

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, October 12th, 2023

The House met at 10.30 a.m.

PRAYERS



[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

Suspension of Standing Order 80(2)

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, I seek your leave in accordance with Standing Order 122(1), to move a Motion for the suspension of Standing Order 80(2), in relation to the calculating of time for statutory instruments, where the prescribed period falls within the period of the parliamentary budgetary process, October 02 to 25, 2023.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, leave is granted. Leader of the House.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I beg to move that this House suspend Standing Order 80(2) in relation to the calculating of time for statutory instruments, where the prescribed period falls within the period of the parliamentary budgetary process, October 02 to 25, 2023.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Speaker: The calculating of time for statutory instruments where the prescribed period falls within the period of the parliamentary budgetary process, October 02 to 25, 2023, is hereby suspended.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023

[Sixth Day]

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

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

UNREVISED

Madam Speaker: The Members who have already contributed to this 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; Member for Moruga/Tableland; Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister; Member for Pointe-a-Pierre; Minister of National Security; Member for Naparima; Minister of Health; Member for Fyzabad; Member for Tunapuna; Member for Caroni East; Minister of Labour; Member for Couva North; Minister in the Ministry of Finance; Member for Oropouche West; Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister; Minister of Rural Development and Local Government; Member for St. Augustine; Minister of Social Development and Family Services; Member for Chaguanas East; Member for Tobago West; Member for Couva South; Minister of Trade and Industry; Member for Mayaro; Minister in the Ministry of Education; Member for Tabaquite; Member for Port of Spain South; Member for Chaguanas West; Member for Point Fortin; Minister of Public Utilities; Member for Princes Town; Minister of Works and Transport; Member for Oropouche East; Minister of Education; Minister of Digital Transformation; Member for Barataria/San Juan; Minister of Planning and Development.

Member for Tobago East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy):

Thank you for recognizing me, Madam Speaker, and giving me the opportunity to lend my voice to this very important debate. Madam Speaker, permit me to begin by acknowledging the goodness of God, and expressing my gratitude for the love and support of my family, friends, supporters, and constituents, without which I

would not have been able to serve with humility, dignity, integrity, passion, and unwavering dedication to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Before I speak to the portfolio I have been assigned as Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, I will quickly touch on the constituency of Tobago East. After all, it is by virtue of the great institution called the People's National Movement, and the goodwill of the people of Tobago East that I have the ability to serve in this capacity.

Madam Speaker, my team and I have attempted to remain in constant contact with constituents. And let me thank my team for their commitment to service. We have been diligent in our walkabouts, roving office days, and distribution of support to constituents. As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, recently there was a voice note circulating in Tobago where a non-supporter was berating me. In the voice note the constituent was complaining that, and I will quote:

She, Ayanna, she only walking up and down de place. She only dey ah walk up and down de place like big bird.

Madam Speaker, if I found the time to walk and ask people for their votes, now that I am in office it is my duty to stay on the ground.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: It is my duty to find the time to walk and interact with my constituents, to hear and see first-hand their concerns. Yes, I have offices that are strategically located, but not every constituent has the ability to come and see me at my offices. So, Madam Speaker, I will meet them where they are.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: My field officers will continue to meet constituents where

they are. Madam Speaker, if after eight years of service, her issue is that I am walking and interacting with my constituents too much, then I can hold “meh head up high and puff up meh chest.”

Madam Speaker, the families and communities within my constituency have benefited from significant investment in social programmes and physical infrastructure development over the last eight years, particularly, during the period 2016 to 2021 and we are indeed thankful. I like my colleague, the MP for Tobago West, often boast that the people of Tobago are fortunate in that we get two bites of the cherry. We enjoy the perks derived from central government projects and programmes made available to citizens, while also directly benefiting from the resources allocated to the Tobago House of Assembly for the administration of Tobago’s affairs.

Many of my constituents have been able to access support through programmes delivered through central government, as well as the Tobago House of Assembly. Madam Speaker, my colleague the Member of Parliament for Tobago West, would have succinctly outlined the state of affairs in Tobago and how the fiscal measures outlined by the hon. Minister of Finance will benefit the people of Tobago, so I would not rehash.

However, permit me to express my appreciation on behalf of my constituents who would have benefited from the many initiatives executed in Tobago under the central government and state agencies. Tobago East has experienced unprecedented development under the loving, stable hands of the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Every PNM Minister, from Dr. Eric Williams, Mr.

George Chambers, Mr. Patrick Manning, and now Dr. Keith Rowley, ensured that Tobago was not excluded from the national development agenda. The only Prime Minister, other than a PNM Prime Minister, to demonstrate genuine care, concern, and compassion for Tobago was former Prime Minister ANR Robinson. Madam Speaker, I wish to thank again the hon. Prime Minister for ensuring that Tobago East is not left out of the national development agenda.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, if a PNM Government working alongside a PNM executive council did not have the political will to answer the passionate cry from the people of Tobago East, the current THA would not have the facility or means to successfully implement a programme for cataract screening and removal. Hundreds of Tobagonians, and even Trinidadians, have travelled to the Roxborough Hospital for cataract screening or surgery.

Madam Speaker, the 31,320 square foot hospital on Bloody Bay Road in Roxborough Tobago was completed at a cost of \$98,379,410.04 VAT inclusive. The staff have been serving the people of Tobago East and the people of Tobago diligently. Madam Speaker, I, along with my constituents, eagerly anticipate the full operationalization of the hospital and the day we will be able to access 24/7 health care services.

Madam Speaker, again putting the health and well-being of the people of Tobago East high on the agenda, the former PNM administration in Tobago, in collaboration with central government, ensured that funding was made available for the construction of a health centre in Moriah. The construction of the Moriah Health Centre came in at a cost of approximately \$27million. Madam Speaker, I believe that Tobago at this time has the highest number of health care facilities per

capita in the Western Hemisphere. If I am not mistaken, Madam Speaker, Tobagonians can also boast of having the highest number of community centres per capita in the Western Hemisphere.

During the period that the PNM held the reins of the Assembly, a number of community centres were constructed and renovated across Tobago. This was done in keeping with the PNM's philosophy of delivering facilities to advance human capital development. Madam Speaker, I recall a former Commissioner of Police attempting to close the Moriah Police Station. This nonsensical plan was conceptualized without consultation with stakeholders or even officers in the district. I had to reach out to the then Minister of National Security and ask him to intervene.

Madam Speaker, if you know the Tobago geography you will understand how important the Moriah Police Station is for ensuring safety and security, particularly in communities Golden Lane in Tobago West, Bloody Bay and Mason Hall in Tobago East to name a few. Thankfully, Madam Speaker, that plan was shelved and the Moriah Police Station continues to stand as a symbol of safety and security for the people within its jurisdiction. Madam Speaker, the Roxborough Police Station and fire station were built under the PNM administration—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—and high-speed interceptors were acquired for use by the Tobago Coast Guard base. Madam Speaker this was done in response to a call for greater monitoring of the island's coastline and borders as fisher folk in Tobago East were reporting an increase in piracy and illicit activities on the waters around the island. Madam Speaker, we remain thankful for this investment.

Madam Speaker, with the allocation received by the central government, the

former THA administration was able to execute an intensive infrastructure development programme. The PNM administration was putting money in the homes of Tobagonians by engaging Tobago contractors who in turn were able to provide employment opportunities and drive the construction sector in Tobago.

Madam Speaker, agricultural access roads were developed across the island. Retaining walls were constructed, and extensive drainage works, road rehabilitation, and road paving were done. Madam Speaker, Tobago was in a growth trajectory that the PNM central government fully supported.

Recently, I attended a function, Madam Speaker, and I overheard a gentleman complaining that it was the first time he had seen so many potholes in Tobago; imagine that. Madam Speaker, look where Tobago reach. Unfortunately, many Tobagonians are experiencing buyer's remorse but are afraid to publicly speak out because of fear of victimization. Madam Speaker, many Tobagonians are experiencing buyer's remorse the same way they experienced buyer's remorse between 2010 to 2015.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, we have a saying in Tobago, "Tom drunk but Tom no fool." During my many walkabouts, Tobagonians would often pull me aside and reassure me that "we big and we have sense."

10.45 a.m.

During my many interactions with fellow Tobagonians, they would remind me that they have already experienced a Tobago under a united national central government and they have no intention of making that mistake again. Madam Speaker, on my many walkabouts Tobagonians tell me they know that a vote for any party besides the PNM at a General Election is a vote for the UNC. Madam

Speaker, Tobagonians tell me they cannot risk the future of our nation by betting on the UNC ticket again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: On my many walkabouts, Madam Speaker, Tobagonians tell me they remember the period of disrespect to the Tobago House of Assembly under a UNC central government. Tobagonians tell me Madam Speaker, they remember being cut off from accessing Self-Help and other essential government grants. Madam Speaker, Tobagonians tell me they remember all the UNC MPs who as recently as 2020, said Tobago was receiving too big a slice of the national pie. Madam Speaker, on my many walkabouts Tobagonians tell me, “the axe forgets what the tree remembers”. Madam Speaker, Tobagonians will never forget the way we were treated by a UNC government headed by Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: The Member for Siparia. Madam Speaker I wish to commend the staff at WASA and T&TEC for always responding to the needs of the people of Tobago East. We have seen notable improvement in the supply of water and have experienced fewer power outages. As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, I received fewer complaints from constituents who have suffered loss of appliances or damage to appliances because of issues such as low voltage or power surges. Additionally, a number of constituents would have received assistance through the Ministry of Public Utilities Residential Electrification Assistance Programme. In fact, approximately \$180,000 would have been spent on the REAP in Tobago during the previous fiscal year.

Madam Speaker, access to potable water is a fundamental human right.

WASA has been doing commendable work to ensure that the constituents of Tobago East benefit from an improved supply of potable water. Due to the construction and installation of the French Fort boosters during the previous fiscal year, 120 residents of upper French Fort now have access to potable water 24 hours a day, three days a week, for the first time. Madam Speaker, the installation of a 450-metre, 100-millimetre PVC pipeline has resulted in an improved water supply for 60 residents along the Mason Hall, Les Coteaux Road. As the level of service has been increased to 24 hours per day, five days per week. I am pleased to report that the construction and outfitting of the Hope Trace booster will result in a change in service level for 120 residents of Hope Trace and upper Blenheim, from twenty-four hours a day, one day per week, to 24 hours a day, five days per week. Madam Speaker, these are just a few of the projects undertaken by WASA in the constituency during the previous fiscal year. On behalf of my constituents, I extend sincere gratitude to the Minister of Public Utilities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, Tobago East is well poised to advance food security on the island. I am grateful to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for providing agro incentive grants to farmers and agro processors in my constituency. The long-term effects of this assistance to farmers will benefit all Tobagonians by promoting food security and economic diversification.

Madam Speaker, while I boast that Tobago benefits from two bites of the cherry, I must acknowledge how difficult it is to be serving constituents with an Executive Council that is largely unwilling to cooperate with the elected Members of Parliament for Tobago East and Tobago West. Despite the fact that we have all been elected to serve the people of Tobago, some secretaries refuse to

acknowledge any queries or correspondence coming out of my constituency office.

10:50a.m.

I can count on one hand, Madam Speaker, the number of secretaries who will respond to my calls or letters and I will still have fingers remaining. Madam Speaker, that is not right. Madam Speaker, whenever I send correspondence with the MP for Tobago East letterhead, I am not writing on my own behalf, I am advocating for my constituents. I am writing on behalf of fellow Tobagonians, I am writing on behalf of members of their electoral districts. Madam Speaker, the least they could do is just mamaguy me with a response.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, I listened keenly to the Leader of the Opposition's response as well as the contributions of Members opposite. Madam Speaker, we cannot please all of the people all of the time and it is expected that some people and some sectors will be disappointed. But by and large, Madam Speaker, the budget has ignited hope in the vast majority of Trinbagonians. So I wish to commend the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development, and their respected teams, for delivering a budget that inspires hope.

Madam Speaker, while delivering an address in Washington, DC, in February 1968, a mere two months before his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed the following:

“We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

I sincerely hold the view, Madam Speaker, that many of the fiscal measures outlined in the Minister of Finance's presentation instil hope in the citizenry, hope for a brighter future, especially for society's most vulnerable. So, Madam Speaker, while we acknowledge the feelings of those who wanted more, while we

knowledge the sentiments of those who wanted something different, we look to the future with hope. Madam Speaker, the majority of Trinbagonians are optimistic about the future because this budget has continued to propel Trinidad and Tobago towards social and economic stability.

Madam Speaker, permit me to quote a short excerpt from the executive summary on the Ernest & Young's publication, "Focus on Trinidad and Tobago Budget 2024". Madam Speaker, while noting that Trinidad and Tobago has witnessed a decline in key economic indicators and the attendant challenges that would have emerged, the Ernest & Young publication highlighted, and I quote:

"...our macro-economic indicators remain relatively strong when compared to our Caribbean peers. Our GDP per capita, debt-to-GDP ratio, Heritage and Stabilisation Fund...import cover and employment figures are commendable. Trinidad & Tobago has enviable economic buffers and is not in an economic crisis, but we must be vigilant as the crisis could loom in the future if we fail to rapidly adapt to the changing landscape. By acting now, we can foster hope and positivity for a brighter future."

Madam Speaker, as I note the caution in the Ernest & Young commentary, I do so with a deep sense of satisfaction that this Government, this PNM administration, has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate the highest levels of competence to manage the affairs of the country—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—allowing us to continue on the path of development that is in the best interest of this of all citizens.

Madam Speaker, through astute leadership and prudent fiscal management, this Government has been able to successfully navigate many challenges over the

years to ensure that citizens can enjoy a decent standard of living. And I wish to assure the citizens that this Government will continue to work for every citizen of our beloved country. This is solemn promise of my government, Madam Speaker, a government for the people.

Madam Speaker, if my colleagues opposite paid attention to the contents of the Minister of Finance's budget for this year, they would notice that the budget is geared towards promoting resilience in our people, an ideal that is certain to prepare all to be able to achieve the aspirations while also preparing them to withstand the multiple waves of economic turmoil and social distress that are sometimes unavoidable, despite our best efforts.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister has entrusted me with key operational portfolios within the Office of the Prime Minister, including the Central Administrative Services Tobago, CAST; Gender and Child Affairs; and the national response to HIV and AIDS. These portfolios play a vital role in supporting the national development goals outlined in the National Development Strategy, *Vision 2030*. My initial appointment, in 2015, was the Central Administrative Services Tobago, CAST. Consequently, I would address that aspect of the portfolio first.

Madam Speaker, the Central Administrative Services Tobago serves Tobago under three main categories, the Meteorological Services Division; the Registrar General's Office; and General Administrative Services, which includes the Sub Treasury, the Weights and Measures Inspectorate and General Services, amongst others.

Madam Speaker, the Central Administrative Services Tobago is a department under the Office of the Prime Minister. The department plays a critical

role in Tobago, ensuring that essential administrative, legal and meteorological services are available on the island and is responsible for supporting all central government agencies in Tobago.

An initiative coming out of CAST that I am particularly proud of is our Student Internship Programme. The Office of the Prime Minister's CAST Student Internship Programme was developed to aid young in developing their knowledge, skills and abilities for the world of work. The programme aids in providing short-term supervised work experience that is usually related to a student's specific field of study or career aspirations. The mandate is fostering a new generation of skilled and motivated individuals. To date, the programme has engaged over 128 students in a wide range of areas, including accounting, HR, corporate communications, and information and communication technology. In the last fiscal period, we were able to facilitate 20 students. And, Madam Speaker, just as a joke and an aside, there is no line Item for this. Every year I bother my Permanent Secretaries and the team to make sure we find the money to host this programme because I understand the value to Tobago's young people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, another area of note is the work of the Financial Assistance to Non-Profit Organisation Committee. The committee was constituted to deliberate on applications for financial assistance from individuals and organizations, and make recommendations to the Permanent Secretary on those that meet the criteria set out by CAST. The committee is guided by the financial assistance to the non-profit organization policy framework. Cabinet approval of a policy for the disbursements of grants and funds to non-profit organizations at CAST was granted in March of 2017. The said policy provides

guidance for interaction with NGOs, CBOs and FBOs, and managing request for funding. To date, the committee has awarded over \$1,099,166 in grants to more than 122 non-profit organizations in Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: The grants have been used to assist NGOs, CBOs and faith-based organizations operating in a wide range of areas, including sport, arts and culture, education, agriculture, to name a few.

