

SENATE*Friday, October 20, 2023*

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. The Hon. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal, who is out of the country, and Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein, who is ill.

SENATORS' APPOINTMENT

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

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. NDALE YOUNG

WHEREAS Senator the Hon. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal is incapable of performing her duties as a Senator by reason of her absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in

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accordance with the advice of the Acting Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you, .
 NDALE YOUNG to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from the
 20th October, 2023 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of
 the said Senator the Hon. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the
 President of the Republic of Trinidad and
 Tobago at the Office of the President, St.
 Ann's, this 20th day of October, 2023.”

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. MICHAEL SEALES

WHEREAS Senator the Hon. Kazim Imtiaz Hosein is incapable of
 performing his duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as
 aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section
 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in
 accordance with the advice of the Acting Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you,
 MICHAEL SEALES to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from
 20th October, 2023 and continuing during the absence of Senator the Hon. Kazim
 Imtiaz Hosein by reason of illness.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 20th day of October, 2023."

AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE

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

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Michael Seales took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023

Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2024, brought from the House of Representatives. [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

PAPERS LAID

1. Motor Vehicle and Road Traffic (Extension of Period for Payment of Fifty Percent of Fixed Penalty) (No. 2) Order, 2023. [*The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan)*]
2. Annual Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Creative Industries Company Limited and its subsidiaries for the financial year ended September 30, 2017. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon)*]Annual Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Creative

- Industries Company Limited and its subsidiaries for the financial year ended September 30, 2018. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
3. Annual Administrative Report of InvesTT Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
 4. Annual Report of the National Information and Communication Technology Company Limited for the period 2019/2020. [*The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus)*]
 5. Annual Report of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the period 2020/2021. [*Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus*]
 6. Annual Report of the Ministry of Public Administration for the financial year October 01, 2017 to September 30, 2018. [*The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West)*]
 7. Annual Report of the Ministry of Public Administration for the financial year October 01, 2018 to September 30, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. A. West*]
 8. Response of the Personnel Department to the Fourteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an examination of the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Twenty-Fourth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee from the Eleventh Parliament on the Processing of the Payment of Pensions and Gratuities of Retired Public Officers and Contracted Employees. [*Sen. The Hon. A. West*]
 9. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for the financial year 2021. [*The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox)*]

10.10 a.m.

11. Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation (Vesting) (Amendment to the First Schedule) (No. 2) Order, 2023. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
12. Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation (Vesting) (Amendment to the First Schedule) (No. 3) Order, 2023. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
13. Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation (Vesting) (Amendment to the First Schedule) (No. 4) Order, 2023. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
14. Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property (Exemption) (Financing Services) Order, 2023. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
15. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Fair Trading Commission for the financial year ended September 30, 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
16. Second Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Non-Receipt of Financial Statements of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended December 31, 2008. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
17. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Non-receipt of Financial Statements of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended December 31, 2009. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
18. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Non-receipt of Financial Statements of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended December 31, 2010. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]

19. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Non-receipt of Financial Statements of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended December 31, 2011. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
20. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Point Fortin Borough Corporation for the financial year ended September 30, 2000. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
21. Third Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Point Fortin Borough Corporation for the financial year ended September 30, 2001. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
22. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Arima Borough Corporation for the financial year ended September 30, 2008. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
23. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Point Fortin Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2008. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
24. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Point Fortin Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2009. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
25. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Point Fortin Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2010. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
26. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Point Fortin Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2011. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]

27. Third Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Sangre Grande Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2007. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
28. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Sangre Grande Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2008. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
29. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Sangre Grande Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2009. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
30. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Sangre Grande Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2010. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
31. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Sangre Grande Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2011. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
32. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Sangre Grande Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2012. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
33. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Sangre Grande Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2013. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
34. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Sangre Grande Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2014. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]

35. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Sangre Grande Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2015. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
36. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Mayaro Civic Centre for the financial year ended September 30, 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
37. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the National Library and Information System Authority for the financial year ended September 30, 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
38. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the National Library and Information System Authority for the financial year ended September 30, 2017. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
39. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Southern Academy for the Performing Arts for the period June 30, 2022 to September 30, 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
40. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the National Academy for the Performing Arts for the period June 30, 2022 to September 30, 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
41. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board for the financial year ended September 30, 2009. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
42. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board for the financial year ended September 30, 2010. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]

43. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Public Transport Service Corporation for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
44. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Institute of Marine Affairs for the financial year ended September 30, 2010. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
45. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Police Complaints Authority for the financial year ended September 30, 2022. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
46. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2007. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
47. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Chaguaramas Development Authority for the financial year ended September 30, 2015. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
48. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Chaguaramas Development Authority for the financial year ended September 30, 2016. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
49. Annual Report of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago and the Audited Financial Statements of Accounts for the financial year ended September 30, 2022. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
50. Annual Administrative Report of Caroni (1975) Limited for the year 2019. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
51. Annual Administrative Report of Caroni (1975) Limited for the year 2020. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]

52. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Finance for the fiscal year 2020/2021. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
53. Annual Report of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the year 2021. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
54. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for the financial year 2021. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
55. Annual Report and Financial Statements of the Regulated Industries Commission for the year ended December 31, 2017. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
56. Annual Report and Financial Statements of the Regulated Industries Commission for the year ended December 31, 2018. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
57. Annual Administrative Report of the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme Limited for the fiscal year 2016/2017. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
58. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development for the fiscal year 2017/2018. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
59. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development for the fiscal year 2018/2019. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
60. Annual Audited Financial Statements of the Water and Sewage Authority for the financial year ended September 30, 2020. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
61. Annual Audited Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation for the fiscal periods ending September 30, 2016 and September 30, 2017. [*Sen. The. Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]

62. Ministerial Response of the Office of the Prime Minister to the Fourteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an examination of the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Twenty-Fourth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee from the Eleventh Parliament on the Processing of the Payment of Pensions and Gratuities of Retired Public Officers and Contracted Employees. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
63. Draft Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
64. Draft Estimates-Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the financial year 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
65. Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the financial year 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
66. Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the financial year 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
67. Draft Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
68. Social Sector Investment Programme 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
69. Public Sector Investment Programme 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
70. Public Sector Investment Programme-Tobago 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
71. State Enterprises Investment Programme 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]
72. Review of the Economy 2023. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne*]

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS**(Presentation)**

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell): Mr. President, I have the honour to present the following reports as listed on the Order Paper in my name:

**Public Administration and Appropriations
Management and Operations of the
Housing Development Corporation**

Thirteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an examination of the Management and Operations of the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) including the restructuring of HDC into three distinct State Enterprises.

**Examination of the Implementation of the Recommendations Contained
in the Twenty-Fourth Report**

Fourteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an examination of the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Twenty-Fourth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee from the Eleventh Parliament on the Processing of the Payment of Pensions and Gratuities of Retired Public Officers and Contracted Employees.

Finance and Legal Affairs

**Follow-up Inquiry into the Implementation of the new Public Procurement
System**

Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye: Mr. President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper in my name:

Sixth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on a follow-up inquiry into the implementation of the new Public Procurement System, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament.

Social Services and Public Administration

Examination of the State of Technical and Vocational Programmes

Sen. Dr. Paul Richards: Mr. President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper in my name:

Sixth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an examination of the state of technical and vocational programmes and their contribution to achieving the developmental goals of Trinidad and Tobago, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament.

Mr. President: Leader of Government Business.

Suspension of Standing Order 78(2)

The Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Mr. President, I seek your leave in accordance with Standing Order 112(1), to move a Motion for the suspension of Standing Order 78(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.

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, leave is granted. Leader of Government Business.

Sen. The Hon. A. Browne: Mr. President, I beg to move that this Senate suspend Standing Order 78(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.

Mr. President: 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

Mr. President: Minister of Finance.

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

That a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th of September, 2024, be now read a second time.

Mr. President, it is difficult within the time allowed in this House to compress a four-hour budget statement into 45 minutes, but I will try. It means of course, that not everything that I said in the budget statement I can say it within the next 45 minutes.

The Bill before the House seeks to appropriate the sum of \$50,745,215,991 for the service of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September 2024. The Bill comprises three clauses and a Schedule. The Schedule gives various Heads of Expenditure and the sums to be appropriated to these Heads beginning with the first Head, 01: President, and ending with the last Head 82: Ministry of Digital Transformation. The appropriation does not include and this must be noted, direct charges which do not need to be appropriated and therefore the 2024 budget is in fact \$59.209 billion with revenue of \$54.012 billion resulting in an estimated deficit for 2024 of \$5.196 billion.

