HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, October 09, 2023

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAyERS

[Madam Speaker in the Chair]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023

[Third Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 06, 2023].

That the Bill be now read a second time

Question again proposed.

Madam Speaker: The Members who have already contributed to the debate are the Minister of Finance, the Leader of the Opposition, Minister of Youth Development and National Service, Member for Caroni Central, Member for Toco/Sangre Grande, Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, Member for Laventille East/Morvant and the Member for Moruga/Tableland. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I would like to start today’s debate and in particular my contribution to this year’s budget debate by thanking the constituents of Port of Spain North/St Ann’s West, thanking them for the opportunity and the privilege because I do view it as a privilege to serve not only the constituency but also my country, our beloved country of Trinidad and Tobago for the last eight years.

It dawned on me, Madam Speaker, as I was reflecting over the weekend in preparation in today’s proceedings and what is sure to following in the coming
days that this is the ninth annual budget debate that I am contributing to and I use the opportunity as I reflect with the 40 other Members of this House, all of us elected Members, to put a question to all of us. Do we believe in Trinidad and Tobago or do we not believe in Trinidad and Tobago? Madam Speaker, I can say that without fear of contradiction, not only do I believe in Trinidad and Tobago but I will always bat for Trinidad and Tobago and do my utmost best as I serve Trinidad and Tobago in whatever capacity.

Because you see, Madam Speaker, I believe that we are a blessed land. I believe as well that despite what we hear and it is quite unfortunate within recent times because I have observed that some of our very own citizens—and that is what hurts. It is not the outsiders, it is not the international commentators, it is not the expert rating agencies whose duty and job it is to rate us but it is our own. Our very own citizens sometimes and within recent times who degrade our beloved country and unfortunately cry us down. So Madam Speaker, I would like to use my contribution to set out the indisputable facts of Trinidad and Tobago’s energy sector.

Because, you see, Madam Speaker, respectfully, there are a few of us, a handful but they are very loud, raucous, misinformed but unfortunately as well, I have observed that it is their intentional strategy to mislead the population of Trinidad and Tobago and to mislead our citizens. So, Madam Speaker, respectfully, today my contribution must be to set out what has been happening in our hydrocarbon sector, our energy sector, our oil and gas sector which has served us so well for many, many years. And I would like to start, Madam Speaker, by just putting things into context because it appears to me that some persons do not understand or may be some just choose to misinform themselves and worse yet to
try to mislead the population about how production works, the stage that we are at as a province, meaning Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we are a mature province, we have mature oil and gas fields. We have been exploiting oil. One of the first in the Western Hemisphere to commercialize, and I repeat it, once again, making history as far back as over a century ago, Trinidad and Tobago has been exploiting our oil which means the drilling and production of oil, selling it, commercializing it, monetizing it for well over 100 years. Thankfully, a PNM government that came before us in the 1970s as they took charge of our country and charted our progress, saw it fit to develop a gas industry and we have a sophisticated gas industry and it is an opportune moment for us to thank our forefathers, those who came before, those who made the decisions and most noteworthy, the PNM people who made the decision to develop what was developed at Point Lisas, fertilizer plants, a petrochemical industry and later on an LNG industry, and I have great pride in that.

So almost 50 years of commercial gas production, Madam Speaker and this ultimately means a few things. As you exploit these resources, they are not renewable. These resources, when exploited, basically do not return, so it means after 100 years of oil drilling and production and after over 50 years of commercial gas production, our fields are in natural decline. This is the reality. This is one of the main reasons for lower production but it does not stop there as I will explain. Our fields’ natural decline—and this is indisputable despite what you may hear from those who hold themselves out as experts. Our fields’ natural decline are between 20 to 25 per cent per annum. So that means that if you do nothing and you are producing 100 barrels of oil, for example, from one field, by the end of the year, you will only be producing 80 to 75 barrels. So you must find a way to not
only increase your production by that 20 to 25 per cent barrels but if you really want to increase it more than what has become your average, you have to find more oil or more gas to uplift it.

Another point that it is necessary to make, Madam Speaker—because you see the hypocrisy that I hear at times and the irony of some who hold themselves out as somehow experts on production—you have to negotiate contracts well in advance. You have to look into the future and see that there is going to be a decline. You cannot do something today in most circumstances in oil and gas and bring on production immediately. So what you do you look at a period when someone is in charge and see what it is that they did to ensure not only a stabilization of production to arrest that natural decline that I have spoken about, but also to increase the production and that is where you begin to negotiate contracts, that where you begin to have discussions with persons because you know there is a horizon, you know a gas contract is going to come to an end. What it is that you do to do that. So let us just put some facts on the table because it seems very often people try to avoid the reality.

Gas: I will start with gas, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in 2006, we were producing 3.8 bcf of gas a day, 3.8 billion cubic standard feet of gas a day; 2007, 2008, we went up to 4; 2009, 4.2. Now, all of that production would have been as a result of decisions taken in advance, at least two, three, four, five years in advance. So up to 2009, we were at 4.2. Our best year ever in gas production was 2010 at 4.3 bcf a day. In 2011 and 2013, it reduced to 4.1. So you see the decline beginning from 2011 to 2013. But most importantly—because you see nothing was done—in 2014, it dropped to 4 bcf; in 2015, it had already dropped to 3.8 bcf a day.
So when you are seeing this decline taking place, the natural question that citizens should ask is: what was done? What was done to increase production? What was done to arrest the natural decline? And the answer quite simply is absolutely nothing. In fact, what we have heard about is incentives granted during the period 2010 to 2015 and I will come to that in a while but it is an important point to put down two markers. It is an indisputable fact, indisputable that not a single gas supply contract, upstream gas supply contract was negotiated in that period of 2010 to 2015. In fact, the incentive that you hear so often spoken by someone who says he is a former Minister of Energy which is too indisputable, but one who along with his leader, the hon. Member for Siparia, respectfully did nothing to promote and progress the oil and gas sector during that period and I will give the examples. Did not negotiate a single gas supply contract during that period, not a single upstream gas supply.

In fact when questioned, we were told, oh, it is maintenance but the decline had begun and I will then say what was done from 2015 to date, to not only the arrest this decline that we were faced with and the crisis we were faced with but how in fact you ensure the future and the future for decades to come.

Oil production now, Madam Speaker. 2008, it was 114,000 barrels of oil a day; by 2010, it had fallen to 98,000 barrels of oil a day; by 2012, it had fallen to 81,600 barrels of oil a day; by 2015, it had fallen to 78,000 barrels of oil a day. So you see, from 2008 at 114,000, it dropped by 2015 to 78,000 barrels of oil per day but this is something you never hear about. One of the explanations, of course, is because we have been exploiting oil for over 100 years, over a 100 years, a century—I said a decade earlier, I think. It is a century and this leads to natural decline. But it shows that under the former administration, oil production fell from
100,000 barrels to 78,000 barrels of oil per day but we hear nothing about that. They pretend as though it was hunky-dory. Today, oil production stands at approximately 59,000 barrels of oil per day because of the natural decline of our aged fields.

But as I will explain, we have been working, we have been doing all that we possibly can and save that you find a massive oil field, the likes of what have been found in neighbouring Guyana and hopefully in Suriname because I am hopeful for our neighbours. But I will give you a quick story about Guyana as well.

In Guyana, one of the main operators, for example, was Shell for many years, they actually held that acreage where now Exxon has found hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil a day they are able to exploit. Shell gave it up because they could not find what they were looking for. Along comes Exxon, fortunately for them, good production. But that is how the oil and gas sector goes. But the point is we are facing natural decline. The point is do not come and pontificate because you did nothing to increase it during your time or to ensure the future. In fact, you did the exact opposite. So to do it in the energy sector, you must always be pursuing initiatives to bring on production. Always negotiating, always strategically pursuing possibilities which is what again, no one can contradict, we have been doing since 2015.

Because you see, Madam Speaker, it is this PNM Government that did not put all of its eggs, Trinidad and Tobago’s eggs in one basket. We did not only focus internally in our own borders. We have been pursuing every single basket that is possible, regionally, extra-regionally. We have been looking to Venezuela next door and we have been looking elsewhere in the region. We have signed MOUs with Barbados, with Grenada. We actually have a commercial term sheet
in Grenada for a field where gas is believed to exist. These are things that we have been doing to ensure that there is a future for our children.

Madam Speaker, another point that I have heard being referred to which I find is just confirmatory, with the greatest of respect, that there is a complete lack of understanding of how the energy sector works and the cyclical nature of the energy sector.

10:15 a.m.

When you are building plants, onshore plants or petchem factories which are the ammonia, methanol, urea, UAN or Atlantic LNG with the four Trains, obviously there is going to be a flurry of activity. The time for construction of infrastructure means you have support companies like Baker Hughes, Schlumberger—not “Schlumburger”, I heard the Member for Siparia say—Schlumberger, Halliburton, Baker Hughes. These are the companies that construct infrastructure, construct the pipelines. Where Trinidad and Tobago is in the cycle now, is we have completed construction. You look globally, there is no more pursuit the way it was once pursued globally in the early 2000s and the 2000s in the construction of these types of plants, one, because of the whole talk of global climate change but two, because of the closing horizons of oil production and gas production as countries try to arrest global climate change.

So, it is absolutely not unnatural. In fact, it is expected because we are sophisticated, we have already constructed the infrastructure, it exists, and we are utilizing it amongst the best in world for these service companies to look elsewhere now, to hope that they will find the opportunities and the abilities to build what already exists in Trinidad and Tobago, and that is the reason for this. As we start the projects, as Manatee comes on stream, as Dragon comes on stream; as these
other projects come on stream, Calypso, which holds great, great opportunity and hope for Trinidad and Tobago in the deepwater where there is no infrastructure, you will see the return of the companies but they are not going to sit here where you already have existing infrastructure.

Madam Speaker, the next point is, what did we face in 2015? In 2015, when we came in, as I just said, there was no negotiation of a single gas supply contract. The sectors you have heard me say before were in crisis. And let me tell you what NGC—I will start with the gas industry—what NGC faced. Between 2010 to 2015, Madam Speaker, NGC did not receive its contracted supply of gas from upstream suppliers and as a result, it was forced to curtail supply to downstream customers. So what we are seeing began in 2010 to ’15, but what did not happen was any attempt to have discussions with the petchem, the industries that were receiving a shortfall of gas. There was no attempt to renegotiate contracts, there was no attempt to stave off claims being made. No, it was business as usual, utilizing NGC to build playing fields, et cetera, et cetera.

Fourteen billion dollars disappeared from NGC’s coffers during that period and what we faced is when these curtailments started in November 2010, and peaked in 2014 to 2015, were claims being made against NGC for failure to supply during that period. This is indisputable. Claims were made—have been made against NGC for the failure to supply gas during the period of 2010 to 2015; total value of those claims, US $1.3 billion, which equates to TT $8.85 billion. That was the management of the industry.

I can assure the people of Trinidad and Tobago, one of the ways we, this Government, have addressed that is that we have—in the renegotiation of contracts with all of these petchem industries and companies, what we have now done in the
new contracts going forward is they cannot pass on curtailments of gas to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So the people of Trinidad and Tobago are no longer going to be subject to damages if there is a shortfall of gas. Did the UNC do that? No. So they have saddled us with $8.8 billion in claims.

Not only did this PNM Government successfully negotiate now, I can say, all of these claims away for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, but we have also ensured that contracts going forward do not put that liability on us anymore. Because, you see, despite what some others were doing, which is questionable, this Government has stayed focused and we have entered into difficult conversations and negotiations, not only with the upstream industry, but also the downstream petchem companies—petroleum companies. But let me tell you how it was worse. The upstream supply situation could have been seen during that period that it was on the decline.
And there were certain contracts that had actually renewal—options to renew, that were ignored.

10.15 a.m.

The people of Trinidad and Tobago deserve to know this. Because you see, Madam Speaker, you have them going on television, you have coming in the Parliament, you have them coming everywhere; persons who know nothing but pretend that they do, holding out as though they have the answers. But when you were in charge—and I will draw the worse, the most offensive that I have found—there was a contract with our largest upstream gas supplier that was due to expire in December 2018.

But under that gas supply contract, Madam Speaker, there was contractual timeline, that between the 1st of January 2014, from that period, for two years, so
from the 1st of January 2014, you had two years to meet and negotiate an extension of the gas supply contract. They did not do it. But yet still you hear them, on a weekly basis, asking the country about gas production. UNC failed to negotiate gas supply contracts for Trinidad and Tobago, where the contract required them to meet and negotiate from January 2014. But they have the audacity to ask Trinidad and Tobago: Why we are in this position? That was one of them. That was the single largest gas supply contract. That was how they managed the industry. That is a fact. It is indisputable. It is not subject to legitimate and truthful contradiction.

There were others; a base gas supply contract that was not renewed upon expiry on the 31st December 2015, which again they allowed to just fall off the precipice. Because you do not being negotiating a gas supply contract today for today. We lost 250 million scfs of gas. So these are the reasons why we face the production decline and the curtailments.

There was another one that again was expiring in early 2016, that should have been negotiated before, that dropped from 645 million scfs to 255 million. So right there, Madam Speaker, you are seeing why it is we found ourselves in these great difficulties. But we did not sit back. We did not rock back. We did not say: Well look, this is something that we cannot manage. No, we set about immediately, Madam Speaker, to do what needed to be done.

But it did not stop there. There was another one that should have been negotiated during that period, that they ignored, that meant we went from 150 million scuffs of gas a day to 50. So right there we are almost up to a loss of over 1.2 bcf of gas a day that should have been renegotiated. I cannot claw back time. No one on the PNM can claw back history and time. But what we do is we face the crisis and deal with it.
And it continued. There was another that went from 220 million scfs to 30 million, to zero. Because again, no negotiation was done during that period. But the persons in charge who should have been managing our country's resources and ensuring that contracts are negotiated, where were they? But now they come forward to the population and pretend as though they understand the energy sector.

Madam Speaker, these are facts. There is no alternative to the truth. There was one, one contract that was negotiated, one new plant that was negotiated. But, of course, it was negotiated at a time when we were seeing curtailment of gas. So if you know that you have less gas to sell to the existing plants, you will go now and put priority on a new plant to give it gas, as opposed to those who have been here for us for decades? So that led to us losing claims. We lost claims as a result of that one contract that was negotiated during that period, and that contract has cost NGC billions of dollars. In fact, the only loss ever recorded by NGC is as a direct result of accounting standards that require it to impair and write off the losses of that contract. And I am told that the losses continue as a result of that one contract that was negotiated.

You know what I find also offensive, Madam Speaker? These same people called for: “Tell me what is happening with Dragon. Tell us what is the agreement signed with Dragon. Tell us this, tell us that.” But they did not tell the country that they changed the gas allocation policy to a Green Field gas allocation policy, which exposed us to billions of US dollars in claims. Because what that means is that you are taking the limited gas we have and you are giving it to a new plant, versus the plants who are already contracted to receive gas supply. You did not tell us that. You did not tell us about this one contract that you negotiated that is literally still costing you, and me, Madam Speaker, and the future generations,
billions of dollars. But that was how you managed it. That is what you should talk about and answer. So, that project has cost us greatly and deeply, and continues to cost us.

As I said, it led to the only loss NGC has ever made in its 2020 annual report, because we had to provision TT $2.1 billion, as the losses to book in that year as a result of this one contract that you did. And there were worse terms that fortunately we managed to negotiate and renegotiate. But you cannot renegotiate the whole thing when it was brand new.

The next thing that came is the settlement of pet chem claims. And I can tell you, Madam Speaker, due to the intervention of the Government—the last one was with a company that the President of NGC and myself met with in Vancouver when I went to speak at the World LNG conference a few months ago. And they reported coming out of that meeting, because of the sense of assurance they got from the highest levels of the Government, that they will continue in Trinidad and Tobago and they settled the last outstanding claim. So I can say today, without fear of contradiction that we have saved Trinidad and Tobago, US $1.1 billion, $7½ billion by our negotiation of claims.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Young: So when I hear those on the other side and some from the other House ask: Tell us about it. I am telling you about it now. You left us with $8.8 billion in claims. We saved, in our negotiations, US $1.3 billion, TT $7½ billion. So you all still cost the country a billion dollars in claims. But a PNM Government negotiated that. And I can say as well, negotiated that without expensive lawyers and friends here and there; negotiated with NGC and with the Government supporting NGC and doing what we did.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Young: Contrary to what you heard about the management and the lack of negotiation of gas contracts, I can also report to the country, Madam Speaker, during the period 2010 to 2015, not a single, let it resound in this Chamber, through you, Madam Speaker, to the people outside, not a single gas supply contract negotiated. We heard about renewals that had come up, that should have been negotiated, nothing done. So right there, in a lack of negotiation and foresight of the industry during that period, we lost over 1½ bcf of gas in contracts immediately.

Contrary to that, what I can report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, again, without fear of contradiction, from 2017 to date we have negotiated 31 upstream contracts and 115 downstream contracts for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Young: So zero, zero from 2010 to 2015, versus 31 upstream contracts and 115 downstream contracts. That is how we have been managing your resources in the gas industry.

We have also ensured that in all of the NGC contracts going forward, we have mitigated against the contractual risk. Because we learnt from the past and we learnt from what the people unfortunately have to face. So they do not now face the liability if there are reductions in gas. They have no bills to pay as a result of that. And I will prove to the country that we managed to renegotiate in the most difficult of areas in the LNG area, better terms for Trinidad and Tobago. We have also entered into this, this is NGC, innovative arrangements, where we have signed EPC contracts. We have signed and we have actually sold, and I am proud of this

UNREVISED
one; we have sold LNG as a country. NGC has sold LNG as a country. We have sent 20 third-party cargoes to Egypt. We have sold other LNG.

We have also entered into arrangements where we now get methanol cargoes. And I can tell the country, as I will come to in a short while, that with respect to our renegotiation of the LNG sector, we have also managed to get an increased shareholding at no cost to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. S. Young:** So you see, that is how we govern PNM style in the energy sector. We do not run up claims. We do not burn money. We do the exact opposite. The decisions we take, the contracts we negotiate, resound for the betterment of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and I say that again, without fear of contradiction, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, in early 2016, we found the gas master plan that was actually commissioned during the period 2014 to 2015, but hidden. So, we found this gas master plan that talked about the leakage, meaning that we were not getting sufficient revenue for our gas resources. What did we do? We sat and we strategized how best to deal with this, and we came with up the Spotlight on Energy that again will go down in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. We went to the Spotlight on Energy and we took on the large multinationals. At the time they were screaming and shouting that we were going to run investors from Trinidad and Tobago. But you see, that is not how we do business.

The reason for the travel of the Prime Minister and myself over all of those years is to go and establish relationships with the decision-makers. Because you see, the decision-makers at BP and Shell are in London and they are in The Hague. In EOG, they are in Houston. In BHP, they were in Australia, now Woodside they
are in Australia. These are the major upstream suppliers in Trinidad. So we go to them and meet with them, so they know what we are doing for Trinidad and Tobago. And we took on the restructuring of Atlantic LNG.

But one of the things we found, you hear them talk about you need to have initiatives to increase gas production in Trinidad and Tobago. Let me tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago what happened with the initiatives that were put in place during that period of time of 2010 to 2015. Our largest gas supplier who was exploiting at the time almost 2 bcf of gas a day, told us that based on what the UNC did, we the people of Trinidad and Tobago will not receive any revenue for our gas till 2024. So all of our gas being exploited we will receive no revenue till 2024, which, by the way, has not even come. So for all of these years we would receive nothing. What did your PNM Government—and I am proud, Madam Speaker, to have been given, and privileged to have been given, the opportunity to lead the negotiations. And what we managed to do has resulted to Trinidad and Tobago, as a result of our restructuring and our negotiation of new gas prices, and new royalty regimes, I can report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that from 2017 to 2023, whereas we were going to get not a drop of revenue, due to what we negotiated, so it means we would not have gotten it, we have received to date $9.1billion.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Young: So your initiatives led to no revenue, but as a direct result of the negotiation that I am proud of, I was given the opportunity to negotiate on behalf of Trinidad and Tobago, my beloved country, in that instance we got $9.1billion.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Young: But it did not end there, Madam Speaker. Also, as a result of
those difficult, complex negotiations, I can tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we concluded some difficult negotiations with another one of our large gas suppliers that led to an initial payment of US $265 million in 2019. And to date, as a result of the new formula that we have negotiated for the value of our gas, a new formula, which is a basket of indices; and that is how we managed it on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. From 2019 to date, we have received $6 billion that we would not have received.

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

10.35 a.m.

**Hon. S. Young:** So you see, Madam Speaker, when I hear them questioning about the management of the sector, we on this side can say without fear of contradiction that as a direct result of our intervention at the highest level from the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and with our technocrats, and with the NGC, we have managed to get for the people of Trinidad and Tobago almost $16 billion that they would not have received due to what was done before. And that cannot be rewritten. It is a fact.

We are renegotiating the restructuring of Atlantic LNG, Madam Speaker, which is again something that has never taken place in any jurisdiction in the world, and that is something we will come to the people. Hopefully, within the next month, we intend to sign the final agreements, thousands of pages are now being reviewed for a restructured Atlantic LNG, that will mean better shareholding for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

We also managed to negotiate third-party access to gas. So that means that not only NGC, Shell, and BP can bring gas to Atlantic LNG in the future, but others can as well. And it was our vision to fight for that which now opens the
opportunities for deepwater with Woodside. It opens the opportunity for regional gas, it opens the opportunities for cross-border gas because that did not exist before. And it would not have happened if it were not for this PNM Government during the period 2015 to now.

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

**Hon. S. Young:** And that is what we are doing for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So better shareholding, third-party access of gas, better pricing for our gas, and therefore we ensure a future. And these negotiations lead to investments in projects like Dragon, in Manatee, in Calypso, in deepwater, and also regional. The downstream relationships with our petroleum chemical industry, the ammonia methanol. Trinidad and Tobago—and again I stand here without fear of contradiction, those decisions taken by PNM governments of the past, Trinidad and Tobago as at the last statistics that are readily available, which are 2021, Trinidad and Tobago is the second largest exporter of ammonia in the world just after Russia, and in methanol we are the second largest exporter of methanol in the world just after Saudi Arabia.

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

**Hon. S. Young:** Again, something to be proud of, and we have managed the relationships with Nutrien, Methanex, Proman, Yara, Tringen. In fact, just last week, in meeting with the executives of one of them that flew down to meet they were happy to tell me that based on what they see us doing and they see the initiatives that this Government is taking in upstream, next year they will investment US $150 million in their plants in Trinidad and Tobago. These are global companies—

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Hon. S. Young: —that do not have to invest here anymore, but they are saying and they said it to me frontally, based on the Government’s initiatives and what we see happening in the energy sector, we have taken the decision to invest US $150 million in Trinidad and Tobago next year to upgrade our plants. They would not be doing that if they did not see a future.

Madam Speaker, equally on the upstream side, if you would permit me to just refer to the work that we have done again, indisputable, not subject to contradiction. Contrary to what you heard of the management or the lack of management in ’10 to ’15, from 2016—September 2015 to date, as a direct result of our intervention on negotiations for terms, conditions, et cetera, production sharing, contracts, E&P license renegotiated. I can report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago these are some of the projects, there are more that came on as a result of that. Osprey with EOG, we finalized the determination of the truck project with BHP. The Iguana project of DeNovo, Angeline development with BP, Dolphin development with Shell, Ruby Delaware development with BHP. This particular one, it was the Prime Minister’s intervention at BHP’s head office in Australia that they took the decision to do it. That was a company that was considering pulling out of Trinidad.

As a result of this Government’s intervention, we got Ruby and Delaware, Barracuda with Shell, again, our negotiation of terms and better prices of gas. Matapal with BP, Colibri with Shell. The Zandolie development which was the second one with DeNovo which is part of the Proman group. Coho development, we got Coho and Cascadura over the line with Touchstone. Cassia C compression would not have happened which is one of the most sophisticated investments and engineering feats in the whole BP operations globally, Cassia C took place in
Trinidad and Tobago as a result of our meetings with BP in London.

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

**Hon. S. Young:** These are direct results of our meetings. The same thing with EOG. I will never forget when we were in Houston and we met with EOG and they felt assured by what we were doing, they immediately got on the phone and called Trinidad and said, “Proceed with the project.” BP have done the same thing, Shell has done the same thing. I will tell the story about Woodside. I have met with Ms. Meg O’Neill three physical times, even though she is in Australia, whenever she comes to the western hemisphere to make sure that this country gets Calypso done. And the technocrats at Woodside will tell you, they do not know what we discussed and how it is that Ms. O’Neill came out of that meeting so assured that she prioritized it. Because you see, when a company, Woodside acquired BHP, when a company does that, one of the first things they do is look at their books and assets and decide where they are going to stay or not. We have ensured that they stayed in Trinidad and we are working with them to develop Calypso. So we will have that deepwater. Mango with BP.

Last meeting in London with the Prime Minister, BP said go ahead with Cypre. We have Mento with EOG. BP’s infill drilling programme, thankfully has been meeting with a lot of success. Osprey with EOG. You have Ginger coming on with BHP. You have a lot of infill drilling going on, and there is a whole list of future production that will take place as a direct result of our intervention, discussions, and negotiations with the upstreamers.

**Manatee:** To explain Manatee, Manatee is part of the Loran-Manatee field which is between Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela, 2.7 tcf in Trinidad’s water and approximately 7.3 on Venezuela’s side. There was a unitization agreement.
When we saw what was taking place as a result of the US sanctions, we negotiated and got President Maduro to allow us to produce Manatee Field. So that is going to happen and that provides a future for Trinidad and Tobago, and it is only natural that Loran will follow. And I can tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago, in my recent discussions with the Venezuelans, and in particular President Maduro, and Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez, they are looking at Loran coming to Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. S. Young:** So I use this opportunity now and I am disappointed the Member for Siparia is not here to ask where is President Guido now? But it is the PNM Government—

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

**Hon. S. Young:**—it is the PNM Government that stood firm on the principles of the UN Charter of non-intervention in another country’s political landscape, we stood firm with our neighbours in Venezuela and that is why there is this potential that is now in black and white, in ink.

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

**Hon. S. Young:** Calypso, we are negotiating Calypso. You saw in the last 10 days in the energy sector, unprecedented. One of the things was the signing of three deepwater wells with our largest multinationals BP and Shell. We have had a successful onshore nearshore bid round, 16 bids received for eight blocks all awarded. EOG brought in a rig from New Zealand for 12 months to have a drilling programme of over nine wells. People would not be doing this if they did not see the future of Trinidad and Tobago. And every single one of them will say it is because of a sense of assurance that when they sit down and negotiate with the
Government of Trinidad and Tobago there is credibility, there is no corruption, and there is competence on this side.

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

**Hon. S. Young:** We have launched, just a few days ago, the shallow water bid rounds where 68 companies, 68, had expressed and gone into the data room, interest and gone into the data room, 28 of them nominated, meaning they identified blocks that they intend to bid for. So that is the future. That is what is going on. This is indisputable. This is irrefutable. These are facts. This is the proper management of an energy sector.

Let us then talk briefly, Madam Speaker, about Petrotrin. Because you see there is a lot of false narrative taking place with respect to Petrotrin. In fact, just over the weekend, not surprisingly, a video started to circulate with one of those persons who holds office for life, in an entity who knows what they do, based on a document talking about subventions from the Ministry of Finance, completely out of context.

First point, Petrotrin was not shut down, Petrotrin still exists today. Petrotrin is costing the people of Trinidad and Tobago today, and let the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, who is one that likes to profess some knowledge, understand, Petrotrin is costing the people of Trinidad and Tobago today in short-term loans taken out to purchase crude, US $420 million. That is the legacy of Petrotrin that continues to exist but we restructured it. So there is TPHL, Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited, which is the holding company, which is the parent company of Petrotrin, Heritage, Guaracara, and Paria. Paria brings in fuel for Trinidad and Tobago and the region. Not one day—

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member, your speaking time is now spent. You are
entitled to 10 more minutes extended time to complete your contribution.

Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I will use it.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Hon. S. Young: Petrotrin continues to cost us US $420 million on short-term loans that when you roll it, because they cannot pay it off, the interest rate continues to rise. And that money was utilized to buy crude.

Let me briefly tell the people about the management of Petrotrin. In 2011, again that period of ’10 to ’15, because they pretend that period did not exist, but the people of Trinidad and Tobago remember it, and they decimated, they destroyed the energy sector. And that bothers, in particular, the Member for Siparia who likes to repeat it because it is true.

In 2011 Petrotrin made a net profit of $2.4 billion. In 2012 it dropped to $1 billion. So immediately you can see something was not going right to lose almost one and a half billion dollars of profit. 2013 the profit dropped to 15 million; 2013, Petrotrin’s profit dropped to 15 million from two and a half billion in 2011. That was the management of Petrotrin. By 2014, we were now in a loss of $201 million. And that is for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. By 2015 the loss had turned to $1 billion. In 2016, four, almost $5 billion because oil had dropped to US $25 a barrel.

By 2018 the loss for the people of Trinidad and Tobago was $16 billion because the chickens had come home to roost. Because of the mismanagement—and it is irrefutable. Anyone can go and research this and see that in that period of ’10 to ’15 they drove Petrotrin into a loss-making entity that we still carry on the books today. We were faced with the auditors telling us that there was $4 billion
in losses that they wanted to write off. Again, I was tasked and mandated, along with the then Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance, to meet with the auditors of Petrotrin to understand this. And the auditors told us you have to write off over $4 billion in carried forward tax losses. I said, “But that would make the company insolvent, why are you doing this now if these losses were being carried since 2013/2014?” And that is one of the things we had to deal with. We also had to deal with two bonds coming due, US$850 million and US $750 million, so almost TT $12 billion coming due in a company now that had these losses and was insolvent.

So let those who like to talk about Petrotrin deal with these facts and these issues because that was the reality of Petrotrin. But I am happy to report and it was not an easy decision. We had to consider every single worker but it had outlived its use. We were no longer producing. I showed how in the UNC period they dropped the production of oil by almost 40,000 barrels of oil a day, but they pretend that did not happen.

10.50 a.m.

So if you have to import oil to put into a refinery, it makes no sense. If the uplifting cost which is the cost of taking the oil out of the ground was costing more than the sale price you could get of the oil, how does that make sense?

So, we took the difficult decision, the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago paid the workers of Petrotrin as hard as it was, $2.7 billion in cash to go home with, restructured it, and today Heritage which is the exploration and production company, as a result of the new management, as a result of new techniques, new tooling, et cetera, is declaring net profits in the billions; PNM-style.

**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]
Hon. S. Young: Madam Speaker, Dragon, let me say a few things on Dragon because I have heard persons say: Oh, but you have signed agreements already on Dragon—which again just confirmed to me, Madam Speaker, that they never knew and they still do not know how the energy sector works, because it is a progression of agreements to get to the PSC or the licence or the E&P licence. You have to take the steps and make sure you secure it in black and white as you go along. So the first agreement—and this is all PNM, you know, because the UNC did not have the foresight to pursue a cross-border—Loran-Manatee is one thing because that is in our borders. They did not have the foresight to look for gas elsewhere but that is the PNM Government and thank God, we have been managing it since 2015.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Young: We went and we pursued it. In 2016, we signed the first set of agreements that said the teams will work together in pursuit of it, otherwise, you have everybody pursuing it. Trinidad and Tobago is not the only place interested in Venezuela. I can tell the people of Trinidad now, and Tobago, when I was in Venezuela a couple of weeks ago, meeting the PDVSA headquarters, as I walked out of the boardroom in the middle of negotiations to strategize, there were literally a number of multinational companies there meeting with them. There are other countries in the world wanting to do business with Venezuela. But what we have done is manage the relationship to make sure we are the priority.

So what was signed in 2016, we then negotiated a commercial term sheet which was signed in 2018. So to have the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre and the former Minister of Energy and the Leader the Opposition ask, “well, why are you signing so many agreements”—because the US put sanctions. And do not forget—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Hon. S. Young:—that is what stopped it, otherwise the Dragon gas would have been in Trinidad since 2020. The US put sanctions and stopped the project. And let us not forget those on the other side, wrote to the US Government asking for the Member for Diego Martin West, the Prime Minister, and for myself to be sanctioned by the United States. That is part of our history, because they were supporting President Guaidó and asking why I let the Vice-President of Venezuela, Delcy Rodríguez into the country. Thank God I did, because today we have a future with the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Consider if it was those on the other side—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Young:—nowhere on the landscape now. So the agreement that was signed actually refers to our 2016 agreement. And the agreement that was signed was between myself and the Minister of the People's Power of Petroleum for the promotion of joint projects, in the gas hydrocarbon sector. And I can report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago today, it is not only for Dragon.

Also, as part of that agreement—and we cannot get into the terms of it because as happens with all commercial agreements and energy sector agreements, there are terms of confidentiality. And let me explain to the people why, Madam Speaker, because if Trinidad and Tobago is negotiating and then you have the EU negotiating, and then you have other companies negotiating, Venezuela would not want each party to know the terms of the deal. That is how the energy sector works. But they would not know because they never negotiated a gas supply contract. They never negotiated anything with the upstream, they negotiated one contract that is still costing us billions of dollars. So Dragon is well on the way.
And let me just tell the people as well, you can see the strategy of this Government.

Last year, I went to the United States eight times—seven to Washington DC very quietly, I never made any announcements and that led to the second, only the second OFAC licence ever granted for Venezuela production. The only other one is Chevron that is a three-month licence. So when you hear the ignorance of, “oh, is only two years”—and let me tell you something more. When we signed that there was silence because it had not happened anywhere else. The next thing you know is, “oh, well, Maduro would not do the deal with Trinidad and Tobago”, so what happened two weeks ago? When he signed an agreement that is in black and white, that is not only for the pursuit of Dragon gas that I can tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago because I hear the next false argument right now that it is only for LNG. It is not only for LNG because this Government knows what it is doing. There is an allocation for domestic gas—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Young:—and right now I can report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, we have had a number of meetings and we are now negotiating the pricing—I am being told that I have to hurry and wrap up. We have also signed an MOU with Suriname, we are pursuing regional opportunities as well and we have had two technical meetings with them, again quietly. That is how I operate, that is how we operate and at the end you see the results. Project Lara, the largest solar project in the CARICOM; we are also pursuing wind for the generation of electricity. We are pursuing more efficient power generation by combined cycle. We are building the first green hydrogen project, CCUS. The reduction of methanol and carbon is taking place, so we are looking into the future, we are launching NGC green. And
finally, Madam Speaker, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the people of—as I started—to thank the people of Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West for the opportunity and to assure them that I will continue to work on their behalf and the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and good morning to you and the Members in this Chamber. I know it is Monday morning and Monday morning is always difficult. I have just listened for the last 55 minutes to the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West and he sounded very angry, Madam Speaker. I want to start off—and my contribution basically will be entirely in the energy sector, with some comments along the way on the budget, Madam Speaker, but really and truly, I really have to refute a lot of the stuff or statements made by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries in the last 55 minutes, Madam Speaker.

I want to start off by asking the Minister, when would the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and this Government take responsibility for the failure of the energy sector in the last eight years Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: They have been in control and in charge of this country and the Government for the last eight years—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee:—and the metrics in the energy sector have always been down and continued to decline in the last eight years under their stewardship.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: So those are the facts, Madam Speaker, those are the facts. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the Government has not increased oil or gas production in the entire eight years underneath them—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: —and you listen to the Minister this morning, of energy, and you would swear after the Member read out the entire list of projects, especially in the upstream, you would swear after listening to him, that we had an increase in oil and gas in our country and today our production has been declining steadily year upon year, Madam Speaker. So I really do not understand if Minister Young, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is telling this country, based on the projects that he would have listed here this morning, let us wait until 2028 or 2030. Let us freeze, let us go into—let us freeze ourselves and freeze the country, but only in 2028 and 2030, we will see something positive happening in our country. So let us forget what is happening, the reality of our energy sector, and let us hope in 2028 and 2030, based on the great negotiations by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and his team, that something great would happen in our country. But before that I—“crapaud smoke our pipe” Madam Speaker, if I can use that phrase as colloquial.

Madam Speaker, I listened to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and if the public is listening to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, it is a repeat, repeat, repeat of the same narrative that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries has done in the last eight years—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mr. D. Lee:—in every budget that the Minister has presented. He goes back to—the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries starts from 2010, Minister runs up between 2010 to 2015, the track record of the PP government—blame, blame, blame. And you would swear if it was not for the success and what the PP government had put in place, we would not be—the country would have been in a worse position than we are in today, Madam Speaker. Those are the facts because under their stewardship, they have done nothing in our energy sector.

Minister Young, for the last eight years if you listen to Minister Young, all—the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, sorry, Madam Speaker—it is renegotiate, we negotiate, the lawyers negotiate, we did claims, you know—I know the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is a lawyer by profession, Madam Speaker, and that is all the Minister has spoken about is about renegotiating and, you know, from a legal point of view, and has not increased our production in oil and gas for the last eight years and that is what the country wants to know. Because we agree, Madam Speaker, we agree that our revenue from energy is our life blood in our country that has been so for years and Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the Member for Port Spain North/St. Ann’s West, every time the Member gets up to speak, you would swear that that Member is the only person living in Trinidad Tobago and that Member is the only patriotic individual in Trinidad Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I want to put it here today, you see every Member in our Opposition, we love our country called Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: We are true patriots of the son of the soil and daughters of our country, Madam Speaker. You would swear that the Minister of Energy and
Energy Industries is the only person living in Trinidad and Tobago. I grew up in pan. I grew up in culture from Diego Martin, Madam Speaker. I grew up playing “jab jab”.

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

**Mr. D. Lee:** I grew up in when Panorama finals—when Panorama was on a Thursday, Madam Speaker, on a Thursday night and then after Panorama, semi-finals you get king and queens of the band parading in the savannah, I grew up on than, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. D. Lee:** I could tell the Minister about patriotism and culture in our country. I might look like oriental, Madam Speaker, but I love my country.

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

**Mr. D. Lee:** So when you want to talk about “jab jab”, I could tell him about “jab jab”, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. D. Lee:** I could tell the Member about “blue devil.” I did all that. I did all that. Madam Speaker, so I in my contribution today, I will refute everything that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries presented in the last 55 minutes because it was like a book—rereading a book and I was preparing for this budget debate and I knew exactly what the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries was going to come and say today. He is a book that I just have to reread and I know exactly what he would talk about—Petrotrin, the Member would talk about NGC contracts, the Member would talk about between 2010 and 2015, and you know, the Member would not say they have done nothing different in the last eight years, nothing.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: So, Madam Speaker, I just want to as I get in, I just want to rebut a little bit what the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, in his contribution on Friday. I know that Member’s straddle is the Minister of national youth—and Youth Development and National Service, Madam Speaker, I do not know if I got it right. But the Minister when the Minister spoke on Friday, the Minister spoke about a lot of skills training programmes, Madam Speaker. And the Minister spoke about HYPE and, you know, and NGC and NESC, MIC, YTEPP, MiLAT, MYPART, Madam Speaker. And you would swear that the Minister is reading out these training programmes, and you would swear if the country was listening, that it is the first time that these programmes are being introduced underneath him.

11.05 a.m.

I want to tell the Minister—and I think he is a good friend and I like that Minister. If it is anybody on that side, I like that Minister.

Hon. Members: Aww.

Mr. D. Lee: He might be the next leader of the PNM for all you know.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. D. Lee: I like that Minister. Maybe it is newness in the Ministry, maybe it is newness, but I want to tell the Minister, all those programmes that he would have read out and gave the impression that these are new programmes, these programmes have been around under the PNM administration. Before, it was under the UNC administration. And I want to say, between 2010 and 2015, we took the skills training level programmes in our country to a higher level never seen before in our country.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mr. D. Lee: And what did this administration do in 2015 to now? They have destroyed every single training programme in the skills area and they are now trying to resuscitate it, because they realize the youths depend on it—and that is why we have a lot of the issues in our country among our young people—that they are now resuscitating and giving the impression to the country that these are new programmes.

I want to touch about one programme in particular, Madam Speaker, the MuST Programme. The MuST Programme has been around under the PNM. It was around under the PP government and it is still around now, Madam Speaker. That MuST Programme was just a vital programme because it fell under MIC. And it really was about taking the young people who could not have gone on to maybe Sixth Form or even tertiary education and giving them a skill in the service sector in our country in tourism, Madam Speaker, because they talk about diversification; they talk about diversification. And that MuST Programme was critical for our young men and women in the service sector, especially in our tourism, the restaurants, you know, the service sector.

And what used to happen coming out of that programme, they used to go for training within business people, Madam Speaker. And what used to happen out of that, it was a natural progression for those individuals who would have wanted to go on and improve their education to end up in the hotel school in Chaguaramas, Madam Speaker. You know what this Government did? They shut down that hotel school under their tenure, Madam Speaker, and they want to talk about tourism and diversification? Madam Speaker, they shut down that hotel school in Chaguaramas that gave—you know, they talk about the Sandals project but that hotel school was an avenue for our young men and women to go to first-class
hotels throughout the CARICOM, Madam Speaker, and increase their skills in that sector and come back home and really, you know, make our service sector in tourism greater than what it is today, Madam Speaker, and they shut it down. They shut it down. So to come and hear them talk about growth and diversification, Madam Speaker, in this budget—I mean, for real, Madam Speaker?

So, Madam Speaker, I listened to this budget and I listened for four hours and, I think, 10 minutes of the Minister of Finance presenting his budget, and it was painful. I must say so. It was painful. Because if you listened to the Minister of Finance’s first budget in 2015, it was about 41 pages or thereabouts, and the Minister of Finance gave a presentation of two hours. That is the only thing that is increasing in our country, Madam Speaker, the time that the Minister of Finance gives a budget statement, Madam Speaker. So, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance talked about failed diversification. Now, I want to ask before I get into my energy sector, Madam Speaker. Sometime in May 3rd this year, Madam Speaker, we were all brought into this Parliament to discuss a mid-year review and an increase of over an additional $3.2 billion in expenditure for our country, coming out in addition to the fiscal year 2023 that just ended on September 30th, last month, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, if you look at the book, the *Review of the Economy 2023*, which is part of the bundle of our documents today, Madam Speaker, something is very curious to me, because I am a bit concerned that when we started off the fiscal budget 2023 in October, or in September 2022, the entire budget was about three-point-something more, Madam Speaker. And we came in the mid-year review and asking for an additional $3 billion more in expenditure for our country, Madam Speaker—and I am a bit confused that when I looked at the deficit that the
Minister of Finance presented—we came here on April the 28th, Madam Speaker, and we asked this country to give us $3.8 billion additional; that was the amount, and it is for different expenditures in our fiscal year 2023. National Security, the Minister of Finance asked for an additional $128 million. Even in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, they asked for an additional $348 million.

So when you looked at even the Central Bank six-month review bulletin that they put out in June, Central Bank talked about at the end of fiscal 2023, we were supposed to have—they were projecting a deficit of about $6 billion. Now, when the Minister of Finance—and even in the mid-year review, the Minister of Finance said that, that they would have had a greater deficit than what was projected at the beginning of 2023 by the Minister of Finance. And the Minister of Finance—when the Minister of Finance presented his budget last Monday, Madam Speaker, I am asking, what happened to those expenditures that we came in this Parliament to approve, that extra $3.8 billion? Because all things being equal, because our revenues went down, we were supposed to have had a deficit of approximately $6 billion for fiscal 2023. And the Minister of Finance talked about a deficit of only $3 billion, or 1.8 of GDP, which is within the norm, according to the Minister of Finance.

So I am asking the Minister of Finance, or even the Member for San Fernando East, that when they are presenting, could you explain to the country and to us, or to me, what happened to that $3.8 billion that came at mid-year review in April—the ending of April, early May, and debated? We debated that and I am not seeing it anywhere. So I do not know if this figure, the true deficit will show up sometime in December this year, Madam Speaker, because clearly, when we
debated, we approved $3.8 billion extra. Where did that go? Where did that go? And everybody is silent because it is there in the *Review of the Economy*, Madam Speaker. So, again, there is some deception in these budget figures, just like the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries when he presented his numbers, Madam Speaker.

So, Madam Speaker, my projected deficit for fiscal 2023 is supposed to be at least $8 billion for this country because based on the *Review of the Economy*, Madam Speaker, total revenue is supposed to be $53 billion. Based on our expenditure that we came in addition to approve in this Parliament in the mid-year review, it is supposed to be $62 billion. So my simple maths, we are supposed to be about $8 billion, not the small amount that the Minister of Finance presented here on Monday last, Madam Speaker. So I ask, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, let us go to the *Review of the Economy* with respect to the energy sector. The Minister of Finance told us once again that the energy sector has contracted by 0.3 per cent. This is not a simple contraction but it is the ninth consecutive contraction in our energy sector. So listening to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, I do not know, you know, what they have done in the last eight years, Madam Speaker. The *Review of the Economy 2023* tells us a grim story in our petchem industry. The real GDP in the energy sector fell by 3.5 per cent, real output in the crude oil exploration and extraction industry fell by 4.5 per cent, condensate extraction recorded a contraction of 8.2 per cent, Madam Speaker, refining LGN industry decreased by 1 per cent, Madam Speaker, so it amazes me what the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talks about. Madam Speaker, the Government has never—I want to say it here, this Government has never surpassed the work of the PP government in our energy sector, Madam

UNREVISED
Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: They have never surpassed that work. Minister Young, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries likes to call us unpatriotic. I had mentioned, Madam Speaker, you know, he does that every year. I want to just quote some things, some numbers to put it in context with what the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries said here this morning. Wells drilled—and this is from the Review of the Economy, Madam Speaker. This is not, I am pulling this out from myself. This is in the book. Wells drilled, the Review of the Economy 2023, page 56:

“...forty-two (42) wells were...”—drilled in the last year.

When the PP government left office, we had over 75 wells in our last year, Madam Speaker. That is performance. Rig days—rig days is a parameter of how well we are doing in our country in energy. The Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries’ bulletin for August 2023 tells us this year we recorded—this year, 565 rig days. In 2015, when we demitted office, rig days under the PP government was 2,859 rig days, Madam Speaker. That is performance under the PP government, and the list goes on and on.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: The energy sector growth, Madam Speaker: You know, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talks about our tenure, 2010 to 2015. I just want to read out some numbers in the energy sector that Minister Young is managing: 2016, underneath them, the energy sector declined by negative 9.8 per cent; 2017, 0.5; 2018, negative 3.2; 2019, negative 4.3; 2020, negative 12.2; 2021, negative 2.7; 2022, negative 5.1. That is their performance, Madam Speaker, all negatives,
Madam Speaker; all negative, nothing positive.

I listened to the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Finance’s budget presentation talked about, “Finally, this Government will stabilize oil production. Finally, we will stabilize oil production”. Madam Speaker, for the last eight years, oil production underneath this Government has been declining year on year. They destroyed Petrotrin. I listened to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries say that, “We did not shut down Petrotrin. We did not shut down Petrotrin”, but yet over 5,000 people went home, but they did not shut down Petrotrin, they restructured Petrotrin. Those were the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries’ words here this morning, they restructured, they did not shut down. Well, that is a debate that will continue outside of the walls of this Chamber, I am sure, by certain individuals in the coming few days, Madam Speaker, because the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries said here this morning, they did not shut down Petrotrin, they restructured.

So what they did, they created a company called Heritage Petroleum which was technically Trinmar under the Petrotrin model, Madam Speaker. They could have left it and called it Trinmar Limited, which, I think, there is a company, but they called it—they changed it and they called it Heritage Petroleum. Heritage Petroleum underneath this Government was purposed to be the be-all and end-all for them because they shut down the refinery. And the production in Heritage Petroleum has been declining ever since they formed Heritage Petroleum. It has been declining steadily, Madam Speaker. So, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries comes to say that things are rosy and things are nice, the Heritage Petroleum in the production of energy is worse off than when they were under Petrotrin as Trinmar, Madam Speaker. When we left in 2015, oil production was
about 86,000 barrels a day.

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

**Mr. D. Lee:** Today it is hovering somewhere, they are struggling at 55. Even with destroying the union, sending home all the competent workers, they are struggling to even meet a bare 55,000 barrels a day, Madam Speaker. So I do not know what is the success story that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is talking about.

Let us talk about gas production. It is the same “ole” story every year with this Government about gas production. They blame the PP government, 2010 to ’15, about gas production. We have listened to Minister Young come with the same story time and time again that we did not negotiate contracts. I will read out some—a discussion that was held in a JSC for NGC, Madam Speaker, in a short bit, and those are not our words, these are words from NGC, Madam Speaker.

11.20 a.m.

So, Minister Young is saying—the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, sorry, is saying that we are supposed to negotiate before negotiations. If my memory serves me right he talked—the Minster talked about, we supposed to negotiate it since 2014 because in 2018 the contract was ending, so we should have negotiated since 2014, four years before. But four years in 2014 based on the numbers that Minister Young presented here, was one of our better years in gas production, we were producing over four cubic feet a day—billion cubic feet a day, in 2014. What is it today? We are struggling at 2.5 billion cubic feet a day underneath them, Madam Speaker. They have done nothing, those are the facts. So, Minister Young could come and talk—

**Madam Speaker:** Member Lee, I know you have been trying, so maybe you can
just stop at the Minister it might help.

Mr. D. Lee: The Minister, sorry, Madam Speaker. The Minister has been trying to convince this population that under the PP government we should have done negotiations and made their life easy and made their life easy.

Now the Minister talked about claims, I have evidence here and I think the Minister also said it, that not a claim has been paid out by anyone in the energy sector based on claims made to NGC. They negotiated and I think the country should thank the Minister if the negotiations went well. But as far as a cost to this country based on the information I have, this country never paid any claims, any claims to any one of those companies, Madam Speaker. Even the Mitsubishi plant which I will come to in a bit, Madam Speaker. So—I see San Fernando East jumping up. So, Madam Speaker, the claim story is something that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talks about all the time, Madam Speaker, to give a narrative to this country that we did nothing.

The Minister talked about when we dealt with the upstreamers and you know, we gave them very lucrative incentives. Madam Speaker, I mean the story is there every year, the Minister comes with the same story. I will read out again a Norman Christie statement on that same incentive that Minister Young keeps talking about every year, every time he gets up to speak, Madam Speaker.

So the oil and gas production, down, underneath them in the last eight years, Madam Speaker, they have done nothing to increase our production. You know they keep using the word “mature field,” and “mature province” but yet, Madam Speaker, they would not do the right thing to incentivize our energy companies to increase the drilling, Madam Speaker and explore for over the last eight years. They have done failed bids, Madam Speaker, in shallow waters, under the late

UNREVISED
Franklin Khan and it is only recently they now, after a year of negotiations, they now concluded the deep water bids, Madam Speaker, and that will not bring any benefit to our country until 2030 at best, Madam Speaker, at best.

Madam Speaker, I listened to the Minister talk about Dragon Gas, the country wants to know about Dragon Gas and every time we ask questions this Government feels that we should not ask any questions. They alone know about running the energy sector, Madam Speaker and they are the worst players to run our energy sector—

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

**Mr. D. Lee:**—because they have done nothing in the last eight years.

So let us talk about Dragon Gas. What did the Prime Minister sign in 2018 with the Venezuelan government, Madam Speaker? They said it was a term sheet, and I ask the question, the country is asking the question, what did the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries sign on September 20th or thereabout with the Venezuelan government in particular President Maduro? What did they sign?

11.25 a.m.

What did they sign? Did they sign anything different? Did they sign when we will be getting first gas out of the Dragon gas field? Did they sign when we will be actually starting operation? Did they sign, well, we agree with the US Government licence and we would negotiate and do not have to pay cash to the Venezuelan Government? Or is it a non-cash agreement? The country and the people of Trinidad and Tobago want to know what it is that you signed.

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

**Mr. D. Lee:** Because you gave the impression to this country and to the world that there was great agreement. Now, I listened to the Minister of Energy and Energy
Industries here and I am still confused, and I think the country is still confused. What did they really sign?

