness in the economy, and according to the NIB report, by 2020 June, some 112,800 persons lost their job when it came to the contributions
towards the NIB.

I am coming towards manufacturing. I am zeroing to manufacturing. The CSO also placed job losses at 67,500. When you check the total of persons with jobs, on the last quarter, when the then led UNC government in 2015, up to December 2022. And I will remind this Senate again, it was a United National Congress led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar who created 56,000 jobs under the UNC, Mr. Vice-President, 56,000.

2.15 p.m.

And when we look at this major sector for economic activity and job creation, it is the manufacturing sector. Yeah, the Minister of Finance boasted about the manufacturing sector today, Mr. Vice-President. But when we checked CSO data, let me tell the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Trade, through you, when we checked the CSO data we saw that as at December last year only 39,500 persons had jobs and were employed in the manufacturing sector, and this was compared to 51,700 persons in the second quarter of 2015. So this represents a decline under this Government of 12,200 persons in the manufacturing sector. Check the CSO. CSO figures were quoted today, Mr. Vice-President. So the question of job creation under this Government, they have failed miserably.

Mr. Vice-President, the level of joblessness in this country sets the context for persons who are depending upon Government spending to improve their lives and livelihoods, Mr. Vice-President. And I really hope today that this $3.85 billion supplementation would treat with the manufacturing sector and boost the outputs of our industrial estates, creating employment, Mr. Vice-President, but I will treat with this later in my contribution.

Mr. Vice-President, I will round out the context by considering a few other key economic indicators where the Government is facing challenges. Namely,
foreign direct investment has exited our shores in the tune of $7 billion under this Government. Mr. Vice-President, government debt and debt servicing continues to be debilitating to this economy, Mr. Vice-President. The higher the Government carries our debt, the worse the debt-servicing situation becomes. Total public debt, Mr. Vice-President, at the end of last fiscal according to the Auditor General’s Report stood at a whopping $145.14 billion, which was an increase, Mr. Vice-President, of $3.26 billion when we compared public debt, not under the UNC you know, but just compared to 2021. So they have grown this, this mounting debt has to be serviced. And it is by an increasing charge on the account of the public debt figure, we stood at some $9.5 billion in fiscal ’22 up from $5.3 billion in 2015 under the UNC.

So the Government has carried the requirements for servicing debt annually up by $4.2 billion, Mr. President. So this means that every year our economy under this People’s National Movement loses the opportunity to develop by $4.2 billion because the Government has borrowed largely and mainly to support a deficit. That is what is going on and that is what is being argued today, Mr. Vice-President, in this Bill because we heard it is not just the Consolidated Fund, but through financing that the Government intends to accomplish this. And another key measure of the economy and the Government’s decision as to where to spend this increased allocation ought to be the general price level in the country. And for those—in other words, inflation.

Mr. Vice-President, I would like to point out to the fact that at January this year, the Central Bank website outlined inflation year on year in several categories, and these are the ones most pertinent to the citizens of this country. Hear it:

Food price inflation at 17.3 per cent, transport increased by 14 per cent. Bread, bread prices rose by 19.8 per cent.
Mr. Vice-President—

And overall prices of goods and services in this country rose by 8.3 per cent. So we have a problem with inflation in this country, Mr. Vice-President. And this means that citizens who have to now face these high prices when they have to buy food from the supermarket, have to find an additional $173 more dollars for every $1,000 they spent in the previous year, in January, Mr. President. And how does this become possible for these people who are struggling, when this Government since 2013, has only given the public service an increase of 4 per cent of their salary, Mr. Vice-President, how do they survive? Mr. Vice-President, how can they afford this $173 more?

Transportation prices have skyrocketed, and these price increases should have prompted the Government to spend significant sums on money on households in the form of transfers. Mr. Vice-President, one is really left to suspect that a major reason why we are not seeing sufficient spending on vulnerable families is because this Government is following the IMF playbook to a letter. I heard the Minister speak about the IMF earlier. And in the recommendations issued on May 5th, just a week and a half ago, called on the Government to tighten its squeeze on Government spending. I heard the Minister again speak about this, but the Minister of Finance, and I listened to him in the other place. He did not mention it here but when I was looking on TV in the other place, spoke about the IMFs Article IV Consultation Board Report. And the Minister of Finance’s commentary was captured in a press release and also presented in the other place.

However, despite the enthusiasm by those in the Government, there are some issues facing our economy based on this IMF report. Mr. Vice-President, if the Government follows the recommendations from the IMF Report, it would lead to harsher cuts to spending, more taxation, and general difficulty across the board.
Mr. Vice-President, the headline issues raised by the IMF and I state it here and I read it here for you Mr. Vice-President:

More deficits to be expected in the coming years.

And we are seeing that here today. This is because the IMF stated, and I quote:

“The fiscal position is expected to swing from surplus in FY2022 to a deficit in FY2023, and then stabilize at moderate deficits over the medium term.”

Mr. Vice-President, the IMF went on:

The local economy has not recovered to pre-COVID levels in 2019, and is not projected to do so in this year based on projections.

Mr. Vice-President, we see the National Insurance Fund continually being under significant risk. We continue seeing the forex situation in this country worsen as import cover is declining, and forex ability hampering the investment prospects, worsening the ease of doing business in this country, Mr. Vice-President. And cuts to social spending may continue as a result of these IMF recommendations.

Mr. President, the Bill before this august House calls on Members present to approve an additional sums of money by this appropriation Act, its specific Heads of expenditure and details in the amount—oh, sorry, Mr. Vice-President sorry. But it is necessary to impact—to consider the impact when we consider the Heads of expenditure. It is necessary to consider the impact of these increased allocations on the budget deficit for several reasons, Mr. Vice-President. You see, it is incumbent upon all of us to ensure that we adhere to the principles of fiscal responsibility as we consider this increase of a whopping $3.85 billion. And we may encourage this required transparency and accountability in our decision making process if we have a thorough grasp of how this supplemental appropriation would affect the budget imbalance. The deficit will widen according to the Minister of Finance by this additional $1 billion in reduced revenue that he

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In fact, Mr. Vice-President, I heard Sen. Mark, say that it could go, this deficit could go upward of $8 billion, I do not doubt that at all. But listening to Sen. Deonarine and also taking the figures announced by the Minister, we are looking at a possible total deficit that would be around $6.36 billion. This would of course include $1.51 billion of initial estimate deficit back in October, the supplemental allocation of $3.85 billion that we are contemplating here today that is going to have to come from the Consolidated Funds and from loan financing, putting us in further debt. And an additional $1 billion for reduced mid-year revenue estimates as stated by the Minister of Finance.

And again, as I said, I listened to Minister Deonarine very closely and it seems as though the expected revenues can be way less than what the Minister has indicated. So this deficit could be worse.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Sorry Sen. Deonarine, Sen. Deonarine, sorry about that, yes, yes. I watched the Minister of Finance over there and I am in disbelief of some of the numbers he has used.

Mr. Vice-President, a supplemental appropriation’s effect on the budget deficit has a direct bearing on our country’s long-term debt management policies. Put simply, more deficit equals more debt, and more debt means higher loan payments for debt financing, Mr. Vice-President. And we have seen this Government that has raised the annual debt financing by more than $4 billion, and the strain that it puts for access for funding for state resources, for education, for infrastructure, for health care, for national security. All spoken thoroughly by Senators before. But we do not have to listen to the Senators, we can look outside. We could listen to people cry when we see schools unfinished in this country,

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roads falling apart by the day, Mr. Vice-President, fire stations being depleted of resources and no fire tender.

We saw a family perish as a result of no fire tender, Mr. Vice-President. We see the collapse of this State under this Government. And we see nothing for agriculture here today. Little or nothing for manufacturing and trade and most certainly with the exception of a $16 million for UDeCOTT, nothing for my good friend for tourism, Mr. Vice-President. I was hoping that to see something for my good friend. I was hoping. That Ministry has been suffering, that Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, neglected by this Government, Mr. Vice-President, it will take a United National Congress to come and bring some sanity to that Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. But it is not his fault, Mr. Vice-President, it is not the Minister’s fault.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. D. Lyder: The problem is that this Government has mounted deficits totaling $56 billion in their first six years in office. And we are here with this appropriation today, and despite the Minister of Finance’s claim that the deficit was slashed to .2 per cent of GDP or .329 billion in fiscal 2022. However, when we consider the Auditor General’s Report we see that the borrowing to finance expenditure last year stood at some $7.3 billion. So how is this $7.3 billion not reflected in the size of the budget for 2022? I leave that for the Minister to tell us in the wrap up but given that economists will agree that $7.3 billion was borrowed to finance the shortfall in revenue, I would say it is in an effort to finance a deficit, Mr. Vice-President. That was what that money was for. But I move on, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, today in this Bill, under the Ministry of Finance via the Infrastructure Development Fund, under Sub-Head 48, Ministry of Trade and
Industry, I heard the Minister indicate that some $9.8 million is being supplemented to meet the cost of value added tax on the value of works pertaining to the construction of the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate.

And Mr. Vice-President, let me remind this Senate that in 2022 it was the Auditor General’s Report, on page 63 that treats with this project, the Construction of the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate. And the report states that the project started in January 2020 and was supposed to be completed in 12 months. But here we are, in 2023, it is still incomplete and some $84.65 million later. So I just have two questions to ask, through you, to the Minister of Finance or trade, whoever would like to follow me, right. Just two questions and I move on. What is the expected completion date of this project? And what is the expected total sum for the project when it is completed? Just two simple questions.

Because at the end of last fiscal in September 30, 2022 the amount at Phoenix Park Industrial Estate cost the taxpayers of this country some $84.65 million. And this issue of the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate was one I raised last year in a very mild year review. Sorry—a very mild mid-year review I should say. And the Minister of Trade and Industry focused on the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate with the allocation then, and today again, it is only mentioned with respect to the same project.

The difficulty I have is that this year the Government has chosen again only one singular project when it comes to these industrial parks. There are many issues plaguing industrial parks across the nation. Why are we not seeing more in the supplementation for that? But anyway, I move on, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, I heard several Senators before me speak about VAT refunds, and it has been a very topical issue. I will try to take a different angle at that today, Mr. Vice-President, because the Minister of Finance came here and
spoke about vat revenues and accelerated VAT refunds, believe “dat”, and of course he spoke about the issue of VAT bonds.

2.30 p.m.

But, Mr. Vice-President, it was at March 31st that VAT refunds outstanding stood at $7.8 billion. And in this supplementation of appropriation, only a marginal amount is dedicated towards anything that is resembling VAT refunds. So—and I listened attentively, as a businessman involved in the value chain with manufacturers who pay VAT on inputs, Mr. Vice-President, and the Minister of Finance raised this matter here today about VAT revenues, VAT refunds, VAT bonds.

And at the same time, Mr. Vice-President, the hon. Minister, a mere two weeks ago, answered a very pertinent question from Independent Sen. Deonarine regarding VAT refunds. And, Mr. Vice-President, I heard Sen. Deonarine today speak about tax compliance issues, especially when it comes to persons avoiding VAT. But two weeks ago, Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance, it was his decision—and that is how I read it—to lay the blame at the feet of businesses who do not pay VAT on time as a reason for the delay on VAT refunds or hampering VAT refunds to manufacturers. And this, to me, is a fanciful way of passing the buck, Mr. Vice President.

The Government cannot and must not sidestep the duty to pay VAT refunds on a timely basis. Companies pay VAT upfront at the ports and they need their VAT refunds back. What is—these delinquent VAT payers have nothing to do with manufacturers who paid the VAT in advance at the port, at the entry, for inputs to the manufacturing process. So what do delinquent payers have to do with this? When they export the goods, they need to get back what they paid up front. The money does not belong to the State, Mr. Vice President. Therefore, it is
important that the Government does not withhold VAT refunds of what I consider to be an interest free loan. You see, this as much needed liquidity and capital needed to support organizations for expansion. How can manufacturers be expected to fulfil the TTMA’s mandate to double manufacturing by 2025—or double exports, rather, by 2025 if the Government removes some $7.8 billion of liquidity from the system?

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance in the debate here today announced VAT bonds to the tune of some $3 billion, with an additional amount of between 1 or $2 billion estimated to be paid in cash over the upcoming months. But the Minister of Finance failed to inform Members present what will be the residual VAT refunds outstanding. You see, Mr. Vice-President, this is because VAT refunds outstanding is not a stationary figure. VAT refunds accrue daily. And it is misleading to point to payments in isolation when the outstanding balance due is what is of concern to the private sector, so you do a stopgap measure and give them bonds. What are you putting in place to ensure that there will be a timely repayment of VAT bonds and we do not get ourselves back into this 7.8 or maybe even $10 billion in VAT owing, Mr. Vice-President?

Mr. Vice-President, I believe the Minister stated that he would be paying some—I wrote the note—$250,000 for those who are owed in sums lower than $250,000. This would be paid in cash and the rest would be paid—this $3 billion would be paid in VAT bonds. But let me tell, through you, Mr. Vice President, to the Minister of Finance, these VAT bonds do not constitute any favour to manufacturers and neither is this a reason for that side, the Government side, to be thumping any desks.
Mr. Vice-President, the Government by law is obligated to pay VAT refunds and if they fail to do so within six months, they are supposed to pay a 1 per cent interest rate on every month thereafter—six months. And I challenge the Government to let me know today, how much interest has the Government paid to manufacturers in this country when they are delinquent with paying? Because I know if manufacturers pay late, or businesses pay late, they are persecuted by the Government, they have to pay these penalties, Mr. Vice-President. So the Government must understand, by their actions, they are systematically removing liquidity from our system and hurting manufacturers.

Mr. Vice-President, I will move on because a lot was said on VAT bonds, and printed in the papers by businesses, business organizations, Independent Senators, Senators on the Opposition, lots have been said. But, Mr. Vice-President, this Parliament, as our history assures us, belongs to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And several economists of note were reported to hold the view that the Government needs to stimulate economic growth, to inspire confidence in the economy. It is not just the UNC saying this. Economist, Dr. Indera Sagewan, is reported to have stated:

“...she expects the Minister of Finance to come and”—and I quote—

“shout to the mountains about the growth of the economy, and how well the Government has been balancing the budget.”

Well, I will say that Dr. Indera was completely correct, only that she could not have expected the Minister of Finance to come here today and use nominal GDP in such a misleading attempt to point growth between 2015 and 2022. She would not have thought that, Mr. Vice-President. And Dr. Indera further indicated that:

“...nothing has changed fundamentally, concerning the economic challenges in this country and there is nothing to celebrate...”
Absolutely nothing to celebrate.

And furthermore, the fact that the economic fundamentals remain the same is that the Government is waiting on the twin kings of oil and gas to once more come like a knight in shining armour and save this economy. But you know what? Let us not stay in Trinidad. I see my brother from Tobago across the way, an economist, Dr. Vanus James, who is from Tobago, pointed to the IMF’s scathing review of the Government on the question of diversification. Mr. Vice-President, it is clear, the Government is not laying the foundation for diversification, despite being in their eighth year in office. It is clear that from this supplementation of $3.85 billion, nothing substantial is being put towards diversification of the economy.

Mr. Vice-President, and to echo concerns of economists, I wish to get from the Minister of Finance answers to the following questions because he spoke in glowing terms about manufacturing. But tell me why did Unilever shut down? Why did Nestlé shift their manufacturing out of this country? Why is Digicel gone and moving parts of their services out of this country? Given the global food supply chain issues have forced food price inflation to over 17.3 per cent, why are they leaving? Well, I could give you the answer now—I heard it from the Independent Senator, Sen. Deonarine—all of it gone in liquor, rum and wine, Mr. Vice-President. That is what the Government is gloating about, rum and wine. Yes, yes, and I asked this question because I look at these Heads of Expenditure and I see nothing to stimulate agriculture, nothing to stimulate manufacturing, nothing to stimulate tourism, nothing to bring towards diversification of the economy.
Mr. Vice-President, and then, then we have Roger Hosein—Dr. Roger Hosein, a senior UWI economist. He is on record saying that the Minister of Finance’s pleasure with the IMF report is misplaced as the:

“Details in the data”.

I wonder if the hon. Minister of Finance, when he was hinting towards persons he called commentators, I wonder if he was speaking towards Dr. Roger Hosein. I just wonder. But Dr. Hosein contends that the data tells us a story of odds with what the Minister of Finance understands, because Hosein stated, and I state for the record:

“...the IMF and some of the institutions tend to write flowery, so I tend to rely on the data and the report, and if you look at the data in the report, it tells a disturbing story about the Trinidad and Tobago economy.’’

And, of course, this interpretation did not sit well with the hon. Minister of Finance, who issued a media release almost immediately after that, to which Dr. Hosein simply issued an invitation for an informative session to the Government. I wonder if Dr. Hosein is asking for a debate with the Minister of Finance and whether the Minister of Finance will accept such a debate.

Mr. Vice-President, in a Guardian newspaper article on Sunday the 14th of May, 2022 titled, “A comment on the Mid-Year Budget Review”—hear this, eh, “all yuh hear this”. A former Finance Minister Mariano Browne, PNM—

Hon. Senators: [Crosstalk]

Sen. D. Lyder: —has also been critical of the Minister of Finance’s celebratory tone in the mid-year review, in the other place, in the wake of the IMF Article IV broad report. The former PNM Finance Minister advised to take the Government statements:

“...with a pinch of salt.”

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Mr. Vice President, when he wrote, and I quote, for the record:

“One must remember that the minister is an elected parliamentarian and therefore wishes to present the best view on the performance of the T&T economy.”

The former PNM Finance Minister on the VAT refund payments also chimed in:

“...they would have missed the opportunity to improve their businesses, or would have had to rely on bank financing to cover the refund/shortfall. Either way, a refund today is worth much less than if it had been received when it was due...”

Mr. Vice-President, even the PNM is in agreement that this is a poor mid-year review, and that even the PNM is in disagreement with the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Vice-President, I want to touch quickly on manufacturing as I have only about six minutes remaining. The Minister of Finance made the claim in the mid-year review that the manufacturing sector increased by some 16.5 in the first nine months of the fiscal 2022. Once more, because the Minister of Finance has a penchant for using nominal figures, I am always very curious as to the statistics being used. But I would like to remind hon. Members present of my contribution at this time last year, when a similar boast was made by both the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Trade and Industry. I have no problem with the Minister of Trade and Industry, she has a lovely—her hands are soft, Mr. Vice-President. She tries very hard, but it is the callousness of the Minister of Finance that holds her back from a true potential, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [Laughter and crosstalk]

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance in the budget presentation, again, came here and cherry-picked certain industries that showed growth over the last year in terms of manufacturing. But let us talk about the
overall mine and manufacturing sector decline. Here are the facts—and it “ain’t” nominal GDP I am using. In 2015, manufacturing sector GDP at constant 2012 prices stood at some $30.9 billion and fell to $28.1 billion by 2022. Even before the pandemic, it had collapsed to $29.4 billion. So this means that the manufacturing sector GDP fell by 9 per cent over the seven years, a total of $2.8 billion dollars under this PNM Government. So no amount of cherry-picking is going to fix this data, Mr. Vice-President.

But what if Minister of Finance also did not tell you is that the sectors they cherry-picked did not grow as a result of any gifts or policies emanating from the Government. Mr. Vice-President, this growth came as a result of the private sector investment. Let me once more state for the Members present here that it was from the hard-working business people, the tenacity to take risks in this economy, in this country, who continue to fight to grow business to hold this economy together—not the Government—in less than desirable conditions, Mr. Vice-President. And Mr. Vice-President, it is obvious—

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

Sen. D. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. And it is obvious, Mr. Vice-President, we do not need an expert to tell us that coming out of a pandemic, when the world was shut down and then reopened last year, that manufacturing and consumption would have increased, restaurants increased, bars reopened, people started travelling, parties were having Carnival—the mother of all Carnivals, I think it was, happened. So guess what, Mr. Vice-President? Consumption naturally increased and all of those places that I told you that just opened, guess what they consume? Rum and wine, Mr. Vice-President, and that is what we heard from Sen. Deonarine here today, showing the bulk of the increase.
So we do not need a rocket scientist to tell us that there will be an increase in the manufacturing sector. And again, this was as no result of any government initiative or favours provided by the Ministry of Finance. The point is that should the private sector be operating in favourable conditions, the Government would not have to come here and cherry-pick here today. They would not have to report a 9 per cent decline in manufacturing over seven years under this administration. Rather, they will be able to report overall manufacturing sector growth. What are these unfavourable conditions manufacturers are going through? The ease of doing business, Mr. Vice-President, has plummeted under this Government and continues to collapse under this administration. VAT refunds, they are running like a headless chicken to pay back because the pressure came not, only from the Opposition, pressure came from the economists and pressure came from the private sector, that they have to come now and give these VAT bonds. But let us see if they put anything in place that would be sustainable to pay back VAT refunds on a timely basis.

2.45 p.m.

We await. I will be here, hopefully. I will be here to answer to the next budget debate and I am bringing it back for them again. And of course, Mr. Vice-President, access to foreign exchange, that continues to be a major burden on all in the business sector in this country. This is what has limited the true potential of these companies as this Government continues to drag the economy down. Mr. Vice-President, I heard Minister—Mark—say—but it will be remiss of me if I do not mention this. The Minister of Finance makes the claim that they are giving more money for salaries and several items of recurrent expenditure. That is what he claims here today. However, Mr. Vice-President, at the beginning of the year it was clear that they had underbudgeted, and this means that they want to be praised
for the underbudgeting back in September and then come back in May; September/October and come back in May to put the allocation in what was meant to be there in the first place.

We will call it for what it is, this Government by their tactics, by their tactics understand that budget and overstated expected revenues. That is what they did, they overstated it, and in doing so they gave the impression that the deficit would be at minimal, $1.5 billion, only to come in May now to see a deficit that will be exceeding some $6.36 billion. Mr. Vice-President, as I close, an objective mid-year budget assessment will highlight Trinidad and Tobago’s worrying economic performance under the current administration, and despite this Minister of Finance’s euphoria over nominal GDP estimates, our real GDP still has a pre-pandemic hold. Our economy has been developing slowly as a result of the loss of foreign direct investment and the mounting cost of government debt. Inflation has also been a negative impact on citizens as food and transport costs have significantly increased.

The supplementation of $3.85 billion should be used to address the critical difficulties facing the manufacturing sector, increase industrial output and help disadvantaged households. Mr. Vice-President, it is our patriotic duty in the UNC as the people’s representative to examine and challenge the Government’s financial allocation decisions. We stand in the gap—United National Congress stands in the gap, and in order to revive our economy, safeguard citizens’ livelihood and promote sustainable economic growth, we must make sure that these financial resources are used effectively and efficiently. We in the Opposition, in the United National Congress stand proudly ready. We have a winning team. We have the best plans, and under Kamla Persad-Bissessar—

**Hon. Senators:** [Desk thumping]
Sen. D. Lyder:—Trinidad and Tobago will win and become a great place once again. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. Senator: Bring it home! Bring it home!

Hon. Senators: [Crosstalk]

Sen. Lyder: Only “blows” today coming from the whole side. This whole side “go give blows” today.

Hon. Senators: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Deoroop Teemal.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Deoroop Teemal: Mr. Vice-President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute on this Bill that is before us, but before I do so, I am sure that my senatorial colleagues here would like to join with me in offering congratulations to Sen. Paul Richards who obtained his doctorate—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. D. Teemal:—and is now Sen. Dr. Paul Richards. We wish you all the best, Senator.

Hon. Senator: Very well.

Sen. Dr. Richards: Thank you very much.

Sen. D. Teemal: Mr. Vice-President, what we are seeing in this Bill before us is an overall increase of about—of around, approximately, 11 per cent from what was presented in the September budget of 2022. Mr. Vice-President, as a layperson, I would have been a lot more comfortable with a range of probably 3 per cent to 5 per cent, particularly in the context that we are not in a situation of the pandemic anymore or any international or national emergency outside of some flooding and some damage, landslips to roads brought about by excessive rainfalls due to the

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climate change, as we have been told. So 11 per cent to me is indeed quite high. I am not sure what the norms are internationally and I guess it would vary from country to country, availability of revenues, but to me, when we look at the increases they seem to revolve around a pattern of Heads of Expenditure over the past years. Now, this has also been noted by Sen. Seepersad in her contribution, and Sen. Deonarine did go into a bit of detail in that, with regard to Gratuities, Wages, Salaries & C.O.L.A; utilities, which would include telephone, water and electricity; Security Services, Contract Employment, payment of principle amounts and interest on public debt, Fees, Other Contracted Services, outstanding payments to suppliers and contractors, and certain aspects of infrastructural development, under these respective Heads of Expenditure, as I said, it seems to be a recurring scenario, particularly with regard to these Heads of Expenditure.

So, I mean, it begs the question, is it coincidental that it is just happening like that, or is it just bad budgeting, poor and inaccurate budgeting?—or, I think some of the Senators before me would have mentioned, is it part of the budgeting strategy to reflect a minimal deficit? So building on that, I would just like to go into a bit of detail with respect to the respective Heads of Expenditure, and under Gratuities to Contract Officers, what we are seeing is, for the Auditor General, 15 per cent increase; okay, not so bad; Head of Service Commissions, 135 per cent increase; under Pensions and Gratuities itself, which was omitted—it was omitted, $1.6 million; Ministry of Education, 121 per cent increase; and the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, 250 per cent increase. Now, I think in those particular cases, you know, we are talking about increases of this order. Now, in my basic understanding for something like Gratuities for Contract Officers, surely the information is at hand because we would know who are the officers on contract, whose contracts are coming to an end and the quantum of the
gratuity that has to be paid, so I cannot follow such large percentage increases that are being put forward here in this Bill to us.

Again, with regard to utilities, telephone, electricity and water, we see increases ranging from 30 per cent to 50 per cent for different expenditure Heads, like the Ministry of National Security, the President, the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, and it begs the same question that I have asked, you know, why such significant shortfalls in the budgeting? Are our projections—are the projections not being based on the past years’ rates because we have had—although rates have been—rate increases are being proposed, you know, those have not come into effect as yet, or it is because of the usage or the expansion of facilities within the respective Ministries that we are seeing such increases?

The other area is that of Contract Employment; for Parliament, 25 per cent increase; Statutory Authorities Service Commission, 58 per cent; Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, 34 per cent; Ministry of Education, no provision was made and we have to now approve the allocation for the Ministry of Education; and under the Ministry of Public Utilities with regard to WASA, I am seeing $328 million. Now, in the case of WASA, I am not aware of what the original allocation was for Contract Employment. Now, following a 2020 report of the Cabinet subcommittee appointed to review the operations of WASA and related recommendations, that would have been almost three years ago, and understandably—I mean, to get WASA on track to provide a decent service to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, considering the situation at WASA, it is expected that we have to invest a large amount of funds into WASA, and based on previous budgets a staggering amount of funds are being spent by WASA. Now, in order to assess this large appropriation of $325 million for Contract Employment, I think it
would have been really beneficial for this Senate to have seen some semblance or have been—to be told of some semblance of justification as to why such a huge sum of money.

Now, is it in accordance with the strategic and business plan of WASA which we have not seen any complete or conclusive business plan for WASA? In fact, I think WASA is desperately trying to come up with a business plan that would fulfill the needs of the Regulated Industries Commission so that a rate increase can be considered. And being part of the Joint Select Committee that we looked at this—we had an enquiry into the 2020 report coming out of the Cabinet subcommittee, and that was about two years ago, you know, we are seeing huge sums of money being expended with the Water and Sewerage Authority but we just cannot seem to match it; we cannot seem to marry it with a business plan or a strategic plan to justify such expenditure. I mean, of course, I wish the Water and Sewerage Authority all the best, you know, the nation deserves a good water supply, a reliable water supply, a sustainable water supply, particularly in the context of all the implications of climate change and the projections, not only for excessive rainfall but projections for drought conditions in the years to come.

So it is not a question of just beating up on WASA here, but it is a question of whether the spending that we are seeing, it is going to sort out the problems of WASA; whether the spending that we are seeing is going to ensure a sustainable and a viable WASA. And, you know, coming with an appropriation of $325 million for contract labour, I think, you know, we need to see a bit more information on that, because that is in addition too, that WASA has not entered—as far as I know, as far as I am aware, they have not entered into any severance packages yet for staff. That is still pending. They are still engaged with the unions and all of those things.
3.00 p.m.

The other area of expenditure, the other Head of Expenditure is the question of fees. Now, fees could be a bit emotive. It could be a bit of a politically emotive issue, particularly with the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. You know there is a jump from 30 million that was allocated in the budget, to $190 million. Now that is almost 633 per cent increase. Now, in the budgeting itself, how come it is—I am trying to just piece together the facts here. How come it is that we have such a major omission in the budget, or is it that the approach is to say, well look, we really cannot manage the outstanding fees, but if revenues improve well then we are going to increase the allocation? If that is the approach to the budgeting exercise.

The Office of the Prime Minister and the Children’s Authority, there is a proposed increase of $62.5 million over the original allocation of 70 million. Mr. Vice-President, of course, we should not spare any efforts whatsoever to ensure the welfare of our nation’s children. No efforts should be spared at all. But I would like to ask the question, how after substantial years—remember this Children’s Authority was formally set up since 2015. We are talking about almost seven to eight years, and a lot of money has been spent to get this Children’s Authority going. Such a drastic increase in the projected expenditure, by almost 100 per cent, you know, it begs the question: Are we getting it right?

Now it is stated that this additional moneys is to look at, or to make sure, or revise the organizational structure of the Authority. Now, I have problems coming to terms with this, because we are talking about hundreds of millions of dollars, from 2015 to now, invested in a Children’s Authority, and now we are coming to increase allocation by almost 100 per cent to revise the organizational structure. Did we get it wrong from the beginning? Did we get it wrong from the beginning,
so much so that the Authority is not as efficient as it should be, and we have to undergo major restructuring for it to be in consonance with the needs of the children of this country? I really hope and I trust that this significant increased funding would ensure that the issues surrounding the Children’s Authority would finally be resolved, and they would be operating at maximum efficiency in the near future.