The difference between the total fiscal expenditure and the appropriation we

are discussing now represents charges which are a first call on the Consolidated Fund such as salaries paid to Judges, state council, Industrial Court, the defence force, and so on.

If I start by looking at the global economy, world growth is forecast to slow down in 2023 as the global economy navigates a slew of economic challenges. And we now have the added or should I say, I am not what to call it, event, is probably the most polite word of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. So that adds to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and also adds to the attempts of the world to recover totally from COVID.

So global growth is estimated to decelerate in 2024 and 2023 down to approximately 3 per cent. Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean is likewise forecast to decelerate, moving to 1.9 per cent in calendar 2023 from 3 per cent in 2022. And this is primarily due to the waning or weakening of the rapid post-pandemic recovery that we saw in 2022.

10.25 a.m.

By contrast, growth in Asia is expected to improve to 5.3 per cent from 4.5 per cent primarily because of a resurgence in China, and better than forecasted growth in India. In Trinidad and Tobago, we estimate that there will be real GDP growth in 2023 of 2.7 per cent, which follows growth of 1.5 per cent in 2022, and that 1.5 per cent is actual and actual as recorded and calculated by the CSO. The expected out turn for 2023 is premised on moderate growth in the energy sector, flat growth actually, and significant expansion in the non-energy sector.

Now, based on actual data from the CSO for the first quarter of 2023, and might I add, Mr. President, the CSO is now in step with the international requirement, which is to produce actual statistics within six months of the event, so

that the CSO published first quarter statistics in September of 2023, which would be the actual data up to the end of March 2023. So, based on data from the Central Statistical Office, real economic activity expanded by 3 per cent in the first quarter of 2023 and this was affected by marginal growth of just 0.3 per cent in the energy sector, and a much higher expansion in the non-energy sector of 4.2 per cent. And if you look at the non-energy sector over several years, you are going to see year and year improvements in a number of non-energy industries.

The manufacturing sector in particular, registered strong performance driven by real expansions in food, beverages and tobacco products, 7.6 per cent; textiles, clothing, leather, wood, paper, printing 31.5 per cent; and a significant growth was also reported by accommodation and food services 17.5 per cent; and transport and storage 16.7 per cent. These are just some examples.

For the full 2023 calendar year, we expect positive activity in the non-energy sector to be driven by non-energy manufacturing, trade and repairs, transport and storage, as well as continued rise in tourism activity, as evidenced by visitor arrival data for the period January to May 2023. The total number of visitors to Trinidad and Tobago expanded robustly in the period January to May 2023 to 198,778 arrivals in that period, up from 69,964 persons for the prior comparative period. So we had over 100,000 additional visitor arrivals in January to May of 2023 compared to January to May of 2022. Air arrivals also increased by 85 per cent, from up to 129,546 persons over the same period January to May 2023. And with respect to cruise ship activity, during the first five months of 2023, 50 vessels docked with 69,232 passengers, representing again, a substantial increase when compared to the comparative period in 2022.

Global inflationary pressures eased due to the normalization of supply chains, lower shipping costs, improved delivery timelines. Domestically, following a peak of 8.7 per cent year-on-year in December 2022, headline inflation more than halved to 4 per cent in August 2023, dropping to 3.9 per cent in September 2023. This was due to softer or weaker pricing pressure within the food and core components of the all items Retail Price Index.

We also benefited from reduced shipping costs, reduction of transportation bottlenecks and lower international food commodity prices, it does appear that the spike in prices globally has abated post COVID. With respect to fiscal consolidation, after a significant deficit of 9.1 per cent of GDP in 2020, the COVID year, we generated a budgetary surplus of 0.6 per cent of GDP in 2022 and we are estimating an overall deficit of less than 1.8 per cent of GDP in 2023, well within the international benchmark of 3 per cent of GDP for a fiscal deficit. Our external fiscal buffers remain healthy and robust, with gross official reserves at US\$6.4 billion or eight months of import cover on our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund at US\$5.5 billion. Foreign currency deposits in local commercial banks also exceed \$4 billion.

Just within the last few days, we got a credit rating from CariCRIS, the Caribbean Information and Credit Rating Services Limited, which reaffirmed our sovereign issuer credit rating at Cari,AA for both foreign and local currency on its regional rating scale.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: This rating indicates a high level of credit worthiness compared to other sovereigns in the region. In fact, and this needs to be emphasized, we

enjoy the best credit rating in the Caribbean from CariCRIS and Standard & Poor's.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: In fact, we are the only investment grade sovereign in the Caribbean region. The strengths that support these ratings, as told to us by the credit rating agencies are that we are a significant regional economy with a diverse economic base, which encompasses both energy and non-energy sectors.

In terms of institutional quality, we continue to develop our institutions, and I will start with the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority which we expect to improve the efficiency of tax collection and administration. It combines two divisions of the Ministry of Finance, the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise Division. In December of 2022, in accordance with the law, the TTRA board submitted its first three-year strategic plan for 2023 to 2025, including a three-year roadmap and a detailed operational plan for year one, and this was laid in Parliament. We look forward to a timely resolution of the present legal challenges, so that we can move swiftly to operationalize the authority.

In the interim, the TTRA Board of Management and its advisors continue to work on other aspects of the TTRA implementation, such as recruiting the director general and senior executives, and designing and operationalizing key systems and processes. We expect that once the TTRA is fully operational, we will be able to close the tax gap which is estimated at as much as \$10 billion. And the tax gap is the estimated difference between what we do collect and what we should collect based on all the indicators in the economy such as GDP, total sales and other indicators which tell us what we should collect. I can give you an example of Value Added Tax. Value Added Tax is based on purchases and sales and charges

throughout the system from imports all the way up to the final product. And we had a consultant some years ago from the IMF, who looked at our economy and deduced that the tax gap in value added tax alone could be as much as \$5 billion, of that \$5 billion, \$2.5 billion is due to policy decisions of the Government, such as the exemption of VAT on food and other basic items but the other two and a half billion is due to tax evasion, I think is the best way to put it. And therefore, we hope that the TTRA will assist in closing the tax gap and will assist in enhancing our revenue. And once we can enhance our revenue, we can do many things once our revenue improves, once everybody who is supposed to be in the tax net pays tax, we can do many things, we may be able to do many things in terms of subsidies and so on.

With respect to property tax, we have made significant progress, property tax will be effective in the 2024 financial year. The valuation roll for residential properties has been finalized, and the Inland Revenue will be issuing assessment notices for property tax very shortly. I think it is necessary to point out for yet another time, that property tax on residential properties is calculated at 3 per cent of the rental value in the valuation roll and not the capital value. And this is something that our opponents on the lower bench continue to attempt to confuse the population with, by saying that property tax is based on the capital value; it is not. It is based on the rental value. And in the budget statement in the other place, I made the point that we expect that at least 50 per cent of property owners in Trinidad and Tobago will be required to pay property tax in the range of \$500 to \$1,100 per year, or between \$42 and \$92 per month. That is what we have seen so far from the valuation roll which has now registered in excess of 200,000 residential properties and there is also the provision for deferral of tax for those

who are genuinely unable to pay property taxes. There is a provision in the law for that, it is simply an application made for deferral of the tax. Let us say for example, you are a senior citizen on a fixed income and you simply cannot pay the tax, there is a provision in the law for such a person or any other vulnerable person to apply for deferral of the tax so they will not have to pay it.

We expect during fiscal 2024 we will proclaim and operationalize the relevant sections of the local government legislation to allow residential taxes to be collected by the two cities, the five boroughs and the seven regional corporations within the 14 municipalities. This will provide local government bodies with a new and sustainable revenue stream to procure goods and services and for the Development Programme. I want to emphasize that we are not going to permit property tax to be used for personnel expenditure. I have made allocations in the 2024 Estimates within each municipal corporation to allow them to collect, retain and utilize property tax. But we will be making legislative amendments in due course to ensure the money is not used for the wrong purpose. I want to emphasize that it is for goods and services and the Development Programme.

In terms of local government reform, this took a significant step on July 01, 2022, when the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Act was assented to. The new legislation provides the legal and administrative infrastructure to accommodate our vision, the centrepiece of which is a managerial and technical infrastructure working for and on behalf of the people in our 14 local government bodies. The new legislation seeks to create a far more efficient, effective and purpose-driven system which will be ably assisted by the new revenue stream from property tax. I wish to say at this point, that our calculations

tell us that the full property tax for 2024 would be in the vicinity of \$400 million but we expect that there will be a learning curve.

10.40 a.m.