Madam Speaker, as a child growing up in Roxborough, one of the activities I eagerly anticipated was the Republic Day Route March. I anticipated seeing my uncle who was then a serving member of the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service, proudly marching through his home town in his well-ironed khakis. And I anticipated cheering for my cousin, Bravo, and his friend, Polly, as they marched with the cadet contingent. Madam Speaker, for some reason, the hosting of the route march was discontinued. And I remember even as young lady, making a promise to myself that once I am in a position of influence, I will work to bring back the activity to the people of Tobago East.

Madam Speaker, with the exception of the period of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Republic Day Route March has been an annual event since 2017. The route march engenders a feeling of patriotism amongst various groups and communities, especially in the east of Tobago where it is greatly anticipated by members of the public.

Madam Speaker, I am sincerely thankful for the team at CAST and all stakeholders who would have ensured the success of the route march. Madam Speaker, every year, the team at CAST; the planning committee, which comprises members from the Ministry of National Security; the Tobago House of Assembly

and stakeholders across Tobago, every year, they endeavour to make the route march bigger and better. Every year, they endeavour to make sure that the children of Tobago East can have a reason to smile on Republic Day, as they too benefit from other children—as other children who would experience a parade on Independence Day in Scarborough.

Madam Speaker, this year, we had over 500 individuals from armed and unarmed detachments who participated in the route march, and the feedback from the public has been positive. Madam Speaker, I want to thank the Mounted Branch for bringing the horses to Tobago. I want to thank the police for bringing the Canine Unit to Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, I want to thank Mission Riders. I want to thank the Pathfinders. I want to thank cadets, girl guides, scouts. Madam Speaker, I want to thank every unit under the Ministry of National Security. Madam Speaker, “I dance for so” when prison band passed through. I am indeed grateful.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, CAST has been leading in terms of embracing Government’s agenda around digitization and digitalization. CAST is actively digitizing its systems to enhance service delivery and efficiency across its divisions. This includes the 2021 launch of the CAST intranet and website to facilitate improved communication, collaboration and access to information. Madam Speaker, CAST’s digitalization drive also includes substantial investments in ICT infrastructure to boost productivity, improve relationships with citizens and stakeholders, and deliver better outcomes within the organization. In 2019, CAST

invested \$550,000 in a file tracking system to assist the registry in locating physical files within the general administration building. Furthermore, CAST networks the District Registrar Office in Roxborough, Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the newly installed ICT infrastructure plays a critical role in ensuring that the services at the Registrar General's Office are accessible to the public, particularly those residing in eastern communities of Tobago who previously had to travel to Scarborough for these services.

Madam Speaker, in 2022, CAST allocated \$998,500 for implementing an enterprise content management system, aimed at digitizing physical files and workflow processes. This ongoing project will transform the organization's public services. Madam Speaker, CAST also established a conferencing and training centre at the general administration building with an investment of \$490,000. This project prioritized state-of-the-art equipment and applications, facilitating webinars and training sessions for up to 20 staff members, with the flexibility of breakout groups for more targeted experience.

11.05 a.m.

Madam Speaker, in the last fiscal period, team CAST utilized this technology to host a number of in-house seminars and training sessions. Madam Speaker, under the former Ministry of Tobago Development the construction of the new Met services building for Tobago commenced. The building was completed and commissioned during our first term in office under the leadership of Dr. Keith Rowley. Since then, team CAST has placed emphasis on acquiring new technology and equipment, thus ensuring that the Tobago Met Services Division is able to contribute to the overall improvement of metrological services available to Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean. Our investment in the

state-of-the-art technology includes six towers for the low-level wind shear alert system which were installed across Tobago. The low-level wind shear alert system provides critical meteorological data which can be relayed directly to the cockpit of an aircraft.

Madam Speaker, the Meteorological Services Division is also continuing the installation of automatic weather stations across Tobago. The automatic weather stations provide measurements of meteorological elements needed for safe operations at the ANR Robinson International Airport, including, but not limited to, approach, landing and take-off. Thus far, automatic weather stations have been installed at the ANR Robinson International Airport in Crown Point, Buccoo, Charlotteville, the Dwight Yorke Stadium, Main Ridge and Goodwood. The Meteorological Services Division also installed a geostationary operational environmental satellite, ground station satellite dish to effectively monitor climate patterns, and a Ranger-X5 J9868 dual-polar radar was installed and commissioned in May 2022. This radar allows for improvements in locating and predicting the path and intensity of precipitation.

Madam Speaker, the automatic weather stations and radar were in the testing stage for most of the last fiscal period, however, data for both became available for use from early July 2023. In the last fiscal period, we continue to upgrade the TT Met Office mobile app, ensuring that we fix bugs within the system. The upgrade has significantly enhanced the early warning capabilities of the Meteorological Services Division by making adverse weather alerts and other updates more accessible to the public while on the go. The app is available for both Apple and Android devices, and I want to take this opportunity to encourage all citizens, not just Tobagonians, to utilize the app.

Madam Speaker, I now turn my attention to the last unit under the CAST, the Registrar General's office. Today, as I speak to some of the achievements under this unit of CAST, I do so with a heavy heart as I reflect on a situation that is brewing in Tobago. Madam Speaker, there is a popular African proverb that I am often forced to refer to when I reflect on the nuances surrounding the delivery of service to the public, especially the Tobago public. Madam Speaker, "when elephants dance, it is the grass that suffers". Let me repeat that, "when elephants dance, it is the grass that suffers". Madam Speaker, this African proverb cautions us that it is the weak that get hurt in conflicts between the powerful. In other words, Madam Speaker, when bigwigs in bacchanal, it is the grassroots people who does suffer.

Madam Speaker, I simply wish to convey to the people of Tobago that I am aware of the current difficulties at the Registrar General's office in Tobago, and I assure Tobagonians that I am doing everything in my power to ensure that the underlying issues are resolved so that Tobagonians are not disenfranchised. Madam Speaker, notwithstanding the current circumstances, the Registrar General's office, Tobago, is ensuring that we expand services and the access to services so that we have a wider reach on the island. With the opening of the district registration office at the Roxborough Administrative Complex, we have facilitated easier registration of births and deaths for residents from Goodwood to Charlotteville, including the villages of L'Anse Fourmi and Bloody Bay.

Madam Speaker, in 2023 we were able to implement the Companies Registry Online System in Tobago. This system facilitates electronic submission of documents to the registry. It is intended to provide ease of use to members of the public and streamline the processing of documents by the office. Once

registered on the system, users are able to access a range of online services including, name search or name reservation; public record search; registration of business names; incorporation of companies; registration of external companies; registration of non-profit organizations; filing of annual returns; filing of change of directors; filing of change of address, and filing of notice of secretary, change of secretary.

Madam Speaker, again I want to caution those at play and remind us that “whenever elephants dance, it is the grass that suffers. Whenever elephants dance, it is the grass that suffers”. So I just wanted to remind those who have the ability to end an administrative tit for tat, let us end it, because we have people in Tobago East waiting to register births and waiting to register deaths. Madam Speaker, we have to put people first in service at all times.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, I wish to now report on the Child Affairs Division. Madam Speaker, as we in the Gender and Child Affairs Division of the Office of the Prime Minister, alongside other government Ministries, strive to enhance the quality of life of our citizens. We must acknowledge the unfortunate reality of violent acts occurring within our communities. These acts are perpetrated against innocent citizens in their homes, on the nation’s streets, shopping centres, and elsewhere. Today, I make yet another appeal to all citizens to come together to reduce the incidence of violence in the nation.

Let us play an even greater role in helping others to value life and value living. Let us watch out for our children. Let us as parents and guardians train our children to respect themselves and to respect each other. Let us inculcate in our children the need to be courteous and respectful. Let us cultivate a culture of zero

tolerance for crime and violence—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—particularly towards our nation's young. This Government remains resolute in its commitment to creating a safer society for the nation's children, now and in the future. And I am going to repeat that, Madam Speaker, this PNM Government remains resolute in its commitment to creating a safer society for the nation's children, now and in the future.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, the overall child protection system received a tremendous boost at the beginning of the last fiscal period with the commencements of the meetings by the standing committee on child protection. The committee comprise key Ministers and their Deputy Permanent Secretaries, the Chief Administrator of the Tobago House of Assembly, and other administrators of the Tobago House of Assembly, and other strategic stakeholders, such as the Judiciary.

Madam Speaker, this committee was able to make significant strides in advancing crucial work for children and the childcare and protection system. Over the period 2016 to 2023, this Government invested roughly half a billion dollars in the provision of services for children who are in community residences across the country. And we will continue to support community residences and children's homes through our ongoing provision of subventions and the payment-per-child system. Madam Speaker, in the last fiscal period the division provided support to 582 children. The investment in this area was approximately \$54,683,568.

Madam Speaker, with the support of UNICEF, we are currently conducting a thorough review of the payment-per-child system to ensure that it accurately

reflects the reality of providing for a children in the care of the State. This will enable us to better meet the needs of children in our care. Madam Speaker, notwithstanding this commitment, in fiscal 2024, the division, through the standing committee, will aggressively push forward with our deinstitutionalization efforts. It is our intention to ensure that children are well cared for in their families, and where this is not possible, alternative family options, like adoption, foster and kinship care will be rigorously pursued. And let me be clear, Madam Speaker, it is not our intention to just close down homes willy-nilly. Madam Speaker, we will be revisiting the arrangements at some of the existing children's homes to ensure that smaller, familial-type settings are established and adhered to at all times.

This is in keeping with the best interest of the child philosophy that guides our work at the Office of the Prime Minister. Madam Speaker, through the work of the standing committee, I was able to witness first-hand the benefits of an all-of-government, all-of-society approach to childcare and protection. Madam Speaker, earlier this year the Government worked closely with children's homes to ensure their compliance with the necessary standards for licensing and operation. I consider this to be one of the more significant achievements over the past year. Whilst some homes initially face challenges in meeting the licensing deadline, we persevered, Madam Speaker. We persevered amidst widespread criticism and negative commentary from detractors, remaining resolute in our commitment to enhancing all homes for the well-being of the children who reside within them.

We put the interest of the children first and make sure they were not displaced, again, demonstrating our commitment to operating on the best interest of the child, the principle. Madam Speaker, the Government has fulfilled its role in this particular area and has responded to the trust of the nation's children to always

keep their best interest as paramount. Madam Speaker, we in the Government remain committed to the development of a robust, integrated, proactive and responsive childcare and protection system within our nation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, in October 2022, we launched a National Children's Registry. Since then over 90 per cent of MOUs have been signed with central government agencies to share data, and data is being uploaded in both Trinidad and Tobago. As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, in the last fiscal period almost all of the data for children in Tobago was uploaded. Madam Speaker, I thank the THA for the willingness to collaborate on this very important exercise that benefits the nation's children.

Madam Speaker, since the launch of the NCR, it has recorded in excess of 140,000 data points from children in several sectors, including education, health, youth, protective and social services. To remind the public, Madam Speaker, the NCR is a digital monitoring system that seeks to ensure that every child achieves their developmental milestones. The NCR will serve as an early warning system for children who may be at risk and is in urgent need of care and protection. Madam Speaker, we are in the final stages of the child poverty analysis, which is being done in collaboration with UNICEF. We are all aware children have specific nutritional health, education and other needs, which are different from those of adults. As such, we have embarked on the child poverty analysis as the resulting data and information will allow for the design of policies to eliminate child poverty and monitor the impact of the implementation of these policies.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, every April we heighten our public education and

sensitization efforts around child abuse. A collaborative approach was taken by the Children's Authority, and the Gender and Child Affairs Division in 2023. Apart from targeted campaigns in traditional and non-traditional media, school tours were conducted at both primary and secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Sensitization sessions were also conducted with parliamentary representatives and the National Parent-Teacher Association.

11.20 a.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, an outreach activity at City Gate saw us engaging over 1,000 persons. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the more we inform and sensitize the public, the better chances we have, off reducing and eliminating child abuse in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, again, your initial speaking time has elapsed. You have an additional 10 minutes. You care to avail yourself?

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, can I have 15?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed. No, 10.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have so much more to report in terms of the child affairs division, but allow me to just refer to some of the things done at the Children's Authority. The National Interagency Child Abuse Protocol was finalized in the fiscal year. The protocol was published in May 2023 and provides as a guide for how abused or maltreated children should receive treatment from, or interact with, various child protection agencies in the country. The protocol, once embraced and fully implemented by all stakeholders, will ensure that there is better service delivery for abused children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am going to quickly skip over to the Gender Affairs

Division in the interest of time. One of the key initiatives coming out of the Gender Affairs Division is the national strategic action plan to end gender-based violence and sexual violence, and I want to thank the Cabinet for approving this initiative.

At the recent ceremonial opening of the 2023/2024 law term the Chief Justice indicated that there were 9,051 new filings, of which, 3,173 were domestic violence, 2,992 were divorces, and 1,766 were maintenance. The previous years' filings were in the range of 5,500 per year. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I must admit that as a country, we can do better and we must do better.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, whenever I read about an incident of abuse or death as a result of domestic violence, I always reflect on the fact that these outcomes are preventable. It is only after these unfortunate incidents, we hear the story of all who are aware that something was going on. In a recent article which dealt with the death of a child, I noted that several persons in the community were very much aware of what was taking place, yet, no one spoke out. No one sought to involve the relevant authorities until it was too late. If, we are to reduce or even end violence in our society, if we wish to improve the circumstances of our society's most vulnerable, we must adopt an all-of-society approach. Curbing this disturbing trend of violence can never be the responsibility of the Government alone. We need all hands on deck.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is not a them issue, or a we issue, it is about all of us. We have the responsibility to be duty bearers. We are the first line of response in the communities. Why wait until someone becomes a statistic to then say, what you know and what you hear and what you suspect. As they say, if you know

something, say something. If you see something, say something.

At the Gender and Child Affairs Division, our call to action in 2023 has been "be a hero, help get gender-based violence to zero". Today, I call on all citizens to be a hero.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in keeping with the United Nation's Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, Cabinet, in April 2023, agreed to the membership of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in the Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network. Trinidad and Tobago also attended the Fifth Capital-Level Meeting of the Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network from the 6th to 8th June in Washington DC.

11.25 a.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Women, Peace and Security is a policy framework that recognizes that women must be critical actors in all efforts to achieve sustainable international peace and security. The WPS Agenda promotes a gender perspective on women's equal and meaningful participation in peace processes, peacebuilding, and security. While in the initial application of this concept, it was predominantly used in regions of armed conflict. More and more we are seeing where it has been expanded to encompass domestic concerns including crime and climate change.

The Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago through the Gender Affairs Division in collaboration with the High Commission of Canada in Trinidad and Tobago and the UN Women Multi-Country Office in the Caribbean collaborated to host a national workshop toward the implementation of Women, Peace, and Security on Wednesday 21st June at the Hilton. A note has already been prepared to seek the approval of the Cabinet to complete the first Women, Peace

and Security national action plan. The first action plan is expected to address guns and gang violence. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the division will work closely with the Ministry of National Security to implement the pilot projects in selected communities across Trinidad as the Ministry of National Security is one of our key implementing partners for Women, Peace and Security.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, another initiative under Gender Affairs that I must mention before my time elapses, is the financial support to women who are survivors of DV. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we introduced the Survivors Transformation and Empowerment Programme. We did this because a 2021 survey of women who were accommodated at The National Domestic Violence Shelter revealed that 95 per cent of them were financially dependent on their abuser prior to entering the shelter. Although only 5 per cent of the clients returned to their former abuser, 84 per cent of them ended up in another DV shelter.