Mr. Vice-President, I would like to just mention about the principal payments and interest payments on loans. A quick exercise, because we are talking about Office of the Prime Minister, for projects by UDeCOTT; Ministry of Education for the schools project of the past; Ministry of Health, the Port of Spain central block, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, interest of some small loans there; Ministry of Works and Transport through NIPDEC, and then NIDCO, a variety of projects. Then also the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. When you do a quick addition, this comes up to almost $195 million that was not covered in the original budget.

Now, again, it begs the question. The amount of the deficit here that we are trying to cover now, I mean, again I have to ask, these loans and the principal payments that are due on the loans, and the interest that is due on the loans, the information is there. Most of these loans are not new loans, they have been on the books for quite some years. So if we are to service these loans, obviously that information is there for us to realistically allocate funds to service these loans.

Then I will come to the Ministry of Finance and the amount owed to contractors. Now previous speakers before me, including Sen. Deonarine, spoke about the amounts owed to contractors. Mr. Vice-President, not just this Government, but since I have been involved in the construction industry for 35-odd years, payments to contractors, non-payment to contractors, timely payments have

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become part of our culture in Trinidad and Tobago. It is not just a way of doing business, it has become a culture where we think that it is okay to transact business with contractors and suppliers, and not have the means to pay them.

I could tell you, I am in the industry. A lot of contractors of course they would be happy with this increased allocation here, because we are increasing it by about 314 million, from the 619 million allocated in the September budget. So some contractors will be happy. But there are several questions.

One, after these payments are made, what would be the remaining balance due to contractors, especially for contracts completed over five years ago, four years ago, three years ago? The reason I ask this is because such a system, particularly for the construction industry, is not healthy, for any country. Because we would all know that the construction industry is almost always one of the biggest factors in a vibrant economy in a country. When you are not paying contractors on time, the effects of it would defeat the very objectives that we are trying on other avenues, such as manufacturing and all of those things.

Now, what this does really is that you are downsizing the list of contractors who would continue to take contracts from Government. What I mean by that is that only contractors with deep pockets—only contractors with the ability to raise cash in order to invest in projects for three and four and five years, would be left. The construction graveyard is littered with many, many contractors who have gone bankrupt, because of this failure of governments, as I said. As I said, it is a culture to not pay contractors on time.

Not only that, because what you do you end up with a select grouping of contractors with deep pockets, and you exclude and preclude opportunities for other contractors to engage in Government contracts, because they cannot carry projects for so long without being paid. What about the small and medium-sized
businesses? You have an industry in which small and medium sized contractors are doubtful. They are sceptical of entering into Government contracts, because some of them have to mortgage their homes to raise financing to do the projects, and then when they cannot get paid on time their homes and all those things are at risk, and they go bankrupt. So a lot of them are sceptical.

So we have an industry where the middle band, from the established large contractors to the small contractors, you see that middle band that you want to be vibrant and dynamic and employ people, that band is not there, because of this here where contractors find it very difficult to get paid. Not only that, it gives rise to corruption, because people have to come up with unique networking abilities in order to entice persons within the system to pay them on time. And what happens is people would pay this one, put back this one, squeeze this one for little incentives. It leads to corruption. I am in the industry, I know what I am talking about. It also applies to suppliers as well, not just contractors, but suppliers of goods and services.

Mr. Vice-President, I go to the Ministry of National Security, Head 22, and see that an allocation of an additional increase of $76 million, has been made to the Strategic Services Agency. Now this is addition to the 243 million that was allocated in the original budget, which included provisions for the National Operation Centre and the National Security Training Academy.

Now this $76 million, it is stated that it is for:

“the upgrade of security software and the installation, training and initial operation of a dedicated Data Connectivity Solution for the National...(CCTV) Network...”

[MR. PRESIDENT in the Chair]

Now this, Mr. President, I think it is a very necessary aspect of the
intelligence operations for crime fighting, but again, at the same time, we have been making real considerable expenditure to this particular agency, the Strategic Services Agency. In fact, it is piling up to billions of dollars.

Now the question would naturally arise—the question would naturally arise—with all of this investment here, what are the benefits to crime fighting? Are there tangible benefits that we can say, yes, these are the tangible benefits? Or are the benefits so intangible we still have difficulty in quantifying them, bringing them into dollars and cents? But with all of this investment here, I think the population at large would really expect a much greater impact on crime fighting, and input from the Strategic Services Agency.

Now, the Ministry of Health under Head 30, the Regional Health Authorities. Mr. President, since we had the formation of the Regional Health Authorities, I am not sure if any comprehensive audit has been done, performance audit or performance evaluation has been done of these Regional Health Authorities. We are spending the major part of our budget—one of the major parts of our budget on health. Of course, it is a necessity.

But, you know, I cannot understand how we would leave out $71.5 million from a budget, to pay Global Medical Response of Trinidad and Tobago for provision of national emergency ambulance service. I mean, maybe it is an error. It is just plain error that has been made, that we would leave out something like that, and such a significant sum of money.

Then we see $321 million additional being allocated for North-West Regional Health Authority, the Eastern RHA, North Central RHA and South-West RHA to facilitate payments on trade payables—321 million. Now, what is stated is that these moneys are for partial payments of trade payables. Not to settle the trade payables, but they are for partial payments. And it begs the question, you know,
what is the debt situation? What is the situation of the Regional Health Authority with regard to trade payables?

Now the reason that I raise this is because I do not know if colleagues would remember, that years ago the Regional Health Authorities had to borrow almost $1 billion that we are still paying back. They had to borrow almost $1 billion to settle trade payables, and we are still paying back that loan.

3.15 p.m.

And here stepping into a situation, or we are in a situation, where trade payables have become—is back on the front burner. And how extensive this problem is? How extensive this issue is? And it, again, goes to what I said about the construction industry. You have suppliers here and providers of services being owed money, and then what do we do? What does the system do? It eliminates those who cannot carry such—who does not have the finances to carry such cash flow for businesses. So what we are doing is we are ending up with a select group of suppliers who can finance and who can cash flow business for three to five years before they get paid. And I just have to ask, why are we not getting this right, particularly when we have borrowed so much money to correct a situation before and we seem to be stepping into the same situation again?

And then my final point, Mr. President, is about the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. Now, we see Maintenance of Vehicles, an addition of $38 million, over the $28 million allocated, an increase of almost 135 per cent. Now, Sen. Deonarine did mention VMCOTT, and VMCOTT being a graveyard for police vehicles. Now, we keep pumping money into VMCOTT, we keep utilizing VMCOTT for the maintenance of our police vehicles and our buses as well. And is VMCOTT due for a serious review, in terms of their performance and efficiency, and whether or not it is economically feasible for a Government of Trinidad and
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Sen. Teemal (cont’d)

Tobago to be engaged in maintenance of vehicles, or whether that should be given to the private sector for more efficient operations.

And then, an addition of $29.8 million, over $21.9 million, an increase of 136 per cent for the acquisition of new police vehicles. Mr. President, I wish someone would just conduct an exercise on the amount of moneys that we have spent over the past five to 10 years on police vehicles. It would reach into billions of dollars.

And why such a high replacement of police vehicles? Why such a high replacement of police vehicles? You know, one gets the impression—or I have heard from some members of the public that the police, the TTPS treats these vehicles as a child would treat a toy. Some of them “doh” last more than a year, if so long. There is an extraordinarily high rate of replacements for police vehicles. Now, sure, we can say it is because of the nature of the job. Yeah, but how many high-speed chases are they involved in? And how many vehicles get damaged due to high-speed chases? The rate of replacement, I think we need to look at that. I am of the view that—without concrete evidence because I have not done the research—but there is always room to bring down that high rate of replacement.

I think with the police service, you have seen every make of vehicle in Trinidad and Tobago, from Chevrolet, to Mazda, to Toyota, to Nissan. I mean, every brand under the sun we have purchased vehicles. I wonder how efficient that is for maintenance of vehicles and maintaining stock, keeping adequate stock, when you have about 15 different brands of vehicles? And why can we not rationalize the whole aspect for the police? And in addition to that, why can we not have projections about long should a police vehicle last with proper maintenance? I mean, what is the average life? Should we aim for three years? Should we aim for a five years? And what is the investment that we need to do,
from a maintenance point of view, to ensure that we are much more economical with this spending and this spending is sustainable? Because despite all the spending on police vehicles, we still hear almost every week in the press we do not have any vehicles, particularly in the rural areas, where we have police outposts and the smaller police stations.

In fact, two weeks ago, the Chaguanas Police Station was faced with an incident. The person was told, “We do not have any vehicles,” and they had to contact the Longdenville Police Post who had a vehicle. Imagine that. Chaguanas Police Station, being the major police station in the central region, did not have a vehicle to respond. And it is not that they have not been given vehicles before—they have not been given vehicle before. I think when we realistically look at this challenge that we have, with regard to police vehicles, there is definitely room for improvement in the procurement, in the maintenance, and how the vehicles are used by those assigned to drive them. Mr. President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Mr. President: Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing: Thank you, Mr. President, for this opportunity to join in this debate here today on the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2023) Bill, 2023. Mr. President, this has been a rather interesting day. We are now into the sixth hour of the debate and numerous speakers have gone before me, and so I will not be very, very long but I will bring some facts to this Chamber and into this debate and explain in certain instances why some of the money is being allocated in certain spaces. But it would be remiss if me, Mr. President, if I started here this afternoon without pointing out the levels of irony and hypocrisy that came out during this debate and was on display
here today so boldly from Members of the Oppositions Bench.

The Members of the Opposition, it seems they live in some parallel sunshine universe in which there was no COVID, in which the world did not go through a pandemic, in which sunshine cures everything. It is really unfortunate, I thought— the setting sun—I thought that the rant of a madman concert was two weekends ago when David Rudder had his farewell but, Sir, I am very concerned about the performances here today to compete with that.

Sen. Mark started in his usual flamboyant self, a sustained and deliberate attempt to create hysteria in Trinidad and Tobago, wild accusations, senseless lack of points that he was making. And of all the notes that I have taken, there is really nothing that I could respond to from Sen. Mark who only spoke about “who bawling” and what has collapsed. And I would tell him that he should look around at his own UNC house and see what is collapsing there.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: Sen. John, dear Sen. Jearlean John, spoke about the vaulting optimism of the Government. And I just want to remind her of the vaulting rhetoric of the Opposition, where there is the constant exploitation of the figures of speech, of course, and whispering sweet nothings to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And that contribution too, there is nothing much to come from here.

3.25 p.m.

And then we go on to Sen. Lyder. “Woo.” Well, this is where the hysteria went. This is where the hysteria rested and this is where the hysteria resurrected. So—

Mr. Vice-President: One second, Senator.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder. Please.

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. President. And Sen. Lyder said that the UNC was prepared to stand in the gap for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: I am not sure which gap. Because UNC lives in the “and”. The UNC is neither for Trinidad, neither for Tobago. The UNC is for itself. So that is the gap that you are standing in, Sen. Lyder. You have no authority to stand in the gap. They did not—when you all stand in your other spaces and project yourself to be the alterative government and try to create a space where there is a parallel government in Trinidad and Tobago, no such thing exists in this democracy and you are setting a bad example for my colleagues in Tobago because you are giving them false hopes and false expectations. So, Mr. President, anyway, let me get—oh, let me also congratulate the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:—for receiving his award from the very prestigious Howard University at the 155th commencement convocation. And it is very telling that the comments of the political—of the President of the United States of America were very favourable to our Prime Minister and to our leader.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: Of course, this is a far cry from the Glamour award that a previous Prime Minister would have received for wearing a pretty dress that was not even designed by her. So, we move on, Mr. President.

Today, I will speak on the matters pertaining to the children. So, I will refer to the Office of the Prime Minister, particularly the Gender and Child Affairs
Division. And I know Sen. Teemal raised some concerns about the Children’s Authority. So, Sen. Teemal, if you would permit me, please, I want to just discuss with you a few things about the Children’s Authority and what that allocation of $62 and a half million would be for. So it is, of course, an investment that shows the Government’s commitment to meeting the needs of the people of Trinidad and specifically to keeping the cogs of the Children’s Authority turning so that the vulnerable children of our nation have some space.

I know Sen. Teemal asked or suggested that there was an almost 100 per cent increase in allocations and he was asking if we got it wrong. But if you would allow me please to justify what most of those costs would be. Currently, there are 224 contract officers at the Children’s Authority with 34 service providers. And dare I say that this increase is to actually strengthen the Children’s Authority. Because with the recent restructuring that was mentioned in this document, it speaks to there will be, by September 2023, 241 new persons to be recruited and hired as staff to strengthen and bolster the Children’s Authority. And if you will permit me to just to breakdown what this staff would look like with the new restructuring and this is to supplement the 224 already in existence.

So one CEO, 64 child support officers, 16 child support assistants, 145 child support associates, eight executive assistants, one general manager corporate support services, one general manager finance enterprise and risk management, one general manager legal services and general council, one general manager planning and development, one general manager child welfare service, one leadership and transformation manager, and one general manager child and family reintegration services. So all of these new positions are being created to strengthen and to provide better service for the Children’s Authority. And there is an expectation that there will be 609 staff now in the Children’s Authority by

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September 2023. And this is part of the Government’s effort to improve and optimize the efficiency at the very much needed Children’s Authority in Trinidad and Tobago.

As I said, Mr. President, I am going to be very brief so I am just going to skate through the next one which is the Ministry of Education where there is a request for $69,419,023. If we look under the first Head on the note that we have which is 02/001/16: Contract Employment for $10 million, it is for two units which would be the educational health services unit and the educational technology unit. And I think it is very important for us to read into the records and to inform the national population exactly what these two units do, the function of these two units.

So the education health services was the unit that was set up in 2021 to manage the Ministry of Education’s COVID response. It consists of one doctor and the 18 nurses who operate in districts to liaise directly between the principals and the Ministry of Health personnel to deal with COVID management. This group, this unit was an on-the-ground resource for principals in the management of cases or suspected cases at school. They presently play a wider role which is to monitor in the school population any communicable disease such as hand-foot-and-mouth disease and to guide on all health related matters of schools. And I can testify to the efficiency of this service because I have children who attend schools both primary and secondary school. And anytime there is some incident happening insofar as health, for instance, recently there was hand-foot-and-mouth last term, I know for sure that the district nurse came in and visited the school, put certain guidelines in place, ensured that correspondence went out to the relevant classes and to the children and the parents. So that is the educational health services. That is to pay for the staff there.

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The educational technology unit was approved in 2021 and formed in 2022 to directly manage the optimization and implementation of the Ministry of Education’s School Learning Management System. This unit is charged with creating and maintaining the e-classroom platform, loading it with content and creating the profiles of all students and teachers, training teachers and students in the use of the platform and generating reports based on the use of the School Learning Management System. So, COVID might have been a terrible thing. It was absolutely a terrible thing to experience as humanity but there are some good things that have come out of COVID insofar as the evolution of education, the inclusion of technology in a more real and sustained way, as well as strengthening the health responses in the different districts, educational districts in Trinidad and Tobago.

So, we know that the Ministry of Education has its mandate to provide modern, relevant, equitable education for all. And we know that there are 250,000 students and there are just approximately 850 government institutions. And so I just want to talk about two things here underneath Head 26 which talks about seven schools that are being completed under—with MTS, with the MTS loan facility. So this is the first repayment of a very recent loan, the $13,481,195. And these are seven schools in critical—seven schools that need urgent attention in certain spheres. And the seven schools are La Horquetta North ECCE, Ramai Trace SDMS Primary, Arima Central Secondary, Holy Name Convent, Piccadilly Government Primary, Bishops Anstey High and Lower Morvant Government Primary School.

And then lower down we see the MTS repayment for the 26 schools. And I want to read out these 26 schools to show that this Government is working across the length and breadth of this island as best as it can to provide or improve, rather,
the facilities at schools across the country. And the 27 schools that are accounted for under 04/001/20 are: Barataria North, Brazil Secondary, Carapichaima West Secondary, Chaguanas North Secondary, Chaguanas South Secondary, Diego Martin North Secondary, East Mucurapo Secondary, El Dorado East Secondary, El Dorado West Secondary, Five Rivers Secondary, Malick Secondary, Manzanilla Secondary, Moruga Secondary, Morvant Laventille Secondary, Mucurapo West Secondary, Point Fortin West Secondary, Princes Town East Secondary, San Juan North Secondary, Sangre Grande Secondary, Siparia East Secondary, Siparia West Secondary, South East Port of Spain Secondary, St. George’s College, Success Laventille Secondary, Tranquillity Secondary, Union Claxton Bay Secondary and Valencia Secondary. So 27 government schools that the Government has its eye on right now and paying attention to improve the infrastructure.

And the final thing is the Development Programme, $16 million. And that really is money to bring the 756 existing scholars to the end of this academic year, 49 open scholarship winners, 91 additional and the two President Medal winners. So this is money to make sure that we can finish paying for them throughout the course of this fiscal year. And so, Mr. President, those are three little details that I wanted to speak on insofar the effect of this variation to the—young people and the children of Trinidad and Tobago.

And we spent a lot of time in drama and theatre, and feigned interest, and gaslighting, and a set of noise but we did not hear anything significant towards nation building coming from the Opposition Bench. And I continue to remain firm in my conviction that the Opposition is bereft of any ideas. Many of their actions are inimical to the interest of the people of this country and to this country in itself but really and truly and I should not be surprised at that.

And so I join with Sen. Teemal as he talks about revisiting the culture and
the thinkers of some of the people in this country. And I do hope, I want to put out a call to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we must do what we can to protect and build our country. And I endorse this Bill here this afternoon, Mr. President, and I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Mr. President: Sen. Lutchmedial.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial: Thank you, Mr. President, for recognizing me in giving me the opportunity to join in this debate here today. Mr. President, we are called to this House today to scrutinize and to approve an additional $3.9 billion which would be added to the—to supplement government expenditure under various Heads. Now, I think a lot has already been said on the economic climate and I have no background in economics so I will stay away from those things. But what I would say is that, when we look at expenditure from a government we do not expect and when I say we, I do not just mean—I do not mean the Opposition, I do not mean just myself but the people of Trinidad and Tobago expect a sort of report. They expect something like a progress report and an explanation as to why it is necessary to supplement expenditure under the various Heads. What has been delivered and what they can expect. And many speakers before me would have spoken at length about the state in which the country is currently functioning and the feelings and the sentiments amongst the people in this country. Because when you spend money based on two things, taxes collected from persons and your revenue is basically from tax and borrowing, which is really a debt that future generations have to carry, people want to know more and they need to feel that they are getting some value for money. And every time we have one of these debates, I speak on that concept of value for money. Because any time this House,
this Senate, is called upon to approve expenditure, we have to scrutinize the various measures and look at value for money.

Mr. President, it is no secret that a lack of economic opportunities would drive further upcoming generations of youth towards a life of criminality. That is the critical underlying factor that affects crime in this country. And we are like hamsters on a wheel at times, I feel, going nowhere when we do not properly allocate resources towards our crime situation and to seriously tackle the underlying causes of crime. So when we have to—when we are called here to deal with proposals to supplement expenditure and we are not told of any measures that would promote sustainable growth, that would help with diversification of our economy so that we become less dependent on the energy sector, when we do not see, for example, that serious issues rearing their head time and time again being reported in the newspaper, and those issues are not being tackled with these supplementations, we have to question the value that we are getting for these sums that we are asked to approve here today.

3.40 p.m.

If you do not have Government policies that are really promoting sustainable growth then you really are not spending your money in the way that it ought to be spent, and you are not delivering to the people of Trinidad and Tobago what they need. You are just keeping the wheels going. It is like you are stuck in the same place and keeping the wheels going, and the Government boasts about recovery and we are doing better and so on. Well, coming out of COVID you expect figures to rise, and I think everybody has spoken about that already, but at the end of the day we have to again ask, well, have we experienced real growth in manufacturing not linked to the energy sector? We are not talking about the energy sector and we are not talking about petrochemicals, we wanted to hear about manufacturing,
non-energy related manufacturing. And I think Sen. Lyder made the point about the number of companies that have moved their manufacturing out of this country.

Now, what is the link when you talk about that type of—those types of development and crime? Because that is where I would focus, on the supplementations requested for the Ministry of National Security and to an extent the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. When you are discussing the lack of or the decline in the number of companies that are here and that are moving their manufacturing facilities out of the country you are again looking at a reduction in the number of jobs available, and particularly to young people. Sen. Mark gave some alarming statistics about the level of employment and under-employment that we have in Trinidad and Tobago, and unless we really address our issues of employment and creating proper, good paying jobs, sustainable jobs for young people we are going to continue to have problems with crime. So nowhere in any of these supplementations do we see a real effort being made to address the issues that would affect the country and tackle the crime situation.

I want to speak about a few of the specific allocations here today, and the first one that stood out to me was the supplementation for the amount of money to be spent on prison transport. An additional sum of money is requested for that Head under National Security. Now, back in 2018 the Ministry of National Security, you know, was very vocal about the amount of money being invested in facilities at the prison that would facilitate a reduction in the need to transport prisoners and so on. In 2018, they said the projects were 70 per cent complete, and they expected those courtrooms and the virtual environment to be fully functional in a short time. COVID came along, and then it was said that they were opening 12 off-site facilities, modified containers at the cost of about $70,000 each at each court at different prisons in order to facilitate its virtual court hearings. They
promised savings at that time to the population was $80 million. That is what was promised.

Now the figure has been reduced but it is nowhere near what was quoted before. Because pre-COVID we were spending about $40 million, and the estimates coming out from the budget was about $7 million. But today we are hearing now it is to supplement for a further $7 million. What I found strange is that last year around this same time the question was posed because of the supplementation requested to pay bills, and in the other place it was stated that an investigation was needed, and that some of the invoices submitted during the COVID period for prison transportation, that needed to be investigated. And that was not raised by the Opposition or anybody else, it is the Minister of National Security that went on record and said that he had to investigate some of those invoices to ensure that people were being paid.

Now, as you would see later on in my contribution, we tend to hear about things needs to be investigated and so on, then you hear nothing again, and then you come here for a supplementation. So I do not know if somebody could just clarify. because if you have an estimate in 2022, the estimate was the same of $7 million, and I think the revised estimate ended upcoming close to $20 million, and now you have estimated again for 2023, $7 million, and you have come now for a further $7 million. So is this to deal with an issue of what? Outstanding invoices. What has become of the promised investigation into the amount of invoices promised during the COVID period? Because there were no prisoners, or very few prisoners being moved for that entire COVID period when all of court was virtual. And as someone who from time to time would still attend, for example, Magistrates’ Court where you have the most amount of prisoners, I would tell you that most courts still receive a link from the prison every day and they deal with all
of the remand matters. And it is only when matters are set for trial, in most cases, and not even in all cases, that the prisoners are brought to the courts. So, why the need, and was it just a situation of under-budgeting when the $7 million figure was presented in the budget in September or October of last year.

The second area that I want to make mention of is that of a further $7 million for security services—no sorry, that was the prison transport. The $76 million for the Strategic Services Agency, the colourful, and I would say sordid, debacle of CCTV in this country leaves a bitter taste in the mouth of most people. Because, and as Sen. John went through the details of some of the more disturbing crimes which struck at the hearts of this country which could have perhaps been prevented or at least solved in a timely manner had we has a proper functioning CCTV network, it really does emphasize why it is when people in this country hear that a further $76 million is being requested they question what value they are getting.

Mr. President, in November of 2020, the Prime Minister made an announcement that $80 million had been spent to acquire cameras. Back in 2018, there was a decision taken by this Government to discontinue a contract which was previously held by TSTT. When they went out to tender, the head of the SSA at the time wrote and said that there has been some compromise of the tender and the entire thing was scrapped. It took the Government two years—for two years we heard nothing, and then an RFP went out, and lo and behold scrapped again in January 2021. By October they went out again, and someone was selected based on that tender. Lo and behold shortly thereafter it was announced that even that matter was passed for investigation to the Attorney General, the present Attorney General. And the country was left without any answers whatsoever about this contract and what took place with the contract and why there was a need for investigation, only to be told sometime later that $80 million had been spent on
cameras, at a political meeting. Not even the courtesy or the propriety to report to the Parliament on the situation.

But we are told and we read in the media that $80 million is being spent on cameras, and today for the same things that they were supposed to tender for, which is a data connectivity solution, we are being asked to approve a further $76 million, without us even knowing what has become of the investigation. Who has won the tender? Is this an additional sum of money that is being allocated for a new tender? Is this a new contract? Who are the suppliers that are being awarded these contracts? Because the Opposition has raised time and time again the issue of corruption with these CCTV contracts. And when you take that in the context as well, put into context that of the roughly 1800 cameras that were in existence and reported last year to be in existence, close to 700 of them were reported as being non-functional. And this is a country where crime is out of control. And in a country where crime is out of control and we have an abysmal detection rate, we are being told about an $80 million here and a $76 million there, and half the cameras or close to 700 cameras are non-functional. Where is the real information that would help the population to understand what they are getting for this additional $76 million? It is non-existent, Mr. President, and I think that is something that is unacceptable when we come to have a debate such as this, and to deal with expenditure.

In a country that is so riddled with crime, one would also expect that if under the Head 20—22, or the Ministry of National Security, the Ministry of National Security who in the budget was allocated $5.79 billion and is now here to get a further $128 million, that you would see some meaningful expenditure that could address the issues that we are commonly faced with, which impacts upon the crime situation, but that is missing. In fact, throughout, when I perused this entire

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document, and I think Sen. Deonarine addressed the issue quite clearly, this document speaks to expenditure that was totally predictable when the budget was delivered in October.

How does a government deliver a budget and not cater for things like gratuities for contracts that came to an end. Do you not know how many contract officers there are in each Ministry? Do you not know that the contracts are coming to an end? Do you not know that the gratuities would be payable? Are you not able to properly estimate things like materials and supplies, electricity and so on? Or is there a deliberate attempt to under-budget every October and then come to this Parliament to seek a supplementation because you painted a picture that is based on a situation that is completely unrealistic. Are you just cooking the books, and are you just delivering something to the population and selling them dreams? Because that is what it sounds like. Because these supplementations deal with nothing new. They are not bringing anything new to the population to say, listen, if we want this additional sum of money this is what we are going to do. We recognize that we have fallen short in this area and it is a serious problem facing the country, and so we are going to spend more money to deal with it. If that were the case these are some of the things I would have hoped and expected to hear about. The first would have been a lot more money being put into the Forensic Sciences Centre.

Mr. President, I saw the other day that the Minister is again boasting about financial assistance that we are going to get from the Government of China to construct a new Forensic Sciences Centre. Many, almost more than a year ago I posed questions in this Parliament that revealed that there were over 16,000 samples awaiting testing at the Forensic Sciences Centre. Now, what does that mean, and I will explain it for the average citizens to understand. It means that
crimes that could be solved if these exhibits are analysed cannot be solved until that is done. It means that people who are charged and awaiting trial, or victims who are awaiting their day in court to get justice cannot have their matters proceed because we are waiting for samples to be tested at Forensics. So if you come here to say that National Security needs more money, and that you are going to deliver something to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, I expected to see some sort of allocation to address the deficiencies at the Forensic Sciences Centre. Instead what do we have? We have a Minister acting like it is brand new, fresh, hot off the press news, that we are getting a brand new Forensic Sciences Centre. And I had a moment of déjà vu when I heard the Minister making that announcement, I was proudly outside of the Hyatt, so I went back into the archives, and the previous Minister of National Security, in October of 2018, and I found the article, said:

“10m Chinese funding for new forensic sciences centre”
—and I am reading from an article dated Tuesday the 16th of October, 2018.

3.55 p.m.

Mr. President, in that article the words of the then Minister of National Security are reported indicating again where the centre will be located. And he said and I quote:

“…the breaking of ground will be soon after the budget with an…”—

Mr. President: Senator, do you have a source?

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Sorry, the Newsday newspaper, article titled, “$10m Chinese funding for new forensic science centre”, written by Julien Neaves, Tuesday 16 October, 2018. And I am quoting:

“…the breaking of ground will be soon after the budget with an estimated completion of the last quarter of 2019 or 2020.”

Now, I know they are going to come and say, “well, is COVID, is COVID, is
COVID”. But you still have a backlog of samples waiting for testing. When I posed those questions in this Parliament I specifically asked if they had attempted to outsource DNA facilities, either locally or abroad. Nothing has been done. And in the meantime what does the country face? Well, I will tell you, Guardian article, May 16, 2023. Sorry, that is today’s date that was printed. It was about 74 days ago. That is how they put it up when you pull it off the internet:

“Eight months and no DNA results: Mother begs for son’s body at Forensic...”

Another article dated March 06, 2023, this time from the Express:

“Five years of pain.
DNA testing identifies 20 victims but parents of missing nursing student waiting closure since 2018.”

January 06, 2023, Express newspaper:

“Family ‘distraught’ over autopsy delay.”

A mother of seven who drowned, they were waiting over—after waiting for many hours they could not get any sort of answer, some two weeks after that drowning took place to have the autopsy completed at the Forensic Science Centre.

The Forensic Science Centre is a key part of our national security infrastructure and it affects everything. The Government’s great plan to help move the justice system forward is to do away with juries and to cut cost and cut down on food for juries. Well, I think the Express editorial over the weekend dealt with that quite well when they described it as an insult to the national intelligence. And I have to say—

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

Mr. President: So hon. Senator, the point of order is towards irrelevance. I would ask you at this point in time as much as you are tying it to that particular
item that is before us as it deals with the Ministry of National Security, what I would want to caution you on is tedious repetition because we are hearing a lot about national security from several Senators going before that have spoken and I would like you to just tie it in succinctly and make it concise and then if you have any other points to bring them forward now.

**Sen. J. Lutchmedial:** Thank you, Mr. President, for the guidance. But you see, Mr. President, national security is the most critical issue affecting this country right now.