So therefore, we have made a preliminary allocation in the budget estimates in three different categories, three different sizes of local government corporations. So we have allocated \$8million to the smaller ones, \$10 million to the medium-sized ones and \$12 million to the large ones, in terms of population size. We have used population to determine the allocation. We do expect to see an improvement in the performance of local government with the reform and also, with this new revenue stream.

With respect to the energy sector, we have long recognized the changing dynamics of the energy system. That is why we are currently focusing on diversification. We cannot count only on the energy sector anymore. We review oil and gas prices all the time to ensure that our energy revenue estimates remain as accurate as possible since this is central to our budget process. In establishing prices for the budget, international organizations provide us with analysis and forecasts. For example, the current forecast produced by the International Energy Agency is that Brent crude oil will increase to an average of US \$90 per barrel by the end of 2024. The IEA estimates that West Texas Intermediate will follow a similar path and maintain a discount to Brent of \$5 per barrel, so that the IEA expects that WTI would average \$85 per barrel in 2024. If you will allow me, Mr. President, just let me check the actual prices as we speak. WTI is \$89.89 and Brent is \$93.08, and this is probably due to the conflict in the Israel-Palestine area. It has increased significantly over the last couple of weeks.

The US Energy Information Administration's, US EIA, current short-term

outlook estimates the price of Brent oil in '24 at \$88 per barrel, but we have been advised by the World Economic Outlook—that is a publication of the IMF—that we need to be careful because advanced and emerging economies will focus on restoring energy price stability. There are all sorts of ways that advanced economies can affect the price of oil, not as powerfully as the three large oil producers, Saudi Arabia, Russia, United States; anyone of these three can affect oil prices. For example, the US has become the largest producer of oil within the last couple of years, primarily due to their increased production of shale oil. The US now produces about 11 million barrels a day; Russia, 10 million; Saudi Arabia, 10 million. Anyone of those, if they increase production or reduce production, can affect the price of oil. Of course, reduction in production does, as we have seen, cause an increase in the price. But as I said, anyone of those three players can influence the price of oil in either direction.

So we have decided to be conservative, even though the International Energy Agency estimates \$90, and US Energy Information Administration estimates \$88, we are using \$85 per barrel for our estimate of revenues from petroleum in 2024, and US \$5 per MMBtu compared to the \$6 in '23. Now, I need to explain the gas price, that gas price of \$5 per MMBtu. It is a fallacy that the price that we get from gas is the Henry Hub price that you would see if you go on Google and you do an Internet search. You will see a Henry Hub price currently about \$3. It is a fallacy that that is the price that we receive. We have a netback price which is based on four indicators: Henry Hub; a British indicator called NBP; an Asian indicator called JKM, which is Japan/Korea; and now there is a European indicator. So we are using the four of them. We have formulas now where we benefit from the prices in Europe, the prices in UK, the prices in Japan. And the

last time I looked at the prices of natural gas in Europe, UK, Japan, you are talking \$15, \$16.

So even though Henry Hub is \$3, the prices of the other indicators are in the \$15 range, and we have in fact averaged in 2023 a netback price of in excess of US \$5 per MMBtu. So we will see how it goes going forward. I do expect with climate change that we may have an increased use of natural gas—it is a clean fuel—across the world and we may very well see the trends that I am seeing in natural gas pricing in the Far East and in Europe trending upwards. They were about \$10 per MMBtu six months ago. They are now up in the \$15 range. At the height of the crisis, the Ukraine war crisis, we saw prices in those regions, Europe and Japan, in excess of \$30 per MMBtu, so we will see how it goes. So based on what we are seeing in the forecast for the next 12 months, we are using a \$5 price netback for gas.

Looking at the enabling sectors in the economy now, we intend to continue to support agriculture. At present, there are some loopholes in the legislation or ambiguities that defeat our objective of making the agriculture sector completely tax-free. We will be doing legislative amendments throughout 2024 and remove all ambiguities and loopholes within the law to make and achieve our objective of making agriculture completely tax-free in all its facets.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: We also intend to review, update and improve the system of concessions, incentives and rebates. There is a whole suite of concessions and rebates but some of them are dated. So we will be looking at them to see what we can do to make them more relevant to the modern era. We are continuing to support our very innovative and creative solutions to attract young people to the

sector, and there is a substantial programme in the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, attracting young people into the agriculture sector, training them in agriculture and giving them the opportunity to acquire homesteads to do their own farming.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is also seeking to revitalize the cocoa and coffee industries, as well as the coconut industry, and also has in its 2024 plan, the strengthening of the Praedial Larceny Squad, and a significant programme of upgrading agricultural access roads and infrastructure. We have given the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries an additional \$400million for those purposes to deal with incentives to farmers, support for farmers and also, infrastructure access roads and so on, \$400million. We are also going to push models, such as the Cashew Gardens green market model. This project worked very well. It established a community greenhouse and a green market in Cashew Gardens. For those of you who may not know where that is, that is in central Trinidad. And we intend to establish community greenhouses and green markets along the Cashew Gardens green market model in Demerara, Arima; Bon Air North; Pine Settlement; Bagatelle; John Boodoo, Brazil; Maloney Gardens; Trincity, Dinsley and so on. We have an allocation of \$7.5 million in this budget specifically to establish community gardens and green markets.

We are also resuming our Market Box Initiative and we have allocated \$60 million for the production of market boxes. It is something that came out of COVID, where we gave vulnerable families a food card and a market box. What this did was provided families with fresh produce, fresh meat, and it also created backward linkages into farming because it gave farmers a stable market for their products. So we have allocated \$60 million for the resumption of the delivery of

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market boxes to vulnerable families—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—fresh produce, fresh meat. We are also going to re-examine the school feeding programme to ensure the use of local foods, fresh produce and local meats as a mandatory requirement, and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has been mandated to restructure the food card programme to include a compulsory market box programme.

With respect to manufacturing, manufacturing has emerged as a standout performer in our diversification efforts.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: How much more time do I have, Mr. President?

Mr. President: You finish at 11.06.

Hon. C. Imbert: The manufacturing sector has achieved significant growth—

Sen. Roberts: You have—[*Inaudible*—]minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Seventeen minutes, sorry. Thank you very much. You are good for something after all, Sen. Roberts.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: In 2022, the sector's contribution to GDP—this is the manufacturing sector—surged to 17.2 per cent. This was a notable increase from the 14.7 per cent recording in 2015. Let me just repeat that, the contribution of the manufacturing to GDP surged to 17.2 per cent in 2022.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And that is up from 14 per cent in 2015.

Dr. Browne: That is performance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Our exports saw remarkable growth. Non-energy exports were

valued at US \$2.4 billion in 2022, compared to US \$2.1 billion in the previous year, an increase of 15 per cent—just year on year, an increase of 15 per cent in exports.

As I said, diversification is one of our primary focuses at this time. We are looking at areas, such as machinery and transport, equipment, beverages and tobacco, and recent decisions by CARICOM to promote the free movement of various categories of workers. And the ability of CARICOM nationals to establish businesses in any Member State gives additional opportunities to our entrepreneurs looking to expand their market presence in CARICOM.

We are also committed to supporting and nurturing small and micro enterprises. We think this is crucial in generating revenue, creating employment and enhancing foreign exchange. We have a series of incentives, and I expect the Minister of Trade and Industry will say more about this. I will just repeat some of them: the Export Booster Initiative, the Grant Fund Facility, the Yachting Grant Fund Facility, Research and Development Facility, manufacturing apprentice and wood products apprenticeship programme. And, Mr. President, we are also looking at the question of renewable energy. There is within the budget an allocation within the Ministry of Trade and Industry's budget for green industry and green manufacturing.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The Unit Trust also has quite an important programme. It has partnered with UWI Ventures, and it is called UrpreneurPlus programme. It is dedicated to nurturing the growth of young and emerging entrepreneurs. In 2024—it is a very successful programme, that Unit Trust programme. We expect this programme to impact 100 small and micro enterprises, and we have made an

allocation of \$15.7 million to fund the Urpreneur programme of the UTC/UWI to ensure that it continues to be successful to empower and uplift aspiring entrepreneurs.

Just let me say a few things about health. We recently commissioned the Health Administrative Building at Queen's Park East, a brand new modern facility. It will save the Ministry of Health upwards of \$12million in rent, and this is a policy of the Government that wherever we have Ministries scattered all over the place, which was the case with Health, we are seeking to construct administrative buildings, thereby consolidating all activities under one roof and saving millions of dollars in rent. This will now consolidate health administrative activities, which were formally housed in six different locations across the country.