Further, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 95 per cent of the clients required and received government grants due to their financial status. It is for this reason, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Cabinet in June 2023 approved the STEP, Survivors Transformation and Empowerment Programme. STEP aims to improve the financial independence among survivors of domestic violence and reduce the likelihood of survivors of domestic violence remaining in or returning to abusive relationships.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, another initiative we undertook at our shelter was the commencement of the agricultural programme. This was done to help to ensure the food security of our clients when they exit the shelters and to ensure that they have the ability to benefit from opportunities made available under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Another key initiative coming out from the Gender Affairs Division was the Virtual Bilateral Meeting, a workshop between Ukraine and the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. The virtual workshop was held on June 13th and this came out of a meeting—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have two minutes.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—this came out of a meeting I had with the Minister for gender from Ukraine. We made a commitment to see how we could share our experiences and learn from best practices applied in each country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not have the time to address the National AIDS Coordinating Committee at the moment.

However, in closing, I want to just speak to the people a bit. We acknowledge there is much work ahead and we are actively devising strategies to attain our set goals and objectives. In the coming year, we must expect to initiate additional programmes to protect our nation's most vulnerable. We urge all stakeholders including members of the general public to accept that they have key roles to play in this regard. Let us unite to enhance the well-being of our vulnerable population and pledge to create a brighter future as we progress towards 2024 and a better Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, most importantly, I urge all of us not to lose hope in our potential as a people, not to lose hope in our potential as a nation, not to lose hope in our potential to achieve greatness and be great. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.30 a.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Arouca/Maloney.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the budget debate for this upcoming fiscal. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I start off by indicating that if this is not the worst Opposition that we have ever seen, it is close to being the worst Opposition that we have ever seen.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is clear that they had absolutely nothing, and I repeat, absolutely nothing to contribute to this debate. As is usual, they feel that by dropping so-called bombs or by saying things that they feel people want to hear, that they are doing something to us or doing something to our supporters. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what they continue to do is have a little bit of truth in something and then a bucket load of untruths, half-truths and innuendoes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will have none of that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to deal frontally with one matter that was raised yesterday by the Member of Parliament for Oropouche East. Mr. Deputy Speaker, what I find very amusing about the Member of Parliament for Oropouche East is that he has suddenly found this voice in relation to housing matters. A Member who, when he served as Minister of Housing and the Environment, had a lot of questions to answer thereafter. We had the issue with the EMBD. We had the issue with Carlsen Field. We had issues with Eden Gardens. We had issues with Oasis.

Mr. Young: Correct.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we even have issues in finding these 70,000 houses that they say that they have built. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is even more amazing is that in a recent newspaper report, he said to us, the Member for Oropouche East, as is reported, that he presented certain information as it relates to a valuation. One valuation was in or around \$52 million, the other was for over \$100 million and he presented, when asked, well, why you did not ask for a third because these seem so different in terms of their numbers, he said that was not his responsibility. He presented it to the Cabinet and it was up to the Cabinet. Suddenly, it is not his responsibility as the Minister of Housing and the Environment to present the best information to the Cabinet. But yesterday he, the Member for Oropouche East, is calling for the resignation of the Minister, the resignation of the board, the resignation of the managing director. None of this he ever found before.

Dr. Rowley: The Prime Minister.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: He even called for the resignation of the Prime Minister, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as it relates to a project in Trestrail. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as is usual, he came in with incorrect information because he felt he had to drop a bomb but it was a squid, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me put, for the *Hansard* record and for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the facts on this particular matter. First of all, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this contract is a design-build finance contract, which from the outset, given the type of contract, the HDC does not put out any money, not one cent; design-build finance—I know they are not accustomed—

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Mr. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48 all.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Charles: It was not—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Naparima. Member for Naparima. Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: 48(1).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member.

Mr. Charles: 48—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I am on my legs.

Mr. Charles: Oh, sorry.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right? That is not a Standing Order to start with.

Mr. Charles: May I correct it?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know a design-build finance contract would not suit that side because they like to see—

Hon. Members: Money.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—money. They like to see cash.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—if I could put the facts into the *Hansard*. On October 2019, the tender committee of the HDC agreed to the engagement of the contractor to provide a design-build-finance service at the Trestrail site. On December 19,

2019, the board agreed in principle to the award of the contract and to do so using the FIDIC EPC Silver Book. In January 2020, the HDC entered into an agreement with the contractor to execute the performance of the works described as the design-build-finance services for the construction of townhouse blocks, comprising 101 housing units at the Trestrail Lands, D'Abadie, housing development site. In October 2020, the contractor commenced these works. In November 2020, the HDC's executive management conducted a routine site visit to the site.

Between the period July 2021 and September 2021, the HDC issued numerous notices to the contractor as follows: on July 23, 2021; July 26, 2021; July 29, 2021; July 30, 2021 and August 03, 2021, the HDC, through its clerk of works, issued site instruction work orders to notify the contractor of various breaches and to instruct the contractor to make good the works to ensure that there was compliance with the contract.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: By correspondence dated—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, hold on. Hold on. Members, I know we are coming down to the close of the debate but please, I am not going to tolerate outbursts across the floor on both sides, please. Right? Everyone had their opportunity and, again, we are down to the last few, please, Members. Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: By correspondence dated July 22nd, July 26th, August 4th, August 9th, August 16th, and August 24, 2021, the HDC issued various notices, pursuant to subclause 15.1, which is the notice to correct. And pursuant to subclause 7.6, which is under the rubric, remedial works, to correct in relation to structural issues identified.

In September 2021, the HDC instructed the contractor, pursuant to the subclause of the contract, to submit a revised programme and supporting report describing the revised method that the contractor will use to expedite the progress and complete the works within a reasonable time. November 03, 2021, the contractor submitted its remedial retrofit methodology and design.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on January 05, 2022, CEP Limited was engaged by the HDC. And I repeat that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, CEP Limited, which was the information that the Member for Oropouche East quoted from, was engaged—but he did not say that it was engaged by the HDC, tried to give the impression that the HDC was being negligent—was engaged by the HDC to conduct a condition assessment at 11 townhouse units and they asked for two reports, an assessment report and a design development report.

February 22nd, CEP submitted its report. March 2022, the HDC gave notice to the contractor of the suspension of works. August 2022, CEP submitted a second report which provided methodologies for the remediation. September 2022, the HDC advised the contractor that CEP had completed its assessment and enclosed the report for the contractor's viewing.

November 2022, the HDC issued notice to the contractor, pursuant to FIDIC, that failure to recommence works would result in the HDC having to terminate. In December 2022, the contractor submitted his remedial works methodology and in January 2023, the HDC submitted their comments. And in February 2023, the HDC informed the contractor that inspections would be conducted on every unit on the site and it was also agreed that the contractor would provide an update.

In May 2023, the HDC obtained written advice from its external attorneys in

relation to the termination of the contract. The advice was given to the HDC board and resulted in a decision to further engage the contractor. June 2023, the HDC met with the contractor to discuss the way forward and also to indicate that they were not happy that the contractor was taking so long to remediate. The matter was then presented to the HDC board in August and in September, and the HDC board decided as follows:

One, the board directed that management write to the contractor informing him that an assessment was conducted of all 110 units and it was found that the structures were not fit for purpose. The CEP report was referenced. Consequently, the HDC is unable to take possession of the units. The contractor is required to produce units that are fit for purpose and therefore, he is required to bring the buildings to a standard that is fit for purpose.

The board directed that the letter must state that the managing director and the engineer will delegate CEP to perform the work of the engineer. Additionally, the letter must be accompanied by a scope of works. The board directed the management to further inform the contractor that an enhanced supervision would be required and the board noted the advice of the external legal counsel.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the HDC has entered, therefore, into a situation where the contractor must remediate at his own cost. So this talk about, that Oropouche East is saying that the taxpayers will have to pay—

Dr. Rowley: “Is ah lie”.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—millions and millions of dollars is totally fabricated and totally untrue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, at that Trestrail site, we

already have over 169 units that were properly built. They have been allocated. Citizens are living on that Trestrail site but it is only because the HDC management, the then Minister, the board, went to visit the site, we recognized that something was wrong and immediately took action.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Took the right action.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: So we took the right action at the time and we are continuing to take the right action. And that would never happen under that government—under the PP government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.45 p.m.

In many instances, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have been found wanting in relation to so many instances. We have a situation where they have on more than one occasion had sole select for billions of dollars. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are interested in taking care of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: We are not interested in filling our pockets or anything like that. We are interested in ensuring anybody who works for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago as a contactor does the work that they are supposed to do. And that is why I can stand here proudly and say that the HDC has acted honourably and that the Member for Oropouche East, as usual, is trying to mislead the House and the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, but they are not totally surprised at that, because you will recall that at a joint select committee, the Member for

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Oropouche East who is one of their Members of the Joint Select Committee on National Security, we raised an objection to the Member for Oropouche East sitting on that Committee.

And Mr. Deputy Speaker if I may be allowed to remind this House that the Member was seen, when he was Minister of Housing, touring a police station with a gang leader. There was a photograph of him in the papers with him touring a police station with an alleged gang member or gang leader who was given the contract to build the police station.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: A gang member given a contract to build the police station. And Mr. Deputy Speaker,

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Let me just remind this honourable House and those opposite who have very short memories of a July 4, 2020 article in the *Trinidad Express*. And it is headed:

“Cops probe Moonilal alleged links to gangs

Member of Parliament for Oropouche East Dr. Roodal Moonilal...”

—and I am quoting Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Hosein: I rise on Standing Order 48(8) the conduct of any Member of the House should not be raised except on a substantive motion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: So, I will repeat a *Trinidad Express* article by Denyse Renne dated July 4 2020 and it is headlined:

“Cops probe Moonilal allege links to gangs

Member of Parliament for Oropouche East Dr Roodal Moonilal remains under police investigation for allegedly being affiliated with members of the Rasta City gang.

The investigation came following an interception of communications last year allegedly between a top member of Rasta City and Moonilal, both of whom were said to have planned to meet at the Hyatt Regency (Trinidad) hotel on Wrightson Road, Port of Spain.

Commissioner of Police Gary Griffith was aware of the interception, the Sunday Express understands.

However, on meeting day, a sting operation was organised and only four members of the gang arrived.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. D. Tancoo: Mr. Deputy Speaker 48(8). The Minister is going on and on about things that have nothing to do with this budget and reading newspaper articles—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, it is not the first time that particular media houses have been quoted. The Member has identified clearly her source, kindly proceed. Members, I have ruled. I have ruled. Proceed.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Moonilal—the issue of Moonilal and his alleged gang affiliation came to the fore earlier this year during a Joint Select Committee meeting.

Moonilal—in presenting the case, it was said that the Joint Select Committee recommended that Moonilal recuse himself from the inquiry on crime based on the evidence given by the Commissioner of Police and Minister of National Security,

Stuart Young and that he, Moonilal, had been identified in intelligent reports in relation to certain gang members. The JSC report indicated members of the committee felt Moonilal had a personal and direct interest in matters before it.

Remember this is the National Security JSC of which the Member for Oropouche East continues to be a Member. Continues to be a Member as recommended by the Member for Siparia.

11.50 a.m.

Mrs. Morris-Julian: Shame!

Mr. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), and as you ruled, she takes ownership.

Hon. Member: “Who you calling she?”

Mr. Charles: The Member. The Member takes ownership for what she is quoting. That is all I am asking.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And again, hon. Members, the Member has so identified her particular source, and kindly proceed.

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled. Overruled.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: You want to take ownership of it? Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed. Member for Naparima, I have ruled, and it is a standard procedure within this particular Chamber. The Member is on her legs and she is identifying her source and she takes ownership for it. That is clear.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is clear, so, okay. So again, please!

Mr. Charles: All right. Sir, all right I apologize.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is clear that we on this side are very concerned by some Member who could be found in this way to— apparently his affiliations are questionable, and that Member wants to talk to us about criminality and about corruption and issues of that nature. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we reject. We on this side we reject whatever is being said.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just wanted to move to one other issue as it relates to the Member for Mayaro. Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I keep saying that the Members on the other side never come with the whole truth when they are discussing any matters. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you may recall that the Member for Mayaro told us that he has made applications on behalf—[*Device*]—sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. He has made applications on behalf of 60, I think he said 63 constituents for grants from Mayaro. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the information that I have from the Ministry is that there were eight referrals from the Member for Mayaro for grants.

Dr. Rowley: Eight.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Eight. He claimed it was over 60.

Mr. Young: Wow.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to that that, of the eight that he asked about, one benefited, because they had completed the application, another did not attend, the third benefited, the fourth one had no proof that they had land tenure which is necessary for the grant, the fifth one there was

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no contact number for the fifth one, the sixth one got the grant, the seventh one got the grant, and the eighth one had received a grant previously.

Hon. Member: “Oooh.”

Dr. Rowley: Jesus Christ.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Yes, double dipping. For the entire Mayaro/Rio Claro region we have only had 19 requests.

Hon. Members: Wow.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And the Member for Mayaro is telling us that he made over 60 applications.

Hon. Member: Fibs.

Dr. Rowley: And he wants to be leader of the UNC.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And he is whom they are now looking at as leader of the United National Congress.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. Rowley: Fully qualified.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Yes, he is fully qualified, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was another where the Member talked about Home Construction Grants which is also under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. For Rio Claro/Mayaro total, there were 21 requests. We have disbursed 12, three were denied and six are unprocessed because documents are missing. Coming to the Parliament, the highest court in the land and not speaking the truth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move on now to the

Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and what we have done over the last few years. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this year alone we have delivered 496 housing units, we launched the More Ways to Pay, we have given 762 Home Improvement Grants, 114 Emergency Relief Grants, 217 Home Construction Subsidies, 397 Home Improvement Subsidies. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are in the process of transforming the HDC, as was said in the budget 2022/2023. May I also indicate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the TTMF falls under the purview of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, and the TTMF has issued over 500 new loans, new mortgage loans for this year.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it must be borne in mind as the Finance Minister said in his presentation, and I quote that:

“...the construction sector is a large employer of workers, with backward linkages to suppliers and ties to the financial sector through residential mortgages.”

And to this end, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and the HDC and LSA in particular, have been working assiduously to ensure that we achieve that goal of making sure that the housing and construction sector is one of the largest employers of workers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the transformation of the HDC was designed to achieve certain imperatives, the confluence of which we argue will radically alter the consumers' experience as it relates to homeownership. The objective of this transformation is to develop an organization that is nimble and responsive. We have in fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, done what was proposed in the last budget in that the HDC is now the holding company or the parent company, and there are three companies that are subsidiaries of the HDC and they have very specific

mandates. All the boards have been appointed to these companies—of these companies, the senior management has been appointed, and the companies are in the process of filling other posts within the company. These companies are:

- The Trinidad and Tobago HDC Asset Management Company which is responsible for completing the sales of all housing units, and they will continue to manage and provide administrative support.
- There is the TTHDC Construction Company Limited which will manage all elements of the HDC's property management mandate, including land acquisition, urban planning, project and construction management, and other solutions to undertake construction and projects.
- There is the third subsidiary which is the TTHDC Facilities Estate Management Company which manages all elements of the HDC's property management mandate, including the maintenance of rental units, the administration of the management of the portfolio, and partnering with regional corporations and other entities to upkeep the community HDC communities and promote sustainable community development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the objective of this transformation is to ensure that HDC communities receive a greater degree of sustainability and empowerment, and those that have to interact with the HDC, receive the best service possible. We honestly believe, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that with the streamlining of operations that has been achieved by this transformation, these companies will prove to be a sterling example of what should obtain in the state sector with respect to governance, revenue generation and collection, and reduce the reliance on the national purse.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, between October 1st and December 31st of this year, the Government is poised to construct and deliver approximately 567 new houses spread geographically throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Some of these are construction that had stalled and we have—because of the \$1.5 billion loan guarantee that had been generated by the Minister of Finance, we have been able to restart stalled projects, and we are poised to begin new housing projects, including rentals, which is very important because we understand that not all citizens will be able to afford a mortgage, but it is important for persons who need a housing solution to be able to get the kind of solution that best suits them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And so it is not only houses for mortgage, but we will also be doing rental units, and returning the HDC to its moorings, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As you will recall in the period 2010 to 2015 there was a change in the upper threshold of applicants for HDC houses, and also a drastic increase in the cost of the houses, and in the cost of producing these units, and the HDC is returning to its moorings.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, what we find of particular gratification for us as a government, is that we have been able to partner with the private sector in order to produce houses for the HDC client base, and so there are approximately 600 units being constructed under the design-build finance utilizing public-private partnerships. And that is of significance to us because a few years ago, the Minister of Finance in his budget speech had indicated that the HDC needed to move more aggressively towards the public-private partnerships, and that is exactly what is taking place now.