Now, I understand, based on an article, that there was some agreement or maybe discussions, Madam Speaker—the Venezuelan Government, that the Dragon gas field, and I stand to be corrected, one is that, we pipe the gas from Dragon gas to Shell/Hibiscus platform and then the country Trinidad and Tobago gets the gas. I understand that Venezuela has asked to consider a pipeline from the Dragon gas field to Guiria which is on the Venezuelan border and then run a pipeline from Guiria which they, the Venezuelans, say is a shorter distance to Point Fortin where Atlantic LNG is. So, from my information, I do not know if I am correct, I am just saying I was told that that becomes now a negotiating item where the Venezuelans are asking us to consider, because we would be putting in the amount the money to run a pipeline from the Dragon gas field to Guiria and then from Guiria to Point Fortin.

Now, if that is so, Madam Speaker, and the Venezuelans want us to consider that, you understand what goes in Venezuela. Every Monday morning they could turn off that pipe that comes from Guiria to Point Fortin and we would have no—our money would be jumping up, Madam Speaker.

Now, let us talk about the Manatee and the Loran. From what I understand, the Venezuelan Government has now lumped the Manatee and Loran and the Dragon gas in one; in one. Now, back in 2019, the Minister did say, and I agree, that there was some agreement signed to hive off Manatee from Loran. Manatee is on the Trinidad and Tobago side and we would develop the Manatee field. That sounds good, Madam Speaker. Now, it is a cross-border. Same waters, Madam Speaker. I understand, based on negotiations that President Maduro is now asking
us to reconsider that whole Manatee and Loran development. And if you listen to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries carefully this morning, or the Minister, he mentioned something to that effect. Because the Minister lumped now this morning Manatee with Loran back together. He lumped it back. Right? So, I am asking, is there new negotiations? Because, you see, if we develop the Manatee field first before the Venezuelan Loran, what would happen naturally, Madam Speaker, the flow from the Manatee side would be so powerful, and I put it in layman terms, that the people of Venezuela might feel that they are being, I do not want to use the word “robbed”, but they are not getting their fair share from that Loran-Manatee field, Madam Speaker.

So that is why there is now some discussion by the Venezuelans to let us now consider developing it back together as one, Madam Speaker, and that impacts on the Dragon gas deal. So we have lumped all that together and I heard the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries did sort of mention something along those lines and then came up with the non-disclosure clause as usual, Madam Speaker.

So, Madam Speaker, I ask the question, maybe in the wind up or somebody can get up and add some clarity to this whole Dragon, Manatee and Loran that seems so be in a circle, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, let us look at the shallow water. In the past month, we have seen a flurry of announcements by this Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. We saw the announcement of the new Dragon gas deal at the ending of September. Then we saw the announcement of the deep-water bids and then at the end of September, yesterday or last week, we saw the commencement of shallow bid rounds, Madam Speaker. The manner in which all these things have come
together in the past few weeks, from what I understand from my information, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries wanted to have something good to say to this country in this budget statement, Madam Speaker.

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, from what I have gathered, was a PR to give the impression that things are happening in our country in the energy sector, especially for the budget statement. And I will go into the shallow water bid rounds again, you know. It is a long way off, Madam Speaker. A long way off. The deep-water bid rounds that the Minister spoke about has been ongoing for more than a year, renegotiating with Shell and BPTT to come to some agreement, to take up the deep-water bid rounds because it was not attractive in the first place so they had renegotiated to make it attractive. These are the facts, Madam Speaker. So deep-water bid rounds it is, again, if it was to happen, Madam Speaker, it is years off, Madam Speaker, 2017 thereabout, and shallow is the same thing, Madam Speaker.

So, Madam Speaker, nothing here that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries came here this morning to add anything new to our energy sector, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Minister again talked about this NGC contract with the Mitsubishi plant. Madam Speaker, just one second.

And I want to say, Madam Speaker, this contract and back in 2016, if my memory is correct, the Minister talked about that same contract and renegotiated that contract. He boasted about it, Madam Speaker. He boasted about renegotiating that contract. It was the 02nd of December, 2016. It was a ministerial statement about the CGCL contract, Madam Speaker. And I will just go to that last couple sentences, Madam Speaker, where the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries came and said:

UNREVISED
“The re-negotiated agreements…”
And I am quoting:
“…and rescission of the Green Field Gas Priority Policy mean that NGC…”—and by extension the people of Trinidad and Tobago are “…no longer exposed…”
Hear it:
“…no longer exposed to the potential”—of—“billions of dollars of claims for damages.”—Madam Speaker.
Additionally, this Government is pleased to say that it is working towards finding lasting solutions for the curtailment of gas.
Now, Minister Young came with, as a ministerial statement on 02nd of December, 2016, it is there in the Hansard, and told this country, based of his astuteness, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, legal astuteness, that they renegotiated that contract and the country has nothing to worry about. We did that. Why is it this morning, and again the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries keeps talking about this contract and we suffered losses? NGC suffered losses, Madam Speaker, because of this contract that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries renegotiated in 2016? So if there are claims on this contract is because of the bad negotiation done by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries on this same very contract in 2016.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mr. D. Lee: We are now in 2023, Madam Speaker. We are now in 2023. So if there are any claims it is based on the negotiation, the renegotiation of that same contract done by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Madam Speaker. So, I am amazed.
And then I want to read in rebutting some of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries points on this same NGC. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries keeps talking about, we are supposed—the PP Government should have renegotiated the contracts way before. There was a joint select committee back in July 2016 in Parliament. A Joint Select Committee on State Enterprises, Madam Speaker. NGC management, top management came in the Parliament in that committee, Madam Speaker. And, you see, I like—you need to go back to listen to these individuals who are the NGC management. They are the life of NGC. They are the life of NGC. So let me just read a few things. Under “Challenges”, Madam Speaker, based on the report.

“The Committee was informed…”—in addition the company—
These are “Challenges”—
“In addition, the Company faced the possibility of reduced margins given at several upstream gas supply and downstream gas…”—supply contracts—“…were due to expire.”

This is in 2016, Madam Speaker.

[Minister Young is on his legs]

Mr. Tancoo: Standing Order.

Madam Speaker: Okay. Member, you are quoting from the Hansard?

Mr. D. Lee: Yes.

Madam Speaker: What are you quoting from? It is Hansard, you have to give the proper citation.

Mr. D. Lee: Madam Speaker, I am quoting from the Third Report of the Joint Select Committee on State Enterprises, which was laid, okay, on July, 2016.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mr. D. Lee: “In addition…”

And I quote, Madam Speaker, from this report:

“…the Company faced possibility of…gas sales contracts were due to expire. There would therefore be a period…”

This is July 2016. Who in Government? This administration, Madam Speaker.

“There would therefore be a period of significant renegotiations on these agreements during the next five years”—Madam Speaker.

So what the management is saying, NGC management is saying to the committee on State Enterprises, that they know that hard negotiations on expired contracts are coming due over the next five years and they are preparing for that? Who is in government, Madam Speaker? This administration is in government. They are the ones responsible or negotiating or renegotiating these new contracts, not the PP Government, Madam Speaker.

And I just want to put it further. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talks about these contracts under NGC and the downstreamers. The PP Government came into place in 2010, May 2010, Madam Speaker, May 2010. These same contracts that this Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talks about with NGC and the downstreamers, they developed it, Madam Speaker. It was underneath them those contracts were in place, Madam Speaker. So if the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries finds those terms and conditions were a bit strenuous and, you know, and against the country, they were the ones that originally negotiated those contracts, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: And it has fallen back on their lap between 2016 and the next five years that is why they have a problem, Madam Speaker. I agree, it is difficult,
Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, let me just say, our life in our revenues in our country is dependent on oil and gas. Nobody is disputing that. And nobody is disputing that our gas production is struggling, Madam Speaker. But they have a responsibility, just as we had between 2010 to ’15 to continue looking and incentivizing our energy sector to continue looking for oil and gas, Madam Speaker. Every government that is in place has that responsibility, Madam Speaker. Government is a business, Madam Speaker. I agree. No matter what administration changes, Madam Speaker, government is business because we have 1.4 million people depending on us, Madam Speaker. So, we agree on that. But do not come here for the last eight years and blame, blame, blame the PP Government as if the Government or the country only started in 2010, Madam Speaker. They developed the down sector—the downstream sector. They, I mean, under the PP last administration they were the ones that developed these contracts, a lot of these downstream contracts, Madam Speaker.

What has happened in our downstream industry for the last eight years, Madam Speaker? No new investments have come into our country. We are struggling for investments, Madam Speaker, and my colleagues will go more into that. We are struggling for investments, Madam Speaker. We have actually had capital flight in a sense, Madam Speaker. The energy companies, based on the lack of incentivization are not investing in our country, Madam Speaker. They have no done so, that is why you see forex is at its lowest, Madam Speaker, and the problems in forex. You know, the Minister talks about our incentive that we created and we gave the upstreamers the energy companies like BPTT, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I keep having to read this statement every year, Madam
Speaker, every year. And this is a statement by Norman Christie who was in charge of BPTT at the time because the Minister raises this issues.

11.40 a.m.

The article is dated, Trinidad Express, Madam Speaker, 14th of March, 2018, bpTT Regional President, Norman Christie said that, and I quote:

“…said that those incentives—which allowed BPTT to bring forward its capital expenditure allowances—were instrumental in supporting BP’s decision to invest US $6 billion in T&T between 2011 and 2017…”

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: So the development went over both administrations, Madam Speaker. The PP and this present PNM. What is so bad about that? What is so bad? Is it because they did not develop it? They did not come up with the idea. They did nothing in the last eight years to incentivize our energy sector.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: The Minister talked about Juniper and TROC, it was underneath the PP government that started those projects, Madam Speaker. And if it was not for those projects coming into fruition in 2015, because governments are a business. It is a continuum. It is a continuum, Madam Speaker, and just like how we will be in office very soon, we are hoping that they would have left something for us, but we would have to start from zero, Madam Speaker, when we come back into power.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: Madam Speaker, I want to turn to Petrotrin. The Minister talked about Petrotrin, not shutting down Petrotrin, restructuring Petrotrin. Do you know how much money by this restructuring—they destroyed the refinery. Right? They sent home over 5,000 workers at a cost to this country. The Opposition Leader in
her dynamic and excellent contribution in our budget—

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

**Mr. D. Lee:**—the Opposition Leader showed that as a ward of the Treasury, Petrotrin was not based on the FOIA from a group, that no subventions were paid to Petrotrin under—at least not under the PP government—

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, your original speaking time is now spent, you have 10 more minutes, if you wish, to complete your contribution.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Ten minutes.

**Madam Speaker:** You may proceed.

**Mr. D. Lee:** So, Madam Speaker, under Petrotrin I want to ask the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries who has direct responsibility, whatever they want to call Petrotrin today, old Petrotrin, new Petrotrin, Heritage, Paria, legacy, whatever they want to call it. What about the deficit in the pension plan for the retirees of Petrotrin? I thought that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have come and given some hope to the retirees that their pension plan is not in jeopardy. Based on an actual valuation that I have read from Bacon Woodrow, the latest, this Government is being asked to put in over $200 million annually for the next 10 years to save that pension plan. I thought that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have come and given some hope to the retirees. We heard nothing, silence. And I really hope that the Minister of Finance in his wind up would try and give some comfort to the retirees of Petrotrin, who gave their sweat and life to our oil industry, and we owe them a debt of gratitude. We owe them gratitude for that, before they destroyed Petrotrin.

Madam Speaker, they created a company called Paria fuelling. So we went from our own security on fuel to have to import fuels. In the last two/three years,
Madam Speaker, under Paria, we spent over US $3 billion importing fuels, over US $3 billion, that we have now taken out from our foreign exchange supply, and we ask a question, why are we struggling for forex, Madam Speaker? Why are we struggling? The facts are there, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, as I know, my time is coming to an end and I have a lot more I could say, but I will leave that for another time. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talked about Woodside. Do you know that Woodside Energy abandoned one of their blocks? They gave it up underneath them. They gave it up. They say they could not—it is not financially viable. They gave up that Woodside block, one of their blocks in July 2023. They gave it up, and the block is called TTDAA 5. Madam Speaker, they gave it up, because there was no incentivizing by this Government to incentivize Woodside to drill in a deepwater area in TTDAA 5. They gave it up. They say thanks but no thanks, take it. Take it back. And you ask yourself why we are in problems in finding gas for our country.

Madam Speaker, as I come to an end, I want to say and I want to spend a couple of minutes on my constituency, and I really hope that, firstly, I want to say to the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, that was a very dynamic contribution, she gave over four hours. Very comprehensive, Madam Speaker. Well structured, well presented. It went through and it showed about we are in touch with the people. Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia mentioned our consultations we had with the people throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad, and they gave us feedback, and she presented it here in her contribution. And that shows you how we care. We care for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, as far as my constituency of Pointe-a-Pierre, I know the Minister of Energy—the Minister of Education is here. I hope when the Minister of

UNREVISED
Education is presenting she can give the people of Pointe-a-Pierre, especially in the Claxton Bay area, that we will be seeing a new primary Anglican school. Because the Minister, and she promised me last year that they would start rebuilding that school. So I ask on behalf of the parents and constituents about the Claxton Bay Primary Anglican School.

Madam Speaker, I ask my colleague, I would not say—my colleague from Laventille West, as the Minister of National Security, that new allocation for vehicles, that some consideration could be given to St. Margaret’s Police Station to at least get a couple of vehicles. We only have one in St. Margaret’s Police Station, so I really hope that the Minister of National Security, when we meet in the corridor he can tell me that will be done. I know he would not say it in front in his debate.

I hope in the wind up the Minister of Finance could explain the deficit, the issue that I mentioned. We came here in midyear and asked about an additional $3.8 billion nowhere to be found in his presentation in the budget, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, as far as local government, my friend from San Fernando West can really help us in the Claxton Bay/Pointe-a-Pierre/Marabella areas, those rivers need cleaning, and he knows the rivers that I speak about, because we share the same rivers, Madam Speaker. We share the same rivers.

Madam Speaker, as I end, like most in our nation I have spent some time attempting to describe this budget, which was lacklustre in my view, lacking sound policies to stimulate our country, our economy, failed to meet the needs of the population, and was absent of any policy to drive our national development. Having thoroughly reviewed the Minister of Finance’s figures, his promises, his lack of achievements, and his prediction for the upcoming fiscal year, the best way
I can describe this budget is by using the Minister of Finance’s same very words as a Member for Diego Martin North/East in this budget contribution, *Hansard*, October 08, 2012, and I quote:

This budget is a deception. The budget Arithmetic is bogus. The measures are ridiculous, and the Minister should be ashamed of himself.

Eleven years later, Madam Speaker, these are the words of the Minister of Finance. That is exactly the reality of this budget that the Minister of Finance presented here on Monday last. With story after story in our media about job losses, this Minister of Finance reported that he has achieved one of the lowest unemployment figures. With sector after sector facing contraction, this Minister of Finance has told us that they are on a path of growth. With the country struggling to earn forex and no sustainable development in the non-energy sector or energy sector, this Minister of Finance reports to us that he is ready to build capacity for diversification. The Minister of Finance has been selling dreams in this 2024 budget, Madam Speaker. And I thank you with those few words. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Laventille West.

**The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this budget is all about the lives, the livelihood and the well-being of all of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. When I listened to its delivery, Madam Speaker, I thought to myself, in keeping with the Government’s philosophy to treating with the nation’s issues, particularly as it relates to crime and violence, that it was really not only a people’s budget but it was really a crime-fighting approach made simple. I would like to thank my
constituents for their support and their encouragement over the many years. I would like to thank the Prime Minister for his very stern and his very sound leadership of his government, the Government that has managed the affairs of Trinidad and Tobago for the past eight/nine years. I would also like to thank the staff led by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of National Security, whose support would have underlain all that I would say to this House today. And of course I thank God for our life. I thank God for the PNM, because with the Member who last spoke, admitting that he played devil as a boy, and demonstrating in some ways that he has perfected that role—

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

**Hon. F. Hinds:** I thank God for his presence and his guidance upon us. The national security budgetary allocation for 2023 to 2024 is proposed at $6.9 billion out of a total of $59.2 billion. And it must be noted that education, health and social development were allocated 8, 7 and $5 billion respectively. Given that a public health approach to violent crime focuses as well on health, some cases mental health, poverty, housing and education, and given that we have taken a whole-of-government approach, these allocations yield no surprise to me, Madam Speaker.

This demonstrates our cohesive understanding and coherent approach, public health approach, to the safety and security of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. A major policy shift brought about earlier this year when the Prime Minister convened a regional meeting at the Hyatt encouraging his counterparts from the other countries of CARICOM, and made this major policy shift, not only for Trinidad and Tobago, but for the region, taking and treating with the violence that plagues us as a public health concern.
We are faced, Madam Speaker, with seven enduring threats to our safety, security and well-being: Narco-trafficking, small arms and light weapons trafficking, irregular migration, including, of course, human trafficking; terrorism, cyberattacks, climate change, and global health pandemics. We have, Madam Speaker, noted that most of those manifest themselves in the business of transnational organized crime. These organizations and networks are expansive, very well organized and well oiled. They kill, they destroy, they extort, they bribe, they threaten even public officials, intimidate even public officials in order to have their way. National security is both multi-dimensional and multi-directional in nature, and our response must reflect a spirit of endurance as well, and an integrated whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach on the basis of security, our national development and respect for human rights, as well as the advancement of a flexible and innovative environment through forging effective local and international partnerships.

In this regard, these seven enduring threats manifest a couple of characteristics; one, that they are predominately coming from outside of the borders of Trinidad and Tobago, and for that reason alone, transnational in nature. For example, narcotics, most of them that pass through here come from the South American continent. And of course within recent times we are seeing an increase in business, synthetic drugs, for example, ecstasy, ketamine, fentanyl and hybrid marijuana coming from North America and other parts of the world.

11.55 a.m.

The small arms and light weapons problem is manufactured or they are manufactured predominantly in the United States and human beings trafficked to Trinidad and Tobago are usually from South America and this is real. Human
trafficking is real, Madam Speaker, and we are addressing that.

In terms of terrorism, the one known terrorist plot that we had in 2018, that had roots outside of Trinidad and Tobago as well. The transnationality of these threats to the safety and security of our citizens, as I indicated, require organized, transnational and tough responses. There is an inescapable convergence of narco, human and small arms trafficking to the extent, Madam Speaker, we are seeing these new drugs, we are told that we have about 32,000 illegal firearms around here and human trafficking, as I said, is real. And we have noticed that the same international transnational networks that do guns, also do human trafficking and drugs.

I want to apologize to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, those who have lost dear ones; those persons who are traumatized by some of our citizens, and perhaps others, in home invasions, in rapes, in incest. That woman who was dragged on Charlotte Street a few days ago, pained all of our hearts. Madam Speaker, on behalf of those of who behave in those ways; who choose crime, in some cases, as a business model, I apologize to the rest of us and give you the assurance that as Minister of National Security, leading national security, we will continue to put up the walls, put up the fences and fight like hell to protect you from that.

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

**Hon. F. Hinds:** To fight this, we must operate in the spirit of international cooperation, and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has adopted simultaneous local, bilateral and multilateral engagement. For example, in April of 2023, we hosted the symposium at the Hyatt that I just spoke about, and that involved all elements of the society, whether they be the family, the church,
academia, cultural groups, sporting personalities, minority political parties like my friends on the other side, and the wider civil society, are all embracing whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach. The Government is committed to this approach and is quite happy that we have gotten the support of our friends and the leaders of CARICOM.

There are two elements that I must lay as a backdrop to this, people are not the way they used to be. Societal morals have changed. In fact, if you are not observant, it may miss you that people are more likely or appearing to be able to hide and protect wrong and to support wrongdoing; not everyone, but too many of our people are heading in that direction. And secondly, it appears as though—and there are those you feel that the laws as they now stand in Trinidad and Tobago and the jurisprudence favours the criminal rather than the rest of us who are their victims; matters for debate.

So we are focused on the border security, in dealing with these narco, human and small arms trafficking issues. And we completed at the Ministry a border security policy which is now ready for the consideration of the Cabinet. It is hoped that this would be part of the broader management system that seeks to find a harmonious balance between trade for our economic well-being and interdiction on our ports of these illegal things that are coming in here through increased use of surveillance and inspection technologies. And therefore, Madam Speaker, the four new non-intrusive mobile scanners at a cost of $90 million to be acquired in 2024 are, for us, very critical because we need the technology to support this effort.

Madam Speaker, I am told by the Customs Division that with that and what we already have, the fixed scanners we already have, we have the capacity to search every container, if we wanted to, leaving our ports. We do not do it, but we
could. We have the capacity to do it. And the 16 handheld scanners also to be acquired in 2024, as announced by the Minister of Finance, will take us a long way, Madam Speaker, in improving our port security, particularly our legal ports.

There is an institution known as AIRCOP, a multiagency project in partnership with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, INTERPOL, and the World Customs Organization, and it is aimed at strengthening the capabilities that we possess at our international airports, Trinidad and, of course, Tobago, to target and intercept high-risk passengers’ cargo and mail. And the operation centre for this—the nucleus for this interagency force is already established and in operation at Piarco.

SEACOP, its marine version, is also up and running and we did that in partnership with the European Union’s Global Illicit Flows Programme, and SEACOP works with relevant agencies in Latin America, the Caribbean and West Africa, fighting transnational crime, maritime illicit trade and associated criminal networks. It provide for ongoing training. It is also an interagency unit. It involves customs, immigration, defence force, police and other elements of our national security fabric. And as well we have established the national maritime information system to promote information sharing with other SEACOP units around the world.

Madam Speaker, our Joint Maritime Control Unit and our Marine Interdiction Unit are coordinated by our National Operations Fusion Centre, in conjunction with TOCU, our Transnational Organized Crime Unit. And in order to participate in phase V—we have done I to IV already—Trinidad and Tobago was required to sign an MOU between the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and Expertise France. We did that.
Madam Speaker, yes, the same NOFC and TOCU that the Opposition Leader in her very feeble and weak-kneed contribution implied that this Government ignored NOFC, the fusion centre, and TOCU. I want to give you the assurance they are up and running and serving this country very substantially over the years.

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

**Hon. F. Hinds:** And they continue to do that. That the Minister of Finance told us that we will provide an additional $15 million for 10 additional TTPS riverine crafts to continue their work in collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard. These vessels will add to the existing stock of riverine vessels already operated by the coast guard and the defence force. And thankfully to the United States, particularly to the Ambassador, Madam Candace Bond, we received four by way of a donation from the United States mere weeks ago and that has added very happily to our stock and give the assurance we will make every use of them in our rivers, in our inlets, some of which remained untouched for many, many years as the riverine patrol unit of the police service and the elements of the coast guard and the defence force managed our borders from the shoreline to two miles out.

With the help of the United States, about a month ago I went to the coast guard headquarters and saw the re-outfitted, upgraded command centre that we always had there, and I had in my company the Admiral, his name, James Aiken, who came here on *USNS Burlington* on its second visit. I went on that vessel on both occasions. And I asked more Aiken on the margins, very quietly, what were your impressions of that upgraded command centre? And he told me it was comparable to what they use in the United States and I was more than proud about that. And therefore, it will allow us, along with our national radar centre, it will
allow the coast guard to see what is coming, what is happening, identify targets of interest and to treat with them accordingly and that, I assure you, is actually happening on an ongoing—on a daily basis.

We are now engaged in a project, Madam Speaker, for the outfitting and upgrade—re-outfitting and upgrade of our 12 Damen vessels. We are as well in negotiation with the UNODC for the acquisition of a number of additional metal detectors because as we speak weapons in this country, possessed of metal as they are, are hidden in some of the strangest places you could think about, some are even buried, and metal detectors are critical in finding them to remove them from the hands of the criminals and form part of law enforcement stockpile.

Drones: We are also negotiating to add some more drones to that which we already use in our management of our border and the border security operations. An air surveillance is critical to air, sea and land interdiction strategies. Madam Speaker, let me give you a little example against the backdrop of the fact that the Leader of the Opposition is on public record telling this country and the world, “We do not have to fight on the sea, we have to fight on the land.” Well, Trinidad and Tobago is part of the Joint Interagency Task Force, working along with SouthCom in this hemisphere. SouthCom is a US marine and military outfit. And I get a weekly report because Trinidad and Tobago has representation on that committee, JAITF, as we call it. And this is every week—I am just going to give you a small sample. In one week, beginning on the 29th of September or thereabouts—on the 22nd of September, 2023, there were 10 operations leading to seven seizures. Two of the vessels managed to hit the coastline before they were able to get them but those vessels were flagged for future attention. One succeeded in delivering its dirty cargo, apparently, from the JAITF report in front of me. In
those one week of activities, 10,514 kilogrammes or 10.5 tonnes of cocaine were seized; 5,744 pounds of marijuana all in one week. So when you hear the hapless, reckless Leader of the Opposition talking about, “You do not have to fight on the sea, wait for it to come on the land,” it demonstrates the level of ignorance that befuddles me.

So as I said, Madam Speaker, we focus—during 2024, the MNS, the Ministry of National Security, is scheduled to send several of its personnel to training courses at the International Law Enforcement Academy where I had the benefit in an earlier manifestation of attending training myself, to train in firearms interdiction, narcotics interdiction, both at sea and airports, as well as intelligence gathering and analysis. National security personnel are scheduled to participate in small arms trafficking course in November 2023.

We continue to acquire equipment, in some cases, on donation, for example. Recently, the UNODC, working along with Canada, we received visit, board, search and seizure equipment and kit from them and we were more than grateful. I was there for the hand over. The national drug policy, the early warning system of that policy was implemented. Trinidad and Tobago remains the only English-speaking Caribbean nation with membership in the UN Commission on Narcotics and Drugs and legislative amendments are currently being drafted for the Forensic Science Centre’s capacity to test for precursor chemicals. The recent find of a methamphetamine factory highlights the need for this because some of things they found was not yet manufactured into the drug, methamphetamine. So when you get the precursor chemicals that would be put together chemically to form the drug, there are criminal offences in relation to that too and we are preparing legislation, as I indicated, in terms.
We lobbied CARICOM real hard to get the CARICOM Crime Gun Intelligence Unit to be located in Trinidad and Tobago. I am happy to tell you we were successful, and I attended and delivered the featured address at its launch on November 14, 2022.

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

**Hon. F. Hinds:** Madam Speaker, intelligence-driven regional investigations and operations against gun crimes is the main purpose of that and this is being done in collaboration with our US agency partners, the ATF, Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosive unit; the Homeland Security Investigations; the Customs and Border Protection people; the Bureau of Industry and Security; and, of course, the DEA. And all of those organizations, or let me say most, 99 per cent have personnel working with us on the ground here in Trinidad and Tobago.

**12.10 p.m.**

I personally, with the support of my Prime Minister and the Cabinet lobbied hard over the last two and half years, the United States, to return ATF posting personnel in Trinidad and Tobago. That too was successful and it is taking us a long way because it is the ATF that assist us in tracing even the birthplace where these guns were manufactured, who they were distributed to in America, who they were sold to at the end of the consumer line there, and then we have a better idea when we find these illegal things in Trinidad as to its origins and with intelligence, we can have a better handle on things.

Madam Speaker, Cabinet recently approved the regional road map for addressing CARICOM priority actions on the illicit proliferation of firearms and ammunition across the Caribbean in a sustainable manner by 2030. And the three main goals of that is to re-enforce the regulatory framework governing firearms
and ammunition to reduce the illicit flow of firearms and ammunition into our borders, and to systemically decrease the risk of diversion of firearms. And when I say diversion, I mean where they leave legal and law enforcement stock piles and end up in the hands of criminals which have happened. You have heard people talk about finding TTDF and TTPS ammunition on crime scenes, leaving room for all kinds of interruptions. I cannot say too much about that. These matters are under police investigation, but diversion is the problem there.

We are finding a lot of 7.62 ammunition on the scene. In one case recently 94 shells were found, all of which, most of which 5.56 and 7.72 which the military in this country no longer uses, but then diversion is the issue. We have had significant importation of that through the hands of who I consider now to be a weak less former Commissioner of Police because the record shows that he allowed for the importation of more 7.62 and 5.6 ammunition than all the commissioners of police add together since our independence. And when we find them on crime scenes now the question of diversion gets to me, and diversion also include where they are sold or allowed to be imported legally to firearm dealers and possibly end up in the wrong hands to. But these matters are under police investigation and, therefore, I do not want to say too much more about them.

I can tell you, Madam Speaker, our national radar system is 100 per cent functional and we are now moving to discussions. CARICOM is moving to discussions with an international outfit or two to see whether we could get a regional radar system to help all of us and I could easily see the wisdom in that. Because ours benefited, St. Lucia, Grenada, St. Vincent and other countries. That is how it was set when it was set up back then. And we had a meeting with US Secretary of State, Blinken. I was present, Minister Young was present, the Prime
Minister was present, and heard him, acknowledge the difficulty we in Trinidad and Tobago and the region is facing with US produced firearms legally dealt with in America but once they cross our borders illegality sets in and we were assured of full US cooperation and I can tell you we are gaining it in dealing this problem, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, we are at the cusp of settling a MOU mechanism for maritime security cooperation between the Bolivian Republic of Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago to combat human and narcotic trafficking migrant smuggling and other forms of transnational organized crime. And the CARICOM arrest warrant treaty not only settled, but there is a draft in the atmosphere now. Thanks to the AG of Barbados and the AG in Trinidad and Tobago. They have been working along with their counterparts in the region and we are on the cusp of settling that CARICOM arrest warrant which will help us in finding our fugitives among our islands and no doubt elsewhere.

The human trafficking and regular migration problem is in front of us, and the National Task Force was re-established on August 21st, 2023. It is chaired by this Minister and other Ministers are involved. The Attorney General; the Social Development and Family Services Minister; Labour; Foreign and CARICOM Affairs; Education; Public Administration, also the Chief Medical Officer and the directors and leaders of the counter trafficking unit. We followed the three Ps as we call them, prevention, protection and prosecution.

In 2024, Trinidad and Tobago will no doubt experience the positive effects of the renewed strategic leadership and implementation of the TIP—that is the Trafficking in Persons Act—as well as our studying and dealing with the issues raised in the US Department of State TIP report which we receive annually in this
country. And I would like to thank the Attorney General, who with the support of national security, engaged the Judiciary so that the Judiciary became sensitized to the need to deal with human trafficking cases and the Judiciary has stepped up to the plate, is lending support, and I am happy to let you know, as we speak, a matter is being dealt with in the High Court before one of our judges for the business of human trafficking especially given that one of the major challenges we face in terms of our annual reports is that there has been no prosecutions, Madam Speaker.

With the help of the US appointed a strategic tip adviser who has been working closely with the Ministry of National Security on dealing with the issues around human trafficking particularly as it relates to the expectations of our assessors in Washington. And, of course, we have already generated an effective implementation national action plan and a strategy for enhancing prosecutions. We have established a home for the children victims of trafficking in December of 2022, that is up and running. The Minister of Housing and Urban Development rallying on this whole of government thing, made five units available which we will be using to shelter victims of trafficking.

Madam Speaker I want you to know for the first time we have 21 police officers, immigration officers and a coast guard officer, intelligence officer, in our counter trafficking. Uniform personnel working closely inside of there to investigate and advance the business of human trafficking which, of course, is a transnational crime.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. F. Hinds: Our migrant registration framework set up in 2018 under the hand of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries today, it is still very, very effective. Still up and running, still open to those who deserve the protection of the
laws of Trinidad and Tobago.

Very recently, we renewed the registration process for all of them and that system is working and working reasonably well. We are now making efforts, the Minister of Education, to get some of these migrant children into our formal education system. At least more of them, because some were already in there from information available to me, and I very, very proud of that. That would have come after some collaboration with the Archbishop of Port of Spain, and I want to encourage Madam Minister that we continue to do this. And we are heading toward full compliance in terms of our ranking, in terms of our assessors. From Tier 2 Watchlist, we are expecting very, very good things in 2024, all things considered.

The cost of policing our communities, Madam Speaker, the cost of incarcerations, $25,000 per inmate per month, the cost of rehabilitation, the cost of unproductivity. When we lose able-bodied young men and women to drugs and to nothingness, the cost of familial breakdowns, the cost of the fear and the trauma that we experienced, all of these are far more expensive than the cost of our offshore border interdiction to put a lie to what the Leader of the Opposition as I referenced had earlier said.

Madam Speaker: Member, I believe you used a word that—

Hon. F. Hinds: I oblige. I withdraw that word. Sorry. I oblige, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is the major element of our fight against the threats to our security. They have a complement of near 10,000 men and women, 750 regular police officers, and 2,500 Special Reserve Police officers, and they are guided by a comprehensive current operational and strategic plan both of which I have and lived with and worked with
and hold them accountable on.

Insofar as patrols are concerned, for 2022 the police reported some 345,000 patrols across their 10 divisions. To date in 2023, 311,873 patrols establishing presence, and even so I hear cries from the public for even greater presence, and those cries are justified. And therefore, we have to continuously reshape, redouble our efforts, redeploy to meet public expectations because things are happening at a rate that is troubling. The IATF, the Inter-Agency Task Force, which consists of soldiers and coast guard men and women, they done during the course of their last year, 30,000, not yet to date, well last year, 30,951 patrols. So when I hear people say Mr. Hinds you should bring soldiers in the atmosphere, I say quietly to myself they are already there. I heard a businessman calling a couple days ago for soldiers to be on job sites. I can give him the assurance soldiers are already out there supporting the police service those and in other ways.

Some say the solution to our problems is more guns and more ammunition following the philosophy wrongly adopted by that last commissioner that I spoke about. This Government is more focused on the restrictive policy where firearms are going to be granted to people who can demonstrate that they need them and not simply because you are somebody’s friend, or not simply because somebody could make you happy. And some people feel the formula to this is stand your ground and shoot back and knock it and “matic” and all of that. If the law enforcement of this country takes that bad advice, you know what chaos we would have.

So I want to reject that. We believe if we strengthen and professionalize the police service and tool them with intelligence and come together as a Parliament and pass the right laws to support law enforcement, we could fight that without the madness of “matic” and shoot up and lick up and clip it and all kind of foolishness.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. F. Hinds: But again I do not want to talk too much about that, suffice it to say that a distinguished former retired Justice of Appeal described all that happened there with the legal firearm regime as a well-oiled criminal enterprise, and I would not go further. I will just confine myself to that description because I know that these matters are gaining the firm investigative attention of the police service.

We are engaged in a serious national gun retrieval exercise because all the murders you hear my friends on the other side and everybody justifiably talking about and the trauma that it yields in the society, they are done with guns, 87, 90 per cent of them across the region and in Trinidad and Tobago. So we believe that if we put a national gun retrieval exercise—which we have done—in place, it is led by an Assistant Commissioner of Police, hardworking professional, and in conjunction with a major of the defence force, they are leading this charge to take in these illegal guns back into our care and dismantling them.

Last year we began a process of dismantling 7000 of them to avoid the diversion of which I spoke from legal stockpiles to others, and we call on the public, as I heard the Commissioner do up to yesterday, if you can help yourself by identifying the presence of these lethal items, please do so because the life you save may just be your own. Revolvers, pistols, shotguns, submachine guns, rifle, the homemade shotgun and even hand grenades have been found here. Ninety-six revolvers recovered so far for the year, 298 pistols, 35 shotguns, 11 submachine guns, 62 rifles using 5.56 or 7.62, 18 homemade shotguns, all together 521 firearms recovered by the police so far for the year.

I would like to see that figure quadruple, quintuple and the more guns we
get, the more the public support the police in getting these guns out of the hands of criminals, the less likelihood we will have to cry every Monday morning as we gather outside the forensic science centre, and I have to account for these murders as Minister of National Security. I want the public support and I want the support of my friends on the other side, for us to gang up if I may say so, in a civilized wonderful legislative way and fight the criminals, the minority in this country who are putting stresses upon us.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping].

Hon. F. Hinds: So for murders figures, is guns and bullets that causing the murders. In 2022, among the 10 divisions in the police service: 2022, 605 murders we had; for 2023, yet to date, we have had 458 as at when I received these figures here between January the 1st and October the 9th—458, 63 detected.

12.25 p.m.

So we are running close to what happened in 2022 unfortunately. The total number of murders solved in 2023 so far is 85; 63 of them, as I just said, committed in 2023; 22 in previous years combined and 90 persons have been charged for murder in 2023. We have seen in addition to the murders so far for the year to date, 572 woundings and shootings with the use of firearms, of course, for the most part, and if every one of that 572 was a fatal blow or a bullet or shot, you could imagine what we would have been dealing with in this country.

We have seen an increase between 2022 and 2023 in rapes and incest and other sexual offences. We have seen an increase in fraud offences. Right now I am aware of one being investigated by the police in a certain government department among others. So what we saw in 2021, 10,100 and—2022, 10,180 serious crimes and so far in 2023, 9,412; a reduction so far statistically of
something like 8 per cent; 768 serious crimes less or 8 per cent thereabout.

So, Madam Speaker, the police are very busy out there with some targeted operations. The number of them so far for the year is 225; warrants executed, 196; firearms found, 124 so far in the period that we are talking about, summary of the operations between August and the 9th of October. Marijuana and cocaine found, firearms found, money seized. So I am satisfied from that as Minister, the police are out there doing what they are supposed to do.

I am so happy to know that we will now be supporting the Commissioner’s effort to increase her annual recruitment from 300 to 1,000 recruits. Insofar as the roads are concerned, all the police will tell you, especially through the active directed patrols, the road is the place to control because you find issues there. Only recently there was a murder in San Juan and the Police Transit Unit saw a man break a traffic light down in the Petit Bourg area, incepted that vehicle because of the traffic offence and it turned out that that vehicle had something to do with the murder up the road or down the road. So it shows, it proves—control the roads, you could make a lot of indent.

The CCTV cameras, which my friends are always happy to ask about, well we are well inside of that. Some of the cameras are already up. Five areas in the Port of Spain Division will have them by the bottom of this week and from the 16th of this month, October, we will be installing them because the infrastructure, the backbone, the NEMA boxes, all of these have been done and from the 16th of this month, Madam Speaker, cameras will be installed at about 75 of them per day across the place and we will get the benefit of them going forward.

I have in the Parliament an integrity testing Bill. When the Prime Minister spoke about vetted units, my friends on the other side howled. Well we have had
vetted units here for a very very long time and so we go.

In my effort to oversee the professionalization of the police and other units, I can tell you the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force had, year to date, 438 officers participated in various training programmes locally, regionally and internationally. For the police service, 8,383 of them and all of the staff of the probation services, all of the fire service, 338 persons trained; prison service, 751—different kinds of training—Immigration, 98 of them; National Drug Council, 65 training opportunities and training therefore is it. There is an old military saying training, training, training. The more you train in war, the less you bleed; in peace, the less you bleed in war and I like it, it tells the story. This is not about pelting money as the Leader of the Opposition said on the day after the budget. This is not about pelting money. This is about training our officers to professionalize them, giving them the tools that they need in order to be able respond to the challenges that we face. And a lot is happening at the Police Academy and there is a lot of close work taking place between the TTPS and Forensic Science Centre.

You heard, Madam Speaker, that they just solved the Guanapo murders and charged two persons for it. That was work, scientific work, starting with SERU which is the Specialist Evidence Recovery Unit of the Police Service. I visited them and I see what they do. Worthwhile investment. And then they would send the thing to the Forensic Science Centre for further analysis. All I can tell you without saying too much is that the Guanapo situation was as a result of nice collaboration between different elements of the police service and the use of the science so we are doing things and we are getting there.

We have improved the ballistic capacity of the Trinidad and Tobago Forensic Science Centre. There was a time when only the casings could have
given them help, now even the projectiles, the part that leaves the bullet and goes to its targets, that too is of help scientifically and we have done that in the year 2023. And I think the Forensic Science Centre must be complimented for this and all overseen by, of course, the Ministry of National Security. Close collaboration and I am satisfied that the police are solving more murders, but because of the rate of these murders, you know, it is not so easily evident because we are getting more and more murders. This is why the gun retrieval and the ammunition retrieval programmes and the border security issues of which I spoke are so critical and important. All of them managed by our National Operations Fusion Centre and the National Intelligence Fusion Centre as well.

Insofar as the TTDF is concerned, the Defence Force, I have already said that they are already out there with us. They recruited and enlisted in 2022, 227 persons, graduated 212. So far in 2023, 201 persons have been enlisted, recruited and their training is ongoing. As for officer ranks, commission ranks, 15 persons. As for patrols, the Defence Force is reporting 10,000 patrols between January the 1st and the 30th of September. And I am hearing one of the persons on the other side asking “wais de result”? Well it is hard to measure the preventive aspect of law enforcement unless if he could but I could tell you without these, the situation would have been from a logical point of view far more dire and I want to encourage them rather than ask stupidity, Madam Speaker, I want to encourage them.

We are working on a returnees Bill to facilitate the vision of the Government to return terrorist fighters from conflict zones and other persons who may not have been fighters but progeny of and associated with those persons. The Government appointed recently a three-man team with Nizam Mohammed and a couple other
persons to assist the Government, assist Project Nightingale, and we are doing that. We have already identified an assessment centre when they, in accordance with the returnees Bill return, they will be assessed and so on and then well of course, we will take it from there.

And, Madam Speaker, in terms of cyber security, you know of the attacks that we have been having, we are training our personnel. I have records here to demonstrate the extent of the training. I am willing to make it to my friends on the other side but time is running hard so I am going to deal with this.

Madam Speaker, the budgetary measure announced a few days ago by the Minister of Finance to give tax relief to businesses that would invest up to $500,000 on measures to improve their cyber security software is a powerful and a good thing, because as the nation becomes more digitized, even the Government, through the Ministry of Digital Transformation, we need to put up defences because cybercrime is real and it is burgeoning and all the training and all the support that we can do, it is in this public health approach, it is like an individual deciding I will wear a mask, I will buy my own sanitizer. So the Minister of Finance will give financial consideration, tax consideration, for those who invest in protecting all of us in this public health approach that we are taking. All of us have a role to play.

Insofar as the fire service is concerned, I can tell you, Madam Speaker, the fire service is very busy, busier than the public would understand. In 2021, it responded to 555 residential fires; in 2022, 537 and insofar for this year, 454. Non-residential fires for this year so far, 84. Bushfires alone, which you see destroying large chunks of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, 2,439 bushfires. I was at a fire in Laventille where unfortunately one of my constituents, wheelchair
bound, perished in a little small wooden place but when the fire officers got there, they got there from a bushfire that they told me that they had just been dealing with and therefore—

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member for Laventille West, your original speaking time is now spent, you have 10 more minutes to complete your contribution.

**Hon. F. Hinds:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

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

**Madam Speaker:** You may proceed.

**Hon. F. Hinds:** Madam Speaker, you hear a lot about breathing apparatus, I am now able to tell you all fire stations are outfitted with breathing apparatus and we have even imported a breathing apparatus trailer to carry them around and we are confident that we can, while we procure even more, respond to our fire service office personnel who would need them to go in there and fight fires. We have just acquired two water rescue vessels. We have these party boats up and down the place every night and you wonder sometimes what would happen if something breaks out there, well the fire service has prepared itself to be able to treat with them with two water rescue vessels and we have just commissioned as well a mobile water system which would allow us to draw water, apart from what the tenders will bring, this system will allow us to draw water from any open source—rivers, the sea, people’s swimming pools, whenever there is a source of water. So I know that it is getting better and better as we go along.

Madam Speaker, search and rescue issues, you have been hearing a little bit about that. The fire service is involved in all of them, search and rescue issues and again, I know when we hear stories, sometimes the fire service does not get the credit that it should, but I have spoken to the leadership of the fire service to
improve its public relations or its communication bit in order that we can get those things sorted out.

We understand even climate change and its direct impact on food security, water security, NSE security and the like because we understand. An absence of these securities or a break in these could lead to social disruption and disorder, so we keep a good eye on those things from National Security as well and in 2024, we expect to see some serious headway in terms of, Madam Speaker, our approaches in disaster management.

We have created in this whole-of-Government approach in the Ministry of Youth Development, we have the GRACE programme operating out of National Security. We have the IATF’s Hearts and Minds, we have all the community police groups, we have the youth groups, prison service, TTDF doing MiLAT and MYPART. About three weeks ago, I sat in the Grand Stand at the Savannah and saw a young man who graduated from the MiLAT programme, he was a young man at risk, exposed to guns and drugs and everything else like so many others unfortunately. He in two years at the hands of those soldiers in the MiLAT programme, came out of there with six passes, four ones and two twos.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. F. Hinds: An outstanding example of while we understand, we have to deal firmly with the criminals who use crime as a business model who feel they could go and take what contractors have and bully their way into people’s house when the night comes in so-called home invasions. We have to deal with them and we are dealing with them but at the same time, we create pathways for our young people, so many and Minister of Youth Development and National Services would have spoken about that.
So we focus, Madam Speaker, on professionalizing and improving the technology of our crime-fighting platforms. We are confident and we want the criminals to know that we are getting stronger and we are getting better and we are coming to get you. That is what we want them to know. And to the public, I say in metaphor, if you want to live in a litter-free country, you cannot be littering yourself and if you see someone littering, you got to speak to them and sometimes when you see litter, you need to pick it up sometimes in terms of your own civilized contribution to things. And that was my metaphor, meaning that if you tell us, help us clean up the litter of firearms, ammunition and the molly and the drugs and the filth that is around your children, you will be doing yourself, your community and the country a great service.

It is the intention of the Minister of National Security in this public health approach, borrowing from the Minister of Health and the Prime Minister, to go more frequently after this budget to the public and keep them updated as the Minister of Health did on a very regular basis about what we are doing, what are the outcomes, how we will do it in order to protect them and of course, to tell them what you can do to assist yourself in this regard.

12:40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I am very sanguine and very confident that the police service, the defence force, the law enforcement family is on the move to push back against the criminals as the people of Trinidad and Tobago deserve and expect. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mr. Rodney Charles (Naparima): Thank you, thank you very much Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, once again we come before this House to waste precious time. I listened to the Member for Laventille West, the hon. Fitzgerald Ethelbert Hinds, and he—

Madam Speaker: Member, remember here we do not call people by their names. Okay?

Mr. R. Charles: Thank you, the hon—I listened to the Minister of National Security, and Madam Speaker, he wasted our time. How do you speak for 55 minutes and provide no hope, no enlightenment—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles:—no vision for a safe and secure future Madam Speaker. And I go back to the words of my political leader who said that there can be no prosperity without safety in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles: Madam Speaker, if there were a poster child for incompetence, ineptitude, cluelessness, underperformance, inadequacy, ineffectiveness, it is the hon. Member—

Madam Speaker: Okay, Member—

Mr. R. Charles:—for Laventille West.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Okay so I am just going to guide you a bit. Remember we are not—at all—about personal invectives, okay? So try to temper that approach. Just warning you going forward.

Mr. R. Charles: Yeah. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of National Security spoke about the Inter-Agency Task Force making 30,951 patrols last year. What
the Minister refuses to tell us is that in the Princes Town police station for example, there are only two vehicles to serve over 30,000 residents. And, Madam Speaker, when the criminals know and they call for a crime, and the police—one of the vehicles head to that situation, they commit crimes elsewhere. Madam Speaker, the Minister of National Security spoke about developing an education programme for the migrants and that is commendable. But how many of our teachers are trained to deliver a bilingual education programme in the southwest peninsula, Madam Speaker. We hear talk about 521 firearms recovered, but for every firearm recovered there are 10, and 20, and 30 times that arriving on our porous borders every single day. But, Madam Speaker, as a Courts employee on High Street expressed to the *Guardian* media reporters on the budget day, he said:

“This is the PNM, anything could take place. Nothing good is happening. It’s only talk they talk, and they don’t walk the walk.”

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER in the Chair]

Madam Speaker, last year—oh Mr. Deputy Speaker, last year I spoke about the serious deficiencies in the allocations for the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service during the Standing Finance Committee session on October the 6th. Ignoring me and numerous statements by the Fire Service Association, the Minister of National Security boasted in October 2020 that he believed that the allocation was considered and I quote:

…appropriate and adequate…

Saying days later that he had, quote:

“…‘no outstanding and massive requests’ from the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Services for equipment for vehicles…”

And that was reported in the *Guardian*, October 11, 2022.

UNREvised
12.45 p.m.

Had we, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and here I speak about honest engagement and serious engagement—had he been open to meaningful engagement and understood his limitations, then maybe Kemba Morris and her eight-year-old daughter, who died in a fire earlier this year because there were no fire trucks available at the nearby Siparia Fire Station, those persons would still be alive today.

The Minister of Finance said that they are allocating money to purchase new fire trucks, and to repair and maintain old ones. Yet, we see a $1.17 million decrease in fuel allocation for the fire service. So you have more trucks and you provide less money for fuel. That is the kind of nonsense that passes for budgeting, serious budgeting, in Trinidad and Tobago. So that is why I speak about we are wasting time in this Chamber.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, had the Minister treated seriously with the question of providing equipment for the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service last year, perhaps last week’s incident—and I take this moment to extend condolences to the family of the 13-month-old Harley Persad. Perhaps if neighbours had confidence in Minister Hinds’ fire service and its ability to respond swiftly, then they would have called the fire service first, then endeavour to extinguish the fire themselves.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the United States Fire Administration, the National Fire Data Center tells us that unless fire appliances arrive in less than 11 minutes, then their impact is minimal. In the UK, the UK Fire and Rescue Services has an average response time of nine minutes and 12 seconds across all of England. Let me read than again. Let me say that again. The UK Fire and Rescue Services has an average response time of nine minutes and 12 seconds. So I ask the Minister of National Security and the Minister of Finance, who is leaving, whether it is true
that 90 per cent of our fire stations cannot respond to most fires in under 11 minutes, which is the international benchmark? I ask Minister Hinds if it is true that 90 per cent of our fire hydrants are non-functional? Can the one appliance in Princes Town Fire Station, for example, arrive in Marac, 25 miles away on a road filled with potholes and landslides and other hazards, in under nine minutes? I am told it would take at least an hour—one hour. I am told that by the Member of Parliament for Moruga/Tableland, my good friend; one hour. But the world benchmark says that it takes nine minutes to function effectively.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, before I continue on in national security, I wish to make a point raised by the Minister of Finance, in terms of our foreign exchange. With regard to foreign exchange, the Minister of Finance rambled on steps being contemplated to deal with our foreign exchange shortage. I am switching gears. Mr. Deputy Speaker, no that matter how you try to concoct engineering solutions to our foreign exchange situations, and in spite of the nonsense spewed by our Ambassador to Guyana, the reality is that we have a shortage of foreign exchange. If you are earning less, you will have less available. And this Government has failed miserably to create new sources of foreign exchange revenues. What we know for sure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that the allocations of what precious little foreign exchange we have favours family, friends and financiers of the PNM and Balisier House.

And if I raise the issue of unfair allocation of scarce foreign exchange in this House, nothing will happen. The poor, the 99 per cent, those without a favoured PNM party card, those who refuse to contribute to Balisier House refurbishment, will have to line up and beg for a US $200 allocation.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Mr. R. Charles:  We have to beg, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for foreign exchange, even if we have a US account in the same bank. Meanwhile, the big boys get millions to invest in the US to purchase assets; franchise holders get millions to kill us with processed foods; others, just by over-invoicing, salt away in foreign accounts, waiting on the right time to migrate. And I ask the question: How did Massy get US $47 million to buy a supermarket chain in America? Just asking for a friend. Either they used our foreign exchange to invest abroad and did not repatriate their profits, or they use favoured status with the banks to acquire foreign exchange, or they fired workers to enhance profits, which they used to get more foreign exchange.

But I want to make the point, it is our foreign exchange, derived from energy earnings and resources, which God put in the ground. Jah Rastafari or Oludumare, whichever name you want to call him, in his infinite wisdom, has bestowed on all 1.4 million of our citizens, the oil in the ground, which in turn is monetized into foreign exchange.