With respect to housing, the HDC will continue its work, continuing construction on a number of sites across the country. One of the most important aspects of the HDC's work for—well, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development's work for 2024 is the Housing and Village Improvement Programme, and I urge Senators to go and find out what that is. It started in Moruga. The hon. Prime Minister was the champion of this programme some seven years ago, where there was a village in Moruga where people were living in quite impoverished conditions, in board houses, and the vision of the Prime Minister at the time was to convert those board houses into concrete structures, and that was the birth of the Housing and Village Improvement Programme.

10.55 a.m.

What it does is that it creates for someone, obviously underprivileged and vulnerable families, because clearly this is for the people at the lowest end of the income spectrum—but what it does is it takes somebody who is living in a board

house in quite unsanitary conditions and gives them, free of charge. This is not a situation where the person has to put out any money. It gives these vulnerable families, free of charge, a two-bedroom concrete starter house complete with all facilities, internal plumbing, proper arrangements and so on. So it lifts the person out of an underprivileged situation and gives them a brand new concrete structure which they can then develop.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: We have allocated \$100 million to this programme and we expect to construct 600 of these starter houses in 2024 in 26 areas throughout the country and I may say, the cost of the houses is only between \$150,000 and \$175,000 you would be surprised. Whereas in the past, previous administrations were building HDC houses for \$1.5 million, we are able to build a two-bedroom modern concrete house for these underprivileged people for \$150,000, believe it or not.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: In the education sector our remedial education and vacation remedial programmes have contributed significantly to improve the results of students so we intend to continue those programmes. The remedial education and vacation remedial programmes will be delivered in 106 schools and we expect it will benefit 25,000 students and we are also addressing a burning issue, which is the standardization of textbooks.

We all know that there are changes to textbooks, little changes, one page and persons are now required to buy a brand new textbook. There is no generational passing on of textbooks and we are going to put a stop to that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. C. Imbert: We are going to have discussions with all stakeholders to standardize textbooks. We expect push back of course from the—

Hon. Senator: Cartel?

Sen. West: Publishers.

Hon. C. Imbert: Whatever. From the people who benefit from what goes on right now. In addition, in recognition of the difficulties faced by vulnerable groups, the Government has decided that in 2024 needy families will benefit from a grant of \$1,000 per child to assist with purchasing school supplies subject to a means test. We expect—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—this will help 65,000 students, it will cost \$65 million and where did we get this 65,000 from? That is the amount of students who are currently enrolled in the School Feeding Programme, so we used that as a point of departure to determine how many students will satisfy the means test and be eligible for the grant and the grant goes to families of course.

In terms of literacy, we are well aware that there is a significant number of persons who are not as literate as they should be and therefore we are partnering with ALTA to widen its reach to an additional 4,000 persons in 2024. That is the Adult Literacy Tutors Association, and we have allocated \$7.6 million for adult literacy in 2024.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

11.00 a.m.

We also have a number of programmes within the social sector specifically targeted at accommodation for the socially displaced and I would expect that the Minister of Social Development and Family Services will deal with that in her

contribution.

In terms of capital spending we have kept the allocation for our Public Sector Investment Programme at \$6.2 billion in 2024 because we are of the firm view that spending in the capital programme is what creates jobs and what diversifies the economy and creates opportunities for citizens to lift themselves out of poverty. Some of the areas that will be getting funding from this \$6.2 billion in the PSIP are agriculture, national security, education, transportation, drainage, digital transformation of the economy, sports and community development, health care, housing, et cetera. I will not go into details in terms of the hospitals that we have built, Mr. President. Suffice it to say, we have a brand new hospital in Arima. We have a new hospital—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—in Point Fortin. We are constructing a brand new hospital block in Port of Spain. We are almost finished with a brand new hospital in Sangre Grande. And I must say that, in terms of facilities in terms of all these new hospitals, Trinidad and Tobago is getting very close to world-class in terms of the availability of modern hospital facilities.

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

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: In terms of safety and security we have decided that we need to deal with a problem that has been identified by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and that is the reduction in the active strength of the police force through all sorts of reasons, people retire, people are on leave, people are on vacation, et cetera. So the active strength of the police force is not what it should be and therefore we are providing the Trinidad and Tobago Police Force with the

resources to triple the normal intake of 300 up to 1,000 recruits in 2024. And also recognizing that the police force has issues with mobility, we have provided \$80 million this year for the police force to invest in new vehicles and other equipment.

Hon. Senator: Excellent.

Hon. C. Imbert: With respect to Tobago, Madam Speaker, we have—sorry. Mr. President, I apologize. With respect to Tobago we are giving Tobago 4.36 per cent of the national budget this year. And I might add, although some people may feel that it should be more, throughout the five years of the UNC, they gave Tobago the bare minimum of 4.03 per cent of the budget.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Through, and they had the most revenue, they had money coming through their ears and they gave the Tobago the bare minimum.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Moving now to the allocations for various sectors. I have already said we expect revenue to be \$54.0 billion, expenditure to be \$59.2 billion giving a deficit of \$5.2 billion which is still less than 3 per cent of GDP.

Hon. Senator: Excellent.

Hon. C. Imbert: Of that, we expect oil revenue to be \$16.7 billion, non-oil revenue to be \$35.5 billion and capital revenue to be \$1.8 billion. The major allocations for 2024, Education at \$8 billion, Health at \$7.4 billion, National Security at \$6.9 billion, Social Development at \$5.8 billion, Works at \$3.4 billion, Public Utilities at \$3 billion, Local Government at \$1.8 billion, Agriculture at \$1.4 billion and Housing at \$1.2 billion. And in the last few minutes available to me, the significant fiscal measures in 2024 will be an increase in the minimum wage by 17 per cent.

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: From \$3 per hour or \$3 an hour, from \$17.50 to \$20.50 per hour. This will assist almost 200,000 persons providing them with additional income of between \$500 and \$900 a month, all tax free of course because they are below the threshold that, I might add, that from between 2001 and now, the minimum wage has been increased seven times of which it has been increased by the PNM six times.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So the minimum wage has gone from \$7 in 2001 to \$20.50 in 2023 and of that \$13.50 the PNM has been responsible for \$11.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: We have increased the minimum wage six times. They have increased the minimum wage once. We have also another significant initiative in 2024 which is to settle the backpay that will be owed to those workers, those unions that have accepted the Governments offer of 4 per cent. The backpay is going to cost us \$1 billion, Mr. President. We expect to pay it before Christmas of 2023.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And we believe this is a very appropriate allocation of \$1 billion, Mr. President. As I said, Mr. President, it is impossible to condense four hours into 45 minutes but I think I have given a fair overview of the budget measures for 2024 and I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

VISITORS

St. Joseph Convent Students

UNREVISED

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, before I put the question for debate I now invite you to join me in welcoming to the public gallery the students of St. Joseph Convent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023

Mr. President: Senators are reminded in accordance with Standing Order 43(1) that they can speak for a maximum of 40 minutes. Sen. Mark.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, the 2024 budget can be described as a declaration of war on the poor and the downtrodden.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: This declaration by the PNM and their IMF ally has plunged the nation and the people into a virtual darkness. The measures announced and not announced in the 2024 budget represent a blueprint for the PNM. It is a blueprint, rather, of the PNM and the IMF to pauperize, brutalize and oppress the vast—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark:—majority of working.

Mr. President, one only has to examine the contents of both the Article IV Consultation of 2023 and Moody's report to understand the collaboration, the conspiracy, between the PNM and the IMF. Mr. President, I think it was DJ Bravo who has immortalized in song and I want to share with you some of his lyrics.

“This is a sad place”

Our—“...country”—is in “a sad place.

When I look around only...sad faces.

Who took the S out of Port of Spain.”

It is only pain for the working class.

Mr. President, blood flows through our streets, our villages and our communities. No one is safe. Nowhere is safe. Our motherland is under siege. The State has now come under direct attack. You cannot experience the fruits of prosperity if you are dead, if you are murdered. Mr. President, there can be no prosperity without safety and security.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Poverty, hunger, joblessness hopelessness and sadness seem to have conquered what was once paradise. Mr. President, Trinidad and Tobago is in trouble and no amount of deception, deflection, misinformation, falsehoods, victimization and untruths will cover up the advanced decay and decomposition of this country's body politic. Mr. President, our country is in profound danger. The economy is in deep trouble. Our nation is in a worrying place and space and the Government, without admitting it, is fast becoming cash-strapped. Mr. President, the soul of our nation has been hijacked by an economic aristocracy—

Hon. Senators: Wow.