Because it must be understood, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Government cannot finance all the housing construction that is needed, and so moving to this public-private partnership is of significance, and I repeat that we have over 600 units under construction using this public-private partnership model.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.05 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will recall that the PNM, as a government, has always said that we encourage small contractors to get into different aspects of the heights of the economy. And consequently, in terms of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, we have made it a duty to encourage small and medium sized contractors to participate in the construction of housing units under the HDC and its subsidiary. As a result of that encouragement, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have had several units built by small and medium contractors and we congratulate them for that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, at present we have 110 units under construction throughout Trinidad being done by small and medium contractors.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, what this has done is moved persons who have the skills, who have the capability from doing small projects to doing larger projects. So we have some people who may be given contracts to construct one housing unit, some are constructing 10 housing units, but through it all we have encouraged the movement of small and medium contractors and that has proved to be a very excellent programme.

In addition to that, these small and medium contractors utilize persons who live in the area where they are constructing the houses. So what we call the HDC

local content has become very evident and we are moving to ensure we improve the skills of small and medium contractors. So the HDC is working closely with these contractors to provide training in financial management, training in project management and we have been assisting them in becoming OPR compliant to ensure their greater participation in the construction of houses.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is not all. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would have heard my colleague, Minister, the Member of Parliament for Laventille East/Movant who is the Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development talk about quite a number of areas that are under his purview specifically. So I am not going to touch on those areas because he did a masterful job of—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—telling us what happens in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development in those areas. But one issue that I would like to touch on that my colleague did mention, was the fact that we have been in the Ministry, in HDC and its subsidiaries digitizing the Ministry and digitizing the subsidiaries of the HDC. And we are very proud of that.

As a result we have multiple payment channels for the clients of the HDC. And it means that they can use online payments; we have decentralized payments by ensuring that they can use the PayWise and SurePay solutions; we are working with the banks to enable online deposits directly to HDC's bank accounts; we are also working with streamlining repair requests so that the clients of the HDC who are rental clients, they will be able to put on their phones with a message to the HDC indicating what are the concerns that they have and what the HDC needs to repair on their behalf.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the bugbears of a number of state enterprises has been their inability to complete audits or to submit audits and the HDC is no exception. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the HDC's auditors have only just concluded a number of years of audits, because in many instances we got what is called "a qualified audit", because things were not found that were claimed, and money that was said to be existing was not existing, and so we had to get a number of qualified audits. What was even more alarming was the inability of the auditors to verify the existence of housing units allegedly constructed to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars during the period 2011—2015.

Hon. Member: Wow. No.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me quote from one of the audit reports and the auditor was KPMG and I quote:

The Corporation has not prepared a comprehensive inventory of its housing units available for sale. There is an unanalyzed sum of approximately \$789 million representing cost of housing units that could not be attributed to identified or identifiable physical structures.

Dr. Rowley: What!

Mr. Young: Repeat that.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: I will repeat.

Mr. Young: Let the population hear this.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: I am quoting from the 2013 audit report prepared by KPMG. And I quote:

The Corporation has not prepared a comprehensive inventory of its housing units available for sale. There is an unanalyzed sum of approximately \$789 million representing cost of housing units that could not be attributed to

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identifiable physical structures.

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

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: We were also unable to obtain underlying documentary support for a sample of the construction cost. Consequently we are unable to perform audit tests to ascertain the accuracy and existence of the reported inventory.

So what this means, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that there were buildings that were allegedly constructed but they could not find the buildings—

Mr. Young: And paid for.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—and paid for.

Dr. Rowley: KPMG.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Yeah. KPMG. So the taxpayer paid for ghost houses.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me also—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, again, let us recognize the Standing Orders, please. Proceed Member.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, again from the same audit report, and I quote:

Management has also not provided underlying documentation supporting the repayment terms of a loan payable from the National Lotteries Control Board. Consequently, we are unable to satisfy ourselves that the entire balance is appropriately classified as non-current in the statement of financial—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, just one second. Again you have approximately two more minutes of your initial speaking time. You have an

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additional 10 minutes. Care to avail?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Yes, please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you.

So as at year end, we do not know whether interest should be accrued to this so-called loan and whether covenants are applicable or the loan is secured on the assets of the Corporation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the report goes on to state, and I quote:

We have been unable to obtain appropriate and sufficient evidence of the existence and valuation of \$180,566,982 reported within loans receivable held at financial institutions.

Hon. Members: What!

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Money missing supposedly for the repayment of a loan, supposedly taken from NLCB.

Hon. Members: Wow.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Imagine—

Dr. Rowley: A loan—

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Yes. So we are now trying to find out, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are now trying to find out what this was all about. But we have no—there is nothing, there is nothing on the books or otherwise that tells us where this is, if it was a loan from NLCB, whether it was a loan to NLCB, so we are investigating this. And they want to advise us on how to run the country, they want to advise us on how to run this country.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, if anybody takes God out of their

thoughts and vote them back into government—

Dr. Rowley: God help us.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—they need licks and God help us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with all of this we are now in a position where we are working assiduously with the auditors in trying to make sure that we can get these things sorted out and also to make sure that the HDC's audits are up-to-date. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is one other issue that I would like to raise, one other part of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development that we find is of great value to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and that is the Housing and Village Improvement Programme.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would have seen that the Minister of Finance has allocated the sum of \$100million to this programme, and we are very happy that he has done that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: The Housing and Village Improvement Programme. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the HVIP in total has constructed over 1,700 of these houses over the period that it started. And so for last year we completed 468 housing units and we are soon to commence construction of an additional 275 units. Mr. Deputy Speaker, why this programme is so important to myself and the Member for Laventille East/Morvant, and it should be important to all Members, is that it moves persons who are in a situation of squatting, who may be living in a ply board house, who may be living in squalor, from that position, to at least a two bedroom house, with indoor plumbing, with a roof over their heads, in a situation where they had been living in squalor.

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Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we cannot tell you what this has done for people in Trinidad in particular, who have moved their families to a situation where they have indoor plumbing and electricity and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me say that this, this is free to those who we are doing this for.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: All they have to contribute is sweat equity. All they have to contribute is sweat equity. They have to put in their labour, they get their neighbours to also help and we put a small contractor to do these houses. And what do these houses cost? They run from \$165,000 to \$175,000 and it has changed so many lives.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And Mr. Deputy Speaker, it does not end there, it does not end there. Apart from the house we also are putting in infrastructure. So they have roads and—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—they have roads and we are now encouraging them to learn different crafts, we are encouraging them to start small gardens, we are encouraging them to start their own market, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it has transformed the lives of thousands of citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.20 p.m.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me say that this is in communities from Arima to Couva, Claxton Bay to Moruga, Diego Martin to Penal/Debe, Morvant/Laventille to Princes Town, D'Abadie/O'Meara. It is in

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every single constituency—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—including Pointe-a-Pierre, Oropouche West, Chaguanas, Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Not Naparima.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is true—“you wouldn’t know because you doh go in yuh constituency”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Address the Chair.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Address the Chair.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, address the Chair.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Sorry.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Address the Chair. Address the Chair.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is in the constituency of Tunapuna. It is everywhere because we are firm in our view that no citizen will be left behind. We are firm in our view that everybody deserves a chance—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—to move out of a situation that may not be able to produce the best for them, but if they are given the opportunity, they will produce the best for themselves. That and is why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance in his budget presentation has ensured that there is a \$4,000 lump sum payment to retirees; \$1 billion back pay for 37,000 public sector workers; \$80 million for new police vehicles; an increase in minimum wage, court scanners, port scanners; \$60 million for the resumption of the market box programme; \$7.69

million to expand the adult literacy training; \$400 million for agricultural incentives; \$1,000 for the school supplies and book grant per child; \$20 million for a new youth development and activity centre; \$2.5 billion for the THA; \$3.4 billion for the Ministry of Works and Transport, which will help with the infrastructure throughout Trinidad and Tobago; \$100 million allocated for housing in the HVIP programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is why I say thanks—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes, Member.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—to the Minister of Finance, and thanks to the Minister of Planning and Development. Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me say that we on this side are proud of the Member for Diego Martin West—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—because the Member for Diego Martin West has been one of the best Prime Ministers in Trinidad and Tobago. The Member for Diego Martin West, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has had to run this country sometimes on very little, but the Minister of Finance has ensured that he has had enough to be able to keep this country going.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: The Member for Diego Martin West, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the only Prime Minister that has ever had to run a country in a pandemic—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—and that is why the Minister of Finance can say that we are moving out of the doldrums of that pandemic and moving ahead in Trinidad

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and Tobago. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, without anyone who can contradict us, I say thank you to the Member for Diego Martin West for—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—[*Inaudible*]—and ensuring that the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the Member for Arima could ensure that today we have a budget that we on this side are all proud of.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with those words, thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the hon. Prime Minister, MP for Diego Martin West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to begin my short contribution by acknowledging the sterling work done by the staff at the Ministry of Finance, and the associates of the Minister of Finance, and the Minister of Finance of Trinidad and Tobago for an outstanding job in managing our very difficult affairs and ensuring that when we report to the population, that any reasonable person would have a clear idea as to whither goest Trinidad and Tobago and have a good view of our circumstances, both local and in our international location.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have been in this Parliament for decades and I understand the difficulty of being in Opposition because I have served in Opposition for three terms, 1987 to '91, 1995 to 2001, and 2010 to 2013.

Hon. Member: '15

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: 2015. So I have served three terms in Opposition. So I understand the difficulty in treating in a situation where you are in a pretty permanent bias and you express your views on what is happening with the Government, and persons who get your views must understand that those views are really views of a person in conflict, have an interest. But I must say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that my colleagues on the other side overdo it because they have a difficulty in seeing anything good in Trinidad and Tobago.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

But I want to use my time to respond to some of the issues raised or the positions taken by my colleague from Siparia who led the response to the budget, and what surprised me was the position taken by the Opposition Leader, who has a penchant for being personal on matters of national reasons; always personal, always denigrating at the personal level, always pull down, always attack at the personal level. And here it is we had one of the best budgets presented in a difficult situation, a budget that brings hope and promise to the people of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—and the Opposition Leader started out her response by saying that that Brian Manning and Faris Al-Rawi, because of their comfortable upbringing, cannot speak to and about the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I find that a ridiculous statement coming from the Opposition Leader, trying to separate two of my colleagues on the basis that Brian Manning grew up in a house with food and a father with a job, and Faris Al-Rawi is in somehow a comfortable family, with a wife who has a family that is wealthy, and as far as she is concerned, the Member for Siparia, that disqualifies them from speaking about poor people in

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Trinidad and Tobago. What a ridiculous state of affairs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And that was the opening gambit of the Opposition Leader. I would like to say to my colleague from Siparia, spend some time on your own, coming up with your own views and matters of this country, and stop coming to the Parliament and reading foolishness that others give you to write.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So here it is we had a budget debate and we are waiting to respond, because we have been the Government for eight years and you can hold us accountable, and we are ready for that. But all we got, Madam Speaker, is a rehash and promises to return to failed programmes, and that has been our colleague's management response to offerings throughout our term as Government. "Oh, laptop, laptop, laptop, laptop", forgetting that that programme has been discredited as a bad programme. "Comfort patrol, comfort patrol, comfort patrol", where—what is comfort patrol? A failed programme where you spent \$200 million a year, hiring private security people to pick up Tom, Dick and Harry unscreened, put them in a car to drive through neighbourhoods and you call that comfort patrol.

As a matter of fact, I was more frightened of them because I did not know who they were, whether they were bandits or priests just driving through the neighbourhood; put on a white t-shirt, in a private car and driving around in this kind of climate, and that was their idea of comfort patrol. And when we came into government, we discovered that they were paying \$200 million a year for that, and they say that is their idea of bringing comfort, safety and security to communities—fearful.

Then, of course, we had the rotating of office. They have been on my case every day to rotate the Minister of Finance; rotate him, rotate him, rotate him. They had—Minister of National Security, sorry. They had seven of those Ministers. That is not how we run the country. We believe in stability and performance. When you know the job, you do the job.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So because you had seven National Security Ministers, do not insist that we must do the same thing too. We have a different approach. It is the same thing, Madam Speaker, where—because we know that stability has great value, especially in these circumstances that I as Prime Minister have always used a most senior Minister of Government to be deputy Prime Minister when I am out of the country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Their approach was to put every single Member of the Cabinet as acting Prime Minister when they were in office, making a mockery of the importance of the management of the people's affairs. So every time their Prime Minister left the country, she put the Prime Minister's Office in the hands of another Member of the Cabinet.

Mr. Charles: Good idea.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Good idea, yes, from Naparima. Good idea. I expect nothing else from him.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So as far as they are concerned—and you could imagine, Madam Speaker, if they were in office in this period of difficulty, playing the fool with the Office of the Prime Minister like that, where every single person in the

Cabinet, every Monday morning, it is a different person? And that was to create confusion.

So you get the result that you just heard from my colleague from Arouca/Maloney, where they do all manners of evil and they have a cobweb—everything wrapped in a cobweb. You do not know what they have done. It is when KPMG came after to put in a report from the HDC that \$700 million of housing cannot be found, and loan from NCB taken but cannot be found, and they have the gall to come in here and want to lecture me? Keep your advice to yourself.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And they have no shame, Madam Speaker. Because if I was sitting down over there and the government was reading about that, about my tenure, I “woulda” hang my head in shame. They have no shame, you know, because they take no responsibility. They take no responsibility for what they have done. They believe they do God service and they believe that they will never be held accountable. That is why they behave like that.

Any government facing that qualified accounts report, where that taxpayer money is being described in that way, you should at least humble yourself. But no, Naparima, in your face shouting across as though there is something to be proud of and telling us that they want to go back to the glory days of the UNC. That is what they say. But if the people of Trinidad and Tobago want to put God out their thoughts and put them back into office, you all are welcome to do that. I could not believe it, Madam Speaker.

They are going to rebuild Caroni Limited, they are going to reopen the refinery, they are going to destroy the revenue authority and, of course, they want

no part of property tax. So we know what the Opposition's position is, rehash and promise to return to the things that have no good for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is what it is.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And, of course, the Minister of Finance provided the nation, not just with "ol' talk", but a series of statistical outcomes of our stewardship.

They have another habit. If the outcome is one that showed that we did not do not well, then the source is good. If the outcome is one that showed that something went well, the source is to be questioned. And, of course, as a throw away, my colleague from Siparia, the Opposition Leader, did not mention, en passant, the whole question of the national statistical institute as something that is missing.

12.35 p.m.

Well I was glad to hear that. You know why? Because the reason why we do not have a national statistical institute after all the work that had been done is because it requires a special majority to be passed and they said upfront that they are not supporting it. I take that what she has said in the budget debate means that they have a change of position and therefore, I will instruct the Leader of Government Business, in the term that we are in now, that we will bring that legislation to Parliament and I am advising the population to observe the behaviour of the Opposition and I trust that they support it with their vote because it requires their vote to be brought into being. So I am putting them on notice.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am putting all of them on notice now that we are going to put that Bill on the floor, we are going to debate it here and take it to a vote and if

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they vote for it, then we will have a national statistical institute. Right?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And, Madam Speaker, I would like to speak without being disturbed by that instrument from Naparima.

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister. Member for Naparima, I remind you of Standing Order 47. If you wish to invoke it, there is a particular way. I would also remind you about the announcement that was made yesterday. Let us please continue in that vein. Please observe Standing Order 53. This is not a two-way conversation. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So, Madam Speaker, we can look forward to that. Right?