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

**Sen. J. Lutchmedial:** And if anyone were to come in this Parliament to talk about the expenditure of funds and not address this Government’s failure to address critical national security issues then they would be not fulfilling their duty to this population. Because without this Government addressing national security issues and tackling crime but also trying to improve the efficiency of our justice system in a meaningful way, not by removing juries and not by dealing with things that would have no impact, but really to tackle it. I want to speak to something—

**Sen. Mitchell:** Mr. President, I am looking for the point of order and I will seek your guidance, but that is a matter under active consideration, that debate is in progress. So I am not sure the Member can raise that.

**Mr. President:** The guidance on this, on the Standing Order that the Minister is trying to find, treats with re-litigation of debates or debates that are under active operation within the Chamber. Again, as much as you have mentioned it, just briefly, it is not to be drilled down into because it is an active debate that is ongoing in the Chamber. So, again, just skirt over it and move forward.

**Sen. J. Lutchmedial:** I am guided, Mr. President. Again even the IMF in their Article IV Report on Trinidad and Tobago recently concluded, stated that:

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Efforts needed to promote diversification of the economy, including by tackling crime, improving infrastructure and improving trade policies and this can be achieved by delivering on the *Vision 2030*, promised by the Government.

Now, at the end of the day, whether something is being debated or not, government policies, and we have to look at the policies, because if you are not tying your expenditure to meaningful policies that would effect change for the people of Trinidad and Tobago then you are wasting time. And I have to say that in everything that I have said here today about forensics and which I will continue to say on other areas of national security and crime and justice in this country, there has been absolutely no movement, no meaningful movement in the direction of tackling the issue of crime and that is why we are where we are today.

So let us move on again to other areas that treat with the crime situation in this country. When I spoke in the budget debate in October I made the point that there is a reason why it is called a justice system and that all the arms have to interact with each other. I made the point that the DPP’s Office remained severely understaffed and that whilst the Government had as part of their policy to be able to expand the number of courtrooms, hire more judges and masters in the Criminal Division of the Judiciary, at a minimum you need to have a functional prosecutorial service, a functional public defenders or legal aid department, as well as a well-staffed and resourced Judiciary.

We have an appropriation, a supplementation being sought today to the tune of almost, a little over $14million for filling positions at the public defender’s office. Now, after the budget, of course we had that whole conversation here, we went away, in March of this year we were told that the entire court system was on the brink of collapse because there were simply no prosecutors to be able to go to
court and to handle these matters. And the alarming statistics that we became privy to at that point in time—you see under the People’s Partnership administration being a responsible government, a comprehensive study was conducted for the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and in 2014 a whole new structure, which included not just the supporting positions that were needed but also the amount of staff needed to deal with the case load at that time, of 129 attorneys, was approved. We learnt that of that they had only 58, which is less than half of the approved strength.

Upon further interrogation both by the media and a joint select committee and so on, we learnt that about a quarter of the current staff complement of the DPP’s Office had little or no experience with prosecuting and had been sent to the office mere months before, hired by the Ministry on contract.

Now, again, if you are coming here to supplement your expenditure and you are strengthening one arm of the criminal justice system to fill vacant positions for public defenders, what is happening at the DPP’s Office? This is something that requires urgent attention. This is something that requires an urgent amount of funds to be made available even if it is to hire short term assistance for this office. Because if not, what are we facing. Are we going to face a situation where you are going to have people with very little or no experience taking on serious matters as prosecutors? Are we going to face a situation where there simply are not enough warm bodies to put in all of these new courtrooms? A government that boasts endlessly about outfitting the Waterfront for the Civil Courts and freeing up space at the Hall of Justice for the criminal courts, freeing up space for whom? Who are you going to put into those courtrooms? So that is also something that is urgent, pressing and has engaged the attention.

I think that single concern about the Office of Director of Public
Prosecutions having sufficient resources and staff to carry the system, occupied space in our media for more than a month because it is of such grave concern to the population and where are the solutions that are being proposed here.

Now, if we have to sit back and take a look at all what is happening in the system we know that moneys have to be spent in specific areas to strengthen the system, we know that policy decisions are needed and the sad reality is that some of the Government’s policies have created a situation where it does not just address—it does not just fail to address the present crime situation but it may also contribute to the perpetuation of what we are seeing here today. And I want to make specific reference to the Government’s policy on migrants.

I see, again, there is a lot of information being put out there by various Senators about the amount of, the rebounding of the services sector. How many migrants who entered the country illegally and were then—

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Point of order, 46(1), Mr. President, this is not in the supplementary appropriation—

**Mr. President:** Yes, Sen. Lutchmedial. The point that you are making in relation to migrants, can you tie it into something specific that is before us.

**Sen. J. Lutchmedial:** Yes, I will. You see unless the Government comes up with a policy to treat with the migrant population then this will be a further strain on our economy down the road. We are hearing and from the last budget to now we have had discussions about the need to raise the retirement age because the National Insurance Board is not—

**Mr. President:** So Senator, as much as—I understand what you are doing, but nothing I have heard so far in terms of the explanation per the guidance just given ties to what we have in front of us. The last thing I heard that tied to it dealt with the DPP’s office and so forth. So in keeping with what I just spoke to, try and tie it
to what is in front of us.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I will make it very clear then. You cannot have an entire segment of your population deprived of social benefits, deprived of education, deprived of full integration into a society and expect that crime will be tackled. Because that is what the lack of government policy or their bad policies when it comes to the migrant community, is creating. They are creating the environment in which crime can thrive. What do you think happens to children who are deprived of an education? What do you think happens to people who are deprived of benefits if they are not contributing to the economy?

So if we have a situation, for example, where the economy and our social security safety net, our social security system requires more contributions, why not take action to bring people into the system instead of allowing the system to be burdened and to fall apart and to be, I think it was $1 billion deficit or something like that, and at the same time not treating with the issue of having an entire population susceptible to falling by the wayside and going into a life of crime. You see, there are different things that we have to speak about when we speak about crime. It is not just about an expeditious justice system, it is not just about having staff in one place. It is a holistic approach which we must take in order to tackle—sorry—

Mr. President: So Senator, so I have gotten the point that you are making where you are tying it to crime which will be the Ministry of National Security inside of what we have here. The problem with that is that puts you in breach of tedious repetition. We have had the generalist comments coming from several Senators before you, speaking to crime and tying it to the Ministry of National Security here. So I would ask you to move on from that point because that point has been made ad nauseam for the day.
Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Yes. Guided, Mr. President. Mr. President, a government that comes today to seek a further $190 million in fees to be paid to local and foreign attorneys for the provision of legal services, is a government that after removing scrutiny of legal services from our procurement legislation is really a government that refuses to account to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. President, it is really and truly an affront to good governance that this amount of money could be requested in this supplementation and that there is no accountability whatsoever for the expenditure of these fees.

4.10 p.m.

I found it very difficult to listen to the Senator before me speak about the amount of money being allocated to the Children’s Authority and that, you know, this Government is going to continue to protect children and so on. There is a case reported in the news, in the media, where this Government took it all the way to the Privy Council—and the matter is complete before anybody “jump up” on sub judice. The matter was completed where an appeal was filed in the Court of Appeal to reduce the award of damages to a child who had been abused while under the care of the Children’s Authority from $2 million to $1 million. And in the effort of saving a whole million dollars, I think this Government should tell the country how much they spent at the Court of Appeal and the Privy Council—

Mr. President: Senator, you have five more minutes.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial:—in order to achieve that result, because candle is definitely costing more than funeral in this situation. And, Mr. President, it is really—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: It is truly—it is really and truly absolutely unbelievable that an additional $190 million will be requested in the supplementation to pay legal fees when this Government has absolutely nothing to show for it.
I do not know what successes they have achieved. I think they have one judgment that talks about Suratt and Suraj. I know that they will come to talk about winning that matter. I think apart from Suratt, Suraj, and I do not know which other “Su” they are going to come with afterwards, there is absolutely no real material benefit to the people of this country for the kind of money that is being spent on legal fees to date.

Mr. President, there is absolutely no reason why the persons who are awarded contracts—because that is what they are, contracts—to provide legal services for the State should have been removed from the procurement legislation. If that were the case, I think we will be having a totally different conversation here today about the amount of additional funds needed to pay legal fees. In addition to which, the fact that you have to request a supplementation, brings into question the amount being spent and whether or not there is proper budgeting being done for legal fees.

I heard in the other place that blame was being assigned to a citizen that chooses to challenge this Government time and time again on their bad policies, bad decisions and so on. And I want to say that when a government has to resort to blaming a citizen who has been bringing and being successful in litigation against the Government because of their bad policies and bad decisions—and that is where they resort to blaming the citizen for the amount of money they spent on legal fees—they are a total and complete failure. Total and complete failure.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: And I want to remind them that it is public interest litigation like that, over the years, that has built the public law jurisprudence of this country and we are a richer society for it.

We have seen over the years that public interest litigants have undertaken
litigation to allow our courts the opportunity to further define the constitutional rights and freedoms that are guaranteed to citizens of this country. And for a government to stand up and say, “Well, we have to defend”—you do not have to defend. You do not have to look for a way to spend an additional $190 million. What you should be doing is managing your litigation portfolio.

I posed a question in this House about the number of matters in which there were default judgments given against the State for failure to file an appearance or a defence, and the Attorney General provided information and said it was gathered by speaking to attorneys. So you walk around the Ministry and ask everybody, “So, ay, how much case you lose? How much case you lose”, and come up with something here? The figures given were totally misleading because I was able to put my hand on two—just two matters in which default judgment was granted against the State that amounted to almost 80 per cent of the figures that the Attorney General quoted for a five-year period, and that was in one year alone.

So there is very improper management of the litigation portfolio and that is why we are coming here today to seize $190 million—yes, $190 million additional. What benefit have the people of Trinidad and Tobago derived from all of the moneys spent on legal fees to date? How will this $190 be spent? What type of litigation is the Government defending? Are you defending or are you trying to cut the award of damages to children who are sexually and physically abused whilst under the care of the State? That is how you expect the money that the taxpayer gives to you and that is how you are managing it? Those are the questions that I call upon this Government to answer today when they come here to seek supplementation under these types of Heads, please, Mr. President. I thank you.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: [Desk thumping]
Mr. President: Sen. Richards.

Sen. Dr. Paul Richards: Thank you, Mr. President, for recognizing me and allowing me to make a contribution to this, the Finance (Supplemental and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2023) Bill, 2023. I am speaker number eight of, I believe, 18. I know that we started at 10.00 a.m. this morning and quite a lot has been said already, so I will limit my contribution to specific areas, and even within those areas a lot has been said, including national security, education, the police service. I will add Social Development And Family Services, and Ministry of Sport and Community Development.

Very often it is easy to—there is a tendency to look at these exercises of the budget and also the supplementation of the mid-year review as formalities, just mere accounting exercises. But it is important because it is an opportunity for the population to hear, one, what the Government has achieved in terms of its original budget presentations and also, what the allocations have done in terms of tangible positive impacts on the lives of Trinbagonians and in terms of value for money. And when we hear $52 billion budget and we hear in the case of national security, it is $128.8 million and 69 million, 419—69 million, sorry, and 100 million, it just sounds like numbers. But numbers should be translating to value in the lives of everyday lives of Trinidadians and Tobagonians.

And if that is not happening, you could imagine how the population gets despondent. And we are in a space in this country where I want to believe that we are all in some sort of collective post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome because of what we face every day, and it is not unusual when any society goes through a series of traumas on a consistent basis. New York went through it, and Washington, DC in 9/11, London went through it. And some of the symptoms could include what we are seeing today, in terms of a very antagonist society, a
very conflicted society. So I think accounting for these allocations and appropriations is very important so the population gets a sense of what the value is for them.

Let me go straight to education and the $69,419,023. And the original allocation for education, I think, was the highest in 2023 fiscal with $7.4 billion in which there were a lot of challenges coming out of COVID-19 where the Education Ministry allocated an initial $10 million to deal with learning loss because there was significant learning loss, not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but also around the world.

In the fiscal 2023 presentation, the Finance Minister allocated an additional $50 million to deal with remedial lessons to mitigate learning loss. And the education stakeholders commended that, including myself, because I thought it was a good step in the right direction for this particular fiscal. But we have not heard, in terms of accountability, what the result of that investment has been.

The first $10 million, though well intentioned, only saw a very small percentage of students participating and it was aimed at dealing with the transition students from SEA to Form 1. The additional of $50 million was supposed to be more widely allocated and implemented, and we have not heard about the results of that. What we have heard about, unfortunately, is the issue of school dropouts to the tune of about 2,500 between primary and secondary schools, which I raised in 2017, interesting enough, and I do not think it has been addressed significantly. And this is a trend that precedes this Government in terms of about 2,500 to 3,000 students dropping out primarily during the secondary school tenure, but at some level during primary school, which has a significant impact on national development.

In addition to that, the issue of student performance generally, where
according to a *Guardian* report—let me just get the reference, please—by Joshua Seemungal and Carisa Lee, the 2nd of April, 2023, which focused on the issue of 9,000 students scoring less than 50 per cent in the SEA examinations who were still enrolled in secondary schools. Nine thousand scoring below 50 per cent, but we spent $50 million on remediation and we do not know if that has been effective or not. So it goes back to my earlier point. When we come to ask about supplementation, we have to ask about value for money, and if the intended expenditure is bearing fruit and achieving the objectives. Because the other side of that is students falling out of the system to the tune of 2,500 to 3,000 every year adds to the vulnerability in society where gangs and criminality, they become vulnerable to those tendencies, and we do not seem to be getting value for money though the allocations are being made and the moneys are being spent.

When are we going to start measuring the success of these allocations and these expenditures in a way that we can identify whether or not the allocation needs to be improved, or if the way the money is being spent and the policies and the strategies are really effective enough given the significant expenditure the Government is making in this direction? So it is all well and good to spend $60 million for remediation, of course nobody can argue with that in principle, but is it bearing fruit? And if it is not bearing fruit, as we are seeing by the statistics—this is not me, this is the Education Ministry saying so—it means we are doing something wrong. And the consequences of that down the road are dire and we are seeing it in remand.

So we have to deal with that in a really significant way. Part of that also is looking at the way we are dealing with special needs in Trinidad and Tobago, and learning disabilities. And a closer look at those numbers, in terms of the education spent particularly in this appropriation, Mr. President, is the Government primary
schools show 24 students dropped out in 2020, 36 in 2021, and 91 in 2022. So we are seeing an increase in the drop-out rate in primary schools. And this, again, is from the *Guardian* newspapers from the 2nd of April, 2023, the article by Carisa Lee and Joshua Seemungal. We are also seeing in the secondary schools where the dropout rate is much more pronounced, because I think the—if I am not mistaken—the age at which we stay in school legally maybe 14. The mandatory age that is. So we maybe need to look at that. In government secondary school, 623 students dropped out in 2020, 1056 in 2021 and 984 in 2022.

4.25 p.m.

So there was a slight reduction and the district with the most dropout was St George East with 724 students. In 2021 alone, 302 students dropped out of the secondary school in that district. So if we are spending the money for remediation and if we are spending over $7 billion in education generally, we have to be getting value for money, it has to be having an impact on particularly the student population for national development. Because in this appropriation, we are asking for an additional $69 million which primarily, according to the appropriation details, is supposed to go for infrastructural upgrades, et cetera, school repairs but it makes no sense repairing schools and not repairing the curriculum, if the curriculum is not having the right effect on the student. I think we need to take a deeper dive into that.

Mr. President, if we also look at the issue of coming out of the pandemic and the data coming out of that when you look at education and according to an article in Icare Sustainably, December 10th, 2020 and the impact of COVID-19 on how we should be looking at allocating supplementation expenditure in Trinidad and Tobago. There are specific areas that have been identified in terms of the impact of COVID-19 which we are not totally out of it yet because the effects are still
being felt in terms of learning loss, in terms of the impact on students, primary, secondary and tertiary and also in terms of the teachers and how they had to deal with it.

“…in 2019 around 86.3%…”

According to this article and the title of the article is:

“…How the pandemic…changed how we learn and teach”

And it is tied to the SDGs in Trinidad and Tobago.

“…83.3% of children left school with basic proficiency in maths and reading. The number of children finishing secondary school with basic proficiencies is 51.3%. Unfortunately…”—according to this article—“20-30% of the secondary school students drop out…which the majority are boys.”

Look at the correlation on Remand, look at the correlation in the criminal justice system. There is a direct relationship that we are seeing year on year with the dropout rate and in particular, the negative effects on an education system that is not reaching some of these students effectively.

Recently, in the symposium on crime in the Caribbean, we also had a presentation from Dr. Malisa Neptune-Figaro who also went a step further as we are talking about the impact of expenditure on education, on recruitment from fundamentalist Islamic groups like ISIS and the same issues came up. Education system that is not dealing with the student’s needs effectively, gang culture in Trinidad and Tobago, social stratification and inequity. Are these expenditures in Social Development and Family Services, National Security Public Utilities, Health, Education, the Office of the Prime Minister understanding that there are specific challenges that we have to zero in on in Trinidad and Tobago or are we just operating in rote and spending moneys on recurrent expenditure and not
drilling down into the vulnerable groups in society and I think we need to take a real look at that.

On my last issue related to education, I would like to quote an article from a former classmate of mine at USC. She is now Dr. Se-Anne Chance and her doctoral thesis, Doctor of Philosophy in Family Studies from Loma Linda University, which was titled:

“Youth-At Risk Behaviors within the School System in Trinidad and Tobago”

And her results were quite startling. She looked at Caribbean youth risk profiles and she looked at the profiles of Trinidad and Tobago at-risk youth. Not the first study of this type, we have had similar studies from Prof. Ramesh Deosaran, the late Prof. Selwyn Ryan and many others looking at the vulnerable groups and youth at-risk in Trinidad and Tobago. And she was able to quote UNDP statistics from 2012 which indicated that, quote:

“…the high social costs of youth crime on grassroots communities and the nation as a whole…estimated…”—according to the—“UNDP”—in—“2012)—at 2.88 per cent of total GDP.

That is significant. It means that we have to look at it in the context of the impact on national development in Trinidad and Tobago and make the necessary changes. I also saw, finally on education, before I move quickly to national security and the other two areas I outlined, on one of the Heads I saw, Head 26, Ministry of Education which among the expenditure Items, were looking at the repair of ECCE Centres which is commendable, furniture and equipment for schools, of course, some school repairs and I saw something that looked very, very strange, development of a school for special education.

Now, by my understanding, the Ministry of Education has a stated inclusive
education policy and an inclusive education policy means that students with special needs or learning disabilities are remediated in the general education classroom settings as much as possible, yet we continue to have this inconsistency policy application where we are having special schools and we are allocating funds to the development of a special education school—a school for the blind, a school for the deaf—when many of these special needs and learning disabilities can and should be remediated in the general education classroom setting, so that struck me as very strange and inconsistent with the Ministry’s stated education policies. So we are going to allocate funds for the development of a special education school which I guess is in the embryotic stages without looking at the whole picture or the picture in a holistic manner.

Mr. President, before I quickly move on, let me just go on to the issue of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and I know it has been brought up before but I think it is worth repeating because of the fact that the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is the tip of the arrow in our fight against crime in Trinidad and Tobago. They are under the gun, no pun intended, or pun intended, and we, as I started by saying, are shell-shocked and the numb by crime in Trinidad and Tobago. The level of heinous crimes, the murder, the home invasions, that are happening at an alarming rate and when we see $100 million extra being requested or being asked of us to approve, the population is asking the question: Is it going to redound to better policing, more effective policing, more effective intervention, taking the criminals off the streets? Because it was quote before.

This young woman, Gabrielle Raphael, 24 years old, it took us days to identify her body and over 24 hours or 48 hours before she was found. We are seeing this recurring decimal of women and girls being attacked in the most horrendous manner in Trinidad and Tobago. We are seeing almost every two
months now a child being shot. The criminality is intensifying and we have to ask for value for money when we are looking or seeking to appropriate an additional $100 million, one, for the purchase of vehicles but two, we are begging to get officers in terms of accountability because the new Commissioner of Police has indicated an extensive new strategy for dealing with crime including police accountability and transparency, reducing corruption in the police service, more data-driven policing. Is this expenditure going to be applied to that and are we going to see the results of the expenditure when we have these grandiose announcements? The population has the right to ask.

We seem to have a challenge getting officers to even wear body cams, to provide evidence. There does not seem to be an audit of the number of police cars when we are asking for a supplementation for the maintenance and purchase of new police cars to find out how many police cars we are going through on a yearly basis or on a quarterly basis, what the maintenance schedule is like and if we are over general baseline averages around the world and are officers being held accountable if they are careless with state equipment. What is happening with the old cars? Is the disposal of public property being done in a manner that can redound to benefits to the police service? All these questions that have to be asked in terms of accountability with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. And it is critically important in terms of the public’s trust and confidence in the police service in Trinidad and Tobago.

Finally, Mr. President, the $2 million additional for Ministry of Sport and Community Development which I think quite frankly should be more but I know the idea of the itemized amount is specific to certain expenditure in the Ministry because we have seen the effect—the intervention effect of sport and community development on national development and crime. You know, recently, there was
an unfortunate idiotic conversation—I was going to use another word but one of my colleagues advised me that it would not be parliamentary so I would not use it—about the East-West Corridor and persons of certain complexions targeting other groups in Trinidad and Tobago and a wholly idiotic superficial analysis on a very complex crime situation in Trinidad and Tobago.

Because no matter how you try to clothe it in nice language, it is veered towards racial and ethnic division in Trinidad and Tobago and it was wrong and should be denounced, and fortunately I heard both major political parties in Trinidad and Tobago strongly denouncing that sort of sentiment because it only leads to division and it belies a lack of understanding of the complexities that have led us to this position in Trinidad and Tobago where crime is concerned.

So if you want to—you know what they say? If somebody’s eyes are covered, they will only see things from that covered perspective and they will veer to that sentiment unfortunately without looking at the picture in a holistic manner. I am from the East-West Corridor and I have hundreds of associates and friends from the East-West Corridor and the large majority of the people from the East-West Corridor are of a certain complexion, if you want to use the phrase, do not engage in criminal activity and go to school and work, and if we want to go down that road, you could pull up every stereotype, erroneous stereotype about ethnic groups in Trinidad and Tobago and bring it to the table but how productive is that in terms of nation building and national development? And it should always be denounced because it is a superficial interpretation of a complex issue that faces us all.

There is, as I close, a triangular theory of crime: victim or survivor, perpetrator, time and place, and coincidence. And one can look at either, any of these three and find a way to intervene as opposed to going down a road that
implies some sort of racial and ethnic foolishness that does not add to the productive conversation about crime-fighting and intervention in Trinidad and Tobago.

So I want us to be very careful in this country about the way we treat the social issues facing us all equally. If any of us walk down any street of any particular group unprotected and unaware and a criminal is there, and an opportunity presents itself, the criminal is not going to say “your hair this”, “your colour this”, they are going to pounce on you no matter who you are or where you come from or what your socio-economic background is and we need to stay away from that sort of rhetoric in Trinidad and Tobago and focus on productive conversations that help build this country and deal with the issues facing us in a productive manner. Mr. President, I thank you.

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

**The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell):** Thank you very much, Mr. President. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Bill before us and before I start, I want to also congratulate Sen. Paul Richards on his academic achievement.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** In like manner, I would like to congratulate the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for making all the citizens proud on the receipt and the acknowledgement of his doctorate.

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

4:40p.m.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Mr. President, I also commend, you know, Sen. Richards, for acknowledging the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. And he spoke a lot about the educational sector, and on the students, and all the

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stakeholders within the educational sector but the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic also affect all sectors of our economy, and all sectors of government in Trinidad and Tobago.

So, with that said, we are here to debate the supplementation and variation of appropriation Bill, 2023, and essentially we are here to give approval and to discuss the supplementation of finance, and funding to Ministries, Departments, and agencies. And that is what we are here to discuss. Now of course, the Opposition would want to create a mini-budget debate but essentially, we are here to discuss the supplementation and the variation of the 2023 budget which as we all know, but which some of us refuse to accept, is a budgeting exercise. It is an estimating exercise of what we expect to spend during the financial year.

And during the Minister’s usual—Minister of Finance’s honest and forthright piloting of this Bill, and other Finance Bills, in his usual style, calm demeanour, he said in a cordial way that those opposite, you know, really refuse—and I am speaking about the Opposition bench, refuse to acknowledge or accept good news, Trinidad and Tobago having regard to our circumstances and the world’s circumstances. And I immediately thought, as I usually do in my terse way, that they are simply allergic to any good news in Trinidad and Tobago. They certainly are allergic to any news that is good for the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

But that is the style of the Opposition. The style of this Opposition is to continually see dark clouds over this country, and over this country’s economy. That is their job. Their job is to, as far as they see it, their job and their style is to continually paint Trinidad and Tobago as the worst place you can ever live, or you can ever exist, or you can ever do business. And for them, they believe that once they do that, it improves their chances at the next general election. So we expect
that from them, but then I wondered, Mr. President, painting Trinidad and Tobago with these dark clouds—we are always under these dark clouds—is one thing, but to persistently mislead the population is a totally other thing. And then I remembered the term confirmation bias. And I think confirmation bias is something—anytime we are faced with some good news in our economy, the Opposition, they are always afflicted with confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias, of course, is the tendency to cherry pick information to confirm the existing beliefs or ideas. And the Opposition suffers from confirmation bias in these matters tremendously. They always want to paint Trinidad and Tobago in the worst way. So we should not be surprised about the Opposition, and their contributions here today. But again I would echo the sentiments on this side, that since 2015 the population has been consistently rejecting the United National Congress in election after election—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:**—preferring of course, the stable management of this PNM-led Government. So Senator Mark and others on the Opposition side, they have continued to cite Prof. Hosein to support their contention that the economy of Trinidad and Tobago is in decline, of course, contrary to the IMF Article IV Report. And in their contributions they refuse to also acknowledge that when the Minister of Finance challenged Prof. Hosein’s comments, he quickly had to backtrack. And we have had a notable and independent commentator, and I have taken notes of his article, his commentary in the Sunday Express just gone. Mr. Noble Philip, and here is what Noble Philip had to say about the exchange:

“Our newly…”

—this is on Sunday 5th—Sunday 14th, rather, of this month, 2023 in the Sunday Express. And this is what he had to say:

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“Our newly minted Prof Roger Hosein reportedly accused the IMF of using ““flowery”’ language, necessitating him to scrutinise the data. The Express reported his comments. Minister Colm Imbert responded immediately, identifying his misconceptions. Prof Hosein then gave a ““corrected”’ version of his remarks to Newsday but never addressed”—Minister—“Imbert’s points directly. The whole week went without a peep from him.”

That is the professor that they are citing. And they are not saying that when confronted with facts, and with the IMF report, he had to quickly backtrack. He goes on to say:

“His Newsday spiel smacks of what is called ““gish gallop”’’. ‘“Proof by verbosity”’ is the game: ““drown you in a deluge of deflections and distractions”’.

—Much of what the UNC does, much of what the opposition bench does.

“…‘drown you in a deluge of deflections and distractions’.”

He continues:

“This exchange, bereft of comment from other economists and professional bodies, immediately politicises the discussion. This lack of professional courage is our bane.”

That is what Mr. Noble Philip had to say about Prof. Roger Hosein. And you would say he is a PNM; he is no PNM.

Sen. Mark: He is!

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: He is no PNM, but what they would not say is that Prof. Idera Sagewan was a former Senator of the UNC. That is what they would not say. So Mr. President, Prof. Hosein has lost the plot, he has lost credibility. I do not know why the Opposition continues to cite him. And I also, like Mr. Noble
Philip, wonder, whether he will carry out his threat to migrate, or whether the UNC after painting Trinidad and Tobago in such a dark way, whether they simply do not just get up and migrate and get out of this place.

**Sen. Mark:** Because that is what you want, but that is what you will never see!

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Mr. President.

**Sen. Mark:** [Inaudible]

**Mr. President:** Members, Members, Members, Senator. Sen. Mark, there is no need to shout across the floor. If you have to remove your mask, to then speak, you do it—

**Sen. Mark:** [Inaudible]

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

**Sen. Mark:** Sorry, Sir. Sorry, Sir. “I born here”, and I will die here—

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark, I am on legs. Continue, Senator.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Thank you very much for your protection from Sen. Mark. And as we are—speaking a bit about Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark in his contribution as always, Sen. Mark is the king of conjecture. Sen. Mark is an expert at quoting a lot of figures, a lot of information without any authority, or citing any source. Sen. Mark, king of conjecture, king of misleading the population.

4.50 p.m.

So Sen. Mark spent some time on the labour statistics. Let me quote some of the labour statistics for you, Mr. President, and I am quoting from the Annual Economic Survey by the Central Bank, 2022, at page 12, table 4. Here is what this report by the Central Bank has to say, contrary to all of Sen. Mark’s statistics. The labour force in 2021, 592,000 approximately. And it has increased, in 2022, to 594,000 approximately. Persons with jobs in 2021, 560,000. And in 2022, it has increased to 565,000. Persons without jobs, 31,000 in 2021. In 2022, persons
without jobs decreased to 29,000. The participation rate marginally increased by a little less than 1 per cent. With respect to the unemployment rate in 2021, 5.4 per cent, and it has decreased to 4.9 per cent.

Sen. Mark also went on to speak about youth participation, or youth underemployment or unemployment, without citing any sort of data, nothing at all, just pulls it out of a hat. I can proudly say that under this Government, Mr. President, we have increased the OJT Programme to ensure that young people enter into the economy, gain the relevant experience and can meaningfully, with some experience, participate in our economy. We have expanded the OJT Programme. We have introduced an apprenticeship programme and we have introduced a number of other programmes, specifically targeted towards the youth, in youth agriculture programmes under the MIC. And they conveniently ignore those facts, conveniently ignore it.