Sen. W. Mark:—a kind of parasitic oligarchy whose interest is self-serving—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark:—and credo is naked and unadulterated greed and absolute power and control. This is the background in which the country is being called upon to assess the Minister of Finance's budget. The people of this country, of course, not today but when he presented, the hon. Minister, was subjected to four hours of painful and frustrating rhetoric and old talk.

Mr. President, the people need to take urgent stock of our current reality or else increasing chaos, disorder, confusion and instability will engulf our future.

Mr. President, some people have described the situation that we are in today as pregnant with major challenges and implications for our very stability as a community. We cannot, Mr. President, have prosperity without human security, without human safety. Everywhere we turn there appears to be a deficit in justice, in fairness, in freedoms and equity in our nation, Mr. President.

11.15 a.m.

After eight consecutive budgets, with this one being the ninth, with an accumulated expenditure of approximately half a trillion dollars, ordinary people, the vulnerable, the middle class, among others, are still without decent work, a regular supply of pipe borne drinking water, poor and inadequate health care and sanitation, an irrelevant education system with thousands of youths falling through the cracks and virtually disappearing. Mr. President, people are asking, where is Trinidad and Tobago heading? Many of our young people cannot even read or write.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: “Wow.”

Sen. W. Mark: That is the challenge that our young people face today. They are being recruited by gangs, Mr. President, and this is taking place all under the watch of this Government. Over the last eight years our economy has contracted between 16 and 20 per cent. The life blood of our nation with its natural gas is under intensive care. Production has collapsed from a peak of 4.3 billion cubic feet to a mere 2.6/2.7. Mr. President, where are we going? We have to appreciate that natural gas is inextricably linked to economic activity, and more particularly to our country's foreign exchange. So when you have oil production collapsing as well as natural gas, where does that leave our economy? And then the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is selling us pipe dreams. He talks about the Dragon

gas.

Hon. Senator: “It dancing.”

Sen. W. Mark: The Dragon gas.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: But we are reading where the United States is saying that the Dragon gas more or less cannot flow unless there is free and fair elections in Venezuela. Is the Government willing to encourage their friend to host free and fair elections in that country?

Mr. President, the macro economy of our country is on the wrong track. We just only have to look at some of the key indicators to fully appreciate what is taking place. Gross Domestic Product has declined from a high of \$187 billion in 2014 to a low of just under \$150 billion. The country’s foreign exchange has plummeted from \$11.5 billion in 2014 to a low of US \$6.2 billion, just under seven point two months import cover. Mr. President, I think that the Minister needs to tell Trinidad and Tobago, when we extract from our foreign exchange reserves the special drawing rights and allocation in August of 2021 of US \$650 million, the withdrawal of almost US \$2 billion from the Heritage Fund, and external borrowings with a maturity period of about above one year, the Minister must tell us, Mr. President, what is the state of play with our foreign exchange? Foreign direct investment is now minus \$500 billion or \$500 million.

Mr. President, the public sector debt stood at 44.1 per cent when we were there at the end of 2015. Today, it is now 71.1 per cent, according to the Minister of Finance. Whether it is the fiscal deficit, whether it is the overall general debt increasing from \$75 billion to now \$129 billion, Mr. President, the country is in trouble. And, Mr. President, inflation is eating away at the people’s purchasing

power. The standard of living, the quality of life of the people has collapsed. Mr. President, would you believe between 2014 and the end of November of 2022, prices increased by over 67 per cent along with transportation and health care costs. People are reeling as we speak. And then, Mr. President, on the heels we have the Government introducing what can only be described as draconian measures. Draconian measures to further pauperize the middle class, the working class, and the working poor.

Would you believe that the Minister of Finance spoke for 45 minutes today and not on one occasion did the Minister of Finance mention the 15 to 64 per cent increase in electricity rates for poor people and households in Trinidad and Tobago? Not once did he talk about how the increases will impact negatively on commercial business, on the industry. Not once did he talk about, that is going to contract, aggregate demand in this country, and where is the economic growth going to come from? Nothing. Mr. President, it is only hammer blows. Only hammer blows for the poor, for the middle class, for the working class for the youths, for our farmers, whilst their friends and their financiers live in luxury. Some of them, Mr. President, “doh” even pay corporation tax. There is one of their financiers listed on the Stock Exchange, he got five years free of paying corporation tax. But you know what, Mr. President? Property tax for you, property tax for me, property tax for 400,000 residents, but big business “eh” paying no corporation tax. How is this fair?

Mr. President, we warned, the hon. leader of the United National Congress warned this country, that as soon as local elections were over, the PNM and the IMF would increase electricity rates, and so said so done. They waited, they waited, and now, Mr. President, we are being called upon to pay huge increases in

electricity rates. Why? Look we just read today \$55 million paid in rent, some financier of the PNM “gone with” \$55 million, but property tax for the poor.

Mr. President, \$3 increase in minimum wage for the poor, a 4 per cent increase for public officers, police, army, teachers, fire offices, prison officers. But you know what? The Government wasted close to \$250 million in an experiment to turn around Train 1 of Atlantic LNG. Who is going to be accountable for \$250 million? Mr. President, who? How are you going to hold the powerful accountable? Who? Mr. President, \$250 million gone down and no one is held accountable for that, Mr. President? But you come to increase, what? Electricity rates. You come to do what? Impose property tax. You come to do what? Reduce national insurance pension. That is what you are doing.

Mr. President, I want to warn this Government, they are playing with fire. They are laying the seeds for social unrest in Trinidad and Tobago. If this thing continues people are going to riot in Trinidad and Tobago if this Government continues on the course that it is on. I call on the Government, Mr. President, to withdraw, to halt—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark:—any increases in electricity rates in this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Roll it back. The people cannot afford to pay new electricity rates in Trinidad and Tobago!

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: We may have to take to the streets to roll it back if the Government does not do it. Mr. President, you only have to look at Moody’s report to show and to see where the IMF, the Government conspired in order to

impose these new rates on the people. This was not an RIC decision. This was an IMF/PNM decision to impose electricity rates on the people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President, do you know the impact this will have on the cost of living? Do you know the impact this will have on small and medium sized businesses? Do you know that disposable income is going to decline? People would not be able to purchase things. That will impact on business. It will impact on the quality of life of the people, Mr. President. How can a government sit idly by and allow this kind of pressure to be placed on people. As I said, Mr. President, the Government has plunged Trinidad and Tobago into darkness. That is what they have done.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: And you know, Mr. President, what is interesting? The Minister of Finance boasted a short while ago that the PNM increased minimum wage by some 14 per cent. What he failed to tell us is that this is their second term. Their first term they gave the workers \$2 increase, second term they gave them \$3.50 increase, and when Patrick Manning was in power he gave them \$2 over a five-year period. We were in power for one term, and I want to remind the Minister, Mr. President through you, do not come and peddle misinformation in this Parliament. It is the second time he has done it. I want to remind the Minister that the United National Congress and the People's Partnership increased minimum wages, not once but twice.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: We moved minimum wages from \$9 when we came to office in 2010, to \$12.50. The legal notice is there. And we also increased it from \$12.50

to \$15. In one five-year period we increased the minimum wage by 66 per cent, 66 per cent!

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President, how can you expect people who have not had any increases in their salary for almost eight years, and then you give them crumbs of 2 per cent for one triennium and 2 per cent for another triennium, and then you come and you impose, what? A 3 per cent property tax on these people.

12.30 p.m.

Mr. President, how are these people going to survive? And then you come now, Mr. President, and increase electricity rates. You increased fuel at the pump, not once, not twice, not three times, but six times and “de people eh” riot yet.

Sen. Roberts: Shame, shame.

Sen. W. Mark: That is the kind of punishment that the poor people have experienced under this PNM. Mr. President, we call on the Prime Minister to dissolve the Parliament and call general elections in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: The people cannot take this pressure any more, Mr. President; cannot take the pressure.

Mr. President, you may not be aware but let me share with you some realities facing the people of our nation. Mr. President, would you believe that this Government, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, has taken a decision to reduce the NIS pension for workers? Mr. President, may I remind this honourable Senate that the issue is not 65 years—it is not increasing the retirement age to 65 years. That is not the issue. Mr. President, you know what is the issue? The issue is that the Government, in collaboration with the IMF, has taken a decision to

reduce workers' pension by 6 per cent annually. That is the issue.

What the Government has decided to do, Mr. President—and I want to share the facts with this honourable Chamber so that we can understand the scheme, the trick, the deception of this Government as it relates to NIS pension. You know what they have said? They said the \$3,000 that the people receive at the age of 60, after making a minimum of 750 contributions, they are saying that \$3,000 is too generous. The IMF is saying, it is too generous. The PNM is saying, it is too generous. And you know what they want to do? It is in the Tenth Actuarial report, read it. They want to bring national insurance pension to 80 per cent of the national minimum wage. It is in the report and the Government has adopted the report.