Mr. Charles: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: But, Madam Speaker, the aspirant political—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Sorry.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Member, I do not want to know anything—

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Member, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Tancoo: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West, I think you know much better. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, I will appeal to you that these disturbances which are wholly unnecessary, I hope I get injury time for them, right, because I really do need to talk to the population of Trinidad and Tobago. So we are to look forward to the coming of the national statistical institute with the Opposition support. It is ready to go. Right? It is there and ready to go. They have a change of view, we will proceed.

But, Madam Speaker, I was saying it was not only the Member for Siparia who made ridiculous statements in the budget debate. The aspirant to replace her—

Mr. Young: Mayaro?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Yes, my friend from Mayaro, he made even more ridiculous statements. Having made his contribution on the numbers presented by the Minister of Finance, concluded that—his words were that we were following the prescriptions of the IMF and we are at the door of the IMF. Madam Speaker, I crave your indulgence to quote for my colleague from Mayaro so that he can appreciate how ridiculous he has been. There is an article in today's newspaper. Today is Thursday October 12th?

Hon. Members: Yes.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Today's papers and the headline of the article is:

“Broad-based recovery in T&T”—Trinidad and Tobago—“economy”

“Governor Hilaire in Central Bank's 2022 annual report”

So a summary of the annual report is here published today in a daily newspaper 48 hours after the Member for Mayaro invoked IMF on us; IMF, you know. Let me just take out a couple of extracts from this statement and this is from the Governor of the Central Bank speaking to the country in the annual report. He mentions that:

“The unemployment rate dipped to an average of 4.8 per cent...down from 6.1 per cent...”

And he pointed out that there was:

“...a surge in international food prices”—in that same period as well.

He mentioned that:

“...monetary policy centred on managing externally generated inflation risks.”

He went on to say that:

“...the 2022 financial year saw a steady revival of the T&T”—Trinidad and Tobago—“economy as business activity continued to reopen following the pandemic-induced lockdowns.”

That is the Governor of the Central Bank. As I said earlier, our colleagues on the other side have the difficulty of being in Opposition and they have some bias in their positions and so on but this is the Governor of the Central Bank speaking. He has no axe to grind, he has no side in this political arena. So he is telling you “we revive”, we are reviving.

He goes on to say:

“Good progress was made on all three of the plan’s pillars - monetary policy, financial stability and internal operations during the financial year and an ambitious set of objectives has been established for the year ahead...”

He added that there are good signs of a measured, broad-based recovery domestically, noting that a revival of business credit has provided support to manufacturing, construction and distribution activities.”

He goes on to say:

“...good progress was made in fortifying the information technology (IT) systems, moving towards energy efficiency...”

He went further to say:

“...the Central Bank Governor assured that the bank remains well poised to confront what promises to be another challenging year...”

Madam Speaker, he said:

“On the financial stability front...that advances were made in strengthening intra-regional supervisory...”

So this is the perspective of the Governor of Central Bank but yet, a Member of this House with ambition dripping from lip and shoe sole—

Mr. Young: Correct.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: But coming here and talking about we are following IMF prescriptions. And that is against a background where I can reaffirm to the people of Trinidad and Tobago today that insofar as prescriptions have been formulated and applied in this country, as leader of the Government of this country, at the beginning of our tenure, I told this country that there were difficulties to be hard, to be managed and we will make our own prescriptions and apply those prescriptions as we see fit for our people and that is what we have done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And we gave them the assurance that we will keep Trinidad and Tobago away from the doors of the IMF and that is what we have done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: However, we have been able, using our prescriptions, to maintain employment levels. IMF programmes do not maintain employment levels, especially in the public sector. Not one gazetted public servant has lost his

or her job in this country under this Government as a policy arrangement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: We were able to maintain and improve, not just maintain, improve and expand our social services support systems in this country. That is what we have done. We have not relinquished a single programme that was bringing relief to the poor and the needy in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: While we have curtailed some subsidies, we still maintain a major subsidy programme in this country in the face of serious disturbance from some of them. We have reduced subsidies in a responsible way, but you still have subsidies on electricity, on water, in health care and in energy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: We still have \$1 billion of subsidy on energy in this country. Madam Speaker, we have maintained an ongoing Development Programme, and we have maintained a heritage fund.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Yet they come here and talk about IMF. If an IMF programme had come to this country as they were predicting, every single one of these areas of activity that I have just mentioned would have been slashed and they would have lost jobs, we would have lost opportunities. I mean who would lend you money as the lender of last resort while you are piling up money in a heritage fund? Who will do that? “The day we go to the IMF, the first thing they had was to tell you is spend from that fund.” And who will not spend from a heritage fund in a pandemic where you needed to borrow \$13 billion?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: But of course, what they are telling us, Madam Speaker, as they did, they are deniers. They are COVID-19 deniers and they are saying that they would have spent no money and they would have done nothing about COVID-19, except drink bush rum, white rum, and puncheon and lime and kill people across the board in this country because they would not have spent from the Heritage Fund and they would not have borrowed. These are the jokers who are in fact the alternative to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, these are the people who are spending every cent we earned and then borrowing money from the bank and putting it in the Heritage Fund. That is what they did. They are in no position to provide advice to this country on anything serious.

And of course, the Member for Siparia in her budget debate became an expert in human trafficking pointing her finger at us about what we are doing with human trafficking. I noticed that she has done something about it.

Hon. Member: Yeah?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Yes, moving her Members around.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And quoting for us something that—the what? The American Trafficking in Persons Report. So our Leader of the Opposition is very interested and very versed in the American Trafficking in Persons Report but she has no interest in the Devant Maharaj report—

Hon. Member: No.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: —about what happened in their party, in their Government, in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: There were certain Members who were in the Back Bench over there, “ah see them in the Front Bench” over there promoted, promoting people who have questions to answer. Madam Speaker, we have arrangements in place to treat with reports of human trafficking and we do so aggressively. The courts have issues to deal with, the police is on the job and we have specialist agencies in the police service dealing with human trafficking. As a matter of fact, in Trinidad and Tobago, there are reports of that affecting people in the Parliament. We await the outcome.

Madam Speaker, well, of course, the Opposition spent a lot of its time echoing the pain and suffering of the crime wave that we are experiencing in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, nobody in this country can say that they are happy with what is happening in our country with respect to crime, criminality and violence in general. Comes at us from all directions in all forms and fashion. The Government has its responsibility. There are government agencies on the job and we are continuously confronting these issues. There is no shortcut and there is no easy solution.

So, Madam Speaker, when politicians come and pretend that if they were in office, this was not going to happen, it is just so much hooey. But, of course, when they have the opportunity to help, they should help and we welcome their help. We are hearing that we are going to be meeting, we agree to meet after the budget, today is the last day of the debate and then there are five more days of examination of the numbers and then the budget debate, it goes to the other place. I did say publicly that after the debate, we will take them up on their offer.

But, Madam Speaker, in the budget debate, the Leader of the Opposition

produced what she calls her alternative crime plan and I did take time to go through it line by line; what it is they are offering that we are missing and what it is that we can engage in. There are some issues that we can engage in usefully and I hope that we do. But what I did find is that much of it was related to either what was already going on or the Commissioner's day's work that one expects the Commissioner to be engaged in.

So you know, I do not want to go into the details because we will have a chance to do that later on but clearly, a number of the issues, talking about—well she did speak about an area of great experience, recommending a review of the marijuana legislation, but I can say that already we do have entities: the NADAPP, NPTA and Children's Authority. These are all people who are paying attention already to how marijuana is being used in our country and if there are reviews to be had, it will come in due course.

12:50 p.m.

And you know there is—they normally speak as though they have information that is not available to anybody else and therefore they are alerting the public. The Opposition Leader spoke, interestingly, about the witness protection programme, and did so specifically while calling the name of a child who—that horrible situation where the child went with her father to report—

Hon. Member: Rape.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—a rape, and then within hours having returned home, one of our citizens, because “ah sure” nobody from Mars did that, one or more of our citizens went to their home and attempted to snuff out the family. Well, of course, the Opposition Leader was delighted about that, so she came here to report that had we got a witness programme—had we been involved in a witness protection

programme the child could have been protected. Now, Madam Speaker, you are a lawyer, you could figure that out for me please. The child went to report an incident of crime. Almost immediately the criminals killed the child and her family members were damaged.

What is the Opposition Leader saying in her criticism of the Government? That we should have a programme where you are going to the witness protection programme before you report the crime? That is what she was saying? But they so want to play politics with the instances of crime in the country, that the Opposition Leader came here and talked that foolishness. If the crime is not reported, then how in God's name could it become a part of the witness protection programme? Witness to what? An unreported crime? So, let me just go and tell you, Madam Speaker, just in case anybody in this country follows the Opposition Leader, and believe that there is no witness protection effort being made by this country. Let me tell you what it is. We are engaged in something called the Justice Protection Programme, and it is not even local "eh", it is international. And it is not a small programme, and it is not cheap.

Mr. Imbert: Very expensive.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Between 2020 and 2023, in our programme here in Trinidad and Tobago, we are engaged in managing 401 persons in that programme, of which 145 are actual witnesses, and 256 are members of the witnesses' families, because when you are protecting the witnesses from the criminal, in many instances you also have to protect their families because the criminals decide that they are not "gonna" go before the court, there will be no witness to carry out the case to be made against them, so the family is also at risk.

So we end up protecting more family members than actual witnesses; 401

people in the programme of which 256 are associates and family members. And, Madam Speaker, 16 per cent of that are non-citizens, are CARICOM citizens who we interact with in a similar way coming from their territory to us, because they had the same problem there too. But what is the cost, Madam Speaker? What is the cost? That programme is costing us—Madam Speaker, that programme is costing us—we allocated between 2019 and 2022, we allocated \$120 million. For that programme we spend \$111 million, 73 per cent of that on the actual persons—because you have to mind them “eh”, in secret—73 per cent of that on the actual persons, and the 27 per cent on the administration of the programme. And that programme is costing us about \$30 million a year; about \$30 million a year. Two point something million dollars a month, and in the face of that, the Opposition Leader would come here and give the impression that if we had a protection programme as though we have none.

Mr. Hinds: It existed when she was Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And this is somebody who served as Prime Minister, and chairman of the National Security Council, who knows about this “eh”.

Mr. Hinds: Ought to know.

Mr. Imbert: With an adviser.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Well I should—let me correct that, who ought to know.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.55 p.m.

When you come and tell us here and behave like that in a budget debate, when the whole country is paying attention, your colleagues on this side paying attention, that you would come and deal with it, that is what you come to mislead the population and to tell the world, and to signal to criminals that “de place wide

open, do wey yuh want”, because we have no witness protection programme. Two hundred million dollars-worth in the last how many years, three or four years, hundred million dollars, \$120million a year, as the case might be, because the programme is growing, Madam Speaker. In the earlier period, we had 303 people in the programme in the last triennium. In this triennium it is 401.

So, this kind of cost—as a matter fact, recently I have asked our people to tell us, look at it and tell us exactly how we are benefiting from this programme. Because what happens, at that cost, it is only about one murder per year being dealt with, you know. Because in this triennium, at that cost I had just mentioned, only three murder cases were concluded, you know, with people who are involved in the programme. Because other people do not seem to see the urgency of it to get things done and out of the way, drag it on, drag it on, drag it on. Because the defence, the best defence of the people, the defendants, is delay, delay, delay. But while they are delaying it, the cost is running. So, at one murderer per year, one murder case per year being concluded in this kind of programme, the taxpayer is taking a beating. And, of course, the Government has no say in speeding up any of this, because we have to stay far from it except to fund it. And I would ask my colleagues on the other side, when you go to talk, talk about it in the context of how you know the law operates and what the Government can and cannot do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, the Opposition Leader talked about the Chief Justice talking about anxiety about crime. I do not understand why the Opposition Leader is quoting the Chief Justice in trying to make her case against the Government. Because, Madam Speaker, the Government does not go about talking about the Judiciary, and so on, because we all have our difficulties to

manage. But the one thing I could tell you for sure is that the criminal element understands all of us. And they understand who is on their side making arguments for bail for murderers, blocking everything in the Parliament that would give the Government and its agencies a leg up or an upper hand. The criminals understand it very well.

And, of course, the root of our jurisprudence is innocent until proven guilty. That is the root of it. But the problem that we are having in this country is that there is great difficulty in proving this innocence. Because the process of proving the innocence, the process of proving the innocence is where all fall down. First, you have to find the accused.

Now, Madam Speaker, there was a time in this country where I distinctly recall as a child reading the newspapers and seeing strange faces in the newspapers with a sign saying “wanted”, “wanted for questioning”. Do you remember that? But we got very modernized. We got very civilized. Today, you cannot put anything in the papers—and I do not know why. If the police are looking for somebody who they want to talk to, apparently you are offending their sensibilities. So you cannot put anything asking. The police want to talk to John Brown because they have good reason to believe that John Brown has information that could help us with what we are dealing with.

I want to ask the Opposition today, would you agree, if it is required, to change any law in this country, to allow the police to ask the population to help them find John Brown or James Henry by a picture, because they want to talk to him, would you agree to amend the law to allow that to happen if the law needs amending? Or is it because we just decide that, “Oh, you can’t do the people that”. “You can’t put anybody’s picture in the papers or their name.” So, they could go

and hide after they commit the heinous murder, until they come out to commit the next one, and they are protected by the system, the system.

Madam Speaker, we take advice from other people who make changes to their laws. I could say now that the laws as exist in Trinidad and Tobago today in some of these things, those laws were designed for other people in another time with a different behavioural pattern.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And unless we are prepared to make the changes required to treat with what we have to treat with today, we will always be behind the eight ball. Madam Speaker, so I look forward to meeting with the Opposition to discuss matters of this nature to see what comes out of it. But I am not holding my breath.

Madam Speaker, we have made some significant gains since we had that crime symposium. We have got a tremendous amount of support from the United States Government. I see my name somewhere being criticized by at least one of my colleagues, a particular one who shall remain nameless, that I should never have raised the fact at the UN to say that we are dealing with an intractable crime problem in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, how come?

I went to the UN to report, to give a country report on Trinidad and Tobago. Who can report on the country of Trinidad and Tobago, as leader of the country of Trinidad and Tobago, and not touch on this intractable problem, which is probably the largest problem we have in Trinidad and Tobago today?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: But they must criticize. They must criticize. But, Madam Speaker, we, together with CARICOM, confronted this issue and made specific requests of the United States, which is the source of the equipment that people are

buying and bringing here.

Madam Speaker, look at today's papers. Look at the front page of today's *Guardian*. I just refreshed my memory there, Madam Speaker. And the point is tables full of heavy weapons, not handguns for personal protection, you know. We have gone past the ordinary assault weapons now. Those 50-caliber weapons, Madam Speaker, are a threat not to people or to gangs, you know. They are a threat to the State Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And you have to ask yourself: Whose sons and daughters and nephews and boyfriends, who are these people who are bringing these things into this country and for what purpose? And they ought to have no mollycoddling from the rest of the population of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: These are national security threats. I want to say to my colleagues on the other side, I know you want to win the next election, but you have had tremendous success decades ago. That would not bring you any success. You will do well to stand with the Government in opposition to those who will harm us with those weapons.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And you will do well to stop the nonsense talk about “knocking it” and “emptying clip” and “knocking matic”. Because what to do when you talk “dem kinda thing dey, is to gid dem de impression dat’ what they are doing is God’s service and it is fashionable. Madam Speaker, people in this country need to condemn those among us who could see it fit to make a life of crime—

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—make a life of crime and believe that the solution is to cast blame on the Prime Minister and the National Security Minister and the police and the police. Today I want to congratulate the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Because if we did not have a proper police service, these 35 weapons—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, no display please.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—these 35 weapons, that group alone, have the potential to bring about great harm to any and all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And it takes the police service first, to identify them, and then to apprehend them, and then to bring them to the court and to lead evidence against them. I know the police service has its shortcomings and its ragamuffins in there. But by and large, we do have, Madam Speaker, a police service that requires to be congratulated.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And it is very depressing, Madam Speaker, when other arms of the State do not seem to understand what we are dealing with.