Sen. Mark also spoke about food inflation. And, of course, food inflation is an issue.

**Sen. Mark:** May I ask if my colleague—

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** I will not give way.

**Hon. Senators:** [Laughter]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Food inflation is, of course, an issue. Mr. President, I know Sen. Mark likes to hear himself, you know. I know Sen. Mark likes to hear himself. But, Mr. President, I am dealing with him right now. He would sit down and listen.

Mr. President, on page 20 of the same Annual Economic Survey, it gives the reasons for the food inflation. Of course, it is a problem in Trinidad and Tobago. And they identified the:

“Supply-side factors, including a reduced labour supply, disruptions…”—in

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But, of course, as anticipated, Sen. Mark and the Opposition, they refused to acknowledge a lot of the measures implemented by this Government to address the rise in domestic inflation, especially as it relates to food inflation: zero-rating—expanding the list of food items that are zero-rated; expanding the list of basic food items; the suspension of the common external tariff on a list basic food items—all of these measures to reduce the cost of food; increasing the supply of forex via the EximBank facility—and Minister Gopee-Scoon may have some time to speak about those and how it assists in mitigating those effects of food inflation; the agriculture stimulus package; development of a working group between industry and agriculture; of course, food price monitoring under the Ministry of Trade and Industry. And those are some of the measures done by this Government over the last financial year to mitigate the effects of food inflation.

So, Mr. President, while the Opposition, they wish to revisit the annual budget of 2023 and create a little mini budget debate, it is their right to discuss any matter, as it relates to the Bill, I want to specify and state again that the budgeting exercise in the public sector is a massive exercise and it is an exercise where estimates are provided in a document, and those sums provided, those sums appropriated, are expected to be spent in the financial year. It is not an exact science. Whether it is in the public sector, in the private sector or in the household, a budgeting exercise looks forward. It is just that. With your best information, you estimate the amount of moneys to be spent.

So I can speak to, under Head 18: Ministry of Finance, the Infrastructure Development Fund, and the moneys appropriated under the IDF to Head 80: Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, $16 million to pay outstanding
payments to UDeCOTT for the construction of the Desperadoes Pan Theater, Ariapita Avenue project.

And I can say immediately that while, Mr. President, in budget 2023, under the Desperadoes Pan Theatre project, $6 million was allocated to pay for that project, in 2023 the Cabinet-approved budget for that project is approximately $14 million. And while it was anticipated or expected that $6 million worth of work would have been done, and therefore $6 million would have been spent during this project, I can happily report, Mr. President, that during this financial year and before the anticipated end of the project, before the anticipated end of the project, as at March 31, 2023, the project has been completed and handed over to the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, and to the Desperadoes Pan Theatre. And therefore, the additional moneys that are being varied and supplemented, with respect to the Desperadoes Pan Theatre is simply to pay the outstanding balance, which is approximately $8.1 million, to pay the outstanding balance now, because the project has been completed now and it was completed in advance of the estimated completion date.

And where that project is concerned, I congratulate, of course, UDeCOTT, as project manager for ensuring the project was brought in and the project was completed, and also to acknowledge that during the construction period, a number of jobs were created for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour. The project has, as its core, an acknowledgment of the importance of the steel pan movement; the importance of steel bands to our communities, to the young people, and to Trinidad and Tobago; and, of course, the importance of these pan yards and what they play now in our tourism sector as tourism attractions. The project, as is completed, is expected to also create economic activity by attracting persons during the carnival period, and otherwise, to a number of events. And those things generate economic
activity at a community level.

With respect to the Ariapita Avenue project, the amount allocated in 2023 was $7 million, and it is anticipated—that project is not yet complete. But it is anticipated that the project would either be largely complete, as it was amended, and the expected spend will go past the $7 million that was already allocated in budget—in fiscal 2023. You cannot spend more than you are appropriated via the Appropriation Bill. And therefore, we have to come here and we have to do this process to supplement the moneys that were appropriated in the budget.

This project also is expected to stimulate some employment activity for the skilled, the semi-skilled. This project is, at its core, to enhance the already entertainment hub, that is, the Ariapita Avenue experience. And therefore, we expect that it is going to enhance our tourism product in the City of Port of Spain. And again, we commend the project manager, UDeCOTT, for bringing this in.

So, Mr. President, those are the comments that touch and concern the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. I re-emphasize that this is the adjustment to an estimating exercise done last year in our budget. We could not always get it perfect, especially coming out of the pandemic, when restrictions were put on, restrictions were taken off, restrictions were put on again. We could not—it is impossible to get it perfect all the time. So on this occasion, we are here, and I fully and totally commend this Bill to this Senate. And with those few words, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Mr. President: Sen. Smith.

Sen. Dominic Smith: Let me first thank the President for the opportunity here to contribute to what has been so far quite an interesting debate. Most of you would have been labelled by many comments made thus far. And the gist of what we are
here to look at today really is the way in which government’s budget reveals the ability to prioritize wisely—and I use that in inverted commas, “wisely”—manage resources effectively and deliver on its promises to the public.

The mid-year review also provides us with the opportunity to assess our progress, reassess our strategies and make necessary adjustments to ensure economic stability and growth. We must not only assess the economic indicators, but we must also assess the impact on policies and on the lives of our citizens, so that we ensure that we prioritize the well-being of the citizenry. And I think that is fundamental in what we are approaching here today. And so today, this afternoon, I stand before you, not only as a Senator, but like you, and many of you, even on the other side, a concerned citizen and a patriot of our beloved country of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

5.05 p.m.

And it is quite interesting that the hon. Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing, she mentioned in her contribution a quite interesting calypso by the one and only David Rudder, the Madman’s Rant. And what she failed to demonstrate to the public is that the way this which our country has descended over the last eight years, it can send any citizen mad.

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

**Sen. D. Smith:** And if I were to quote from the lyrics of our dear friend and brother:

“This is it, this is it, this is it, I’ve been hit
...no time to give up, brother, no time to quit…”

Was—

“…a chant of a madman in this tale from a strange land

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…Give me the chant of the madman. Is the only salvation”

And sometimes I sit, when considering Motions and Bills, as we are here to represent the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and I looked on the other side and I listened quite diligently to the contributions made on the other side, and I wonder as the Senator would have mentioned this concept of good news. And I am speaking specifically to the hon. Sen. Mitchell, mentioning—

Mr. President: Senator, just a reminder, we refer to Ministers by their portfolio and not their last names.

Sen. D. Smith: Apologies, I am guided. I am guided. And almost as a disciple coming to bring this news on behalf of the hon. Finance Minister, I wondered to myself, what is this good news this gentleman is speaking about? When we look at the data as it relates to the situation our economy is in, how can we speak of good news? Reference was made to the IMF report, at a base level the IMF report was quite neutral, but let us for a minute consider some of the warnings and precautions that they in fact spoke to, and I wondered to myself what in that script gives any indication that we have good news in this country?

When the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries’ data for 2022 shows that ammonia production, that exports are down 8.5 per cent and 9.1 per cent year to year, where is the good news? When our production levels remain stagnant year to year, where is the good news? When our crime rate—we can all speak about the crime rate—it is where it is at when daily our young people are being slaughtered on the streets regardless of the geographic location, where is the good news that you are speaking about? When inflation is 7.1 per cent and increasing? Where is the good news? When food inflation is upward of 17 per cent, what is this good news you are speaking about?

And so Mr. President, indeed it was a chant of a madman that we had to sit
down for so many hours and hear this confusing narrative and storytelling which clearly is not the reality. And you see, Mr. President, it is not a hyperbole to state that our national economic wellbeing hangs in the balance, and it is our duty as stewards of the people to critically examine the policies and decisions that shape the place we call home.

And so Mr. President, in assessing this particular Bill it directed me to consider what were the areas we should be evaluating, and what are the questions that should arise from this evaluation? Because indeed this was an opportunity for the Government to lay its cards on the table and to set the stage for the reality of what our citizens will bear in the coming months, but not only the current generation, but the future generation. What will we leave for those young people that sat in the pews earlier today? What type of Trinidad and Tobago will we really leave for them?

And so, in terms of my analysis, I looked at areas of this particular Bill and stipulation and one fundamental aspect that requires scrutiny is the first issue, the issue of the economics. And I know that many speakers have come up here before and they have waxed lyrically about the data as it relates to the economics, but quite frankly, it is a crucial and critical part of our functioning as a nation. And when we are speaking about three-plus almost $4 billion in appropriations, this is not a small sum that we can summarily dismiss. These are not sums that we can, in hard times, afford to casually look at.

And so, are we truly adopting prudent fiscal policies or are we resorting to short-term fixes that may have long-term consequences. And this is one of the questions that we must ask when we meet here in terms of the review of the mid-year. And that is fundamental for the Government to come to terms and come to the people and give us an assessment of where we are, and an honest assessment
Furthermore, one would think that there should be a comprehensive assessment of the Government’s efforts to enhance revenue generation. And in terms of this debate, there are three main components that the Bill spoke to, subsidies, transfers and, from my evaluation, quite a bit of interest payments. And so, when we are looking at revenue generation we must examine what are the proposed strategies that align with our economic realities and foster sustainable growth and development. And while looking through the Bill and the Heads, it was difficult for me to find specific items that would allow for revenue generation, and economic growth, and sustainable development. And so, that begs the question when considering this particular Bill, are we diversifying our revenue streams to reduce dependency on our volatile sectors?

And quite poignantly, Sen. Deonarine, she would have gone through, I would say, an expert assessment of our current situation as it relates to revenue generation and the lack there of. And in particular, the type of support or lack of support that we are providing for the real lifeline of this revenue generation, which is the small and medium-sized enterprises, the lifeline of every economy globally is backed by the hard sweat and tears of the middle class, and the populations that work daily to earn their keep.

If I were to look again at the review and shed light on the Government’s commitment, it should also in light of these volatile times, look to secure the social welfare and inclusive development of our most endangered, and the persons that are most vulnerable in society. And so, I believe it is our moral obligation to ensure that economic growth translates into the improved living standards of our citizens via this Bill. And so, the question therefore, again, in an assessment, are we investing in our human capital sufficiently? Are we addressing the needs of the
marginalized and the vulnerable in our society? Are we keeping pace with technological advancements and innovation? Are we fostering an enabling environment for foreign direct investment and domestic entrepreneurship? And we have to specifically look at the plans and policies that treat with these things. A lot of the times we come here and we peruse the material and we glance—

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Point of order 46(1), and I only do that because I cannot tie in what he is saying to the Bill.

**Mr. President:** So Senator, you have crossed the point of what would be considered an introduction or opening remarks for your contribution, so at this point I would need you to tie it in to what is before us. What you are doing right now is broad and generalistic, but it is not a wide budget debate that we are dealing with. We are dealing with what is in front of us, which is moneys that are being appropriated for specific purposes. So I would ask you to tie it in to what is in front of us.

**Sen. D. Smith:** Thank you, Mr. President. I am guided. And you are quite right, the point I was making as you said in my introduction is that when we massage the material there must be a human approach to looking at the numbers. There must be a societal approach to looking at the Bill. And if I were to go specifically, Mr. President, to Head 40, which speaks to the shortfall in subsidy, a $600 million shortfall. And in particular, I want to create the context of a global outlook because we are looking at this expenditure and we must look at it in the context of a global framework.

In particular, our future, though it does not rest in the oil and gas industry, it surely for now depends heavily on its contribution. And when we look Deloitte and their prospects for the oil and gas industry, in particular they have said that:

“While the oil and gas industry isn’t new to supply disruptions and price
volatility, the situation today is unique. A confluence of economic, geopolitical, trade, policy, and financial factors have exacerbated the issue of underinvestment and triggered a readjustment in the broader energy market. As a result, all three components of a balanced energy equation—energy security, supply diversification, and low-carbon transition—are now facing a ‘trilemma’ of concerns.”

And the reason I bring that up, Mr. President, is that the World Bank projects an almost 11 per cent energy price decline in 2023.

In fact, the Reuters Business Review—and even if I were to go to IMF, the article that was so quoted today, Article IV, it speaks of an overall fiscal balance projected to turn into a deficit of 2.8 per cent of GDP for the year 2023.

And though colleagues would have mentioned the report, and I know by now the ears of the Opposition are probably red with hearing of the specific stipulations as it relates to the IMF, allow me the indulgence to reflect on three or four particular comments. When it speak to the management of the economy these are the recommendations that have come out of that report. That we:

“…continue…”—to—“...prudently…”—manage—“… the energy revenue windfall, avoiding procyclical spending, and rebuilding fiscal buffers, while providing targeted support to the most vulnerable”

It then speaks to “capital expenditure” supporting economic recovery and addressing critical bottlenecks in the infrastructure.

5.20 p.m.

Also highlighting that this capital use and injection needs to be efficient, and of a high quality. To support these efforts, it is recommended to enhance revenue mobilization, cut down non-priority expenditure in terms of current expenditure and maintain debt below the new soft debt target. And so, this is important,
because as we delve into the Bill, specifically, and the Head expenditures as it relates to the Bill, these concerns are really not addressed by the Head Items. We have a situation where, if we refer to the specific supplementation of appropriation, we have a situation of Current Transfers and Subsidies of over $2 billion, and they are asking for about $3.8 billion. So, you are speaking about almost half of the expenditure, which is required to meet current transfers and subsidies. And the question must be asked: What percentage therefore, is in capital expenditure, that is pro-development, that is pro revenue generation, that is pro capacity rejuvenation in our country? And so, the economics does not say good news to us.

So, therefore, in considering the sum that is being requested, a sum of $3.58 billion, this is quite concerning given the overall economic outlook as it relates to specific sectors that we are heavily dependent on, given the fact that we have not yet moved our expenditure to increasing capacity and a diversification strategy that is planned and ready and mobilized. These are issues that are concerning. And it is not only concerning to the Members of the Opposition, it is not only concerning to the citizens of Trinidad. In fact, if you look at the landscape, of the institutions that we hold dear and true to us, institutions, for example, the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce, in their review of this particular appropriation, they have been quite critical of the Government. And so, if I were to quote specifically from a release of this expressed view via *loop News*:

“The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is expressing concern that Finance Minister Colm Imbert is seeking an additional $3.58 billion for the rest of the fiscal year 2023. The additional monies will now bring the total 2023 budget figure up… to $6.1 billion.”
The—“...$3.8 billion funding for the remaining fiscal was noted.”—as—
“...concerning”—and this is why it was concerning to them. Because—
“...that in such a short space of time between reading the budget last
September and now, such a large increase in expenditure has been identified
for 2023.”
And so this issue has been brought up by several Senators, both on the Independent
Bench and on the Opposition Bench and so, I will not labour my colleagues further
on that specific issue. Safe to say, it is surprising and maybe the Minister in his
wrap up, he can explain to us why after having read the budget in September, and
now we are here again, to look at such an exorbitant increase which is required.
And safe to say we understand where the expenditure lies, we understand there is a
need for payments and bills have to be paid. But it is also important for us to
critically analyze the “why” as we consider the Bill.

And so, Mr. President, as we look at this particular Bill and the supplements
under the Bill, the Head expenditures, to me, I am seeing quite a number of gaps.
You know, and the local experts that the Chamber has spoken—many Senators
have spoken of the views, some of which were palatable and some of which were
not. The facts remain that we are seeing a downward trend and that downward
trend indicates to us that there should be a level of caution, there should be a level
of assessment, there should be a level of re-evaluation. And in my view, this
particular Bill, and its appropriations, do not adequately reflect that level of
cautions, that level of concern, that level of forward thinking that is required
especially given the global environment and the volatility of the sectors that we are
so indebted to.

And so, from an economic standpoint, we are facing quite a number of
challenges. One particular point that I want to speak to and several items in the

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Bill speak to this issue, is related to our debt and our debt profile as it relates to particular Head expenditure. And if I were to list a few of those, in particular, Head 13, which deals with the Office of the Prime Minister; Head 23, which deals with the Office of the Attorney General; Head 26, which dealt with the Ministry of Education; Head 28, which dealt with the Ministry of Health; Head 42, which dealt with the Ministry of Rural Development; Head 43, which dealt with the Ministry of Works; Head 61, which dealt with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. And I want to speak to those Heads on the backdrop of our current debt profile.

The IMF in particular, estimates that the gross government debt grew by about 20 per cent year on year in 2020, and it estimates it will increase by TT$10 billion per year between 2020 and 2026. And for anyone who dabbles in sustainability and sustainable economics, one understands that the debt-to-GDP ratio is quite an indicator of economic prosperity, and economic collapse. Debt in particular can be used to finance development but there are also issues as it relates to debt financing and in particular, Sen. Deonarine would have mentioned, the ability of our economy, and the capability of our economy to continue to allow this debt facilitation. You know, we are now in our 14\textsuperscript{th} year of deficit financing, minus the one, I would say, slope last year—and we all know there are many questions surrounding that particular surplus but I will leave that as that.

We are in a situation where we are 14-plus years in deficit financing, we have had a situation where our debt-to-GDP ratio had soared upwards of 80 per cent, it then came down a bit to around 60 per cent and leveled off at around 67 per cent, and that, in particular, is quite concerning from an economic development standpoint. And some of the problems of government borrowing—maybe we get too familiar with putting our hands in the piggy bank—
Sen. Gopee-Scoon: What?

Mr. Imbert: What?

Sen. D. Smith:—and we think—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: [Inaudible]—if he said that.

Sen. D. Smith:—it is okay to dip and pull moneys out without much scrutinization. But there is a price to pay when you procure sums from various funds, in particular, we are dealing with consolidated funds, as well as, from other borrowing which there was no indication of where that borrowing would come from but we can assume that that borrowing would come from a quite a plethora of institutions to which we already indebted. And so, some of the issues as it relates to debt and debt financing, which the Government has been on our trajectory to continue, are the high interest payments, the crowding out of the private sector, tax rises, higher interest rates. And all of these are fairly concerning when you look at these specific Heads. And I will just highlight three particular Heads that I want to address as it relates to that. And one in particular, has to do with the principal payment, excuse me, from UDeCOTT, and a fixed rate loan of over $22 million. Then there is another loan where we are paying the sum of $3 million-plus, again, debt financing.

We have another challenge when we look at Development Programmes, specifically under Head 23: Office of the Attorney General. We have the issue of the Strengthened Information Management at the Registrar General’s Department, upwards of $8 million. Again, we have a loan facility related to MTS under Head 26 of $269 million. Again, we have another principal payment that is required for a fixed loan rate related to a four-year non-revolving loan related to the MTS. Under Head 28 it continues, we have the Commissioning and Decommissioning of
the Arima and Point Fortin Hospitals. We have the COVID-19 Emergency Response Facility—that is an interesting one:

“The sum is required to bring to account an advanced payment and provide for a subsequent payment on a World Bank loan of US$20Mn”.

And the reason I bring up this debt financing is because the World Bank in 2020 actually said:

“...if policymakers do not address fiscal imbalance...it will only become a harder problem in the future, due both to the growing size of the...”—deficit and the debt—“and the increased economic costs and political difficulty...”

You see, when you incur debt and you kick the can down the road as it relates to interest payments and to debt facilitation, you have a challenge where, at some point, the chickens come to hatch. In fact, Sen, 1992, says:

Ultimately, the normal debt primarily benefits current generations at the expense of future generations.

And so, this concept of intergenerational equity comes to mind. And the United Nations specifically speaks about intergenerational equity and it says:

It “...holds that, to promote prosperity and quality of life for all, institutions should construct administrative acts that balance the short-term needs of today’s generation with the longer-term needs of future generations.”

And so, this is important when considering the specific Head Items and our prominent use of debt and debt financing in the way we structure our particular expenditure payments.

5.35 p.m.

Another issue which has been raised by other colleagues relates to the inflation rate. And again, I will not get into the details of that, safe to say that the *Express* was quoted as saying that there was a:

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“45.9% increase in food…”—prices—“…from 2015—2022…”
And this is quite alarming considering that we have had the COVID-19 impact. We have had issues related to loss of jobs. We have had issues as it relates to underemployment. We have had issues as it relates to sectors downsizing. And though many of this is a global problem, we have our specific unique issues that we need to treat with. And this is why it is important, in circling, when we are speaking about $26billion of the budget going towards transfers and subsidies, and $4billion going towards capital injection, the issue of how do we preserve and generate revenue for future generations becomes an issue. And that is a key challenge that we are going to face as it relates to our economy on how do we navigate our global economy.

In particular, the symptoms of a healthy country, I really cannot see at this point. And I hope in prudence and in wisdom that the Government, behind closed doors, are actively planning and strategizing and ratifying towards an end that will eventually benefit the people. I think we are all hopeful but at some point, eight years-plus, hope begins to dwindle, and so there is a need for us to consider that maybe things may not change, and if things do not change then we as citizens need to make a change.

And I want to wrap up my contribution by considering one of the premier leaders on development, economics and specifically, sustainability, and it is not what is being quibbled across on the other side, but the gentleman by the name of Amartya Sen, he says:

“Development is the process of expanding human freedom. It is ‘the enhancement of freedoms that allow people to lead lives that they have’”—a—“reason to live’.”
And so you must give people a reason to live, a reason to be hopeful, but this
cannot be without facts, without promise. And he continues:

“Hence ‘development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom…”’

—and when you speak to “unfreedom” you are speaking about issues such as:

“…poverty…tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systemic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states’.”

And when I looked at the definition that was provided by Amartya Sen, I could not help but recognize that many of these issues, these “unfreedoms”, as he would call them, are very evident in our society today. And many of the Senators here, both Independent and on the Opposition, have spoken about these issues.

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

**Sen. D. Smith:** I am guided. We have spoken about these issues as it relates to the problems that affect our society, the individuals currently, our future generations, and we have to take a good look at ourselves beyond the giggles and the waxing of words and the frivolity. We have to take a look in the mirror and really speak to ourselves, “Are we making the decisions and the strategies that will effectively bring Trinidad and Tobago into a prosperous future?” And this is what I would like the Government to speak to when they bring a review, and this is what was lacking, in my view and in my humble opinion, about the specific Bill and the Heads of Expenditures as it relates to this Bill. So in conclusion, colleagues, let us continue to engage in constructive dialogue and hopefully, in the very near future, we can rise again. Thank you.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Dillon-Remy

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

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Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy: Mr. President, thank you for allowing me to join in this debate, the mid-term review for 2023. I will start by commending the Minister of Finance for his optimistic outlook.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: I know that it is a difficult time to be leading, but to whom much is given, much is required, and it is in crisis that leaders are revealed. I too, I am optimistic but I must say, Minister, that my optimism more is in God first, our people second, and then our politicians. Because unfortunately, I have not yet seen the kind of, what I would have expected would have happened by now, after having those three difficult years of the pandemic. I really hoped, and I am still hopeful, about the Government and Opposition at least getting together on important things like crime. It is not happening as yet. We are here debating, we are here in the mid-term review and we are still far apart. I am sorry, I am still hearing about one side saying, who spent how much money for legal briefs when they were in government, and the Opposition now saying, who is spending money for legal briefs now that they are in Government. I am fed up of that. I am truly fed up of that, because while we are here sitting as leaders talking, people are looking at us. I know I said this already and an Opposition Senator, you know, talked to me and talked down to me when I said that, because people indeed are looking. And what do we expect our young people to be doing, who do not necessarily have the same amount of reasoning that we are supposed to have, when we just sit and accuse one another? So, yes, I am too optimistic but more, first in God, in our people who will have the opportunity to say what they need to say when they need to say it, as they have been doing, and then in our leaders. I am not seeing it as yet in our leaders.

I commend Sen. Deonarine for her excellent contribution to the debate. I
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy:—in her analysis. The total request for supplementation is $3.852 billion and several Senators have already spoken about the breakdown of the request, mainly to cover recurrent expenditure; main areas including: for development funding, it is for outstanding payment to contractors. I am not going to deal with any of those things. I will touch briefly on about five Heads of Expenditure, and that is because I am the fifteenth speaker of this Bill and it is late in the day. And, Mr. President, I will not be accused of tedious repetition today.

Dealing with Head 05: Parliament, where $14.59 million has been allocated, I note the allocation goes for Repairs and Maintenance, in terms of recurrent, and in terms of DP of restoration to the Red House. And I would just like to ask, in terms of the restoration, is the restoration work going to be new works or is it a repeat of some things that would have been done before that needs correction? Just a question to ask.

Of Head 13—Head 13: Office of the Prime Minister, where a request is being made for $125.5 million; Head 02/011/66: Hosting of Conferences, Seminars and other Functions, it is mentioned here that one of the areas of request is:

“…to meet the cost of hosting the recently concluded ‘Regional Symposium on Crime and Violence as a Public Health Issue’; as well as expenditure projected to September 30, 2023.”

I must say that the short time I spent on this crime symposium, I was pleased at what I experienced, and mainly the fact that they were speaking to each other rather than at each other.

We were discussing things, and I thought people were bringing things that
were real to the discussion. I loved the wide range of groups that were involved in the discussion. It was not just dealing with the police; it was not just dealing with specifically as it related to national security, but all the range of areas that are related to crime, both prevention—well, I mean, there was not much in terms of the policing and detection and stuff, but more or less in terms of prevention which is what I think we really need. And at the end of this we have asked for—and the Government is going to get the approval to go ahead and spend money to pay for that particular symposium. I am asking, what next? And the reason for that is that I really do think we need more than what has happened over the time, and I really do hope that we put people around the table, to put meaningful plans on the table that can be executed in all the areas.

I, again, I have said before, we have been talking too much about crime as it relates to the police and policing and not enough about prevention, or if we speak about it, it is in bits and pieces and not in any comprehensive way. That crime symposium brought together people from the different areas that I really think we need to be doing here in Trinidad and Tobago to get our act together. I note what is happening in Tobago with crime where we are now seeing in Tobago an increase in murders and I hope that that is going to be the approach that is taken, because we cannot sit and just wait on the police to do things which they are incapable of doing by themselves. That is my view. Still under Head 15—Head 13 on the Prime Minister—sorry, my paper has gone. It has disappeared, Mr. President. Hopefully I will find it again. [Laughter] Right. Okay. Found it.

5.50 p.m.

Back to the Office of the Prime Minister, Head 13, the request for the Children’s Authority. The areas for spending here being the revision of the org structure, and the creation of an internal security department to provide oversight
and security to children’s homes. I welcome this opportunity, because I think it is a great opportunity to deal with some of the concerns with the issues plaguing the Children’s Authority and its mandate.

Again though, I see what is happening in the Children’s Authority in the same way as I see what is happening in terms of crime and criminality, where we are burdening one organization, with wanting that organization to bring solutions that we are not addressing as a society. The Children’s Authority needs more than what is happening with them, and the needs that they have include and must include what is happening in society. Not just waiting on them. We are sending more and more children to them and expecting them to do miracles. I am suggesting that more is needed, than just what the moneys that are allocated to the Children’s Authority.

Head No. 15, the Tobago House of Assembly, where Minister, Mr. President, 100 million was allocated, and I note that it is mainly for road repairs. Request for supplementation for—it was said it is 60 million and 40 million. But it is 40million for major improvements of works of secondary roads, and 60million for resurfacing programme. So at the midterm review 100 million is given to Tobago, mainly for road repairs. I wondered what happened to things like the Division of Education. I am saying that because I know there have been significant issues with schools in Tobago. Right now the Scarborough Secondary School that has been a problem for a long time, has had significant work put in. As far as I am aware, they have been behind in terms of what they have, and they owe contractors a lot of money. So it may very well prevent their being able to do repairs within the next two months when school is closed. I wonder about that, Minister, and whether there should have been an allocation, as is happening with schools in Trinidad. I heard Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing who spoke about the number
of schools that are earmarked for repairs. I just wonder about that.

I would also say here that I note Minister Imbert is always talking about how the allocations—like every time the budget is read and he talks about the allocation to Tobago, says what percentage of the budget is given to Tobago. This allocation of $3.85 billion is given, and when you look at what is the minimum of that in terms of allocation as far as Tobago is concerned, should be about $154 million. I am not sure how that would work out eventually at the end of the financial year, but I just note that, because I think more is required for Tobago.

I heard, again, the Minister saying in the other place in the Standing Finance Committee that he understands that there is another government in Tobago other than the Government that is under Trinidad and Tobago. I must say, Minister, through you Mr. President, that we are still waiting. I am still waiting on that debate to come back to the House, where we will be discussing meaningful change in Tobago in terms of its governance. I hope the other Senator from Tobago will support me in this cry.

We have spun around too much with this in so many years, it is time to come back. I am saying this in this place because we need the support of the Government as well as the Opposition. We need to go further in terms of Tobago’s development. I am saying this because right now where we talk about development in Tobago, we are talking about giving further allocations in this midterm review, and 100 million is given for road repairs. That is all that is available.

I will also mention that as far as I am aware there is a significant situation in terms of the availability of ambulances to provide emergency care in Tobago. That is not in this supplementation. I would not say any more about that.

In terms of Head 22, the Ministry of National Security, I just want to say
that I note Sen. Lutchmedial’s mention about the 7 million in security services. I just wondered what is going to be taken away as a result of what has happened on the growth in, like, remote hearing as a result of the pandemic. How much of that is going to be maintained and continued as something that we would have gained from, and would not go back to, if it is not necessary?

I know that in some cases it would be necessary to bring prisoners from the prisons, but how much of the remote hearing is going to continue, I am just asking about that as it relates to this security services of 7 million that is being requested here from the Ministry of National Security.

The Head 28, the Ministry of Health, where 692 million is being requested. I would mention sub-Head 04/011/22, the allocation to UDeCott for central block, Packages 2-6, just a question, through you Mr. President, to the Minister. What is the proposed date for this project? How far are we with the central block? What are looking at in terms of end times, end of this project?

In conclusion, Mr. President, I did say I was going to be brief, I know that we are in difficult times. I do think some light is shining as we are coming out of the pandemic. I know that we are not alone as many countries, including many developed countries, are having difficulty. Read the news. Look at what is happening in terms of the UK, strikes, public sector strikes, what is going on in France and many other countries. So we are not alone in terms of a difficult time. Even though, yes, I know there may be some light, I am sure that we could have been doing much better as a nation, if some of the things that we have been avoiding could have been put into place.