So, is it being used not in the interest of the 1.4million of us? I know I will not get answers in this House; I will not get. But my constituents, especially those involved in small businesses, have asked me to find out. That is why I have taken matters outside of this House and written to the banks themselves regarding their policies for disbursing foreign exchange to us long-suffering citizens.

On Friday last, I wrote the CEOs of FCB, Scotiabank and Republic Bank, seeking clarification regarding their foreign exchange allocations and their policies. I asked the following:

1. What are your bank’s policies regarding persons holding US accounts and wishing to access those funds?
2. What are your foreign exchange allocation policies for those who do not hold US accounts but wish to travel, for example, for medical treatment?

3. What are your policies for determining which small businesses receive foreign exchange and which do not?

4. What are your policies in place for large business owners conducting franchise operations? How do you prioritize them?

5. What are your policies regarding families wishing to send their children aboard to study?

6. What are your policies for businesses wishing to purchase assets abroad?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I await a reply, and if I get it, upon receipt, I will inform the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I ask all this in the context that other countries are taking steps to rein in their banks. Barbados’ Central Bank Governor, Cleviston Haynes, was mandated by Prime Minister Mia Mottley to investigate the issue of bank fees, which are said to be among the factors driving the rising cost of goods. Mia cares for her citizens, it would appear. But Dr. Rowley, our Prime Minister, prefers to play golf and travel.

President Biden, in his State of the Union Address on February 07, 2023, boasted that he reduced late payments charges for credit cards from $30 to $8. But banks in Trinidad and Tobago are given free rein. But banks are taking advantage of us. They know, for example, that every month pensioners visit banks. Would they employ more staff on month-ends to shorten the process time? No. Would they liaise with the TTPS to beef-up security for the elderly pensioners at month-end? No. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I asked our Prime Minister, in this
Parliament, in a parliamentary question, if he would do as Mia Mottley and Biden had done, he became a raging bull.

I go to security—national security. This budget, and I want to make the point, will not improve national security in Trinidad and Tobago. The Finance Minister rambled for four hours and eight minutes and said nothing whatsoever about reducing our murder rates. I heard nothing from the Finance Minister, nothing from the Minister of National Security on increasing crime detection rates. You see, what we get from the other side is a list of things that they are doing. Eight years they are here providing lists, but they are not telling us out about the outputs of those lists, the consequences of those lists, and the measurable indices that improve our lives.

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

**Mr. R. Charles:** Nothing we heard today on increasing crime detection rates, nothing on improving convictions, nothing on deterring criminals, nothing about fully staffing the DPP’s Office, nothing about getting the Forensic Science Centre accredited and fully functional. Through these allocations, we are only seeing the stage being set for more and more crime.

Is this Finance Minister aware that increased economic hardships lead to escalating crime? And when you fail at reducing crime, you fail every sector of the economy and every person in this country.

Already, we spend more per capita than many countries in the world on national security. Clearly, we are not receiving value for money. According to an article written in the *Guardian*, dated October 03, 2023, and I quote:

The Ministry of National Security has more funding than many prestigious international organizations such as INTERPOL, which has a budget of
around €170 million, or around $1.36 billion, at a conversion rate of 8:1.

But our budget for national security is five times that of INTERPOL. Our budget is $6.9 million. INTERPOL’s is TT $1.36 billion. It goes on to say:

We, Trinidad and Tobago, spend 3.38 per cent of our GDP on national security. For comparison, the UK spends just 2.1 per cent of its GDP on defence.

And our neighbour, Barbados, spends only .9 per cent of GDP on defence, according to the CIA World Factbook, though this figure may not include spending on its police service.

So we are spending money. We are making lists. The Minister could tell us about all kinds of activities, but we are not getting value for money. Clearly, this administration’s policies are not governed by data or international benchmarks.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles: We see this lack of data-driven policies with the Government’s plan to increase the TTPS recruitment from 300 to 1,000 per year. What is the data upon which that is based? On numerous occasions, we on this side have provided data to show that the problem is not more police but better management of the TTPS.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping] Mr. R. Charles: You can give them $80 million of vehicles. If you do not have management maintenance processes, they end up in the junkyard. We currently have 7,000 regular police, plus 3,000 SRPs—that is 10,000—add over 5,000 army officers whom we are told are available to assist with patrols. So over 15,000 officers are available, yet Toronto has only 5,500 policemen for twice our population, and their police are move visible on the streets.

UNREVISED
Appropriation (Financial Year 2024)  
Bill, 2023  
Mr. Charles (cont’d)  

And that city’s murder rate is one-fifth of ours. The problem is not police, the question is management pure and simple. 

1.00 p.m.  

Even the Prime Minister admitted during his “Conversations with the Prime Minister” in February 2017, that 6,000 police and 2,000 SRP officers we had at that time was far above world benchmarks per capita. He also said that we had enough officers and we have provided the resources to the TTPS, but the problem was with the systems. Why did the Minister of Finance advance the EDOC of adding 700 more police officers and we ask the question, what is the return on investment on that expenditure? For heaven’s sake, the 2017 Police Manpower Audit stated clearly that:  

The TTPS was more than adequately staffed with a ratio of 494 officers per 100,000 of population.  

It further went on to state that what was needed was: 

More effective utilization of available manpower resources.  

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we were promised seven years ago, 1,400 municipal police. Seven years later today in the Princes Town Regional Corporation only 33 of the 100 promised have been appointed, with only two working vehicles for a population of 130,000, spinning top in mud. You provide $80 million allocation for vehicles only for them to end up in junkyards.  

So Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have to ask if this Government is serious. They do not know what they are doing, and worse, they do not know that they do not know. They operate by vaps. Mr. Deputy Speaker, all the institutions, notwithstanding what we heard today, all the institutions run by the Minister of National Security are in shambles. Let us deal with some.
The coast guard. As with the TTPS, unless the management of our coast guard is improved our borders will continue to be porous.

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

**Mr. R. Charles:** All the Government has done for the coast guard in this budget is throw money at building improvements and vessel maintenance. They allocated $100 million for logistic support and maintenance of the 12 Damen vessels that they had received brand new in 2016. They neglected these vessels for years out of spite, allowed them to rot, and now they have to spend $100 million to fix them.

I recall, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of National Security in his response to a written question I asked about border protection capabilities. This is what he said:

“The T&T Coast Guard does not currently have and never had enough vessels to provide 24-hour patrol service along all areas of…”—our—“…entire coastline.”

That is the *Guardian* May 25, 2023. So we are getting confirmation now through this budget that the lack of coastal patrols was because these 12 Damen vessels were not properly maintained and operational.

In this budget, Fuel and Lubricants is allocated $9.5 million for the coast guard. While it might appear to be 3.5 million increase over 2023, in 2022 the Actual amount was 9.4. So we are spending in 2024 the same as we spent two years before when the 12 Damen vessels were not working, when we did not have the two additional brand new Austal boats, and you spend the same. And in 2024, with increased fuel prices, you are telling us essentially that less fuel is needed for the coast guard. Mr. Deputy Speaker, even if they claim that our naval vessels are not sufficient to patrol our borders 24/7, why did we not see an allocation to fund
new surveillance methods?

In 2021, the US Navy did a demonstration with our defence force in the use of a drone called ScanEagle, which could be utilized to search for potential contacts of interest that might be transporting illicit drugs in our waters. This ScanEagle drone has a 60 mile vision radius. This could be an integral part of our border security to supplement the radar system, which every year we are told is working, but still drugs wash up on our shores in Mayaro. Why did we not see, if you were trained by the US Navy, why did we not see you operationalizing this by giving us the requisite drones. Why not an allocation for a similar drone for our coast guard?

Let us go to the fire service. The second institution that is collapsing under the Minister of National Security. Like all other areas under national security, the allocations are not governed by data. President of the Fire Service Association, Leo Ramkissoon, said after the budget presentation:

“Imbert rubbed salt in our wounds…”

Our firemen are still, as recent as September last month 2023, saying that there is a shortage of appliances and vehicles, *Daily Express*, September 11, 2023. Deputy Treasurer of the Fire Services Association, Ag. Fire Sub Officer Mohammed said, officers sometimes use:

“…their own vehicles to respond to emergencies…”

—and sometimes—

“…use garden hoses to help control fires.”

Imagine that. How embarrassing. We have billions in national security allocations, more than the international agencies like Interpol, and officers using their own vehicles for rescue responses.

**UNREVISED**
He further said that of the:

“…11 fire stations in the northern division…six have no tenders.”

Are we serious in this country? Out of:

“…11 fire station in the northern division…six have no tenders.

At any time, there were hundreds of officers on duty, but there are about ten sets of breathing apparatus in the whole fire service and they have to be shared…”—among—“…officers.”

That is Newsday September 17, 2023.

We are told today that there are breathing apparatus equipment for all fire officers, but a month ago, two weeks ago, we are told by the fire officers themselves that there are 10 sets of breathing apparatus in the whole of the fire service and they have to share breathing apparatus among officers. Yet, allocations have only been listed for Mayaro, for Penal and Point Fortin.

So we have 11 fire stations in north Trinidad, only six have tenders, but allocations in this budget for only Mayaro, Penal and Point Fortin. What a shame, what a disgrace, what an embarrassment.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles: When will all our fire officers across all stations be equipped with breathing apparatus sets? They are not serious.

Let us go to prisons. Ceron Richards, past President of the Prison Officers Association, used to plead with the Government about working conditions for prison officers till he was blue in the face. Year after year we get the PNM list, we doing this, we doing that, but the equipment never reaches the prison services. Last week, the new President, Gerard Gordon:

“…flagged ageing infrastructure, including broken air-condition
units…no…functioning alarm…issues surrounding communications…”

—As a major concern for prison officers operating at the maximum security facility.

That is the *Guardian* September 22, 2023. He described the Maximum Security Prison as a ticking time bomb. Yet today we hear the Minister giving us the list of all the things that they are doing, and they not doing one thing for improving the quality of security in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. R. Charles**: It is hard to take, Mr. Deputy Speaker. A ticking time bomb, that is the Maximum Security Prison as described by the President, Gerald Gordon. Nothing in this budget to address these issues at the Maximum Security Prison. Only one meagre allocation for the MSP for an alarm system.

Let us look at the SSA. And I want to ask the Minister of National Security to give me an undertaking that the SSA does not spy on Opposition Members in this Parliament. I want a yes or no, not an obfuscatory, long-winded answer.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis**: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6) please.

**Mr. Hosein**: [Inaudible]

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis**: The Government of Trinidad and Tobago, which we are the Government.

**Mr. Hosein**: “He say the SSA, you are not the SSA.”

**Hon. C. Robinson-Regis**: Stop. You are being ridiculous.

**Hon. Members**: [Crosstalk and laughter]

**Mr. R. Charles**: Mr. Deputy—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker**: Okay. Members, Members, Members. Okay. All right. Thanks for the discourse, Members, but again, it will not continue to be tolerated.
All right. I know a little banter at times but again, you know, let us keep the decorum going nicely as it has been going all morning. Right, so Member for Naparima, right, you want to ask a question, right?

Mr. R. Charles: Yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: So just state you would like this question to be answered and again, I do not like how, you know, you had put it across.

Mr. R. Charles: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right.

Mr. R. Charles: I would like this question to be answered.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles: Could somebody somewhere give us an undertaking that our e-mails on our phones are not monitored by the SSA. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles: The SSA’s budget was increased by $20 million. Their budget is now $270 million. I want the Minister to—I want to indicate that something is not right with the SSA’s budget. In 2022 they got 287 million, an additional 66 million in the mid-year review, yet we see in the budget books before us today Actual spend for 2022 is 246. So they got 287 and an additional 266 but the expenditure is much less, for 2022 is 246. Why did you ask for additional funding in the mid-year review? You see this is a joke with this budgeting process. It is a joke.

Life guards: The past President of the Lifeguard Association, Augustus Sylvester, has repeatedly made requests for refurbishment of patrol towers and more equipment. Just last week the President of the Life Guard Association, the
current President, Anthony Paul, confirmed that:

“There were no lifeguards…”—patrolling beaches—“because of the dilapidated conditions of the tower as well as the lack of transport from the headquarters...”

Guardian, September 27, 2023. You come and you give us a list. We do not want a list, we want results, we want a safe society.

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

**Mr. R. Charles:** We need safe beaches where our children can bathe in safety.

He claimed, this is the President of the Lifeguard Association, they also had manpower shortages and requests for discussions with the Government have been ignored.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think it is clear that this Government is not serious about any aspect of national security.

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

**Mr. R. Charles:** Our national security personnel beg, they cry, and they bawl for the same things every year, begging this Government to do the job for which they are paid handsomely. They are repeatedly disregarded.

The PNM has no clue on how to allocate, spend, or operationalize activity—allocate, or spend, or operationalize, or agencies under the Ministry of National Security. They are versed in fancy talk. It is no wonder that systems are failing miserably, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I want to look at the question of—and my leader spoke about that, prioritizing crime suppression instead of crime rehabilitation and crime prevention. Instead of preventing citizens from becoming criminals, this PNM administration has taken the opportunity to use crime, use crime as a money-making enterprise to
fill the pockets of friends and financiers.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. R. Charles: Millions paid to transport prisoners to court.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6) please.

1.15 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes, again, Member you clearly know what you are doing so I would like you to retract and again say over please.

Mr. R. Charles: I retract.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Put it across appropriately.

Mr. R. Charles: Yes, I retract. Millions paid to transport prisoners to court. Millions paid in briefs exempt from procurement oversight, but Vision on Mission, a programme for rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners, ex-prisoners, delinquent youth and deported nationals got a cut in their allocation by $1.5 million; unconscionable.

At some point, the Government must realize that it is a waste of resources, a waste of human capital, a waste of time and a waste of money to focus so wholeheartedly and short-sightedly on arrests. The Minister spoke about arrests in Guanapo. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to make the point that we in a law-abiding society we look at convictions not arrests. You cannot have a tonne load of arrests and zero convictions and call that performance.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles: 4H clubs, $50,000 but $270 million to the SSA. Police youth clubs $1.5 million, but you could find money for the SSA. Mr. Deputy Speaker, my portfolio includes foreign and CARICOM affairs.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: You have a portfolio?
Mr. R. Charles: All of these national security failings—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, thank you Members.

Mr. R. Charles:—have resulted in a global image crisis for Trinidad and Tobago. The damage this country has caused to our global image is irreparable. After being gifted with the President of the United Nations General Assembly, our Prime Minister goes to this year’s UN General Assembly and tells the world that we have mass killings in Guanapo in Trinidad and we are depending on the US to pass legislation to stop guns from arriving on our shores. Somebody needs to tell our Prime Minister that stopping guns from coming into our country is a responsibility of his Government—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles:—to ensure that there are operational scanners at Port, not we are buying or we allocating, but they are functioning. Somebody needs to tell our Prime Minister and the Minister of National Security that they need to get our coast guard operationalized 24/7 to stop the guns, arms, ammunition, from coming into our country.

The Prime Minister appeals to the US, the United States’ Executive which cannot pass laws requiring background checks for citizens purchasing military grade assault rifles in the US. You—they cannot pass background checks and you want that same government to pass laws to stop guns from coming here? Dr. Rowley’s request showed a poor appreciation of the stranglehold which the National Rifle Association has on the United States domestic politics, and even the Supreme Court regarding the Second Amendment of the US Constitution. Dr. Rowley fails to realize as I said before, it is our job and our job alone to secure our
borders. You cannot outsource our porous borders to the United States. It is our responsibility as an independent, proud nation.

Other factors affecting our global image: The United States in their latest travel advisory updated July 17, 2023 downgraded Trinidad and Tobago to level three. Hear what they are telling their citizens:

“Reconsider travel to Trinidad and Tobago due to crime.”

**Mr. R. Charles:** They are telling their citizens, in other words, do not come to Trinidad and Tobago because of the ineptitude of the Minister of National Security. The Trinidad rated Tier 2 in the US, Trafficking in Persons Report set to be further downgraded to Tier 3 next year. Now the Minister told us that he is taken action, and he is hoping that we would not be downgraded. I wish him well. But the US is calling for convictions, not arrests. The World Population Review in 2023 lists Trinidad and Tobago as having”

“...the sixth-highest overall crime rate in the world”
— and the 12th highest murder rate with their reports of 12 Saudi diplomats allegedly robbed in Port of Spain—thanks—in July 2023 while returning home from dinner. And the media keeping this quiet. Is it true I ask, is it true? Yes or no that four Saudi diplomats were robbed in Port of Spain in July this year?

Trinidad and Tobago flagged for police impunity, treatment of asylum seekers corruption and trafficking of persons as areas of major concern in the US State Department 2022 country report on Human Rights Practices. Is what the world is saying about us. This is not Parliament where you could get up—Standing Order, whatever and silence, you cannot silence the US State Department. Trinidad and Tobago is still on an EU list of non-cooperative jurisdictions for tax purposes as a tax haven. That hurts Mr. Deputy Speaker,
because my I was on the subcommittee where we asked the Minister of Finance, tell us all that we need to get off the EU blacklist; all that you need. He promised us four pieces of legislation. We supported the four pieces of legislation, and today we are still on the EU blacklist for tax evasion.

Denmark terminated its double taxation agreement with Trinidad and Tobago in December 2021, Denmark. Norway, tax treaty with us will take effect—their termination of their tax treaty with us will take effect in January 2024. I just make the point that Norway is not part of the EU. But these countries are saying there is something wrong in the state of Denmark in Trinidad and Tobago. You cannot fool the EU. The European Commission, here this, issued Trinidad and Tobago with a red card for being a non-cooperating country in the fight against illegal unreported and unregulated fishing. This was an escalation of the yellow card that Trinidad and Tobago received in 2016. Not when we were in power, not when the Peoples Partnership was in power. 2016 they came in, 2017 we got struck off the EU—we were put on the EU watch list 2017, a year before—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member you have approximately two more minutes of your initial speaking time.

Mr. R. Charles: Uh-hmm.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You have an additional 10, you care to avail yourself?

Mr. R. Charles: Yes I will.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. R. Charles: Thank you. Yeah. Both the EU blacklist and the red card and the yellow card by the EU Commission was given when the PNM was in government. You know what hurts Mr. Deputy Speaker, about this red card? You know what hurts is that Trinidad and Tobago has a judge who served on ITLOS,

UNREVISED
that is the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. And this judge is a world
renowned expert in drafting the required legislation to remove the red flag. But
this Government does not like competence, they do not like professionalism—
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles:—they do not like intellectualism, they do not like performance
so, they ignore this expert and traditionally Trinidad has always had—we were
world renowned when it came to the Law of the Sea. Lennox Ballah, Lennox
Ballah introduced ITLOS. We were so renowned at the UN that whenever we put
up a candidate for ITLOS as a judge in ITLOS, a Member of the ITLOS, they were
unopposed—unopposed.

When Lennox Ballah died he was replaced unopposed by a Trinidad judge,
Justice Anthony Lucky. He was replaced. You know what, ITLOS came up two
years ago, two or three years ago for re-election. We did not have—did we? No
we did not have—we refused to put up a candidate. So that whole expertise that
Lennox Ballah and those gentlemen of yesteryear, that excellence that they
bequeathed to this Government has now gone, has now been abandoned. And
today we are on a red flag, a red flag for illegal unreported and unregulated fishing.

So we have with Barbados with flying fish we should be setting the
benchmark laws that the world should be referring to. But under this PNM
administration, everything is going into disrepair and abandonment, everything.

One thing this Government can do well, and proficiently, is spend money
and reap no tangible benefits. They spent 3.4 on a regional crime symposium in
April 2023. No anti-crime plan has come out of the discussions, no reduction in
murders, no measurable reduction in murders or other crimes since the symposium.
And if you ask them about it we will get a list of talk but they would not tell you
Mr. Charles (cont’d)

that because we had that conference, the murder rate declined by 10 per cent. And by the way, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Jamaica, this year has a 12 per cent reduction in the murder rate, they could speak to actual measurable reduction. We are holding fast and hoping that it remains at the same level and we all keeping our fingers crossed as citizens of this country. They bribed CARICOM heads by meeting all expenses for the symposium.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I would prefer a different word please. Withdraw I would prefer a different word.

Mr. R. Charles: A different word for a day?

Mr. Young: Bribing.

Mr. R. Charles: All right.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You said a word there.

Mr. R. Charles: All right.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I would prefer.

Mr. R. Charles: They agreed to pay all the expenses of the CARICOM heads. I know when we go to conferences at the UN and wherever, we pay our expenses, we pay our own hotels and whatnot. Why should the taxpayer be paying for others to come and attend a conference that we are hosting? It means that it is not important, we have to supplement it. Even though Trinidad and Tobago hosted the CARICOM Golden Jubilee Celebrations in July 2023, at a cost of approximately $9 million and the 2023 Commonwealth Games, which were estimated to cost more than $35 million. Our internal national image is one of a crime-infested country that is on everybody’s blacklist, and everybody’s Tier 2 watch lists and when we talk about this, they say we are unpatriotic. I want to make the point that we are as patriotic as anybody. When the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries
said that he went on numerous conferences, numerous conferences to advance the energy interests of Trinidad and Tobago, and he went to eight and 10 and whatnot in the United States. What he is not telling us is that he as Minister of Energy and Energy Industries received $809,899.53 in per diems, between October 2015 to September 2022. If you are patriotic donate that to the Trinidad and Tobago Children’s Life Fund. Do that.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles: And these per diems paid in US currency, our Prime Minister got $1.5 million between 2015 to 2022 and we wonder why there is a forex shortage in Trinidad and Tobago.

1.30p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we paid $999,000 to buy 20 wooden ladders for the fire service at $50,000 each—

Mr. Hosein: What?

Mr. R. Charles:—$50,000 each—

Mr. Hosein: For a wooden ladder?

Mr. R. Charles: A wooden ladder. And we were told that the wooden ladders are needed for high voltage overhead lines, and we only got that because a citizen, a patriotic citizen asked a FOIA. Let me tell this Government something, San Francisco Fire Department makes its own wooden ladders.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Charles: Why is it everything that this PNM—this administration touches, it is riddled with question marks, it is riddled with questions that require that would make you want to feel that something is wrong “in the state of Denmark”. And this contract for the 20 wooden ladders was $999,000, under $1 million; you know
the reason for that, under $1 million—900—50—

**Mr. Hosein:** [Inaudible]

**Mr. R. Charles:** Well, I want to tell the Government on that side, I will make the wooden ladders for $10,000 so we will save $40,000.

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

**Mr. Hosein:** [Inaudible]—has wooden ladders.

**Mr. R. Charles:** Excuse me?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again, no—Member, please, you will have your opportunity to enter the debate, please. Let us not do it that way.

**Mr. R. Charles:** Yes. I want to make the point, this last point that this administration—four minutes—this administration has benefited from work done by the previous government. This PNM had benefited from work done by the Member for Siparia when she was Prime Minister in 2013 and when I was the TT ambassador to the UN; all of the work done by a previous administration to ensure TT’s current position as President of the UN General Assembly. This diplomatic success has fallen short because of the myriad of embarrassments and downgrading and poor ratings that we have endured because of this PNM administration, led by the Member for Diego Martin West.

Conclusion: under this PNM administration, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago now feels like a warzone, a battleground, a place that gives us no hope, a place we can no longer recognize, a place which unfortunately some citizens are beginning to consider the inconceivable, leaving sweet Trinidad and Tobago. We heard it from the lady who was dragged out of the bank and taken, a US—and beaten and kicked, and she said, as a dual citizen, she is not coming back to Trinidad and Tobago. A Venezuelan father of the one-year-old baby who was
shot a few weeks ago, you know what he said, Trinidad—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. R. Charles:**—and Tobago was no better than his homeland of Venezuela now. “Dat is where we reach.” This is not the UNC talking. This is the world, this is Venezuelans in Trinidad, and this is everybody, citizens who are dual citizens are saying she is not coming back to Trinidad. That is where “we reach”, but, as they say, “time is longer than twine”, this PNM administration is in departure lounge.

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

**Mr. R. Charles:** As Brook Benton says in his famous song, “What goes up must come down”, and he goes and he ends his song by saying, “It’s just a matter of time”. I thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the Member for St. Joseph.

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

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I rise to make my contribution. Mr. Deputy Speaker, before I begin, may I sincerely recognize and thank the hon. Prime Minister for his leadership of Trinidad and Tobago. May I also sincerely thank the constituents of St. Joseph, whom I love dearly, for having me speak on their behalf in these hallowed Chambers. It is an honour and privilege which I cherish. May I also take this opportunity to recognize the Minister of Finance, who I believe is probably the longest serving Minister of Finance in Trinidad and Tobago, for his excellent stewardship of our economic fortunes over the past eight years.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And finally, may I also thank and recognize the Minister of Planning and Development, the hon. Penny Beckles-Robinson—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—for the work being done on the PSIP project. Without these individuals, Trinidad and Tobago would not have come through the battles of the last eight years well.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a tragedy of epic proportions that I have to speak after the Member for Naparima because of three major issues which he raised. And we keep saying, words have consequences, and the international community listens to us, whether we are in Opposition or in government, and we cannot be accusing CARICOM Prime Ministers—

Hon. Member: Of freeload­ing.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—of being capable of being bribed to come to a conference.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Your words, Member, will go out to every single CARICOM Prime Minister.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. For the records, it was retracted, so again—

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—I would like you to just retract it and you can say however you would like to, please.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, Members, I have ruled.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you.
Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have ruled.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I withdraw it—

Mr. Al-Rawi: But the stain of the context—

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—but the stain of that context will carry, and I leave that here.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Why would you do that? Why would you do that to Trinidad and Tobago?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: They “doh” care, unpatriotic.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members! Members!

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: The other thing, he spoke disparagingly of the hon. Prime Minister’s recent contribution at the United Nations. I was there, together with the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, the hon. Amery Browne, and also Minister Penny Beckles-Robinson, and I sat in the Chamber, and there was no prouder moment for anyone to be there to see their Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago making his contribution and above him is a Trinidadian in the chair.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We may never see that again in our lifetime, but according to the UNC, that is a bad thing.

The last thing that I want to—I do not want to waste too much of time on the contribution but, you see, this has to be said.

Mr. Gonzales: True.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: The Member was talking about, why does somebody not contribute to the Children’s Life Fund? Do you know your own political leader on exiting office stopped contributing to the Children’s Life Fund—

UNREVISED
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping and crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members—

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: —and gets the same salary as a pension?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, Members.

Mr. Al-Rawi: [Inaudible]—Prime ministerial salary.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please, both sides.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: So I just do not want to waste my whole time—

Mr. Al-Rawi: That is the hypocrisy of this.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: —talking about that. That is what you call hypocrisy.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to talk to my colleagues opposite because all 41 of us, we hold the fate of 1.4 million people in our hands. I want to speak to the Opposition Members, my colleagues on this side. I also want to speak directly, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to all those persons listening to us on radio, viewing on the Parliament Channel. I want to speak to every family, every public officer, members of the protective services, all teachers, taxi drivers, food vendors, and everybody, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Baha’i, all people who make up this mosaic, this wonderful place called Trinidad and Tobago, because as Minister of Health—and I want to thank the Prime Minister for his continued confidence in having me as his Minister of Health.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We want to form a partnership with everyone as we look forward to living better and healthier. And let me say from the onset, we are committed to the continued service delivery and the modernization of our health
care system.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is well known, and it needs repeating, that we have four priority areas moving forward in health: one, the conversion of our blood collection system to a true voluntary system; two, the attainment of our 95-95-95 targets for HIV AIDS by 2030; three, the continued decentralization of mental health services; and, four, the number one issue facing the global health community and all of us, regardless of whether you are red, you are yellow, it does not matter—that issue, the issues of non-communicable diseases, which we call colloquially in Trinidad and Tobago, sugar and pressure.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in an effort to change the culture in Trinidad and Tobago, we on this side are firmly focused on the principles of universal health care, which says that basically an individual, especially those who are financially challenged, should have health care services available from birth to death. To accomplish that, one of the principles of universal health care is primary health care, where persons who come in contact with the first level of services in the health care system, that is our health centres, that is where the action is as opposed to having them in a hospital bed. As my contribution develops, it is going to be developed on the premise that we believe in universal health care, especially for the most vulnerable; and, two, a focus on primary health care at our health centres.

To this end, we are focusing on property, all our 105 health centres. Today, I can report to this Chamber that 69 of our 105 health centres have been refurbished, some of these are Toco, Blanchisseuse, Rio Claro, Brothers Road, Petit Valley, Las Cuevas, Brasso Seco, St. Helena, Debe, Indian Walk, Tabaquite, Cedros and Pleasantville, just to name 13 out of the 69. So that is the property, then comes the people; these are the people who work in our health centres,
dedicated nurses, dedicated doctors, cleaners, records, pharmacists, and so on, and finally the process by which we help those in need of health care.

Our NCD focus in Trinidad and Tobago was brought into the full public glare with the 2007 Port of Spain declaration, first brought about by the late Prime Minister, Mr. Patrick Manning. And I think the world owes him a debt of gratitude for that because he put the issue of NCDs, sugar and pressure, before it was vogue to do so—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—and that found its way onto the United Nations agenda. And as I speak to all of us in this Chamber, as I speak to people on radio, as I speak to the taxi drivers, as I speak to people in the maxis, red band, green band, yellow band, wherever you are, ask yourself a question; I am sure you know a loved one who has had a stroke, died of a heart attack, who has had a limb amputated. And, again, I ask Mr. and Mrs. Trinidad and Tobago, let us join together under the banner of wellness because that is what we are pushing now. And what is wellness? Wellness is just about adopting habits, habits that seek to improve your emotional well-being, your physical well-being, your mental well-being and your religious well-being. But what are we doing on the health component, we have taken what is called a life-course approach to tackling sugar especially, diabetes, and I want to start off by giving the population some information on where we are by tackling the issues of NCDs, sugar especially, before it becomes a problem, and we are doing that by tackling it in the womb when a baby is developing.

1.45 p.m.

And we instituted a programme in 2018 called the diabetes in pregnancy
programme, DIP, and at this point in time I want to congratulate and thank Prof. Surujpal Teelucksingh who was recently awarded a national honour. He worked with us since 2018 on this project as head of the DERPI foundation, otherwise known as the Helen Bhagwansingh Diabetes Education, Research and Prevention Institute.

Out of this project, which we pioneered for the first time in Trinidad and Tobago, this landmark project, we now have a screening programme, a national screening programme for our women who are pregnant where they are tested at least twice during pregnancy for diabetes. I am sure that my colleague from Fyzabad will appreciate this because he knows and he will tell you that a diabetic woman has a much higher risk of dying in pregnancy, that the baby growing in that environment has a much bigger chance of being born overweight and of having childhood diabetes. So if we do this, and we are doing it correctly, it means that for generations to come, our women are healthier, our babies are healthier.

To do this project, we have given out to date over 3,000 glucometers to mothers. We are supporting this with all the infrastructure, the hardware, the software, the computers, 13 mobile testing labs so women get their results as early as possible, and that is what this is doing. It is an excellent project and it affects all 41 of us representing women. Let us celebrate that.

Once the baby is born, we all know that breastfeeding is best. We have, for the first time in Trinidad and Tobago, a National Breastfeeding Policy, which was developed in 2020.

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

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** But policy is one thing, operationalizing—oh, I got it right for the first time. That is a word that always gives us trouble—but putting policy
into operations is different. Before the National Breastfeeding Policy, the rate of mothers in public hospitals breastfeeding their children, their babies, within 24 hours was 10 per cent. Do you know what it is now? Three years later, 95 per cent of women are breastfeeding—

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

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:**—within 24 hours of giving birth, and that includes women delivering by caesarean section. What that means is that we indoctrinate women into the habit of breastfeeding earlier and hopefully those babies can grow up to be healthier because everyone knows the saying, “Breast is best.” We want to encourage that.

To supplement that breastfeeding initiative, we are now getting our hospitals certified and accredited by PAHO with the breastfeeding hospital initiative. North-Central was the first one to do that, we hope to follow with Eastern, then South-West, then Port of Spain, and Tobago is in the mix. That is all part of the generational shift to do that.

The life course approach again, wellness, habits, diabetes in pregnancy, breastfeeding. What happens now to the child when they start to enter school? We are trying to create a zone of health in our schools. What have we done, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have banned the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages in schools. We have put sporting equipment in many schools, if not all, footballs, netballs, agility ladders, badminton, netball, the works.

**1.50 p.m.**

But we ask now for parents to come on board with us. Parents, you have a role to play to partner with us, to make sure that your children get a fighting chance of not becoming diabetic and obese by making healthy choices for them, in what
they eat, what they drink, what they consume and how they move under the banner of our TT Moves Campaign. So that is the womb to the newborn to the child.

Before I leave this, I want to talk about our women again. Mr. Deputy Speaker, our women, prior to this Government coming into office, were dying in childbirth in our nation’s hospitals at alarming rates. The maternal mortality ratio back then was about 70 per 100,000 live births. Do you what it is now, Mr. Deputy Speaker? It is 15.2. By now in the old days 10 women would have died in childbirth. Do you know how many women have died in 2023 in childbirth in Trinidad and Tobago? None.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Not one. But I have to hear the Leader of the Opposition read a part of her health speech written by you know who? And we do not need to call that person’s name, and he comes from that specialty but would not recognize the work done by our doctors, our nurses, our midwives.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And at this point in time, I would like to thank every healthcare worker from Mr. Shade in Point Fortin to the Chief Medical Officer in Port of Spain and everybody in between.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We could not have done this without you. That is what we have done. In giving birth, on coming into office our babies were dying in our hospital at the rate of 12 per 1,000 live births. Do you know what that rate is now, Mr. Deputy Speaker? It is 5.6, less than half. That means 80 to 100 babies a year are now alive because of this Government. But no recognition from my friends opposite—
Hon. Member: Poor thing.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Absolutely none. And we achieve maternal mortality rates and neonatal mortality rates, our SDG Goals, 12 years ahead of schedule, 12 years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is one last thing I want to talk about women’s health before I leave the issue of women’s issues. For the first time in Trinidad and Tobago we held our very first menopause symposium on 12th September, 2023.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: You did not tell me.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy—

Hon. Members: [Laughter]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We were in the retreat. [Laughter] It had to go ahead with me. I was due to speak. Mr. Deputy Speaker, our women especially our more mature women, our mothers, our sisters, our grandmothers cannot be left alone again to go through this phase of their live without help, without assistance and we must start to tackle the misinformation that is out there about menopause. We are doing this for our women whether that woman is a teacher, a policewoman, matters not, whether it is the Leader of Government Business who is complaining that she was there at the symposium but you come again, but our mothers who create life deserve this and we should be proud, not me, that Trinidad and Tobago is taking this signal step.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I continue with the live course approach to treating NCDs and sugar as we call it in Trinidad and Tobago, we have set up for our adults now, I went through children, newborns. I had the opportunity to engage Dr. Dave Harnanan and his team and I want to thank him
publicly. Dr. Dave Harnanan who some Members opposite may know, to understand once and for all the burden to this country of diabetes especially when it comes to limb amputation and toe amputations. Dr. Harnanan did a study going back in time called a retrospective study from 2029 to, I believe, 2023.

**Ms. Ameen:** 2019.

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** 2019, sorry. Thank you, St. Augustine, 2019 to 2023. Thank you very much. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in that time men and women of Trinidad and Tobago lost 1,776 limbs and or toes to amputations. That is a scary amount. But you know what was scarier about it? That over 91 per cent had complications of diabetes and 18 per cent were smokers and that tells you the benefit of stopping smoking and controlling their diabetes. These are people who have lost their mobility, their quality of life will suffer. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the most shocking part and it is first time we have data in the country. The average age for major lower-limb amputation was 63 years with a predominance of males, 61 per cent. So more men are losing their limbs and no differences observed between the two major racial groupings, East Indians or Afro-Trinidadians. But what is scary is what I am about to share with the public for the first time because we have the data for the first time. And I quote:

> It should be noted however, one-third of applications within this group were found to be within the ages 41 to 60 years old.

Age 41 to 60 is when people are in the prime of their life. One-third of 1,700-odd amputations are in that age group. They cannot play football with their children again. Think about it. These are young adults. So what have we have done? And the MP for Cumuto/Manzanilla was asking, what are we doing for young adults with diabetes? Well, this is what we are doing. We have started up a diabetes
transition clinic. We are pioneering it at North Central RHA where we target young adults between the ages of 16, 17 up to about 24, to make sure that we inculcate good habits in them before they reach 41, so that they do not lose a leg.

Another scary statistic is that the data shows that 68 per cent of those who lose a limb came into our hospitals as walk-in patients. That is, they waited at home trying herbal remedies and bush remedies and then it does not work, they walk into a hospital, it is too far gone and they lose a limb. I am urging all of us as MPs, I am urging every citizen listening and viewing, take advantage of the government service which is free, which is excellence and which is First World to treat your diabetic foot ulcer. That is what we are doing to treat this scourge of diabetes.

Our goal with amputations is to reduce the rate of amputations by about 20 per cent in about two to three years but we can do it. To do that we have set up diabetes wellness centres. Now again, I want the population to focus on the word “wellness”. What does wellness mean? It means habit change. It does not mean taking more medication. It means everyone, families developing those good habits that lead to good health which are, slow down. I am not saying stop it. Slow down on drinking the black sweet drink, “nah”. That is poison. Slow down on all the fast foods. Have it occasionally. Invest in some more water and walk a little bit. Three simple habit-changing remedies.

But the diabetes wellness centres, I want to explain briefly what it is. Every diabetic should know what their HbA1c level is. I am not going to go into the science behind it. It is basically a three-month analysis of how been controlling your blood sugars. We use a cut off of eight. We enrol you into these specialist clinics where you have access to all sort of specialists including foot care. We
keep you there and you only leave those clinics after you get two readings eight and below over a six-month period. But we do not release you to go back home to the same bad habits. You go back now to your primary health care clinics which I spoke about earlier. What are the success we have been having so far?

Patient one admitted with an HbA1c of 12 was then discharged with a HbA1c of 6.1, total control and we hope the habit sticks. Patient two, admitted with HbA1c of 8.2, discharged with 7. Patient A admitted with an HbA1c of 15.6 is now down to 12.7, but we cannot release that person yet because our threshold is eight, so we have to keep on working with that person. That is a limb we can save. That is a heart attack we can save. Patient B admitted with 15.8 and later has come down to 10.6. So these are the types measurable results, data-driven analytics that we are using now. So the study done by Dr. Harnanan of 1,776 amputations between 2019 and 2023, we can have a positive impact. I hope to report by the end of the year to this country and hopefully by the next year’s budget that we have started to achieve those targets but this is the first time we have collecting that data. So that is what we are doing for sugar.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now turn to the issue of hypertension. Hypertension and its associated cardiovascular disease is one of the major killers in Trinidad and Tobago. We must get our population to manage their pressure better by reducing salt in-take, by exercising more and so on. To that end, we instituted with the help of PAHO and let me thank PAHO right now, something called the HEARTS programme which we started in 2019 with five health centres, then we escalated it in January 2020 to 30 sites and June 2022 to all of 105 sites; even this being done during the pandemic.

The HEARTS programme is one where take the hypertensive in hand, just as
we are doing with the diabetes wellness centre and showing you the benefits of self-management. Hypertension and cardiovascular disease is one of the major killers in Trinidad and Tobago and around the world. We have achieved a rate of 37 per cent of persons in enrolled in the heart programme with control hypertension, controlled pressure which is 140 over 90. That is the cut off that we use but we need to do more.

Trinidad and Tobago—I was honoured when I went to New York with the hon. Prime Minister and Mrs. Beckles-Robinson, Minister Amery Browne. We were one of two countries together with Ghana invited to speak at the launch of the first world hypertension report. That was a signal honour, not for me, but for Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** The aim of the global hypertension movement is to get in any country 50 per cent of your population controlled. Even if one goes to the report you will see it is estimated that in Trinidad and Tobago we are at 21 per cent controlled, that is both public sector and private.

**2.05 p.m.**

The 37 per cent I spoke about are just those enrolled in the HEARTS programme. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I speak to all of us, as I urge the population to manage your pressure, come in to our clinics, go to your private provider, not a problem, but just get your pressure consistently below 140/90. That will reduce the amount of strokes we have in Trinidad, cardiovascular accidents. To help us do that we recognize that San Fernando is in need of a cath lab. I am happy to tell the country that, after some delay, and the delay was mainly due—we are doing this through the Austrian Government. The Austrian Government had some rearrangements of
their Ministries, not Ministers, and the cath lab project was shifted from one Ministry under the Austrian Government to another one. So it took some time.
The Austrian High Commissioner was down here in July of this year from Colombia. We were able then to fast-track the project. It has now been put on to the agreement that we have with the Austrian Government. I took the note to Cabinet in August and the project has been approved; $13 million-odd I think has been allocated in this year’s PSIP to get that San Fernando Cath lab up and running, hopefully within the next fiscal. That is what we are doing because we need more categorization capability in Trinidad and Tobago. So that is what is happening. And you see, I keep telling people, whenever I speak at functions I always ask everybody, show me—put your hands up. Anybody knows somebody who had a stroke, a leg amputated? Almost half that crowd will put their hands up. It is a crisis that we have to deal with, but we need people now to buy into this, and I am hoping that we can get that going.
In setting up the diabetes wellness centres in the same way I spoke about Dr. Harrinanan and his team. I also want to thank Dr. Ian Hosein, Trinidadian working and living in the United Kingdom, for his work in helping us set up the diabetes wellness clinics. This I believe as we are getting the results now, as I gave you the results, will lead us to a place where diabetics are taking more responsibility for their care with the help of the government service, with the help of our dietitians, with the help of our diabetic nurses, with the help of our endocrinologist, with the help of the new way we are treating wounds and ulcers and foot ulcers. Let me make a plea. We all know—and diabetics please consult with your doctors—that you start to lose sensation in your feet because your peripheral nerves start to die out, and you will be out in your garden and your yard washing the car, gardening.
bare foot, and you damage the soles of your feet and you do not feel it because your nerves have died out. Correct?

Dr. Ragbir: Yes.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We encourage people when you are going outside wear something on your feet, but more importantly, if you know you are a diabetic, if you know you do not have that sensation in your feet, have a relative check your feet almost every single day, so that when you have that first break in your skin we could treat that infection before it becomes something more serious.

It is painful, I am sure, for a family to have someone who has had a toe amputated. Because I will tell you something, and the doctors here will know this. It starts with one toe, then it goes to a second toe, then it goes to a third toe, then it goes to the foot, then it goes to below the knee, then it goes to above the knee. We want to avoid that. And you know if we work together and we are sensitized to diabetic foot care we can make a difference. Our clinics are now equipped with monofilaments. I do not want to get technical again. The monofilaments, as the doctors will know, we just put something on your toes and the sole of your feet to see what sensation you have. So we can judge whether you have peripheral nerve damage. We want to catch you early. And I am hoping that the population that I am speaking to most sincerely, because as your Minister of Health, we have in the Ministry and our health centres, your best at heart.

One of the things we are doing at these diabetic wellness centres, in addition to eye screening, because we all know one of the complications of diabetes is blindness, haemorrhaging in the eyes and so on, foot screening, nutritional counselling, HbA1c testing. We are now giving you a different type of prescription. Not a prescription for drugs, not a prescription for Glucophage, but
we are now giving you exercise by prescription. We have to get moving. We have to get moving under the banner of TTMoves. Imagine that, in 2023 we have to give people exercise prescriptions. In the old days our mothers and fathers had to run us home because we outside playing football, cricket, pitching marbles bending down, skipping rope, whatever. Those days are done, and it is useless saying bring back the old time days, they are not going to come back. So now we have to do exercise by prescription. But just get people moving. It could be simple thing walking around your house, cobwebbing, stretching, mopping, sweeping, washing the car. But just get moving.

So I want to thank all our persons who are manning these diabetes wellness centres. We have one in Princes Town. Dr. Melissa Bachan is doing excellent work there. We have one in north central and Eric Williams, we have one in Diego Martin, Dr. Kegan Bhagan, doing excellent work there. We have one in Sangre Grande, his name escapes me now, and we have one in Tobago. But I am asking the population to partner with us. Partner with us by doing three simple things: Eating more fruits and vegetables. And the budget, as I tie it into the budget now, something which has been ridiculed by the Opposition with the green boxes, the grow boxes, because the cry is fruits and vegetables are too expensive. Well we could start to grow our own, and I plan to do so. Grow your own lettuce, grow your own tomatoes in these boxes. Take advantage of the budgetary allocation to help yourself develop these wellness habits.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, mental health is one of the most serious issues facing us. A book I was reading recently said that by the end of 2020 more research was being done into mental health issues of COVID rather than COVID itself. Even prior to COVID, mental health was a big issue in Trinidad and Tobago and around
the world. Modern living is stressful. Let us admit it. And it is not going to get any easier, because that is what modernity is bringing to us. Modern living is stressful. Our modern environment is stressful. We started the decentralization of mental health services some time ago because we felt that the old model of institutionalizing patients for their lifetime was wrong, was inhumane. We are not saying everybody should be out. Patients who need to be institutionalized on the advice of their doctors will be institutionalized. But everyone in mental health will tell you that too many patients were in St. Ann’s who did not need to be there. And I see my friend from Fyzabad nodding his head in agreement. That is the fact. And Cumuto/Manzanilla you know that. Because families saw it as a way of transferring the problem from the family to the health care system. Decentralization was spoken about since the 1960s in this country.

On becoming Minister of Health I took a Cabinet Note to decentralize mental health and to appoint a national director to help me with this. The same way we appointed the national Director of Women’s Health, big impact; NCDs, big impact; mental health, the patient population at St. Ann’s was close to a thousand persons. And when I visited St. Ann’s in my first term as Minister of Health I could not believe that you had people there who knew no home but St. Ann’s. We took a decision that patients who can be transitioned back to their community should do so, because best mental health practice will tell you the best place for those patients who are capable of being transitioned should be in their community amongst loved ones. And many of them can work. The patient population at St. Ann’s today is 576. That is what we have done. So close to 400 persons are being well managed with dignity.

But the issue of mental health is not only for the schizophrenic or the
depressed who need pharmaceutical intervention. It is about you and I, the teacher, the doubles vendor, who have situations that overwhelm us, and we need an outlet. We need a way to bring our issue, our personal issue, to somebody or some entity who can help us. To that we have partnered with an NGO, and I want to congratulate them, FindCareTT. FindCareTT is a listing of free, absolutely free, local mental health and psychosocial support services, including services for children and youth, suicide prevention. And let me tell you, the page that deals with suicide prevention is the most visited page on that site.

I could tell you, and this is a true story, I do not normally do this. I was in my constituency office last week Tuesday, my secretary comes. “MP, there is a woman here who wants to commit suicide and she wants to talk to you”. Now I am no counsellor. So I gave my secretary—I went on to the FindCareTT website and I scrolled down to the suicide hotline, I said, “Let her call this number”. I thought that was the end of the story. Forty five minutes later my secretary comes with the phone, “The woman wants to talk to you”. Trinidad and Tobago this is a true story. The women said, “Dr. Deyalsingh”. I said “Darling, I am not a doctor”. I said, “You could call me Terrence”. She said, “Terrence, I called the number, I got help, and I am in a much better place now”. That is what these hotlines do. This is a true story. But the issue of mental wellness also has to touch our teenagers, our youths, and what we are proposing to do is to target adolescents between—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member you have just about two minutes of your initial speaking time. You have an additional 10, care to avail?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.
Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We are targeting our adolescents between 10 and 19 under a chat line programme, and let me just read with your permission:

The chat line for youth would be launched in collaboration with UNICEF and the University of the West Indies Jamaica and UWI Trinidad and Tobago. This chat line would be run by post graduate students from the Department of Behavioural Sciences, supervised by an experience counselling psychologist. Overall, the chat line is expected to be an effective way to promote earlier intervention for mental health problems which can prevent death from escalating to more severe disorders.

Minister Ayana Webster-Roy this is for you.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Thank you very much.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: This is for you, not for you personally, but your Ministry which deals with children’s issues.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member remember, proper title or constituency, please.

2.20p.m.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: The MP for Tobago East, this is for the people that you serve and who you serve so brilliantly.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the last few minutes I have—so I have touched the health landscape. The Minister of Finance spoke at length about the hospital construction programme, I will not go there. But I do want to touch on a major initiative we have embarked on and that deals with the Port of Spain Central Block.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is the intention to put the Port of Spain campus in a
place befitting the capital city of Port of Spain. We have teaching hospitals in Eric Williams, fine; we do teaching in San Fernando, fine, but it is our intention from the proposal I am going to talk to the national community about now, in the last few minutes, to transform Port of Spain General Hospital and that campus. So I am now speaking to every MP that touches and concerns Port of Spain, but the wider population because you will benefit—into the premier teaching hospital in this part of the world—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—befitting its status of the capital city. What do I mean? We are not taking over or downgrading the teaching done in any other hospital, but this is going to be driven by Port of Spain in conjunction with the University of the West Indies, and they have already signed on to the project. All the RHAs have signed on to the project. We had a meeting on Saturday morning where we shared the details with them. And I want to thank Prof. Hariharan, the new Dean or the Faculty of Medical Sciences and Dr. Sandeep Maharaj—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—who is working with us on this project. This is going to be a place for medical education; this is going to be a place for scholarship; this is going to be a place for enhanced health care; this is going to be a place where our doctors, our nurses, our pharmacists and our allied health care workers, EMTs, can find the most up-to-date world class training and then fan out into the health ecosystem either here or abroad. It is going to drive innovation.

We hear about these young doctors who cannot find jobs and cannot be employed. It is because we do not have enough specialists and subspecialists, and I keep saying that. The UWI DM Programme currently has 20 specialists, 20
specialties, these are going to be incorporated. Nursing care, especially in the areas of accident and emergency, intensivist nursing, pediatric nursing. Pharmacy is not going to be forgotten. What is the way forward on this?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have already begun the discussions and I can tell the population as I come to them hopefully with more details in early January, step one, the formation of a joint committee which we spoke about on Saturday with all RHAs, and that committee is be developed by October 20, 2023, so this month. Step two, infrastructure review, because to be a premier teaching hospital you need certain infrastructure, you need teaching rooms, library access, lecture halls. So we are going to review the present UWI facilities at Port of Spain and develop an integration plan by November 30, 2023. And step three, development of a cooperative framework by December 31, 2023.

Our first intake according the offering will be in January 31, 2024, for medical oncology training, the DM Programme. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if Trinidad and Tobago—and if I have the backing of all of us this will redound to the benefit of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Trinidad and Tobago should be a center now as we have made it a center of excellence for maternal care and infant care, it will be the center of excellence for training. And I urge our young doctors to come on board because the opportunities that you may not be getting now, it is because we have enough young doctors. What we do not have enough of, and the doctors know this, you know, are specialists and subspecialists. We do not have enough pediatric cardiologists. We do not have enough nurses to talk about asthma. When an asthmatic child comes into an A&E we need more of them to do this. Pharmacy is
not to be left behind because pharmacy is evolving, past counting pills.

I recently spoke at the graduation ceremony for pharmacists last week Thursday and one of the points made is that pharmacists should be accompanying doctors on their rounds, because pharmacists are the experts in medicine, advising on what to use, what doses to use, what are the contraindications.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this vision for the Port of Spain campus to become the premier teaching hospital, supported by the teaching at north central, supported by the teaching in south-west, supported by the teaching in Tobago, will significantly enhance our reputation, not as a centre for treating people, but as a centre for training the next generation of health care professionals as they seek their place in the sun.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is my report to the country on what we have been doing and where we plan to go. In the last two minutes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I again want to thank the constituents of St. Joseph. I want to thank Minister Gonzales for the waterworks he is doing for me in Mt. Lambert right now, First Street, soon to expand to other areas of Mt. Lambert. I also want to recognize the work that he did to finally give a good water supply to the residents of Quarry Drive in Champ Fleurs, by doing two things: the booster pump at the Eastern Main Road, but changing the lines going right up to Knob Hill, and the people of Quarry Drive will know what I am speaking about. In the last year we would have opened the Caiman Community Centre, we would have paved the road there. We also opened the Maitagual Community Centre, for which I am grateful.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I close, I want to thank you for the privilege and honour of recognizing me as the Member of Parliament for St. Joseph and I wish all of us to remember that we serve one country, Trinidad and Tobago. And in the
words of Dr. Eric Williams, there is no mother Africa, there is no mother India, there is only mother Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

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

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the Member for Fyzabad.