So, when you go and you hear about young ladies going out to a function somewhere and somebody put something in their drink, it could be your daughter, your niece, your nephew; somebody put something in their drink and their physical and emotional state is changed. They can be kidnapped, they could be raped, they could be assaulted in some way, and then you find the factory and you find the manufacturer in the factory, and then they put him on \$100,000 bail. You could not be serious, Madam Speaker. We could not be fighting the same fight. We could not be fighting the same fight. And when you find somebody with a bag of

drugs, they go to the court, Madam Speaker, and they plead guilty, and you put them on a few dollars bail, the same bail, and give them time to pay. I know if I go in the Port of Spain market and “tief a leg ah pork or a hand of ripe fig, I could face de same bail too”. We are not serious, Madam Speaker. And those of us who are fighting this fight, we are damned annoyed about that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Policemen and women putting their lives on the line every day, every night to confront these armed criminals, and when you put a hand on them they too become victims of what? Victims of our nonsense? This fight has to be a fight of the entire nation, if we are going to win it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, the Opposition Leader and her friends had nothing good to say about our attempt to bring gas into this country, in a situation where our gas production and consumption has been collapsing from 4.2 bcf to 2.6 bcf. From the day I became Prime Minister, I knew that my numberone job, the numberone job that I had was to find a source to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago stays in the hydrocarbon business, and we started looking next door in Venezuela. Our friends on the other side, “who doh want nuttin good” for this country, attack, attack, attack; badmouth, badmouth, badmouth, badmouth; lie, lie, lie, lie; undermine, undermine, undermine, undermine.”

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: That has been—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: That has been their approach.

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, that particular phrase, if you could kindly—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Words.

Madam Speaker: Well, it was a series, so I do not know if to say a word, but the series of words.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I was simply repeating what we are living. I withdraw that, Madam Speaker. But the bottom line is, we cannot count on our fellow citizens on the other side in a situation where our economy's life and death is at risk. And that is troublesome.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: We run our foreign policy, rooting it in the UN charter. They deviate from that to go and support President Guaidó. Even as the United Nations Secretary General was standing with us saying that the President of Venezuela is Nicolás Maduro, they had another president. And then had the gall to come here now asking for information on Dragon deal. The only information I will give you on the Dragon deal is the one that is to be made public, because we have confidential conversations taking place and we advised the country at every step of the way on what is advisable. These are commercial transactions, and the former Prime Minister must know that these commercial transactions carry with them a certain element of confidentiality.

Because when, under her term, they did the CGCL deal down in La Brea, we in the Opposition never knew what they had done until we came into government. We did not even know that the AG then had a file written in red ink, the election day, written in red ink, that public servants refused to agree to what the Government wanted them to agree to. It is when we came into government we got to know that. The terms and conditions of the contract were not made public or even anywhere. I had to send the Minister to Japan in urgency to talk to the

Japanese Government to ask them to help us amend some of those terms of those contracts. And even though they were amended, some still remained in force and we are losing millions in the process. So, Madam Speaker, they must not come here and pretend that they have the country's interest at heart.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: It was shocking here in this Parliament when we discovered that a former Prime Minister, as we sought to negotiate, did not know the Government shareholding in Atlantic LNG Train 1, Train 2, Train 3, Train 4. And as we fought, using the existence and our presence in Train 1, to stay on the negotiating table, they had all kinds of undermining reproaches with that, would never support the Government and the people on anything, always coming as though they have something special, “some bag tuh buss”, when in fact, all they are concerned about is the next election. That is all they are concerned about.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.10 p.m.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: As a result of the negotiations that we have been involved in, in the last few years, I could tell you, Madam Speaker, we have successfully—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, your original 45 minutes are now spent. You have 10 more minutes to wind up your contribution.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: As a result of the continuous successful negotiations, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries could have reported of the billions of additional earnings that we have got, which we were not going to get had we not done those negotiations.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: We have restructured Atlantic LNG, a major development, which puts us in a position in a sustainable way to earn better and to have a continued future, even as we are producing at a much lower level, even as the market place is difficult and remains so, and you think our colleagues on the other side would take a—start to smile? No, that is something to undermine.

Madam Speaker, in the next few weeks, very, very—in the next few weeks, I look forward to travelling to London to sign off—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Yes, again.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Yeah, yeah. We travel to do our business to work.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I look forward—

Madam Speaker: Please.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I look forward to signing off or see the signing off of the restructuring of Atlantic LNG that will take place in London, sometime in November, and that would be culmination of an outstanding period of work—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—for which I want to congratulate the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—his advisors, the lawyers and the experts, our local and foreign legal teams, who have negotiated with those international companies, Madam Speaker, and out of it has come improved arrangements for the people of

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Trinidad and Tobago. I have no doubt, Madam Speaker, that not everybody in this country would be happy about that because as far as some are concerned, the country has to fail for them to succeed. Madam Speaker, the PNM will make sure that this country succeeds.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The Opposition Leader in the budget debate, having engaged none of the undisputed statistic, is asking about the refinery plan. The refinery plan, there is no refinery plan. That is pure—Madam Speaker, pure mischief. Pure mischief. Because, Madam Speaker, how many times do we have to say in this country that we faced insurmountable odds in 2018? And that the Government of—the duly elected Government of Trinidad and Tobago took a decision to come out of the refinery business—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister. Member for Naparima, the running commentary, I thought just now you self-disciplined and you have returned, so please.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, he is trying to please the Opposition Leader, but he does not have to.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, we have said, and I do know what else to say, we used to be engaged in refining oil when we had a production level in the country that could support the refinery. Our production, our ability to produce more is not there, and buying oil to refine it, as we were doing, was making huge losses, which the country could not afford. It threatened to bankrupt the country and to destroy the quality of life, not only of the Petrotrin workers but of all of our citizens. The Government took a decision that we would no longer be engaged in

refining. We restructured Petrotrin, we now have a holding company. They spend all their time talking about, “yuh close down Petrotrin, yuh close down Petrotrin”. Well, if we have closed it down, it would not be there as a holding company. There is a holding company, we created subsidiaries. Heritage as a subsidiary is successful in producing the oil, selling the oil, servicing the debt and paying into the Treasury billions that were not being paid before.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.15.p.m.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Paria is operating providing us with a constant supply of refining fuels, we never one day as they predicted were short of fuel in this country. And as far as the refinery is concerned, we said from day one, the Government is no longer interested in the businesses of refining, but if there is any person or entity who has a supply of oil and they want to use the refinery come talk to us. A number of persons have talked to us none of which produced anything that was useful, so the refinery remains there. What other policy exists, Madam Speaker? What other policy is there to exist? What is the Opposition leader coming and asking about refinery policy?

They will reopen Petrotrin. Well then, if that is what the country can look forward to that is simply an alternative political position. They will restart Caroni Limited, that is an alternative position. But I think there are enough schools in this country, and I said schools, not fools, schools. There are enough schools in this country, where the average person will know that is just “ol’” talk from an Opposition that will say anything and do anything to try to influence their way back into government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: But on this occasion, Madam Speaker, this budget has been a balanced effort because there is a finite amount of money available. And the one thing that you will observe, our colleagues on the other side could not point to a single area where revenue can be attained or increased. They want nothing to do with the revenue side of the budget. They are concerned only about the expenditure side, but the Government does not have that option. We have to look at the revenues, we have to look at the expenditure. And we also have to be cognizant that even after we borrowed, because we are running a deficit budget, even after we will borrow \$5 billion, we still have a situation of a finite number of dollars.

They have never pointed out once—in all of them who spoke, not one of them was able to say, “Well, okay, take \$10 from this Head and put it in the other Head.” No, no, just general, general statements, “Don’t do this, don’t do that, don’t do this, don’t do that, don’t do this, don’t do that.” On the revenue side, but on the expenditure side is magic. We are not magicians we are just good managers of the business that is Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So I want to ask the population to ignore the “ol” talk, ignore the attempt to “buss mark”, ignore the misinformation, stay away from the history of the past that they inviting you back to because it “ain’t” good, not good. And in our ninth year, Madam Speaker, I am proud to have led this team and this nation where we could say, Madam Speaker, that we are going through or have gone through a very difficult period, but we have made sensible decisions, doing what has to be done and we are in a better position today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And I will take the advice and the information from the

Governor of the Central Bank as a description of our circumstances and ignore the dire hell hole that they describe as Trinidad and Tobago, because Madam Speaker, what they say is not Trinidad and Tobago. That is their vision. That is their election campaign because they have been campaigning nonstop.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The only thing I have not heard in the contribution made by Siparia in the budget debate is “call the election.” That is the only thing I have not heard. But election is due, but we are going to work from then to election day and beyond because we are in fact concerned about the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: It is because we are concerned about the future why we are having a Dragon deal to talk about, and a Loran-Manatee deal, and a Calypso deal, and a visit to London, and a visit to Australia, because we are concerned about the future of the children of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So Madam Speaker, if we are going to be advised we will be advised by those persons who are prepared to let their bias remain in the background and the interest of Trinidad and Tobago in the foreground. I have not seen any of that on the other side. All I have seen are descriptions of a worse-case situation, much of it not true and a misrepresentation of our real circumstances.

Madam Speaker, we have come out of a difficult period, but we still have challenges ahead. We are making the best of our difficult situation and we are ensuring as far as we are able to that no one is left behind. So on that basis, Madam Speaker, I want to congratulate the Minister of Finance, the longest serving Minister of Finance in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: For having taken us to a situation where the Governor of the Central Bank could describe us in that way. “Ol” talk is cheap, commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago requires a belief in their future. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have an analysis of contributions made by Members opposite. It was painful. I really, Madam Speaker, cannot comment on anything said by any Member other than the Member for Siparia, because what the hon. Member’s colleagues did is simply regurgitate what the Opposition leader said. There was no original content whatsoever, none whatsoever. And Madam Speaker, I will try not to be uncharitable but this is the worst response to a budget presentation that I have heard in my 32 years in the Parliament—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—the worst, worst. And what was intriguing, what was intriguing was every one of them if they have to keep their position, they have to start their contribution by saying what an excellent response to the budget. I have never heard—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—Madam Speaker, come on, come on. Lord have mercy.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance, it appears that you are really creating a lot of excitement inside of here this morning. But Members, I remind you all of Standing Order 53. Again, Member for Chaguanas West, Member for Chaguanas

West, I know that you are on the far end, yes. I again remind us of the difficulties we find ourselves in that we had to speak about yesterday morning when there is excessive crosstalk. So let us please comply with Standing Order 53 and maybe Minister of Finance you can try and control the excitement you are creating.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Respectfully, I beg to differ. They are unruly and they have no behaviour. That is what is going on. Now, Madam Speaker, this budget has been universally accepted by the vast majority of the population, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Universally accepted. And that is why they had nothing to say. Madam Speaker, every year when budget statements are produced, a number of documents are laid in Parliament, one of them is the *Review of the Economy*. This is the first—Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: There is a rule against display, all right, please.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, Madam Speaker, this is a budget document, laid on the table in this Parliament. Not one of them, Madam Speaker, referred to one page in this *Review of the Economy*. That is the first time, Madam Speaker, in my 32 years in a budget debate where an Opposition, comprising 19 Members could not refer to one page in the *Review of the Economy*. Not a single page, and you know why? They could not handle it, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: They could not handle it. Because they know, I hear talk from the other side and from their echo Chamber outside that this is an election budget. Madam Speaker, we have no election this year as far as I know. We have no election this year in 2023 as far as I know, as far as I know.

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Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, the election is not due until 2025, how could this be an election budget. You know what it was? It was a damn good budget. That is what it was.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: “Cyah handle it. Cyah handle it.” And you know, Madam Speaker, there is so much dishonest commentary in this country. I asked the Minister—

Mr. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, 48(4) the Minister used a particular word or phrase that is probably very unparliamentary.

Hon. Member: In massa day though.

Mr. Young: He did not say UNC.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: So Minister of Finance, the particular word in a colloquial context, I would agree, is not parliamentary.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: Extremely clever—

Madam Speaker: So I really would not like when I am ruling for people to support me. I do not need any support. Thank you. Minister of Finance, just withdraw that word. I appreciate your passion but please keep your passion within parliamentary language.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Let me put it this way, it was an excellent budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And that is why they have nothing to say and that is why they

say it is an election budget. They cannot handle it. But there is so much dishonest commentary in this country. And it is necessary for us to continuously expose the dishonest commentary outside there. I asked the Minister of Labour just acting on a hunch, on a hunch, what were the successive increases in the minimum wage over the years? And I and all, Madam Speaker, was surprised on what I learnt.

The People's National Movement when we returned to office in 2001, we met a minimum wage of \$7 per hour, \$7 per hour. And this is what happened, Madam Speaker, in the ensuing years in 2003, Madam Speaker, the PNM increased the minimum wage by 14 per cent from \$7 to \$8, in 2005 the PNM increased the minimum wage by 12½ per cent to \$9 per hour. In January of 2010, the People's National Movement increased the minimum wage by 39 per cent to \$12.50 per hour, Madam Speaker. The only adjustment to the minimum wage made by those opposite, and you would not believe this when you listen to the commentary outside there—the only adjustment made by those opposite, Madam Speaker, was in January 2015 when they increased the wage from \$12.50 an hour to \$15. We immediately after that, shortly after that 2017, increased the minimum wage to \$17.50, and this year \$20.50.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So Madam Speaker, from \$7 when the PNM came back into office in 2001 per hour to \$20.50, Madam Speaker, an increase of \$13.50 in the minimum wage of which the PNM was responsible for \$11 out of those \$13, Madam Speaker, 85 per cent of the increase over the last 20 years, People's National Movement. But if you listen to the “ol” talk outside there nobody will know we increase the minimum wage from \$7, to \$8, to \$9, to \$10, to \$11, to \$12, \$15, \$17, \$20. Is we do that on this side, this People's National Movement. And

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“ah set ah ol’talk” about is only \$3. Is \$3 per hour, is not \$3 per month. And this is why I had to make it clear that for the lowest level, they will get an additional \$500 a month in their pocket tax-free. And for persons who work longer hours as much as an additional \$900 per month, Madam Speaker, tax fee, \$900 a month tax-free, \$900 per month tax-free. “Is we do that, is this PNM.”

Mr. Young: And introduced the legislation too.

Hon. C. Imbert: Ridiculous. And the Minimum Wages Act is a creature of the 1976 Republican Constitution promulgated by the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It is not “dem” is we. Is we make the Minimum Wage Act. I am just fed up of the “ol” talk outside there. They raised the minimum wage once, we raised it six times.

And the other issue, Madam Speaker, you know during that very weak response to the budget, where I had to listen to things that people said, the UNC went and consulted itself, itself went all over the country and consulted itself, because you hear what a UNC councillor “say and what a UNC activist say”. But what I heard after that regurgitation of everything that people said, no analysis, no determination as to whether it made sense or not, no guidance whatsoever from the UNC as to whether they agree or disagree, or they will implement, nothing. Just a recital, a recital of what they said to themselves.

1.30 p.m.

That is not a budget response; weak. And you know, Madam Speaker, when I made the point that the unemployment rate had dropped to 3.7 per cent, immediate reaction from those opposite, “Oh, way yuh get that number from, not true.” Usual, “dey cyah handle good news.”” And, you know as I was saying that,

if they had taken the time to go on the CSO website, they would have seen that very figure published on that very day, 3.7 per cent, one of the lowest unemployment rates in this country ever in its history.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Let me give you some facts, because again, there is so much dishonest commentary outside there. I asked the CSO, through one of my officers, to give me some details on how that unemployment rate dropped to 3.7 per cent, because typically Members opposite “doh” want the population to know that we are not talking about URP and CPEP here.