I trust that we would continue, not just to reflect on what has been said here during this debate, but be prepared to take the difficult steps in moving forward, and that is something I am saying we all need, to self-reflect and look to see where
we are doing our best as we go forward.

I thank you very much, Mr. President.

**Mr. President:** Minister of Trade and Industry.

**The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):** Thank you very much, Mr. President, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I can say up front that I would not be speaking my full time, and in my contribution I would definitely be veering on the positives, on the good news. I will be leaving the cynicism, and gloom and pessimism to the Opposition, that is normal for them.

So on the positive side, again, I congratulate the Minister of Finance and his team for their continued dedication to the country’s finances, and keeping us in good order.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Also, at the same time, to my colleague, Sen. Dr. Paul Richards, on his academic achievement.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** And of course to our hon. Prime Minister on the conferment by Howard University of an honorary doctoral degree.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** So we are here today in very normal circumstance, and really this is not a budget debate. We are here, this happens every year. We come, we reassess and realize that particular Heads need funding for particular initiatives and so on, and it is properly justified. So we are not here to shout. This is not a day of shouting and so on. It ought not to be, because we are here to fix the business midway before we come to the end of this fiscal.

So I go right into the fact that the Minister of Finance would have
indicated—and again this is on the heels of the IMF’s pronouncements that the non-energy sector is doing very well. And certainly the non-energy sector—and people sometimes just think it is the manufacturing sector, but no, it is the services sector that is contributing strongly to our GDP. Certainly our tourism sector as well, manufacturing, many sectors are now beginning to get back to where they were before, and then grow in a post-COVID environment as well.

I can tell you that overall I am seeing that the first three quarters in 2022 have been very, very good. I am going to leave the discussion about the nominal GDP, which has been growing across the floor, to the hon. Minister of Finance. In his winding up he will speak to that and the whole question of the releasing of the CSO’s figures, which he would need to address because Members on the opposite side, the Opposition, seem to have a real issue with understanding the figures.

Again, I will go to some positives, the non-energy exported products in 2022, and as I said, looking at 2021/2022, looking at the kinds of increases that we have seen. Then I will go a little bit further, using SEW data, using CSO in the first instance, that we have seen, for instance, in the manufacture of plastic and rubber products, a 63 per cent increase in chemical products. And I am not talking here about ammonia and urea, et cetera, et cetera, I will come to that, 39 per cent increase. Basic chemicals and fertilizers, a 38 per cent increase, and so on. So when I say that, I am talking about sodium hydroxide, chlorine made by ANSA Chemicals, chlorides made by Castrol Oil Company Limited, hydrazine made by Greensol. There is a difference, that is what we are talking about under “basic chemicals and fertilizers”.

Then even in—and I am pleased about this—in clothing, textiles and apparel, 31 per cent increase. Paper and paper-related, a 29 per cent increase. So good performance coming out—and of course food and beverage, a 22 per cent
increase. So good performance coming out, and I have to say that to refute, I have to say, the rubbish that came out, especially from Sen. Lyder, who ought to have known more, and repeated by others on that side about the manufacturing sector not doing well.

Good growth, as I said, especially food and beverage, a 22 per cent increase. It is all relative, and I can tell you as well, good growth per market.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** And you would be surprised at the markets that we are entering to, Belgium and Morocco. Barbados actually increased by 120 per cent. To Chile, to the Netherlands, Brazil, Mexico, even our own Guyana and so on. So non-energy exports have been increasing, definitely.

So looking forward and, again, using the SEW figures to see how we are looking, going from October 2022 into March 2023, and again I am seeing significant subsector increases. I cannot understand how the Opposition is not seeing the same. I could tell you, when I talk to manufacturers all the time, particularly because I go on missions with them, and so on, they are telling me that their exports are going out of the window, booming.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Yes, and so on. So it is very disappointing, and I could tell you, they came here today making reference to an article, and Mr. President, I have to rebut this. They made reference to an article in the newspaper, *Express* newspaper, Wednesday, 10 May, 2023, when a particular economist—I could say it, Dr. Indera Sagewan, referred to the IMF report giving credit to the growth of the non-energy sector, and then making a very inaccurate statement that the entire petrochemical industry now falls under the non-energy manufacturing sector.

**UNREVISSED**
I want to say that that is not so. You all mixing up petrochemicals and chemicals. So that is not so. So on that very day in another newspaper and a commentary by another economist, Dr. Arjoon, he contradicted her completely, and said that manufacturers have contributed to driving some of the growth, very sensible of him, and the current account performance, since last year, and that exports have remained healthy. Two economists, two divergent views. How could that be?

Again, I think Dr. Sagewan has to take a page out of Dr. Arjoon’s book. I can tell you, even looking at Dr. Seerattan’s commentary, that is a UWI lecturer in economics—but he also said that there is much to agree with the general assessment of the IMF.

6.05 p.m.

So, you all must not cherry-pick, right, speak the truth. And there was further conversation, you know, and I will come back to that again. The point I want to make is, going in, coming out of October 2022, this is the beginning of this fiscal year, March 2023, and I will tell how the export performance is looking. Food and beverage exports increased by $85 million. That is an increase of 6 per cent, that is thus far, thus far.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Paper and paper related exports increased by $82.8 million, an increase of 29 per cent. Tobacco exports increased by $30 million, an increase of 27 per cent. Plastic and rubber products increased by $11 million, and another increase of 5 per cent. Chemical products, exports increased by $10.7 million, again, 8 per cent. And I make the point again, we are not talking about the urea, methanol and ammonia and that kind of thing at all.

Again, I am pleased about the expansion in the chemical sector as well and I
can speak later on to some of the investments in those areas. Liquid bleach, insecticides, paints, dish washing liquid, liquid detergents, thinners, all out of these are categorized as chemicals under the non-energy manufacturing sector. So I am giving you a little lesson. So again, as we are all talking about diversification, I am pleased for the progress of the manufacturing sector, so it is very difficult when Dr. Sagewan, in the same article, will make statements and Members will come here today and repeat those statements and knowing them to be wrong, knowing them to be wrong. So in the case of—I will tell you, Dr. Sagewan said that no new manufacturing has successfully started or grown in Trinidad and Tobago over the last several years; untrue, untrue. And goes on to say that Nestlé moved their manufacturing out of this country. And Sen. Damian Lyder who is businessman, I expected to hear more from him. Nestlé is operating in Trinidad and Tobago and manufacturing all kinds of products. In fact, they have now started manufacturing plant-based milk which they have already started exporting to nine countries regionally. How could you say that? Right? Nature’s Heart almond milk.

And then, they are happy to say Unilever moved this operation out of Trinidad and Tobago. You know that globally, that Unilever sold all of their spreads business globally to a company called Upfield. That is what happened. And it is because of the state of the equipment at that stage, that Unilever said it did not make financial sense to continue to operate with the archaic equipment which they had bought from—I mean this is Upfield, from Unilever, that is what is happening. I can tell you that Unilever is still looking at the Caribbean as a place to manufacture and export. So those kinds of erroneous statements you must not to bring to the House because you know the population is looking and you ought to know better.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]
Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And when you speak—and so Sen. Lyder repeated Dr. Sagewan, “no new manufacturing has successfully started and grown in Trinidad and Tobago”. And, I could not be more proud of all of the new products, again, the new Nestlé line of almond milk. New products and new lines, et cetera, and I will give you just a few. Nestlé, almond milk; CARIB Brewery, its Rockstone Tonic Wine that started in November 2022. It is the first tonic wine with power root. I must do some research on that. And this is about small and medium, new businesses starting. Amare Probiotics; Farm & Function who is producing a lot of frozen local fruits like, guava and mango and passion fruit and so on. Associated Brands, they started a wide range of quality chocolate products which you see on the supermarket shelves and which are being exported. It is the first USDA certified organic chocolate produced in Trinidad and Tobago and being exported. Do you not see these products?

Hon. Senators: No.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Fresh industry—if—no. A. Singh Trading, new pasta line; Novo Farms, local production of agro-processed food such a cassava fries, grated coconut, dasheen fries, sweet potato fries, instant potato choka and so on. What is that? Rojan Marketing, new antibacterial formula of hand sanitizer. J Mac Industries, a new detergent line, J Mac is from Tobago. CGA, production of Cedros Bay products, body lotions and so on. And because—Lazuri Apparel, office and safety wear, aprons, chef coats, polo t-shirts. I respect the House and will not go on. But, you see this, I am going to continue repeating because I have pages of new products being produced in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—and being exported. Yeah? And so, for you to come and say to the House, 39,000 persons in the manufacturing sector, I tell you,
52,000 is the figure that we have been using. And I am telling you with the exports booming, we are definitely employing more than that, more than 52,000. So, it is erroneous again, to come here and talk about 39,000 persons, it has dwindled to 39,000; it is wrong. It is wrong and you are feeding this negativity to the population. “Doh try dat”, okay?

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And we will continue to do everything, this is not a budget debate, but we will continue to do everything to make sure that we can find the market access. New markets, et cetera, do the trade missions, I will accompany them to ensure—I tell you, I just want to DR, we started off with 16 businesses going, by the time the second day came, 23 businesses arrived in there with more than 30 persons joining us, eager to enter that new market. With my being there, I was able to at least meet the Government officials and deal with the trade barriers, such as the waiver of Law 173, which will allow the access of our products into there. But I will leave all of this discussion for another time, Mr. President, because it really does not belong in this debate.

So, we will continue assisting all the SMEs, a lot of noise about SMEs today, with all of the grants that are available and I am going to speak a little bit, all of the export accelerator programmes, international certification funds and so on.

And the other problem that I have, as I talk about jobs. Let me tell you that with regard to job creation I looked at the figure of investments local and foreign in 2021 which is, we are coming out of COVID and we had investments and you know, the problem is, you are always talking about FDI, FDI, FDI, why do you not look at LDI, that speaks to the confidence of the people in businesses in Trinidad and Tobago to invest in this country.
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And so, in 2021 despite coming out of COVID, we had new investments—and that is what I keep check of, much more is happening—of at least half of a billion dollars. And then by 2022, investments again were at about $1 billion, providing jobs to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And, I could tell you for 2023 it is more than $1 billion in investments in our country. Okay, and that means jobs.

So do not come to me about that, let me talk about jobs a little more. But I will speak to it in the context of today’s supplementary appropriation. There is a line Item—

Hon. Senator: [ Interruption]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—please allow me. I seek your protection, yeah. There is a line Item that speaks to $9.8 million which is required to facilitate payment regarding the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate and that money is to complete the payment on remaining VAT, additional works on an offsite detention pond and additional works with regard to subgrade treatment, placement of boulders and so on and soft spots in the road network. So, Sen. Lyder made heavy weather about the fact that this project had not been completed, but you know they do as if we had not been through, the world has not been through COVID and that has caused a delay in many, many projects and so on, but here we are. I want to tell you Sen Lyder and the Opposition, that it is 98 per cent complete. I visited on Saturday, and I am pleased about the results that we are getting from this park. So, we are going to spend the $9.8 million, complete the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate and I am pleased about the kinds of firms that we are already attracting. In terms of high value and light manufacturing logistics and distribution and warehousing. I want to tell you, 14 investments have been closed at that PPIE estate, you
understand?

6.15 p.m.

Before we even cut the ribbon, 14 investments have been closed. In terms of local investments, they total over $93 million and they are expected to create more than 300 jobs. Foreign investments, over $200 million and will create as many as 361 jobs. Right?

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Now, I have already called all of this in the other place, so I am not going to call out the 14 names. Okay? We could go home now. But I am telling you, I am pleased because—

Hon. Senators: [Crosstalk]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: No, “you wanna hear”? “You wanna hear”? Anyway, Mr. President, I am on a line Item and therefore, I will call it out. Global Tobacco Limited, cigarette manufacturing and distribution; Pour Me One Brewery, it is a nano start-up brewery; Ramps Logistics, transportation and logistics solutions; Ali’s Hardware & Metal Fabrication, they are going to get involved in the manufacture of liquid laundry detergents; Pillai’s; Southern Reflection Glass, glass products; SM Jaleel & Company, manufacturer of non-alcoholic beverages; Valcom EMI Limited—Engineering, Maintenance and Inspection Limited; Centaur Construction and Services, manufacturer of fasteners and gaskets, et cetera; Do Care Hygienic Product Company, manufacturer of sanitary napkins for exports; MSK Seafood; FCMC, regional distribution centre for Chinese manufactured goods. And the icing is, and I will state the icing, even though it is $14 million investment, it is going to employ 200 people. Why I point them out, that is the Dongguan Summit Luggage Company, manufacturer of Samsonite branded luggage—no, not Samsonite. It is another brand. But they also do
Samsonite in China. Why I point them out is because I went down to visit the park on Saturday. Their production line—I tell you, I ‘eh’ cut the ribbon as yet. Their production line is already set up, raw materials, et cetera.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** They are ready to manufacture. And you come here today to tell me about this Phoenix Park Industrial Estate. “Talk yuh talk”. Right? We are doing the work. Okay? Right?

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** So as I begin to wrap up, I mean, the other noise, I kept hearing them say—again, I spoke about it a little bit before, the SME support. Listen to me. You cannot talk about SME support to this Government. I will tell you, coming out of COVID—

**Hon. Senators:** [Crosstalk]

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** No. Coming out of COVID—and kudos to the Minister of Finance, right.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** We introduced the government loan guarantee scheme. Okay? And—

**Hon. Senators:** [Crosstalk]

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** No. No. No. We have now introduced what is the SME Development Financing Facility to provide financing—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:**—for SMEs. All right? So they can borrow up to $1.5 million. They could get a two-year moratorium on the principal repayments. They could repay as long as 10 years and they could use it for working capital or purchase equipment, et cetera. Okay? What could be wrong with that?
Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And we will continue that and provide support. We will also provide support from micro enterprises through the Ministry for Youth Development and National Service, especially in the area of agricultural programmes and so on. We will continue with the Grant Fund Facility in the Ministry as well, also the research and development fund. The funds in the yachting sector as well. We did 66 programmes—66—we gave support to 66 small businesses there. We will continue with our ScaleUp programme. We just graduated 13 companies out of it and we start another cohort in July. So when we report at the budget we would have assisted at least about 20-something businesses through this ScaleUp programme as well.

So when it comes to—when it comes to supporting MSMEs, our Government is very, very focused and that is not only just under the Ministry of Trade and Industry, it is under the Ministry of Finance; the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service; Ministry of the Tourism, Culture and the Arts; Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. We support MSMEs in this PNM Government.

And also, again, throughout SheTrades, we now have 700 women—SMEs, again, MSMEs under that programme—and we will continue to offer them several training opportunities in export readiness, and identifying and assessing export markets, funding and financing opportunities as well, and give them the opportunity to be represented at international trade shows and so on, and the TIC. And when we talk about job creation, the necessary infrastructure is being put in place. I am very serious about that. You see that SEZ authority we are establishing and which will be in place by the end of this fiscal year?—that is about attracting investment, further investment, by providing a suite of incentives
to both local and foreign investors. And that is where we are going to create more jobs, through the establishment of this authority, and providing the incentives and so on. In and while we are doing that, we will be meeting all of our international obligations, et cetera. So we are very excited about that. Also, of course, our trade and investment promotion agency which, again, will provide a focus, again, for attracting business and extending export activity, et cetera.

The usual cry about improvement in the ease of doing business, I will speak about this Ministry and what it is doing—the Ministry of Trade and Industry—because they all started speaking about it and I will rebut what you are saying. So—and I am not going—not staying too long on it because I want to be able to “ramajay” when we do the thing. Right?

Hon. Senators: [Crosstalk]

Sen. Mark: “Ramajayyyyy”.


Hon. Senators: [Crosstalk]

Hon. Senator: Your hands are soft.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And stop talking about “my hand soft”. You are giving people the—

Hon. Senators: [Laughter and desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Let me put this—listen, I will put this on the record. The only way he knows that is because he shook my hand on one occasion.

Hon. Senators: [Laughter and desk thumping]


Sen. Mark: [Inaudible]—in Trinidad.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Mr. President, I need your protection because,
you know, it is a long evening. The improvement in the ease—

**Mr. President:** Okay. Okay, Members, we have had the light moment, please allow the Minister to continue.

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** I continue and conclude. We are talking about the ease of doing business because “all ah dem” made sure and remembered it and spoke of it. Well, I could tell you, in the Ministry, we are introducing, we are enhancing in the first place our existing services on TTBizLink. So they are across 18 departments, six Ministries. We are enhancing 35 of those existing services. And these enhanced services will be launched by June 2023. I am not going to call them all out. You are talking about within our e-certificate of origin, our e-import duty concessions, our e-fiscal incentives, our e-goods declarations, e-mobile and so on. I could go on and on, but “ah tell yuh”, I am leaving it for when I really have a chance to do a dance with you all. Right?

And then, all of those exiting services that attract fees, and I am speaking to 17 of those services, that upon the enhancement in June 2023, we will immediately introduce the ability for users to make these payments online. So that is also coming in June 2023.

Again, another noteworthy enhancement for the existing services will be the introduction of digital approval documents as well. And also the enhanced system will also expand interoperability with other government systems and so on, so that approval data is shared directly with all of the relevant authorities and so on.

In addition to all of that, by August 2023, we will launch 18 new e-services, not the enhanced ones, new e-services. Mark my words, and to benefit the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the EMA, exporTT, even the Chamber of Industry and Commerce as well. So we are moving and we have already started, we have commenced the implementation of our port community
system as well. Okay?

So I think, generally, I sought to refute some of the negativity on the other side, Mr. President, but also at the same time to speak very positively about how well the manufacturing sector is doing. And as I spoke of the particular item for which we got the $9.8 million, Phoenix Park Industrial Estate is a very worthwhile investment because we have already seen the returns in terms of the 14 businesses that have already signed on to be tenants in that park. And we have a waiting list of more than 30 businesses that are looking forward to consider joining the park as well. I want to thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Mr. President: Sen. Nakhid.


Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. David Nakhid: In the name of God, the most gracious, the especially merciful. Mr. President, I would not be very be long—

Hon. Senator: What?

Sen. D. Nakhid:—surprisingly, just to refute, rebut, some of what has been proffered by that side, and I know there has been a fair amount of jocularity today, as there should be sometimes. But when you hear by several Senators that we are being extremely pessimistic and we have placed Trinidad in a very dark place, and all of these things, and we should be more optimistic, we do not paint Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. President, as having dark clouds overhead, as the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts said. That is a simplification. We point out the reality that this PNM Government is the dark cloud over Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Nakhid: As a matter of fact, after listening to the Ministry of Trade and
Industry and how she will not get into the cynicism of the debate and all of that, but as we sat in this Chamber hoping that we should share the views of optimism from that side, Mr. President, do you know that close to 100 Caridoc workers have been sent home with immediate effect today? As we spoke here in this Chamber.

And I read, Mr. President.

“The employees…were called to a meeting at UTT’s Chaguaramas Campus a short while ago, where the announcement was made. The company’s full name is Caribbean Dockyard and Engineering Services Limited and was recently removed from the Ministry of Finance and placed under the Ministry Works and Transport. According to Mr. Mahabir, a senior official at the Company, the affected employees will be temporarily furloughed for 3 months but he is unclear as what would be the case afterwards.”

And he continues:

“He promised that the company would continue to communicate with its furloughed employees on the employment status. The affected employees temporary received their termination letters after the meeting…”

How rosy is that? How optimistic for those breadwinners who must now go home. Mr. President, imagine the multiplier effect of that. So when we as the Opposition, loyal as we are, after being told we should leave by the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, when we look at what they have done to the workforce, maybe they should pack up and leave.

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

**Mr. D. Nakhid:** And they are right to hang their heads.

**Hon. Senator:** Unilever.
Sen. D. Nakhid: They are right to hang their heads because I heard about Unilever. I heard that from the Minister of Trade and Industry, Mr. President, thinking that we do not do our work on this side. But they forget that we have, not nominal economics degrees, we have real economics degrees. My economics degree is a real one.

6.30 p.m.

So I can tell you that Unilever shut down completely in Trinidad and Tobago as of July. In other places that she insinuated they were having problems, no, they sold off their spreads, product and restructured, but they are still operating in South Africa and Brazil. They completely closed down in Trinidad and Tobago, because the ease of doing business has been a complete failure by this PNM Government.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. D. Nakhid: So you all cannot come with these innuendoes and talk about, you all are talking to a group that is certainly brighter than all of you all.

Hon. Senator: How much workers went home?

Sen. D. Nakhid: One hundred and nineteen. Thank you Senator, 119 workers. What is the multiplier effect of that, Mr. President? You see Economics is not looking in the books and reading the statistics. Economics is very much an interactive science. It is what the effects of those statistics do to the human resources and the population of the country. So it is all well and fine to come and give us the statistics here and tell us there has been an allocation increase or decrease, and then when we try to broaden it they stand up, they get up on Standing Orders, but we have to point out. I will give you the example, Mr. President. The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, he spoke about the granting of the pan theatre to Laventille Desperadoes. We who love the greatest steelband ever created in the history of this country and worldwide, we appreciate that, no doubt.
I say anything else here “meh” uncles will kill me. Because we, we not are fans of Laventille Desperadoes, we are Laventille Desperadoes.

But if this Government truly believed in what they tout as the pan model to be invigorate, to stimulate, rehabilitate the youth of this country, would they have put the Laventille Desperadoes pan theatre in a location almost right next to the All Stars pan theatre, if the purpose was to rehabilitate? It is Laventille Desperadoes. Would they not have created an environment, Mr. President, that would have rehabilitated the people that Laventille Desperadoes used to rehabilitate back in the day, where you had people coming from Laventille? Again, like my mother, like my uncles who saw or sought refuge in that pan yard up there in Desperlie Crescent. Up there, where people used to look forward to going.

So, when you are talking about the numbers, we give them $14 million, and granted, it is not only about the allocation, but it is the location that causes the policy to become actionable. They do not understand that. There is a disconnect. A complete disconnect. And I understand maybe it is, you know, for this Government it is all about when the pan theatre open to come and clink a few champagne glasses, but they do not really know how it is to go every day in the pan yard and see these players who represent their culture, who represent mostly the poor and working class people, how they dedicate themselves to that craft. And you know what they get, maximum for the season? Mr. President, $3,000, a $1,500, and then we ask them to portray what, our better angels, our culture. It is disingenuous. It is hypocritical, Mr. President.

So, just as this part of the allocation, the culture that the Minister referred to, the Minister of Trade and Industry—Minister of Tourism, is clear by what I just exhibited, the Minister of Trade and Industry, that they come with these duplicitous offerings, but they never connected. They are never connected. It is never the
whole truth. It is part of it. So Unilever, she tried to insinuate, it is shut down everywhere so that is why they shut down here. But it is not the truth. There is a certain level of mendacity to that. They have not shut down anywhere completely other than Trinidad and Tobago. Laventille Desperadoes, although we are happy for that pan yard, because we like “nowherians” now, because the hill has been made unsafe by insufficient public policy because of the crime situation, and I will get to that briefly, Mr. President.

When we go to the Items, I will give you some of the—referring to the mid-year review, and I looked at Office of the Prime Minister and it is one of the Items that I have followed, as most in this House know, very closely. I commented on it, and that has to do with the Children’s Authority, the grant of, now the ask, of $62 million. And if you would allow me just to read:

It is “required to meet costs associated with the revision of the organizational structure...”—It—“will result in increased personnel costs, accommodation requirements, procurement of additional goods and services...items of minor equipment...creation of an Internal Security Department to provide oversight and security to all Children’s residences.”

Now who can argue with that? It sounds nice, Mr. President, does it not? Wonderful. And then we hear, if you look at this, that only 200-odd positions filled out of 900. Two hundred. So I thought, well I cannot take the credit, my son who is a clinical psychologist in London, looked it up as a matter of curiosity. Children’s Authority, $62 million, you think well they are in the process. I think Sen. Lezama-Lee Singh mentioned that they are earmarked to have a lot of hiring and all of that. Well it looks like, as usual, this Government does not know what—the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. Because you go on their website and you know what it says? No job openings available. Right here. They
have it right here, you go on their website, no job openings available. So what is $62 million? What all this talk about what they have earmarked, and people cannot be talking. And, you know, I hear one of the Senators came up now and talk about, you know, they are not interested in the crosstalk and the Opposition talking about legal fees, and then the Government come and talk about legal fees. Absolutely correct. But I have to ask that goodly Senator, when we piloted legislation for procurement concerning legal fees, who gutted it? And how did that goodly Senator vote? So it is by—

**Mr. President:** Senator just be mindful about what you are insinuating in terms of that phrase which you just spoke to. So just be mindful.

**Sen. D. Nakhid:** Okay, guided, Mr. President, but I made no—I am talking about the reality of it. It might make nice headlines, there should be bipartisanship. But we, our Opposition Leader, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, directly offered help to this Government on the issue of crime, publicly, and she was publicly refused. So how can you tell us now that we are not interested in bipartisanship? The record is there. You know, so there is a lack of a genuine look at what the Opposition attempts to do in serving the interest of the country. And I think it is very unfair, and I think we can see it here.

So they can get up and talk about, well, we have earmarked. I have never heard a government in my life talk about what is projected to happen like this Government. We have earmarked, we will launch, we are going to do this, we are going to do that, and then we come back six months later, nothing, zilch, zero. This is a Government that talks, but this is not a Government that delivers anything, and I think we know that. We know that. And, you know, I felt sorry listening to Sen. Lezama-Lee Singh because, you know, there is a fundamental—for someone who I guess is in politics a long time, she has a fundamental
misunderstanding of how the process works. She said she was waiting to hear the Opposition come with ideas on nation building in a mid-year review. Well, we have to get the numbers from the Government and we have to examine those numbers that all my colleagues did such a brilliant job in doing, and then we have to tell this Government why you want this. But she lamented the fact that we did not come with anything, any ideas about nation building, not forgetting that they are in Government for eight years and have built nothing in this nation.

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

**Sen. D. Nakhid:** So, you know, it is in the numbers, Mr. President. And I told you I would not stay long, but you know when you are up here and you realize exactly that there was no singular contribution that would have helped the Minister of Finance, and he always seems isolated in these debates, because—

**Mr. Imbert:** Me?

**Hon. Senators:** [Laughter]

**Sen. D. Nakhid:** He seems isolated in these debates because nobody on that side seems to help him sufficiently, so he ends up looking, you know, like “lil Jack Horner alone in the corner”.

**Hon Senator:** [Laughter]

**Sen. D. Nakhid:** No, I say that just to lighten the mood. Because I generally feel that he probably is thinking, why did I not get some help from my own side? I will give you an example, Mr. President, before I close up.

Everybody here, to a man and to a woman, spoke about the effects of crime, the effects of the poor national domestic security. Everybody. Everybody. This is the concern in the country. That is the reality. And then we look at the allocation, not only in the initial budget, but we are limited to hear the mid-year review, and we saw that $2 million was given for sports and community development. Two
million dollars, Mr. President. I think Sen. Richards mentioned briefly how important sports is to a country that is going through the kind of social upheaval that we are witnessing, where there is an increase in gangs, there is an increase in violence, communities are being shattered. He mentioned it briefly.

I will go into a “lil” detail on that, sports, and I did not need to research this because I came out of sports, and I came out of that same East-West Corridor community that Sen. Richards mentioned. Sports, as mentioned by the United Nations, Office of Global Development, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, sports is one of the key indicators, key factors in arresting any crime upsurge, in contributing to the economic development, bringing people who were outside on the fringes of society, bringing them into the mainstream. Sports is one of the most effective social economic weapons that we can use. It is. Thanks for your agreement Senator.

And I give you the model of Belgium. Belgium experienced serious upheaval with their incoming Moroccan immigrants back in the 80's into the 90's. I lived there for a while. What did they do? Simple, infrastructure. They put every 400 metres they put a field. Put a field, just put a field down; open, nice field, AstroTurf, left it there. Slowly because of that one field, sports, they put a basketball court, swimming pool, nice model, tennis courts, and they put that model every 400 metres in the so-called immigrant communities.

6.45 p.m.

After the first year crime went down, 6 per cent; second year, 9 per cent; second year, 12 per cent. By the seventh year, crime was down 30 per cent. Do they do research on that side, Mr. President? Where we are seeing the opposite here, $2 million. And you know what that $2 million is for? Let me pull it up here for you, Mr. President, so they do not think I am doing like them, just talking; $2...
“...is required to facilitate the payment of gratuities/retirement benefits and to meet operating expenses under Export Centres Company Limited...to September 30...”

Nothing, Mr. President, than our boys—and you tell me, Mr. President, you are a young man yourself, tell me these young men in those communities who do not have now education, which has been cut as a pathway; who do not have jobs because the jobs markets are closed to them; skill centres, they are now trying to revive; sports, they do not even have that now. Nothing has been allocated. I would not even go into the original budget, it is poor allocation as well, $13 million or something like that.

Under the UNC, we had upward of $200 million. People were involved in mentorship programmes. The Football Association was getting money for their football league, cricket the same, swimming. This is how you keep boys on the margins, Mr. President, out of crime. Not talk, not talk, not old talk, not give them a hamper and a grant. That is a superficial way to deal with crime, to deal with community development. That is superficial. Nothing substantive in that. But if you give them a serious sporting policy, if you give them a pathway, a roadmap in sport, you tell them, okay, we will fund primary school leagues in a substantive way, not just tell them go up to the savannah where the grass is reaching up to your neck, but we will give them incentives. Whatever school produces a player for a national team, under 13, under 14, under 15, we will invest in that school, maybe laptops, maybe something, you have some kind of interactive policy. But no, this is a Government bereft of ideas, as Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing—I think she was referring to her own Government—bereft of ideas, intellectually bankrupt, and that is why you have the crime rate where it is.