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

**Dr. Lackram Bodoe (Fyzabad):** Thank you, thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2024) Bill 2023, the budget debate. First of all I would want to congratulate, I would want to thank the constituents of Fyzabad for giving me the opportunity to represent them in this august Chamber.

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

**Dr. L. Bodee:** And before I go further, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would want to congratulate the Leader of the Opposition for her excellent contribution—

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

**Dr. L. Bodee:**—showing that once again she understands the needs of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and with the policies that she would have advocated in her response to the budget, that she is prepared willing and able to move this country forward.

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

**Dr. L. Bodee:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to congratulate my colleagues who have spoken before me in this debate, some very heavy contributions from my colleagues: Member for Caroni Central, my medical colleague from Cumuto/Manzanilla, my colleague from Moruga/Tableland, and of course Pointe-a-Pierre this morning, very fiery, and the Member for Naparima.

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

**UNREVISED**
Dr. L. Bodoe: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened to the Minister of Health, I was taken aback a bit, a little bit in shock in terms of his contribution, but to say that there are two aspects to the health sector. And I want to say at the very outset, both as a medical doctor and as a Member of Parliament, that I do agree that the approach of health and wellness is important for our country. We on this side agree with the approach of primary health care and we understand that there are many of these policies that will benefit Trinidad and Tobago, will benefit the health of poor people. We know our healthy nation is a productive nation and we would be willing to support many of these measures, many of which were already started during our time in government between 2010—2015, and I will come back to talk a bit more about that.

But also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to make it very clear at the beginning that whilst all of these measures are important and while primary care is important, at the same time it is very important to recognize that while we are taking a preventative approach—

[Madam Speaker in the Chair]

And all of these measures that were outlined, at the same time there remains the issue of secondary care, the issue of treating with the problems that we see—as I welcome you, Madam Speaker—the issue of treating with the problems that we currently face, and that citizens of Trinidad and Tobago currently face in the health sector. And many of these problems in fact, are related to the complications of diabetes and hypertension, and I have a few suggestions I would want to make to the Minister of Health in my contribution and I hope that he would be kind enough to give them consideration.

But, Madam Speaker, again, before I get to that point I just want to address
some of the points made by the hon. Minister of Health, and again, he mentioned the Children’s Life Fund and I just again would want to thank the Leader of the Opposition then Prime Minister for initiating the Children’s Life Fund.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. L. Bodoe: I will say no more on that. And, Madam Speaker, with regard to the NCDs and so on, there are many points here I am in agreement with, but I will come back and deal with some of these with regard to the contribution I have prepared, and especially with regard to the new approach that is being suggested with regard to teaching and so on.

So, Madam Speaker, to get into the meat of my contribution, so to speak, soon after the Minister of Finance presented his budget last Monday one of my constituents called me to give his opinion on the budget. He called it “a four for three budget”. So, Madam Speaker, I sought clarification as to what he meant by this and he said well, you know in simple language the Minister spoke for four hours to give us $3. I suspect he was saying that the $3 referred to the increase in the minimum wage. But, Madam Speaker, I just make that point to show that this simplistic analysis of the budget reflects really how many citizens thought about the budget. You know, sometimes it is important when you are preparing for a contribution, you know, to listen to what your constituents have to say on the ground.

Madam Speaker, I will go into some of the issues directly. Many of the points that were raised by the Minister of Health—but before I do that I just want to say, again, if we look at the figures, the question really has to be asked over the last eight years with the approximately $50 billion that is being spent in the health sector, whether the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are getting value for money.
This is something that has to be asked, Madam Speaker, it is a budget debate and we always have to look for value for money when we discuss taxpayers expenditure. And the question really is whether they are getting value for money. And many will say that the answer is no.

Madam Speaker, the other issue here would be of that approximately $50 billion, about $35 billion has been allocated to the RHAs. And again, the question is being asked, is the public health sector better off than it was eight years ago? The Minister of Health, Member for St. Joseph, would have, you know, painted a very rosy picture, but it is really a picture. It is a futuristic picture of where we are aiming to go, but he has made no real effort to address some of the current problems that we are facing. And as we speak to allocations to the RHAs, again, there are certain issues that are arising within the RHAs in terms of the provision of services and in terms of infrastructure upgrades and so on.

2.35 p.m.

So, Madam Speaker, really and truly what is the status of the public health sector in Trinidad and Tobago? Let us take an honest look at the reality of the state of our public health sector. One of the biggest problem that we have currently is the access to timely public health care. This remains a major issue. Now, we know, Madam Speaker, that health care services in the public sector are free at the point of delivery. This is a given. But it is also important to understand that the timeliness of access is important because you can have free access but at the same time, if you have to wait a long time, then there can be implications to that. There will be complications and, of course, the situations where in fact it would not matter at all if there was a long waiting time, Madam Speaker.

So we still have the issues. You know, when I prepared for this budget
presentation, Madam Speaker, you know, I perused the previous contributions over the past three or four years in the health sector and I found that many of the issues that were raised and addressed, and so on, are still to be fixed in the health sector. So we still have the issue of long wait times for clinic appointments and surgeries. And if you have constituents who come to my office on a daily basis begging for help in this regard, you know, admittedly the Minister of Health, I must say, will assist in some instances when I send requests, but the question that has to be asked is: What happens to the other patients in the meantime, especially those who cannot access private health care?

So we still have an issue with long waiting times to see a doctor in accident and emergency departments; to get a bed in our public hospitals sometimes; to get a CT, an MIR and ultrasound investigations. And even, Madam Speaker, when the patients do have to get these investigations, you have a situation where it takes a long time to get the report. And this is an important factor that I thought the Member for St. Joseph would have addressed, because it is no point you are getting an investigation and then you get the result two months, three months later. It does not make any difference at that point in time and therefore, this is something that has to be addressed. And especially with the promise of this Government to include and incorporate technology, this is something that can be done in terms of reading MRIs, and CT scans, and generated reports and so on, and, of course, we have the issue of getting outpatient clinic appointments and getting surgeries. There is a long waiting time for that and again, that has come out of the COVID pandemic in terms of the promise.

You know, we were told that there was a parallel health care system, Madam Speaker, when in truth and in fact there was not a parallel health care system.
What we are seeing right now in the health sector is the chronic disease depth, which was outlined by the Seemungal report, and I believe this is what the Government needs to address in a very serious way.

Madam Speaker, the other issue that still remains with us is the issue of the shortage of drugs and supplies. This seems to be a recurring problem. And one of the things that I have raised in this Parliament with regard to drugs and supplies, Madam Speaker, there is a particular line Item in the budget, which I look at very carefully every time the budget is presented, and one cannot help but notice that from a high of $617 million allocated in 2015 under this line Item, this dropped to $252 million in 2022. And despite all of the attempted explanations to explain why there was this decrease, I am still not satisfied that this amount, this big difference, was supplemented over the years, especially from 2020 when that big drop was noticed.

I am happy to see that the figure for 2024, according to the budget documents, is now back to $574 million; not quite there, but closer to what it was in 2015 of $617 million. I just want to ask, Madam Speaker, whether this substantial increase now is to pay for the much needed drugs and other related materials and supplies. In fact, I want to ask you as well whether with this increased allocation, the public can now expect to have available a new diabetic medication, Farxiga, which also has a beneficial effect in not only lowering your blood pressure but giving good heart and kidney protection, something which the Minister was speaking about.

Madam Speaker, I also want to ask whether, with this increase in the allocation, renal dialysis patients will have access to a drug called Zemplar—Z-E-M-P-L-A-R—which has a bone-protecting effect. And I will come back and talk a
little bit about renal dialysis and chronic kidney disease. I really hope that this allocation will be to add new drugs to the health sector, make it available for patients, as opposed to servicing new loans, but I guess we will find that out soon enough in the next stage of this debate, Madam Speaker, in the Standing Finance Committee stage.

Madam Speaker, the other issue here that we often face, and we get this by way of complaints in the public domain, by way of media reports on many occasions, and this is regarding the lack of or the poor maintenance of medical equipment. Quite often you will have patients whose surgeries and so on might be postponed because they are told that the equipment is not functioning or it is broken down, and then they have to be given new appointments, and that is another story as to when they will get their surgeries. But let us look—if I may, Madam Speaker, let us look at how the budget addresses this issue by way of one example, and I will just look at the SWRHA, the PSIP allocation, which is under “Medical Equipment Upgrade Programme”, page 125 of the budget documents. I see here:

“Replacement of two…C-Arms for Occupational Therapy, three…Blood Gas Machines, two…operating tables, and twenty…vital signs monitors.”

You know, Madam Speaker, as one who has practised in the public health sector for over 20 years, I am always happy to see allocations for new equipment and upgraded equipment in the budget, but I also look very carefully when I look at this budget Item for allocations for other essential equipment that I know medical staff has asked for to do their jobs effectively. And I want to speak here specifically of the issue of something called the phacoemulsification machines—we call it a “phaco machine” for short—and these are required to do cataract surgery. Now, the Minister spoke a whole lot about the complications of diabetes
and so on, and what the Government intends to do to prevent the complications of diabetes but, Madam Speaker, cataracts is one of the issues that occur in the elderly. It is something that needs to be treated and there was no mention at all made of how the Minister and how the Government intends to deal with the backlog of cataract surgeries. And I speak only here of the backlog at the San Fernando General Hospital, the SWRHA.

If you were to just take that example, Madam Speaker—because from a newspaper report, and I can quote here, this is the 1st of July, 2023, the Trinidad Guardian:

“Cataract surgeries halted at San Fernando General Hospital”

And it tells us of that time of 200 patients were being—awaiting surgery, and surgeries were suspended because the issue has been that the two phaco machines—these are the machines that are important in terms of doing the cataract surgery to replace the lens. Those two machines are old. They are broken down and the SWRHA is in the process of trying to procure new machines. In the meantime, the old machines were repaired.

The doctors found they were not satisfactory or safe, Madam Speaker, and the doctors are entitled to not perform surgery if the machine is not safe and can endanger lives. But anyway, Madam Speaker, the point is that the tender was issued by the SWRHA for two phaco machines, with a deadline of August 25th. We are now in October and my information is that cataract surgeries have not yet resumed at San Fernando, which means that there is a backlog of cataract surgery. So the Minister comes here and says, well, okay fine, he wants to address the issues of the complications of diabetes, but yet here we are seeing a situation where what needs to be done, in terms of providing the resources, is not being done.
Now, the other thing that is of concern to me here, Madam Speaker, is that in addition to asking what is the status of the tender for these two machines, I want to ask here: Is it true that stakeholders at the San Fernando General Hospital are being asked to modify the specifications of this critical piece of equipment to facilitate a particular supplier? This is what I have been told, Madam Speaker. I am being told, reliably informed, that the delay in procurement of these two machines is because this is what is happening. So I just throw this out, you know, for an answer. And if I look at the SWRHA, PSIP allocation, I see no mention of a phaco machine under the PSIP for SWRHA.

So I am taking it that the Ministry of Health is taking it upon itself to procure these two machines and then disburse it to the RHA, but I leave that there, Madam Speaker. That is something that I hope can be answered in the fullness of the debate or otherwise, and I trust that the Member for St. Joseph will find a solution to this problem and very soon those patients who are waiting for their cataract surgery, that that service can be resumed and those patients will get their surgeries. So I will leave that there and I will move on.

Madam Speaker, whilst patients are waiting for this piece of equipment to be procured, what other recourse is there, from the budgetary point of view, from the allocation? What other access does the Ministry of Health have to deal with this? Well, there are a couple of programmes available to the Ministry and the Minister, and I speak of something called the External Patient Programme, there is something called the Waiting List Initiative and there is something called the medical treatment of nationals in institutions. These are all budget Items for which allocations are made by the Minister of Finance annually that allows and gives the Ministry of Health and the Minister of Health the leeway to deal with situations
like this.

In fact, this is why the External Patient Programme was developed under the People’s Partnership government, just for situations like this, Madam Speaker, so that you can outsource—

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

**Dr. L. Bodo**:—some of these procedures in a situation where the equipment is being procured and so on. So to what extent, I have to ask, have these programmes been used to bring relief to patients waiting on cataract and other surgeries? So let us look at this then, Madam Speaker. Has this programme being used? Let us look. And it is very worrisome here, Madam Speaker. If I just throw out one example, out of an Estimate of $9.7 million, which was allocated in financial 2023 for this programme—I am taking the waiting list for surgery as an example—only $700,000 was spent. You know, I had to read that twice, Madam Speaker, in the book. The books are saying—these books provided by the Minister of Finance and the Ministry of Finance and the Government—that out of an estimated—allocated, sorry, $9.7 million in financial 2023, only $700,000 was spent.

So the question has to be asked, you have patients waiting on surgery, but you have only spent $700,000 out of $9.7 million. So what happened to the long list of patients who are awaiting surgery? Why was this relatively small amounts spent in 2023? Is it that the funding was not released by the Ministry of Finance, Madam Speaker? I ask: Was it a capacity issue? Was it some procurement issue with private providers? So I think, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health, the Member for St. Joseph, owes it to the population to explain to his Ministry, while you have so many patients waiting for surgery, why the Ministry was only able to spend $700,000 out of the $9.7 million while those were left suffering for surgery.
That is just an example, Madam Speaker. I leave that there.

Madam Speaker, the Member for St. Joseph again spoke of all the nice programmes and policies that this Government was proposing but, of course, all of these programmes will require staffing. And again, I come to the issue of staff because this is an ongoing problem. This is something that creates a situation. Nothing can be done without the adequate and proper staffing. I will not go into the issue of nurses. I know my very experienced colleague, the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, dealt with some of the issues with regard to nursing shortages, but I just want to point out, Madam Speaker, and refer to a special report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago which examined the performance of this Government in the health sector between 2016 to 2021 with regard to our progress towards the SDG, Goal 3 target. Basically that is really to look at how we were looking at treating with mortality from NCDs and so on, and I will not go into detail in the brief here, Madam Speaker.

2.50 p.m.

But just to say, Madam Speaker, that a key finding of this report was this—and the key finding was that the provision of human resources needs strengthening to meet the demands of the public health care system. This is what this special report from—this report was done in conjunction with the WHO and the Ministry of Health. In fact, one of the worrying things about this is that the WHO recommendation in terms of staffing—and we have to look at staffing per 1,000 of population, this is how it is compared internationally—the WHO recommendation is 4.45 doctors and nurses and midwives per 1,000 population. And, Madam Speaker, it is very worrying to know that that point in time up to 2021 and I am sure it is no better now that in our situation, we have a ratio of one doctor, one
nurse and one midwife per 1,000 population. So it speaks to the tremendous challenge that we have in terms of providing staffing.

Madam Speaker, this very report goes on to say—and again it hits the nail on the head here in terms of saying that of approximately 17,682 positions directly linked to providing patient care across four RHAs, 37.6 per cent of the established positions were vacant at the end of 2021. So, Madam Speaker, the question really and again one would have expected and hoped that the hon. Member for St. Joseph would have come with some sort of plan to tell us about what the Government was going to do to address this shortage in the health sector.

Let me just examine this a little bit further, Madam Speaker, and I want to use data which was provided by the way of written answer to recent questions posed in this very Parliament, so it is information from the Ministry of Health, from the Minister’s own Ministry. So if you look at the positions. Let us look at the hospitals, let us look at Arima hospital and the Point Fortin hospital, new hospitals which the population now has access to but the question is whether the services that the population expects is being provided. Some of these figures were already mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition in her contribution with regard to doctors and nurses, but what about other situations?

If we just look at the Arima hospital, for example, if you look at positions for radiology: radiology, 59 on the establishment, only 35 filled; laboratory, 79 on the establishment, only 25 filled; supply chain management, six on the establishment, two filled; quality improvement, nine on the establishment, zero filled; HR and finance and so on and if we look all across, we see that there is a quite a deficit in terms of the staffing, not only for doctors and nurses but all the auxiliary staff that is required to provide a proper service.
Madam Speaker, the Minister alluded to the primary health care. Again, I want to say that we on this side, we support the initiative of primary health care. We understand it is important but talking about is not going to make it happen. And again if we look, this is another question, I have the written answer here which was provided, question to the Minister of Health and this question asked for a breakdown of staffing by different RHAs. And when I looked at the answers here and I looked at the Minister’s contribution and, you know, very airy-fairy and you know asking the population and so on to engage and embrace the ideas and so on. All commendable but what happens when we look at the reality.

And again, I will just quote examples. It is a big voluminous document, it is available, laid in the Parliament by way of answer to a written question, written response and if we take for example, the Eastern Regional Health Authority and we look at the category of district nurse, we see that of 45 positions, only 30 are filled. Why do I choose district nurses? Because these nurses are very important in the primary health care setting. MP for Cumuto/Manzanilla, correct yeah, they go out and they look after their patients and so on.

Again, if you go across the answers in this document, Madam Speaker, you will see some very critical categories. Midwives, for example, in the ERHA, 60 positions, only 12 are filled, and if we look at the other RHAs here, there are some very critical positions with regard to how primary health care will happen. And we see here that there is a critical shortage in terms of staffing with regard to all the RHAs. As I said, Madam Speaker, this document is available, I will not go into all of the details but the point that I am making is the staffing does not appear sufficient for what the Minister is proposing.

Madam Speaker, the Minister spoke about the staff and making Port of
Spain the centre of learning and so on, and spoke about the young doctors that are unemployed and made the point that we have a shortage of specialists and subspecialists. The point I want to make, Madam Speaker, is that you know for you to become a specialist, you have to go through a period of training. You do an internship, your expectation in the course of training is that when you finish your internship, you occupy a position called a house officer in the public sector which is where you get your experience and of course, after becoming a house officer, you become a registrar and then you can become a specialist.

So the point about it is how are you going to get these specialists? Short of importing them from abroad, which can also be a challenge. And the way it has traditionally been done until 2015/2016 when the Government changed is that interns were automatically guaranteed a position as a house officer in the health care system and they fell into a pattern of training, but that is no longer happening. Instead what is happening, Madam Speaker, is that you have short-term contracts which create a lot of uncertainty and it depresses the Morales of doctors as we saw, and of course it impacts negatively on the training of these recently graduated doctors.

Madam Speaker, we have to note that millions of taxpayers’ dollars are spent annually to train these doctors and there are currently over 400 doctors, some of them having graduated as long ago as 2019, they are unemployed and therefore citizens are not benefitting from this investment of taxpayers’ dollars. So I want to urge the Minister to look at ways in which these young doctors can be meaningfully employed, Madam Speaker, as we go forward.

Now, Madam Speaker, the Minister, of course, spoke of the issue of maternal deaths and neonatal mortality. You know, Madam Speaker, as an
obstetrician myself, I am very happy for the state of affairs in the maternity sector, however, it would be remiss of me to not commend the then Prime Minister of People’s Partnership Government Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister at that time, for laying the foundation for these gains.

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

**Dr. L. Bodoe:** I think it is important to put that on the record, Madam Speaker, because under her leadership, a report was commissioned into the maternity services in 2011, following the unacceptable situation which the People’s Partnership Government met in 2010 in this area of the health sector. I want to say suffice it just to say that the Member for St Joseph acted quickly on the recommendations of this report when the Government changed and pregnant women and their babies are now reaping the benefits. Madam Speaker, we are happy for that, we are happy for that.

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

**Dr. L. Bodoe:** But, Madam Speaker, before I leave this issue, the Member spoke about maternal mortality, it is his favourite thing, it is my favourite thing too, I am happy but it shows how we can work across the board as governments and you can build on one platform. But I just want to speak about the issue of neonatal mortality. Neonatal mortality is with regard to babies, you know, how many deaths you have within the first few weeks after birth and if you were to listen to the Member for St. Joseph, Madam Speaker, you will think that somehow miraculously from 2016, these changes have happened.

But I have in front of me here a document, Madam Speaker, a UNICEF document relating to these figures for Trinidad and Tobago and I just want to read these figures into the record because I have and we are speaking here about
neonatal morality rate, NMR we call it and it speaks to deaths per 1,000 live births. And let us look at the figures, Madam Speaker: 2010, 14.4; 2011, 14.0; 2012, 13.6; 2013, 13.2; 2014, 12.8; 2015, 12.4. Madam Speaker, during the years 2010 to 2015, we already saw that there was a decrease in neonatal morality rates.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. L. Bodoe: Madam Speaker, again that speaks to the measures that were implemented and had started under the People’s Partnership Government.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. L. Bodoe: And those measures were so good and they were embraced so quickly by the Member for St. Joseph that the improvement continued and I am happy for that. In 2016, it dropped to 12; 2015 we left it at 12.4; 2016, 12.0; 2017, 11.7, 2018, 11.3 and so on and so on. So it has come down and again that is a sustainable improvement, I am happy to say that, Madam Speaker.

But, Madam Speaker, in addition to that platform which the Member for St. Joseph met and the Government met, this Government here would have met another sound platform on which to build and that is the Couva Hospital which was completed in 2015—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. L. Bodoe:—and not 2016 as erroneously reported in this budget statement here. I am not sure if the Minister of Finance corrected himself but I guess the report in the budget is what he was told but it was completed in 2015, August 2015 and the commissioning process for that hospital began in September of 2015. Of course the Government changed, it is another story. But I just want to say had the Member for St. Joseph opened the state-of-the-art when he took office, a lot more citizens would have benefited—
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. L. Bodoe:—and Madam Speaker, it is now history that this 230-bed facility was denied to the public until the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to open it in 2010 in a short space of two weeks.

Hon. Member: 2020.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. L. Bodoe: And, Madam Speaker, I will leave that there. I will leave that there. The people of Trinidad and Tobago will have to judge for themselves what happened 2016 and 2020 with this state-of-the-art facility while which they were denied and patients—it is a sad story, you know, Madam Speaker. Patients will be traveling in ambulances from the Couva District Health facility to go down to San Fernando to wait for a bed, right, and they were bypassing this brand new facility on the way. We leave that there, Madam Speaker.

So, Madam Speaker, I just want to come back briefly to the issue of the unemployed doctors, because I have some information which has come to me and I just want to ask again. I want to ask: What is the process for engaging these doctors? These doctors who have just completed their internship who have applied for house officer position, what is the process for doing this? And I want to further ask the Minister of Health, through you, Madam Speaker, to investigate claims that at the Arima hospital, contracts are being awarded to certain junior doctors ahead of those in line with longer service because they have friends in management and other high places. I was just told this, Madam Speaker, I am just asking the question. Surely this cannot be the policy of the NCRHA or indeed at any other RHA under this Minister’s watch. Or is it that the most senior administrator at the NCRHA does not have to report to the Minister? And I am just asking.
You know, and Madam Speaker, as I mentioned this and I mentioned at the Arima hospital, I am not sure if this is happening at the other hospitals, this thing that was dropped off, I mean it is worrisome. Discrimination is a claim here. We are being told here that the majority—and this is the COVID-19 junior doctors who were promised certain things for serving—and again I want to thank all health care workers who served during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

**Dr. L. Bodoe:** But, Madam Speaker, how are they being treated now by this Government? We are being told that the majority went from one-year contracts to locum contracts without any reasoning. What happens when you have a locum contract? You have no vacation days, you have less pay, you have no gratuity, you get no sick days, you are unable to get a loan, a mortgage and so on.

**3:05 p.m.**

So the promise of job security for those who dedicated their lives to the service of the country during the COVID-19, that promise of job security was never met, you know. And there is a claim of victimization and oppression at the Arima hospital. If anyone speaks out he or she would be transferred to another hospital or forced to resign. So, Madam Speaker, I want to ask the Minister to look at these claims. I am sure that under his watch this cannot be true.

Another thing is being told, Madam Speaker, is that the—and whilst the Minister is investigating these claims, I also want him to check into the allegation that senior staff are being paid for duties at the Arima hospital whilst the majority of major surgical cases and other cases are being diverted in the Eric Williams Medical Science Complex, Madam Speaker. So perhaps the Member for St. Joseph can look into this. I am sure that the Member for Arima cannot be in
agreement with this state of affairs with a hospital that is in her constituency, Madam Speaker. So, Madam Speaker, I will leave the issue of unemployed doctors, I have dwelled enough on that, but I just want to leave on one point today. The current situation reminds me of an analogy that a lecturer once made while I was a medical student. It stuck in my head with regard to the description of diabetes—

[Interruption]

Madam Speaker: [Inaudible]—the offending phone just go outside and get it under control.

Dr. L. Bodoe: So, Madam Speaker, thank you. So, Madam Speaker, the analogy—the definition of diabetes was starvation in the midst of plenty. And we are talking about diabetes here today, Madam Speaker, you know, indulge me. Starvation in the midst of plenty, what does that mean? When you have diabetes you have a lot of sugar in your blood but your cells are starved for sugar. So, you have starvation in the midst of plenty. So, Madam Speaker, this is exactly what we have in our health care system. Madam Speaker, an abundance of unemployed doctors in the country whilst patients starve for proper healthcare in our public institutions, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I want to come to the issue of governance in the RHAs. Because we mentioned, you know, we looked at the allocation in my introduction I looked at the allocations for the RHAs. There are substantial allocations to the RHAs every year. It amounts to the sum of $4 billion out of the approximately $6 billion that is allocated to the health sector. And I want to speak with—again to the issue of management, and the management issues at some odd—at the RHAs. But before I go on to that, Madam Speaker, I just want to note an anomaly—well I
should not say an anomaly. It is something that I have to go with here with regard to the allocations.

And I look at the allocations for the NCRHA for 2023 and 2024, and I notice, Madam Speaker, that there is a decrease of $139,643,600, decreased allocation to the NCRHA. And for the SWRHA, there is a decrease in the allocation for 2024 of $33,399,700. And I just want to ask again, if it is that you are looking at programmes and you are talking about doing this and doing that, Madam Speaker, and you have these decreased allocations to these RHAs, how does that add up? And again hopefully we will get some answers in the committee stage of this debate, Madam Speaker.

So what do I speak of? I just want to give two examples, and again this is important because these things affect patients, it affects members of the public, Madam Speaker. And I want to bring this up because I hope it is fixed, Madam Speaker, and I speak of the pile-up of the bio-hazard bags at the San Fernando General Hospital which was reported in the Express of the 28th of August 2023, and the Trinidad Guardian at the same time. And I want to ask the Minister if he can give us an update as to what is the status of the incinerator at the San Fernando hospital. Because, Madam Speaker, these newspaper reports, you know, an appalling situation where you had images of hundreds of bags of rotting bio-hazard waste lying in the compound of the San Fernando General Hospital. And in a press release, this SWRHA admitted to the problem, Madam Speaker. And their description, you know, the PR person must be well paid, because the PR person admitted to this situation where you had a stench, you had bags of all of this stuff accumulating on the compound, and in full view of the public Madam Speaker. And you know what is the explanation, Madam Speaker?
3.10 p.m.

And do you know what was the explanation, Madam Speaker? This is the explanation:

“‘The transient accumulation of waste that occurred due to some transitional staffing issues is currently receiving the attention of the Human Resources Department,’…”

Such was the disingenuous comment by the PR person for the SWRHA; was making light of a very serious situation.

But Madam Speaker, I want to ask, because I noted there was an article in 2014, which spoke of a new medical waste incinerator which was installed at the San Fernando General Hospital. I am very familiar with it, Madam Speaker. I was there as the Chairman of the SWRHA when that was installed. But I want to ask the Minister today, is it true that this state-of-the-art incinerator was allowed to fall into disrepair because of a lack of maintenance and failure to purchase parts by the SWRHA over the past few years? Sounds like a familiar thing you know, Madam Speaker; neglect of equipment, then it becomes a situation where it cannot be fixed.

I also hope that the Minister would, in some way, explain why the autoclave that was gifted to the Government and intended to replace this neglected incinerator, has taken over a year to become commissioned. In truth and in fact, Madam Speaker, whether this new autoclave has been commissioned and is now available to deal with this biohazard and waste material at the SWRHA.

The other issue of governance refers to the NCRHA. I want to draw attention to the power outage at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, as reported both in the newspaper and confirmed via press release from the Corporate
Communications Department of the NCRHA, Madam Speaker.

The NCRHA has a very good Corporate Communications Department. I see full-page newspaper ads ever so often, Madam Speaker, highlighting clinics, and so on; these walk-in clinics, and so on, very expensive ads. But one wonders whether this kind of money that is paid for the ads cannot better be used, in terms of dealing with issues, real issues, within the RHAs, Madam Speaker.

So, we are seeing here, where in July a major power outage was reported at one of the nation’s largest hospitals. And, by way of a media release from the NCRHA, the public was informed that the situation was caused by a malfunctioning transformer. As a result, load shedding was required, with resultant impact on services. Indeed, Madam Speaker, and this is where I became concerned. Current going, that is all right. I mean, but when you have to move eight ICU patients, when you have to transfer them from Mount Hope to the Arima Hospital, this is a serious thing, Madam Speaker. To move a patient from the ICU to the Arima Hospital, because of a power outage, that is a serious thing. Madam Speaker, I am told that somebody died on that night and that is currently the subject of a lawsuit. I cannot go into that further, Madam Speaker. But we are talking about a situation where a hospital, we have the power supply; an issue like this. In addition to that, Madam Speaker, a number of patients had their renal dialysis curtailed on that day. Several major elective surgeries were postponed because of a power outage.

So, Madam Speaker, I want to ask whether the Member for St. Joseph has received the incident report on this particular incident, Madam Speaker. But you know, rather than wait for the Minister, I looked at the budget document for an answer, Madam Speaker. You know, all these—
Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Fyzabad, your original time is now spent. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to complete your presentation if you wish.

Dr. L. Bodoe: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. L. Bodoe: So, Madam Speaker, I would just move on, just to ask whether this problem has been fixed. Because my perusal of the budget documents showed an installation of an automated load-shedding system for the electrical distribution system has been 15 per cent completed in 2023. But of note, Madam Speaker, is that in the 2024 budget nothing is mentioned of this automated load-shedding system at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex. Fifteen per cent completed in 2023, nothing in 2024. There is a kind of magical gap there, Madam Speaker. Perhaps, again, we might get some kind of answer at the next stage of this debate.

So, Madam Speaker, I want to move on quickly. I am happy to hear that for the—how many times, Member for St. Joseph, the San Fernando General Hospital Cardiac Catheterization Lab is being promised. Madam Speaker, this has been promised from 2016, every single year in this Parliament. I urge the population of Trinidad and Tobago not to hold their breath, Madam Speaker. But I live in hope. I live in hope.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. L. Bodoe: Madam Speaker, I have two pages here entitled, “The Saga of the San Fernando General Hospital Cardiac Cath Lab”. Because of time, I would not go into the details of the saga. I also have here two pages of answers to questions I posed in this Parliament since 2016, regarding the cardiac cath lab, Madam Speaker. But I just want to say that I hope that the people of Trinidad and Tobago
will finally get their cardiac catheterization laboratory and that will go a long way, Madam Speaker, to saving lives in Trinidad and Tobago.

And whilst I agree with the Member for St. Joseph, that the lifestyle changes are important, at the same time, there is a burden of heart disease, Madam Speaker, and there is a burden of kidney disease, which I will speak to briefly in a moment, Madam Speaker, that needs to be treated with as we go forward, Madam Speaker.

So, before I leave the issue of the cath lab, Madam Speaker, there is also something that bothers me. We do not have a cath lab. We have a high burden of cardiac disease. And, again, Madam Speaker, these figures jump out at me when I look at the budget documents. I had to ask, Madam Speaker, when I looked at the budget document, why, in 2022, only $5million was spent out of an allocation of $20million for something, for an Item, which is the treatment of adult cardiac disease, which comes under the PSIP. So again, you have the opportunity, you have the allocation to outsource these procedures, to outsource these investigations, because you do not have the in-house capacity. You are allocated $20million, but yet you only spend $5million. And I am sure, Madam Speaker, the question will be asked in the minds of the public: How many patients suffered? How many patients, perhaps, would have died whilst waiting for these very critical and important procedures, Madam Speaker?

So, I just want to say Madam Speaker, as I said, the Minister promised that it will happen in this financial year. It is a promise that has been repeated every year in this Parliament, in this budget. But I want to say, Madam Speaker, I want to put this Government notice that I will continue to advocate for this cath lab, not only in this budget—

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

---

**UNREVISED**
Dr. L. Bodoe:—but in the mid-year review of this budget, Madam Speaker. I will continue to advocate for this, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members:  * [Desk thumping]*

Dr. L. Bodoe:  Madam Speaker, if by some miracle those on the other side are still in government come the next budget, Madam Speaker, I again will continue to advocate.

Hon. Members:  * [Desk thumping]*  Dr. L. Bodoe:  But, Madam Speaker, the people of San Fernando were not given a cath lab, but they were given a $150million parking facility at the San Fernando General Hospital. And the irony of all of this, Madam Speaker, is that the free parking that was previously available for those relatives who had to come and wait long hours to look after their loved ones, now have to pay to wait. I say no more on this, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Member:  “They go dead in de cath lab.”

Dr. L. Bodoe:  * [Laughter]*  So, Madam Speaker, with the few minutes remaining, I want to come to a very important issue. It is something that is close to my heart, Madam Speaker, and that is the issue of renal disease and renal dialysis in this country, Madam Speaker. And again, I want to say we support the lifestyle changes but in the interim, you still have in the region of about 1,500 patients who require renal dialysis in this country.

So, Madam Speaker, again I have to agree with the Member for St. Joseph who, in a post-budget televised programme, noted that the NCD burden on this country is $6billion, when you look at the direct expenditure plus indirect cost or the lack of productivity. So, I think it is important that all measures to treat with this are dealt with. So, I am with the Government on this issue. We on this side, we are with the Government on this issue, Madam Speaker. I am very passionate

UNREVISED
about this, Madam Speaker, in terms of doing our bit to treat with the NCD burden. You know, Madam Speaker, I am 65 years old. At this age, I am not very—there are very few things which can excite me, Madam Speaker. I have seen a whole lot, I have done a whole lot. But you know, Madam Speaker, the issue, Member for St. Joseph, of treating with NCDs—I am on board with you for this, you know. I am on board with you. Because you see, this speaks to my heart, Madam Speaker. Forty years ago, I had to make a choice between becoming an obstetrician and gynecologist or becoming a public health specialist, Madam Speaker. I chose the previous. I am very happy. I am very satisfied for the 40 years I have practiced as an OBGYN. But I am excited about public health aspects because it gives you a chance to treat with the whole population.

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

**Dr. L. Bodoe:** In my specialty, it is satisfying, you deliver a baby; mother and baby are fine, and so on. It is good. But here we have to look at the whole population, together with the hat I wear as a Member of Parliament, Madam Speaker. So, I am with the Government on this issue.

Can you imagine my joy, Madam Speaker, when the Minister of Finance, in his 2022 budget presentation, announced a national centre for the treatment and management of renal disease? That is here in black and white in the 2022 Budget Statement, Madam Speaker. This was part of a promise to deliver centres of excellence in the health sector; big and bold promise, Madam Speaker. But, Madam Speaker, lo and behold in the 2023 Budget Statement, the national renal center disappeared. You know, Madam Speaker, with a wave of the “Imbertian” wand—**Hon. Members:** What!

**Dr. L. Bodoe:**—as someone described it, Madam Speaker, the item disappeared.
But unlike the recurring decimals of the TTRA, the property tax, the gaming commission, and so many others, this budget Item is yet to reappear, Madam Speaker.

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

**Dr. L. Bodoe:** Madam Speaker, this is a sad blow for those who suffer with chronic renal failure and require renal dialysis and comprehensive care, Madam Speaker. **Hon. Member:** He is Voldemort.

**Dr. L. Bodoe:** Madam Speaker, I want to speak briefly about a special programme called renal dialysis, which is in the PSIP, Madam Speaker. And you know, again I want to ask the question, because this weekend, Madam Speaker, as we speak about kidney disease and renal dialysis, Madam Speaker, there was a very sad situation, which occurred, Member for St. Joseph, at the San Fernando General Hospital this weekend. Where on Saturday night, a 49-year-old young, I should say 49 years young woman with renal failure was admitted to San Fernando Hospital. In the evening, after hours, she required something called emergency renal dialysis. Her creatinine was 15. The Member was talking about the HbA1c. He is familiar with some of these terms; 15 is very high. You are in kidney failure. You require emergency dialysis. And do you know, Madam Speaker, that was not available at the San Fernando Hospital as an emergency? Sadly to say, Madam Speaker, the patient demised the next day. I am not saying that that was the only reason for the demise, but Madam Speaker, I am asking the Member for St. Joseph to ask those in charge at the SWRHA and—I cannot speak for the other regions—why it is, with so much expenditure in the health sector, that that facility is not available to patients on an emergency basis? And I think that is something that the Minister should look at, Madam Speaker.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. L. Bodoe: So, Madam Speaker, I just want to close because we have a lot. There is a lot in the public domain about renal dialysis.

But I also want to ask about the state of our renal transplantation service. Because, Madam Speaker, the ultimate cure for many with end stage renal failure is a kidney transplant. And you know, Madam Speaker, I just want to quote—

Madam Speaker: Member, you have about 30 seconds remaining.

Dr. L. Bodoe: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I just want to say that I want to encourage all citizens to look at this article in today’s Express:

“Save a life; become an organ donor”

—with regard to becoming a donor, and sign up for the donor transplant programme. Madam Speaker, with those few words, I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Tunapuna.

Mr. Esmond Forde (Tunapuna): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to enter this debate, the Appropriation Bill, 2024. Before I start my discourse, the Minister of Health just mentioned to me, before coming to start my discourse, that after such an excellent health and medical discourse on the stewardship within the last year, the most that could have been said by the MP for Fyzabad, is about generators; about little issues of operational and maintenance, which the Minister of Health told me that were dealt with in a speedily fashion. No deaths were lost, no lives were inhibited as we continue along.

You know, other than that, it is—the RHAs and the Ministries would have handled all those issues with the necessary approvals in going forward. You know, other than that, I will get straight into my contribution, Madam Speaker.
3.25 p.m.

As I stand in this honourable House again for the eighth time in order to contribute to the 2024 budget debate, I will like to thank the Almighty God for life and for the opportunity to represent the constituents of Tunapuna.

Congratulations must go out to the Minister of Finance, you know, for his sterling contribution with regard to research, presentation, and the documentation with regard to the Budget Statement of 2024. Madam Speaker, the theme, Building Capacity for Diversity and Growth, has aptly described the positioning of our country at this time, Trinidad and Tobago, in the developmental process and the journey towards Vision 2030.

Straight into the batting: Minimum wage, right, the Minister of Finance has given us an increase. People may say $3, it is a small increase, but it has gone from $17.50 to $20.50 per hour. Madam Speaker, 190,000 persons will benefit as a result of the minimum wage increase. Again, I represent the constituency of Tunapuna. Many of the individuals who qualify for this minimum wage increase in Tunapuna will greatly accept it, you know, because they fall in the lower income earners, some of the individuals, and they will greatly benefit as a result of this minimum wage increase.

Another financial allowance that has been created is the investment tax allowance with regard to cybersecurity. Opportunities that now present itself for a lot of businesses, whether small, whether large, whether medium-sized, there are the business opportunities now with regard to the growth of the digital economy in going forward. So individuals have up to a tax break of $500,000 for companies who invest in cybersecurity, networks, software, and everything to deal with cybersecurity. However, we know that with everything else, there must be the
necessary qualification requirements and this will have to be channelled through iGovTT. Again, the Tunapuna constituency will benefit as a result of this tax allowance, and I know already the greater Tunapuna Chamber of Industry and Commerce executives and their members are looking at the possibility of, you know, taking up this investment tax allowance as we continue along.

Madam Speaker, no taxes, right, the Minister of Finance made it clear that there will be no increase in taxes in 2024. There will also be no reducing of existing taxes in 2024. But people may say, yes, there is property tax. Property tax that has been made clear and sundry in this august Chamber and has already been in the books at the Inland Revenue Division. So it is just going to be reintroduced in order to ensure that individuals, residents who own property within Trinidad and Tobago will contribute to the property tax as explained by our Minister of Finance. No need to go into details, he has made the assurances that individuals will start receiving their notices as to how many taxes they will have to pay on a monthly basis or yearly basis as we go into 2024. So no extra burdens for taxes in 2024 for the population of Trinidad and Tobago. We are only providing relief in key areas to persons of the lower end of the scale for 2024.

The highlight, I know, of this particular budget to many individuals is the so-called Christmas 2023 back pay. Madam Speaker, $1 billion will be allocated for the benefit of 37,000 public sector workers in Trinidad and Tobago whose bargaining units have already accepted the 4 per cent increase in their back pay. Again, representing Tunapuna, I know there are many individuals, residents, constituents, burgesses of the Tunapuna constituency who will benefit tremendously from this Christmas back pay. The only thing I admonish you all to do is to spend it wisely come Christmas 2023; spend your back pay wisely.
Additionally, all public sector workers will be brought up to their new salary levels. Again, made clear by the Minister of Finance, this will cost the Government approximately $360 million in 2024.

Another benefit coming out of the budget 2024 is the one-off payment of $4,000 to retirees with regard to tax exemptions of individuals who would have attained the retirement age and are awaiting the final approval of their retirement benefits. Again, a one-off payment will be made immediately in order to ensure that individuals are not left, if we want to say, out in the rain or out in the cold seeing that they would have now recently retired.

In reviewing my journey within the Tunapuna constituency, I recall during my contribution in 2017, I spoke of transformation and I said, and I will say it again, we, the constituents of Tunapuna, were willing to step into the era of innovation, new products and production, import replacement—production, import replacement and export generation. I extend a congratulations to the greater Tunapuna Chamber of Industry and Commerce who continue to support and service our Tunapuna constituency. Thank you to the President, Mr. Gregorio, and his executive members and chamber members for your contribution to continued nation-building.

As we ready to undertake the race, we continue to move forward. Madam Speaker, I have heard in the Minister’s Budget Statement 2024, with respect to the performance of the non-oil sector. I knew we had increased our striding over the backstretch of our developmental and innovative journey. We in the constituency of Tunapuna are like Joshua and Caleb in this journey. We have heard, we have listened and we trust our leader, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, and Member for Diego Martin West.
Hon. Members:  [Desk thumping]

Mr. E. Forde: Madam Speaker, this goal, this vision, is attainable as we continue into Vision 2030. Madam Speaker, in the recent past, every Monday morning, the query would be water problems within the constituency, especially within the Maracas Valley. Maracas Valley, as we all know, is a net generator of water for a lot of the surrounding environs and communities. Yet still, residents of the valley would be complaining with regard to not having water.

Madam Speaker, all the plans, programmes and policy implementation of the Minister of Public Utilities, Minister for Lopinot/Bon Air, with respect to water generation and distribution, have had a tremendous impact within my constituency of Tunapuna.

One, the Community Water Improvement Project, CWIP, installed new booster stations at Wharf Trace, Maracas, and the Maingot Village, Tunapuna area, benefiting over 7,000 households. We look forward, Mr. Minister, with regard to the continued CWIP booster station programmes within the constituency of Tunapuna.

Two, we can speak about the Utilities Assistance Programme for both social and economic intervention, for both water from WASA and electricity from T&TEC in homes and families that are in basic need. As you all know, this programme is to benefit a lot of the individuals who continue to have a need with regard to water and electricity, where they can apply to the particular Ministry in order to benefit from these programmes.

Thirdly, the domestic water tank distribution assistance programme. Simple as it is, Madam Speaker, it is a programme that is looked forward to for many individuals, I am sure not only within the Tunapuna constituency, but I am sure all
41 constituencies throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Again, it is a benefit that is there, fill out your applications, get it done. At the MP’s office, at the councillor’s office, we assist many individuals on a daily basis in order to ensure that the water tanks and the necessary fittings are put in place.

Madam Speaker, Tunapuna has benefited and continues to benefit from these programmes, as many other areas throughout our nation. While in the area of water and benefits derived thereof, I wish to bring to the notice of this House and nation as a whole, the recent disturbing trend of wanton damage and sabotage of water works and equipment in particular areas.

Madam Speaker, are we willing to descend into such levels of self-hate, where we will destroy the very basic amenities that we complain of, that we make noise of on a daily basis, which allows for the sustainability of life in Trinidad and Tobago? I say no more on that, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, as I continue to examine and assess the 2024 Budget Statement, in terms of my constituents in the areas of housing and settlements, you all are well aware that Tunapuna is residential in nature having served as the residential area partially for the sugar estates of the Orange Grove and Caroni Plains. Therefore, the housing stock in the area is wide-ranging in nature: individual housing stocks of varied types and styles, old and new; ultramodern gated housing developments and communities, a range which requires broad, wide-ranging, DOE-focused approach to meeting the housing settlement needs of the Tunapuna community.

The 2024 Budget Statement meets all the needs and focus from the high-financed areas of mortgage and refinancing to housing units, improvement grants, as well as the newly proposed high-rise HDC flats at the Caura Royal Road in El
Dorado Tunapuna. As mentioned, approximately 200 housing units will be constructed, commencing in 2024, on the Caura Royal Road with regard to new housing units. Again, I am thankful to the Minister again for the provision of providing housing for the housing individuals within the Tunapuna constituency.

Madam Speaker, housing is critical to human existence and survival. The budget provides for a wide range of avenues supported by its administration for receipt, maintenance, continuous improvement of the quality of housing accessed and utilized by the constituents of Tunapuna and other citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development must be commended, along with her team, for the tremendous strides in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. Tunapuna constituents over the years and in 2023 have benefited in many ways under this Ministry, and things will not change for 2024.

1. Home Improvement Grants for critical repairs and house upgrades. Again, this continues to be a particular application request with regard to individuals in need of ensuring that they can do house and the necessary roof repairs on a regular basis.

2. The Housing and Village Improvement Programme, HVIP, under the Land Settlement Agency, LSA, for basic housing construction for needy families. Again, all the necessary applications are available. There would be the necessary means test in order to qualify as we continue to go forward. And as MPs, we continue to provide the necessary information at our offices on a daily basis, along with our regional corporation councillors, or at the cities or boroughs as the case may be.

3.40 p.m.
3. Home improvement subsidies for home construction and home improvement grants to citizens again, of the lower income households. Again, these individuals know themselves and they can make the necessary applications in order to go forward.

4. Disbursements of over 1,500 home improvement subsidies and over 400 home construction subsidies by the HDC under the Minister of Housing for individuals throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

5. Trinidad and Tobago Home Mortgage Bank, a new entity for 2024 will be providing improved mortgage market, strengthened resource mobilization and allocations to benefit low and middle income earners who are interested in acquiring an HDC home.

6. The establishment of micro enterprise gardens, greenhouses and green markets to communities under the Housing and Village Improvement Programme in 2024. A new facility that will be provided via the LSA, Land Settlement Agency division under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.

7. Madam Speaker, 600 housing units to be constructed in 2024. And as I said earlier, of which Caura Road will have an HDC high-rise facility of approximately 200 housing units and again, into Tunapuna we welcome this, Madam Minister of Housing and Urban Development.

Madam Speaker, in terms of education, Tunapuna sits at the apex of education in Trinidad and Tobago, if not the Caribbean, Madam Speaker. Our educational institutions, again we can start to call them by name but we will not go there today. Our educational facilities range from preschool to tertiary, post-
tertiary professional, university in a most significant manner. Madam Speaker, this Ministry of Education under the Member of Parliament for St. Ann’s East, as previous PNM administrations, continues to develop and expand capacity of our nation by the support, maintenance and expansion of educational opportunities for all. This is being reinforced by the strong support of the digitalization thrust, not only in terms of education, but also by the day to day operations of our lives and our children lives in schools.

Further, Madam Speaker, this budget speaks to and provides support to the incubation, support, development, operationalization and monetization of ideas generated over time in our capacity building facilities. Over the years, Tunapuna has become the settlement area of the new paradigm of knowledge-based industry in our nation. We possess the right mix of the old and the new. When the physical, local areas of Tunapuna, Curepe, St. Augustine and St. Joseph are examined, the university city is visualized and still augers well as the education hub in our nation of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the incentives are available. I am most certain this administration is willing to increase these provisions to ensure the diversity necessary for today and for the future needs of our nation. Paramount and outstanding in this Budget Statement of 2024 is the $1,000 school supplies grant for needy children and students for the 2024 academic year. This budgetary allocation is gleefully accepted by the constituents of Tunapuna.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. E. Forde: And I look forward into July/August vacation of 2024 to assist many of these families that continue to request assistance via the MP’s office, via the councillor's office in order to assist them with book grants, school grants,
uniforms, books, whatever, stationery as the case may be. Madam Speaker, there is a saying and I quote:

“One...full basket.”

**Mr. E. Ford:** In terms of culture, and tourism, we see our positioning as that of the basket. Trinidad and Tobago being the basket waiting to be filled. We have in the Tunapuna constituency some of the well-organized steel orchestras alongside with the recent declaration of the World Steelpan Day on August the 11th 2023 by the United Nations. We have a body of research professors on the steelpan at the Engineering Faculty at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. In recent past, Madam Speaker, during COVID-19 we have had before our own digital thrust. We have had one of our steel orchestras, Exodus Pan Orchestra of Tunapuna, successfully organizing a world steel pan competition in Trinidad and Tobago, ensuring tourism remains on the map in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, one of the sons of our Tunapuna soil, economist Lloyd Best, has always demonstrated the need to connect our creativity to our day to day living, if not, even our existence. This is an area of diversification of the oil energy industry that we are now pursuing to develop this creative art industry in Trinidad and Tobago. And again, to the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, again, the hon. Minister, Senator, you know, hats off as we continue to go forward with that creative culture and arts going forward for Trinidad and Tobago. The conditions are there, Madam Speaker, the world wide acceptance and grant funding is available. We are now looking to develop small sustainable manufacturing industries to the benefit of our population in the creative arts and culture industry of Trinidad and Tobago, under the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts.
Madam Speaker, it will be remiss of me if I did not engage in the area of youth, youth affairs and development and the concerns of the youth. The area of youth engagement has been of increasing concern and anxiety in the recent and continuing past, especially in terms of deviant behaviour among our youth population. This PNM administration, this Government under Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, and the nation as a whole, and Tunapuna anxiously awaits with much bated breath, the continued rollout and implementation of the numerous, and I stress on numerous, youth programmes, and the tech/voc vocational training and skills programme as outlined in this 2024 Appropriations Bill.

Madam Speaker, the implementation of the redevelopment of the El Dorado Youth Training Centre at College Road, El Dorado, Tunapuna, is high on the agenda for our Tunapuna constituents, among others would go a long way in reducing the deviant behaviour in our youth in the Tunapuna areas and beyond. Coming out of the deviant behaviours that we are experiencing, the Ministry of National Security has made a mandate with regard to the police service in order to bring it back to full strength. The Commissioner of Police has been mandated to triple the intake of police recruits from 300 to one 1,000 recruits in 2024. We trust that youth within that age category would look forward, those that are educated, those that can fit the bill in order to accept this aspect within the police service. These newly recruited officers should include well educated persons with specific skill sets and qualifications. Recruits should be able to contribute to a modern police service for example, with skills and qualifications in IT, forensic, CSI, communication, psychology, sociology, mediation, and many other aspects that we
can look forward to in order to ensure that we get the right recruits as we continue to go forward.

There must be an effective use of technology and high-level policing strategies, along with serious brain work and understanding the criminal minds. We must always be one step ahead within the Ministry of National Security. Again, representing the constituency of Tunapuna we anxiously await the outcome and the benefits for safety and security reasons for Tunapuna in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, under the Ministry of National Security, $90 million has been added for four inspection scanners for the ports of Port of Spain and Point Lisas. Again, this will assist the Ministry of National Security to ensure that things are in order at our sea ports. For 16 handheld scanners for the Customs and Excise Division, $4.5 million in order to, again, assist with security and scanning of items at our nation’s ports. Madam Speaker, $80 million, budgetary allocation in 2024 for police vehicles and equipment. Again, especially those on the other side, you know, we would hear of the various complaints being meted about with regard to vehicles and individuals. So we look forward in 2024 for this $80 million allocation to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service with regard to upgrading their equipment and also allocation of police vehicles, Madam Speaker, resulting in more accessibility and mobility for the Trinidad and Tobago for crime fighting.