Let me tell you what it is. Madam Speaker, 21,400 persons entered the labour force, Madam Speaker; 21,400 persons in the period under review. A net effect of an additional 28,100 persons finding jobs while 6,000 left employment. So, 28,000 new jobs were created, and 6,000 people left the labour force. What were these people? Small business managers and managing supervisors, 6,296 persons; administrative professionals, 5,773 jobs; mining and construction, 4,914 jobs; protective services workers, 4,703 new jobs; sales, 4,493 jobs; painters, cleaners, related workers, 4,330 jobs; motor vehicle drivers, 3,764 new jobs; architects, engineers and related professions, 3,460 new jobs; managers, specialized managers, 3,114; housekeeping and restaurant service workers, 2,475; office clerks, 2,433; secretaries and keyboard operators, 1,948 new jobs; farmers, 1,923 new jobs in farming; printing and packaging, 1,522 new jobs; building caretakers, 1,403; manufacturing labourers, 1,197 new jobs; personal care workers, 1,131 new jobs; secondary education teachers, 1,125 persons; computer professionals, 1,000. That is what is going on in this country—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—28, 000 new jobs. Listen to “de” kind of jobs, not one of them is URP and CPEP, but they “doh” want “de” population to know that. They “doh” want the population to know that the labour force increased by 14,600 persons under this PNM—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—in just the last year under review. They “doh” want us to know that. Everything they say is just doom and gloom. You know the other day I saw somebody trying to figure out what a naysayer is. A naysayer is a “sour puss”, a prophet of doom and gloom.

Mr. Young: A sour puss”?.?

Hon. C. Imbert: “A sour puss.” That is a parliamentary word, I think. “Sour puss”.

Madam Speaker, you know “I coming” to a budget debate, as I said, I have been here for 32 years. You know what I expect Members opposite to talk about? I will give you a list: banking and capital markets, international finance, macroeconomic policy, microeconomic principles, public financial management, corporate finance, corporate governance. That is what I expect a budget debate to be all about.

Hon. Member: “Yuh expect anything”—

Hon. C. Imbert: They do not understand these concepts, and you know Madam Speaker, I do not know who wrote those foolish speeches for the Leader of the Opposition, I do not know who writes it. I do not know. But they do not have a clue, what they talking about; not a clue. I remember in the budget presentation, I made the point that our country’s financial buffers are strong. And I refer to three categories of buffers, Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, foreign reserves and foreign

cash in banks, and they jump up “ahhhh we don’t what he talking about” and you know—

1.35 p.m.

Madam Speaker, if they would only read Standard & Poor’s commentary on the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, Moody’s commentary, the IMF commentary, and if they would only take two minutes to study economic policy, they would understand that the strength of a country’s buffers is contained in all of its foreign exchange deposits, because if there were no deposits in the commercial banking sector, then they would have to look to the State to provide the cash. When commercial banks provide US dollars, they do it on the strength of the cash that they have deposited in the bank. They do not understand anything on that side, Madam Speaker, it is so disappointing having to listen to what they say, Madam Speaker, it was so disappointing.

Mr. Young: They only know how “to tief”.

Hon. C. Imbert: So disappointing. There is no intellectual content whatsoever, no analysis of anything. They just parrot nonsense. I heard the Member for Princes Town yesterday saying, our debt-to-GDP ratio is 77 per cent. Where did the hon. Member get that figure from? He pulled it out of a hat, somebody gave it to him? Totally wrong. Our debt-to-GDP ratio is 70 per cent. Why is it that Members opposite have to say these things?

Let me go now to what the IMF has to say. Let me go now to what Standard & Poor’s has to say; what Moody’s has to say; what CariCRIS has to say, Madam Speaker. Let me just read, Madam Speaker, from the most recent statement from Moody’s. And what I found so interesting, from the statements from Moody’s,

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they did not just look at our financial situation, they looked at our institutional situation, and this is what Moody's had to say:

“The positive outlook”—the one that they gave us—“reflects improved prospects that Trinidad and Tobago's...fiscal consolidation momentum triggered by energy price windfall gains will be more sustained than projected in...”—our —“baseline scenario, despite lower gas prices...”

You know what Moody's is saying? That notwithstanding the fact that there are lower commodity prices outside there, they expect our financial momentum, our economic momentum, the growth in our economy to continue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: This is just a few months ago. This is what Moody's is saying:

“A sustained return to economic expansion...would also enhance economic resiliency, as would continued diversification efforts in the non-energy sector.”

And you see, they run from that, you know, they do not like to hear it, Madam Speaker. They do not like to hear that in several sectors in the manufacturing industry, there has been growth of up to 20 per cent, Madam Speaker, they do not like to hear that.

I was going through this same review of the economy that “dey fraid” to look at. They do not want to look at it. You know, when you go back into the appendices, Madam Speaker, and I will go to the appendix that deals with gross domestic product and I look at our GDP in 2019 and it is here on page 197 of the *Review of the Economy*, the book they did not want to look at, and on that page, you see that our GDP in 2019, pre COVID was \$160 billion—\$160 billion. Our GDP in 2022 was \$202 billion, Madam Speaker. When I was in school, 202

billion was always more than 160 billion. Always! They do not want to hear that, because you will hear every one of them get up and say the economy is contracting, “we gone through, the country collapsing”. One of them said we are going back to the IMF, on the path to the IMF. How can you be on the path to the IMF, if between 2019 and 2022 your GDP has grown by 25 per cent, Madam Speaker? How? It is the nonsense I have to listen to in this Parliament. And when I go into history, Madam Speaker, and I take a look and I see what was the GDP before. So I decided to go all the way back to 2014. What was the country’s GDP in 2014, when oil was \$100, and gas was how much, about \$10 or something like that, and production was much better now. The GDP of the country in 2014 was \$171 billion—

Mr. Young: “Hmph.”

Hon. C. Imbert:—2014, \$171 billion. Today, it is over \$190 billion under this PNM Government, Madam Speaker. And when you look at the data, because they cannot handle the data either, as I said they cannot handle the truth, our economy actually grew in 2019. We came in 2015 and faced multiple shocks, multiple shocks. They enjoyed an average oil price of US\$100 per barrel throughout their whole 5 years, that was the average, US\$100. We come in and oil hits \$25, and of course the economy goes down but it began to climb back up. If you looked at what was happening, it dropped, then it went up, it almost came to zero and then in 2019 we had growth in the economy, real economic growth, and what happened after that? COVID.

And you know, what bothers me with all of these hon. Members over there? It is as if they were not here when COVID was around.

Mr. Manning: It never happened.

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Hon. C. Imbert: It never happened—

Mr. Manning: It is not real.

Hon. C. Imbert:—it never happened when you had supply chain problems, when the cost of shipping went from \$2,000 a container to \$20,000—

Mr. Manning: [*Inaudible*]—and they are suing us every day.

Hon. C. Imbert:—when you had to shut down the whole country. They were not here when all of that was happening. When the advanced economies declined by 11 per cent, Madam Speaker; when inflation in the advanced economies hit 10 per cent and 11 per cent, they were not around.

When I remember seeing these pictures of Italy, coffins lining up, country shutdown, people locking their homes; as if they were not in Trinidad and Tobago when this was happening. So, we had already turned the economy around by 2019 and it was on a growth path. COVID hit us but we are resilient. We are a resilient party. That is why our symbol is the Balisier.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Cut it down and it will grow again! Cut it down and it will grow again! So, COVID knocked us down and we come back again.

Dr. Rowley: Oh, yeah!

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Come back again.

Mr. Hinds: Resilient.

Hon. C. Imbert: And if you read what Standard & Poor's says, and what Moody's says, and what the IMF says, they have confirmed that our economy returned to real growth in 2022 and continues to grow in 2023. That is what is hurting them—

Mr. Hinds: Resilient.

Hon. C. Imbert: “Dais wah hurting dem.” And that is why we could have such a good budget. Because we as a government decided this was a time not to impose any hardship on the population. We have had some difficult years for the last eight years, it has not been easy, money has been tight, things have been difficult and we decided this time we will focus on the poor and vulnerable—

Mr. Hinds: Yeah.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—that is why we increased the minimum wage, that is why we decided to give a grant for school supplies and they cannot even read. As a matter of fact, I will commend the adult literacy course to all of them!

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Hinds: “Aie-yaie-yaie!”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: To all of them! We have a substantial element in the budget for adult literacy—

Mr. Hinds: Naparima should sit down in the front seat.

Hon. C. Imbert:—sign up one time. Because we did not say it was a book grant. We said it was a school supplies grant. And school supplies means stationery, book bag, uniform, shoes, “dais wah it mean”, books as well, yes.

So we gave the \$3 increase in the minimum wage, as I said, between \$500 and \$900 a month, additional disposable income in people at the lowest end of the income spectrum, 200,000 people we are talking about, going to get that level of help. And then we gave \$1,000 schools supplies grant. But there is so much more in this budget.

And what I found interesting about this budget, when we finished it, and we delivered it, there is so much in there, for so many different interest groups. When I was reading the commentary—because you have to ignore the biased ones, they are watching the economy growing and they say it is declining, eh. We have that in this country, eh. They are watching things going on. They know employment is improving. They know that the country is getting better. But, nah, country has gone through.

You have to kind of turn the page when you see that foolishness, and then you read and you will see the \$400 million allocation we have made for agriculture. You see farmers' groups coming forward and saying, "Yes, you are doing something good". You see the allocation for financial literacy, you see another group come through—they say, "Yes, now allyuh doing something". You see the tax allowance for donations to schools, they say yes, another set of groups coming through and say, "Yes, you know what you are doing".

And right through this budget, Madam Speaker, right through from beginning to end, there are so many things inside of here: money for training programmes, money for green markets, money for our youth in particular, there is a lot of focus on youth in this budget, Madam Speaker, and you will see group, after group coming through and identifying themselves with one or other of the budget measures and that is why I knew it was such a good budget, and I am sorry I cannot use the word I wanted to use.

But moving on from all of that, Madam Speaker, the political leader and Prime Minister read from what the Central Bank said, so I do not need to repeat that—I do not need to repeat that. But Madam Speaker, there are some other things that have to be said, they have to be said. When we look at what this

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Government has been able to do, and you see it hurts them, you know, all those hospitals that we have built, it is hurting them, “it hurting dem”.

You know, I made the point that there is nothing of substance in Trinidad and Tobago that is not a product of the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—there is nothing. Look, today I made the point the Minimum Wages Act is a creature a creation of the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses, free tertiary education, a creation of the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The Chronic Disease Assistance Programme, CDAP, millions of dollars now being given to people in free medication, a creature of the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The St. Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies, People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The University of Trinidad and Tobago, People’s National Movement

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: There is nothing, no programme, no institution, nothing of substance in this country that has not been initiated, developed and nurtured by the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: When I look at their period in government, what have they got to show for it?

Mr. Young: “Dey tief.”

Hon. C. Imbert:—what? A half-finished highway, a billion dollars just went up in smoke—

Mr. Young: Beetham Wastewater.

Hon. C. Imbert:—a billion dollars lost on some corrupt Beetham Wastewater Plant, that is what their legacy is, Madam Speaker. What do they have to show for the five years that they were in government? They have nothing to show, nothing. And you know, what is bothering them, you know, what is bothering them, Madam Speaker? As I said, there is no election in 2023, unless the Prime Minister has something in his back pocket that I do not know about—might have a next budget to come, you know.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: That might kill them. Because if this is causing so much pain, and diarrhea, if this is causing so much pain, and gastro intestinal distress—

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

Hon. C. Imbert:—what is going to happen in the next budget? What? You know, so, Madam Speaker, you know, if you look at every metric, you know, I was so disappointed, there is nothing to answer. They do not even understand what a current account surplus is, we have been posting current account surpluses now, since we emerged from COVID. You know what a current account surplus is, Madam Speaker? It means that your exports exceed your imports. We are one of the few countries in the region, one of the few countries in the whole hemisphere that run a current account surplus, our exports exceed our imports—they do not

even understand what that means. Is too much for them, it is too—way above their heads. We are the only country in the Caribbean with an investment grade rating, they do not understand what that means.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It is too high for them. The only one with an investment grade rating. They do not understand. It is too much for them.

1.50 p.m.

Madam Speaker, you know, to tell you the level of intellectual bankruptcy on that side, they do not even understand the concept of a sovereign spread, in terms of financing. I tell you, there is nothing, no content whatsoever from that side. We went to the capital market, Madam Speaker, just a little while ago and we achieved a spread of 170 basis points. Well, they do not even know what a basis point is. They do not know what a basis point is, but I will educate them. I will educate them. There are 100 basis points in a percentage, so that our spread is 170 basis points. It means that when we go to borrow, we pay 1.7 per cent or 170 basis points above the safest investment in the world—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—which is US Treasury notes. And US Treasury notes fluctuate. US Treasury notes were below 1 per cent in 2019/2020, Madam Speaker; below 1 per cent. They have begun to systematically increase, 1 per cent, 2 per cent, 3 per cent, 4 per cent, 5 per cent, all because the Federal Reserve in the United States has to contain inflation by increasing interest rates. So interest rates are increasing throughout the world because the Federal Reserve is the benchmark for the world.

So we go to borrow, we always will be above the rate of US Treasury notes; always. There is no country in the world that can borrow below the rate of US

Treasury notes. So when the rate is 2 per cent or 3 per cent or 4 per cent, you get a spread on top of that. So we went to market, Madam Speaker, got a spread of 1.7 per cent, borrowed at 5.95 per cent, US \$550 million, to refinance a loan they had taken out sometime ago. And another Caribbean country, Dominican Republic, went to the market the next week. We borrowed at 5.9 per cent, they had to borrow at 11 per cent, but they would not understand that. It is too high for them. You see, they come and they say, “Oh, you doh know what you are doing, yuh cyah borrow at a proper rate”, they do not understand anything on that side, Madam Speaker.

The average spread among countries of the LATAM region is 3 per cent. All of the other countries of the LATAM region have to borrow at 3 per cent above Treasury rates. We are borrowing at 1.7 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: You know why? Because one of the things I had to do, Madam Speaker, in order to raise that US \$550 million, which was oversubscribed, by the way, three times, with high-quality investors, I had to do a roadshow. We had to present Trinidad and Tobago. We had to present the whole Trinidad and Tobago economy. You have to present the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. You have to present our achievements over the last several years. You have to present the performance of the economy in 2022. You have to give them projections for 2023 and 2024, and you have to produce a rating from Standard & Poor's, and Moody's. You do all that, and having done all of that, and we presented to almost 100 investors, you then get a sovereign spread that is half the rest of Latin America. It shows that the rest of the world has confidence in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And, you see, the Prime Minister made a point, when the external rating agencies say that things are not going good, it is correct. When the external agencies say, Trinidad and Tobago is doing well and the Government is doing a good job, they say, the IMF is a PNM party group and Moody's sell-out, and we paid S&P to write that. That is their behaviour, Madam Speaker. That is their behavior, but this budget has something for everyone in it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And there is a deep vision in this budget, which is too deep for them. They do not understand. We have been in an economic situation where you have had to contract spending. We came in, they had taken government expenditure from \$45billion to \$60billion without any commensurate increase in revenue. It is the most reckless economic approach to government I have ever seen anywhere else. And, Madam Speaker, if they get back inside, you know what they will do? They will take our debt-to-GDP ratio to 150 per cent. That is what they will do. They will spend like they are going mad. They will borrow like they are going mad. They will destroy all our ratings because they do not care; they do not care because with them it is all about awarding contracts.

You heard the Minister of Housing and Urban Development make the point that the auditors cannot find houses for which money was spent to the tune of \$700 million. I find that is amazing. So under the UNC, \$700 million was spent on houses but you "cyah" find the houses.

Mr. Armour SC: Ghost houses.

Hon. C. Imbert: I have never heard of ghost houses, you know; never heard of ghost houses.

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Dr. Rowley: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Sorry, the Prime Minister has corrected me, the money was not spent, it was paid. It was not necessarily spent. And, you see, if they come back into power that is what “go” happen.

Dr. Rowley: Again.

Hon. C. Imbert: That is what “go” happen. They will just borrow like they mad. They will destroy every rating that we have and they will pay people money. That is what they will do, they will pay people money. And we are now talking about your ordinary Joe, you know. We are not talking about the citizen, you know, we are talking about the people, like the guy who was happy to receive \$900million for some rusting junk on the Beetham and then he runs away to Panama. That is their legacy.

Mr. Hinds: Yes. Yes.