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So you could come with all the numbers you want but I am reading your own numbers, $2 million for sports and nothing to do, Mr. President, to the Minister of Finance, nothing to do with anything that could take us out of this perilous situation that we find ourselves.

So, Mr. President, as I promise, I will not be long, only to say that again, once again, this Government has failed us with this mid-year review, failed us completely, failed this country, talk and talk, and we will do this and we will do that, while they have done nothing. And I think not only is the goodly Senator fed up but so is the entire country. And once again, we ask them, please step aside. As the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts said, leave the country, leave the country and let us take over this country. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

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

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

**Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh:** Thank you, Mr. President, for allowing me to contribute on the supplementation of appropriation Bill for fiscal year 2023. We are asked to approve more than $3.85 billion in supplementary funding for fiscal 2023 in this mid-year review. Total expenditure for fiscal 2023 was budgeted at $57.685 billion, and this supplementary takes the budget figure for the year to $61.53 billion. That is a lot of money. We heard the Minister of Finance, who presented eight budgets before, say that the country’s Heritage and Stabilisation Fund has been doing well and the country’s overdraft is in very good shape, and while there is a shortfall in revenue over the last six months, it has not been too large to manage. So all these are comforting things that I have heard.

He had called before for sacrifice to be made in—the citizens to make sacrifices for the country until we get back on track. And before, the police officers took a 4 per cent increase in salary, and recently the prison service
followed suit and were willing to take this 4 per cent also, at least showing that they have a level of patriotism waiting, a little sacrifice, not striking out for more, until the country could get in a better situation. So those groups I think are commendable that they have gone forward and at least have gone forward to make some sort of negotiation. And as the Minister said much of the supplementation is designed to clear off the backlog of bills that have accumulated arrears, moneys owed to suppliers and contractors over the last seven years. And he thought it would be appropriate now, to solve those problems that we had, to at least service those debts, because he said the cash is the livelihood of the industry. And so he felt it was appropriate to increase this appropriation by $3.8 billion to go and satisfy the suppliers.

Now, he has some idea that he is hoping that this will stimulate the economy. But I must say, some of those companies no longer exist. Some of those companies during the COVID was trying to pay their own bills, not getting satisfaction, they actually folded up. So we have to still see if some of those companies could be stimulated to come back into business, or open back their business, ease the unemployment. So this is something he has a hope for, and I am hoping that it can also succeed in stimulating these businesses to start mobilizing their workers again.

The Minister said the Government’s overdraft is in a very good shape and the overdraft now stands to 39 per cent and was now as low as 35 per cent recently. So we have available to us 5 billion to $6 billion in overdraft, so we may not need to engage in loan. All these, again, very good points.

Three main things I heard coming from the Minister, positive news that we are emerging from difficult years, economic years; also the fact that he is paying off the debt accumulated, hoping to stimulate the economy more. And also, he
actually launched a defence against detractors, some detractors out there who were criticizing certain things in the budget. But two things the citizens really would look at in the budget, eh. They will look at—presently, in our state of affairs, they want to hear the dialogue: how will this budget help crime, and also how will the state of the economy, how will that give that ease that burden that some of the citizens face.

So the Minister now was actually—when I looked at the—following the budget, I saw he was praised by certain persons. The President of the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers’ Association, Roger Roach, said, the small and medium-sized enterprises and:

“…the manufacturing sector will benefit…from the payment of VAT refunds, which will allow SMEs to reinvest, expand and grow, thereby becoming larger earners of foreign exchange for…”—Trinidad and Tobago—“via…”—exportation.

However, he pleaded that something be put in place, that this would not be allowed to have that same lag occurring and the business persons and these people with the companies would not have to suffer.

Also, again, praises came in from the Confederation of Regional Business Chambers Coordinator, Jai Leladarsingh who said that while VAT refunds being accelerated is a good move and the announcement:

“…that these Vat Bonds are 100% redeemable by the bond holder before the maturity date. This is…”—a step—“in the right direction…”

He said he welcomes the development that:

“...more tax and national revenue…”—is—“being realized by the non-oil sector.”

And:

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“The CRBC would like to see more growth and productivity in the non-oil sector, as this will prove to be a vital financial buffer should the price of our energy commodities enter into state of decline.”

But we all know this. The CRBC is urging:

“…the government to pay greater attention to agriculture and agro-based Industry; enhanced manufacturing…infrastructure; hospitality & tourism…”—et cetera.

But the Minister of Finance mentioned the CSO’s data which showed in 2020, within the non-energy sector, the manufacturing sector, excluding petro-chemicals and LNG, it had expanded by 16.5 per cent. So this, again, is something positive for us to see. He said that the report stated that the biggest increase was in food and beverages which surged by 27.6 per cent during the first nine months of 2022. Again, I was happy to hear that. But I was dismayed when Sen. Deonarine mentioned the fact that the beverages is really looking at alcohol, and I will have more to say on that when I am looking at health.

So, again, the Minister did chide critics to the point—he chided critics to the point and pointed out errors in some of their analysis and expert—and the assessment of TT’s economic health and some praise did come from the IMF, and I always try to see positive things in our country. I always try to see something as a sign of hope. Some people say he was too optimistic but again, we need something for the citizens to hold on to, something that—a message that things will get better.

So we have to be grateful to the attempt in balancing the books. But we also need the awareness that, balancing the books is one thing, but citizens at the grassroots level, who bore the brunt of the economic fallout and experienced hardships further exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic, also the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the bread and butter issues facing ordinary citizens, particularly given
to the fact that inflation, which at the end of 2022 was at 8.7 per cent. Citizens got a painful reminder of that. In fact, every time they go to the supermarket, they go to the pharmacy, it is difficult for them.

So therefore, yes, we have improvement but we have the real bread and butter issues facing the citizenry. We got a positive message and we also got a positive message from the IMF. And the IMF actually said, the most recent report on TT, it actually recommended the Government:

“…continue providing targeted and temporary support to alleviate the rising…costs among of the most vulnerable.”

So the message I got here is the praise that the Government got, one; and two, it seems that the Government was in a path giving support to the poor and the downtrodden, the most vulnerable. And this is something commendable.

And this is when I now want to swing to Head 78 of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, $348,172,814. I support this—any sort of allocation given to this Ministry. I think it is too little and I think this Ministry needs to expand. I see the suffering from persons, I get complains. Social workers are at wits’ end to help all. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services mentioned about all the grants that are given out but I know, you know, she said there are grants and the food cards, and all the good things that her Ministry is doing. But I know some persons have also gotten food cards taken away from them. It is like pulling the rug from under persons in these trying times. I know of some mentally ill patients with food cards being pulled from them. I had to write letters to appeal for some.

But what I am saying, the social workers are really our hidden heroes. They are the ones who decide to help, act as a buffer for counselling persons who do not want to come to our mental health clinics. They do family counselling to hold the
family unit together. Their role in society is not fully appreciated. They can rescue a child from abuse. And we looked at the appropriation to the Children’s Authority. And then we also realized that if you can take a child and make that child who has been abused, an emotionally stable citizen, we will get that child to be a productive citizen who may not get into a wall of depression, who may have to come to clinics to take antidepressants which are very costly, to do psychotherapy. So their intervention at that earlier stage is very important.

7.00 p.m.

We live in an evil place, rampant child abuse, and if we rescue these children and mentor and give them the love, they will not add to the health burden to our psychiatric clinics, and Prozac and counselling will cost more. So I support more money into this Ministry, and I think the social worker has a greater role in saving our nation than all the silk-adorned lawyers or doctors in society. I think we should also consider remunerating social workers more, lift the profession. We need them in society to save society. From the little youth who can turn to crime because of abuse and neglect; to victims of poverty; also to the elderly widow with the dead husband; no children around who has to speak affairs; who is lonely; who we say has the empty nest syndrome; persons with dementia, all those individuals benefit from the social workers.

The ageing population needs a department of ageing to reach out to them, carry them tai chi, carry them tours. All these are things we need. It helps the burden of persons coming to clinic. So therefore, I would have to thank the Minister for having the social worker year award, and I would like to publicly and put on record to congratulate winner Farisha Mohammed who has a patriotic heart and other persons who got second place, third place, Victor Joseph, Nyiida Andrews, Aleena Karamath. These are the true heroes. These are the angels on
earth.

So speaking of grants, I must say the Minister did say that people got the $10,000 flood grants, but I still know persons who are still waiting on some of these grants and we are expecting more rainy season ahead. So those are persons I know. And even today in the Daily Express, if you would allow me to read the editorial, Mr. President, the Daily Express actually said, “Preparing for disasters” and said:

“For…several years and counting, the rainy season has become synonymous with flooding and is associated with disruption, anxieties and damage”

And it made mention that there is a prediction that there will be:

“…44 per cent chance of near-normal activity and a 34 per cent chance of above-normal hurricane activity between June and November.”

And—

“Next month, they say, there is a 36 to 57 chance of above-normal rainfall in western Trinidad. They forecast ten to 18 days of heavy rainfall during the season; in some instances in an excess of 50mm of rainfall a day is expected.”

This is frightening. It is frightening to some persons who—even in my community—because we have not just to deal with floods in some areas, but we also have to deal with crime.

So the Minister of Works and Transport actually met with persons from my community and we expressed our fears about the flooding, and even he had promised to do some desilting. Today, he had actually made mention that he is going ahead to do some things and we pray and hope that he can do this as quickly as possible. Persons I am saying are distressed any time, as I say, you see dark clouds, or you see a heavily tinted car passing in your neighbourhood, that raises
that anxiety. So therefore, the Minister of Works and Transport, as I say, met with us, and you see it is not just us because the ageing infrastructure is all—in America, if you look at America right now, they had an infrastructure Bill to get funding to fix roads, their bridges. They are also crumbling. They have problems. Recently the Fort Lauderdale Airport was flooded out after some small amount of rain and people were trapped for I think two days in the airport.

So it is globally we are seeing some things happening to the old infrastructure. And what I may say is that I would have to—also, I had made mention in a previous budget that persons under flood zones to please let the Government consider they pay less property tax, allow them to bring in replacement appliances tax free. Some got relatives to send furniture but had no money to clear. Also, tax free importation of flood relief equipment like barriers, sump pumps, technical, and give them technical advice from the corporation. Tax rebate for those who need to buy these things. All these we have to consider.

We are living in unpredictable times, ageing features, global warming, rising sea levels, and re: torrential rains, we do not know what is going to face us. The Minister of Works and Transport, he does not know what will face us. The weather can change any time. It can worse and we expect it to get worse, and we have the infrastructure crumbling. I would have liked to see more detention ponds being built in various areas than any sort of highway extension into Toco. So I just put that on record.

Let me go back to the inflation now. While forecast for inflation, that inflation will slow down to 4.5 per cent at the end of the year as international prices continue to decline. So this is something again we could look forward to and consumers would experience hopefully relief further down. So we are being optimistic. We are looking for this inflation to slow down, but it is not just us.
You see, Mr. President, I compared us to the United States and the UK. United States, there are persons there, they are undergoing some economic distress; interest rates have risen, persons are on edge. This capitalistic centre has its population hurting, they are on edge. Persons on the fringe just waiting to ignite, to destroy, to pull down their country if there is any sort of social distress. So therefore, compared to them.

Let us look again to the UK. In the United Kingdom—the cost of living increased sharply across the UK during 2021 and 2022. The annual rate of inflation reached 11.1 per cent in October 2022, a 41-year high. Before easing in subsequent months, it was 10.1 per cent in March 2023. So the price of food—just as how we have this problem here, the price of food, goods, energy and fuel has been increasing and most due to the high demand from customers and problems with supply chain. The war with Russia and Ukraine also contributed to this. Low income households are most affected by high food and energy prices. Households have reported cutting back on essential spending. The poorest households report skipping meals or using food banks. Thankfully, we have the food cards, but we have to make sure it reaches the population that really needs it.

So it is a global thing. It is not just us. Consumer price inflation rose in many countries during 2021/2022.

[MR. VICE-PRESIDENT in the Chair]

As I say, supply shortages are a major factor, but as we started to—you know, as there was an increased demand for products and materials, the thing is this has resulted in pushing up inflation around the world. Inflation rates seem to have peaked in many economies in the late 2022, with a decline in their annual rate of inflation evident in early 2023. So there is hope for them. There is hope for us. So the inflation rate is expected to slow 2023, that is, unless there is some other
unforeseeable global event that takes place. So there are signs that some global price pressures are subsiding. For instance, supply bottlenecks have eased, and wholesale gas prices have fallen on financial markets though this will take some time to trickle down.

So therefore, Europe, let us look at Europe. So despite an unemployment rate of only 6 per cent in the European Union, one-fifth of the European Union population is still at risk for poverty or social exclusion. Experts predict there will be a slowdown in the inflation rate from 9.2 per cent in 2022 to 6.4 per cent this year, to 2.8 per cent. So people are having that expectation, and we realized now that they are getting back—as the bottleneck is being released we are now getting back food. I was ecstatic when I read that global food prices have dropped. So yes I felt happy. I said well, soon our citizens would benefit from this. I felt that persons were waiting for this. I heard food prices would decline, but I also have to look, and with your permission I want to quote an article from Newsday, “Rajiv Diptee explains why food prices can’t go down”. This was on the Newsday, February the 8th, 2023. And in this article he made mention that:

This—“…explanation came on the same day…”—the—“…Minister of Trade and Industry Paula Gopee-Scoon called on businessmen to be reasonable when it comes to the price of food on their shelves.
The ministry said it has noted the decline in global food prices, for the tenth consecutive month, as recorded by UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).”

And the Minister:

“…called on supermarkets, distributors and other retailers to, ‘be fair and make appropriate adjustment to the prices charged to consumers if market conditions improve.’”
And she:

“…also expressed disappointment in a statement made by the SATT that food prices were not likely to drop…soon.”

I too was disappointed. Because you see, even the shipping cost has gone down. There is:

“…steady decline in the Freightos Baltic Index from last October to this January.” And—“…the…Baltic Index is the benchmark used to measure spot rates for 40-foot containers.”

So all those were indicators. Things could have gone better. We would have gotten that price reduction, but we still have to hold strain but hope is there. Hopefully, it will trickle down soon and it is something that we have to look at. So Mr. Diptee responded:

“There is a lag time that comes into play with price decreases on international markets filtering into local production, which can then end up on grocery shelves at lower prices.”

So we have to wait. Right?

So there was disappointment there, but we also saw that—we were still hoping that we can gain from some sort of the oil and natural gas exploration while trying to wean ourselves from being dependent on these products. We have to produce more. The Minister of Trade and Industry have been trying her best to get us producing more, and we heard a list of pages that she would have come and told us today that certain things—and I think her list is not exhaustive—of non-energy export manufacturing products. So therefore, those things are excellent, but remember we are still competing with China who could mass produce and compete with anything that we could produce. So we may have to start thinking why not set up a trade zone within the Caribbean where we could now produce within the
Barbados has now been moving to the pharmaceutical industry where they are now tied in to an Indian company. We would be fertilizers. Guyana is now the oil and natural gas thing. So we within the Caribbean, we may have to see if we could now have that interdependency and forget the outside world. Remember, there is a Caricom meeting coming up soon under Head 65, and if I look at 02/001/66, the cost of hosting that meeting is, I think, $20 million. So two things I have with this: we recently had a very productive, I say, a crime conference on public health, crime as a public health concern, and Sen. Dillon-Remy and myself did get some good information, but that cost us $3.4 million. Why could we not have held strain with that meeting and put it with this meeting that we are going to have carded down the line that we got in Head 65? I am saying that money does not come easy.

We could save all—any little thing we can save, we can save. And if you were looking under Head 65, Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, we are looking at Hosting of Conferences, Seminars and Other Functions, $20 million would be needed to host the 45th Regular Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community and related in celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of CARICOM, and this would be held in the period July the 3rd to the 6th, 2023. I am thinking we could have put this crime conference with this and save some money. This is just my take on it.

But therefore now, I must say that we have to, in my point of view, consolidate what we have because any money saved could have gone. It may be good PR for the CARICOM leaders, but you see, we could have gone to purchase CCTV cameras, we could have gone to purchase body cameras, vehicles for police. We see under Head 22 these things are being considered for the cameras, and we
see there is Head 64 where we are looking at TT Police Service where we have to get vehicles for police. And in St. Joseph area, Mr. Vice-President, there is only one working police vehicle for a big area of St. Joseph, which covers at the end of Tunapuna, going into Mt. D’or, Champ Fleurs, going into Caroni Bridge. So therefore, it is a bit frightening to know we have that alarming crime situation—only one. They have to depend on the vehicles from the 999 Emergency Branch.

You have to depend on the national task force, the task force vehicles to come on board if they need any others. But I am hopeful and I am praying that the Head 64 which asks for some sort of moneys to buy more vehicles, I am thinking we definitely need that. Sen. Deonarine did make mention about the cost and people not taking care of certain vehicles.

7.15 p.m.

But you see we have to go a little further. Our police officers are now being met with persons with AK47s. These weapons, these bullets could penetrate cars easily. We may need now to arm our police officers with armoured vehicles, we may need to look at putting bulletproof glass now for them to not expose our—even members of the public because we see sometimes “yuh driving down ah highway” and people could shoot at you. Probably we have to look at giving us a tax break for persons to put those sort of bulletproof glass in our cars. All of these are things we have to consider to protect the citizenry. Because if I get shot, the crime conference recently stated the cost of treating a bullet wound is tremendous, it is an economic burden to the State. So therefore, we could also look at other reasons that we can help.

Look for instance, taxpayers are now considering, you know, give persons a tax benefit, a rebate to buy burglar alarms. All these can help the citizens; VAT off, tax rebate. Also even consider VAT and motor vehicular tax off to
communities who have set up community watch groups and want residents to patrol their neighbourhood. Consider bringing back the civilian community patrol to help other communities and even some of the old derelict vehicles in the police station, instead of it just remaining there, you cannot fix it, give it to communities. If they can fix it, they can help the patrolling of their communities.

So I want to now make mention of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and moneys there. It came under Head 42 and we see that it is really moneys that you would have to give to the corporation and really speaking, we know we are moving to a different time with corporations getting more involved, in getting their property tax and actually giving in the community because they would see the needs there. But yet still I realize the Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company was formed. I am not sure if it will be taken away from the corporations because you see if this is another company and the corporations know well these roads have to be fixed and they are responsible and now we are going to point fingers to them saying that look, you are taking our taxes, you have to fix our roads for us. You know, that would bring a greater liaison with us and the councillors. But if the Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company is now formed, would that now somehow not make persons in a community, burgesses be able now to get our roads fixed, now we have to look at a different company. So we still have to see how that is going to pan out.

I will also say that our community in Valsayn, we have been liaising with the Chairman of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation Mr. Kwasi Robinson to how we could ease our community crime concerns and I am pleased that he has been very, very welcoming to us and I am hoping they get more staff, I am hoping they get more money allocated to them. I am looking forward to the municipal
police to come on board to add to our protection.

I was disappointed, Mr. Vice-President, when I saw Point Fortin Borough had a celebration on the borough day. Now I know people need to celebrate but we just had Carnival recently. I know funds are hard and when I see big party going on and money spent in Point Fortin Borough Day, I looked—could that money not have gone to get food hampers and give to poor people in the area? Could it not gone to give burglar alarms to persons, water tanks to persons? Could that borough day not be a celebration of the people who are there, people who are citizens, people who are living on the edge of poverty? And you see why I was displeased when I saw that display of partying and liming and thing, I know people are suffering in that community and I think moneys could have been better spent for that. However, I also say now, look at this, one corporation would be spending money “wine and jam” but I want quote:

“Corporations call for funds”

It is an article by Kimoy Leon Sing where she mentioned the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, they are pleading for:

“…Government to release funds…”—because—“the rainy season…” approaching.

And they said:

“…some places in Central Trinidad…yet to recover from heavy rainfall.”

And:

“…we are concerned about the Ministry of Works’ Drainage Division completing its programme of works before the start of the rainy season, especially in flood-prone areas. The cleaning of major watercourses by the Ministry of Works directly affects the risk of flooding.”

So they are crying out for fixing—the Gran Couva Main Road which has been
closed since November 2022 due to landslides, yet still we see other corporations being able to party and whatnot. I mean some things sometimes may not look fair to persons out there, persons suffering and I think the chairperson there:

“Awong urged the Minister of Works and Transport…to prioritise the repair of this landslide on the Guaracara/Tabaquite route in order to avoid endangering the lives of hundreds of children and residents who use the road every day to travel to and from work and school.”

So therefore, moneys spent should go towards things like that. Now, I want to make mention that—I made mention to the Confederation of Regional Business Chamber coordinator who said that he was disappointed that we never really developed agriculture property and he asked for a push there. And I must say I am happy to see the University of West Indies met with stakeholders to see if they can boost our local agricultural ventures. So this is one thing I looked at.

And I must say I did in fact have a discussion, Mr. Vice-President, with Shiraz Khan. And Shiraz Khan for those who know, he was the President of the TT farmers union. He is presently an executive member and he is an advocate for the farming industry since 1998, and yes we are talking about small business enterprise. Yes, we are talking about medium to stimulate but look at what he mentioned and this is something I am hoping we could help solve it for him because he has been there for years as a farmer since—as I say he said since 1998 and yet still, he says, you know, actually since 1984, he was an advocate in the farmer’s body. But what he says now he is having a hard time, that how within the recent Eid celebration, he hardly got any sales and he is recommending this. If you want to support these persons, he has recommended that the Ministry of Agriculture look at giving a rebate on feed for livestock to keep the small business going. He said rebate for each bag of feed from the companies, from NFM and he
He also made mention that the fact that there was in terms of getting benefits. So we all know Government said that persons would get benefits, they would get loans, they would be helped as farmers but he is saying they cannot be helped unless they are in lands that are regularized and this is a problem. Only 10 per cent of persons could register as farmers because they are on lands that are regularized so he is pleading for the 90 per cent who budgets were saying “we are going to help these farmers”, they are not getting the incentive offers unless we look at regularizing this land for them. So this is something we have to know, if we could stimulate that economy. We do not have to get things from New Zealand, beef and lamb and all these things.

He also made mention that the businessmen were encouraged to come into farming and they were given a 40 per cent tax break and this is not afforded to the smaller farmers. So I think he is also suggesting if he could get some concession to these smaller farmers to level the playing field. So I understand why the Government would give that concession, they want big business to go in but if big business goes in, what will happen to the small farmers? They will just be gone to the way side. So therefore farming, I think we have to look at farming, we have to look at agriculture, we have to look at stimulating that to decrease any sort of expenditure we are importing.

And I know we had sugar, cocoa years ago, we had met local demand. We canned orange, grapefruit juice. We were world class in cocoa and sugar. We import watermelons but oil spoiled us and we had experts recently telling us about the COVID pandemic, it is a pity we did not have experts telling us how to fight this Dutch disease. Economists have long known that large resource discoveries could be harmful to economies in the long term and I think we are still feeling the
effects of this and probably we will have to tell Guyana and give them a lesson in any CARICOM meeting we are having in July, that they may catch this also. So after oil entered the picture, we let the agriculture industry go down and we had dreams and planners who did see the benefits.

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

**Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh:** We did go into petrochemical industries, fertilizers, metal, et cetera but the time has come today that you know we know the refinery is dead or dying and oil production is dwindling and we still have a natural gas proportion of our industrial base and a disproportionate percentage of our balance of payments and national revenue was coming from this source. Thankfully, we are now moving away from this.

Now I looked at other concerns that were raised. I saw certain other bodies. I look to see what they were saying about this budget and the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce said that the Minister provided valuable insights into the oil and gas revenue over the six months but they said we were lacking output projected remaining in the fiscal year. This is some concern, the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Commerce mentioned. They also said it is concerning that in such a short space of time between reading the budget last September and now, such a large increase in expenditure has been identified in 2023.

The American Chamber of Commerce of Trinidad and Tobago actually said that with a further reduction in actual expenditure in the next six months of the year due to the likelihood of reduced petroleum and petrochemical prices, the Government’s expenditure should be focused on activities and initiatives which will generate income. AMCHAM said the decision to accelerate VAT refunds and an announcement of an intent to clear outstanding receivables is welcomed. So
again, they praise the Minister there and I am saying also different persons like the University’s Vaalmikki Arjoon said the news of positive growth was a welcome treat but cautioned the Government not to fall into a comfort zone yet.

I want to look at the fact that Head 13, Children’s Authority, will receive the highest allocation since inception and this is something they need. They need to get this going. Tobago House of Assembly in Head 15, they are also faced with infrastructure failing and the tourists there, we have to ensure that the country—the roadways are there. Education, Head 26, needed for our children.

Ministry of National Security, we see that we keep spending more but not getting results. With the sixth highest crime rate in the world, our orgy of violence must stop, we have to do more to stop our citizens under attack in their homes and streets. The National Security Ministry will be getting some $4 million to provide for parts and servicing of emergency tenders for Fire Service. So we saw an unfortunate event where we realized we were not up to mark with our Fire Service equipment, I am glad that is there. We looked at the SSA providing cameras and I am saying that we have such a small mass, 4,780 kilometres, we should have cameras all over that car thefts, we could follow them anywhere. We keep hearing for body cams for police and probably if we had that, it would be less money given to the PCA. And also I may say, I saw more ammunition was needed for the defence force, I got alarmed. Are we preparing for some unrest? A coup? A lot of money for ammunition for the defence force.

But in conclusion, I want to say that after seven years of steep economic decline, it is nice that we can celebrate 2022 as a year of growth duly certified by IMF but it is no small fleet for the IMF to have given a positive review, an indication of the Minister of Finance’s conduct and management of our economy. Article IV report states that the economic activities are recovering supported by
higher global energy prices and the rebound of the non-energy sector leading to real GDP growth in 2022. So they also warned that the current account will narrow because of lower energy prices and that balance of risk of growth is tilted towards downsides.

Minister of Finance is like “ah lookout in ah ship”, to look out for dangers to steer us out of a storm. He has led us out of stormy waters.

**Hon Senators:** [Desk thumping]

**Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh:** External markets and uncertainty to what is out there, we keep hearing about a BRICS nation now going to develop a new economy. All this he has to face with. We do not know what will happen to the US dollar. Our lookout has uncertain events ahead. He is dependent on other Ministers or sailors delivering while weathering the global storm. Some like Trade, Education, Health shipmates have done well, others like National Security have its challenges. So I say we are all here in this together and we need optimism in these difficult times. We citizens have to be grateful for a recovering economy and hope we can soon begin to recover from social distress and effects of crime. Thank you.

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

**7:30 p.m.**

**Mr. Vice-President:** Acting Prime Minister, Minister of Finance.

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

**The Minister of Finance and Acting Prime Minister (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. I must say I really appreciated that contribution from Sen. Deyalsingh.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** But I appreciated it for a particular reason. Of all the contributors on that side, he got it, he got the point that with all the negativity
around us, we must be optimistic—we must. We cannot be pessimistic and
perhaps that is because of his medical training that he came with that, but I thank
Sen. Deyalsingh for his entire contribution. I was very, very uplifted by it.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Now, I want to deal with some issues very, very, quickly before
I go into detailed comments on various contributions of Senators. I was really
disappointed in Sen. Nakhid’s contribution. I timed him, the hon. Senator said he
was going to speak for a little while, he spoke for 26 minutes. But 10 out of those
26 was spent saying the same thing over and over, that in this supplementation of
appropriation, we have only allocated $2 million dollars for sport. And the hon.
Senator went on to allege that in the 2023 budget, only $13 million, or some figure
like that, those were his words, was allocated for sports.

Nothing could be further from the truth and that is why I am disappointed, because all Senators received this document, Mr. Vice President, the Finance
(Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation), with all the explanations for all
of the supplementations. And on page 12 of the Senate document, it is clearly
indicated under Head 79, that under the Development Programme, the Ministry of
Sport and Community Development is being allocated an additional $103,192,097.
The actual supplementation to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development
in this Bill is $105 million. It is not $2 million. And further, the actual original
appropriation for the Ministry of Sport and Community Development in the
original fiscal ’22 budget was $459 million. It is not $13 million. So really for the
hon. Senator to spend 10 minutes saying over, and over, and over, and over, and
over, “We do not care about people, we do not care about poor people, only $2
million for sport”—when it is 105. Add that to the 474, you get almost $600
million appropriated for sport in the 2023 budget, not $2 million and $13 million.

**UNREVISED**
So that dispenses with that.

In addition—and I heard Sen. Lyder there saying, “Yes, tell them”, typical of that honourable gentleman, that hon. Senator. When one—he made an astonishing comment where he said that we have lost a hundred and—let me get the exact, his exact words, Mr. Vice President, with respect to the national insurance situation, the hon. Senator’s exact words, I have it here. Just one second. Yes, Sen. Lyder said, “Some 112,000 persons”—and he said it in a very high pitched tone of voice. “Some 112,000 persons lost their jobs according to the NIB report.” Is that so? When I go to the national insurance annual report for 2022, which is the most recent annual report, in 2022, there were 455,448 contributors to the national insurance scheme. It is now much more than that. But using the annual report, in December 2022, 455,000 contributors to the national insurance scheme.

In addition, in 2022, there were 214,490 beneficiaries of national insurance benefits—214,490 beneficiaries. In 2015, there were 514,000 contributors and only 177,000 beneficiaries. So the number of beneficiaries in the national insurance scheme has increased by 37,000 since 2015; 177,000 in 2015; 214,000 in 2022. And the number of contributors has declined from 514 to 455. So the net change between contributors and beneficiaries is 22,000. But what had happened is that Sen. Mark—and by the way, Mr. Vice President, I timed Sen. Mark to see how long it would take for him to start to shout and scream. It took one minute and 39 seconds.