You would have heard mentioned also, the Riverine police Unit, which will be housed at the Carenage Police Station and again, a budgetary allocation have been given a $15 million in order to assist with this particular aspect. So again, so our Government, Madam Speaker, is moving forward with regard to ensuring that
our national security systems are in place in order to ensure that we have a secure Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, action still speaks louder than words. Under our Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, under MP for La Horquetta/Talparo, who would have outlined not one, not two, or three, but numerous, and I stress on numerous again, Madam Speaker, programmes, courses, projects, skills, training and development, talent sharing, and many other initiatives for youths of our nation. Over the last eight years, there has been something to do for every youth throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Throughout the length and breadth, we have the various programmes being rolled out but as the saying goes, we can take you to the fountain but in order to drink, you have to drink. So the youths of our nation I say, let us get up and running and get involved in some of these programmes which are there in order to benefit each and every one of us.

Over the last eight years, no stone has been left unturned when coming to dealing with the youth of Trinidad and Tobago. Tunapuna youths have been provided with opportunities to participate in all of these particular programmes. And again, we could name a few. We have MiLAT, we have MYPART, we have CCC, Civilian Conservation Corps, we have MUST, we have HYPE, YTEPP. Various programmes with outlets throughout Trinidad and Tobago, where persons can go in whether the youth is considered if it is from 18 to 35, in order to participate in these programmes. MIC, which is situated right in the Tunapuna constituency, walking distance. We have MUST, right. We have the education caravan that the Minister would have spoken about which would be coming in the various constituencies throughout Trinidad and Tobago, which will give you—
identify every particular programme that is on the agenda which can be allocated at this particular caravan as they roll into your particular area.

3.55 p.m.

As the Member of Parliament for Tunapuna, I welcome and I await the caravan coming into the Tunapuna area of my constituency. NESC, again, another programme that we have been hearing a lot about, all those programmes, all those institutions, will be reinstated in order to ensure that our youth are on a good footing. The Minister and MP also spoke about the numerous agricultural programmes, those that are done through ECIAF; those agricultural programmes that will be done through the various youth camps, the various agricultural homestead programmes that will be done via the University of the West Indies, and even programmes that are being affiliated with Guyana. All those programmes are being put in place in order to benefit the youth of our nation who are interested in agriculture.

As we continue along, programmes with regard to the youth, we can identify with Junior Achievement. Again, as a father of two daughters, I remember taking my two daughters to Junior Achievement in order to be part of that programme. Yes, it would have been off the books for a while, but it is good to know that this Government, under Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, will be reinstating the Junior Achievement programme at primary and secondary schools.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. E. Forde: This programme is designed to deliver hands-on learning to equip students with practical skills and a mindset to build striving schools and communities. You know, Junior Achievement, it is all-round, an all-encompassing programme where your students, where our children, will be part of on a basis.

UNREVISED
Yes, a total of 7.2—$72 million, Madam Speaker, has been allocated in 2024 for budgetary allocation. And again, as I said earlier, the education hub that is within the Tunapuna constituency with regard to the university city, Tunapuna, St. Augustine, Curepe, St. Joseph, we welcome this initiative for all the schools within the Tunapuna constituency. So Junior Achievement, get ready youth to get on board. Madam Speaker, $39 million, in 2024 for fostering and promotion of community sports. You know, many times within my constituency alone, there is an average of about 52 educational institutions. Many of those schools, some will have their sporting days, many of them will say they cannot have sports; they have no income, no money. The Ministry “ain’t” providing anything in order to ensure that they could have a sports day. So again, no excuse now, $39 million has been allocated in 2024 for schools in order to foster and promote community sports among these various schools.

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

**Mr. E. Forde:** So again, principals listening, get tuned, get your application forms out, get your letters ready in order to write to the particular Ministry on a timely basis to ensure that you can get your allocations for these various community sports. Again, an excellent initiative coming out in budget 2024, diversification and growth for Trinidad and Tobago.

In Tunapuna, this allocation will help assist our local sporting clubs and organizations in the hosting and management of many community sporting events and competitions. Also, with specialized training at the community level, the purchasing of sport equipment for use in communities is most welcome within the particular area. So again, the provision of sporting items, equipment, in order to benefit individuals, and again, we can say it is mainly carded for the youth, but I
know the not so young will also be able to benefit with this particular aspect. Madam Speaker, $19.5 million has been identified for arts and crafts initiative within community centres. Again, excellent initiative in order to ensure that community centres can be active on a daily basis. No white elephants within the various communities. So again, $19.5 million allocation again for sports, again for youth, again to assist with crime to ensure that our community centres have arts and crafts initiatives taken care of on a daily basis.

I am assured that the various NGOs, the various sports clubs, the various community groups, are anxiously awaiting in order to tap in to this particular budgetary allocation in order to participate in this initiative to benefit all our youth and children within the constituency of Tunapuna. I had mentioned earlier, Madam Speaker, MIC, the Institute of Technology, will continue to benefit the constituency of Tunapuna. An additional 500 youths are to benefit from the expansion of this fund for a total of $3.75 million in order to ensure that these 500 new individuals will be allocated within this MIC programme. As I said earlier, MIC is walking distance from the Tunapuna constituents.

Madam Speaker, also coming under with regard to the youth—yeah, so many things are happening with regard to the youths of our nation, as mentioned by the Minister and Member of Parliament for La Horquetta/Talparo; the various youth camps, those that will be newly constructed, those that would be renovated, those that will be reinstated. We could identify with Presto Praesto. We could identify with Chatham. We could identify with Wallerfield, the new construction in Wallerfield. In El Dorado, where we once housed a female youth camp for girls, a camp for girls, where we are now going to reinstate a new one up at El Dorado on College Road. We can talk about the youth camp in Chaguaramas, just
to name a few, that will be either newly constructed or reinstated or reconstructed within the 2024 period, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, with regard to Social Development and Family Services, a total of $60 million for the resumption of the market box programme in 2024. Excellent. Excellent. A lot of individuals. A lot of constituents and burgesses. I see the Member for Tabaquite is shaking her head there, you know—I mean, so I know. Say something positive about it. Right? You know what I mean, it is about food, it is about living, it is about survival, it is about ensuring that we see about the low-income earners in our society, the needy families. It is not only in Trinidad and Tobago, it is not only in the CARICOM regions, but it is worldwide. It is worldwide. So the market boxes will be readily accepted with a tune of $60 million in 2024 with regard to this programme. This food box delivery programme will be reintroduced for the poor, for the needy and the vulnerable citizens in our communities. Again, Tunapuna anxiously awaits this budgetary allocation which will be greatly accepted because it will benefit all.

All the necessary social welfare benefits and grants will continue to be enforced. We could identify with the TT food card. We could identify with the disability grants. We could identify with the old age pension grants for individuals attaining age 65; public assistance for families and children that are in need within the community, and the many other social benefits that can be identified with regard to small businesses, with regard to the SEED Programme, with regard to ensuring that there is an opportunity for all within our social development programme in Trinidad and Tobago.

Under Works and Transport and with regard to our Rural Development and Local Government, we have, again, Minister—I would like to thank the various
Ministers in both Ministries under the Ministry of Works and Transport, Minister, Sen. Rohan Sinanan in the other place, and then in our House here, with regard to the Minister, MP for San Fernando West, Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, a total of $6.2 billion stimulus will be added to the Trinidad and Tobago economy in 2024. This is to stimulate economic growth further in our communities via our Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) for 2024. We know we would have heard the hon. Minister of Finance talking about with regard to delay in a lot of the roads being in a bad state and the reasons that would have been given with regard to the various funding and allocation for this with regard to the whole tendering process and allocation of budgetary allocation, but we look forward in 2024, Madam Speaker, with regard to ensuring that our nation roads come back to the state we know it ought to be.

So again, as the Member for Tunapuna, I look forward in ensuring that our nation’s roads in Tunapuna will be well taken care of with regard to resurfacing, with regard to paving, with regard to resurfacing potholes, and complete road resheeting as we continue along. Again, as Member of Parliament, I will be generating my various listings for infrastructure, construction, and development projects, and again this $6.2 billion, I am hoping that Tunapuna will get its fair share of the economic pie—

Ms. Ameen: [Inaudible]

Mr. E. Forde: Just ask for yours. Just ask for yours.

Ms. Ameen: Really?

Mr. E. Forde: Just ask for yours—to ensure that I get my fair share of the $6.2 billion for Tunapuna. I will share some with St. Augustine. I usually do. I usually do. All 41 constituencies are to benefit, all 41 constituencies. So fear not MP for
St. Augustine and MP for Moruga/Tableland.

Again, coming out of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, again, they will be also participating with regard to road resurfacing, road paving in the Tunapuna constituency. We could identify readily some of the roads that would have been done recently. Maingot Road, which was a long outstanding road in the Maingot Village area. I must compliment the burgesses and constituencies in the Maingot Road area, First Trace, Second Trace for, you know, having patience with their MP, and the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation with regard to the delay in having Maingot Road ready. We can talk about Belle Vue in the Maracas, Acono area. We can talk about St. Cecelia Street in the Caura/Paradise/Tacarigua area. You know, so those are then some of the few roads that would have been done within recent time.

Drainage improvement, infrastructure, again, we continue to make full use of it. We have a massive programme that is now taking place at the Priority Bus Route and Macoya intersection by Balthazar Street, which is basically the hospital drain which basically starts in Tunapuna, but in order to ensure that the water flows out properly we need to go across into St. Augustine in order to ensure that that is done. So I know the Member for St. Augustine, we would have discussed and we are hoping to cross the Priority within this month. We are hoping to cross the Priority Bus Route within this month in order to link up the complete drain to ensure that we minimize the flooding within the Tunapuna/St. Augustine area. But keep in mind, my colleagues further south, you all need to ensure to put your house in order because the water will be coming down flowing.

So we are now in the third phase and we will have the fourth phase coming up, which will link up all the particular drainage between Tunapuna in the foothills.
heading down to the Churchill Roosevelt Highway. Other drainage works that are taking place right now is in Wharf Trace, Maracas; Acono Road, we are doing some slipper drains; at Caurita Village, we are doing some box drains in order to ensure that the water flow out; Meade Street in El Dorado, Tunapuna. And for those who know the constituency of Tunapuna, it is all areas, the three electoral districts—

Madam Speaker: Member for Tunapuna, your original speaking time is now spent, you have 10 minutes to complete your contribution if you so wish.

Mr. E. Forde: Thank you very much. Thank you. Yes.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Mr. E. Forde: Thank you.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

4.10 p.m.

Mr. E. Forde: And for those who know Tunapuna, when I identify those areas it encompasses the whole constituency. My oath taken twice as a Member of Parliament will be to service the whole of the constituency. So that all areas are taken care of from Maracas—from the Maracas Valley, whether you want to say northwest area straight up to Tacarigua inclusive of Caura, inclusive of Auzonville, Maingot Village, St. John Road, El Dorado, Caura Road, all areas are covered with regard to road improvement and drainage.

We can identify with bridges within the community. I know the El Tucuche residents in Maracas, we had a delay with regard to that bridge construction that would have started just before COVID. COVID came and there was a delay but it is still on the burner, we will be coming to you in El Tucuche to ensure that you all will not only have a walking bridge but you all will have a drive-in access bridge
in order that your vehicles can now be parked close to your homes.

We can identify with agricultural access roads. Again in the Maracas Valley and also the Caura Valley, which are two valleys where we have farmers and we have agricultural produce, right. We are looking to ensure that we get those agriculture access roads for the farmers in the Tumbason area and also for farmers in the Acono area. We are looking to ensure that we get those agricultural access roads ready.

To my constituents in the Guymal, Acono area, your recreational ground space, again, we are working feverishly to ensure that this will happen in 2024 in order to ensure that the recreational space that you desire will be supplied by your government of Trinidad and Tobago under the Member of Parliament for Tunapuna. So I look forward to putting the final touches on that particular aspect in order to ensure that your recreational space will be taken care of in the Acono area.

Drain desilting: I just saw the Minister of Works and Transport there, I continue to thank you for the desilting of our drains and our main rivers in our area. The Caura River which has been raised for a month, has been de-silted from as high up from on the foothill of the Caura area from by the HDC housing development there at Peas Tree, straight down to the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway, which again encompasses the area of St. Augustine. That river is de-silted yearly or sometimes twice yearly depending on the debris and the amount of silt that will come down.

We can identify with the hospital drain, which is the drain by Balthazar Street, which again, traverses straight across into St. Augustine, thank you for that cleaning. And then the St. John Road drain which comes out by Exodus Pan
Theatre, right, thank you for that desilting. And then we have the Acono River up in the Maracas Valley.

I would like to thank again the CEPEP workers within the constituency of Tunapuna. Thank you, Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, MP for San Fernando West, for the continued good work that CEPEP continues to do in the Tunapuna constituency.

The Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation under the new Chairman—Chairman/Councillor Josiah Austin who started his new team, they continue to provide products and services to all the burgesses with regard to sanitation, with regard to recreational park cleaning, drainage cleaning, road rehabilitation, et cetera, et cetera. We know all the things that the local government provides within the municipalities.

Madam Speaker, as I come to a close in my contribution to this debate of the Appropriation (Financial Year 2024) Bill, 2023, myself and every constituency representative of this honourable House, I am speaking now for all 41 constituencies, have benefited from the budgetary proceeds of the State of Trinidad and Tobago over the last 61 or 62 years through capacity building and opportunities provided for all the 41 constituencies in Trinidad and Tobago. Yes, we have benefited tremendously.

Madam Speaker, many in my Tunapuna constituency and other constituencies possess the capacity to invest in organizations and entities for growth and business development, and for unknown reasons, refuse to do so. Constituents, you know yourselves. Madam Speaker, this PNM administration under Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley has put on the table over the last eight years many incentives and support mechanisms to encourage these investments. The
ideas are there, but some of us refuse to go beyond the boundaries and reap the rewards available to us in Trinidad and Tobago.

4.15 p.m.

In 2024, Madam Speaker, we are now building capacity for diversification and growth towards the future.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. E. Forde: So, Madam Speaker, as I say, let us come together and make it happen, not for us, but our children’s children and beyond. Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my Tunapuna constituents. I would like to thank the Tunapuna Youth Desk. I would like to thank all NGOs, sporting bodies, steel orchestras, churches, schools, mandirs, temples, mosques, places of worship within the Tunapuna constituency because as you are all aware, Madam Speaker, I am in touch with every single entity in Tunapuna.

Again, I would like to thank each and every one of them for the contribution they would have made to ensure that Tunapuna will be a better place in the landscape of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, may God continue to bless us in order to bless Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you for the opportunity, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Rishad Seecheran (Caroni East): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to join the debate into the 2024 budget. I would first like to begin by commending my political leader on a majestic and commanding reply to the most uninspiring—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Dr. R. Seecheran:—budget laid by this PNM Government since they have taken office in 2015.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecheran: I would like to concur with her that there can be no prosperity without safety and security in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, every single Ministry is failing and the people of Trinidad and Tobago are the ones that are suffering. My colleagues have dealt with many of the faults of this budget and I also congratulate all of them on their contributions.

On this side of the House, we will continue to fight for equality and a better standard of living for all citizens. It is a patriotic duty that we take most seriously. We will never be deterred by the naysayers on the other side. It is our duty to protect our family and our loved ones from the continued mismanagement of our nation’s resources under this PNM Government and to return Kamla Persad-Bissessar to the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health gave his contribution a little while ago and it was a rambling contribution. It was almost as if he was giving doctors a continuing education lecture rather than a strategic direction of the Ministry of Health going into 2024.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Madam Speaker, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers, the national diversification strategy has not been successful to the levels required despite decades of discussions. Access to foreign exchange remains a persistent challenge for those that have small and medium businesses. Key contributors to earning foreign exchange, namely the petrochemical plants as well as the LNG facilities continue to face gas shortages. We need roughly 4.2 billion cubic feet per
day while current production is around 2.6 to 2.7 billion cubic feet per day, and will be so until at least 2025.

Crime and criminality remain a scourge of our society causing a brain drain and impacting diversification. There is reduced business activity due to the level of—due to the lack of foreign direct investment as well as the difficulty in the ease of doing business. The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund has not grown in the last seven years. Government debt to gross domestic product is at 71 per cent while the target is 75 per cent. And, yes, we have another deficit budget at $5.2 billion or 2.7 per cent of GDP.

So, Madam Speaker, the question remains, how does the Government intend to treat with these issues? After all, it is not a UNC government accessing these socio-economic performance of the Government but PricewaterhouseCoopers. And does this budget build capacity for diversification and growth? We are running a fiscal deficit of $5.1 billion and I can recall a few budgets ago, the Minister of Finance having accused the Partnership government of heating up the economy with a massive budget. Madam Speaker, this budget of $59 billion is on par with any budget the Partnership government did at our time.

The health sector is getting $7.4 billion, the second largest allocation in the budget, and will citizens of this country see a shorter wait time for beds? Will young unemployed doctors get jobs? Will patients get drugs that they need, or will doctors have the basic diagnostic equipment available to them? As we have seen for the last eight years, Madam Speaker, most likely not. The Member for Fyzabad did a fantastic rebuttal to the Minister of Health and I commend him for his contribution—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Dr. R. Seecheran:—as well as the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Madam Speaker, I will try my best not to tread on the areas that they have explored thus far. I will start off with the infrastructure of medical institutions as highlighted by the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance has said that the Government has spent or is spending billions of dollars to build out the country’s health infrastructure and will address non-communicable diseases next.

The Arima Hospital has a cost of $1.6 billion. The Point Fortin Hospital has a cost of $1.3 billion. The Sangre Grande Hospital is at a cost of $1.1 billion and the Central Block of the Port of Spain General Hospital is at a cost that is yet to be determined. It has been allocated to be a premier teaching hospital, as stated by the Minister of Health, but the same was said for the Couva Hospital not more than a few years ago, Madam Speaker, and apparently the Minister has forgotten to thank my political leader for the vision and the plan to design and build the Couva Hospital—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—an institution that was integral to saving thousands of lives of citizens from COVID-19. It was our country’s Noah’s Ark during the storm of COVID-19. I was expecting the Minister to also thank my political leader for the San Fernando Teaching Hospital as well as her vision for starting the Arima and the Point Fortin Hospitals.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Madam Speaker, had my leader not started the Arima and Point Fortin Hospitals, would this PNM administration even have built them? We
Madam Speaker, starting with the Arima Hospital. This PNM Government continues to shamelessly take credit for the Arima Hospital, which was commissioned by the People’s Partnership government. Construction of the Arima Hospital was formerly approved by the UNC/People’s Partnership government on the 3rd October of 2013. Then Arima MP, Roger Samuel, announced at a post-Cabinet press briefing that China Railway Group Limited was the constructor in a government-to-government agreement with China at an estimated cost of $1.6 billion. That was after Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar held bilateral talks with the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, during his 2013 state visit to Trinidad and Tobago.

The Point Fortin Hospital, Madam Speaker, the UNC/People’s Partnership government also turned the sod to begin construction of the $1.2 billion Port Fortin Hospital in May of 2015. The project was executed under a government-to-government arrangement between Trinidad and Tobago and Austria, who was the country that was also involved in the construction of the San Fernando Teaching Hospital. The Minister of Health at the time, Fuad Khan, said that he met no plans in place to build a new hospital in Point Fortin when he entered office in 2011. And he went on to say:

“‘When I came here in 2011 I saw the old Point Fortin Hospital in a…’”—total state—“‘…of disrepair. I could not believe that the people of Point Fortin were putting up with…’”—this—“‘…type of hospital for such a long time.’”

It was never the intention of the PNM to build the Point Fortin Hospital. Madam Speaker, the Point Fortin Hospital was initially budgeted for $1.2 billion. Its final
cost is now $1.3 billion. The Minister has a duty to the people of this country to account for the extra $100 million. Where has the money gone, Minister? And only the PNM can do that.

Madam Speaker, moving on to Sangre Grande Hospital. In 2019, the Minister of Finance, Colm Imbert, stated that the Sangre Grande Hospital would be constructed using the design for the Point Fortin Hospital, with financing as well from the Government of Austria. And it was estimated to cost $850 million. Minister of Health, Terrence Deyalsingh, added that the reason it was cheaper was because the UDeCOTT fees were reduced as it was the same design as the Sangre Grande Hospital. Madam Speaker, today, the Minister of Finance is telling us that the Sangre Grande Hospital is costing taxpayers of this country $1.1 billion, $250 million more expensive than the 2019 budgeted figure. So the Minister must account to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago for the extra $250 million. COVID-19 cannot be a blank cheque for mismanagement, too many excuses while many in our country suffer. So, Madam Speaker, between the Point Fortin and the Sangre Grande Hospitals, we have, so far, $350 million in cost overruns.

Moving on to the Port of Spain General Hospital, Central Block. We have the new Central Block which was announced on the 13th of May, 2019 and the main contractor at the time, Shanghai Construction Group, pulled out of this arrangement. And as a result, UDeCOTT had to hire local contractors to complete the work. CEO, Noel Garcia, said at the time, the project had an initial budget of $1.1 billion.

Madam Speaker, in the 2022 budget debate, Minister Deyalsingh revealed that the Port of Spain General Hospital, Central Block, was now going to cost taxpayers at least $110 million more and take an additional two years. I am sure
that sum is considerably more now, but I am going to use the old figure from 2022 of $110 million more. So, we still do not know the final cost of the Port of Spain, Central Block. So between the Point Fortin, the Sangre Grande Hospital and the Port of Spain General Hospital central block, we have at least $460 million in lost value to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is what the Minister should have spoken about.

And then we have the San Fernando General Hospital addition. It does not end there, Madam Speaker. The Minister of Finance boasted of a nine-storey parkade at the San Fernando General Hospital. The estimated cost of the—so it started as an eight-storey car park, costing $118 million and was scheduled for completion on April 2022. Madam Speaker, the San Fernando parkade was eventually built with nine storeys, an extra storey, and the last quoted price was $132 million and opened in August 2023. Minister Deyalsingh speaking at the official ceremony—

**Madam Speaker:** Member. Member, just remember, I know it is a little difficult, so “Minister of Health” or the “Member for St. Joseph”. Just now you did it with Member for Diego Martin Central—sorry, Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Finance.

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** My apologies. The Minister of Health speaking at the official opening ceremony said that the previously free car park to the back of the hospital was no longer available to the public, and instead patients would be directed to the parkade, which would carry a cost of $8 an hour or a $60 hourly rate. So, Madam Speaker, patients at the San Fernando General Hospital now have the pleasure of paying to park at the parkade to access health care at the hospital.

4.30 p.m.
And I would like to ask the Minister of Health, which other health facility we have in Trinidad and Tobago that patients have to pay to attend the health facility?

So this initial car park initially cost $118 million, but it was eventually built for $133 million, with the specs being changed from eight storeys to nine storeys. That is a whole other issue by itself, why the sudden urge or the need to change from eight storeys to nine storeys to park more cars? Minister, at some point would you please account to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, at least $15 million over budget.

So currently we have the Point Fortin Hospital, we have the Sangre Grande Hospital, we have the Port of Spain Central Block and now we have the San Fernando Parkade with at least $475 million in lost revenue, in lost monies to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago under the Ministry of Health, and that is what the Minister should have spoken about.

But that is not all, Madam Speaker. We also have the Ministry of Health administrative building which is obliquely opposite Memorial Park in Port of Spain. This was constructed through a public/private partnership utilizing a build/own/lease/transfer arrangement, and the initial cost of the administrative building was $280 million, and this was started on the 1st of December, 2020. At the time our country, our Ministry of Health, sorry, was paying roughly $10 million in rent per year for the Ministry. Under this arrangement, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago will pay $30 million a year for 15 years in lease payments to NH International at an estimated cost of $450 million.

So the headquarters will be leased by the Ministry of Health for 15 years and then transferred to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago after the conclusion of this agreement. But quite surprisingly, Madam Speaker, with this project that
started in 2020, it was finished for the exact same price when it was completed, $280 million. So there were no cost overruns in the Ministry of Health administrative building. And you know why that was, Madam Speaker? Because it would have eaten into the profits of the private contractor. The private contractor was the one that took out financing to build this facility. So construction took place during COVID-19, but somehow with the other Ministry of Health projects there were massive overruns and overdue times. So this is the only Ministry of Health project to come on budget. But you must also remember, Madam Speaker, it was built for $280 million, but at the end of it the people of Trinidad and Tobago are going to pay $450 million, $170 million more than the cost of the contractor’s cost for building the Ministry of Health administrative building, excluding interest fees for financing.

So, Madam Speaker, between the Point Fortin Hospital, the Sangre Grande Hospital, the Ministry of Health administrative building, the San Fernando Parkade, we have $645 million in lost value for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And this does not take into account the feeding frenzy that occurred during the pandemic under the Minister of Health's tenure, and this must be his legacy. This must be his legacy, billions of dollars spent and unaccounted for. Many questions are left unanswered, but under a Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC government we will get the answers for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health in the budget report stated that ever since—sorry, the Minister of Finance in the budget report stated that ever since the assumption of the first PNM administration in 1956 that there has been an expanding of our public health system to provide free access to a range
of health solutions and services for our citizens at levels unavailable in many advanced and emerging and developing countries, the impact on our nation's health has been significant.

And, Madam Speaker, Dr. Bodee—the Member of Parliament for Fyzabad spoke briefly about this, but I will go into more detail. While the Minister of Finance is boasting about building this nation’s health infrastructure, a report conducted in conjunction with this Government and the World Health Organization has stated in clear terms that our health sector is under resourced. The World Health Organization in its observations on health systems and policies stated in very, very plain terms, countries are prioritizing building of our physical infrastructure and procuring equipment and supplies, but increasing the number of hospital beds or ventilators is futile if there are not enough hospital staff to operate them. And I will repeat that: It is futile if there are not enough hospital staff to operate them. And this is my firm contention that this is what happens here in Trinidad and Tobago.

On numerous occasions, Madam Speaker, I would have spoken to you before about the Seemungal report, but today I will discuss an Auditor General’s special report that we now have access to+ and the Minister of Health made no mention of this in his contribution. On the 5th of June 2023, a special report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago was laid right here in the House of Representatives. It is named “Contributing toward a strong and resilient national public health system between the years of 2016 and 2021”. PNM years, Madam Speaker. And it is based on our country’s ability to detect, reduce the risk of, and to manage a global health risk. And this is under a United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Target 3.d.
The Auditor General’s special report was done under the authority of the World Health Organization along with the Ministry of Planning and Development, as well as the Ministry of Health, and it utilized contributions from the PS of the Ministry of Health, the Chief Medical Officer, staff of the regional health authorities, the ODPM, Airports Authority as well as the Trinidad and Tobago Registered Nurses Association and the PAHO representative in Trinidad and Tobago, and it make so quite interesting reading, to put it mildly. The report has concluded that a more resilient health care going forward would only be achieved when Trinidad and Tobago’s new and existing health facilities are adequately staffed and equipped for future health shocks.

Madam Speaker, first on the agenda, inadequate human capital, and the Member for Fyzabad spoke about this briefly. The Auditor General’s special report stated that we currently have a ratio of one doctor, nurse and midwife for 1,000 persons in Trinidad and Tobago, whereas the World Health Organization’s recommendation is 4.5 doctors, nurses and midwives for 1,000 persons. According to the World Health Organization, Madam Speaker, we are significantly under-manned in our nation’s hospitals and health centres, and thus we are unable to provide a high level of patient care compared to other countries around the world.

Madam Speaker, as you would remember, as I have said before in this Chamber, according to COVID-19 data, we are number 172 out of 175 countries in our performance in COVID-19. The special report went on to say that out of approximately 17,682 health care positions in Trinidad and Tobago, 37.6 per cent of them were vacant, or 6,647 positions at the end of 2021, and not much has changed since then, because we have the yellow books for 2022 and 2023. So that is almost 40 per cent of positions that are vacant. And the highest number of
vacancies, Madam Speaker, across the regional health authorities was in the profession of nursing. Building new hospitals, spending billions upon billions with new hospitals but no jobs for unemployed young doctors and nurses. Shameless!

Madam Speaker, the report also went on to say there was a lack of medical equipment at our health institutions, and that doctors are concerned about their ability to diagnose patients. A survey was done, that is in the report, Madam Speaker, of 319 health care workers, and it revealed that 65 per cent of doctors stated that there was adequate access to medical equipment to diagnose and treat patients at our public institutions. In fact, representatives from health associations and private health institutions expressed concerns over this fact. And as you know doctors are bound via non-disclosure agreements, so this is the closest we have gotten to confirmation of negligence by the regional health authorities and by extension the Ministry of Health by not providing the adequate equipment to these health professionals.

So from the years 2016 to 2021, $25.5 billion was budgeted by the Ministry of Health, but where has the money gone? Where has the money gone? They are building hospitals lacking equipment and lacking staff. But it goes even further, Madam Speaker, the report spoke about the fact that there is no integration of our IT systems, our Information Technology Systems, and there no interface with the systems from the Ministry of Health’s IT systems. There are information technology systems in place, but they are not connected, so there is no integration across the IT systems in the regional health authorities to facilitate the ease of data sharing for decision making, nor interface of these systems with the Ministry of Health systems. So you cannot go from hospital to hospital and expect your information or your radiographs to be transferred very easily. It just cannot
happen. The full functionality of the systems used including Cellma IT system at the South West Regional Health Authority was not being utilized.

Madam Speaker, the report also went on to say that there was gross disrespect meted out to the Trinidad and Tobago Registered Nursing Association. According to the report, the TTRNA was not included in any decisions concerning COVID-19, and the Minister of Finance in his budget speech was speaking about our advanced health care, and this is contrary to many other countries around the world where the input of nurses was used to optimize equipment and resources at the height of the pandemic. These nurses have endured so much under this longstanding Minister of Health. Also mentioned was the fact that the TTRNA was refused health insurance and hazard allowances during the pandemic, which is the norm in most World Health Organization countries. In the report, on a side note, Tobago is the only regional health authority that has met its staff figures, but that is because it falls under the authority of the Tobago House of Assembly. And this was most apparent during the pandemic when nurses had to do the job of two and three nurses.

Our nation's shortcomings, Madam Speaker, have been highlighted in the 2020 State of the world’s nursing report, which analyses data from 191 countries, including Trinidad and Tobago. And for countries such as T&T that are unable to retain their best nurses the report has advised that we should consider improving the salaries and working conditions, creating professional development opportunities, and allowing nurses to work to the full scope of their training. Something that the Minister of Health has ignored, consistently ignored. The President of the Trinidad and Tobago Registered Nurses Association, Idi Stuart is on record as saying that nurses are currently working on 2013 salaries, and many
have no choice but to seek employment aboard.

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

**Dr. R. Seecheran:** Madam Speaker, currently nurses’ salaries are among the lowest in the public service, and the disrespect continues as the Member of Parliament for Fyzabad said. Nurses are only given short-term contracts, and because of this they are unable to access loans and acquire a house and other assets. These short-term contracts create great uncertainty and depress the morale of those who are exposing themselves to the most risk, and there are over 3,400 nurses that are working under these conditions.

The Auditor General’s report which was obviously—had input from the Ministry of Health, indicated that our doctors and nurses were burnt out as they were forced to work extra hours giving up their vacation leave. The Minister of Health spoke before about mental health, but what about mental health of our health professionals? He mentioned was the fact that there was unpaid overtime, job insecurity, poor meals, lack of transportation, no childcare support, and very poor working conditions; $25.6 billion to the Ministry of Health during this period under assessment.

**4.45 p.m.**

And perhaps this was the most interesting part for me, Madam Speaker. The report said of long wait times and the postponement of surgeries. The Auditor General’s special report said that 64 per cent of patients had longer wait times than normal during the pandemic. A survey of 1,049 persons found that 63 per cent said that there were frequent postponement of elective surgeries and medical appointments during the pandemic and 64 per cent of the respondents indicated that they had longer waiting times than normal at health facilities during pandemic.
Madam Speaker, this finally puts to rest that there was a parallel health care system. There was no parallel health care system.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Doctors were simply transferred to a COVID-19 facility to the detriment of the hospital or the health facility where they came from and that is the reality. Parallel health care was another PNM gimmick, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Madam Speaker, moving on to the NCDs and the Minister of Health spent a considerable amount of his contribution with regard to NCDs. But I would like to tell the Minister that he is placing too much emphasis on—

Madam Speaker: Member you are addressing your contribution to the Chair, so remember this is the budget, this is not a Motion against the Minister, so try to depersonalize it a bit, okay, please.

Dr. R. Seecheran: I understand, Madam Speaker. So, Madam Speaker, there is too much emphasis with regard to policy on individual responsibility for health and not enough is being done with regard to policy, policy that is required from the Ministry of Health.

So the Ministry of Health has received roughly $500 million more than last year’s allocation, and the President of the Diabetes Association, Andrew Dhanoo, is hoping to see some of these extra funds used towards diabetes and NCDs prevention programmes. He is hoping that money would be allocated towards hiring diabetic nurse educators in every health institution in Trinidad and Tobago. And what is he is saying is that citizens need to be educated on managing their blood sugar levels with nutrition and exercise as well as with medication. This is something that we are hoping that the Minister of Health would do in this fiscal
The International Diabetes Federation estimates that there are roughly 150,000 adults living with diabetes in Trinidad and Tobago. The Minister of Health talks the talk, but he must also walk the walk respectfully, Madam Speaker, and more must be done to combat NCDs.

Madam Speaker, another issue we have with regard to NCDs is that currently, and the Minister of Health did not say this in his contribution, CARICOM countries are preparing to vote on whether to approve front of package warning labelling on all food items. If approved, these octagonal warning label system will be added to food packaging containing high levels of sugars, sodium and fat. This follows the PAHO nutrient profile model.

Madam Speaker, on the 14th of October, 2023, that is the deadline that has been given all CARICOM countries to turn in their vote to either accept or to reject this regional standard. And, Madam Speaker, in 2021 the standard was approved by Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, St. Lucia, The Bahamas and Suriname. But you know who did not vote for it, Madam Speaker? Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago did not vote for this very important mechanism that could help in the fight against NCDs. And because, Madam Speaker, a consensus was not reached in 2018, the process had to start over again. So we actually contributed to holding back that process. This system, Madam Speaker, would empower citizens to make an informed decision when purchasing food items and being able to identify foods that are high in sugar, sodium and fats easily.

The Minister was telling us about planting bhagi or something, I cannot remember, but this is more important, we need to know which foods, we need to identify which foods are high in fat and high in sugars. The rates of childhood
Appropriation (Financial Year 2024) Bill, 2023
Dr. R. Seecheran (cont’d)

obesity are linked to ultra-processed foods. I am calling on the Minister of Health, through you, Madam Speaker, for the reasons why Trinidad and Tobago abstained in the vote to approve front warning label foods. I would like him to state our country’s position going into the October votes, Madam Speaker, because he is such a fighter for NCDS.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Madam Speaker, some countries have gone even further. In the UK a levy was imposed seven years ago on sugary drinks which has motivated companies to change their products. So we are not doing all that we can do, that is my point. Companies in the UK pay more taxes for beverages with a high sugar content and less tax for drinks with a lower sugar content. Companies such as Lucozade/Ribena, the makers of Lucozade energy took the decision in 2016 to lower the sugar in its drinks by 50 per cent. So the Minister of Health is putting too many responsibilities for healthy living on individuals and this should be done by policy-driven directives implemented by the Government after extensive public consultations.

Madam Speaker, what is being done to educate the public and to limit the importation of foods containing industrially produced trans fats? What is being done to educate the public about the front of package warning labels, right? That was a big secret, nobody knew about that, right. What is being done to implement the WHO recommendation to make every school a health promoting school? And what is being done to implement the indicators in the healthy Caribbean coalitions, Childhood Obesity Prevention Scorecard, Madam Speaker? So, Madam Speaker, that was my little contribution on NCDs and the Minister’s failure, continued failure, in fighting NCDs. I would like to now move to address the External
Patient Programme, specifically the renal dialysis programme.

Madam Speaker, in 2016, $15 million was paid for dialysis services through the renal dialysis programme. In 2022 that amount has ballooned to $90 million for outstanding payment for an estimated 1,115 patients and in this budget they are asking for even more money, Madam Speaker. And in the past private health institutions have threatened to withdraw their services if payments were not made in full. So, Madam Speaker, my question, through you, is, why does it take years for a health provider to be paid? These institutions are being asked to provide life-saving procedures to assist in the Government backlog. And, Madam Speaker, what I would also like to ask the Minister of Health, through you, are our dialysis treatment facilities in our public health care institutions at 100 per cent capacity? The Minister is on record as saying, patients may not necessarily have to attend private facilities to be dialyzed.

In 2018 dialysis equipment was purchased for the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex. In 2019 Point Fortin Hospital was moved to a 24-hour rotation so more patients could receive this treatment in the public sector. In 2020, 30 stations were procured for the Couva hospital which has a very, very low operating budget this fiscal year. In 2022 six dialysis stations were procured for the Port of Spain General Hospital. So the Ministry is asking for more funds this year for dialysis machinery and my question through you to the Minister is, are we going to return to some level of normalcy post COVID-19 or are we still going to see these very high exorbitant bills from these private health care institutions?

Madam Speaker, moving on quickly to CDAP. CDAP was introduced in 2003 to assist patients that may have a range of chronic diseases to access costly prescription drugs. And its mandate was to reduce the burden on dispensaries, to
minimize patient waiting time, as well as to provide social support to citizens in need. But, Madam Speaker, in June of 2018 a decision by Cabinet made modifications to CDAP and there have been considerable issues since then. Of concern, Madam Speaker is the issue of the Ministry of Health buying or procuring the cheapest medication available for CDAP. All medication, I am asking the Minister, that all medication, including CDAP drugs, to be tested for its efficacy. Trinidad has no facilities or limited facilities to test these medications and pharmacies are also having the issue of having a reliable supply of pharmaceuticals due to non-payment by the Ministry of Health.

So I am calling on the Minister to introduce incentives for rural pharmacies to join the CDAP programme as well as a drug certification panel that will have oversight to test the efficacy and safety of drugs and thus reduce the number of counterfeit drugs entering our borders. The Government, Madam Speaker, must also be more consistent with their payments to these pharmacies.

Madam Speaker, moving on, the Children’s Life Fund. The Children’s Life Fund was a creation of my political leader, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, SC—

**Hon. Members:**  
*Desk thumping*

**Dr. R. Seecheran:**—and its mandate was to provide funding and critical support specifically for children needing lifesaving tertiary level health care not available in Trinidad and Tobago. There are lingering concerns, Madam Speaker, that the funds are not accessible to some seriously ill children. Some have advocated for the fund to cover patients with beta-thalassemia major, a major blood disorder that reduces haemoglobin, and the cure is a bone marrow transplant. Certain children have been denied access to the Children’s Life Fund as they were told that they could not qualify because the condition is not life threatening. So these parents
have had to go the route of raising funds through barbeques, and GoFundMe campaigns, exactly the situation that the Children Life Fund was created to address. So my point here, Madam Speaker, is the threshold is set a bit too high to access the Children’s Life Fund and we must amend the legislation for a medical team to give oversight and approval to applicants seeking treatment under this fund, compromised of qualified clinicians both in the public and private health sector.

Madam Speaker, the Minister spoke about Aids and our goals with regard to Aids. There is a paltry allocation of $100,000 in this year’s budget as there was last year towards the engagement of a consultant to conduct public consultations to publish the final policy and to launch media activities with regard to the Aids policy. And, Madam Speaker, HIV or Aids is one of the top 10 leading causes of death in Trinidad and Tobago, with the largest increase in newly reported HIV cases occurring between the 20 and 39 year age group. We have failed, we have failed in our objectives to realizing the goal of getting to zero, zero new infections, zero Aids related deaths, zero stigma and zero discrimination. The Minister has not spoken about this at all. There continues to be significant issues with early sexual initiation, individuals having unprotected sex, using inconsistent protection, multiple partners and so on. So there is a great need, Madam Speaker, for information, dissemination and education, and in my view, $100,000 is not sufficient to address these targets.

Madam Speaker, while the Minister of Finance boast of achieving, as well as the Minister of Health, boasts of achieving 2030 targets. I would like to remind him that in 2015 the newly elected-Rowley Government indicated its commitment to making universal health insurance a reality. And the Minister of Finance at the
time said in 2015:

“…the Universal Health Insurance Programme has been an elusive goal. We will place universal health insurance high on our agenda and ensure by December 31, 2018, a National Health Insurance System will be in place and operational, thus bringing much relief to our citizens.”

Madam Speaker, we are perhaps further from this than ever before. So I am calling on the Government and specifically the Minister of Health to immediately implement a national health card which was a UNC, People’s Partnership initiative to allow patients to access health services and medication throughout the public sector.

5.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker, with the little time that I have left, I would just like to quickly jump to the Ministry of Planning and Development, and I am hoping that the Minister would be able to respond to some of these issues as I shadow sustainable development as well. So, Madam Speaker, turning to the issue of sustainable development and climate action. Climate change has been a widespread impact in all areas of the world affecting the lives of billions of persons, causing acute food insecurity as well as the reduced access to safe water, and according to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Caribbean is highly exposed, vulnerable, and strongly impacted by climate change. Madam Speaker, this situation is made worse by factors such as poverty, high population density, deforestation, soil degradation, and a high dependence on natural resources. The report goes on to say that the conditions of vulnerability are projected to worsen as the average global temperature continues to rise, and to address these challenges there must be urgent and assertive action.

UNREVISED
Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Caroni East, your original speaking time is now spent. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to wind up your contribution if you wish.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Thank you, I will. Thank you. So, Madam Speaker, as a small island state heavily impacted by soaring temperatures, rising waters and coastal erosion, this Government remains tardy with respect to its outlined goals. The Government has not reported to the nation on any of the targets indicated in the National Climate Change Policy, and it is fair to say that there are no measurable achievements.

There are no indications that the objective of a 30 per cent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2030 is being met. This is unacceptable, especially since Trinidad and Tobago has a high carbon dioxide emission rate per capita. The Government has also not updated citizens on the cutback of carbon emissions, the reduction of plastic and other pollutants, and the replanting exercises to fight the impact of climate change. The country should be properly informed of the status of all climate change mitigation measures including the introduction of sources of new renewable energy.

I would like to take this opportunity to tell the nation that an environmental programme has been launched by the Caroni East constituency office in which my staff and myself have provided nursery plants to all post-SEA students in Caroni East.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Aptly named, “Let’s grow together”, we have delivered plants to each post-SEA student in Caroni East. So the students were asked to grow the plants and we returned one month after to see the state of these plants. The
eventual winner—and we judged them by school—was Warrenville T.I.A. School, but their students in conjunction with their dedicated principal were able to have their plants strive and prosper.

Madam Speaker, in addition to giving the students the plants, we also give them lectures on sustainability, and the SDGs, and all the UN protocols on the vital importance of growing and protecting plants, and generally upholding our environment and shielding it from further degradation. I urge the Government to examine this programme with a view to adopting it as an official exercise to be emanated throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, in the coming years we should also work towards accomplishing even loftier objectives and to meet the requirements of the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Developmental Goals. And, Madam Speaker, as we speak now climate crisis is real. It is unprecedented, urgent and it is happening right now, and this requires Trinidad and Tobago to make strong policy, economic, social and financial decisions. We have to do our part in the mitigation and adaptation to this new reality to save our islands as well as to save our livelihoods.

The Minister of Finance has said nothing on Sustainable Development Goals, nor any policy changes for climate change mitigation, climate change abatement, and nothing on disaster reduction management. The Minister is coming now with the solar park from BP Lightsource, coming soon, eight years now. That would herald a new green hydrogen economy. But what the Minister did not say is that there has been no progress for years with apparent controversy of high tariff prices, land acquisition issues as well as the possible withdrawal of T&TEC. And quite interestingly at an international level, Madam Speaker, that may have
repercussions here in Trinidad and Tobago, Shell has announced that it would be refocusing on its core oil and gas operations, under the new CEO Wael Sawan who has said that its upstream hydrocarbons business is now centre stage.

So the oil giant Shell is looking to sale options for its renewable power business, and considering a possible part sale of its green power operations to an external investor. Shell has in recent months exited offshore wind projects in Ireland and France, and it has sold its UK power retail business and said that it was seeking to sell stakes in renewable projects in India. It is also weighing selling all or part of its sonnen battery storage company acquired in 2019, and several senior Shell executives have left the low carbon and renewables division since the strategy change happened a couple of months ago, Madam Speaker. So, Madam Speaker, the 112 megawatts solar project is slated to be built by a consortium comprising bpTT, Shell and Lightsource. So I would like to ask possibly the Minister of Planning and Development to assure or to reassure the public that Shell will continue to be part of the solar park.

Madam Speaker, with regard to the Ministry of National Security, the Minister of National Security went on and on about crime as a public health issue, and I would just like to touch on that very quickly. Basically there are four key steps in designing a public health response to any threat of well-being and these are: identifying and monitoring the extent of the problem, identifying the cause of the problem, formulating and testing ways of dealing with the problem, as well as applying widely the measures that are to be found. And these measures can be primary, secondary or tertiary and can take the following forms, and I am trying to advise the Minister here.

Universal interventions: These are approaches aimed at large groups of
people, usually the general population, without regard to individual risks, and examples would include violence prevention curriculum delivered to all pupils at the secondary school level or a community-wide media campaign, selective interventions: These are approaches aimed at those considered to be at heightened risk or perpetrating violence. An example would be giving parenting skills to parents of low income families, right? And then there are indicated interventions, and these are approaches aimed at those who have already demonstrated violent tendencies or behaviours, such as persons that have done domestic violence.

So, Madam Speaker, instead of a thousand more police officers, what we really needed was a thousand more social workers and student counsellors in our schools to identify antisocial behaviour and to treat with it according to the guidelines of their profession. This was done during the Partnership government under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, and it will be returned under her tenure as Prime Minister in 2025. Madam Speaker, what is needed is prevention rather than cure. In some jurisdictions when the number of officers was greatly expanded, many who entered the police force were not ideally suited for the job and we must be ever so vigilant of those who we bestow the powers of law enforcement.

Madam Speaker, in the very little time that I have left, as I usually do, I am asking the Minister of Health to look into amending the Dental Profession Act and allowing the prosecution of non-registered persons performing dentistry. As it stands there is nothing in law preventing a person who is not duly registered or enrolled to practice dentistry, from importing, gaining access or being in possession of drugs, dental equipment and paraphernalia pertaining to dentistry. The Dental Council of Trinidad and Tobago is asking for this, and they have been asking for this for many, many years, Madam Speaker. It is in the public interest
to restrict importation access and possession of dental drugs equipment and other associated items to only dental professionals, dental schools, registered suppliers, hospital, health clinics and appropriate arms of the Government.

So, Madam Speaker, with those few words, I thank you for your indulgence and I thank you for allowing me to contribute in this year’s debate. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for La Brea.

The Minister of Labour (Hon. Stephen Mc Clashie): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it is a privilege to stand before you here today as part of a team that is invested in the well-being of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and the continuation of a human-centred recovery post-COVID-19. Our people it is said are our most precious resource and the Government is cognizant of the need to nurture them and provide them with tools and resources they need in order to lead fulfilling and sustainable lives, so that they can be productive members of society especially in the face of an evolving working environment. Before I begin my discourse and the work being done specifically at the Ministry of Labour, may I take this opportunity to thank the men and women of the La Brea constituency for having confidence in me to represent them in this august body here today. I would also like to thank the Prime Minister for the confidence shown in me in terms of his decision to allow me to serve as Minister of Labour in his Cabinet.

As I begin, allow me to commend my colleague, the Minister of Finance and his team. The preparation of the budget is a herculean task which requires not only the examination of national economic, social and environmental realities, but also the realities that exist globally. In his presentation aptly entitled, Building
Capacity for Diversification and Growth, the Minister of Finance and his team have once again managed to expertly integrate local, regional and international conditions and create policies which will generate sustainable growth and development of our economy.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Labour remains committed to achieving people-centred progress in alignment with Government’s official policy framework, the National Development Strategy Vision 2030, the Roadmap to Recovery reports, the Community Recovery report, and the International Labour Organization standards. Our initiatives aim to empower the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago through the promotion of decent work, industrial peace and the facilitation of employment as we work towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8:

“…decent work…and…economic growth”.

We at the Ministry of Labour believe that a more educated and empowered labour force that evolves with the rapidly changing world of work, will serve as the basis for Trinidad and Tobago’s economic sustainability. Madam Speaker, part of the effort—and I turn my attention now to the increase in minimum wages. As part of the effort to increase productivity and social and economic inclusion, that resulted in the decision to increase the national minimum wage from $17.50 per hour to $20.50 per hour with effect from January 01, 2024. This move certainly did not come as a surprise.

In the lead up to the budget, I made it clear that a recommendation was before Cabinet and that the Government was actively considering it.

5.15 p.m.

I can assure you, Madam Speaker, that the increase was not pulled out of a hat, but
was based on a recommendation from our minimum wage-fixing machinery, in this instance, the Minimum Wages Board, which is established under the Minimum Wages Act, Chap. 88:04. The increase in the minimum wage helps to guarantee that those at the lowest end of the earning scale can meet their basic needs. It also protects the vulnerable workers, including non-unionized workers, from exploitation by their employers.

A rise in the minimum wage was bandied about at $30 and some at $25, and there was and is a lot of discussion in the national place with regard to whether it was effective and a good increase or not. Some proffered that a minimum wage of $30 would have been better suited to create a living wage rather than a minimum wage. But this, Madam Speaker, would have created significant pressure and demands for wage increases by entry-level positions as well as low and semi-skilled workers. Some middle-level positions would now find their remuneration package in close proximity to the minimum wage. Contract workers will increase wage demands, even though they exist in higher brackets currently in order to maintain the differentials. Government employees, given that the State uses minimum wage as a reference point in computation of salary structures, would always seek under such a wage increase to have their voices heard. We would also put some pressure on the National Insurance Fund recipients who would also demand higher wages. A worker at a minimum wage of $30 will cost $2,000 more to their employer every four weeks.

Imagine a business place that has contributed to the community by employing 10 young persons. This means an additional $20,000 has to be found. The logical expectation would be that should the business be unable to withstand this shock, they will reduce staff and increase the workload for those that remain.
The alternative for many business may not be bright and they may actually have to close down altogether.

The decision of $20.50 is responsible from the perspective of economic realities. There are sectors that can afford to pay persons more but there are many sectors that simply cannot afford it. The decision would result in an outcome that on the face of it seems to have the workers in mind, yet in reality, because of the expected job losses, works against workers’ best interest.

On the face of a 71 per cent increase in the minimum wage in Trinidad and Tobago, from 17.50 to $30 per hour, it may benefit those workers that are retained by their employers but it will also pose several problems, namely job loss. A large percentage of the labour force are employed by small and medium-sized businesses. Many operate in sectors with slim profit margins. They may also be facing stiff competition from larger players that possess the ability to absorb wage increases, given their financial buffers and economies of scale.

As a result, the smaller players in the market may simply not be able to pass on the wage increases to consumers by jacking up prices of goods and services. It may also be manifested via reduced working hours, hiring freezes, staff cuts or retrenchment. That level of wage increase also produces inflationary pressure. It is easy to deduce that a 71 per cent rise in minimum wage will contribute to inflationary pressure on the price of goods and services. Simply put, businesses will be required to treat with increased labour force and once the market allows for it, they will pass on their higher wages to their consumers. Additionally, a rise in prices will erode the purchasing power of families. The benefit of a wage hike will therefore be lost.

Also, industries reliant on exports and those facing competition from
imported goods may become uncompetitive, potentially leading to reduced economic growth and employment opportunities in the long term. Many who propose a higher increase seemingly fail to take into account the overall economic conditions, the ability of businesses to adapt, and their accompanying policies and measures which will be required to mitigate the potential negative impacts.