Mr. President, let me take you on a brief journey so you can understand the criminal conduct of the IMF, in collaboration with this Government, in order to deny the people their entitlement of \$3,000 after they worked and contributed their 750 contributions.

Mr. President, hear what they have in their report, and we have calculated it for you. If you retire at the age of 60, under the PNM and IMF scheme, you will only, you will receive a whopping 30 per cent reduction in your NIS pension. You listen to what I am saying? A 30 per cent reduction in your pension and that will result in you, at the age of 60, receiving only \$2,100 a month and not \$3,000 per month as you are currently receiving. This is a \$900 decrease. And, Mr. President, what that would mean is on an annual basis you will lose \$10,800 as a result of the Government's decision to reduce your pension by 30 per cent.

Mr. President, if you go at the age of 62, it is a 18per cent reduction, you go home with \$2,460, you lose \$6,480 every year. If you go at 63, it is 12 per cent

and you go home with \$2,640 a month, you will lose about \$4,320 every year. And if you go at 64, you get a 6 per cent reduction and you go home with \$2,820 per month, you will lose about \$2,160. Only, Mr. President, if you take your leave, if you take your retirement at the age of 65, would you be entitled to your full \$3,000 NIS pension. The Government has not tell the country that the purpose is to reduce your pension by over 30 per cent. That is the trick. I want to tell the Government, Mr. President, we reject that completely. We are saying that people who have served and they have worked and they have contributed, they must be entitled to go at the age of 60 in accordance with the law, right now as we speak, and they must get their full \$3,000.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President, would you believe that in 2016, we had 530,000 contributors to the NIS? You know as we speak, the Minister of Finance has publicly confessed that we only have about 400,000 contributors? “Where de 130,000 gone” in seven years? Mr. President, you know where it gone? The Government closed down Petrotrin and 6,000 workers stopped paying NIS. The Government sent home 800 workers at TSTT and those people are no longer contributing to the NIS. So retrenchment and termination of employment and the Government’s employment practice is what is contributing to the weakness and deficiency of the NIS.

So, Mr. President, I thought it was important to share with you and the people of our country the scheme. And, Mr. President, you know what is even more alarming? The Government came to this Parliament and indexed their pension. You know that? The Prime Minister’s pension and Ministers’ pensions are indexed and they included, not their last salary, you know, alone, but they

included their housing allowance. So the Government's business is fixed but the poor people, reduce their pension. That is what they want to do. We will have none of it. We call on the Government, do not touch the NIS, \$3,000.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Do not touch it. Mr. President, how many more minutes do you I have? Mr. President, how many more minutes do I—

Mr. President: Time? You finish at 11.47.

Sen. W. Mark: Okay. Mr. President, here is what we are saying. We have done a survey using CSO's data and the survey revealed that between 2010 and 2020, the income distribution in this country has worsened. We have seen where 3,000—people who are working for \$3,000 per month in 2010 stood at 138,300 persons. By the end of 2015, that figure was reduced to 62,500. That was under the People's Partnership. As soon as the PNM came in, it went to 51,400. In other words, we collapsed it from 138,000 to 62, and look at where it has reached now. And when we look at those persons working for \$11,000 and/or more a month in our country, what do we see?—16,900 in 2010. By 2015, that went up to 36,000 under the People's Partnership. It now stands at less than 25,000.

Mr. President, I would like to indicate to this honourable Senate that the collective bargaining process has collapsed under this administration. It is under attack. You have ILO Conventions being openly breached and violated. There is a report from the committee of experts calling on this Government to reform the Trade Unions Act, to reform the Industrial Relations Act, and they have done nothing in the last eight years to reform the IRA.

Mr. President, I found it very strange that the Government remained very silent on the performance of the country as it relates to the implementation of the

Sustainable Development Goals. There is a comprehensive report, I have it with me, Mr. President, dealing with what is called the Implementation of the SDGs, and Trinidad and Tobago has performed badly in every single Sustainable Development Goal; every one.

Mr. President, as we speak, if you will allow me, Belize performed better than us.

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

Sen. W. Mark: Iraq—thank you, Sir—Bangladesh, Suriname, Barbados, Jamaica, El Salvador. Mr. President, as we speak, I want to let you know that 5,000 WASA workers are facing retrenchment and termination. The Government allocated \$50million in 2022 to NIS payments. You know how much they allocated in 2024?—\$25million. It means half of the workforce of WASA, 2,500 workers, are earmarked to be terminated in 2024. It means that the NIS will come under further stress and further strain.

Mr. President, in the few moments I have, I want to indicate that there are alternative measures that we can take to raise funds. The Government has to focus its policy on addressing transfer pricing in our country; too much leakages in the transfer pricing mechanism. We have to look at the whole issue of misinvoicing. Trinidad and Tobago, according to a report, loses between 2.7billion to US \$3 billion every year as a result of misinvoicing, not to mention capital flight where people are opening overseas accounts rather than bringing back their moneys home.

11.45 a.m.

These are having negative impacts on our ability, Mr. President. Mr. President, in my final two minutes, I would like to call on the Government, through

the Minister of Finance, to give us a status report in his closing on Clico and CL Financial; what is the state of play with Clico and CL Financial; what is the state of play with Methanol Holdings International Limited and the shares that we have in Methanol Holdings? Mr. President, we need to have information on the Maritime matter and the Central Bank.

Mr. President, in closing, I want to just quote from the late great Nelson Mandela.

“Men and women...”—from—“...all over the world...come and go. Some leave nothing behind, not even their names. It would...”—appear that—
 “...they never...”—lived—“...at all.”

Madam President, every time the names of such persons are mentioned, even in the heights of power and with the glittering symbols of power, they are like a grave, beautiful on the outside but rotten on the inside. Mr. President, the late Nelson Mandela reminds me of the PNM. The PNM is like a grave. “Dey are beautiful on de outside but dey rotten on de inside.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: And the people must come to a decision very soon that the PNM is not good for Trinidad and Tobago, and for the country—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark:—and its economy to grow.

Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President, the PNM must go.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: The PNM must to go, Mr. President, for Trinidad and Tobago to grow. I thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Appropriation (Financial Year 2024)
Bill, 2023
Sen. Mark (cont'd)

2023.10.20

Mr. President: Sen. Dr. Paul Richards.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Paul Richards: Good morning again, colleagues. Mr. President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on what is commonly called the budget debate. I am grateful for the opportunity. And while many may see this as a formality, I consider it an opportunity to offer my views on the Government's performance in the preceding fiscal and policy initiatives expressed to be operationalized via the budget expenditure for fiscal 2024.

Before I begin my substantial contribution, may I welcome and congratulate the four new Independent Senators: Prof. Gerard Hutchinson—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. P. Richards:—Sunity Maharaj, Dr. Sharda Patasar and Helon Francis. Welcome to the Senate. I trust your stay is enjoyable and productive. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank our former colleagues: Charrise Trot Seepersad, Amrita Deonarine, Dr. Varma Deyalsingh and Evans Welch for their service and sacrifice to Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. P. Richards: I would like to also congratulate Ms. Keiba Jacob Mottley as acting Clerk of the Senate—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. P. Richards:—and thank and congratulate Mr. Brian Caesar on his appointment to Clerk of the House of Representatives, and thank Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Miguel—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. P. Richards:—for her unstinting service as Clerk of the House, and wish

you all the best and enjoyable retirement, though I much expect Mrs. Sampson-Miguel will find astounding new ways to contribute to serving Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, I really congratulate Government's clear statement of its continued focus on education and training in the largest allocation of \$8.022 billion. And when we take a look at budgetary allocations in education and training between 2015 and projected for 2024, we see—and in 2015 may I just note, that was the final budget under the People's Partnership Government, under then Minister of Finance Larry Howai at \$10.126 billion; 2016, \$9.763 billion; 2017, \$7.222 billion; 2018, \$7.29 billion; 2019, \$7.392 billion; 2020, \$7.55 billion; 2021, \$7.98; 2022, \$6.89 billion; 2023, \$7.45 billion; and projected in 2024, \$8.02 billion; totalling between 2015 and 2013, \$71.636 billion. That is a lot of money that we are spending on education, and I think it signals this country's and this Government, and in many regards the past governments' focus and understanding that education is the way to move the country forward.