Sen. The Hon. Sinanan saw me using my stopwatch, and I showed it to him, one minute and 39 seconds before Sen. Mark started to scream. And he told me, he must be having a bad day, he normally takes 39 seconds. And you know, I so wish I could come into this honourable Senate one day and engage in some kind of
learning discourse with the Opposition Bench. But it is impossible, because when one looks at what they say, it bears no relationship whatsoever to reality. For example, I do not know who wrote that speech for Sen. Mark, I have no idea, but he kept carrying on and carrying on about the GDP, under the UNC, being US $185 billion. And he kept saying it over and over, it was US $185 billion, that was our GDP under the UNC. In fact, he went up to 189 at one point in his contribution— US, eh.

If our GDP in 2015 was US $189 billion, you know how much that is, Mr. Vice President? That is over a trillion Trinidad and Tobago dollars. Sen. Mark cannot even get his currency right. It is not US dollars, and the figures are all wrong. And I want to make the point, some commentators, even when they are not Members of the Opposition, they get trapped by the negative nonsense that comes from the Opposition. I have looked very carefully at what has happened in this economy. When one goes to the CSO’s website, it is there for everybody to see, and if one is honest and one looks carefully at what is on the CSO’s website, one will see there are a number of graphs on the CSO’s website that will give you an indication of the changes in various productive sectors in the economy over time. And if one looks, for example, at the manufacturing sector, one sees that in the 2012 to 2013 period, the contribution of the manufacturing sector to national GDP, when one excludes value added tax and other tax influencers on the GDP, per quarter, was somewhere in the vicinity of $1.3 billion per quarter. That was the contribution of the manufacturing sector.

7.40 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: Now, 2023—

PROCEDURAL MOTION

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

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Point of Order.

Hon. C. Imbert: Sure.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I am sorry. Mr. Vice-President, in accordance with Standing Order 14(5), I beg to move that the Senate continue to sit until the completion of the business at hand, inclusive of the matters on the adjournment; two of them. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation)

(Financial Year 2023) Bill 2023

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. In fact, I have the CSO graph up here, and you can go there. There are various links and I am on the food, beverages and tobacco products, GDP constant prices, which is real GDP, food, beverages and tobacco products subsector. And in 2014, the contribution of that particular subsector to real GDP was actually TT $1.2 billion per quarter.

If we go now to 2022, third quarter, it is $2.2 billion. So the contribution of the manufacturing subsector, food, beverages and tobacco products within the manufacturing subsector has grown from 1.2 billion per quarter to 2.2 billion. That, Mr. Vice-President, is a 75 per cent increase. When you look at the graph it is a steep upward trend, steep upward trend. And it began, believe it or not, Mr. Vice-President, during COVID. When one looks at the tremendous growth in the food beverages subsector of the manufacturing sector, in terms of real GDP, which measures volume. Because hon. Members, really I do want to have a learned discussion with Members of the Opposition, but come on, you could do better.

The difference between real GDP and nominal GDP, Mr. Vice-President, is that real GDP is referenced to a base year, and I will come to that in a little while, because our GDP was rebased in 2017 and rebased at 2012. Prior to that, our real
GDP was based on 2000 prices. But in 2017, the Central Statistical Office rebased our real GDP to the prices in 2012. So you cannot go and look at the old data, because you are comparing apples and oranges. You have to look at the CSO’s publications with the rebased GDP, with the base year being 2012. You cannot use the 2000 base year data. It is irrelevant, but that is beside the point.

Let me go now to the growth in the food and beverages subsector of the manufacturing sector. When I look at that in 2020, the contribution of that sector was just about $1.5 billion per quarter, and that is up from 1.2 and 1.3 back in 2013 and 2014. And there is a steep, sharp incline upwards. It goes from 1.5 to 2.2 in just the space of about three years, Mr. Vice-President.

And you see, one of the hon. Independent Senators, for reasons unknown, told us that that hon. Senator had done some investigation into the food and beverages sector, which increased by 27 per cent in the first nine months of 2022, 27 per cent in real terms, Mr. Vice-President. And an Independent Senator told us that she looked into the data, she got feedback, and it is rum and wine. Firstly, I do not think that is entirely accurate. I do not believe that is so, because I have been looking at the various subsectors within the food and beverages sector, and it is not all rum and wine. But be that as it may, assuming that it was, these are products produced in Trinidad and Tobago by Trinidad and Tobago citizens for export. So whether it is rum and wine or whether it is other products within the food sector, and I happen to know that a lot of our food, our manufactured products, especially packaged food, is exported to Central America, is exported to the rest of the Caribbean region and even further afield into North America. But that is beside the point. Whether it is packaged food, or whether it is alcohol, it does not matter. There is 27 per cent growth in that subsector in the first nine months of 2022. And this is why I really appreciated Sen. Deyalsingh’s contribution.
Because what happened in 2020? It seems that some Members opposite forgot that something happened in 2020. It was called COVID-19, COVID-19. And if one looks at the economic performance of Trinidad and Tobago, prior to COVID-19, anyhow you want to look at it, whether you want to look at it in real terms, whether you want to look at it in nominal terms, one would see a consistent improvement in the Trinidad and Tobago economy up to 2019, continuous improvement. Then COVID hit us, and yet even though COVID has hit us, even though COVID has hit us, and like the rest of the world, we had issues in 2020. We had significant economic contraction, like every other country in the world. We did not do as badly as some other countries. The world average decline in 2020 was 11 per cent. Our economy did not decline by 11 per cent in real terms in 2020. We did better than many countries.

Some of the Caribbean countries, Barbados declined by 18 per cent. That is what happened within the Caribbean. We declined by 8½ per cent. COVID caused that. You had lockdowns. You had a complete cessation of virtually all activity in the county for two months. Then you had public health restrictions. So that when I hear negative commentators coming out of our university talking about, “Oh, well, the GDP now is so much lower than before”, it is as if they were not living here when COVID hit us? They were not here. But even so, even with the economic pressure caused by COVID-19, not just to our economy, but the entire world, what we are seeing—and the Minister of Trade and Industry spoke about it, you are seeing that our manufacturing sector has improved its production to surpass pre-pandemic levels, pre-pandemic levels.

I was talking to the Minister of Trade and Industry, and I think the hon. Minister needs to go and let people know what the truth is. Because if you listen to some of the Opposition Senators in this debate, you would think you are living in a
different country, Mr. Vice-President. For example, I kept hearing talk and talk and talk about our crushing debt and increase in crushing debt and huge expansion in contingent liabilities; poppycock. When I was hearing all of that, I asked the debt unit in the Ministry of Finance, give me the figures. And at the end of 2022, our total government debt, adjusted government debt, which includes contingent liabilities, was $129 billion at December 2022; $129 billion was our total adjusted government debt.

[MR. PRESIDENT in the Chair]

Now, in May of 2023, our total adjusted debt is $129.7 billion. So an increase of less than a billion dollars, an increase of 0.6 per cent in our adjusted total government debt, which includes contingent liabilities of 0.6 per cent, I have to listen to people talk to me about crushing increase and huge expansion in contingent liabilities? People have to get their facts straight.

And worse than that, in 2021 and in 2020, our debt-to-GDP ratio, which is important, because you need to understand the significance of real GDP. The significance of real GDP is that it measures volume. So you take a base year, in our case our base is now 2012, and the CSO is working towards rebasing again to 2017 as the base year. But you take the prices in 2012 and you look at the volume of production, the amount of goods and services produced in your economy, the volume. And then you measure the change in volume. So the prices remain the same, and then you measure volume. So that real GDP is a measure of the increase in the volume of production.

Nominal GDP, on the other hand, takes current prices, today’s prices, and multiplies it by volume. So, even if you do not have an increase in volume in a particular sector, you may have an increase in the value of the goods produced in that sector by as much as 50 per cent. So when you see our nominal GDP going
from 150 billion in 2020/2019 to 200 billion today, a 195 billion today, a 25 per cent increase, what that does, and that is what the credit rating agencies look at, that is what the world looks at, that is what the international banks look at. What that does, when your nominal GDP increases by 25 per cent, and your debt remains flat, as has occurred here, we have not increased our public debt by 1 per cent in the last 12 months. When you have an increase in our GDP and debt remains flat, your debt-to-GDP ratio goes down. So in 2020, our debt-to-GDP ratio was 81 per cent, COVID, at the end of 2020.

In 2021, it was still high, 79.5 per cent. By 2022, it began to go down because of the increase in value of goods produced in the country. It dropped from 79.5 per cent to 70.3 per cent. And today, as of May 16th, it is 67 per cent. So we have reduced our debt-to-GDP ratio from almost 81 per cent in the COVID years, down to 67 per cent now. That is a tremendous significant increase. There is no other country in the Caribbean that has had that kind of performance, reducing its debt-to-GDP ratio from 81 per cent to 67 per cent in just about two years, Mr. President.

And these are the things we need to talk about. Because when the agencies, the international institutions, look at Trinidad and Tobago and they talk about debt, you cannot talk about debt in isolation. You have to look at it in terms of your country’s ability to repay debt. So that when you look at a country like Barbados, for example, struggling with a debt-to-GDP ratio of 150 per cent, they are struggling with it, 150, 140, 135, they are struggling. Jamaica with 100 per cent debt-to-GDP ratio. When international agencies look at countries like that, that is why they have to go to the IMF, because the IMF is the lender of last resort. So when you exhaust all your options, in terms of borrowing on the world stage, in terms of borrowing from international banks on the international capital market,
which we in Trinidad and Tobago can do very easily, when you exhaust that, when nobody wants to lend you money except at very, very high rates, that is why you go to the IMF because it is the lender of last resort. So these countries in the Caribbean which are in IMF programmes, they have to go there, because they do not have the sort of credit rating that we have in Trinidad and Tobago.

We have gone on the market twice, 2016, 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, and on both occasions we were able to get international banks, JPMorgan, Deutsche Bank, City Bank, a series of international commercial investors. On each occasion, within a matter of hours, in 2016, while oil prices had dropped from $100 in 2014 down to $25 in 2016, Trinidad and Tobago was able to go on the international capital market in the United States, in New York and California and raise US $1 billion over a 10-year period at a very attractive interest rate of 4½ per cent, and we did that in two hours. I remember we opened up Bloomberg at 8 o’clock and by 10 o’clock, we had offers of US $3 billion available to us.

7.55 p.m.

We closed it off, so we were able now to get value investors, investors that will keep Trinidad and Tobago paper. US $1 billion just like “dat” in two hours, 4-and-a-half per cent. We did it again in 2020, in the middle of COVID, and we were able to raise US$500 million in two hours, again, at 4 and-a-half per cent over 10 years in the middle of COVID. Those other countries in the Caribbean are not able to do that. They cannot do it. And what I do not understand about some of the commentary outside there, I can understand the Opposition trying to paint the most dismal picture of Trinidad and Tobago because that is their modus operandi.

I cannot understand people from academia just making up stories, and you know, Sen. Lyder decided to repeat the nonsense that was put into the public domain by a university professor, who on reading the IMF report, where the IMF
said that the Trinidad and Tobago economy is recovering, and that we expect to have growth in the economy in 2023. That university professor decided that that—

**Hon. Senator:** [Inaudible]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** This is not the first time, he did a whole press release. That university professor decided that even though the IMF was saying that, that the Trinidad and Tobago economy has recovered, it has grown in 2022, it will grow in 2023. That particular individual decided to make up his own data and said, “Ah not worrying with what they say because dey like to talk flowery.” Whatever that means. And instead, he went to the data and he saw a 4 ½ per cent decline in the economy. Totally untrue. When you go to the data you see a 3.2 per cent increase, positive growth in the economy.

And you see, as I said, I “doh” mind if the Opposition makes up its own facts. “Dais what dey accustomed doing. Ah doh mind.” But when commentators decide they have to be negative, make up stories, talk “ah” set of nonsense, and it is published in the media—

**Hon. Senator:** What!

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Why “ah” must not say “dat”, Mr. President, I understand they do not like what I say, but when a UNC MP masquerades as a university lecturer, a UNC MP, there is a particular lecturer at UWI, sat down in this Parliament, sit opposite me representing a UNC constituency. The Minister of Trade and Industry spoke about that individual, UNC MP. Who after that, went for screening on a number of occasions at Rienzi Complex. And I have to be told that that is a neutral and dispassionate commentator. Come on, come on. So anyway, let me move on, Mr. President, let me go to contributions.

**Sen. Mark:** We defend Roger Hosein.

**Hon. Senators:** [Desk thumping]
Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, how much more time do I have?

Mr. President: You end at 8.15.

Sen. Lyder: [Inaudible]

Mr. President: One second. One second, Minister. Members, Members, the Minister is on the floor wrapping up. Minister, you have till 8.15.

Hon. C. Imbert: And you see, you know, you could have your own opinion but “yuh cyah” make up your own facts.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Sen. Mark: [Inaudible]

Hon. C. Imbert: So anyway, I am looking very carefully—Mr. President, why are they screaming? It took Sen. Mark, I think he had left us for a little while and he came back. It took him less than a minute to start to scream. I am looking at various comments from Senators. And the main point which has been missed, my dear friend Sen. Teemal complained about and the explanations given for the supplementation, but in the same contribution complained about Government not paying its bills. My point, Mr. President, is one cannot have one’s cake and eat it too.

What has happened in this country is we have had seven hard years. And you see, if in 2014 the national expenditure was $62 billion. Mr. President, there is a murmur over there. Can you get them to—can you get them to—

Sen. Mark: The murmur is not over here.

Mr. President: Okay. So the Minister speaks to the murmur and then you raise the voices to ensure that he is correct in what he is saying. Minister, continue.

Sen. Lyder: We wanted to [Inaudible] this side.

Mr. President: Let us just have silence while the Minister wraps up, he finishes at 8.15. Continue, Minister.
Hon. C. Imbert: If in 2014 the national expenditure was $72 billion, nine years later, nine years we are now looking at supplementation where if all of the money that has been appropriated is spent, and that is not always the case, quite often there are implementation challenges especially with the development programme. But assuming that the entire supplemented budget will be spent, nine years after the country became accustomed to government expenditure of $62 billion, we are spending $61 billion. How could that be wrong? Are we supposed to stay in a situation where the Government decides to squeeze expenditure forever? No. The whole point is, and former Finance Minister Dookeran has been saying this for a very long time, very long time. Did not always agree with him, but I took note of what he said recently a couple months ago, and his view is that one should always spend to stimulate economic growth, create jobs and so on. And that they should not be a sort of a slavish adherence to balancing the budget and so on. Yes, a balanced budget is great, but if you want to maintain momentum in the economy government has to put cash into the system. And therefore the whole point of this supplementation is to deal with long outstanding bills owed to suppliers and contractors, Mr. President.

Now what could be wrong with that? What could be wrong with that? If the complaint is that the Government does not pay its bills, and the Government brings a supplementation to allow it to clear off a series of arrears owed to suppliers and contractors, what is wrong with that? The whole point, Mr. President, is to continue to stimulate the economy.

And the other thing I want say, the Minister of Trade and Industry referred to this briefly—you know, come on I “cyah” be bothered with these people. These people are unrequited and bitter. Unrequited and bitter. I “cyah” be bothered with them. Let me deal now with what this Government is doing for the small and
micro enterprise sector.

The Minister of Trade and Industry referred to it, but I would like to go into some more details. Some time ago, and I have told my Ministry that we need to advertise it more because it seems that is it is not well known, so we are going to be doing a radio and a television programme, in addition to the newspaper advertisements. There was one in the Guardian today for our SME development financing facility. And the Cabinet approved, it took us quite a while to get the commercial banks on board, but some months ago the Cabinet approved a brand new loan guarantee scheme for small and medium enterprises in Trinidad and Tobago. The value of the facility is $500 million. It has never been done before. Never. And the Government is guaranteeing—

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: —80 per cent of the principal plus interest payments on the loan, 80 per cent. And, Mr. President, and Mr. President, the eligible economic sector and I need to reemphasize this, is the non-energy sector. This is where we focusing.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: This $500 million loan guarantee programme is for the non-energy sector and listen to these words, with strategic allocations to benefit from economic diversification. So that the entities that will get first preference will be the entities that are involved in diversification of our economy, a $500 million guarantee loan programme for small and medium enterprises.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: And we have defined small and medium enterprises with an annual turnover ranging from to $500,000 a year, which is just $40,000 a month to $25 million a year with a minimum of five employees. So that any small business
with a turnover of $40,000 a month or $500,000 a year with just five employees and up to $25 million a year will be able to benefit from this loan guarantee programme.

In addition, the loan will be for working capital, investments in tangible or intangible assets, and it has these features, Mr. President, not just 80 per cent guaranteed by the Government, but in addition there is a moratorium on principal repayments for two years. There are loan amounts of up to $1.5 million for qualified SMEs, and the tenure of the loan, the period will be up to 10 years including the two year moratorium on interest payments. And the rate of the loan would be the repo rate plus a small addition.

So we put this in place now. This is now in place permanently. This $500 million loan guarantee scheme, which provides this kind of financing to small and medium enterprises. This is what this Government is doing for SMEs.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: So I heard somebody over there say we doing nothing for SMEs. I think I need to do about three video on this yes, run it on the TV. Because if one falls for the propaganda of the Opposition, you will believe anything because they say anything they want. It does not have to have any relationship to reality, none. They just say it in the hope like—

Sen. Mark: Call the general elections!

Mr. President: Sen. Mark, again, you are shouting across the floor to the Minister. That is not required.

Sen. Mark: I apologize to you, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Minister, continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. The fact of the matter is, Mr. President, and this is to deal with another issue, in 2022, I came to this honourable House to
present the 2022 budget, after having presented it in the other place. And in that year, our estimate of the budget deficit was $9 billion. We expected to generate about $45 billion in revenue and spend about $54 billion. And the reason why we thought it necessary to spend that 54 is that we had to put more cash into the economy. So we decided we going with it even though the estimates of revenue were $45 billion, and the estimates of expenditure was 54, with a $9 billion deficit, we decided we going with it because we want to maintain economic momentum.

I did not hear anybody carry on about the deficit on that time. They seemed to understand then what the issue was, that we need to maintain economic momentum. As it turned out, as we went through the year, our estimate of a $9 billion deficit was wrong. As we went through the estimate dropped to $7 billion, then $5 billion, then $3 billion. By the time the 2023 budget was read, the estimate I received from the Budget Division was that the deficit had dropped from $9 billion to $1 billion. By the time we closed the accounts for fiscal 2022, and we looked at the revised figures instead of a deficit of $9 billion, we had a surplus of $1 billion.

So, the whole point is, the whole point is, Mr. President, is that our economy has had to deal with fiscal deficits before. Is nothing new about “dat.” We have been there and we have done that. We survived COVID where we had to deal with deficit of $10 and $15 billion. We passed through that and we emerged, we managed our way out.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: So that, I say to hon. Senators, right now obviously, with a small decline in revenue based on reduced commodity prices, we expect perhaps the revenue will be a $1 billion or a little more than $1 billion, less than we originally estimated.
Yes, we have asked for supplementation of $3.8 billion if you do the math, you come out somewhere around the $6 billion figure in terms of the projected deficit with this increased supplementation.

8.10 p.m.

But last year, we had an estimated a deficit of $9 billion. The whole point about all of this, these are estimates, Mr. President. And it is in our considered opinion, that it is far better to pump the money into the economy, to preserve jobs, to stimulate economic activity, to develop our infrastructure, to deal with long outstanding bills—the trade payables to the regional health authorities, I heard somebody query that. Why would you want to query that? Our health sector provides free health care. That is one of the issues that we have in this country. It costs a lot of money. You look at the education sector, it is over $5 billion, the health sector is over $5 billion, the social sector is over $5 billion. Take those three Ministries together, you cross $15 billion per annum in expenditure. And it is all free.

Mr. President: Minister, you have four more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. I am almost finished. We provide a huge social safety net in Trinidad and Tobago: $5 billion-plus in social grants; $5 billion-plus in free education, from cradle to grave; $5 billion-plus in free health care. And these things do not drop from the sky. You have to get medication, you have to get medical equipment, you have to get oxygen, and all these things, in order to keep your health sector running. It is not cheap, it is expensive. And therefore, if we come now and we know that we have built up arrears to suppliers to the RHAs for essential supplies, and we come now and we want to clear off the bulk of those arrears, what is wrong about that? You see, that is why I like Sen. Deyalsingh’s
contribution. You have to look at the upside. Stop looking at the downside all the time.

And we—this Government has demonstrated its ability to manage this economy with the limited resources that we have had to struggle with for the last seven years. We have demonstrated our ability to manage this economy. We have demonstrated our ability to face external shocks, exogenous shocks as they are called. We have faced collapses in oil prices, we have faced a global pandemic and we have emerged from it, Mr. President. And therefore, this supplementation is all about dealing with a number of issues that have arisen over time.

With respect to some of the questions asked by Sen. Dillon-Remy, we do have a detailed list of answers to a number of questions asked in the other place in the Standing Finance Committee, I will make this available to the hon. Senator, because it is impossible in 45 minutes to answer everybody. And we did have 12 speakers on the other side on this occasion: six on the upper bench and six on the Opposition Bench. It is impossible to do justice to all the questions that have been asked. It is impossible. So that I apologize to any Senator on the Independent Bench whose questions I have not dealt with.

But I want to close, Mr. President, I want to close by saying that, as far as I am concerned, this Government has done a good job in managing this economy under difficult circumstances.

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

**Sen. Mark:** [Inaudible]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Mr. President, as I said, the Member for—the Senator is just screaming as usual. I am not going to depend on the Opposition to recognize the good work of this Government, because they will not. It is our responsibility as
Hon. C. Imbert (cont’d)

Government Members to let the people know the good work we have been doing. And with those words, I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping and crosstalk]

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 entitled an Act to supplement and vary the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorized by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2023) Act, 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.

MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS

(TRIAL BY JUDGE ALONE) BILL, 2023

[Second Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [May 12, 2023]: That a Bill to amend the Jury Act, Chap. 6:53 and the Criminal Procedure Act, Chap. 12:02 and for related matters be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, on the last occasion, Friday, May 12, 2023, there were 16 speakers on the second reading debate of this Bill. The Attorney General, Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC, commenced his wind up of the debate and utilized seven minutes of his speaking time. Therefore, the Attorney General has 38 minutes of speaking time remaining. Attorney General.
Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Thank you very much, Mr. President. Before I begin the end of my wind up, may I offer congratulations formally to the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Rowley, on his doctorate awarded by Howard University.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: And may I offer sincere congratulations to Sen. Paul Richards—

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: —on his continued academic achievements.

Mr. President, on Friday last, I opened with a restatement of my first remarks that the Act which we are today assembled to amend, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Trial by Judge Alone) Act, 2017, has demonstrably, since its proclamation in 2019, produced a successful working platform from which we are seeking to build. I emphasized that, Mr. President, as at May 11, 2023, accused persons have availed themselves of the option of judge alone trials. On average, two requests were made per month for judge alone trials during the year 2022, while 13 requests were made for the month of January 2023 alone thus far. The records therefore suggest emphatically that requests for judge alone trials are continuing to increase despite the resumption of trials by jury in June of 2022. And I emphasize this, Mr. President, in order to state categorically that it is not correct, as some have attempted to suggest, to describe the data which I have referred to in my previous remarks as being limited to the pandemic period. The data which has been collected is post-pandemic and demonstrates the platform from which we are seeking by these amendments to continue to build. Of the 59 completed judge alone trials, there have only been six appeals which demonstrates confidence and trust in this mode of trial.
Mr. President, in examining this Bill, it is important to employ the first principle of statutory construction. And the Bill which seeks to amend two Acts, the Jury Act and the Criminal Procedure Act, must be read as a whole. By this Bill, Mr. President, we are addressing two Acts, as I have said, the Jury Act and the Criminal Procedure Act. Simply put, the Jury Act has been amended to repeal those parts of that Act dealing with special jurors, and to reduce the number of jurors in a judge and jury trial. The jury trial, Mr. President, and I emphasize this, is not being abolished. The intention by these amendments is to retain trial by jury, and to fine-tune and to improve on how jury trials are to be operationalized into the future.

The cost of jury trials has been spoken to by my colleague, Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, and I am afraid has been exaggerated in the reports that have led on from her remarks, because the intention of this Government is not to fine-tune and improve on jury trials because the cost of jury trials is too high. That is a misrepresentation of what my learned colleague, Minister in the Office of the Attorney and Ministry of Legal Affairs, has said.

There is no interference with an accused being able, on his election or her election, to be tried by a judge and jury according to law and applicable principles. In my opening remarks last Friday, Mr. President, I addressed, and I will not repeat the principle of law established by the Privy Council coming out of this country, that trial by jury—sorry, coming out of Jamaica, that trial by jury is not an entrenched constitutional right and that principle applies to this country. What we must therefore be concerned with, in examining the proposed amendments, is that the trial process proposed by these amendments is a fair process. That is unequivocally so, Mr. President.
The Criminal Procedure Act is being amended to improve the operationalization of the criminal trial process by building on the improvements which are shown to have been effected since 2019, and are now a confirmed part of our working criminal trial process, that is to say trial by judge alone. Ample checks and balances are maintained. In a judge alone trial, the accused is to be provided with reasons for the decision of the judge, unlike a jury trial where the jury is not required to give reasons for a finding of guilt of an accused. The accused retains the option to apply to have an indictment quashed or amended. The accused can make a submission of no case to answer and the accused has a right of appeal. All procedural safeguards, Mr. President, which maintain a fair trial, are preserved under the judge alone option.

This Bill has made no inroads into trial fairness, and in fact maintains and upholds all key principles of a fair trial. Any objection to this Bill on the basis of an absence of trial fairness before a judicial officer is, in my respectful view, not only unfounded but unwarranted. The Act, I repeat, must be read as a whole.

8.25 p.m.

So if we were to look at one of the first sections that are to be amended in the Criminal Procedure Act, we remind ourselves, reading that section and reading it against the principle of statutory construction that the Act must be read as a whole, we read section 6(1), which is introduced by the amendment in the Bill, clause 4:

“A person against whom an indictment has been filed shall, subject to the provisions of this Act, be tried by a Judge alone, unless he elects to be tried before a Judge and jury and the Court so directs in the interest of justice.”

An important part of section 6(1) therefore, is that part which says:

“...subject to the provisions of this Act...”

UNREVISED
So when we look at section 6(1), we have to read the entirety of the Act, including the entirety of all of the amendments which are being brought before this House in order to improve trial by judge alone and trial by judge and jury. And that therefore means that we must spend a little time, Mr. President, looking at some of the other provisions of the Bill and the amendments which are proposed by the Bill. So if we were to go to—remembering that is it subject to the provisions of the Act, section 6(1), and remembering that the accused has the right to elect to be tried by a judge and jury and that the court may direct, in the interest of justice—that is in section 6(1)—we can then look at section 6(4) of the amendment which reads:

“...the Court shall make an order that the accused person be tried by a...”—judge and jury—

—that is the amendment—the words, “by a judge alone” were struck, and the words “a judge and jury” are introduced by the amendment:

“...the Court shall make an order that...the accused person be tried by a...”—judge and jury—“if...is satisfied that—

the accused person has sought and received”—legal—“advice from an Attorney-at-law in relation to a trial by a...”—judge and jury.

So what do we have here? We have here an amendment which is not only preserving the right of an accused, the election of an accused to be tried by a judge and jury, but ensuring that when the accused so elects, the judge must be satisfied that he has proper legal advice consistent with the law of this country that an accused is entitled to an attorney of his choice. That is part of the considerations of the interest of justice which is spoken to in section 6(1), the first amending section introduced by clause 4 of the Bill to the Criminal Procedure Act.

If even the accused does not—and this is section 5(6)—I beg your pardon—
section 6(5) of the amendment which is proposed:

“Where an accused . . . does not wish to be represented by an Attorney-at-law and elects to be tried by a . . .” — judge and jury — “the Court shall make an order that the accused person be tried by a . . .” — judge and jury — “if it is satisfied that the accused person —

(a) is competent and has waived his right to consult an Attorney-at-law for legal advice in relation to a trial . . .” — before a judge and jury.

So again, the interest of justice considerations are brought to bear that if even the accused says, “I do not wish legal advice but I want to be tried by a judge and jury”, the judge has to be very careful, bringing all of his training to bear to appreciate and to have that accused understand the significance of his electing to be tried by a judge and jury but waiving his right to legal representation. All of this is what is contemplated in the expression, “in the interest of justice”, and that is why it is important, Mr. President, with the greatest of respect, that the Act must be read as a whole. It is not just section 6(1) that says the default option, judge alone, unless the accused opts to be tried by a judge and jury.

So we have to bear all of that in mind, Mr. President, as we look at the amendments that are being brought to this House and which this House is being asked to approve in order to go forward with the trial, either by a judge alone or by a judge and jury on the election of the accused. Further even, if there are joint accused, the judge — this is section 6(6), also introduced by clause 4, the judge must be satisfied that the accused, all the co-accused, elect to be tried by a jury in order to ensure that everyone gets a fair trial.

These, Mr. President, are all instances of the interest of justice consideration which must be kept foremost in mind by the trial judge on the election of the accused to trial by judge and jury. And it bears emphasizing, Mr. President, even
though it is regrettable that in the discourse that takes place elsewhere, we might be misled into questioning the efficiency, the competence and the knowledgeability of our judges, it bears emphasis that the exercise by a judge of her discretionary evaluation is to be understood and applied against the background that our Supreme Court judges are chosen by a system that is now codified under the Supreme Court of Judicature Act, introduced in this country in 1964, which requires them to be competent in their fields of endeavour with experience of not less than 10 years practice as an attorneys, and which equips them competently to bring to the bench their knowledge of the law with dispassionate qualities as trained judicial officers capable of applying to the facts before her and over which she presides as a judge.