I move on, Madam Speaker, to investments in technical and vocational education and training. I was also delighted to hear from the Minister of Finance a focus on youth development and training, especially as it relates to technical and vocational education and training, TVET. The Minister of Finance mentioned investments and expansions in numerous programmes and most importantly, the building of teacher capacity levels in the technical and vocational institutions. TVET is a gateway to opportunities, providing persons with highly demanded skills for the current job market. It also enables those who have found themselves without jobs, new careers in business opportunities through reskilling and upskilling. This is something close to my heart and I fully support these initiatives, given that it will facilitate further job creation.

Industrial relations: I was also glad to hear, Madam Speaker, the directive of the Minister of Finance to pay those public officers who accepted the CPO’s 4 per cent wage increase, the moneys owed to them by December 2023. Many of these workers would have been working on 2013 salaries and I am certain this gesture will go far in fulfilling their immediate needs and to further enhance their quality of life, especially with the payment of arrears by the end of 2023. Like the Minister of Finance, I look forward to the early determination of the Chief Personnel Officer’s settlement offer by the four remaining unions.

Increase in retirement age: Finally, the Minister of Finance gave a clear
signal that instead of increasing the rate of contribution by employers and employees with respect to the national insurance contributions, the strategy being considered is an increase in the retirement age from 60 to 65 years. What I would like to say is that this decision will not be taken unilaterally. The conversation has already begun and consultations are being completed, but we are all aware that some action will need to be taken in order to ensure the sustainability of the National Insurance System.

As I now move to the Ministry of Labour, Madam Speaker, I believe it is important to look at the prevailing labour market conditions, globally as well as in Trinidad and Tobago, in order to provide a context in which we operate. The International Labour Organization in its 2022 labour report noted that:

“The economies of Latin America and the Caribbean continued on the recovery path which began in 2021…”

In 2023, the region has seen the return of pre-pandemic employment rates. However, the adage of not painting everything with a broad brush comes to mind as this regional employment rate does not reflect the individual situations specific to the countries being considered.

According to the “International Labour Organization Monitor on the world of work”, eleventh edition, while global employment in 2023 is expected to fall below pre-pandemic levels to 191 million, which corresponds to global unemployment rate of 5.3 per cent, the low-income countries remain far behind in the recovery process. According to the ILO report entitled “World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2023”, the labour market continues to be negatively impacted by external shocks, which include, on top of the impacts of the pandemic:

“Emerging geopolitical attentions,”—and—“the Ukraine conflict…”

UNREVISIED
The effect of the aforementioned can be seen in the current cost of living crisis and the decreases in earning potential and livelihoods worldwide, particularly in developing nations.

The IMF expects global gross domestic product to slow to 3 per cent in both 2023 and 2024, down from 3.5 per cent in 2022. The prediction, as always hides, a considerable gap between the advanced and emerging economies. Madam Speaker, as many of my counterparts, Trinidad and Tobago is no exception to these inferences. However, through sound economic policy and favourable terms of trade, Trinidad and Tobago has continued to weather the storms. As the Minister of Finance would have mentioned, data from the Central Statistical Office for the second quarter of 2023 showed improvements in all major indicators of economic growth, such as GDP, the unemployment rate and the labour force participation rate.

Total unemployment showed a significant improvement of 3.7 per cent in second quarter of 2023, compared to 4.5 per cent in the same period in 2022. There was also a slight increase in the number of persons with jobs from 562,000 in the second quarter of 2022 to 587-plus in second quarter of 2023. This was reflected in an increase in the labour force participation rate to 56.2 per cent, up from 55.2 per cent in 2023, and 54.4 per cent in the second quarter in 2022.

Madam Speaker, in 2021, the ILO called for a human-centred approach to recovery. This call remains relevant today and it is something that has always been incorporated into the work of the Government as well as the Ministry of Labour. In 2022, the ILO went a step further calling for diversity and inclusion in the workplace, leading towards greater productivity, innovation and employee well-being. I must add that our agenda at the Ministry of Labour nurtures diversity and
inclusivity, where they have been intertwined with on-going responsibilities and developmental initiatives.

5.30 p.m.

Strengthening our labour market information system: It is in this context, Madam Speaker, that the Ministry of Labour continues to pursue our mandate to facilitate the provision of decent work for citizens in Trinidad and Tobago. I am a firm believer in data and evidence to guide our decision making. When someone approaches me and says, “unemployment is skyrocketing”, I can understand that this may be a personal experience, but is it true? Does the data confirm this? It is therefore critical to have a repository of data and information that can be analysed so gaps can be identified, recommendations can be made, and solutions found. The labour market information system provide an essential basis for employment and labour policies and inform the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of such policies that can better be focused and targeted to current and future needs of our citizens.

This is why the Ministry of Labour is continuously striving to strengthen our labour market information systems. Madam Speaker, we are attempting to eliminate situations of incomplete information within the labour market. One such initiative is the job vacancy survey for both the public and private sectors. I am happy to state that the data collection process has been completed for the public service—public service civil—excuse me—has been completed for the public service, civil service survey and the report is in its final stages. The data collection phase for the private sector survey has been completed and the report is being prepared.
The data gathered from these surveys will not only inform our needs to identify gaps in the demand for labour, but it will inform all users of such data in their policy development and decision making. One such entity is tertiary education providers in couching their programmes and courses to address skill needs and gaps. In the coming year, Madam Speaker, I would like to state that the Ministry of Labour will be intensifying our surveys to gather vital data on the municipal corporations, the regional health authorities, and protective services, thereby expanding our database of demand side information.

The Ministry has also sought to ensure that the relevant staff receive appropriate training. Earlier this year, a number of them were privileged to participate in a CARICOM workshop, and later this month they will be exposed to an Inter-American Development Bank workshop to build capacity in identifying skill needs in the Trinidad and Tobago labour market. Madam Speaker, the Government understands that sustainable and accessible employment is a major driver of economic growth and development. It is the lifeblood of the citizens, and provide an avenue to support themselves and their families. It is for this very reason that the Ministry of Labour continues to play a critical role in facilitating decent work opportunities for job seekers.

The Ministry of Labour facilitates employment by providing the necessary infrastructure and enabling environment for job seekers and employers to find each other. The enabling environment is created through two of our main services, the first being the National Employment Service (NES) and the second, the On the-Job Training Programme. It is important to note that the findings and recommendations derived from the job vacancy survey mentioned earlier, will also serve to inform and strengthen these services.
5.35 p.m.

Madam Speaker, the National Employment Service is a free employment service, where employers and ask jobseekers can register, so those looking for work can match with those seeking workers.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry created an online portal dubbed the National Employment Online Network (NEON), which will allow both employers and job seekers to register with NES online. This portal will provide more accessibility and facilitation on the platform.

The NEON programme, Madam Speaker, will provide an avenue for those seeking jobs and those who can provide jobs to meet on a platform and in a portal where they can exchange information and move the process along. Think of this as a free digital recruitment agency, which works to allow efficient and convenient connections between employers and job seekers. Therefore, I encourage all employers and job seekers, including persons with disabilities, to sign up, using the website neon.labour@got.tt, when it comes on stream.

One of the issues that we have with such a system is that, what it will require really is for people to use the system more in order for it to become effective. We have a number of online agencies in Trinidad and Tobago, and we have a number of Ministries who try to match jobs with applicants. The more people that use the NEON system, the faster it will become effective and the quicker we will be able to transition from the time someone needs a body on board, to when that body actually gets on board. So I urge those, all in this room and in the general public, to take advantage of that system.

The portal also links citizens to the webpage for one of our most popular programmes, the Commonwealth Caribbean Seasonal Agricultural Programme,
commonly referred to as the Farm Programme. Approximately 900 persons participate in this programme each year. I am happy to say that recently the Ministry was granted approval to strengthen the programme by enhancing our presence in Canada and exploring more gainful opportunities there.

One of the things that places Trinidad and Tobago behind in such a programme is that we do not have enough people on the ground in Canada to make contact with the various farms and to get our people out there. If we compare Trinidad to, say, Jamaica or Mexico, Jamaica has over 8,000 or 9,000 people on that programme; Mexico probably 23,000. So I took it to Cabinet and it was approved; a programme for expanding the office to allow us to make further reaches, not only in the agricultural programme, but on a number of other programmes that exist currently.

In fact, Madam Speaker, in November we will be hosting the Farm Programme, as it is known. We have an annual meeting. And this year we will be hosting the meeting in Trinidad and Tobago. And we will be seeking to involve a number of agencies and Ministries to help us push that particular—to find the resources and to ensure that we sell Trinidad and Tobago as an acceptable place where the farm workers and the farmers could come and recruit our nationals. The Farm Programme can also be described as a success, as many of the participants who would have gone would have benefitted tremendously from being involved in that programme.

So, we have been trying to get—additionally, while the main focus of the NES is the facilitation of job matching, through our numerous outreach programmes, we have also, and do prepare, job seekers for the world of work by improving their marketability by assisting in résumé writing, interview skills, and
guidance on professional dress, et cetera.

During the period October 2022 to April 2023, the NES held world of work seminars and career fairs assisted almost 2,435 in preparation for the work environment. Madam Speaker, the NES is not the only unit that prepares persons for the workplace. Perhaps, our most well-known and far-reaching programme is the On-the-Job Training programme, which continues to grow and improve. This year we celebrated 21 years of preparing young nationals between the ages of 16 and 35 for the world of work. This is 21 years of providing participants with the relevant work experience so that they are able to access sustainable employment in their field of interest.

One of the things we try to do at the On-the-Job Training is to match people’s academic qualifications to that of the work that they will be performing. Too often people come to the OJT with the mindset of getting a job so that we could “eat ah food” and that is not what the OJT is about. The OJT is about taking people with specific qualifications and matching them with jobs so that at the end of the 24 months they would actually be able to participate in work for which they were trained. Too often, if we do it differently, 24 months will pass and somebody with a chemical degree who worked in a clerical position would be no better off in their engineering field. And, therefore, we would have wasted money, time and effort in allowing them to “eat ah food”, but not preparing them for the future. And, therefore, for some of my colleagues who sometimes get frustrated when they ask for OJTs to be placed, I urge you that sometimes it takes a little longer to place people based on the qualifications that they have, and where we feel they can in fact benefit. So, be patient.

During the period 2022 to August 2023, we had about 5,000 persons in the
programme, approximately, and we recruited 2,815 during that period. You will expect that after 24 months that every month in fact people exit the programme and new people come into the programme. So although it is 5,000 in one year, approximately, we sometimes recruit. The recruiting and the numbers do not always match because we move people from month to month.

One of the good things about the On-the-Job Training is in many instances, persons who spend 24 months within an organization are often offered positions of permanency when their training period is completed. One of the things we try to encourage is for those who would have made an impression in the workplace, that the employers would keep them and not release them.

Now, there is little catch-22 in that, in that sometimes because the OJT may be low in cost or free to some people, they find it more expedient to get another set of OJTs rather than to facilitate those who have been there. We urge people, as part of the training, yes, we acknowledge and we appreciate the training that you provide, but this is about creating and trying to create a sustainable environment for getting young people to be placed in meaningful jobs. So, while we recruit additional OJTs, I urge you to hire some of them also who would have met the particular performance criteria.

So, one of the things that we have also done in the OJT programme, as we continuously evolve, is really to partner with those organizations that would like to be a little more involved in our process. So, to that end, we would have signed some Memoranda of Understanding with a number of training providers, including the National Energy Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago, the National Gas Company, and the MIC Institute of Technology. And this is all in keeping to better streamline the programme to meet the needs of the trainees.
I turn my attention now to the Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperative Studies. Madam Speaker, the establishment of the college is well in keeping with the commitment of the People’s National Movement since its founding to inclusive development.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Mc Clashie: This institution was founded in 1966, making it one of the oldest tertiary education institutions in the region. It was born out of the vision of Dr. Eric Williams to ensure that all citizens of the new nation of Trinidad and Tobago, in this case workers and their representatives, had a fair chance and a viable place at the table.

The Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperative Studies started off as vocational school in the mid-60s in a radically different environment to the present one. The college has transformed and continues to transform itself as it adjusts to the dynamic world of work and an equally dynamic higher education ecosystem, while remaining true to its moorings.

Madam Speaker, when I assumed this office, I gave the college a mandate that it had to redouble its efforts to anticipate the needs of the changing world of work and within its resources to provide teaching and learning solutions and research to support working people in their quest for justice and equity. The Ministry of Labour, for its part, has invested in building the infrastructure of the college. We have paid particular attention to investments in the information technology infrastructure, allowing the college to position itself to take advantage of e-learning market opportunities and extend its reach regionally and internationally.

I also mandated the college to ensure that, on issues related to the world of
work and the development of working people, it is in a position to make evidence-based contributions. I am quite pleased that the college has taken up this challenge. This institution is a shining example of innovation and resilience.

5.50 p.m.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the college was forced to realign its strategies and structure to full online delivery programmes. This was not a hindrance. Within three weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, protocols had been announced in April 2020. The college was able to successfully implement its online mode of teaching and learning. Not only that, Madam Speaker, the college has been able to capitalize on this advantage and use this opportunity to expand its reach in our neighbouring islands. I am proud to state that the college has now been able to attract students from Antigua and Barbuda, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Guyana, and Anguilla, and its enrollment of regional students continues to grow.

In the last three years, Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperative Studies through its staff, has done a number of things: they have published three books with major international academic publishers; they have published a refereed academic journal; they have partnered with the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Population Fund, the Caribbean Congress of Labour, the Caribbean Employers Confederation, Public Service International, and the Open Society Foundation to conduct research or develop policies in the areas of just transition, the social and solidarity movement, cooperative development and gender-based violence.

The college has also hosted five international academic conferences which have drawn participation from around the region and the world. More recently, the college in recognition of its work, was engaged by the Caribbean Development
Bank to conduct ground-breaking research into labour market and differentials in 15 countries in the Caribbean. This pioneering work will provide social partners in the region with detailed analysis and a data set specific to the Caribbean world of work for the first time.

I take this opportunity to commend the college for facilitating events such as these that allow for the sharing of views and information among academia, labour representatives, government representatives, non-governmental organizations, employer representatives, and so much more which can greatly assist as we navigate into the future of work.

Promoting industrial peace. Madam Speaker, as I speak to the future of work, I want to assure the public that the Ministry has not lost sight of its role in the promotion of industrial peace in the context of the evolving work environment. Industrial peace is essential for the sound operations of organizations in society, as well as the well-being of all workers. It is also a significant driver of economic growth, development and sustainability. It is therefore something that the Ministry of Labour takes very seriously.

The ongoing work of the Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy Division of the Ministry promotes the well-being of industrial relations climate that encourages dialogue amongst the social partners. The CAAD as we fondly refer to them, has also adopted a proactive approach to creating and maintaining an environment conducive to meaningful social dialogue. This innovative approach actively seeks to minimize the amount of grievances experienced and disputes reported across all sectors in the economy. I can report that between October ’22 and June ’23, 743 trade disputes were reported to the Ministry of Labour, and 614 were disposed, meaning, they were settled, withdrawn, or referred to the Industrial Court. Further,
it is the firm commitment of the Ministry of Labour to promote an environment in the workplace where each individual is safe, respected, and his or her human rights are preserved and promoted.

To this end, the Ministry of Labour works extensively to ensure that employees and employers are educated on their rights and responsibilities in the workplace. We try to fill knowledge gaps by engaging in activities which are information-rich and accessible. I expect that you and my colleagues have seen our—

**Madam Speaker:** Member for La Brea, your original speaking time is now spent. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to complete your contribution. You may proceed.

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

**Hon. S. Mc Clashie:** I expect Madam Speaker, that you all would have seen our work on the social media and television ads, and appearances on television talk shows and radio talk shows actually pushing the mandate of the Ministry of Labour. Just recently we held two child labour mall caravans, one in Trincity and the other at Gulf City, for which we brought out members of the Inspectorate Division to speak to people on how to identify child labour issues and to deal with it.

We also, Madam Speaker, as I fast forward, we also take—we have also acknowledged that the migration issue in Trinidad and Tobago is also important, and we recognize that we have a number of migrant workers coming from Venezuela, and to this end we would have rewritten all our policies and all our brochures and so on, in Spanish, so that these migrants are able to read and initiate any issues that affect their rights. Moreover, Madam Speaker, we recently
launched a hotline, 800-CAAD, which provides trilingual avenues, English, Spanish, and French for persons seeking to address sexual harassment in the workplace.

We have also focused, Madam Speaker, on safe and healthy working environments and to this end we have—and our OSH arm has been working assiduously to bring all our regulations and to improve their level of service delivery to a point that we can now investigate matters being reported within 24 hours of receipt of such reports. We also take our health issues at the workplace very, very, seriously, and we recognize because people spend so much of their lives in the workplace, in fact, they spend more time at work than they do at home, that we need to create a framework that would allow them to work and operate in environments that are very safe.

So, we have created a number of workplace policies where we try to enforce good working standards within the workplace. In the short time I have, Madam Speaker, it would be remiss of me not to touch on the issue of legislation and the fact that in 2023/2024 we can expect to lay before this Parliament a number—at least three or four pieces of legislation that we have been working on, which are at different stages of development.

One of the issues I have recognized is that we keep saying that the world of work is changing and it is changing quickly, and in reading a number of these legislative documents, we seem to always be playing catch-up. Simply put, things change so fast, that by the time you write legislation on one thing, something else happens and it makes that obsolete. So it becomes very difficult to—when we listen to people in the labour environment, and the amount of things that are changing and we are writing legislation for the workplace when the workplace as

UNREVISED
defined is now—could be any place, could be home, it could be in your car, and all the ensuing difficulties that come with just defining what is a workplace.

And when you define what a workplace is, then you ask questions like, in this workplace if you get in an accident, is it an industrial accident or is it a personal accident? You ask questions as, if you are working, do you have good ergonomic chairs and desks? You ask yourself, and all these things have to be written and considered when writing legislation, and we just always seem to be playing catch-up in that regard, but we have to start someplace, and we will.

So, we have before us right now the Trade Union Act, we have a set of OSH Regulations, we have the Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperative Studies issues and so on, so we are pretty much in tune with what is necessary and what we are doing.

Additionally, we will continue to work on other pieces of legislation like HIV and AIDS in the workplace, employment standards, sexual harassment, and so on. The Ministry will continue the focus on people-centred development and I encourage our stakeholders to join us in our journey. We welcome meaningful social dialogue with workers, employers, and social partners. We understand that there is always need to have difficult conversations, but it is in the context of difficult conversations that we arrive at meaningful solutions. We need to not sweep things below the carpet but to speak our truth in earnest and to navigate our paths towards the realization of our goals and objectives.

In closing, Madam Speaker, I would say that the Ministry is dedicated to achieving decent work, industrial peace and opportunities for all. Together with the social partners and other stakeholders, we look forward to continuing the work we have started in building a more resilient, innovative, and creative workforce.
that is characterized by inclusivity, productivity and versatility. Indeed, under this Government, I can truly say that the future of work for Trinidad and Tobago is undoubtedly bright. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva North.

Mr. Ravi Ratiram (Couva North): Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker, for this opportunity to participate in this debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2024) Bill, 2023. Madam Speaker, as I begin I want to applaud the contribution made by the distinguished Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Siparia, on presenting a very detailed, articulate and comprehensive budget response.

In her response, Madam Speaker, the hon. Leader of the Opposition highlighted the pain of our citizens and the pain that citizens are experiencing in every sector across this country. Whether it is the pain from the escalating crime situation plaguing our society; whether it is the pain from the poor supply of water affecting almost every community in the country; whether it is the pain of poor infrastructure, of bad roads, or poorly maintained drains and rivers resulting in several homes and gardens being flooded out; whether it is the pain they are experiencing in their pockets due to the increasing cost of food and living expenses; the pain of not knowing where their next meal is coming from; Madam Speaker, our citizens are in pain.

6.05 p.m.

They are hurting, and this budget presented by the hon. Minister of Finance fails on every front to address the pain that our citizens are facing. It is a testimony that this Government remains clueless, with no plans and no consideration for the well-being of the citizens of this country.

UNREVISED
Madam Speaker, before I get into my substantive contribution, I also would like to take this opportunity to thank my political leader for having the confidence in me to afford me the opportunity to shadow a very important Ministry, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I also want to take the opportunity to thank the constituents of Couva North for giving me this opportunity to represent the issues affecting the various communities across the constituency. I also take this opportunity to congratulate all my colleagues on this side who have already contributed towards this debate and bringing some clarity to a budget that really lacks the touch and the pulse of the constituents, and really was not in touch with the issues affecting the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, as we examine the 2024 budget presented by the hon. Minister of Finance, along with the supporting documents, we see once again repeated broken promises, which never materialized, promises that never materialized. This is what it represented and this is what they stand for, broken promises year after year after year. Madam Speaker, as we take a closer look at the budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, along with the history of these allocations, we see how little this Government really cares for the agriculture and for the fisheries sector. Madam Speaker, it was really sad and disappointing to listen to the Minister of Finance boast about:

“...actively seeking to expand agricultural production.”

That is the words of the Minister:

“...actively seeking to expand agricultural production.”

—when the actions of this Government have been the total opposite.
On October 05, 2015, the Minister of Finance, upon delivering his first budget presentation, stated, and I quote:

“We must do all that we can to expand agricultural production to reduce our reliance on imported food products.”

However, last Monday, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of October, this year, 2023, the Minister of Finance, upon delivering this year’s budget, stated, and I quote:

“Madam Speaker, the agriculture sector has been on a decline, recording a low level of less than 2 per cent of Gross Domestic Product over the last five years.”

When we look at the results of how the Government has been reducing our reliance on imported food products, as stated by the Minister of Finance eight years ago, the Minister shed light in his presentation last Monday when he said, and I quote once more:

“Regrettably, food imports per annum have been escalating, reaching over $5 billion in 2019—2021, with $7.3 billion in 2022.”

So, eight years ago in 2015, the Minister of Finance asked in his first budget presentation if the country was benefiting from an agricultural sector geared towards achieving food security. Madam Speaker, eight years later, we are facing a food security crisis, with declining food production and a significantly increasing food import bill, now at an all-time high of $7.3 billion.

Madam Speaker, this Minister of Finance, on Monday, in his presentation inserted that the Government is:

“…actively seeking to expand…”—agriculture.

This is quite ironic because as we look at our different crop production levels, it seems as though it is the opposite of what he said he was trying to do, and the
information is there. The data is in the documents that we received, the *Review of the Economy*, Table 6: Domestic Production of Agricultural Products per 1,000 kilogrammes.

And if we look at the production of root crops, in 2020, we had 11,053,000 kilogrammes. However, when we look at the figures of 2022, that fell to 5,844,000 kilogrammes, Madam Speaker, a decline of 47 per cent. When we look at copra, 2020 and 2022 figures were similar but if we just go one year back to 2019, we see copra production in this country from 103,000 kilogrammes, falling to 56,000 kilogrammes, a decline of 44 per cent over that four-year period.

Rice production: When we look at the 2022 production of rice, 734,000 kilogrammes in 2020, but then in 2022, rice production has fallen to 125,000 kilogrammes. And if we just go back a few years earlier to 2017, rice production was actually at 1,619,000; 2022, fallen to 125. Madam Speaker, that is a 92 per cent decline in the production of rice here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Vegetable production: In 2020, vegetables, Madam Speaker, was at 30,257,000 kilogrammes. In 2022, vegetables fell to 20,000,720, a decline of 13 per cent. And I can go on and on, Madam Speaker, this is the *Review of the Economy* presented by this Minister of Finance.

So, while this uninformed, unaware and right out clueless Minister—that the way to reduce food import bill is to tax everything, tax food items, tax fruits that are recommended for healthier lifestyle—this Minister brought additional taxes on fruits, fruits that are recommended by Dr. Boodoe and Dr. Ragbir, the MP for Fyzabad and other doctors, that recommended for healthier lifestyle, I want to call upon the Minister to tax his little brain just a little bit and review the figures presented in the *Review of the Economy*. Upon doing so, Madam Speaker, the hon.
Minister will recognize that the solution lies not in taxing, but in solving the issues affecting the farming community and boosting cultivation of primary production.

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

**Mr. R. Ratiram:** Madam Speaker, as we examine the figures for agriculture in the *Draft Estimates Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* for fiscal 2024, we see, Madam Speaker, that there has been a $108 million increase in the allocation between last year and this year; sounds good, something to celebrate. However, Madam Speaker, when we look to see where this $108 million increase was actually allocated, what we see, Madam Speaker, is that $85 million have already been assigned to pay loans via transfer to state enterprises. So out of that $108 million increase, $85 million is already gone towards paying loans.

As we examine the allocation of last fiscal term, we see the Minister of Finance announced that the allocation of the Development Programme under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries was going to be, for last fiscal term, a whooping $110 million. Madam Speaker, that reminded me of when the previous People’s Partnership administration was in government, when the Minister of Food Production had spent, not allocated, but spent $139 million towards development projects to uplift agriculture here in Trinidad and Tobago. That was so, Madam Speaker, because that was the kind of investment you would expect from a government that truly cared about agriculture and the food bill of this country, because the country was being run by the progressive and dynamic leadership, the most compassionate, performance-driven, result-oriented and the best Prime Minister this country has ever had—

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

**Mr. R. Ratiram:** —the Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar.
However, Madam Speaker, when we look at the Revised Estimate for fiscal 2023, we see that the sum of $110 million was reduced to a measly $18 million. They reduced the Development Programme by $92 million. That is 84 per cent of the original allocation and yet, they do not understand why the agriculture sector has been declining? It is because they are the ones who are systematically destroying the entire industry—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—and discouraging any new interests or investments.

Last month, I raised in a Sunday morning press briefing that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries was owing farmers over $7 million in subsidies for this last fiscal term. I understand after that, they went and paid a $4 million release to farmers but they are still owing farmers over $3 million in subsidies for last fiscal term. Madam Speaker, I will say a little more on that as I go down into my contribution, but as we take a closer look at this $18 million, that we felt as though something was happening, we see acquiring land for non-agricultural purposes, which did not have an allocation for the fiscal term, received a Revised Estimate of $8,135,000. That was acquiring land for non-agricultural purposes. So what that means, Madam Speaker, is that the actual allocation for projects meant to develop agriculture for fiscal 2023 from $110 million, it was only $10 million utilized; very sad and disappointing, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, as I move on the agricultural access roads, agricultural access roads have been the lifelines of a farming communities, connecting gardens to market and facilitating the transportation of input factors, goods and produce. Unfortunately, over the past eight years, under this uncaring Government, these roads have suffered from a lack of maintenance, upkeep and investment, becoming
destroyed by machinery, rain, flood, erosion, landslides or overgrown by bushes, making it increasingly difficult for farmers to access their gardens and to transport their produce. As a result, Madam Speaker, we have seen farmers abandoning their gardens and exiting the agriculture sector.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance came into this House last Monday claiming that 240 kilometres of agricultural access roads were going to be rehabilitated in the upcoming year. Development Project 09/003/01/ J./001: Provision of Agricultural Access Roads to Targeted Commodities and Strategic Crops was allocated $10 million for fiscal 2023. However, Madam Speaker, only $270,000 was utilized to rehabilitate, and listen to this one, to rehabilitate only 1.8 kilometres; very sad, Madam Speaker. That is the PNM style of performance.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

6.20p.m.

Madam Speaker, in the constituency of Couva North, there are agricultural access roads in Felicity, Chandernagore, Korea, Waterloo, Brickfield, Orange Valley, Union and Exchange Village. I want to ask the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, or even the Minister in the Ministry, why were any of these roads not maintained or rehabilitated, taking into consideration that the Ministry had $10 million just sitting there? And if it was another case of geographic discrimination, which our local government councillors continue to face from this PNM Government, then why was it not utilized—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please.

Madam Speaker: I will give a little leeway.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mr. R. Ratiram: And I ask the question, why was this sum of money not utilized to repair agricultural access roads in other constituencies? We have farmers across the entire country who are crying out for their agricultural access roads to be rehabilitated.

Madam Speaker, I had written to the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries on access roads in the constituency of Couva North. I completed site visits with the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, highlighting to him the poor, dilapidated condition of these agricultural access roads, Madam Speaker. Today, I want to ask the Minister, what has really been preventing him or his Ministry from providing proper agricultural access roads to these farmlands in the Couva North constituency? On that site visit, Madam Speaker, we identified issues with the Randy Carter Bridge, which eventually collapsed into the Caparo River. This bridge provided access to farmers to access their agricultural plots.

Earlier in this year, the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, he gave the undertaking that this bridge was scheduled to be reconstructed, however, to date, our farmers continue to feel the pain of not having access to the agricultural plots and the bridge remains absent. And I am, once again, calling upon the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to seriously look into the reconstruction of this Randy Carter Bridge to assist the farming community.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, when the Minister of Finance stated in his 2024 budget presentation that:

“we are strengthening the praedial larceny squad to reduce praedial larceny in all farming districts.”
—that was nothing but lip service, and the Minister must be exposed for coming year after year after year, pretending that resources will be given to deal with the problems of praedial larceny. This is an issue which has been allowed to get out of hand, out of control to the extent where just a stone’s throw away, right behind the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries’ office in Soogrim Trace, farmers were beaten and robbed of their equipment, produce and vehicles.

Madam Speaker, you see, the Minister of Finance, after making his bold, hypocritical pronouncement on Monday has in fact cut the project for the praedial larceny squad from $9,054,000 last year down to $3 million this year. In fact, Madam Speaker, how they treated this development project exposes the Minister and their “Promises Never Materialize” Government—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—for the incompetent track record in dealing with praedial larceny. Out of that $9,054,000 allocated, Madam Speaker, in the Revised Estimates, not one cent was spent after numerous promises to have vehicles. They promised since the beginning of this year that they were procuring vehicles. They were going to upgrade the building and the facilities, not one cent in that Development Programme in the Revised Estimates.

Madam Speaker, let us delve into the difference between the UNC proactive and farmer-centred approach to dealing with praedial larceny and the lazy PNM “don’t care” response. I make reference to a newspaper article entitled—a *Guardian* newspaper article entitled, “Praedial Larceny…lack manpower and resources”, by Shaliza Hassanali, dated the 21st of the fifth, 2023, and the article states:

“Seven years after a performance assessment on the Praedial Larceny
Squad…recommended expansion of the unit to enhance food security and sustainability in T&T, there is still a lack of officers and resources. This has left…”—the—“…farmers at the mercy of criminals.”

Madam Speaker:

“The…performance assessment…”—report—
“…was drafted by the Office of Law Enforcement Policy… It outlined 44 recommendations for the…”—praedial larceny—“…but senior…”—officials when contacted by the Guardian newspaper were unable to—“…say if any of…”—those recommendations were—“…implemented…”—up to—“…seven years later.”

The article continued:

“In March 2013 Cabinet agreed to the establishment of the…”—praedial larceny squad—“…to operate in the eastern, northern, central and southern divisions.” To date—“…officers operate from only two stations North/East and South/Central.”

And, Madam Speaker, that seems to be the only combined effort the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries appeared to be speaking about when he said in his last budget contribution in the other place, and I quote:

“And I also want to say...”

This is the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in the other place quoting:

“And I also want to say...”

Madam Speaker: If you are quoting from Hansard, you need to give the reference, “eh”, please.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Okay. Thank you, Madam Speaker. This is from the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in his contribution in the other place at
The date and so on, please.

All right. So I am guided accordingly, Madam Speaker, and I will oblige and move on.

Madam Speaker, the report that I was making reference to in 2013 highlighted that the praedial larceny squad had a complement of 84 constables, 14 corporals, five sergeants, two inspectors, one ASP, one superintendent, a civilian coordinator, and eight clerical staff when it began operation. That was a total of 116 personnel. That figure has dwindled to 28 constables, three corporals, two sergeants, one ASP, and one superintendent by May this year, with no civilian coordinator or inspector while the clerical staff was reduced to one. That is now a total of 36 personnel; from 116 to 36 personnel. So, Madam Speaker, from 2013 to 2014, the praedial larceny unit which utilized the 12 vehicles, at present the officers utilize only two vehicles to conduct patrol and respond to reports after being immobile for almost two years.

Some of the recommendations with the Office of Law Enforcement Policy identified were as follows:

“The recruitment of additional officers in an effort to bring the squad to its sanctioned strength; the establishment of an annual performance measurement system;…the implementation of a robust fleet management system;…”

And of course, Madam Speaker, that was based on the fleet that they had back then, now it becomes irrelevant with only two vehicles. And the list of recommendations continues, however, Madam Speaker, it was reported in May this year that when the Guardian newspaper reached out to senior officers of the
praedial larceny squad, they could not say if any of the recommendations were implemented. Does that sound like a government who is serious about agriculture or solving the praedial larceny pains farmers have been feeling?

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

**Mr. R. Ratiram:** I do not think so, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, every year since this administration came into office, farmers have been pleading for the support of Government to clean and to desilt rivers all the way to the sea. As soon as the rain falls, whether it is in the rainy season or even in the dry season, water backs up and gardens are flooded out, with crops being left to rot. The tributaries leading to the rivers between the agricultural plots are also not being cleaned. Madam Speaker, for the past three years I have been making representation on behalf of the farmers, pleading with this Government to clean and maintain water courses all the way to the sea. Farmers have been crying out for help, however, these cries seem to be falling on deaf ears, Madam Speaker. The Leader of the Opposition during her budget response highlighted the inadequate compensation for natural disasters. In November 2022, unprecedented flooding affected farmers significantly due to the Government’s failure to manage waterways properly. Despite this, almost a year later the Government has not compensated these farmers, discouraging potential entrance into farming.

Madam Speaker, these farmers applied for compensation from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to assist them in getting back on their feet, however, listen to what these farmers received from the Ministry. I have in my hand here, Madam Speaker, several letters which farmers received from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and I just want to read to you some of
the responses; 21st of the fourth, 2023:

Dear Sir/Madam,

This is to inform you that your flood application number...two-acres vegetable, hot pepper, cucumber, ochro has been disapproved for the reason as stated hereunder. One, you are not registered on the plot; two, your application therefore does not qualify you.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER in the Chair]

Another letter:

Dear Sir/Madam,

This is to inform you that your flood application, dated 28th of the eleventh, 2022, for one-and-a-quarter acres vegetables and root crop, hot peppers and eddoes has been disapproved for reason as follows: no sign of flood damage by the inspecting officer.

Another document, another response from the Ministry:

This is to inform you that your flood application for one-and-a-half acres cucumber situated at Jerningham Junction, Cunupia, has been disapproved for the reason as stated hereunder: No sign of flood damage seen by the investigating officer, your application therefore does not qualify.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this was two, three weeks, four weeks, two months, four months after the flood receded. We have pictures, which I will not be able to display here at this time, but I will put it up on my page. We have pictures of the damage that these farmers incurred, and this is the kind of callous and insensitive and uncaring response that farmers are meted out when their fields are flooded out. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is really sad that this is how Government continues to neglect our farmers. They are not providing them with any kind of support and
they are frustrating them out of the industry.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move to the giant African snail, another threat to the agriculture sector here in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we say that the giant African snail is moving faster than this PNM Government, it is no laughing matter. After the Minister of Finance boasted last year of a $3million allocation set aside to deal with the eradication of the giant African snail, and a 5kg bounty programme was launched by the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, these Ministers take our farmers in Trinidad and Tobago here for a complete joke. The Ministry’s $5 per kilogramme bounty initiative clearly was the only idea this Government could have come up with to combat eradicating this pest, and the participation level, laughable to say at least. Out of a grand $3million allocated, only a measly $27,262 was paid out. This is a testament to the low participation in this programme. The numbers speak for itself. Mr. Deputy Speaker, farmers have rejected this programme and call for subsidized costs for chemicals. The challenge for snail collection for our farmers, especially those operating on vast acreages is monumental. Expecting farmers to manually collect these pests from vast fields is not only unrealistic but also shows a complete lack of understanding of the practicalities of farming by this Government. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to ask Minister Singh, Minister in the Ministry, where is the snail bait you had promised since last year September?

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

**Mr. R. Ratiram:** Why has the Government not provided chemicals at a subsidized cost for farmers? I recall my colleagues, MP for Chaguanas East, MP for Oropouche West had highlighted these chemicals and these pesticides that were needed; up to now no support for our farming community.

**UNREVISED**
The Giant African Snail continues to run faster than this Government covering all of Trinidad and Tobago and there is no relief for our farmers.

6.35 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move on to another very important issue in the agriculture sector troubling many farmers, and that is land tenure. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the failure of this Government to address the issue of land tenure affecting the farmers of Trinidad and Tobago has had a detrimental effect on the agriculture sector. If the Government is genuinely committed to bolstering agriculture, why is there no sense or no serious effort to provide farmers with land tenure? I recall a few occasions where farmers were being advantaged, their rights were being trampled upon and I had to get involved.

Just last year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had to call on the Government to cease and desist the wilful destruction of agricultural crops. This was highlighted in the media. This was in Vega De Oropouche, where farmer Mark Williams and his family, their crops were destroyed by the LSA, and this family for generations has been cultivating on that parcel of land. The project was eventually halted, and the project was eventually stopped.

Another similar situation occurred in the constituency of Couva North where crops of the Felicity farmers were also bulldozed to create another Land Settlement Agency project on premium agricultural land to be converted to housing. Mr. Deputy Speaker, land tenure provides that security for our farmers for them to make long-term investments into the agriculture sector and provide sustainable contributions to our nation’s food security. There are farmers whose families have been cultivating agricultural lands for generations, yet they cannot be regularized by this Government.
Mr. Deputy Speaker, I call on this Government to provide the necessary legal documentation to provide our farmers with the land tenure that they deserve. I want to tell this Government that they are already in the waving gallery, they are already on the way out, and if do not get it done, do not worry, very soon the next government, a UNC government, will get it done—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—and will provide our farmers with the necessary land tenure they deserve. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I am on this topic, I want to ask the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, what is the delay in providing the former Caroni workers with the outstanding parcels of land they have been waiting on? Mr. Deputy Speaker, we must remind this country that it is the PNM Government who shut down Caroni (1975) Limited and who were required to distribute lands to former Caroni workers. However, we know this is something the PNM cannot be depended upon to execute. It was only seven years after the closure of Caroni (1975) Limited when the People’s Partnership came into office, it was only then the former Caroni (1975) Limited workers were able to receive their plots.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the information provided is that 3,062 leases to two acres of agricultural plots and 3,097 deeds of residential lots were executed but there is still a lot that is outstanding. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am once again taking this opportunity to call upon the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to provide the former Caroni workers with their leases and their deeds, and again Minister, if you cannot get it done then step aside and let someone else get the job done.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

UNREVISED
6.40 p.m.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I turn now to the St. Augustine Nurseries. When the Minister of Finance stated in his budget presentation and I quote:

“We are developing and providing facilities at the St. Augustine Nurseries…”

I want to ask if this is the same St. Augustine Nurseries in which the Government was seeking to build housing units. We must remember that it is the same Government which identified this site for a proposed HDC development. So, I wanted to ask if the Minister was still referring to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries or was he speaking of providing facilities under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. Because, you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government has treated the St. Augustine Nurseries with scant courtesy, not recognizing and appreciating the importance and value of the St. Augustine Nurseries to the agriculture sector and not recognizing the premium arable lands that make up the St. Augustine Nurseries.

So when the Minister of Finance speaks about development of the St. Augustine Nurseries, the actions of this Government prove to be nothing less than old talk. I say so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because in fiscal 2023 the St. Augustine Nurseries was allocated $2.5 million for development of provision of facilities. However, the Revised Estimate of 2023 shows that this project did not receive a single cent. From $2.5 million, the Revised Estimate shows not one cent. This was not the first time that the St. Augustine Nurseries has faced this level of contempt by this PNM Government, as it was only recently the Government identified this site for a proposed HDC development, which also had the potential of voter padding but I will let my other colleagues coming up deal with that matter
of that housing project and the potential of voter padding, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I want to move on swiftly to the fisheries sector. I once again stand in this august House to represent the fisherfolk here in Trinidad and Tobago. With a Ministry and not one, but two Ministers who have both neglected our fisherfolks’ needs, as it continues to be an afterthought by this Government. New year, new budget, same struggle. Listen to these headlines, Mr. Deputy Speaker. One, “Search on for four fishermen, boat found”, Express, February 05, 2023; “Toco families get proof of life of missing fishermen”, Newsday, September 10, 2023; “Gunmen attack six fishermen at sea”, Guardian, June 02, 2023.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, while seven of the coast guard vessels are docked away, our fisherfolk continue to be vulnerable and open to attacks from the criminal entities. Last year it was the murder of Mr. Lennox Joefield at sea. May his soul rest in peace and condolences to his family. The year before were Navindra Garib and Parasram Boodoo, two sons of the soil of Couva North. May their souls rest in peace and condolences to their families.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in meeting with the Minister of National Security and his team, the Carli Bay Fishing Association and the Claxton Bay Fishing Association and myself proposed a number of recommendations which more than two years later we are still awaiting on implementation while our fisherfolk continue to be attacked and murdered at sea. Allow me to reiterate the recommendations we made: One, the establishment of a Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard base in central Trinidad. And on the north, south, east and west coasts of Trinidad, to decrease the response time to emergencies and to increase the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard presence. The Fisheries Division had indicated their willingness to partner with national security to identify spaces at the
various fish-landing sites.

Two, construction of a security booth at the Carli Bay Fishing Facility. Three, installation of CCTV cameras at the Carli Fishing Facility. Four, co-ordinating with the Ministry of Public Utilities to improve lighting at the Carli Bay Fishing Facility. Five, emergency repair of the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard interceptors that can operate in the shallow Gulf of Paria. And this was promised by the former Minister of National Security since November 2018. Six, the Ministry of National Security to partner with various registered fishing associations to provide GPS trackers for vessels and engines. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the list goes on and on. New year, new budget, same struggle. After yet another year, the Carli Bay Fishing Facility remains in the same state with no enhancement to its light or jetty, no improvement to the lighting, no security guard booth, no coast guard presence. Despite the numerous requests to the Minister, there is still no installation of CCTV cameras.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to once again call out the deception and trickery that this budget contains, in this case, to the fishing community on how this Government’s attempt to hoodwink citizens year, after year, after year. I refer to the fact that this Government allocating a whopping $10 million in 2023 to the development project, upgrade and construction of fishing facilities. However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as has been the case with this incompetent Government for the majority of development projects, not a cent was spent on this project also. Not one cent towards upgrading or constructing any fishing facility while fishermen continue to be neglected and abandoned by this Government. And this abandonment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is not only at the local level, but also at the international level, they have abandoned our fisherfolk.
And I make reference—why I say that, I make reference to the European Union, the European Union which is one of the largest trading partners in Trinidad and Tobago and really any nation could have. The EU comprises 27 nations with over 400 million citizens who imported a significant quantity of products from Trinidad and Tobago in 2022. So imagine the shock when only last week we got news that the European Union has now issued a red card against this country for the importation of fish, preventing Trinidad and Tobago’s fisherfolk from accessing the EU market due to the failure of this Government once more, the non-compliance to the EU regulations.

It should be noted, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the EU warned this Government about this non-compliance since 2016, seven years ago, and despite this, the Government has failed to put forward the necessary legislative framework or regulatory mandates that might have allowed us to be compliant with the EU regulations.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move across swiftly to the dairy, the dairy sector in agriculture. Local dairy production in 2017 stood at 2,482,400 litres and in 2022 that production level has drastically dropped to 1,394,200 litres. This represents a 45 per cent decline in the production of fresh cow’s milk in five years. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if this Government remains in office, we may not have any fresh milk in this country in five years’ time with their track record. Thus far for this year—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, your initial speaking time has elapsed. You have an additional 10 minutes. Care to avail yourself?

**Mr. R. Ratiram:** Thank you most kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Proceed.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, with respect to the dairy industry, based on production levels which have been calculated for this year, we expect a further 10 to 15 per cent decline. Does this sound like a government who is actively seeking to expand agriculture? We have seen the local dairy sector in a steady decline owing to the deliberate disregard by the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries towards this sector.

The Artificial Breeding unit is operating in an environment which is not tandem with the needs of the sector. There are no checks and balances, no quality control, no quality assurance in the artificial insemination unit. And insemination technicians remain unable to respond to calls in a timely manner. Aside from this, farmers do not have access to technical guidance and support. These two factors alone are enough to severely affect the development of the milk production in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Mon Jaloux farm has not been a source of valuable forage which is a critical component in animal husbandry. Severe understaffing and frequent equipment breakdowns have been allowed to continually plague this entity for years and now we are seeing the unfortunate results. Praedial larceny of dairy cows has been on an exponential increase and has crippled numerous productive dairy farms. This issue has been left to become so bad that more and more farmers are exiting the industry as we see the production continues to decline.

Turning to the Forestry Division where it was allocated $11.3 million for nine projects for fiscal 2023. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we look what went on at the end of the year, that figure was revised to $840,000. That sector could
not even get $1 million, from 11.3 revised to $840,000. And let us look at some of the projects that the Forestry Division is supposed to develop during the year.

One, improvement of forest fire protection capability. Of course, this project is aimed at improving the Ministry—the Forestry Division response and protection of our forests from fire. It was allocated $2.4 million but, again, normal PNM-style revised down to zero.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, similarly forest access roads were allocated $1 million. Again, not one cent released. When we look at the farm to table project in the development project. Let us look at this initiative. Another project that has been consistently highlighted in the Development Programme, allocated $1 million was set aside for this initiative. However, it is deeply concerning to note that not a single cent was allocated in the Revised Estimates, farm to table. Another project suffering, farm to agro-processing. Again, neglected and put aside in the priorities of spending by this Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the remaining time that I have, I want to use this opportunity to turn to highlight some of the issues affecting the constituents of Couva North. And I want to plead with the hon. Ministers to hear our cry and try your best to assist our constituents. I am calling on the Minister of Works and Transport, Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan in this financial year, to focus on some of the following roads in Couva North. Roads such as the Perseverance Road, the Waterloo Road, Orange Field Road, Carli Bay Road, Exchange Road, Southern Main Road from St. Mary’s to Couva; the Old Southern Main Road. These roads are in a deplorable state. And, Minister, we are pleading with you to assist our motorists, to assist the constituents in having these roads repaired.

I want to ask the Minister also who is responsible for the Secondary Road
Rehabilitation and Improvement Company, to look at other areas and to co-ordinate with the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government and assist us with the repair of: Ghany Street, Joyce Road, Roopsingh Road, Correa Village, Ramsaran Street, Datta Drive which is a monumental site, this is the road leading to a monumental site, that location. Cassava Street, Wyaby Road, Sampson Street, Brickfield Village, Ojar Maharaj Avenue, Mahaica Road, Perry Lane and the roads inside Roystonia and Couva North Phases 1, 2 and 3.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I ask both the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government and Minister of Works and Transport to kindly use your gracious office to assist the constituents of Couva North.

As we turn to the schools in the constituency of Couva North, I plead on behalf of the constituents and those associated with the schools, to the hon. Minister of Education to help us in the constituency of Couva North.

6.55 p.m.
With respect to the Carapichaima West Secondary School, this institution is in dire need of infrastructural improvement. The school requires a drainage system to prevent flash flooding during rainfall and filling of the low areas to avoid the water pooling, especially from the security booth to the prefab area.

Moving on to the Holy Faith Convent, we ask that something be done to assist with the traffic issue and the traffic congestion, especially along the Couva Main Road. We ask if the Minister can consider assigning traffic wardens to assist those at the Holy Faith Convent. The institution has also expressed the need for two additional buildings to accommodate the growing number of students and enhance the learning environment.

Moving on to the Waterloo High School, another significant institution built by the

UNREVISED
hon. Member for Siparia in the Couva North constituency. This institution faces a similar traffic congestion and we are asking for wardens to assist with the flow of traffic in front the schools, and also the school entrance gate is in a state of disrepair and needs reconstruction. Moreover, as we are facing the heat, the AC units within the school premises are outdated and require replacing.

And lastly, the Orange Valley Government Primary School is grappling with a sewer problem. The regional corporation, the councillor, Councillor Allan “Taxi” Seepersad and Councillor Dubraj Persad, along with chairman—well, former Chairman Henry Awong and now Chairman Ryan Rampsad have been assisting the school, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in having the cesspit and the sewer clean, but it needs to be addressed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move across to drainage, and there are several drains in the constituency of Couva North that require upgrade, cleaning, box drains, and I will provide the hon. Ministers with a list of this as we go forward. Similarly, the recreation grounds in the constituency, Sugar Cane Avenue Recreation Ground, Agostini Settlement Recreation Ground, Chandernagore Recreation Ground—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, you have about two more minutes.

**Mr. R. Ratiram:**—Roopsingh Road Recreation Ground—thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—Carapichaima Recreation Ground, Union Village Recreation Ground, Jerry Junction Recreation Ground and the Couva Recreation Ground, Mr. Deputy Speaker, some of these require pavilions, they require jogging tracks. I had asked the questions concerning lighting of these recreation grounds, and I am hoping that these questions and the letters that I have sent to the various Ministers are treated with in this financial term.
One issue I want to plead with the Minister of Education is for the opening of the Waterloo ECCE Centre. This was 100 per cent completed and once again, I am pleading with the hon. Minister to assist us.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in winding up my contribution and wrapping up, I borrow the words from the hon. Leader of the Opposition that there is no prosperity without food security. Our nation is facing a food security crisis. We have seen the contribution of agriculture to GDP in this country significantly declining under this PNM administration. We have seen our food import bill consistently rising. We recognize that this Government has a problem with implementing and executing projects, where they come to this Parliament throwing out big money and at the end of the day, when we ask for the transparency and the accountability, we expose their incompetence and we recognize that they did absolutely nothing during the entire year. And that is why I say, it is time they call the election now, this Government has to go. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for San Fernando East.

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Brian Manning): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let me begin by thanking the good people of San Fernando East for electing me as their representative in this august Chamber. It is indeed a privilege to be able to stand here today to contribute to this extremely important debate. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened very carefully to the Opposition Leader contribute last week here in this Chamber and I can only describe her response to what I can call a “people’s budget” as disingenuous, vacuous and uninspired, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

UNREVISED
Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, our people’s budget has been called Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth. I could only call the Opposition Leader’s response as an attempt to gaslight the people of this country. There were so many falsehoods and misinformation being presented in that contribution and if I decided to refute them all, we will be here all day long, and that is not something that either of us would like. It was a cut and paste budget response.

At one point, the Opposition Leader started to read out recommendations that were published in the local newspapers that all of us would have read. There was no kind of academic rigour. There was no kind of analysis. There was no suggestion of exactly which recommendations were good, which ones were not. It was simply cut, paste and recite, even reading letters to the editor into Hansard here in this Chamber, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is not what a budget response is supposed to look like. That kind of uninspired response is not something that this country would be interested in.

Let me deal with some of the misinformation. At this point in the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would have expected that the Opposition Leader would have at least apologized to this Chamber and the people of this country for misleading them with some mythical inheritance tax and millionaire tax, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which never materialized. It was a matter of pure fiction.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: The Opposition Leader was up and down, all over, talking about an inheritance tax, which never happened, and a millionaire tax, which also never happened; more misinformation, more gaslighting.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this budget had something for everyone. It was also rife with a lot of facts that I would like to share with the national community. The
Opposition Leader gave a bunch of statistics, none of them made much sense to me. But let me tell you exactly what the facts are. Trinidad and Tobago’s economy: Trinidad and Tobago remains the only investment grade country within the CARICOM region—

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

**Hon. B. Manning:**—investment grade meaning that there is a relatively low risk of us defaulting on our loans, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is a sign of economic strength, contrary to what is being said by those on the other side, that somehow our economy is in a state of collapse. They came here and said our energy sector is in a state of collapse. But we have an economy that is heavily dependent on our energy sector, so how can it be that we have an investment grade rating by independent international agencies?