Hon. C. Imbert: That is their legacy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: That is their legacy. They take out a clause in the contract for the Point Fortin Highway. They rescued a contractor that was bankrupt; a clause in the contract that says if the contractor is bankrupt, you can terminate immediately. A week before election, they take that out—

Mr. Young: Not a week, the Friday before the election.

Hon. C. Imbert: On the Friday—I am sorry—a couple of days before. That is their legacy, Madam Speaker. But this—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I am not afraid, Madam Speaker, no matter what they say, no matter how they scream.

I am confident that—we have heard all of this before. I have been in this Parliament, you have been in this Parliament too, Madam Speaker, and all of this talk, this set “ah ole” talk from their side, shouting and screaming, I have heard this before, I heard it in 2019, I heard it in 2020 that “We coming back into power soon”, and what happened in 2020, Madam Speaker? They lost the election. They get a “cut tail” again. They never expected that. And as the Prime Minister said, Opposition is not a nice place to be. It is not a nice place to be, especially when—

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, there is a running commentary from Oropouche East. It is really ridiculous.

Mr. Young: Ask him where is the \$700 million in houses.

Madam Speaker: Oropouche East and Barataria/San Juan, I would ask you all to please oblige and comply with Standing Order 53. All right? I am sure you will have an opportunity to comment some time. Yes. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, as soon as you told them that, they started to mumble again, but I know why, you know—

Dr. Moonilal: *[Inaudible]*

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, I do not need to prove anything.

Madam Speaker: No. So let us go on, come on, Minister of Finance, please.

Dr. Moonilal: I think I will help him.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, Madam Speaker, perhaps he could go and find out where that \$700 million went.

Mr. Young: Correct.

Hon. Members: *[Laughter]*

Dr. Moonilal: “Ah goin fuh it now”.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, do that. Madam Speaker, I will tell you why they have no answer to this budget. I will tell you why they could not go through the *Review of the Economy*, they could not do any economic analysis, they could not do any—they could not make any suggestions on the revenue side. I will tell you why. You know why? Because there is so much inside of there. Look at this on page 110 of the budget:

“Throughout our network of communities, sporting disciplines, including cricket, football, netball...and where available, aquatics generally take place at varying levels of involvement. We propose to boost these activities further and inculcate them into our communities’ fabric.

I have therefore allocated a total of \$39 million in 2024...for the fostering and promotion of community sports.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: “That hurting them. That hurting them”, Madam Speaker.

Then, we go to the fact that we are allocating:

“...\$19.5million...to administer...”—a—“...community arts and crafts initiative in community centres throughout Trinidad.”

—in 2024. That hurting them as well, Madam Speaker.

The fact that we are returning to the market box programme, which serves a dual purpose, it gives needy families fresh produce and fresh meat, plus backward linkages to the agricultural sector, boosting agricultural production, “dey cyah” handle that, Madam Speaker. The farmers are looking forward to that, Madam Speaker. They cannot handle it. They cannot handle the fact that we have touched so many areas in this budget, as we go through what we are doing in digitization, as what we are going to do in housing.

They “cyah” handle the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries neither, Madam Speaker, they cannot handle him, because they know that because of all the work being done by Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, and the Prime Minister, we have grasped the nettle. We have dealt with the problem squarely. We came into government and we found that they had done nothing to ensure energy security; absolutely nothing. They could say what they want, they had done nothing. And over the last eight years, Madam Speaker, these two honourable gentlemen, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, have gone throughout the capitals of the world, have gone to our neighbour across the Gulf of Paria, have gone to Washington and have secured energy future for our children and our grandchildren, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And the dividends will reach us very soon.

Madam Speaker, let me just deal with some of the points made by the Leader of the Opposition. Apart from all the bogus statistics, which I cannot be bothered to repeat because they know that the economy is growing, the Leader of the Opposition went back again to the closure of Petrotrin, went back to the mythology, got a video done by some fisherman, or somebody associated with fishermen—I “doh” know why the gentlemen “don’t” just stay with fish. People should stay in their section and not tread into areas about which—

Dr. Rowley: [*Inaudible*]—fishing, cloth.

Hon. C. Imbert: I am now being told he is a cloth man not a fish man. But people should stay in their section—doing some silly video about Petrotrin.

Let me tell you what the facts are about Petrotrin. Petrotrin was operating at a loss for years. The company was a drain on the Treasury, overburdened with

debt. The net debt at financial year-end 2015 amounted to \$11.4billion. That was Petrotrin's debt at the end of 2015, \$11.4billion. Not 2010, eh, 2015. Taxes and royalties owed to the Government—and this is the part that they run away from, eh—taxes and royalties owed to the Government by Petrotrin amounted to \$3.1billion as at February 28, 2017. The company was not complying with the taxes laws. And even when Petrotrin collected taxes from companies that paid their taxes to Petrotrin for onward transmission to the Ministry of Finance, Petrotrin was keeping the money and utilizing the money for its own operations.

Left as it was—Madam Speaker, the financial analysis we did in the Ministry of Finance that if we had left Petrotrin alone, it would have required a cash injection of \$25 billion just to stay afloat; \$25 billion. And you see that when the accounts came in at the closure of the refinery operations, Petrotrin had to report a loss of \$18 billion; \$18 billion, Madam Speaker. So you have a company not paying its taxes, owes the Government \$3.1billion.

I remember as Minister of Finance in that difficult period, 2016/2017, when oil was at \$25, calling on Petrotrin to pay its taxes and they said, they cannot pay, they cannot pay, and Petrotrin also owes US \$400million in short-term debt, another \$3 billion—

Mr. Young: For buying crude.

Hon. C. Imbert:—guaranteed by the Government. And they borrowed that money, that \$3billion to buy oil and then refined the oil at a loss of sometimes as much at US \$8 per barrel. That was Petrotrin. It was insolvent. It was bankrupt. It was a drain on the Treasury.

The refinery was losing \$2billion a year and yet people still pretend that this was one of the crown jewels. A complete pretense. If any serious person goes and

looks at Petrotrin's financial statements, you will see the tremendous losses incurred by the organization. And now we have Heritage Petroleum making billion-dollars profit and they do not understand that either. They do not understand. "Oh", they say, "that is the old oil production arm of Petrotrin". Nonsense. Petrotrin was overstaffed. Petrotrin had 5,000 workers when it needed maybe about 1,500 at most. Heritage is now running with what? Less than 1,000, about 800, and that is why Heritage can now report profits of billions of dollars. It can pay taxes and royalties. It can pay taxes to the Treasury of billions of dollars, Madam Speaker.

2.05 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance, your original 45 minutes are now spent. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to wind up your presentation if you so need.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, I just cannot understand. You know what the facts are. You know that Petrotrin was hiding its accumulated losses in the refinery. You know that they had debt of \$12 billion and you know that the refinery was bleeding \$2 billion a year. You know that Petrotrin was not paying the taxes in the billions, and yet you still put up this nancy story about Petrotrin was a cash cow and it was the crown jewel. Why? The facts are there, in black and white for anybody to see. And as I said, getting some fisherman to make a fool of himself with some video.

Madam Speaker, there is another thing, I would like to deal with and you

know the leader of our party, the Prime Minister, made the point that they always get personal. They want to attack people that they think are close to the government.

There is a section in the budget address response from the Leader of the Opposition, about how we are favouring large pharmaceuticals importers with foreign exchange. “Ah sorry ah cah” use unparliamentary words. But I asked the Eximbank to give me the facts, and this is the information I have received from the EximBank. In terms of the way that the EximBank has distributed foreign exchange to the business community, of the total amount of forex that they have given out since we have started the facility, somewhere in the vicinity of US \$1.5 billion, they gave it to 158 manufacturing companies and 97 importers.

But of all of that, Madam Speaker, what I find interesting is that when you look at the foreign exchange given by the EximBank to small and medium enterprises, it comprises 84 percent of the companies who received forex from the EximBank. So 84 percent of that total that I just read out there for you, the 197 or so—let me get the correct figure. Madam Speaker, 158 companies that received foreign exchange from the EximBank, 84 percent of that 150 number, are small and medium enterprises. Only 16 percent are large, and when you look at the quantum, 58 percent of that 1.5 billion was given to small and medium enterprises.

But if you listen to them, you would think everything is going to financiers of the PNM. And, then, if you go to pharmaceuticals in particular—because they get very personal, they get very nasty. There are seven pharmaceutical companies that accessed foreign exchange from the EximBank. Seven, not one. Of these seven pharmaceutical companies, two are large, two are medium and three are small, Madam Speaker. And in the pharmaceutical area where money is given,

foreign exchange is given to importers; 32 percent of that is given to small and medium enterprises. Those are the facts, those are the facts. So you have over 250 companies getting foreign exchange from the EximBank and I want to congratulate the CEO of EximBank—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: —Mr. Dookeran and the staff, and the Board of the EximBank. That EximBank window has been a tremendous success—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: —and when you look, Madam Speaker, at the results, when you look at the results, what we are seeing is that the companies that are getting foreign exchange from the EximBank are now repatriating more foreign exchange, more than what they been given by the EximBank.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And that is the reason why our exports are growing by 15 percent, and 20 percent and 30 percent. These are all facts. That is why at the beginning of this presentation, Madam Speaker, I could read out all of these new jobs. Jobs in small business, mining and construction, motor vehicle retail, manufacturing and so on. This is why I could read out 28,000 new jobs in the last period under review by the Central Statistical Office. That is just for the first six months of 2023 by the way, eh. That, 28,000 created under this new government is just for a six-month period in 2023.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.10 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: They do not want to hear that, they do not want to hear that. When you listen to them—you know, Madam Speaker, I think I better read it out

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again, you know. How much more time do I have?

Ms. Ameen: Too much.

Madam Speaker: You end at 2.15.17.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very— I think I better read it out again, you know.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It is very important that the public knows the truth. This PNM Government has created 28,000 new jobs—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—in the last six months, 28,000 new jobs.

Mr. Hinds: Tell them.

Hon. Member: “Who you fooling?”

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, 6,000 in small business; 5,000 administrative professionals; 4,900 mining and construction workers; 4,700 protective services workers; 4,000 sales and service—4,493 sales and service workers; 4,330 painters and cleaners—

Mr. Hinds: Tell them.

Hon. C. Imbert:—3, 700 motor vehicle drivers. Now why will 3,700 motor vehicle drivers get work, unless the economy was growing, Madam Speaker?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: “What, dey just driving around?” Clearly, these are good vehicles, these are people transporting goods across the country from our booming manufacturing sector. Housekeeping and restaurant service workers, 2,475; clerks 2,433; secretaries and keyboard operators, 1,948. Farmers, I am very pleased to see this number, 1,923 new farmers in the first six months of 2023.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: You know—yuh know what it is yuh say? “Yuh doh miss de water until the well rundry.” You know, Madam Speaker, I have confidence in the population of this country. They had given us a mandate in 2015 and despite surviving the catastrophe of COVID or despite the population suffering under the catastrophe that was COVID they gave us another mandate in 2020. And as I said, I have heard this all before. I heard all this ole talk in 2019 and 2020 about how the end of the PNM is near and “all yuh” going out of government just now and we coming back. I heard that in 2019 and 2020 but the population did not buy it, they did not buy the ole talk from the other side.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—and I am hearing it again. But I know, Madam Speaker, that this country is emerging from the difficult place it was in. I know that this Government has a vision. I know that every Minister is working for the service of the population of Trinidad and Tobago and as a result when you get the next budget, if there is another one, that will be an election budget that will blow your minds. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance, I believe we are ending.

Hon. C. Imbert: I beg to move.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

(Hon. C. Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 81(8), I beg to move:

That the Appropriation (Financial Year 2024) Bill, 2023, be referred to the Standing Finance Committee for the consideration of the Bill together with

the Estimates.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, the House shall now go into Standing Finance Committee to consider the Bill and the Estimates.

House resolved itself into Standing Finance Committee.

2.15 p.m.

House resolved itself into Standing Finance Committee.

Madam Chairman: Hon. Members, in accordance with Standing Order 81(2) and (8) the Estimates containing the details of the financial requirements along with the Appropriation Bill have been referred to this Committee for consideration. The documents before the Committee therefore include, the *Draft Estimates Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the Financial Year 2024*, which identifies:

1. The Heads of Expenditure;
2. The chart of accounts for expenditure;
3. The classification of expenditure Sub-Items under the Personnel Expenditure, Goods and Services and Minor Equipment Purchases Sub-Heads;
4. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure;
5. The Sub-Item details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the Financial Year 2024* which identifies:

1. The statutory board or body for each Head of Expenditure;
2. The abstract of estimated revenue and expenditure for the year ending 30th of September, 2024;

3. The abstract showing the Government's subvention for 2022 Actual Expenditure, 2023 Estimates, 2023 Revised Estimates, 2024 Estimates and the increase or decrease of the 2024 Estimates over or under the 2023 Revised Estimates;
4. The chart of accounts for income and expenditure;
5. The classification of expenditure Sub-Items under the Personnel Expenditure, Goods and Services and Minor Equipment Purchases, Sub-Heads;
6. The Sub-Item details relevant to each statutory board or body for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The *Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the Financial Year 2024*, which includes:

1. The summary of estimates of the Development Programme for the financial year 2024 for Part A, the Consolidated Fund;
2. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure for Sub-Head 09, Development Programme Consolidated Fund;
3. The Item, Sub-Item, Project Group and Project Description details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding;
4. The summary of estimates of Part B, the Infrastructure Development Fund for the financial year 2024;
5. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure for Head 701, Infrastructure Development Fund;
6. The Item, Sub-Item, Project Group and Project Description details relevant to each Head of Expenditure, for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The Appropriation (Financial Year 2024) Bill, 2023: The Bill provides for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2024. The Bill seeks to authorize the sum of \$50,745,215,991 from the Consolidated Fund. The Schedule details the sum to be approved for each Head of Expenditure.

In accordance with Standing Order 85(1), the consideration of the clauses of the Bill will be postponed until after the consideration of the Schedule, which lists the Heads of Expenditure to be approved. The Heads will be considered in the order submitted by the Leader of the Opposition.

Proposed work schedule: Hon. Members, there are 41 Heads of Expenditure to be considered over a five-day period. Therefore, I propose that the Committee meets each day from 10.00 a.m. to consider a minimum of eight Heads of Expenditure per day.

Consideration of Tobago House of Assembly: Hon. Members, I crave your indulgence to have the Committee agree on the time for the examination of the Tobago House of Assembly and the Central Administrative Services Tobago on day four, on Wednesday, October 18, 2023, in order to allow these representatives to make arrangements to travel to Trinidad. May I suggest that given the order submitted by the Leader of the Opposition, the Tobago House of Assembly and Central Administrative Services Tobago, be examined in consecutive order commencing at 10.00 a.m. on Wednesday, October 18, 2023

Speaking time: Hon. Members, in accordance with Standing Order 45(1) the speaking time in the Standing Finance Committee shall not exceed five minutes on each intervention. Each Minister will be invited to make a brief five-minute opening statement on the Ministry or department's priority areas for the upcoming year.

Procedure for each Head: Hon. Members, the procedure for each Head of Expenditure shall be as follows:

1. The Head and the amount to be appropriated will be announced by me as Chair.
2. The Minister will be then be invited to make a brief opening statement.
3. The Chairman will then propose the question that the sum proposed stand part of the Schedule.
4. For each Head of Expenditure, the Chairman will call the Sub-Head followed by the Item. The Chairman will not call the Sub-Item. Discussions can ensue on the Item called or the relevant Sub-Item and clarification sought. Once the Committee moves to another Sub-Head, questions from a previous Sub-Head will not be entertained.
5. The Chairman will repeat the procedure for the Development Programme.
6. Once this is concluded, the Chairman will then put the question that the sum stand part of the Schedule.
7. The procedure will be repeated for each Head of Expenditure.

Any other business: Is there anything that any Member may wish to raise? And that being the case, Hon Members, the meeting of the Standing Finance Committee is suspended and will resume on Friday, October 13, 2023 at 10.00 a.m.

2.23 p.m.: *Committee suspended.*