Judges are appointed, Mr. President, by the Judicial and Legal Service Commission and this bears emphasis, judges are appointed by the Judicial and Legal Service Commission after a rigorous recruitment process which includes psychometric testing. It is one of the few jobs in this country in which an officeholder is subjected to a recruitment process that includes psychometric testing. The competence, value and capacity, training, objectivity and dispassionate ability of our judges cannot be called in question. And it must be presumed, Mr. President, that this honourable House will understand in the discussion taking place now and accept that our judges will apply their training, their experience, their dispassionate judicial acumen and disposition according to law and will apply properly a judicial discretion which is valid and rational. And that comes to when section 6(1) is being looked at, or indeed section 6(1A), and let us turn to section 6(1A), which is an important part of the amendment which is being proposed; 6(1A) says:

“Notwithstanding subsection (1), a person against whom an indictment has
been filed may be tried by a Judge and lay assessors to be appointed in accordance with section 6C, if the Court considers it necessary in the interest of justice.’;”

So we have the first option in section 6(1), trial on default by judge alone; we have the second option, trial by a judge and jury, and section 6(1) tells us, and it bears repeating:

“Notwithstanding subsection (1)—above—“a person against whom an indictment has been filed may be tried by a Judge and lay assessors to be appointed in accordance with section 6C, if the Court considers it necessary in the interest of justice.’;”

Again, we are reading the Act as a whole, Mr. President. So that the qualities of the judge which are called for in the judicial consideration of the application of section 6(1) and section 6(1A) of the proposed amendments where the person against whom an indictment has been filed is to be tried by a judge alone or on his election by a judge and jury are subjected to those considerations of the interest of justice. And we ask ourselves, Mr. President, what are we looking at when we speak to the introduction of the judge having the view that the election by an accused of trial by judge and jury should be addressed by a judge with the assistance of lay assessors, and let us speak about that a little bit. And may I go on record to acknowledge the very erudite and learned contributions of the Minister, my colleague, the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts who spoke in terms that I adopt wholeheartedly on the applicability of the provisions of the amendments which bring into being the factor of lay assessors.

First of all, Mr. President, lay assessors must be qualified. You will find that at section 6D of the proposed amendment; 6D tells us:

“A person is qualified to be a lay assessor who—
(a) is over the age of eighteen years and under the age of seventy years;
(b) is ordinarily resident in Trinidad and Tobago;
(c) was born in Trinidad and Tobago or, not being so born, has resided in Trinidad and Tobago for two years or more;
(d) is able to read and write the English language and understand the same when spoken; and
(e) possesses—
   (i) experience in the administration of justice; or
   (ii) qualifications, experience or skill in any matter which may be considered at the trial, as prescribed in the Rules…”—
and…”pursuant to section 6L.”
—and we will come to section 6L. So that lay assessor must be qualified in accordance with the proposed amendment. Secondly, those lay assessors, Mr. President, are to be trained. They are to be trained and you will find that prescribed at section 6L of the proposed amendment which says:

“The Rules Committee may make Rules, subject to negative resolution of Parliament, to generally regulate lay assessors and in particular to provide for the selection, appointment, qualification, exemption and training of lay assessors.’;”

Again we remind ourselves, Mr. President, the Act must be read as a whole. So when we are reading section 6(1) and section 6(1A), we remind ourselves that when lay assessors are brought into the picture by the judge, they are of a particular qualification and they are to be trained.

We remind ourselves as well, Mr. President, that those lay assessors are to be recommended by the judge for the trial of the accused by a judge assisted by a
lay assessor in relation to particular types of offences. Not all of the run-of-the-mill offences, not in cases of offences punishable by death, and this is provided for at section 6C of the proposed amendment:

“For the purposes of sections 6C to 6H, ‘lay assessor’ means a person qualified to serve as a lay assessor pursuant to section 6D.”

Subsection (2):

“(2) The High Court may in respect of any indictable offence, except any offence punishable with death, and in particular in an indictable offence—

...order lay assessors to be appointed for the trial.”

And the offences which are listed from 1 through to 15 are offences of a particular kind, quality and type which require a particular skill, a particular level of understanding, a particular level of expertise involving fraud, involving offences under the Proceeds of Crime Act, misbehaviour in public office, offences under the Anti-Terrorism Act, under the Anti-Gang Act, under the Trafficking in Persons Act, under the Economic Sanctions Act, under part 7 of the Securities Act, which deals with market conduct and regulation; persons known as market actors.

Those are highly specialized areas of potential fraud that the lay assessors will be trained in, so that they can assist the court when the court comes as a judge alone to adjudicate on an accused who is charged with a particular offence. That is the thinking behind the amendment which is being proposed.

8.40 p.m.

May I say this, Mr. President, in the final analysis, that the judge’s competence is beyond question, is not necessarily to be bound even by the opinion of the lay assessor. The judge retains her discretion to evaluate the quality of the advice received, and to either accept it or not to accept it. That is provided for by
section 6I(2).

Very importantly, Mr. President, when we read in the proposed amendment that the lay assessors are to be trained consistent with rules made by the Rules Committee, we ask ourselves: What is this Rules Committee? The Rules Committee, Mr. President, is provided for—and this has been the case in Trinidad and Tobago since Independence, under the Supreme Court of Judicature Act. By section 77 of that Act, a 1976 Act, the Rules Committee has been in existence since 1976. They consist of that Rules Committee, a judge of the Court of Appeal nominated by the Chief Justice, a judge of the High Court nominated by the Chief Justice, other members of the legal profession, two members of the Law Association, representative out of the Attorney General’s Office, and other specially qualified persons. That is the Rules Committee.

Very interestingly, Mr. President, they have elaborate rule-making powers. It is very interesting to remind ourselves—very interesting to remind ourselves—that by section 84 of the Supreme Court of Judicature Act, the Rules Committee has been making provision for trial assessors since 1976, under the Supreme Court of Judicature Act—trial assessors in areas other than criminal proceedings. Now, what this amendment is seeking to do is to endow the Rules Committee with the power to appoint and to train lay assessors in the area of criminal practice and procedure.

So that the idea which has been brought to this House by way of the proposed amendment, for lay assessors to function in preference over special jurors, has not been plucked out of the sky. It has been introduced as part of a measure, and given over to by the enabling provisions of 6L of the proposed amendment, to a body whose competence has served this country well since Independence, the Rules Committee of the Supreme Court, which has developed
its experience and its competence in this area.

There was a criticism, which I can understand, that the sections of the proposed amendment are not sufficiently prescriptive, they must spell it out in more detail. It is a challenge for legislative drafters. Do you get an Act of Parliament—and this is a lawyer’s nightmare, or sometimes a lawyer’s dream. It depends on your preference as to what you prefer in the area of the practice of law. But a reality is that when you pass what is called “enabling legislation”, you do not burden the legislation with too much detail. What you do by the enabling legislation is you create the power, you create the provisions and you leave the details to be spelt out in the rules. This is what is being done by the power being granted to the Rules Committee by section 6L of proposed amendment, to make rules to provide for, among other things, very importantly, the training of lay assessors.

Mr. President, all of that goes back to the first point that I made. The Act must be read as a whole. So that we have to understand, as we bring ourselves to appreciate that amendments that we are asking this House to accept and to adopt, that we are asking this House to propose to confirm amendments that are going to refine and improve the system of trial in the case of judge alone, which is the first default position, and to refine and pay appropriate tribute to the right of an accused who elects trial by judge and jury, to fair trial rights, assisted every step of the way by judges of exceptional competence.

Mr. President, part of the reality, if I may say so with respect of this Government bringing this Bill to this House, is that it is not a standalone piece of legislation. I have spoken to that before, I will not repeat myself. But there are any number of other provisions, any number of other pieces of legislation that are already on our statute books, that are part of the Government’s commitment to
improving our criminal justice system. There are other measures in place, administratively and otherwise, to improve our system of criminal justice so that we can address the question of our backlog.

I heard the comments. I heard the criticisms to say, well there are other problems facing the criminal justice system in the DPP’s office here, in the time it takes in case management. We accept all of that, but we cannot stand still and say we are not going to make the incremental improvements along the process, because there are other problems that exist in other chains, other stops in the chain on that process. We have to take it a step at a time, and as we move forward, we are committed to improving the criminal justice system.

It is against that background, Mr. President, that the multiple legislative reforms that this Government has introduced to this Parliament, and will continue to introduce, is the backdrop against which we are saying one necessary step building on the success of the judge alone trials, which came into being in 2019 under the pandemic period, but has been demonstrably successful since then, post-pandemic. We are looking to improve that trial by judge alone system, and refine the system of trial by jury.

This Government, Mr. President, has a proud record of respect of the citizens’ right to liberty and the right not to be deprived thereof, except by due process of law. We have kept those rights at the forefront of this amendment, which is before this House, and we are cognizant of the fact that what we are seeking to do is to improve, so that judge alone trials, which on the records that are now before us can be completed in a matter of days, as opposed to taking the weeks and months that otherwise derail our system. The system is therefore able to move that more quickly. More criminal trials can be heard, and we are addressing the issue of backlog.
It is not, and I repeat this, it is not this Bill that brings the amendments to the Jury Act and the Criminal Procedure Act, is not a panacea for all the ills of our criminal justice system. It is part of a work in progress, which we must move forward with, as one of the objectives of supplementing the efforts in overhauling our criminal justice system.

Mr. President, the policy behind this Bill has been in development since 2020, with a feedback from stakeholders who were invited to participate as far back as 2020, and were received. The feedback was received by my predecessor in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. I regret to have to go on record to say this. One of the early stakeholders who was invited to contribute, and did contribute in that consultation process, was the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago. I am saddened today to be able to acknowledge that notwithstanding that process of earlier consultation, correspondence invited of the Law Association by the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs in developing this Bill, that I found myself here on Friday to be told by colleagues in this august Chamber, that the Law Association has produced a submission which was being commented on and spoken to by other Members of the House, which I had not received, not even a copy of, until after the House had begun its sitting.

I am saddened by that, but that fact notwithstanding, may I say this unequivocally, Mr. President, I have listened attentively, as I said at the beginning of my wind-up on Friday, to all of the concerns that have been placed before this House by all of the Senators, and in particular, and I paid tribute to them already, the Independent Senators, on a number of issues. Not least the issues raised regarding jury numbers, informative data, criteria to inform the interest of justice, that concept which is time worn from time immemorial, the rationale introducing
the introduction of lay assessors in place of Special Jurors, and the role of those lay assessors.

I believe that such matters can be further explored to enable this Bill to be passed into law in this Chamber in the shortest possible time, and accordingly, Mr. President, I beg to move.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

**Mr. President:** Attorney General.

**The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC):** Thank you, Mr. President. In accordance with Standing Order 66(1), I beg to move that a Bill to amend the Jury Act Chap. 6:53, and the Criminal Procedure Act, Chap. 12:02, and for related matters, be referred to a Special Select Committee of the Senate, thereby established to consider and report on the Bill by Tuesday, June 6th, 2023, and that the following Senators be appointed to serve on the committee: Mr. Reginald Armour SC, Chairman; Mr. Randall Mitchell, member; Ms. Allyson West, member; Mrs. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal, member; Mr. Anthony Vieira SC, member; Mr. Evans Welch, member, and one Opposition Member to be named by the Leader of Opposition Business.

**Sen. Mark:** Mr. President, I would like to bring to your attention an eminently, reasonable proposal that I proffered in earlier discussions with the Acting Leader of Government Business in this honourable Senate. In those discussions, I did offer for consideration the following proposal.

I suggested, hon. President, that in the interest of diversity, depth, breadth and broadening the whole democratic process, that the Government, through the Leader of Government Business, and through her to the hon. Attorney General, consider having a joint select committee to consider these very important issues, as
enunciated earlier by the hon. Attorney General.

I would like, Mr. President, through you again, to urge the Attorney General to kindly consider bringing in Members of the House of Representatives, to sit side by side with their colleagues in the Senate, constituting a joint select committee, so that we can collectively put our wisdom together to bring forth a product that the Senate and the House would be proud of. Rather than we take the decision to only allow Members of this honourable Senate to deliberate on an issue that has at least generated so much concern and interest throughout the nation.

So, Mr. President, I would just like to suggest before you put this to the House, that we—

**Mr. President:** Okay Sen. Mark, we got the gist of it. Acting Leader of Government Business.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Thank you very much, Mr. President. I would acknowledge that Sen. Mark did raise that matter with me, the proposal by himself, and I suppose in collaboration with the other Members of his team, that we use a joint select committee for the reasons which he cited here today. I had said to him at that time, look in coming up with the decision that we go to a select committee we did consider the joint select committee as well. It was considered, all of the options, and it is the Government’s view that we go with a select committee. We do believe that this can work, and will involve at least all three Benches, including the Opposition and the Independent Bench.

**8.55 p.m.**

We have had a precedent with a previous Bill and it has worked very well—quite recently actually, probably two or three years ago, and it is the Government’s decision that we go with a select committee.

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, the question is—
Sen. Mark: Before I get up—

Mr. President: Sen. Mark, it is—

Sen. Mark: [Inaudible]

Mr. President: No, no, no, it is not a debate.

Sen. Mark: It is not a debate.

Mr. President: I know it is not a debate, which means that you have raised a concern and the Acting Leader of Government Business has answered. I am now going to put the question.

Sen. Mark: [Inaudible]

Mr. President: Say again?

Sen. Mark: I seek your indulgence for two seconds.

Mr. President: To do what, Sen. Mark, specifically?

Sen. Mark: To just briefly indicate—[Inaudible]

Mr. President: So there is no—

Sen. Mark: [Inaudible]

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: I am not responding to her. I am just asking you if can me allow me at least a minute just to put into perspective where we go from here in the context—[Inaudible]

Mr. President: And I am ruling that there is no need, because you have raised the issue and the Acting Leader of Government Business has responded. So I will now—Sen. Mark, I will now put the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Sen. Mark: Mr. President, in light of that decision and our proposal to have a joint select committee, I am a democrat.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark, are you—
Sen. Mark: I am suggesting, Sir, with your leave, that we appoint Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial to sit on the Committee, reluctantly, but that is where we have to go.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Mr. President: Hon. Senators—

Sen. Lyder: She is worth about four of you all.


ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The. Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you. Mr. President, I now beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Tuesday, May 23, 2023 at 1.30 p.m., which is to be Private Members’ Day. I am thinking that Sen. Wade Mark will like to give now an indication of what he would like to speak with. When you are finished, I would like to say something else.

Sen. Mark: Mr. President, I shall want to conclude the Motion on Parliamentary Autonomy. I anticipate that would be done and once we would have completed that Motion, we will go to the other Motion, which—I do not know if it is No. 2, but that is the one in the name of Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial.

Mr. President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

Sen. The. Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you very much, Sen. Mark, for giving us notice of the Motion to be debated. I wish to also advise that there is a strong possibility of a second sitting next week, so I am doing the courtesy of advising from now on, giving you a little heads-up and you certainly will be updated by the end of the week.
Sen. Mark: Any Bill?

Sen. The. Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I cannot say just yet but there is a strong possibility. And definitely by the end of the week, we will let you know. Thank you.

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 this Senate. Sen. Mark.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Utility Bill for Driver’s Permit Renewal

(Provision of)

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, I have two matters which I would like to pursue at this time. The first one, I would like the hon. Minister of Works and Transport to provide clarity on a matter that has been brought to my attention. The matter concerns, Mr. President, the need for the Government to explain its decision to require the provision of a utility bill for processing the renewal of one’s driver’s permit.

Now, Mr. President, it has come to my attention that several citizens who may not be in possession of legal status in this country are being captured by this particular provision. I have a copy of the application form for a driver’s permit and, Mr. President, in the last part of this form, 6, it reads: application must be accompanied, literally, Mr. President, by a utility bill.

Now, I do not want to deal with exactly what it has said but, in essence, to save time, this section of the application form says, if you are renting from some landlord, you produce the lease agreement. And other than that, you are called upon to produce a utility bill, be it T&TEC or be it WASA.

Mr. President, I am raising this matter to ask the Minister of Works and
Utility Bill for Driver’s Permit Renewal 2023.05.16
Sen. Mark (cont’d)

Transport to provide us with the following information: Can the Minister indicate to this Senate what is the legal basis for the decision of the Transport Commissioner to insert in the driver’s permit application form a provision that says that a citizen who might be squatting has to produce a utility bill and if that person does not produce that utility bill, then it logically follows that that person may not be able to renew his or her drivers permit? And it is why I have brought this matter, because this could mean that an individual’s constitutional right to the enjoyment of property, without being deprived thereof, unless due process is effected, can be challenged.

9.05 p.m.

That is, if you are denied that right, it can result in a constitutional challenge. So, I have attempted to raise this matter as I said for clarification. For example, did the Minister of Works and Transport—and if that is case, the Minister has to guide me. This legal action that has been taken, does it mean, hon. President, that the Minister would have required to have the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Ordinance amended because this is a new policy? This policy I would like the Minister to indicate, how long this new policy was effected by the Transport Commissioner and the Ministry of Works and Transport? This is literally what you can call, Mr. President, a legislative change and hence the reason clarification is being sought.

Mr. President, there are many persons in this country who are citizens but they are squatting on state land, and because of their squatting status they are unable to have access to electricity and water. So therefore, such citizens would not be able to produce a utility bill to the Transport Commissioner if that person has a vehicle and the person requires his licence or permit or to be renewed. So this is why because of representation made to me, I said listen, let me bring this
matter to the attention of the Minister of Works and Transport because what have observed, Mr. President, is that there have been a number of changes taking place at the Licensing Office that are being implemented without parliamentary scrutiny or parliamentary approval. Mr. President, several schedule forms and I will not raise that today but several schedule forms in the Act have been amended or changed unilaterally without any parliamentary scrutiny and/or approval. This is not the place and time to address these schedules which I will do at another occasion or on another occasion, Mr. President.

Today, my simple submission is to get or to seek from the Minister clarification on this matter. And if he can advise us whether the law was broken. What is the legal basis for this request made by the transport commissioner of persons who are seeking to renew their driver’s permit? And, Mr. Chairman, Mr. President, what will happen to citizens who do not have utility bills but they need their driver’s permit renewed and they are living and squatting on state land? So, I am just asking the hon. Minister through you, to clear the air and to clarify this matter for the citizens who do not have that legal status. Thank you.

Madam President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you. Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, I rise today to speak on the Motion before us which seeks to establish the need for the Government to explain its decision to require the provision of a utility bill for processing and the renewal of driver’s permits.

Mr. President, let me take the opportunity to show this honourable Senate and to ensure the population that implementing this measure is reasonable since the licensing authority under section 57 of the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act,
Chap. 48:50 states and I quote:

“The Licensing Authority shall keep a register of all driving permits issued showing the name and address of the holder, the date of issue, the class of the vehicle authorised and a record of any convictions by a competent Court.”

I repeat:

“…the name and address...”

Additionally. Mr. President, under section 93(1) of the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, Chap. 48:50, it is clearly stated that it is an offence to provide false name and address. Again, an offence to provide false name and address. And I quote:

“Any driver or conductor of motor vehicle who commits an offence under this Act or any Regulations made thereunder and refuses to give his name and address or gives a false name or address is guilty of an offence; and it shall be the duty of the owner of the motor vehicle if required to give any information which it is within his power to give and which may lead to the identification and apprehension of the driver or conductor, and any owner who fails to do so within four days of his being notified of such request is guilty of an offence.”

Mr. President, in accordance with the MVRT Act and as I highlighted under sections 57 and 91, to ensure that the address data of licence holders are accurate and up to date, the Licensing Authority is duty bound to establish procedures, checks and balances in order to ensure persons comply with the legislation. More so, to ensure as far as possible that information provided is accurate.

Mr. President, it is important to note that apart from the address verification, ensuring that a person lives where they claim to live assists with preventing fraud.
and postal communication especially where it is necessary for the Licensing Authority to communicate with the person via registered mail.

Further, the MVRT (Amdt.) Act, 2017 introduced a system of traffic violation for certain breaches of the MVRT Act, provides for implementation of a red light camera system, a demerit point system and the reform of the fixed penalty system. These systems rely on the accuracy of information in the register of the Licensing Authority for communication purposes. One such information is the address of the licence holder. In other words, communication with the licence holder is done through or at the address where they are registered. A driving licence permit as we know, Mr. President, also operates as a form of identification, therefore it is critical for an accurate address to be obtained in the verification of a person’s identity.

Mr. President, may I add that such a requirement is not new since other national agencies require utility bills as proof of address for access to service, for example, financial institutions like banks, credit unions. And then there are credit facilities like hire purchase businesses to name a few. A lot of these squatters do operate through places like Courts where they require utility bills. So this is no new creation.

It is also noteworthy, Mr. President, that the Licensing Authority requiring the proof of address is not a novel idea. The department of motor vehicles in other jurisdictions also mandates proof of address when applications are made for first issue and renewal of driver’s permits. In order words, we are not the only country that requires this.

Mr. President, in conclusion of this aspect of the response, I wish to highlight that this request—this requirement also facilitates the further streamlining of accurate records and a more efficient system designed to enable the Licensing
Authority and by extension public institutions to meet the needs of the citizens in an efficient, transparent and secured manner.

Mr. President, the Ministry of Works and Transport is committed to bringing about changes, bringing about transparency and accountability, bringing about transformation and modernization to the Licensing Division. More importantly, this means aligning with the Government’s vision to change the culture of an organizational model, methods and processes, ensuring that accurate information is received, enable public institutions to meet the needs of citizens and businesses, so that at the end of the day, all citizens can benefit from an efficient and robust process and be proud of the achievement of this Government.

Mr. President, yes there are a lot of changes taking place at the licensing office and it is all for better of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [Desk thumping]

Rising Unemployment among University Graduates

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Wade Mark: Yes. Thank you. Mr. President, the other matter I wish to raise here is the need for the Government to address the rising unemployment and under employment among university graduates in Trinidad and Tobago. Now, Mr. President, the last set of data I was able to put my hands on, revealed that the number of persons in Trinidad and Tobago with university education, they are under-graduands or graduates of the University of the West Indies, was at the end of 2021. The data reveals that at the end of 2021 there were 6,950 graduands or undergraduates of the University of the West Indies unemployed. What happened is that when you compare this number with the number that we had in 2015, the number in 2015 was 3,575. We are talking about a difference of roughly about 3,400 or thereabouts. So under the PNM the unemployment among graduates in
Trinidad and Tobago went so—[Senator gesticulates] 6,950.

9.20 p.m.

So, Mr. President, what are we doing with those persons who have graduated in engineering, in management, in agriculture, in education, and several other disciplines, and they are not engaged productively because there is no jobs available for those university students? Mr. President, let us examine the implications.

Hon. Senator: [Inaudible]

Sen. W. Mark: No, you do not interrupt me. Mr. President, let us examine the implications of this. When you have such a large pool of university granduands unemployed in this land, you know what it does, Mr. President? It leads to migration, what is called the brain drain, and we have hundreds of young people who have graduated and they have to leave our shores. They have migrated to other lands, whether it is Guyana, Barbados, the United States, the United Kingdom, they are leaving our shores.

Now, Mr. President, that is extremely serious. What is causing our university graduates to also leave this land through migration is the high crime rate in our land, and the university students who have graduated they are living also in fear. So crime is running these graduands out of the country, and so too, Mr. President, high unemployment. Mr. President, another implication that is leading to this situation is that we have a lot of disgruntled youths with a sound education and they cannot find jobs. You know what is the end result, Mr. President? Several of these young people who are better educated have a sounder knowledge of the world. They can become victims of recruitment by criminal elements in Trinidad and Tobago adding to the crime situation that we are facing in Trinidad and Tobago.
Mr. President, this is a matter that is very important. When university graduands are unable to be employed in Trinidad and Tobago, and there are 7,000 at the end of 2021, you know what it does, Mr. President? We, the taxpayers, who have invested in those students’ education, we take a longer time to get the return on our investments, and therefore the public coffers suffer as a result of it. So that is another implication that we have to pay attention to, Mr. President. Many youths who have graduated from the university they have become disgruntled, they have become discouraged, they have become disenfranchised, and therefore economically they are scarred literally for life, and they end up dropping out of the labour force, that is why the unemployment rate is standing at 4.5 per cent. Not because it is 4.5, that is what is being reported, but there are thousands of people who have become discouraged and therefore they are not captured at the time when the survey is being conducted by the CSO, so that is another implication, Mr. President.

Mr. President, because of the under-employment and unemployment facing university graduands, what do we have? We have these youths, men and women, having to engage in activities, whether it is selling chicken and chips at KFC outlets, whether it is at a pump in the gas station—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** —whether it is selling watermelon. Mr. President, these are some of the realities facing our young people. What is the Government doing to improve the quality of our labour force? Why do we have 7,000 young men and women who are unemployed in this country? What is the Government doing to make sure that these young people are employed so that we can use their skill sets to increase output, to increase production, to improve the quality of the labour force? Why are we not utilizing these young people? Why are we encouraging the brain drain to
take place? Why are we allowing our young graduands to migrate to other lands?

These are issues that have to be addressed, that must be addressed, and this is why I have raised it today so that for instance we could get some answers from the Government, and we have the Minister of Labour today. And I hope Mr. President, that we will be able to get some answers for these 7,000 graduands who are crying out for opportunity and for jobs in Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senator: [Desk thumping]

Mr. President: The Minister of Labour.

Hon. Senator: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Labour (Hon. Stephen Mc Clashie): Mr. President, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Motion raised by Sen. Wade Mark. Mr. President, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago remains committed to providing an enabling environment to promote employment for the people of our country. The development of our greatest asset, the human resource, will help the country progress towards the realization of our national development goals. Despite the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought, Trinidad and Tobago strives to return to its trajectory of sustainable development by 2030. It is imperative that we rebuild the economy through innovation, creativity and critical-thinking skills while leaving no one behind, making it more resilient in the face of possible future shocks.

Mr. President, with regard to the issue of rising unemployment and under-employment of university graduates, I wish to call into question the source or sources of data utilised by Sen. Mark in raising this Motion. According to a recent data from the Central Statistical Office, from 2019 to 2022 the number of unemployed university graduates per year averaged just below 5,000 persons.
which represented under 16 per cent of the total unemployed persons, and approximately 4 per cent of the total number of university graduates in Trinidad and Tobago. The stock of university graduates in Trinidad and Tobago in 2021 was 136,164 persons. The data also shows the gradual decrease in the unemployment rate among university graduates in Trinidad and Tobago from 4.1 per cent in 2019 to 3.2 per cent in 2022.

Additionally, Mr. President, there has also been a marked decrease in the under-employment of university graduates from 2019 to 2021 with respect to hours worked. Whereas in 2019, 172 university graduates would have worked less than 33 hours per week. This number increased to 58 in 2021, meaning that more of our university graduates are being engaged in full-time employment. Mr. President, we must bear in mind that the declining trends in the unemployment and under-employment of university graduates in Trinidad and Tobago, as the data shows, have been realized amidst a historic pandemic that has severely affected labour markets globally. This has been possibly due to deliberate, proactive and progressive actions by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in developing a talent pool and maintaining it.

I heard Sen. Mark indicate that we have under-employment in such areas as engineering, business, et cetera. And one of the things that I note from the debate earlier today, the Minister of Trade and Industry clearly indicated statistically a lot of the work that is being done in that Ministry is to encourage investment and create sustainable jobs and employment. The Government fiscal measures and incentives are also playing an important role in bringing new and sustainable jobs into the economy. So, Mr. President, what have been some of these actions or measures. Speaking from the point of view of the Ministry of Labour, which plays a strategic role in promoting decent work, enhancing employability and equal
opportunities for all in the labour market, as well as maintaining industrial peace, there have been a number of measures that have contributed to integrating our university graduates into decent jobs. These include:

- Enhanced labour market information systems;
- Improving our public employment service; and
- The strengthening of the On-the-Job Training Programme, among others.

Mr. President, in an effort to gain a better understanding of the demand for labour in Trinidad and Tobago so as to inform career choices of students, decisions to be made by policy makers as well as programme and curriculum design by education and training institutions, the Ministry of Labour recently completed a public sector vacancy census on vacancies within the government Ministries. Mr. President, let me say that one of the issues we have or have had in Trinidad and Tobago resides around data and labour market information. The Ministry is working very diligently in creating through our Labour Market Information System Division, the data that would guide how we make choices and where we spend our resources based on what the market requires. In many instances we create educational opportunities that have no basis in what the real world really wants, and unless we know what the real world really wants then we are likely to be struggling with placing a number of students who would have made career choices that were not based on labour market information.

The surveys we designed are producing indicators such as turnover rate, the separations rate, the job opening rates, the average time to fill vacant positions as well as other characteristics of the establishments where vacancies exist. It is projected that these surveys will be undertaken on an ongoing basis, and
information gathered would give a better understanding of the structure and trends in the domestic labour market, and provide the necessary evidence for students to make informed career choices, and for policymakers to make evidence-based decisions before matching the demand for labour, and the supply of labour.

Additionally, Mr. President, the implementation of these vacancy surveys and other related projects form a part of a wider initiative to establish modernized Labour Market Information Systems. The LMIS, as it is called, is understood as the set of institutions, instructional arrangements, procedures, mechanisms and tools that are designed to collect, evaluate and disseminate labour market information about both the supply side and the demand side. The Ministry of Labour has also been playing its part in facilitating opportunities for job seekers through government’s free public employment service, the National Employment Service, NES. The NES network of offices throughout Trinidad and Tobago has been continuously assisting job seekers and employers by matching qualified applicants with vacancies in the public and private sectors, and enabling access to sustainable job opportunities.

To further expand the service the Ministry of Labour is currently engaged in developing a new user-friendly virtual platform known as the National Employment Online Network or NEON. This platform will allow job seekers and employers to network easier with a view to fulfilling their respective demands effectively. Additionally, the NES conducts world of work seminars with students in secondary and tertiary educational institutions to prepare them for transition into the labour market. Additionally—how much time do I have? I am done?

Mr. President: Seconds, yeah.

Hon. S. Mc Clashie: Well I have plenty more to say so I can engage Mr. Mark later on.
Hon. Senator: Well done!

Hon. Senator: [Desk thumping]

Mr. President: Hon.—

Sen. Lyder: You did better than Brian Manning.

Hon. Senator: “Shhh”.

Sen. Mark: You can still circulate your statement.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Take no instructions from him.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 9.37 p.m.