Another fact: Trinidad and Tobago is the only country in CARICOM currently not in the clutches of the International Monetary Fund. The IMF is also referred to as the lender of last resort. If no one else can lend you money on the international private markets, you have to go to the IMF. And, of course, as you all know, that comes as a price. Our CARICOM colleagues had to devalue their currency. They have had to shed, in some cases, 20 to 30 per cent of their public service. They have had to make structural adjustments. None of that has occurred in Trinidad and Tobago. That is due to the expert management of this Government and the Ministry of Finance.

In Latin America and the Caribbean—not just the Caribbean, Latin America and the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago is ranked number one in resilience to climate change. One of my colleagues on the other side earlier said that Trinidad and Tobago was not prepared for climate change. The fact is we are number one in

**UNREVISED**
the region in resilience to climate change. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago is ranked third in the United Nations Human Development Index.

Earlier, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I almost fell off my chair when my good friend from Pointe-a-Pierre claimed that it was a PNM administration that unravelled many of the youth development programmes in this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is matter of public record that it was the People’s Partnership that unravelled those youth programmes that our children desperately needed during that time. They could not care less. It is under this PNM administration, especially under the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, where many of those youth programmes have been resurrected, and that is for the benefit of the young people of this country.

I move on to some other facts, not the misinformation from the other side; other facts. Trinidad and Tobago is a high-income country, ranks number two in terms of GDP per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2022. We have a thriving economy—energy sector, sorry, first in exporter of ammonia until 2021, and third as an exporter of methanol in the world, the tenth largest global exporter of liquefied natural gas in the world.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: Yet we have those on the other side claiming that our energy sector is in a state of collapse. The truth is that we have ever increasing oil production and we have very stable gas production at this point in time. Our economy is in good hands, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: We are a leading business hub. Through CARICOM and
bilateral trade agreements investors have access to a consumer market of close to one billion people. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have a privileged geographic location. We have a strategic location and a competitive advantage due to our proximity of the United States and Europe, and also we are just below the hurricane belt, which gives us the ability to attract foreign direct investment and other kinds of investment to this country.

We also enjoy the lowest energy cost in the region. Right now, I believe it is second lowest, but our energy cost is at US 5 cents per kilowatt-hour as of March 2022. We have the lowest electricity cost in the region outside of Cuba and that gives us a competitive advantage in energy-intensive industries, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Our manufacturing sector especially has benefited greatly from that competitive advantage. And I will talk more about them later on.

We also have economic buffers such as the sovereign wealth fund. We had the first sovereign wealth fund in the Caribbean developed to protect the economy from oil price shocks and accumulate savings for future generations. Mr. Deputy Speaker, all of that, all of those facts, yet those on the other side would come here with only doom and gloom, and collapse of the economy and so on, yet international agencies have no idea what they are talking about.

From the Central Bank data, we have a real GDP, not nominal, real GDP growth year on year from the first quarter of 2023 of 3 per cent. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 3 per cent real GDP growth year on year. Our non-energy sector grew by 4.2 per cent during the same period. They want to talk about diversification but they never come with any facts, anything real. It is just old talk. Let me give you the facts from the Central Bank data, 4.2 per cent growth in one year in our non-energy sector. The energy sector at the same time grew at 0.3 per cent, and we
have a relatively low benchmark rate of 3.5 per cent to stimulate economic activity within our economy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you are borrowing as a country on the international market, your interest rate, the rate at which you borrow money, is an indication of the health of your economy and your ability to repay your debts. So the lower your interest rate the better, the economy that you have and the lower risk you have of defaulting on those loans. Recently I am very proud to say that Trinidad and Tobago issued a bond on the international market of US $550 million. The interest rate spread on that bond was at 1.46 per cent above US Treasury, which is a rate of 5.95 per cent over seven years. Keep that number in mind, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 5.95 per cent over seven years.

Over the last 10 years, Trinidad and Tobago has been borrowing between spreads of 2 and 3 per cent. This year, we borrowed at aspread of 1.46 per cent. It is a sign of an improving and growing economy, much to the chagrin of those on the other side, I am sure. At the same time, other countries within Latin America and the Caribbean, over the same period, have been borrowing at interest rates of over 11 per cent. If the cost of borrowing is that high, it tends to create a drag within your economy because you have to use a lot of your revenues to repay your debts. Trinidad and Tobago is borrowing at 5.95 per cent while our neighbours are borrowing at a rate above 11 per cent, if they can borrow internationally at all. Because if you are in an IMF programme, you have to borrow money from the IMF.

7.10 p.m.

We have a positive current account balance which reached as high as 17.9 per cent of GDP in 2022, 17.9 per cent. Mr. Deputy Speaker, our current account
balance is positive. We also have a Heritage and Stabilisation Fund with assets under management of $5.6 billion and foreign reserves of almost $7 billion, yet we had an economist in the public space, in the height of the COVID crisis stating definitively that by 2022 Trinidad and Tobago will run out of foreign exchange, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have heard several persons on the other side parrot this same misinformation. Here we are in the last quarter of 2023 and we have not run out of foreign exchange. All of our buffers are healthy and international agencies have said so. We have import cover of eight months while the international benchmark for import cover is three months.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: That is a sign of economic health and good management.

Let me move on to another important issue here, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Increasing the retirement age. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened to the Opposition leader and she came to this Chamber and said that she had her own private consultation with various entities—

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Hon. B. Manning: “Oh”, excuse me, public consultations with various entities within Trinidad and Tobago and that none of them were in favour of an increased retirement age. Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the Ministry of Finance, I personally met with every major business chamber within Trinidad and Tobago—

Mr. Hosein: Call them out.

Hon. B. Manning: —and also every major trade union within Trinidad and Tobago and I can say here without fear of honest contradiction that the majority of them were in favour of an increased retirement age.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in fact the—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second, one second.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Hon. Member: He is disturbing—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, no. On two occasions I just have to say, please, come on not across the chamber Members. And some of the persons who are making the comments, you all will have the opportunity to enter the debate. Right, so please, no crosstalk over in that fashion please, Members.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they seem to be offended by the truth.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed, proceed.

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, every major business chamber was in agreement and also the National Union Government & Federated Workers have been a proponent of an increased retirement age in this country for at least the past decade. A simple google search will indicate to you that its President General has been publicly calling for an increase in the retirement age. In fact, while the Opposition Leader was speaking he was in the gallery that day and I could see the consonation in his face when the Opposition Leader said that through her “pink palace” consultations that nobody was in favour of an increased retirement age.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: [Crosstalk]

Hon. B. Manning: Trust me that totally confused and flabbergasted everyone that had been involved in a Ministry of Finance public consultation which were well reported in the daily media. No idea what the Opposition leader is talking about.
Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me explain to the national community just how important of an issue this increased retirement age is. I can say here today that without an increase in the retirement age, there may not be a public pension fund to benefit future generations of this country going forward. Almost every retirement fund or public retirement fund or social security fund around the world has been organized in the same way and let me explain to you how. The funds have been arranged in such a manner, in that, the people that are employed now contribute to the fund and those that are retired now received benefits from those contributions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am getting some noise from the Member for Barataria/San Juan. I crave your protection, please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Rest assured hon. Member you will be protected. And again Members for those of you all who just came in also, please, please maintain the decorum of the House.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, so you have persons that are working now contributing to the fund, you have the fund invested in different kinds of investments and those combined resources are used to pay the beneficiaries of the fund which is the retirement population. Over the past 50 years we have seen a change in global demographics and the simple answer is that people are living longer, Mr. Deputy Speaker, due to better access to health care and for other factors, people are living longer, healthier lives, which is a good thing, not a problem. At the same time, people are having less and less children. So you have a shrinking workforce and at the same time you have a growing pool of retirees. That, of course, is an unsustainable position.

Many of us here would have relatives from a previous generation, even some of our friends maybe, but from previous generations from a family of five, six,
seven, eight children. I have one friend, he is the last of 11 which I am still amazed by. But that does not happen anymore. At this current time, the birth rate in Trinidad and Tobago is at 1.63, 1.63 children per woman in Trinidad and Tobago. That means that we are not even replacing ourselves. Any birth rate below two means that our population is not growing. So we have, effectively, a shrinking workforce to fund a growing pool of retirees, an unsustainable situation. Because of this an increase in the retirement age immediately widens the pool of persons making contributions towards the fund and reduces the number of people that are in the retirement pool of beneficiaries. That, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can tell you right now has to be done.

The last actual report that I saw even if we brought everyone possible under the fund and they all paid contributions, this includes, daily paid workers, this includes persons who are sole proprietors, small business owners and so on, the fund would still have difficulty if we do not increase the retirement age. The retirement age is being increased across the world. I believe it is now age 65 in Jamaica and 67 Barbados. In the United Kingdom, they have completely abolished the retirement age. You can retire when you are good and ready. It has to be done to protect these public pension funds.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, these public funds much like the national insurance fund do not only pay out retirement benefits, there are a host of benefits paid out by the NIB. In fact, we have 23 different benefits in seven categories that are paid by our NIB and let me remind the people of Trinidad and Tobago exactly what some of those benefits look like. We have monthly pensions; retiring grants; maternity grants; invalidity grants; funeral grants, the NIB will even pay you to bury a loved one; disability grants; widows’ pension; child allowance; remarriage
grant, the NIB will give you money to get remarried, Mr. Deputy Speaker; employment injury grant; offered allowance, all of these generous benefits are being paid by those contributing to the NIB fund. The NIB fund is the single largest fund in the CARICOM region. It is hovering between $30 billion and $31 billion. There needs to be an increase in the retirement age to ensure that we can continue delivering these generous benefits to the people of Trinidad and Tobago going forward. And that is what we have gleaned from real analysis and real consultations, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move on to another issue that was keenly addressed in the Minister of Finance’s delivery of the budget report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago: An increase in the minimum wage. Now unlike some of the reckless statements made by the Opposition Leader, increasing a minimum wage is something that has been done very carefully. Why is that? Because an increase in minimum wage can sometimes lead to exploding inflation and also unemployment. It has to be done carefully and it has to be done slowly. We at the Ministry of Finance and this Government had decided to be cautious and to implement a minimum wage of $20.50 per hour. That is a 17 per cent increase on the previous minimum wage of $17.50. That is to ensure that some of the most vulnerable persons within our economy can have a boost in their income without us damaging some of the major employers in this country at the same time. It would have been a retrograde step if we had some dramatic increase in the minimum wage and it caused severe inflation, and unemployment in this economy. It would have completely defeated the purpose of doing it in the first place.

This increase in the minimum wage would benefit approximately 190,000 people working in Trinidad and Tobago. That is significant especially in light of
the inflation that we have seen with the food prices in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, much of our food in Trinidad and Tobago is imported and much of our inflation is also imported. We have increased the minimum wage to give our most vulnerable an opportunity to have an improvement in their standard of living during this temporary inflationary period.

As of July 31, 2023, we are providing financial benefits in the sum of $4.2 billion towards assisting some of the most vulnerable people in our economy. I have another list of many of the generous programmes that we have to benefit our people in Trinidad and Tobago. We have Public Assistance Grant; Food Support Programme; urgent temporary assistance grants; National Social Development Programme; we have a Senior Citizens’ Pension, which has a beneficiary pool of 110,890 persons to a tune of $3.35 billion annually. That is what we are doing to strengthen our social safety net in this country to ensure that no one is left behind, no one slips through the cracks. There is also a Disability Grant.

Government spends on average $5 billion in our social safety net programmes in addition to annual subsidies of also around $5 billion, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is almost $10 billion being put forward in this economy every year simply to combat poverty and to assist the most vulnerable.

Let me remind the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and my good friends on the other side exactly the kind of subsidies that we enjoy here in Trinidad and Tobago, because sometimes I think we forget. We have fuel subsidy; we have water subsidy; electricity subsidy; housing subsidy; we even have a housing loan or mortgage subsidy. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you are a first time homeowner and you borrow from the TTMF to purchase a home you borrow at a 2 per cent rate. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you tell me where else in the world you can borrow money at
2 per cent to buy a home. You know some on the other side like to say only in Trinidad and Tobago for bad things, well here you have a 2 per cent mortgage and I will dare say that is only in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. B. Manning:** I know the truth is bothering them, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I understand. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 8 per cent of locally produced natural gas is used to generate electricity, and on top of we also have rebates of 35 per cent on electricity bills for 121,000 low-income households in Trinidad and Tobago. That is how this Government has been combating poverty in this country. That is an annual cost of $268 million for the year 2019—2023.

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

**Hon. B. Manning:** That is just a rebate on electricity, on already subsidized electricity. That is what we have been doing to help the most vulnerable in this country. We have subsidized education, GATE, $1.7 billion over the last three years benefiting approximately 25,000 students annually. We have free health care, medication for chronic illnesses, which costs this country in the region of $115.8 million over the past three years. Over 162,910 citizens of Trinidad and Tobago benefit from the CDAP Programme. We heard from the Minister of Health earlier speaking about chronic illnesses in Trinidad and Tobago. Many of those chronic illnesses are going to require persons being medicated and treated. The CDAP Programme does that, it benefits 162,910 people in Trinidad and Tobago. This Government is serious about helping the poor and needy in this country.

**7.25 p.m.**

There has also been an allocation in this budget for an accommodation for
socially displaced persons of $23.2, part of a comprehensive framework to address socially displaced persons in Trinidad and Tobago. Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the beautiful thing about this programme is that it will build a facility not just for some of our more mentally ill displaced persons within our society, but as an MP we regularly come across persons who may be homeless for a period of time for various issues. It could be domestic issues. It could be financial issues. It could be a host of other issues. Those persons will now have a place to stay, to have a roof over their heads, have a meal, have a shower, somewhere where they can feel comfortable while they get back on their feet again. That is what this people’s budget is doing for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

You see allocation going to the market box programme, community, gardens, green markets, school supplies and book grants, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As an MP every year at the start of the school term we have a giveaway programme in the constituency where we would give books, book bags, stationery, and so on, to some of the children in the constituency that need it. That is no longer necessary, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister of Finance in his wisdom has added $1,000 at the beginning of the school term for the children that need it so that they can purchase the stationery they need, to get the education they need so that they can live their life of their dreams. That is what a caring Government does.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, some of the other programmes that we would have introduced that I worked on personally at the Ministry of Education, there is an allocation here for ALTA expansion—the expansion of the ALTA programme. That is the adult literacy programme. We have expanded the allocation to this programme and also made it available to those employed in the CEPEP and URP programmes. Now those employment schemes can sometimes attract persons who
may have challenges with literacy and numeracy, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister of Finance has allocated a $7.69 million allocation for this fantastic programme so that more and more persons will be able to help themselves within this economy.

The Ministry of Finance will also now partner with the Central Bank to promote financial literacy especially among lower income groups for this purpose. The Minister of Finance has allocated $5 million in 2024 for this financial literacy programme. This is to work hand in hand with the ALTA programme so that persons within Trinidad and Tobago who need to learn more about financial literacy—and I think many of us do. You know, sometimes I look at some of the conversations online. There was one story about the billionaire Jay-Z not wanting to give a family member $28,000 because he asked him for it because he said he had some business investment that will turn $2,800 into $2 million in six months. Mr. Deputy Speaker, any financially literate person would know that that is not possible legally. And that is why we need to have more financial literacy in Trinidad and Tobago so people could understand how money works, they can protect themselves financially, and also be aware of scams out there that are always being developed to try to take your hard earned money out of your pocket, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have several other youth programmes here and let me move on. There is the junior achievement programme. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the junior achievement programme is a fantastic programme. It is an international programme which has been operating in Trinidad and Tobago for decades but has gone fallow in the past few years. We want to revitalize this programme. Many of our current successful business people in this country would have been part of the
junior achievement programme when they were in secondary school growing up. We have decided to reintroduce this programme and to ensure that it is properly funded. It will be available in, I believe, 20 primary schools and 20 secondary schools going forward, and that is something that we can extremely proud of. The junior achievement programme is reintroduced in primary and secondary schools.

The junior achievement programme of Trinidad and Tobago has helped our youth, develop the employment and entrepreneurial skills they need to find meaningful work and start sustainable companies. That is the history of the programme—sorry, in 40 primary schools and 40 secondary schools throughout the country. The Ministry of Finance has allocated $7.72 million to the implementation of the new junior achievement programme. I hope this programme will be a success, and we will do all that we can to ensure that it helps as many young people as possible.

There is also the MIC programme, Institute of Technology. This programme has been developed—it exposes our young people to professional training, mentorship, and mentorship workshops. We are expanding the MIC Institute of Technology programme from an intake of 26 to one of 500, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with an allocation of $3.735 million to its fund. There is also an expansion of the MPower Programme. The MPower Programme is designed to improve the quality of community life in our country. It addresses issues related to male development in our communities, particularly in support of promoting positive male role models. We have allocated a total of $39 million in 2024 to the MPower Programme for the fostering and promotion of community sport.

We have also allocated $19.5 million in 2024 to administer this community arts and craft initiatives in community centres throughout Trinidad and Tobago.
Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is safe to say that this Government has gone beyond the call of duty in terms of addressing many of the major social issues in Trinidad and Tobago in an attempt to alleviate poverty and to bring some relief to some of the most vulnerable people within our society, contrary to what is being said by those on the other side.

Let me move on to the issue of diversification. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the face of running commentary from the other side of a collapsing economy and a lack of diversification in Trinidad and Tobago, in the last year our non-energy sector experienced a growth of 4.2 per cent. That is our non-energy sector. In fact, our non-energy sector accounts for 68.6 per cent of our GDP. That is larger than our energy sector, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That speaks to diversification of our economy. Of course, the main factor in the growth of our non-energy sector comes from our manufacturing sector which enjoys a huge competitive advantage with low energy costs and also an infrastructure for heavy industry in Trinidad and Tobago which was created for the energy industry.

So the manufacturing sector is benefiting greatly from those competitive advantages and it is diversifying our economy. That 17.2 per cent of GDP is up from 14.7 per cent in 2015; non-energy exports valued at US $2.4 billion in 2022, up from $2.1 billion in 2021. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is the indication of a growing and diversified economy contrary to what is being said by some in the public domain. Non-energy sector comprised of mainly trade and repair, manufacturing and construction sectors. The manufacturing sector has competitive advantages of low cost electricity, infrastructure for heavy industry and our location, our geographical proximity to large markets and outside of the Tropical Storm Bret as I explained earlier.
Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the Minister of Finance we have also been making foreign exchange available to manufacturing sector through the EximBank. Why have we done this? Because our manufacturers are exporters and they are net earners of foreign exchange. So we have ensured that they can receive a supply of foreign exchange to conduct their business because they are also generating foreign exchange to increase the supply of foreign exchange within our banking system. The EximBank also ensures that much of what is earned is also repatriated to Trinidad and Tobago. That is what the Ministry of Finance has been doing to spur diversification and economic growth within Trinidad and Tobago.

Let us move on to SMEs, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, SMEs are extremely important to diversification and economic growth. The Minister of Finance in his presentation announced an SME forex facility which will allow some of the SMEs in Trinidad and Tobago to qualify for foreign exchange. Of course, it will be a rigours process where companies that we believe can be a net earner of foreign exchange can qualify for and foreign exchange from the EximBank, and also other SMEs can qualify for foreign exchange if they qualify through the EximBank’s due diligence process. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have a host of programmes designed to stimulate SMEs in Trinidad and Tobago.

There is also the programme at the Unit Trust Corporation, and I would like to publically thank the Unit Trust Corporation under the leadership of CEO Nigel Edwards who has partnered with the University of the West Indies Ventures Limited in the creation and implementation of their UrpreneurPlus programme which has been providing supportive and enabling environments for the growth of young and emerging entrepreneurs. Thank you very much UTC for doing your part to stimulate SMEs in Trinidad and Tobago.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: I would also like to thank Mr. J. Errol Lewis for a lifetime of dedication to the valuable programme of the junior achievement programme. Mr. Errol Lewis has been a part of that programme for decades.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, he only recently retired and he would have been putting in decades of work to ensure that many of our young people receive the benefits of learning about business of financial literacy, and I would like to publically thank him for his hard work and the sacrifice to improving lives in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the TTIFC, the International Financial Centre, they have taken lead in developing entrepreneurs in the Fintech space in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the past I have been publically critical of the IFC. Today, I would like to be in praise of the IFC for what it has done in terms of developing and assisting entrepreneurs in the Fintech space in Trinidad and Tobago. Recently, the IFC launched the One FinTech Avenue programme which is an incubator for fintech SMEs, determining to make T&T a cashless society which I am sure will upset many of those on the other side having a cashless society because that way every cent can be accounted for. So we would like to publically thank the energetic CEO of the IFC, Mr. John Outridge, and Chairman of the IFC Mr. Richard Young, for their hard work in developing the fintech sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: One FinTech Avenue offers a collaborative environment for
all stakeholders to work, connect, and collaborate on fintech related project, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is a fantastic programme and I expect to see great things coming from this programme in the very near future.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me take some time to also discuss some of the other diversification initiatives that have been developed here in the Ministry of Finance and within the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Another major one has been the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate. The Phoenix Park Industrial Estate enjoys 14 investments, 12 local, two foreign, and it will employ at its peak 4,500 people in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is diversification. Because of the success of this Phoenix Park Industrial Estate, this model will be replicated throughout Trinidad and Tobago to employ even more persons in sustainable meaningful jobs. Within 2014 this programme will be replicated in sites in central Trinidad, the southwest peninsular, and the East-West corridor, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

7.40 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when those on the other side speak of a lack of diversification, they speak from a place of ignorance because they do not want to see all the good work that is being done by this Government to expand this economy. But fortunately for us, the international rating agencies see it and everyone else sees it, and that is something that we are happy about, because the people of Trinidad and Tobago benefit from these programmes and benefit greatly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we move on to the issue of property taxes. In spite of the best efforts of the Opposition in providing nuisance value with frivolous lawsuits, property taxes will be implemented.

Hon. Member: [Interruption]
Mr. Deputy Speaker: “Excuse, excuse” please. Members, when you are thinking that we do not hear when we are on the Speaker’s Chair, because of the acoustics of the Chamber, we do hear, right and I am sure we all know what we are talking about, I heard it. I cannot identify who did it but please let us avoid it. Proceed.

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you. It is a sad occurrence because we sat here—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. B. Manning: I am proceeding. We sat here quietly on the Government Bench listening to some of the more literacy-challenged Members on the other side, present and read out entire contributions and we did not make a sound. But they cannot afford us the same luxury. We did not make a sound.

Hon. Member: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: Moving on. Property taxes. Mr. Deputy Speaker, property taxes are essential to local government reform in Trinidad and Tobago. Why is that? Because homeowners are the ones that benefit the most from local government goods and services and so we ask the national community to pay a small property tax. In some cases, $50 or $60 a month so that we can provide roads, we can provide drainage, garbage collection, in some cases, limited recycling programme, infrastructure, retaining walls, cut grass, all of these things are done by the municipal local government bodies within Trinidad and Tobago. This small property tax will ensure that all of these municipal bodies will be well funded and therefore deliver to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is what a modern local government system looks like.

We have already implemented that in Tobago with the THA system and it has worked brilliantly and we expect it to also work extremely well right here in
Trinidad and Tobago. And regardless of what the Opposition says or does, these reasonable taxes will be implemented and the people of Trinidad and Tobago will benefit from improved local government service delivery, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is so much more to be said but many of my parliamentary colleagues will do so going forward as they go into detail in exactly what these programmes do within the various Ministries.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before you move on, Member, you have just about a minute of your initial speaking time. You have an additional 10 minutes. You care to avail?

Hon. B. Manning: Yes, please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me round up my contribution by speaking about some of the good work that we have been doing within the San Fernando East community. I would like to warmly thank the people of San Fernando East for embracing me as their MP. It has been a privilege to serve them and it is something that we will continue doing tirelessly within the constituency.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: From day one, we said to them that it is all about representation and that we are going to make ourselves accessible and available. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am at my office hours almost every Thursday and every Saturday and on the ground in the constituency—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning:—meeting with constituents, seeing the issues so that we can
deal with them so that we can create a better constituency for all.

I would like to thank the hard-working and courteous office staff of the San Fernando East constituency office. They have worked tirelessly. I have them working in some cases on Saturday mornings and they are not very happy about it but they still show up and work hard and are very caring of the people in San Fernando East. We are all suffering together so they better learn to like it.

We distributed dozens of houses in the past year in the constituency, thanks to Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and the Minister in the Ministry. I would like to thank our Leader of Government Business here for the work that she has been doing in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. The people of San Fernando East thank you and appreciate all of your hard work.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: In the next fiscal period, San Fernando East has a lot to look forward to and let me give you a bit of a preview. In Cocoyea Village, we have listened to the cries of the people of Cocoyea. You have asked and we will deliver. I can confirm here today that you will receive a new community centre in the next fiscal year. We came to look at the old community centre, we realized that it was not up to spec and it was decided that you will receive a modern state-of-the-art community centre. That to go along with your world-class Olympic pool. So the people of Cocoyea Village are going to be extremely happy with that development. And we are also going to ensure that there are major programmes being conducted in that community centre to benefit the young people and maybe not so young of the area.

In Pleasantville, we expect to see an upgrade in overall infrastructure. The refurbishment of many of the HDC units. We already began the painting of the
Pleasantville Plaza, that work will continue, and a beginning of a world-class sporting facility near the Pleasantville Indoor Regional Sporting Facility. That is also on the cards. Also, there is a large area right around the Pleasantville Secondary School that we cleared a year ago, it was overrun with grass and so on, that large space is also going to be used for something, I will let the people of San Fernando East know more of that going forward. I am going to keep that development to myself for now.

In Mon Repos, we can expect the refurbishment of the Leonson Lewis park, repairs to the Mon Repos buildings, work on the sewerage system issue in the area and also continued work on Olera Heights within the Mon Repos area.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am proud to announce that as announced in the Minister of Finance’s budget delivery last week, a project that will entail the expansion of the Tarouba Link Road. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as anyone who lives in San Fernando would know, there is an issue with traffic congestion on the San Fernando Bypass around the Tarouba area. We have already began a year ago by removing the traffic lights near the Tarouba intersection, right near the South Park Mall. We will continue this traffic alleviation initiative by widening parts of the Tarouba Link Road and also widening that road between and the Tarouba roundabout and the Marabella roundabout. The people of San Fernando have a lot to look forward to. I am sure that would make many of my constituents and also thousands more, within the south land, that have to traverse that area to get onto the Solomon Hochoy Highway, happy.

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Madam Speaker, that brings me to the end of my contribution and I would like to take this time to wish my wife, my loving wife, a happy birthday.
Hon. Members: “Awww.” [Desk thumping]

Hon. B. Manning: This is her birthday week and she is celebrating her annual 25th birthday and I would like to wish her a happy birthday and to let her know that she is loved and appreciated. Thank you so much, Madam Speaker. I take my leave.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Davendranath Tanoo (Oropouche West): Thank you, Madam Speaker. After eight years of brutal budgetary bombardment, ferocious fiscal fight down, endless economic eclipses and mass monetary mayhem, we had hoped that this Minister of Finance would have redeemed himself by presenting a people-centred budget to provide relief to the long suffering population of Trinidad and Tobago; but we hoped in vain.

“Parents complain as new”—school—“term nears: Prices too high”
Trinidad Express, September 03, 2023.

“Govt has a duty to tackle high food prices”

“Plenty people suffering”
Trinidad Express, August 28, 2022.

“THE PEOPLE WANT WATER”
Trinidad Express, 4th of September, 2023.

“Murder rate worsens”
Trinidad Newsday, October 6th, just a few days ago, 2023.

These are just a few of the headlines highlighting the social decay, the economic burdens and the suppression of prosperity by the failed policies of this Government, critical issues which we hoped that the Minister of Finance would
have addressed in this budget.

But yet again, the quality of lives of our citizens has been ignored. Yet again, the Minister of Finance has missed the boat. Yet again, the Minister of Finance has abandoned the tormented citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Yet again, single mothers waited to hear a plan that will improve their lives. Yet again, small businesses waited to hear strategies to ignite growth. Youths listened with despair last Monday, Madam Speaker, as yet again, the Government abandoned their holistic development and educational aspirations. Pensioners forced to choose between medicine and food, prayed that something would be done to reverse the continuing decline of their standard of living.

The entire country desperately yearned for a plan to confront the crime tsunami that is drowning our nation in blood and pain. Citizens listened hoping to hear about job creation, new industries and a wage that allows them to survive this cost of living crisis. But everybody was left disappointed and that is why I thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to comment on this budget on behalf of the citizens of my beloved country.

Madam Speaker, budget 2024 is the biggest con job ever foisted on the citizens of this country other than “Emailgate”.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member, could you find another way to say that? That borders on being unparliamentary. Find another way to say that please.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Sure, Madam Speaker. Budget 2024 is the biggest hoax ever foisted on the citizens of this country other than “Emailgate”.

Madam Speaker, it is said that a swindler gives with one hand and takes back with two. He takes back what he gives to you with one hand and takes back
what you already had with the other hand. This is a Minister who gives you a $3 minimum wage and takes back thousands in property tax, higher electricity rates, higher water rates and higher fuel prices. This is a government that withheld labour workers’ money for years, making them suffer to make ends meet, took them to court to force unions to accept 4 per cent and then pretend that the debt that they are grudgingly settling is somehow a PNM Christmas gift.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: “Backpay” is not a gift, it is what workers have worked hard for and what you are owing them. Madam Speaker, this budget is designed to gaslight the population to distract from the billions that are being spent while Cabinet Ministers hide conflicts of interest behind recusals.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: We on this side will continue standing in the gap to confront charlatans wherever they are, to speak truth to power and to demand accountability for our taxpayers’ dollars.

Madam Speaker, allow me to congratulate the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, for her sterling contribution on Friday—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—which provided the evidence of the true state of the Trinidad and Tobago economy, and provided multiple anti-crime initiatives which could be implemented today if this Government was really serious about crime but we know that they are not. I also congratulate all my colleagues on this side who spoke before, publicly exposing this Government’s dishonesty, corruption and mismanagement.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, the rules of engagement require me to rebut the contribution of the Member opposite, the junior Minister of Finance who spoke before me. This year, however, the Minister predictably continued in the same vein as he did last year and in the years before that, when he spoke on the correct Bill. He was inconsequential, uninformed, impudent and irrelevant.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Unable to defend his Minister’s budget speech, he chose fluff, bluff and flams.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, it is often said that the apple does not fall far from the tree but this apple has fallen miles away and clearly lost its way.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: The Minister today said that he was personally involved in consultations with various interest groups and business houses and the unions, and they were all in agreement with raising the retirement age to 65.

7:30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I refer the Minister to the newspapers of yesterday where there was a joint trade union release by three of the largest trade unions which disprove everything that the Minister just said, that unions do not support the increase.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: You are misleading, Sir, you are misleading. Madam Speaker, when a Minister of Finance speaks, he is supposed to inspire confidence and hope. Listen to what yesterday’s newspaper said, and I quote Madam Speaker:

“That the country needs to change direction is becoming increasingly obvious. It cannot be business as usual. The crime situation continues to
deteriorate as the evidence mounts that”—a—“gang culture and a protection racket are growing stronger as our institutions deteriorate. The same is true for the country’s economic performance. Absent the increase in energy and petrochemical prices in 2022 and ...”—this—“...country would still be in a”—state of—“depression.

Apart from a few minor initiatives, the 2024 Budget Speech rehashed several old ideas and dispensed”—just—“enough populist measures to give the appearance of improvement and that the Government was hard at work. There was no new policy direction, no attempt to measure the success of current policies or ongoing initiatives. Apart from”—the”—“self-congratulatory rhetoric, there was no initiative or comment on the Government's effort to improve its administrative machinery.”

These are not my words, Madam Speaker, these are the words which echo the national mood and they are from yesterday’s *Guardian Editorial*, Madam Speaker. And after listening to the junior Minister ramble on for 55 minutes, it is no surprise that this Government—this country is unable to attract foreign direct investments, that businesses are closing down and migrating, and that our economy under their stewardship is smaller than it was eight years ago.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Madam Speaker, if you had listened—and I know that you did—to the presentation of the Member of Parliament for Siparia, I want to tell both Ministers of Finance, and all of those opposite that if they had paid attention to that presentation, that was a plan for recovery, that was a plan for dealing with crime, that is a plan for dealing with agriculture, that is a plan for dealing with energy,
that is a plan for dealing with job creation, that is a plan, Madam Speaker, for rescuing Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** That is budget speech, Madam Speaker, presented by the hon. Minister of Finance is a hoax. The budget is not worth the paper it is printed on.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** The fiscal measures are a deliberate deception, and I will prove it to you, Sir. The fiscal measures are a deliberate deception because the Minister is dependent on people not fact checking him, but Trinidadians are smarter than that. The Minister told this country that he expects to spend $59.2 billion in fiscal year 2024, but according to the Estimates of expenditure, the total expenditure for fiscal 2024 will be $71.4 billion—not $59.2 billion—$71.4 billion. And we already know given the Minister’s pronouncement that he will be coming back for a mid-year review to spend more money that that would be even higher.

More than that, Madam Speaker, the Minister in his Budget Speech tells the nation that the budget deficit was $52 billion in 2024 which he would have to seek financing for. But hidden in the Estimates of Revenue, another book provided by the Minister, is a startling figure that the Minister will actually be borrowing $13.02 billion, with $5 billion on that being foreign borrowing. So we already established that the documents that the Minister is presenting has difference towards to the budget speech that the Minister is using. Something is wrong, Madam Speaker, Last Monday, I heard the Minister of Finance make two startling confessions. The first was the Government had underfunded infrastructural development. The first was the Government had underfunded infrastructural development.

8.00 p.m.
He, of course, blamed COVID, just like his Prime Minister blamed other priorities. But the fact is that our infrastructure did not just deteriorate overnight to the abysmal level that it is today. This Government has what is called implementation paralysis. This Government—let me repeat it for clarification. This Government has implementation paralysis. They talk the talk but they cannot walk the talk.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** And that is why, Madam Speaker, every single year this Minister presents a series of massive infrastructure projects, announces game changers after game changers, goes through the process of conceptualizing projects to treat with specific concerns like flooding and reconstruction, evaluating them, designing them, and even costing these projects. Every year the Minister comes to the Parliament and gets hundreds of millions of dollars approved for these projects and then does nothing. The projects are abandoned, the problems remain, the citizens get no relief and the Minister returns the following year, and year after year, to make new promises that he has no intentions of keeping.

The second confession of the Minister was that his Government is fully, and I quote “fully aware that infrastructure investment has a strong impact on economic growth”. Madam Speaker, investment in infrastructure, roads drains, rivers, building construction, et cetera, plays a known pivotal role in economic growth and in social development, via job creation and the multiplier effect on other sectors.

So, if the Minister knows that the role of infrastructure development is critical in national development, and then turns around and neglects implementation for eight years, ask yourself why, Madam Speaker. Why the
intentional and repeated refusal to implement projects approved by the Ministry and funding for which was approved by the Parliament? That is not merely incompetence, and there is a lot of that too, that is deliberate neglect. And that neglect has cost millions of dollars in direct financial loss and inconvenience to citizens via floods, lack of potable water and horrendous roads across our nation. In fact, ministerial neglect of our road infrastructure has even caused loss of life, Madam Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago in the 21st Century.

Madam Speaker, the Ministers opposite, including the Minister who just spoke, glowingly talked about the amount of money they spent on project after project after project. Let me share some information with him, indisputable facts. You see facts are stubborn things, Madam Speaker. And here is what the facts have to say. In 2016, there was no COVID. The Government got Parliament’s approval to spend $196.2 billion, my mistake. The Government got Parliament’s approval to spend $196.2 million on development projects under the Ministry of Works and Transport. That would be drains, roads, river cleanings, et cetera. Of that $196.2 million, do you know how much was actually spent? Madam Speaker, $53.8 million is what they actually spent, a quarter of what they had parliamentary approval for.

In 2017, same thing; 2018, same thing; 2019, same thing; 2020, same thing; 2021, same thing; 2022, same thing; 2023, same thing. And what do you think will happen in 2024? Same thing. Madam Speaker, overall, this Parliament has approved $1.8 billion to be spent by the Ministry of Works and Transport on critical infrastructure to date, and of that, $1 billion has not been spent, $1 billion.

So whilst citizens navigate the “Bocas” that our roads have become, or fight for survival in floods, with massive unemployment, or stand in the rain with a
bucket hoping to get water, this PNM Government has sat on their hands refusing to address the critical issues that they know are crippling citizens. That is heartless and shameless.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** But what about the money that was spent? The Government has spent $863 million on infrastructure development projects over the last eight years. And still, we have the worst infrastructure in our nation’s history. “Where de money gone?” I have always said, Madam Speaker, that this Government has money. This country has money. It is just that this Government refuses to spend it on citizens. They refuse to spend it to improve the quality of life of our citizens, Madam Speaker.

Let me share with you some more indisputable facts, taken from the various Auditor General’s Reports of the public accounts of Trinidad and Tobago for the last seven years. In fiscal 2026, total parliamentary appropriations, including budget, supplemental and direct charges, approved by the Parliament to be spent in the national interest totalled $66.97 billion. Do you know how much, Madam Speaker? That is 2016. Do you know how much this Government actually spent of that $66.97 billion? They spent $56.6 billion, Madam Speaker. The Minister of Finance refused to spend $10.4 billion that he told Parliament he needed; 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, billions approved for education, healthcare, national security, public utilities, social support, approved by the Parliament, disregarded and discarded by this Government.

Over the period 2016 to 2022, Madam Speaker, the Auditor General confirmed that programmes and projects worth $34 billion that the PNM deemed essential when they brought it to the Parliament, were abandoned by this
Government. So, what exactly was not done? What projects were considered so critical that it had to be done, finance located, approved by the Ministry then Cabinet and then the Parliament and then scuttled by the Minister of Finance.

Today I asked the hon. Minister of Finance. Today I ask you, Sir, through you, Madam Speaker, to provide a complete list of projects which were abandoned by this Government after financing was approved by the Parliament. I am also certain that when the data is provided by the Auditor General we would see again billions of unspent allocations for 2023 and 2024, because the trend continues; you come to Parliament, you ask for money, you get approval and then you do not spend it, and citizens suffer as a result. Because you see, Madam Speaker, no matter what they put in these yellow books and in the budget speech, no matter what they put in these books, the truth is that they already knew, they are aware, that the truth, the reality would be different to what is in those books.

Let me highlight the ridiculousness of this whole exercise with one example. For 2022, the Minister of Finance made the Parliament sit twice to ask for a total of $3.9billion more than what was budgeted in the annual budget. Yet in fiscal year 2024, he came back to the Parliament to demand, to argue, for $3.9million that he said was critically needed, that was urgently required for supplementary variation. Do you know that he did not spend 4.4billion? So, all of that supplementary variation that he asked for, more than that, was approved and not spent. So what is the sense, Madam Speaker, of coming to ask for more money when you very well know, Mr. Minister, that you are not going to spend it to improve the lives of citizens of this country? Madam Speaker, at its very core, the annual budget is to provide expenditure for the development of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

A nation’s development is not measured solely by economic growth and
financial indicators, and even with those indicators, this Government would fail. Development is about people, about enhancing the standard of living and quality of life of citizens. Economic growth is just a mere means to that end. But development requires a vision. It requires articulated goals and objectives, strategies that achieve targets, and development of a national plan. But just as important is the will and ability to implement that plan.

This is all-of-government approach required, where each Ministry is pursuing individual policies, designed to produce a result that dovetails into an overarching framework focused on enhancing Trinbagonians’ current and future welfare. But for this Prime Minister, for this Minister, for this Government and its team, people-centered budgeting, all-of-government approach, fiscal responsibility and public accountability are mere sound bites. They have no value for them. That is why *Vision 2020, Vision 2030* and whatever other vision that they claim to have, and the PNM's roadmap to recovery was just a comprehensive waste of time, man-hours and millions of taxpayers’ dollars.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** The Government called all these professionals, businessmen, public servants, and various subject matter experts together and had them spend thousands of man-hours reviewing and presenting ideas. These individuals now know that the Government used them as window dressing for a PR stunt that was never intended to be anything except a distraction. That is not how you engender confidence in decision-makers in the private sector. That is certainly not how you develop a national planning framework. Between 2010 and 2015, Madam Speaker, people-centered budgeting ensured that development reached every sector of this country in every part of the country, Madam Speaker. But where are we
today? One of my favourite artiste Bob Marley says it. He says who feels it knows it.

Two months ago, Madam Speaker, Market Facts & Opinions revealed its Consumer Economic Sentiment Report; two months ago. It is a very short, but very graphic objective report of the state of our citizens over the period 2016 to 2023. This survey specifically investigated the financial situation of the family in Trinidad and Tobago and found that the number of persons defined as living comfortably plummeted from an estimated 22 per cent of the population in 2016 to 14 per cent today. Almost half of the persons surveyed said that they were living out on a limb of barely meeting their basic needs. This clearly confirms the dramatic pauperization of a large segment of the middle-class as a direct result of the Government’s policies.

The MFO survey also revealed the frightening statistic that almost 20 per cent of the population described themselves as struggling, unable to meet even their most basic needs, Madam Speaker. That is the nightmare faced by our citizens under this PNM Administration. Madam Speaker, 88 per cent of the respondents to this survey believed and believe that things will only get worse under this Government. That is not the Opposition saying that. That is Market Facts & Opinion; an independent survey group, Madam Speaker.

But the MFO survey confirms what the Central Bank survey also revealed since last year. The Central Bank reported that half of the people surveyed were not satisfied with their current financial situation. Madam Spekaer, 29 per cent said that they were just getting by financially. Another 29 per cent said that they had no money at the end of the month. That is the reality being faced by citizens of this country under this PNM Government.

UNREVISED
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, every national and local report says that Trinbagonians are suffering under this Government. The Caribbean Food Security & Livelihoods Survey conducted by CARICOM, the WFO and the UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization found that one in four persons in Trinidad and Tobago was severely food insecure, with 60 per cent of the population being moderately to severely food insecure as of May this year, Madam Speaker.

Armed with that knowledge, this is public information, Madam Speaker, what does our Minister of Finance do, knowing that our citizens are suffering and the extent of the suffering that they are going through thanks to his Government? What does the Minister of Finance do? Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance offers to pay $5million, so that the Ministry of Finance’s logo can appear in partnership with the Central Bank Literacy Programme. His stated intention of that objective, his stated intention, is to target the at-risk community, to teach them how to manage their money. That is his solution.

8.15 p.m.

That is the solution. This would be funny if it were not so extremely sad. These persons are at risk in the first place because they have no job, they have no money in the first place to start with, Madam Speaker. That is why they are at risk. The Minister would have done much better had he used the money to create jobs in these communities for these very same at-risk youths. Instead, the Minister comes here to mamaguy the population, Madam Speaker. This is in direct contrast to what was present under the Government led by the Member for Siparia, when the country was reaping the rewards of having an administration that was people-centered, future-driven, based on a solid plan and astute economic management.
The Central Bank Literacy Programme, Madam Speaker, is one of the few things that the Central Bank is doing well, and I urge the Minister not to blight it. Instead, I call on the Minister, through you, Madam Speaker, to do his job. The people want jobs, not talk, not talk shops.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** I should not have to explain that to them, Madam Speaker, the Minister has been in office going on nine years now. He cannot not know. It is the job of the Minister of Finance to stimulate business confidence in the economy by creating the environment for sustainable domestic and direct foreign investment. A growing economy means more jobs, more development, an improved standard of living, an improved quality of life.

So when you have a Minister boasting about growth but the data which I just recited, that data and all the other indices are saying something totally different, then look carefully at what he is saying, Madam Speaker, because when the words do not match the facts something is wrong. And it is simply not acceptable to bring alternative facts to this Parliament to cherry-pick years and indicators for comparison to give the perception that the country is doing well. Do not do that.

The Minister came to this Parliament, Madam Speaker, with a straight face and told the country that the unemployment rate—the Minister said:

“…the unemployment rate has declined to 3.7 per cent…”

What he claimed was, and I quote:

“…one of the lowest unemployment rates ever achieved in Trinidad and Tobago…”

But what is the truth? What is the truth? Hear the facts, Madam Speaker. As far as the rates go, the unemployment rate the Minister boasted about is not the lowest. It
is not even the second lowest, it is not even the third lowest, Madam Speaker.

In 2013 under the Member for Siparia, the unemployment rate was 3.7 per cent, but with 626,300 persons in jobs, today with the Minister’s 3.7 38,900 less jobs are in the system under this Minister, but he boasts about 3.7 per cent one of the lowest in the country’s history, Madam Speaker. This Minister has presided over the job loss of 35,900 jobs between 2015 and today. Not the 3.7 per cent that he is boasting about Minister. But only a PNM Minister will celebrate failure and try to convince the population that he is doing better. That things are better for them.

Just to be absolutely clear, Madam Speaker, the job situation has gotten substantially worse under this Government and no amount of statistical manipulation, no amount of statistical manipulation can change that. That is why, Madam Speaker, what is why, there would be thousands of persons lined up on the highway for hours on end waiting so that they could get interviewed for one of the few jobs being offered by the prison service. That is why there would be thousands of persons lined up waiting to get a job interview to work on a cruise ship. That is why there would be thousands of applications for any job advertised anywhere in this country.

Madam Speaker, according to this Minister, out of every 100 persons in the labour force only four are looking for work and cannot find a job. Based on what I just said, Madam Speaker, of the thousands lining up, that cannot be true. On a daily basis, there are persons coming into my office frustrated at not being able to get a job, especially youths, many of them who have sacrificed and achieved certificates, including degrees, are today unable to find a job.

Youth unemployment continues to be statistically higher than the national
average., in many instances more than twice as high. Madam Speaker, if any Minister here has been attending their office and meeting their constituents as we on this side have been doing, they would admit that there is a vast number of persons desperately seeking a job but unable to get one.

Madam Speaker, as a policy maker I had hoped that this Minister would have used the Budget 2024 or any of his previous budgets to be straight with the population. Confront the fact that there is serious unemployment issues here. Confront the fact, Madam Speaker, and consult the population and develop and implement a plan, a real plan, for growth and development. Instead, the Minister and his colleagues prefer the charades, the smoke and mirror deception and misinformation, Madam Speaker. But I believe in speaking truth to power and that requires me to call out misinformation and mischief anywhere I see it.

Where in Budget 2024 are the incentives to create new industries or to expand existing industries, to create sustainable well-paying jobs to replace the tens of thousands of jobs you cost taxpayers, Minister? The one project that had some kind of potential, the one project, was the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate, which the Minister, did you know, Minister of Finance was just boasting about. But pay attention, Sir, hear the facts that you seem to have missed. The one project that had some kind of potential to create jobs seems to be limping around, already three years overdue, unable to attract either domestic or foreign investors in that Phoenix Park Industrial Estate.

This is the same Minister of Finance, Madam Speaker, the Member for Diego Martin North East, who came in October 2020 and boasted that they had investors lined up, they had investors lined up and ready to occupy the same park. Amazingly, this is the same Minister that on Monday last was here again
celebrating his failures of an “occupationcy” rate.

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** “Occupationcy?” What was that?

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Oh, let me correct that since you are paying attention. Thank you very much. I am glad you are paying attention. This is the same Minister who came back here once again, celebrating his failure, boasting of an occupancy rate of a mere 17 per cent as an achievement. You are boasting at 17 per cent three years afterwards. What a shame. Worse, this is the Minister who is now saying that that is the model that he is proposing to replicate nationwide. Failure breeding failure.

Madam Speaker, the failure of the State to create new jobs combined with this Government’s policy which saw the closure of Petrotrin, the exodus of several companies including three international energy companies within the last few days, Madam Speaker, and the closure of thousands of SMEs has resulted in the substantial job loss over the years. This has had a knock-on effect on the society, on the economy, and on several key financial institutions, not the least of which is the National Insurance Board.

Madam Speaker, since 2016, the NIB has had to fund its fiscal deficit by withdrawing from its investment accounts. This deficit was a result of several factors. The most significant being the shrinking contributory base and an increasing number of beneficiaries. Ironically and perhaps, Madam Speaker, prophetically, 2016 was the first year of the PNM in office with this current Minister in charge of the NIB. In total, Madam Speaker, between 2016 and 2022 the NIB drew down $4.5 billion of its assets and investments to fund the gap, with the largest withdrawal taking place in 2022 to the value of $1.1 billion.

It is expected, Madam Speaker, that for 2023 the deficit will be again
another $1.1 billion. The Government’s solution is to increase the retirement age with a wave of its magic wand taking away five years, taking away five years of pension from ordinary citizens. That is another opportunity that the junior Minister of Finance boasted. It was something to celebrate, Madam Speaker, but it is clear from the information I will now present, that the Government itself is directly complicit in the current crisis facing the NIB.

When the Opposition raised this issue in the House two years ago, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance, in typical fashion, dismissed it, saying our concerns that the National Insurance Fund was impending crisis was a fantasy according to him. Today the country knows the truth.

Drawing down on investment income, Madam Speaker, means that there is less money being reinvested in the investment portfolio for the future benefit of the NIBTT. Obviously, this will eventually result in the further depletion of assets, but the Government and the Minister must have known these facts at least since 2016 when the fund first went into deficit. What have they done about it? From 2016 to now, Madam Speaker, we are going on eight years, what have they done about it? They have made it worse.

According to a recent media report, Madam Speaker, which has not been challenged by any Member of the Government, seven of the 10 largest debtors to the NIB, seven of the 10, are government agencies and Ministries who are negligent in making their payments to the NIB to the value of an estimated one quarter of a billion dollars, $240 million, Madam Speaker. These include MTS, with a debt of $75 million for 2017 to 2020. But let me spend a two minutes on MTS please, Madam Speaker.

It is reported that the NIB was seeking approval to initiate legal action
against the Government agency. Why, Madam Speaker, was this debt allowed to accumulate for three years? Why has no action been taken by the NIB against MTS? Whose approval, Madam Speaker, has the NIB been awaiting for the last 40 months to take action to retrieve moneys owed to it? Whose approval is the NIB waiting on? Maybe the Minister of Finance, who is the line Minister for the NIB, can advise why to date no action has been taken with regard to this outstanding debt. Is it because persons in high office at the MTS have strong political connections to the PNM leadership, Madam Speaker? I do not know, I am asking for a friend.

The Sunday *Guardian* reported, Madam Speaker, that the MTS has indicated that it is unable to liquidate its debt. That too has not been queried or opposed by Members opposite. Is it that MTS is also bankrupt, Madam Speaker? You see, this incestuous bad pay relationship, Madam Speaker, between government agencies has compromised the financial integrity of MTS, but it has contributed to the financial crisis that the NIB is facing right now. These debts to the NIB, these millions, this $250 million debt, are never included in the value of central government debt which the Minister is boasting is falling. Yet it is a financial obligation that must be met.

It was reported, Madam Speaker, and again not challenged by the other side, that the Ministry of Education also had a $36million debt to the NIB. Ministry of Education, two Ministers here, they can defend it hopefully. Ministry of Education had a debt of $36 million to the NIB. WASA owes NIB $17million. The Ministry of National Security $12 million.

Interestingly enough, Madam Speaker, the Minister’s solution to all of this, to the crises that have been confronted by the NIB because of the Ministry’s
refusal and failure to pay, was to offer the Government delinquents an amnesty for payments for outstanding NIS contribution, without them having to pay interest and/or penalties. That amnesty ended in January this year. However, reports are that only 90 million of that $240 million outstanding was repaid. This means that, Madam Speaker, NIB’s Fund, the National Insurance Fund continues to be suffering because of this substantial outstanding debt by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and their various state agencies, Madam Speaker.

But also, Madam Speaker, what happens to workers at these organizations if the company refuses to pay its own debts? Is it that their contributions are not registered because the state agencies have not met their obligations? Madam Speaker, if an average citizen like yourself or myself do not meet our financial obligations to the NIB, we will face immediate action, including being charged and prosecuted in the law courts of Trinidad and Tobago. But Ministries and state agencies under this Government appear to be above the law. One law for the PNM and another law for everyone else.