If we add this year's allocation it goes to \$79.658 billion, which is almost \$80 billion spent between 2015 and 2025 on the education and training sector in Trinidad and Tobago and we have to understand that is a lot of money. In principle, it is extremely commendable because we shows we understand as a country that we have to prepare for the next generation by education and training. With this substantial investment, we have to also ask ourselves is this investment producing the kinds of citizens we want, because the education sector and system is the one mandatory socializing and training agent between the ages of five or six and 16 years old. It is the one agency that every citizen must pass through by law. So it is the one common denominator in every citizen's life despite their origin,

their background and where they end up.

We have to ask ourselves with \$80 billion has it identified youth at risk and intervened effectively before they cross paths with the many elements of the criminal justice system. Has the \$80 billion produced citizens who can compete globally, who can innovate, create and position Trinidad and Tobago ahead of the global path, certainly ahead of the region? Is it producing kind, caring and compassion citizens? We have to ask ourselves if this \$80 billion is doing that. And again, I am happy that the Government has acknowledged that you cannot spend your way out of a crime crisis by pouring more funds only into national security. It simply not going to work. That is at the end of the continuum. That is when the proverbial—I was going to say “gobar” but that is not parliamentary, crap has hit the fan. We have to intervene before. We have to use the education system to create the type of citizen we want and use it to intervene when at-risk youth start to go down the wrong path, and I will outline some of those issues during my contribution.

My contribution will focus on three areas which I am sure I would not get to the third one, but I hope I do, education and training, national citizens’ security, and time permitting, social services and family development which I also think is critical in moving this country forward and dealing with some of its profound challenges. Many may suggest the education sector is in shambles. I disagree with that statement. I think it is an unfair and overly dramatic statement.

But there are serious gaps in the education sector, particular in the context of the kind of investment we are placing in it, and I do not think the gaps are being addressed effectively or as fast as they should be addressed and given the clear consequences for these gaps on the wider society. Among these, SEA

underperformance and school dropouts which I believe is a time bomb that is already exploding and not ticking any more, but has exploded onto the streets and manifesting significantly in crime, through poverty and homelessness. And I think it is a serious dereliction of duty in many instances, in terms of the lack of effective focus on the disability community and students with special needs in and out of the school system.

Our Education Act amended 27 times since 1966—Education Act 39:01, Act 1 of 1966—has many clauses including,

4(2) In addition to several duties imposed by the Minister in this Act, the Minister shall be responsible for:

“(a) devising a system of education calculated as far as possible to ensure that educational and vocational abilities, aptitudes and interests of children find adequate expression and opportunity for development;”

Is it doing that? Is it fulfilling the—is the Ministry fulfilling that mandate? And 4(2)(d):

“assisting needy pupils...”

We need to replace that word “needy” because it is very ambiguous and outdated.

“...so as to enable them to participate in facilities offered by the education system.”

Is it fulfilling that mandate?

I commend the Minister of Finance, he mentioned a while ago in his—the hon. Minister, sorry, of Finance—that the Government has plans to deal with what I described as the textbook cartel—because it is a cartel—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. P. Richards:—where one paragraph is changed in a book and the school

requires the book to be updated. So there is no passing down of the book to siblings, friends, family, or people you do not know who you want to contribute to their education. So that book is now null and void and money was paid for it, but you have to pay for a new book. Every principal in a particular discipline can choose a different textbook. That makes no sense to me in what is supposed to be a standardized education system. That is also part of the cartel because you could make seven textbooks for the same subject and make plenty money, and there is no, again, passing down of the book or sharing of the material which still has value. That needs to be broken up.

I also commend the announcement by the Minister of Finance of the \$1,000 grant to help students who are in need because as I will outline later down—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. P. Richards:—one of the major contributors to underperformance and student dropout is poverty—abject poverty. Right? The compulsory age of school:

“...means any age between five and sixteen...accordingly a person shall be deemed to be of compulsory school age if he has attained the age of five and has not attained the age of sixteen...and a person shall be deemed to be over compulsory school age as soon as he has attained the age of sixteen...”

I think we need to take a look at that because it is not in keeping with the variety of the types of learners we have and the different rates of learning that exists in any society.

The UN Convention of the Rights of a Child...applies to children under 18. And—“...recognizes education is a legal right to every child on the basis on equal opportunity.”

Does our education system present an equal opportunity to all types of learners? I do not think so. As a matter of fact, I could tell you it is not because I am in the system and I am seeing the deficiencies, and the deficiencies are causing problems down the road, which I would outline in a while.

“...Article 28 guarantees free compulsory primary education for all; progressive free secondary education that should in any case be accessible to all; and accessible to higher education on the basis of capacity.

...Article 29 defines the aims of education and recognises also the liberty of parents to choose the type of education want to give their children and the liberty to establish and direct educational institutions, inconformity with minimum standards laid down by the State.”

We have on record an inclusive education system which means that as far as possible students with special needs and disabilities should be accommodating in regular education classroom, yet, we continue to spend money on the home for the blind, the home for the deaf, when we should be including them in mainstream classroom systems. That is anathema to an inclusive education system and it must be addressed.

Mr. President, data presented from the SEA from 2010 to present, and even before, reveals a consistent and troubling percentage of students who do not achieve 50 per cent or more. In fact, the hon. Minister of Finance is on record in the other place as identifying SEA performance as a critical issue moving forward, and the shortcomings in the SEA performance is also very evident in the shortcomings in the secondary school system and a significant crisis of dropouts but I am going to go into that later on.

Mr. President, in a *Guardian* report of July 05, 2023, the title is SEA over

the years, “Over 11,000 students passed SEA, grades up” and I quote:

“There is a marked improvement in grades among pupils across Trinidad and Tobago who wrote SEA this year.

According to the Ministry of Education...11,015...”—or 58 per cent of—
 “...students passed the test out of...18,797 who wrote mathematics, creative writing and language arts.”

This means that 7,782 did not pass.

12.00 p.m.

But we are spending \$80 million. We spent \$80 million eh.

“Close to 400 of those students scored above 90 per cent while 2,547...”—14 per cent—“ranked below the 30 per cent.”

30 per cent is the placement mark for SEA. 2022:

“...5,306...”—or 27 per cent of—“students scored less than 30 per cent among the 19,079 who wrote the exam. That same year, 7,071...obtained SEA success, marking a 37.06 per cent pass rate. In 2021, 10,259...”—53 per cent—“of 19,544 students passed.”

—which means that 9,285 did not pass; 9,000 students. Now admittedly, that was during COVID and because of the non-face-to-face classes, there was learning loss all over the globe and I am quoting Education Minister Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly here who is quoted as saying in *Guardian* of July 5th, that:

“...The improvement in student performance at SEA 2023 was expected, due to the physical return of students to the classroom, and the interventions of the Ministry in addressing learning loss through the implementation of the Remedial Education Programme in 80 primary schools.

This programme includes initiatives such as the After School Support Education Programme...assignment of dedicated School Social Workers, Guidance Officers, Special Education Officers and Learning Support Assistants..." et al.

But we had a problem before the pandemic, we had a serious performance problem at SEA before the pandemic. And I quote an article again in the *Guardian* by Anna-Lisa Paul from the 7th of August, 2016:

“Govt concerned about the low SEA performance”

This is 2016, the pandemic started at the end of 2019 into 2020, right, so let us not blame the pandemic for our problems. Quote:

“Government is concerned about low performance scores recorded at this year’s...(SEA) exam throughout certain educational districts and has mandated the Ministry of Education to look at ways this can be improved immediately.”

I go down further in the article, I am editing here:

“Of the eight education districts across both islands, Garcia said...”—that was then Education Minister Anthony Garcia—“the picture painted by the results recorded in the Port-of-Spain and Environs Education District is worrying.”

Going down further:

“Adding that worrying trends were also observed from schools along the East-West Corridor, Garcia pointed at the number of students writing the national exam each year continued to decline.”

2017, *Loop* news, from July 10th, 2017:

“The Education Ministry is seeking to refute claims that this year’s

performance in the 2017 SEA was lower than previous years.”

Then:

“Minister Garcia issued a statement on Monday, noting that there has been an overall increase in student performance since 2016.

The percentage of students scoring above 90...in 2017 was 14.3% compared to 12.2% in 2016. This improvement was the highest since 2014 when 17.7% of students scored above 90%.

The release also noted that the percentage of students scoring above 50% in Mathematics was 63.2% in 2017 compared to 64.9% in 2016.”

So while there are commendations being sought for very slight increases in performance, if you are boasting about a 63 per cent pass rate, what about the ones who did not pass?—and why is there no significant improvement—and I used the word “significant” deliberately—in overall performance over the years with the kind of investment I outlined in the start of this contribution.