8.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, that is not the only way that this Government has compromised NIB’s financial status and there are many other instances in which Government action has directly contributed to job losses, and therefore to the contributory base of the NIB. Overall, between 2015 and 2022 under this Government, the NIB’s financial reports Madam Speaker, state that they have lost 12 per cent of their contributors, with the number of paying employees falling between 2015 and 2016, and 2017, and 2020, 2022, with a number of persons falling who are contributing to the NIB, falling by 61,500 between 2015 and today. And although, the value of the contribution income has increased, this substantial
loss of employee contributions would have had a detrimental and predictable effect on the financial health of the NIB. It is short-sighted that the Minister’s solution is to deny pensions for an extended period of five years, when it should be obvious that what was required is an aggressive increase in the number of contributors and also, this would have increased contribution income, but also be much more sustainable in both the long and short run.

What the Minister of Finance and his Government needed to do is not to increase the age, Madam Speaker, but increase the number of contributors, find jobs, create investment, create the environment for persons to want to invest in Trinidad and Tobago to create jobs, Madam Speaker. But I am also extremely concerned as well about the value of the various benefits being offered by NIB and the fact that rising prices have had over time on their purchasing power. It should be noted Madam Speaker, that recipients of these benefits are ordinary citizens who are heavily reliant on these benefits to meet their financial obligations. The Government’s focus however, implies that any increase in the value of these benefits are off the table, even as citizens complain that the real value of such benefits has been drastically falling. I recommend today, Madam Speaker, that the Government increase the value of these benefits to allow citizens a chance at attaining an acceptable standard of living.

Madam Speaker, overall, the failure of this Government and this Minister to adopt a multi-dimensional view of the financing problem facing the NIB, including and especially including aggressive job creation, and the penalization of delinquents is what has been responsible for placing the fund and the NIB by extension in a position of jeopardy. The laissez-faire approach by the Minister to addressing these critical issues demonstrates the tendency of this Minister of
Finance to kick the can down the road for future generations to solve. He has adopted a similar approach in dealing with the existing massive debt, foreign exchange crisis and heavy debt financing requirements of this Government’s policies, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, let me deal with some of the fiscal measures that the Minister has chosen, having already ignored, Madam Speaker, him having already ignored—the hon. Minister—having already ignored the critical issues. Let me tell you how he addresses issues generally. Let me tell you what the Minister’s solutions have been, Madam Speaker. Adult Literacy, the Minister announced a provision of $7.7 million to ALTA—$7.7 million to ALTA online, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West, your original speaking time is now spent. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to complete your contribution.

Mr. D. Tancoo: I thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Over eight years the Minister has discovered finally, after eight years, that thousands of our citizens have been denied basic education. And only now as general elections come closer, is the Minister trying to treat, to put some measures in place to treat with them. In the Minister’s words, Madam Speaker, ALTA was restricted from reaching those in need of the service because they lacked the necessary devices to access the website. Amazingly, amazingly the Minister’s solution is to offer $158 per person, per month. That works out to about five cents per day. That is not enough, Madam Speaker, to provide even the most basic phone or internet access to allow the very same people we are talking about to pursue adult literacy classes, Madam Speaker.
That fiscal measure is a publicity stunt by this Minister to create the impression that he is finally doing something about a problem that he has identified and created. Perhaps what is more unfortunate, Madam Speaker, is that there is nothing in this budget that shows that the Minister and his Government recognize the increase dropout rate of children from the education system over the last eight years, which will create yet another generation of citizens with literacy challenges. That initiative, Madam Speaker, is pure “mamaguy”.

The National Financial Literacy Programme has been in existence Madam Speaker, since 2008, developed and executed by the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. In 2019, the head of the NFLP announced a target of 50,000 persons per year using their own resources. What the Minister is trying to do with his fiscal measure Madam Speaker, is to rebrand and rename the existing and successful project by the Central Bank and claim it as a PNM Government initiative. It is an attempt Madam Speaker, to pass it off as some new initiative, costing the Government and the taxpayer $5 million in deception, Madam Speaker.

The community gardens and green markets that the Minister spoke about, Madam Speaker, again, more mamaguy, that system exists, the programme is going on. A more common-sense approach would have been for the Minister to partner with the successful CGCC programme and expand its reach, not create a parallel organization doomed to failure. The junior Minister also spoke about the Minister’s Junior Achievement Programme, and they need to reintroduce it in schools, Madam Speaker, but why did this Government stop the programme in the first place? Why did the Minister refuse to provide funding for this programme he now acknowledges all of a sudden is so valuable to development of our youth? Furthermore, Madam Speaker, the proposed allocation of $720,000 works out to an
average about $3,600 per school, about $1 a day, Madam Speaker. Obviously, this
is just a mamaguy, a stingy one at that, destined to fail at the start, Madam
Speaker. The Minister needs to stop paying lip service to our nation’s youth.

Madam Speaker, I can go on. The assessment centre and temporary shelter,
Madam Speaker. This is to repeat the same plan that they have been putting
forward year, after year, after year and failing because they believe that they need
to have a one size fits all solution which does not work. Obviously, Madam
Speaker, what is required is targeted interventions and individualized assessments
and treatments—an expensive building is not a solution, Madam Speaker. This is
just them throwing money at problems hoping for the best just before election,
Madam Speaker.

The minimum wage Madam Speaker, a $3 minimum wage, my other
colleagues have spoken about it. At $3 Madam Speaker, the Minister also admits a
$3 minimum wage he says that there are 190,000 persons who will benefit, Madam
Speaker. It is a shameful thing that a Minister of Finance in a country like
Trinidad and Tobago will admit that 190,000 of our members of the labour force
are working for minimum wage. That is a shameful thing after eight years, and
$420 billion spent. That increase, Madam Speaker, is not enough for a worker to
buy a box of KFC, a chicken roti, or a small box of Chinese food. It is a mamaguy,
Madam Speaker.

The Market Box programme that the Minister is boasting about, last year
that was named a “food box”, Madam Speaker. This year, he did not come to tell
us why he did not implement it, he came now to put a new label on it, call it a
Market Box, rebrand, rehash, no explanation as to why it did not happen, Madam
Speaker, failure.
The school grants, Madam Speaker. My colleague, the Member who shadows the Ministry of Education will tell you Madam Speaker, that this incentive of $1,000 the Minister is boasting about, comes after the school year! “People done buy” their stuff already, Madam Speaker, school supplies have already been purchased. So giving them the money now has little value in treating with the problems that they faced before. It is a mamaguy, Madam Speaker. The UrpreneurPlus programme, Madam Speaker, that too has been functioning before. The Minister comes now and wants to add money to it to label it as associated with the Government, Madam Speaker. Completely false; pure mamaguy.

Madam Speaker, the incentive to SMEs. Well, I would want to spend one or two minutes on these SMEs, Madam Speaker, because it is a given fact Madam Speaker, it is a given fact that SMEs have been begging for foreign exchange—access to foreign exchange. And this Minister comes here and identifies a series of concerns that SMEs have been having, including in his budget presentation, Madam Speaker, including things like not having bank accounts, et cetera, et cetera. And then he lists out a series of initiatives he claims are supposed to be for the benefit of the SMEs. If they do not have banking information, et cetera, Madam Speaker, because SMEs are in crisis right now, I am sure, Madam Speaker, that those initiatives are not designed for them. They are designed—the SME initiatives he is speaking about, are designed for somebody else, some other entities, not the vast majority of SMEs that exist in Trinidad and Tobago that he just identified was suffering.

Madam Speaker, the Minister proposes a fund which he says would be used for the provision of support to the SME sector. Madam Speaker, on the last occasion, the Minister increased and responded to increase the allocation for our
foreign reserves in the system. They used the same mechanism so that the same people who were getting, continued to get. Those who were not getting have not been getting. Madam Speaker, I challenge the Minister to consult, consult with the real persons, consult with the SMEs and find out what they need. Make sure that the system is transparent Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, like all of Trinidad and Tobago, the constituency of Oropouche West continues to be suffocated by the policies of this Government. I listened to PNM Ministers boast today that the PNM Government is providing pipe borne water 24/7 in their constituencies, Madam Speaker. But there are taxpaying citizens in Penal, in Debe, in Woodland and in San Francique, and they have not had water for upwards of 60 days, Madam Speaker, no pipe borne water upwards of 60 days and these Ministers are boasting on their side how much they are getting, Madam Speaker.

My area also suffers from bad infrastructure, Madam Speaker, horrendous infrastructural works. Why are the people of these areas being victimized? Why? We have seen a massive increase in crime, but we do not have enough police cars, we do not have enough manpower in my constituency, Madam Speaker. Why is my area—why are people south of Trinidad and Tobago, suffering and being victimized by this Government? It is completely unacceptable. I challenge the Minister, Madam Speaker, let us put people before the politics, Madam Speaker.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48 (6)—we are not victimizing anybody.

Madam Speaker: So, Member, could you just find another way, withdraw that, and find another way to say that please.
Mr. D. Tancoo: Why is this Government treating the residents of Oropouche West less than human? Why?

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Do they not deserve more, do they not deserve better, Madam Speaker?

Mr. Young: It is the same thing.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6) please.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: No well, before you move on, you withdraw it please.

Mr. D. Tancoo: I withdraw it, Madam Speaker, I withdraw it. Madam Speaker, to quote Buju Banton:

“From the minute of birth, you enter this earth
Obstacles deh inna your way to overcome first
Throughout everyday they seem to get worse
Oh my God, cast away this curse!”

Madam Speaker, it is time to cast away this wicked PNM curse from our land. I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member Diego Martin Central.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister-Communications (Hon. Symon de Nobriga): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Member for Oropouche came and gave his contribution and we sat through that. And he was his usual theatrical high-strung self, but tonight he was bordering almost on angry. Madam Speaker, the Member raised several questions during his
contribution and I believe most if not all of them had been previously answered by—

[Device goes off]

Madam Speaker: The person with that device, please go outside, get it under control, and then they could return.

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Thank you, Madam Speaker. But a lot of his questions must have been rhetorical because the Member for San Fernando East had addressed all of those issues in his contribution. So, I would suggest to the Members of the House and those listening and viewing that if they want to get the answers to those questions put forward, just go back and listen to the contribution of the Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

8.45 p.m.

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, the MP for Oropouche West came here, accused the Member for San Fernando East of gaslighting, and then bolted headlong into the biggest gaslighting exercise that we have seen for the day. Madam Speaker, he spoke about the Minister of Finance giving a $3 increase in minimum wage and then taking it back with thousands in property tax and increases in water rates and electricity and gas. Madam Speaker, I hope it was not the Member who wrote that opening, because I suspect whoever wrote that contribution for the Member did so based on that fake budget that I had seen passing around social media in the week leading up to the reading of the budget. If it is the Member, however, I think this is a perfect example of getting high on your own supply.

Madam Speaker, let me thank and congratulate the Minister of Finance for
not only a budget that has found a balance between fiscal responsibility and what is still a challenging period for the world, and particularly for small island states like ourselves whose economies are petrochemical based, he found that balance with the support for the continuation of programmes, initiatives, and support for the private sector, young people, farmers, and those in our society who need the support and partnership with the Government most, including those from the constituency of Diego Martin Central, which I have the honour to represent.

Madam Speaker, let me also thank the Minister of Planning and Development and her team for their support of our Development Programme for this fiscal year as we continue to invest in the people of this country across all Ministries. And, of course, Madam Speaker, none of this would be possible without the astute leadership and the guiding influence of the Prime Minister, leader of this Cabinet.

Madam Speaker, no annual budget exists in a vacuum. It has to be proactive in its measures to achieve short and medium-term goals. It has to be reactive to changing global realities, all while keeping time with the Government’s overarching plans, policies and directions, and to be able to do this across eight years in wildly changing and challenging local and global environments is a mammoth task. And, again, I congratulate the Minister of Finance for steering the economy through that storm.

Madam Speaker, over the course of my adult life, and in particular the last eight years, I have listened to many budget debates. And on many occasions over the last eight years, I have done so with some measure of astonishment at what passes for intellectual analysis and rigorous deconstruction, and even informed debate from those opposite, and in the instant case the Opposition’s weak response
has not been entirely unsurprising. But putting capacity and capability aside, Madam Speaker, it must be such a challenge for them to come here and find fault with a budget that has so obviously demonstrated that the PNM Government, having fulfilled the mandate given to us twice over the last eight years to save us from the ravages of 2010 to 2015, rebuild our economy, protect us in times of global economic collapse and deadly pandemic is now yet again laying the framework necessary for the realization of our boundless destiny.

What we heard from the Opposition Leader, Madam Speaker, on the evening after the budget presentation, was the carefully scripted rehash of all the policies that she implemented during the dark days of her stewardship. The provision of laptops for students, for example, is her favourite tune to sing and it is picked up time and time again by those opposite. Notwithstanding all the experts indicating that her policy was flawed from its inception, the Member for Siparia continues to engage in her delusion that this was somehow the panacea to all the country’s educational programmes.

Ms. Ameen: Madam Speaker, 48(5), please.

Hon. Member: Yes, correct.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. Ameen: She is not “yuh fren”.

Madam Speaker: Continue.

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, I think that might be a record for me. Madam Speaker, there is no question that some children benefited from the programme, but they were the ones who already had Internet connectivity in their homes. There is no question that certain suppliers made a ton load of money from the project. But check the Ministry of Education to see how many laptops were
returned shortly after issue because there was no prior training on how to use them and, very importantly, the consumables for repairs were nowhere to be found and the personnel to conduct the repairs were in extremely short supply.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia also criticized the school book grant with a puerile argument that this is October and the school year has already begun, forgetting that there is another school term that starts in January, and another school term that starts in April, and surprise of all surprises, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga:—another in September, well before the next budget is presented. Madam Speaker, on behalf of the parents of Diego Martin Central, I want to publicly thank the Minister of Education who, with the support of the Minister of Finance, will be distributing laptops and book grants to those families who need them to ensure that the fullest potential of their children can be achieved.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: But, you see, Madam Speaker, this Government will not be derailed from continuing to seek what is best for all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, whether they live in the north or the south of Trinidad and Tobago; whether they are young, they are old, or in between like myself, Madam Speaker, and regardless of their religious persuasion.

Well, Madam Speaker, as the Minister of Communications in the Office of the Prime Minister, I have a very broad perspective on the operations of the whole of government, and this is so because it falls to me and my various teams to synthesize the work of the entire Government and ensure that the average citizen becomes more familiar with the policies and programmes, with the subsidies and
grants, and with all the avenues available for them to enhance their quality of life, and so, Madam Speaker, there are a few matters that I must concern myself with.

The first is the efficiency of the Ministry itself, and while this applies to all the departments, for the purpose of this contribution, I would like to refine my comments to those departments actively engaged in informing the population. Madam Speaker, there can be no refuting the fact that globally institutions of authority are fighting a war against misinformation and disinformation, and Trinidad and Tobago is no different.

The opposition that these institutions face daily is real and deeply concerning, and nowhere is this more prevalent than on social media. Daily we see the misrepresentation of facts, the purposeful cutting and pasting of videos not related and sometimes years apart to creating a cohesive narrative that is designed to undermine and mislead. And, Madam Speaker, daily I see the uninformed, or worse yet, the informed presenting their own misinformed or purposefully erroneous positions to citizens who have either unwittingly succumbed to the power of platform algorithms or have willingly come to listen to persons in groups that they believe will give them the facts so that they can make the best decision. But, Madam Speaker, make no mistake, we are at war with misinformation. The truth is at war with untruths and the prize to be claimed is not governance or a political term, it is the future of our country and the avoidance of chaos.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Into this war, Madam Speaker, enters the Government Communications division, the Information Division, TTT, NALIS and the National Archives, each making its own contribution, but more importantly, working with each other and across whole-of-government to present the facts, the ongoing work
and daily investment of this Government in the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I will begin with the work of the Government Communications division and the Information Division, and our Week in Review. Madam Speaker, the Week in Review is a weekly compilation of the achievements and activities of government Ministries and agencies to highlight the work of the Government and how it is beneficial to citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. The Week in Review is published every Monday in the daily newspapers as a full-page advertorial showcasing a spotlight of those activities, and then videos that are even more wide-ranging are posted to social media platforms and broadcast on all major television stations.

Madam Speaker, besides being a tool to inform the public, Trinidad and Tobago is unlike other countries in the region, where the main revenue earner is tourism and where all stakeholders understand that the country’s international image must be treated in a particular way. Unfortunately, Madam Speaker, that is not the case in this country and there are those who harbour no such compunction. Left up to them, citizens living here and across the diaspora would be treated to a daily diet of bad news and could easily come away with the impression that nothing good is happening in this country. Well, through our Week in Review publications, a growing number of citizens in this country, regionally and the international diaspora, have become increasingly aware of the positive and impactful work of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and I have thanked Government Communications for presenting them with a different view.

Madam Speaker, I believe that the Government has a responsibility to its citizens, a responsibility to present the facts, the figures, the policies and the programmes so as to ensure that citizens come away with some degree of balance.
And it must be noted that at least four major radio stations utilize the Week in Review newspaper publication every Monday to inform their listeners of the Government’s activities, and the Week in Review is also shown on at least one television station in Canada and another in the United Kingdom.

But, Madam Speaker, there is no resting on our laurels. In the new fiscal, the young, energetic and hard-working team at Government Communications division, alongside their colleagues at Information Division, will be expanding the Week in Review format to reach even more citizens across all media platforms and inform them about the work that this Government is doing every day in the service of every citizen of this country.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, the Information Division played a significant role in providing coverage and support for government events, and converting radio and audio footage, as well as photos into informative and educational platforms. These platforms and productions aid in providing the wider citizenry with information that creates an awareness of government initiatives and services, as well as those services—as well as how those services can be accessed.

The Television Unit produced 69 productions, which inform the citizens of the Government’s initiatives, as well as how to access the services highlighted. These productions were posted on our social media platforms and sent to all television stations for viewing. The Radio Unit kept the public informed with audio features, series and promos, highlighting the events, the work, the services of the various Ministries and state agencies, and over 800 audio pieces were created and aired on commercial radio stations. And it should be noted—and again, Madam Speaker, I will have to thank the Minister of Finance for this, but this was
largely facilitated by new studio and audio equipment acquired in fiscal 2023.

The Photographic Unit completed a total of 445 assignments in fiscal ’23, and this represents requests for coverage that were received from the Office of the President, the Office of the Prime Minister, other government Ministries and agencies. And, Madam Speaker, here too, there will be further expansion of the role and impact of the Information Division in informing the national conversation. With the equipment already procured in the last fiscal and with additional equipment to be procured in this fiscal, the Information Division will continue its exceptional work and will be looking at a collaborative project, including TTT, NALIS and the National Archives, that speaks to our lived history as a nation. Madam Speaker, this initiative will be produced for television, radio and social media.

Madam Speaker, while we are always looking at our best we can consistently improve within OPM – Communications, we also look at our role as a stakeholder for corporate communications departments across the whole of government. And with that in mind, our communities of practice function as a networking and learning space for communicators in the public sector. It provides a monthly platform for upskilling and sharing of best practices towards improvement of the way government communicates.

The communities of practice have been able to upskill a number of communication professionals within the public service. Each session has been targeted to specific needs within the group, ensuring that each member of the communications departments across Ministries and agencies can benefit, and it has also helped to stimulate government communicators to think outside of the box when communicating the work of their Ministries to the public on how to be more
impactful and memorable. And the communities of practice programme has also yielding more efficient communication between all Ministries and agencies, and the Office of the Prime Minister – Communications. Madam Speaker, I would like to thank all my colleagues today for their support of this initiative, and the GCD team for their efforts in the planning, hosting and overall management of this very important programme.

Madam Speaker, TTT Limited is an institution in Trinidad and Tobago. And though it has experienced many reincarnations, its reason for being remains the same, to provide the facts accurately and in a timely manner to the citizenry here and across the diaspora; to be a home for and a supporter of the creation of local content that allows our population to see and hear excellence that looks and sounds like them; to live for local by placing special emphasis on highlighting our diverse culture and creativity through their TV and radio arms; and as a responsible state media, to positively impact the development of our young people and future leaders through their broadcasting.

9.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker, this Government and successive administrations have provided multiple tax concessions to the private sector to encourage the creation and promotion of local content for television.

Madam Speaker, it was a PNM administration that moved to ensure that the University of Trinidad and Tobago had among its offerings degree programmes in the performing arts, fashion and fine arts. Thus, ensuring the creation of a pipeline of talent for the local, regional and international theatre. It was a PNM administration that ensured the construction of NAPA and SAPA and refurbished Queen's Hall—
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Hon. S. de Nobriga:—and Naparima Bowl so that the availability of theatre spaces will no longer be an issue. And on a local level, every new community centre being built comes fully equipped with a performing stage, and modern light and sound infrastructure so that truly local content can be created right there in our villages and communities.

Notwithstanding all of this, Madam Speaker, the local corporate community has been very hesitant in expending recoverable resources in the local theatre and arts community to create and develop local content. It has fallen therefore on the shoulders of this Government, utilizing the vehicle of TTT Limited, to jump-start this venture. This is because we understand the critical role that TTTL has to play in reflecting the best of us as a nation.

Madam Speaker, our national psyche, our collective self-esteem and our national pride are hinged on our ability to consistently see glimpses of excellence that look, and sound like us. We dare to dream of a better and brighter Trinbago when we are reminded of the irrepressible resilience, creativity and genius that we possess on these twin islands.

To this end, Madam Speaker, TTT Limited has embarked on a series of new programmes, as well as some that harken back to the days when our nation's talents featured more prominently on television than our less savoury side. Madam Speaker, it is an obligation that I continue to lend my voice to, and I will continue to expand on them in the new fiscal. But Madam Speaker, among these initiatives are the following: the first is Delving Deeper.

Madam Speaker, Delving Deeper is a weekly news magazine programme that adopts a conversational format between government officials, CEOs, other
executives and other stakeholders. To date, 63 episodes of this programme have been produced and it serves as an informative platform to explore the Government's policies and interrogate the impact of initiatives led by the Government and sector partners in pursuit of achieving the goals outlined in Vision 2030.

Madam Speaker, another new programme of note is *Hamaara Desh*. This is a vibrant platform dedicated to celebrating and spotlighting the rich tapestry of Indian culture flourishing within Trinidad and Tobago. Its mission extends beyond cultural appreciation, emphasizing inclusivity as it bridges communities together and through this initiative, the Indian Diaspora gains amplified market presence and heightened visibility fostering a deeper sense of connection and belonging within Trinidad and Tobago and its cultural landscape.

Madam Speaker, over the last fiscal TTT, restored the *Scouting for Talent* brand. *Scouting for Talent* is a familiar name to many of us, as it was a staple in our households for a number of years of our youth. This reimagined endeavour is aimed at nurturing and promoting local talent and cottage industries and this initiative goes beyond mere talent recognition. It actively contributes to community building by providing opportunities for skills development and economic growth. And in doing so, it ensures that these talented individuals and cottage industries gain the recognition and market presence they deserve while simultaneously fostering stronger, more resilient communities.

9.05 p.m.

And another undertaking in this vein, Madam Speaker, is *12 & Under*. The *12 & Under* revival remains committed to inspiring the younger generation by nurturing their artistic and creative talents. It serves as a dedicated platform for
showcasing the remarkable abilities of these young individuals. And by doing so it not only encourages their artistic growth but also provides them with the recognition and spotlight they deserve, motivating and empowering their peers and future generations of creative minds.

And, Madam Speaker, another critical and timely production, I am sure that Minister Manning will be happy that TTT will start this year, is positive pay cheques. This financial literacy show that seeks to empower individuals with essential knowledge and skill to make informed financial decisions and it provides individuals with the skills and resources necessary to efficiently handle their finances including budgeting, saving, investing and preparing for their financial futures. These are all invaluable skills, Madam Speaker, to navigate the tough financial times the world is currently experiencing while preparing to maximize the value of the more prosperous times that are sure to come in Trinidad and Tobago under the astute stewardship of this PNM Government.

Madam Speaker, TTT Limited has emerged as a prolific producer or partner in the production of diverse documentary content spanning a wide spectrum of subjects and themes. This is an acclaim that we hold with pride and seek to uphold. From thought-provoking historical retrospectives, to insightful explorations of contemporary issues, the documentaries serve as a compelling window into a world fostering understanding education and engagement. With a commitment to delivering high-quality narratives and in-depth storytelling, TTT Limited’s documentary productions not only inform and entertain but also contribute to a richer cultural and intellectual tapestry for our viewers.

Madam Speaker, the creation and development of local programming such as the relaunch of Scouting for Talent and programmes such as Hamara Desh not
only celebrate and preserve the rich cultural heritage of Trinidad and Tobago but they also allow for the exploration and representation of local customs, traditions, history and folklore by showcasing the unique aspects of the nation’s culture, as well as individual talents and it promotes a sense of pride, an identity among the local population.

So today, I am inviting those in the private sector to invest in local content, to partner with TTT in the creation of programming that celebrates our people, celebrates our nation’s past and present and contributes to the best possible future by allowing our young people to see excellence that looks and sounds like us.

Madam Speaker, while that is happening on television, TTTL is also actively improving on radio and online. Having seen the successful rebranding of Next 99.1 and the continued success of Sweet 100, TTTL is now focused on Talk City 91.1. The initiation of the rebranding process marks a substantial transformation in the station’s strategy, the aim to not only attract new audiences but also ensure that their current listeners continue to find value and relevance in their programming.

This comprehensive approach seeks to position Talk City 91.1 as one of, if not, the preferred source of information and entertainment for both their long-standing listeners and the emerging generation of media consumers. These objectives will be mainly achieved through the introduction of podcasts and visual radio productions. Madam Speaker, with that also comes TTT’s efforts at improving their own internal operations to become more efficient and to make the organization, not only fit for purpose now, but for the future in a rapidly evolving industry. This began with the successful implementation of a stabilization plan and now the process of developing a strategic plan is nearing completion and it is anticipated that the strategic plan will be approved and begin its implementation.
phases in this fiscal, charting the way for a TTTL of the future.

Madam Speaker, I would like to take the opportunity to thank every member of the board of directors and all the hard-working management and staff of TTTL for their continued efforts and to say that the future is bright for TTTL.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, when it comes to informing the population of this country about the work of this Government, the work of and the need for government communications division, information division and TTT both on air and online as a strategic partner cannot be underestimated or undervalued.

Madam Speaker, when the region convened in Port of Spain to declare crime and violence as a public health issue requiring a whole-of-government approach and whole-of-CARICOM approach, we were there as a strategic partner. When the region came together for the Agri Investment Forum and Expo, we were there as a strategic partner. When the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service celebrates the young entrepreneurs of this country at the youth awards, we are there as a strategic partner. When the Ministry of Education had to find ways to continue the schooling of our children during the pandemic, we were there with them as a strategic partner.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, when the Ministry of Sport and Community Development is changing the lives of thousands of Trinbagonians through Self-Help or helping our young people to see themselves beyond their current realities through tremendous programmes like EmPOWER, we have been and we will continue to be there as a strategic partner.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Hon. S. de Nobriga: When the Ministry of Health had to battle the active efforts to undermine this Government’s actions to protect the country—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga:—from the worst ravages of COVID-19, we were there as a strategic partner. Madam Speaker, when the Asantehene, the king of the Ashanti, visited this country on the invitation of the Prime Minister, we were there for that pivotal moment in our nation’s history.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, when this Government opens new community centres or refurbishes existing or opens new health centres, we are there as a strategic partner.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: And when the Ministry of Public Utilities positively impacts thousands of people at a time through the Community Water Improvement Programme, we are there as a strategic partner.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, when the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development changes the life trajectory of a family with a key to a new home, we are there as a strategic partner.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, the way in which these arms of government communications support our sister Ministries is as numerous and varied as the way they themselves positively impact this country daily. I wish I had a day to list them all out but alas, Madam Speaker, I only have the time allotted to me in the Standing Orders.
Madam Speaker, it falls to the Office of the Prime Minister - Communications to be one of the Ministries charged with the preservation of this country’s heritage while simultaneously opening doors for increasing numbers of persons to have greater access to information. And there are two agencies that fall under the ambit of OPM Communications charged with these specific responsibilities. The first of which is the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, a country that is ignorant of its history can never adequately prepare to face the onslaught of the future. Though we are beginning to understand more clearly the need to preserve our heritage, it is a painful and painstaking task to still hear persons who we believe should know better speak in such disparaging terms about the funds expended on the preservation and conservation of our local and iconic architecture.

The National Archives is tasked with the duty of preserving this country’s lived history and over the years has acquired a significant collection of artefacts and historical documents and records including several private and public archival collections through donations and transfers to build a very inclusive and diverse national collection.

Madam Speaker, most recently the Port of Spain City Corporation and the archives of Caroni have been transferred to the National Archives for processing to be accessed by the public. Other collections acquired through donations include the Ronan Owen Baptist collection, the Nasir Khan cricket magazine collection, the Percy Farrell collection and a collection on the Jewish community has also been initiated.

Madam Speaker, yet again time permits me from sharing all the ongoing
activities of the National Archives but I think it is important that a few highlights are shared. Madam Speaker, the digital transformation of the National Archives is well underway and in alignment with the Ministry of Digital Transformation’s direction regarding the creation of a digital society. And to that end, the National Archives continues to increase the availability of digital records for public online access and offers an on-the-demand digitization service to users of the public search room. There is also a dedicated computer in the public search room to access digital records as required, Madam Speaker. That lab has produced the National Archives digitalization guidelines for archival and library collections. It is my intention in the fiscal to have the National Archives and NALIS work together to make public searches of their archives available at all NALIS locations.

Madam Speaker, I am aware that as we speak there are archival records detailing the growth and development of Trinidad and Tobago being held in other national archives and repositories around the world including the UK, Spain, India and the Netherlands. One of the National Archives projects being pursued in this upcoming fiscal is the repatriation of our digital surrogates of our archival records held in those repositories. And while we may never be able to acquire the original documents, we are prepared to explore acquisition in other media.

Madam Speaker, as we seek to embrace new and emerging technology in all aspects of the Ministry, I am happy to report that the National Archives has established a trusted digital repository through the introduction of digital preservation software to protect, secure, and monitor digital records in the long term based on the Open Archival Information Systems’ ISO standard.

Madam Speaker, there is a backlog of government media including analogue, photographic, video and audio media going back decades in some cases
waiting to be digitized. I met this project being done in-house, and quite frankly, Madam Speaker, I was not happy with the progress being made in this most critical area, and the project was reshaped to look at competent and qualified out-sourced options.

Madam Speaker, the creation of these parameters, taking into consideration the need to future-proof the process in terms of formatting and cataloguing took some time but it was better that we did that work right in the initial stages to ensure a successful outcome, and in this fiscal the project will be initiated. And while the backlog of digitizing specific government media content is addressed through out sourcing, the National Archives intends in the upcoming fiscal to expand its existing staff complement under the DOGMA Project in the AV digitizing lab to continue the work of digitizing and re-purposing other private and public AV content for the planned YouTube channel, social media use and for use by video producers.

Madam Speaker, the cataloguing of over 10,000 digitized assets has to be done as a matter of priority in the upcoming fiscal to facilitate timely and easy access to archival video footage. There can be no doubt that the National Archives has a critical role to play in the preservation and conservation of this country’s archival records. These works that I have outlined will therefore ensure that the National Archives fulfils that role, ensuring greater public access to additional primary historical resources for research, scholarship, education and family history.

Madam Speaker, the second institution under the ambit of OPM Communications with the responsibility for the dissemination of information in Trinidad and Tobago is NALIS and the past fiscal year has been a very busy one
for NALIS and the upcoming fiscal year promises to be even busier. There have been significant achievements in the past year. Two of the more significant ones that impact positively on the employees in the initial stages are the signing of an MOU with COSTAATT and a memorandum of cooperation with the National Library of China.

Madam Speaker, after many years of discussion, COSTAATT and NALIS signed an MOU for five years on June 6th of this year, the essence of which surrounds NALIS’ recognition and acceptance of the associate and bachelor’s degrees in library and information science offered by COSTAATT. The key principles of this collaboration are the sharing of knowledge, expertise and resources with each other, the provision of undergraduate and professional development training to NALIS employees, the recruitment of graduates with both the associate and bachelor’s degree in library science and the identification of research needs in key areas.

9.20 p.m.

Madam Speaker, the collaboration would serve as a catalyst for the development at NALIS’s workforce in the library and information field, and immediately upon the signing of this MOU, NALIS was able to promote nine employees to the position of Librarian I, and three to the position of Library Assistant II as their degrees obtained from COSTAATT were now recognized. Madam Speaker, in keeping with NALIS’s strategic agenda they have also signed a memorandum of cooperation with the National Library of China in June of this year. And coming out of the signing of that memorandum of cooperation the Chinese Embassy has formally agreed to cover the expenses of two invited NALIS employees to participate in seminars in October 2023.
Madam Speaker, as the designated authority under the Marrakesh Treaty, NALIS has an obligation to ensure that the blind, visually impaired and otherwise print-disabled community in this country, amounting to approximately 250,000 citizens now have unfettered access to libraries in the same way that those who are sighted do. The Marrakesh Treaty authorizes NALIS to reproduce books in all different formats so that they can be more accessible to those who are print disabled. This includes formats such as Braille, large type and audiobooks. Madam Speaker, it gave me great joy to not only attend but be joined by my colleague the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, when NALIS and the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association signed a memorandum of understanding on March 3rd of this year.

Madam Speaker, NALIS has also ensured that the visually impaired persons in our communities, as they refer to them, the VIPs, have access to recording studios at the National Library in Port of Spain, and the Couva Public Library. We also are ensuring that all new libraries come similarly equipped so as to ensure that the needs of our VIPs are accommodated at all our libraries. Madam Speaker, this new fiscal promises to be an exciting one for NALIS and by extension, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. In this fiscal we will see the opening of the brand-new Diego Martin and Mayaro public libraries. Ongoing construction at the La Horquetta Public Library and the commencement of construction of the Toco Public Library.

And, Madam Speaker, let me also state for the record and for my colleague the MP for Mayaro, that immediately upon the opening of the Mayaro Public Library the reading room will be named, the Michael Anthony Reading Room. Madam Speaker, not only would these new libraries allow for increased numbers
of persons to be employed, but it now makes the provision of library and information services more accessible to citizens of those communities. Madam Speaker, in this fiscal NALIS also looks forward to the reopening of the newly renovated Tunapuna Public Library which has been the centre of library and information services and community life in Tunapuna for approximately 78 years. The authority will also be focused on renewed plans for the restoration of its southern flagship, the iconic Carnegie Free Library, and this library will be the home of NALIS’s south western—southern West Indian reference library service, and host part of its Presidential and Prime Ministerial collections at its Harris Promenade location in San Fernando.

Madam Speaker, while all of this is happening, NALIS is also continuing its public library refurbishment programme across the country, and I look forward to hearing my colleague from Point Fortin report that work will continue on the Point Fortin Public Library. Madam Speaker, the National Library and Information Services is the winner of the 2023 OCLC Award for Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in the Caribbean—

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

**Hon. S. de Nobriga:**—for its work to create and promote co-located libraries along with a wide range of digital library services to underserved communities. Madam Speaker, NALIS’s co-located library project supports Government’s efforts to realize the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Co-located libraries are smaller flexible spaces in the heart of communities, and different to public libraries. These libraries are intentionally situated within already existing communities and community spaces such as
community centres. Our initial collaborations have been with the Ministry of Sport and Community Development and the Ministry of National Security and the Kiwanis Club of St. Helena.

But additional government Ministries were included in the roll out of this project with an expanded mandate for a wider range of services for under-served communities. And these new partners include: The Ministry of Digital Transformation and the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service as part of their AccessTT and their residential and non-residential training programmes. Madam Speaker, I have saved what I consider to be the best for last. Madam Speaker, when this Government says that the solution to crime does not rest solely on the shoulders of the Minister of National Security, there are many on the opposite side who claim that to be a cop out and as shirking responsibilities by the Government, or more so by the hon. Minister, but we on this side disagree. We on this side have continued to seek after solutions that are multipronged and involve input from different Ministries in big and small ways, so that the whole-of-government approach to crime and criminality becomes much more evident.

Madam Speaker, this fiscal we will see the implementation of an OJT Programme within the walls of the nation’s prisons where inmates will be recruited, trained, deployed and paid as On-the-Job trainees just as their non-incarcerated counterparts. This On-the-Job Training programme will be implemented at all correctional facilities in collaboration with the OJT division, Ministry of Labour and the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Services. Madam Speaker, the MOU amounts to three partners, NALIS, OJT and the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Services, is in its final stages of preparation, and I look forward to witnessing its signing in the very near future as the proposed assumption of the
inmates into the programme is expected to commence this calendar year. This has the potential to be a game changer and I am happy to be a part of it.

Madam Speaker, I have had the honour of being elected representative for the constituency of Diego Martin Central since August 2020, and it has been a signal honour. Daily I am given the opportunity to provide assistance, big and small, to the constituents I meet or speak with on the phone or online. But for that to happen it requires a team, and, Madam Speaker, if you would allow me I would like to thank the members of staff at the MP’s office—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga:—who also support me seven days a week, and the chairman and members of the PNM’s Diego Martin Central constituency executive. Their collective support has been and will continue to be my foundation for purposeful representation.

Madam Speaker, Diego Martin was recently proclaimed a borough, and it would be remiss of me to not also thank the local government councillors and the new mayor of Diego Martin, Alderman Akeliah Glasgow-Warner, who started her career in electoral politics at the same time I did as a councillor in the then Diego Martin Regional Corporation. Delivery to the constituents of Diego Martin Central is a team effort as well and they are major contributors, especially as we see the reform of local government transforming the lives of our citizens. Madam Speaker, in the vein of delivery I am constantly harassing my colleagues to find ways to improve the lives of my constituents. And while I offer no apology or promise of respite, I am happy to thank them for the projects that will be benefiting Diego Martin Central in the not too distant future. Madam Speaker, the residents of Cocorite can look forward to the much needed repairs at the Cocorite
Community Centre.

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

**Hon. S. de Nobriga:** It is unfortunate that this centre was hurriedly opened in the lead up to the 2015 general elections, and suffered from all manner of infrastructural issues that never allowed the community to truly benefit from it. Thankfully with the support of the Minister of Sport and Community Development, those days will soon be over and I will be petitioning both the line Minister for AccessTT locations and the line Minister for co-located library locations for the inclusion of this community centre in their programmes.

Madam Speaker, the North-West Water Improvement Programme has already yielded benefits for Diego Martin in general, but for Diego Martin Central in particular. And I am reliably informed that this will continue in this fiscal with the replacement of over 2,300 metres of aged infrastructure along the Morne Coco Road in Petit Valley.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member for Diego Martin Central, your original speaking time is now spent. You have 10 more minutes to wrap up your contribution.

**Hon. S. de Nobriga:** I will, Madam Speaker. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** You may proceed.

**Hon. S. de Nobriga:** Thank you.

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

**Hon. S. de Nobriga:** Madam Speaker, this will bring an end to the daily leaks along this major vehicular artery and the water delivery issues that stem from that. Madam Speaker, new booster stations at Fort George and Cocorite Terrace and Pioneer Drive which will positively impact the services—the service for these communities which are all at high elevations. And alongside that, Madam
Speaker, the upgrade of the Simeon Road booster station and the upgrade of the Four Roads booster station.

Madam Speaker, Fort George Road is an access road leading to Cumberland Hill, which is a main communications point in this country, and it and the community have experienced real issues with landslips in recent times. And I want to thank the Minister of Works and Transport and PURE for getting this project going to replace the fallen retaining wall in the vicinity of the barrier. Madam Speaker, I believe the selected contractor is mobilizing tomorrow. Additionally, Madam Speaker, the Highways Division will be conducting geotechnical surveys to determine the best solution for a long-term solution to this ongoing problem along the Fort George Road. Madam Speaker, the Diego Martin highway is the region’s main traffic artery, and its maintenance and upkeep has been an issue for some time. Having spoken to the Highways Division I have already seen their promised programme to address the condition of the highway started, and the mayor and I will be working together with the relevant agencies to have a programme of maintenance to seize the bush that exists on the verges and in the middle of the highway, cleaned, bagged and removed in a timely manner.

Madam Speaker, lighting along the highway has also been an issue and that has been brought to my attention, and I have brought this to the attention of the Minister of Public Utilities who has given me the assurance that it will be addressed along with the lighting of the Pioneer Recreation Grounds in Petit Valley. Madam Speaker, these were the major improvements and a major improvement to that Pioneer community in particular, and I thank him for that assistance.

Madam Speaker, in closing I would like to thank the now retired Clerk of the
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga:—but to the nation. Madam Speaker, as a new parliamentarian it would be easy to take for granted the efficiency with which this Parliament operates, because I have never known anything different. However, in May of this year I had the honour of leading a delegation to McGill University to attend parliamentary residency courses alongside madam clerk and my colleague Sen. The Hon. Lawrence Hislop, and the MP for Oropouche West. Madam Speaker, it was there that I was able to see and hear the high esteem in which Jacqui and this Parliament are held, and, Madam Speaker, I was never more proud to be a Member of this august Chamber.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: So, Madam Speaker, I have sought to put into perspective the various initiatives being undertaken by the agencies under the ambit of OPM-Communications. I have outlined the benefits that these initiatives are accruing to the good people of this blessed republic, and I have given the country a look ahead at where we intend to be by the end of this fiscal. Madam Speaker, these are exciting times. Challenging times but exciting times, and I urge the national community to not take anything for granted, but rather to take everything being offered by this fiscal package as an opportunity to build personal capacity and to build resilience for future growth and development. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille
Robinson-Regis): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Tuesday the 10th day of October, 2023, at 10.00 a.m.

**Tribute to Madam Clerk**

**Mrs. Jacqueline Sampson-Meiguel**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, as we all know the Clerk of the House, Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel has officially proceeded on preretirement leave after 37 years of parliamentary service.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Madam Speaker: This leave will culminate with her retirement at the end of January 2024. I will now invite Members to bring remarks in recognition of Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel’s exemplarily service. Leader of House.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, after 37 years of parliamentary service, Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel has obviously served the Parliament longer than any of us here. And, Madam Speaker, she has during that time operated as a steady light in a space that can sometimes be tumultuous. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel remained the beacon of grace and at times the bridge that was needed in good times as well as bad. During the turbulence that sometimes attended this Parliament she may have been forgiven if she had even sought a quieter life of comfort and ease.

However, she is a patriot. Not in a superficial manner but a true patriot who dearly believes in her country and the rule of law and the democratic institution that is the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*
Tribute to Madam Clerk
Mrs. Jacqueline Sampson-Meiguel (cont’d)

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: This ever faithful, ever present, always willing, always woman, always able woman of Trinidad and Tobago has presented to us what is the epitome of the highest regard for public service.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

9.35 p.m.

During several momentous occasions, including the time of Occah Seepaul; including the time of Hector McLean; including the time of Rupert Griffith; including the time of Barendra Sinanan; including the time of Wade Mark; and including the time of our current Speaker, Bridgid Annisette-George, Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel has been a beacon in this Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Her strength of character has always been demonstrated. Every Member, past and present, now and then, lucky enough to be under her pastoral care, can sing her praises of her modesty and quiet bravado, her stylish attire, her willingness to encourage a new Member and her frank, extremely frank, conversations with those of us who are more experienced.

Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel has demonstrated her love for this hallowed institution and all that it stands for. She has demonstrated integrity, true representation of and commitment to the people. This is a woman whom I have come to know and respect, a humble advocate for what is right, a woman of honesty and decency. Let me take this opportunity, on behalf of the PNM Members on this side of House, to thank Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel for her extraordinary support of our Members, and I dare say of all the Members of Parliament, because without let or hindrance she has given her support to both sides of the House.

She has been here day in and day out, and in many ways I know both she
and her staff have always exhibited that sense of responsibility to us on both sides of the House and she has been extremely judicious, and she is and has been the epitome of forthrightness.

So today, we not only pay tribute to a remarkable public servant, we celebrate the principles for which she served and for which our Parliament stands. Her career should serve as a reminder, especially to us here in this honourable House, that civility and respectful discourse and country over partisanship should not only be her characteristics but qualities that we need now more than ever, for whatever differences of party or ideology we may have, we can keep Parliament robust when we come together and work together for a common cause, as did Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel as Clerk.

She has the distinction of being the first woman appointed to this office and one of the youngest persons in the Commonwealth to be appointed to such an office. She is esteemed and respected in the Caribbean and the Commonwealth as an authority on parliamentary practice and procedure. She oversaw what is nothing short of a complete transformation of the Parliament into a highly respected institution. She oversaw the introduction of a robust committee system, the move to parliamentary accessibility and public outreach, deepening ties with regional and Commonwealth parliaments. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel is a walking encyclopaedia of parliamentary practice and procedure.

This Parliament, Madam Speaker, strong and ever-evolving to which Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel has devoted her life, I can think of no better way to express our appreciation to someone whom I have come to admire and who I consider a friend, a very good friend, than today to express our deepest and most profound gratitude to Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel for continuing to serve this Parliament, this country and this House as Clerk for over 30 years. Jacqui, you are one of our nation’s
finest public servants and certainly, you will go down in the history—

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

**Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:**—of our nation of Trinidad and Tobago as one of its very best citizens. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Oropouche East.

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

**Dr. Roodal Moonilal (Oropouche East):** Madam Speaker, thank you. On this extremely rare and one-off situation, I would like to share the views expressed by the last speaker and to indicate that really there is absolutely no critical remark to make, but to indicate that this is indeed a historic juncture in the life of our Parliament and it is difficult to imagine our parliamentary family without Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel.

On behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, and on behalf of all Members of the Opposition, we would like to first sincerely thank Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel for her decades of patriotic service, not only to our Parliament but to our nation as Clerk of the House of Representatives.

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

**Dr. R. Moonilal:** Madam Speaker, the very image of this Parliament has seen the emergence of, at times, tumultuous events in our history. Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel has served this Parliament for 37 years, and 34 years as Clerk of the House. Her name, her image, her work, her persona has typified values inherent in democratic parliaments. And as the speaker before me indicated, in my earlier years travelling to several Commonwealth areas for parliamentary conferences and so on, I recall very well that on arrival, whether it is Jamaica, London, other areas and so on, colleagues abroad would always ask how is Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-
Meiguel, how is she.

She was extremely hard-working, a dedicated professional that had at her heart at this place, the interest of the Parliament and always had this vision of where the Parliament should go. And it was noteworthy that Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel have also trained several persons throughout the years who continued that vision and that calling.

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

**Dr. R. Moonilal:** Our Parliament as an institution has been enriched through the professional, innovative and dynamic work of Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel, the work that she has undertaken throughout her career. Members of Parliament on both sides of the aisle, and often we do change sides, can all attest to the committed approach of Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel.

I recall, Madam Speaker, in one of our most enduring but destabilizing moments, it was, I believe, the Seventh Parliament in 2002, between the period April to August 2002, when this Parliament met for three days and nights to elect a Speaker, the only face the nation saw was the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel, during that time. And her persona, her grace, her personality brought calmness to that very, very difficult moment in the history of politics and democracy.

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

**Dr. R. Moonilal:** And I think on Wednesday, 28 August, 2002, she also was relieved when former Prime Minister, Patrick Manning, announced in the middle of a debate on a speaker that he had invited His Excellency the President to dissolve the Parliament during the debate. So Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel has stood the test of time; has been extremely dedicated, committed.

I had the great opportunity to work closely with Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel
when I had the honour to be Leader of the House during the Tenth Parliament, 2010—2015, and we worked together on the Standing Orders Committee that brought this revolutionary change to the way we conduct business, the committee system and other Standing Orders that deepened the democracy in Parliament, the accountability and responsibility of Members and the Government. And Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel contributed in no small way to the outcome of that committee, in particular.

We have had times over the years when—there are times when you will not agree with a Secretary to a committee, you will not agree maybe with the Clerk of the House on certain matters, but during the entire period, while this Clerk of the House would be steadfast, I think she also recognized the imperatives of politics, notwithstanding her deep commitment to the values of administration. And that was something that enriched our relationships over the years. We had one discussion one day on the administration of policy and the policy of administration, and at the heart of it was an understanding that politics matter because this is still, ultimately, a political domain.

And today, as we say goodbye and wish her well in her endeavours, we remember fondly her work, her commitment. We remember her enormous drive. We also had the opportunity to work with her when we moved to the Wrightson Road Parliament, the Waterfront, for a short time to work with her and UDeCOTT to ensure that the facilities were of a certain standard for Members of this House and the Senate and so on, and at all times she had the interest of Members at heart.

As Clerk of the House, you can call her anytime concerning a constituency, an administrative matter; concerning a parliamentary matter, a joint select committee matter and so on, and she was always accessible and always willing to help. And public officers being what they are, Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel was
someone who always followed up and returned, not just returning calls which is almost becoming out of fashion these days, but was always committed to updating you on a matter. Where is the matter, what has happened, was the air condition fixed, did people come, is it repaired, are you happy, that was her. That was her approach to ensuring that all Members would be comfortable, all Members would be satisfied, all Members would conduct their business in a particular way.

In fact, Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel is truly deserving of the development award for women, a medal that was introduced by the Partnership administration as well. And this year I believe none was given, if I am not mistaken—

**Hon. Members:** [Crosstalk]

**Dr. R. Moonilal:**—and it is worthy—Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel is worthy for consideration.

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

**Dr. R. Moonilal:** I say no more, I say no more—but is extremely worthy for consideration for such recognition of her value and her work. As a public officer exiting public service in this way, on preretirement leave and so on, Madam Speaker, one is always cautious about wishing people well and so on, because public officers of this type, they are so committed, so interested and so their experience is so rich and valuable that we should all be thinking of how they can continue to serve, not just the Parliament but Trinidad and Tobago. That wealth of experience, expertise is not something that you would happily park away somewhere.

So as I told Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel a few days ago, I said good luck, best wishes but I have a feeling our paths would cross again somewhere in public service. We wish her well. We would like also to congratulate and welcome Mr. Brian Caesar as the new Clerk of the House of Representatives.
**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]

**Dr. R. Moonilal:** We look forward to working with him to ensure that our democratic principles of our Parliament are preserved to deliver on our roles as Members of the House of Representatives and of the Parliament. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, today marks another first in the continued journey of our Parliament. Today, the Clerk of the House, Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel, began preretirement leave, which shall culminate with her retirement at the end of January 2024.

9.50 p.m.

Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel has devoted most of her working life in the service of the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and in particular, to parliamentary service having started in 1987 in the Red House at this Parliament in a junior role. There are none among us here—and I dare say there are few living former parliamentarians who would have worked with any other substantive Clerk of the House, Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel having taken the reins in the year 1995.

Hon. Members, there can be no dissent from what we have heard before to the statement that Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel has overseen the transformation of the Office of the Parliament into a modern organization which serves as an inspiration to various arms of the State, and to other legislatures of the Caribbean Americas and Atlantic Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

One example of the transformation overseen by her was the increased ICT infrastructure and the decision of the House to have parliamentary proceedings broadcast live. In addition, the capacity building of the staff of the Parliament must also be credited to the Clerk, Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel. There has been no
development in this Parliament from in and about the year 1995 to present that has taken place without the vision, leadership, and the direct involvement of Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel.

Hon. Members, we can all give our individual accounts of the personal interest of which Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel has taken in our professional development as parliamentarians, as well as in our well-being. We, and by extension our nation, owe her a debt of gratitude as her commitment and devotion to our Parliament, its development and advancement played no small part in insuring that our democracy function and functioned well.

On behalf of all of us and on the nation’s behalf, I extend sincerest thanks to Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel. Knowing our Clerk, she shall not be idle. And as Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel is so knowledgeable about Parliament, its practice and procedures, and is possessed of demonstrated excellence in leadership, I suspect that she will be answering many a call from legislatures and legislators within the region and the wider Commonwealth. I bid her best wishes in her new endeavour, whatever it may be.

I am also to welcome our new Clerk of the House, Mr. Brian Caesar, who is no stranger to us. With effect from today, Mr. Caesar has been appointed to the position of Clerk of the House. Mr. Caesar formerly served as the acting Clerk of the Senate of our Parliament. On your behalf and on my own behalf, I extend sincere congratulations to Mr. Caesar on his appointment.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 9.54 p.m.*

UNREVISED