One of the issues I have already also while I commend the Government for the investment of the first tranche of \$10 million to deal with learning loss and increasing that to \$50 million projected to be happening over the last five years as outlined by Minister Gadsby-Dolly, we have not had data to look at how that has impacted the student performance. So we see that SEA performance has increased from 2022 to 2023. Of course it will, they went back into the physical classroom. It improved all over the world whether governments invested money or not. And I am not saying that the Government should not have invested the money to deal with remedial education. But we have no idea how profound that impact was because we do not have the data to do any analysis. We will just have to take the Government’s word for it and I do not think that is adequate. Just like you go into

details about 14 per cent scoring above 90 per cent, give us the data so that we can do proper analyses of how that money that is being spent is impacted, particularly when you increase it from \$10 million to \$50 million.

And again, I am saying I commend the Government for understanding that that investment is important, but we have to do the analysis or the analysis maybe it is being done and we just do not know, it is not being presented to us but I think the population needs to get the information to make up their minds as to if this is happening because I can tell you being in the system myself, there are still significant gaps in students not being remediated.

Another issue I have is I know at the start with the \$10 million, the Government focused on the Standards 4 and 5 and Forms 4 and 5 because those are the groups, the cohorts, that were most in need of remedial action because they were about to write exams. I believe, I can stand corrected, that this may have been expanded to Standards 1, 2 and 3 and Forms 1, 2 and 3 but I do not know for sure because I have not been told or maybe I missed it. And if it has been, as I am hoping it has, what is the result? How has the expenditure impacted them in the various areas? I do not think that should be a secret. I think it is taxpayers' money so we have the right to know. So I am asking for the Ministry to hold a press conference or something to let us know how it is worth.

Mr. President, all things being equal, over the years, we have seen an average of about 40 to 45 per cent of students over the last 15 to 20 years not achieving a passing grade in SEA and that is a serious critical issue in this country. Is the curricula evolving effectively enough? Is the Student Support Services doing what it is intended to do in terms of providing the interventions for students?

And I looked on at the debate in the other place and the Standing Finance

Committee and a question was posed to the hon. Minister of Education about a reduction in expenditure to the Student Support Services and the response was from the hon. Minister that because of the expenditure of \$50 million, funding to SSSD had been cut. When we have all heard over and over again that it is not only learning loss that the SSSD remediates, emotional behavioural problems which also increased during the pandemic and the plethora of issues facing students who are underperforming later on have to be addressed, by my understanding, through the Student Support Services Division.

Mr. President, Dr. Rowley, the Prime Minister, just on Wednesday at Canada-Caricom Summit in Canada is quoted as saying, quote:

“...laws...

—and in reference to crime in the region, the:

“...laws catered for a different breed of people...”

And I open quotations, sorry. The:

“...laws catered for a different breed of people, where there was some moral compass, some underpinning of good behaviour, some expectation of integrity in the institutions.”

Dr. Rowley also said:

“...if the legal responses were not adjusted, then the court would become a mockery for criminals.”

As I said, he made the comment during the opening of a three-day Canada-CARICOM Summit in Ottawa on Wednesday. May I respectfully suggest that it is not our laws that need to evolve but we need to evolve into the criminality before the criminality takes route through a more responsive education system.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. P. Richards: And it is not responsive enough, let me just put on the record.

Mr. President, another critical issue in addition to SEA which stems from the shortcomings in SEA and I will go into about my comments about SEA now because there is a big conversation about SEA in Trinidad and Tobago and whether SEA should be continued and I know there is a consultation on regarding that, is the issue of school dropouts which is no longer a ticking time bomb because it has exploded onto the streets of Trinidad and Tobago and manifesting as blatant rampant crime, rampant crime.

Researchers Alexander, Entwistle, Horsey and Carson et al 2000 described dropping out:

...as a process rather than a single event and it is often the end result of a long period of disengagement particularly in the education system. Academic challenges, grade retention, disengagement from school, family challenges, poverty, substance abuse and problems with behaviours and attendance frequently begin in elementary school—which is our primary school—and compound over time and they are linked with dropping out in later years. Dropouts reported they frequently missed classes, felt alienated from a system which did not cater for them, ignored for one or more years prior to leaving school, providing further support for a long process of progressive disengagement and ending up in in criminal justice system.

Morrison 2006:

It is also important to know that while there is a definition for dropping out as an act of physically ceasing to attend class in the required age period, may attend school but are so disengaged—

—they basically drop out already. They just go to school but they have cognitively dropped out.

An article in the Trinidad *Guardian*, Mr. President, by Joshua Seemungal and Carisa Lee, April 2nd, 2023 and I quote:

“2,800 children drop out from primary, secondary schools from 2020-22”
 Now we would note that that is during the pandemic, 980 plus students dropped out in 2022.

“At least 151 primary schools pupils dropped out of government schools in...”—T&T—“...the beginning of 2020 and at the end of 2022...2,663 students dropped out of government secondary schools during the same period...

...623...in 2020; 1,056...in 2021...984...in 2022.

The district with the most secondary school dropouts was St. George East with 724 students. In 2021 alone, 302 students dropped out of secondary schools in the district.”

Has there been an intent focus on that cohort to find where they are and make sure they end up back in school? Because the remedial system enacted by the Government is more than likely not going to reach them, they dropped out. Or are we just going to say, well, they chose to drop out and then deal with it in the police stations? And this is a pervasive problem.

In an exposé, a document entitled:

“No time to quit: Engaging Youth at Risk”

2013, an:

“Executive Report of a Committee of Young Males and Crime in Trinidad and Tobago”

Chaired by the late scholar Prof. Selwyn Ryan, Chair and Deputy Chair Dr. Indira Rampersad, Dr. Lennox Bernard, Prof. Patricia Mohammed and Dr. Marjorie Thorpe, all noted academics in Trinidad and Tobago, 2013 and I quote from the article, from the document, from:

“As early as Form 1, some students are at risk, before they are mechanically tracked to Upper Secondary school.”

And that term “mechanically tracked” means as a formality. Whether they are ready to go in secondary school or not, they are pushed ahead. Whether they could cope with the work or not, they are pushed ahead.

“All of this has contributed to a high failure at the CSEC. Many of the secondary schools to which students in disadvantaged communities are assigned were underperforming and had a low level of achievement...

Some 5,000 students out of 17,000...writing the SEA each year do not make it to the CSEC level.”

What is the point? Are they just collateral damage or are we not seeing where they are ending up?

“And every year approximately 80% of students preparing to write SEA choose no more than 25-30 secondary schools as their first choice. Using 2011 figures, that could amount to 14,000 seeking to gain...4,000”—available—“places...in...so-called ‘prestige’ schools.

Who is in charge of the government schools? Who? Why do we have the paradigm still of the need to get into a prestige school because of the perception that your child will get a better education compared to the government school? Because it is true in many cases because the denominational schools have a record of more attention to their students for many different reasons. They have more

resources, they have a stronger PTA, they have more responsive systems. Why can that model not, at some level, be translated to government secondary schools so it does not matter where you go, you are going to get a good education? Why is that so difficult? \$80 million.

“Those who do not succeed gaining admission to those ‘prestige’ schools generally have to cope with the psychological trauma of a deep sense of failure, which...”—many—“never overcome.”

12:15 p.m.

That is what the article goes on to say and it is true. Because we have a thing in this country, “I went to posh school, you went junior sec and government school, you not as good as me”. That segregation starts at the SEA, formal segregation starts at the SEA where they segregate students into “bright” and “also ran”. And we have done little or nothing to fix it in 30/40 years, because we just accept it as the status quo when the Government—whoever that government is, has full remit over government schools. Is it that that is how we are and we accept that, and we are comfortable with that?

Another article coming out of UWI—and you know I heard a comment the other day that we do not have a lot of research in Trinidad and Tobago. That is not true. We have so much research from our academic institutions in this country, because everything I am getting here with the exception of one article is from academic institutions, and research they have done that just sits on a shelf because it does not say what somebody wants it to say.

“UWI St. Augustine conducted a national survey on school dropouts in T&T
...July 17, 2014,
...Principal Investigator, Dr Priya Kissoon...

The study, titled *A Matter of Survival: A life-course approach to understanding the decision-making and economic livelihoods of school dropouts in Trinidad and Tobago* will investigate the life-course trajectories and complex decision-making of early school leavers in Trinidad & Tobago in order to analyse their challenges and successes since leaving school...”

The study tracked 1,822 persons who did not complete either primary or secondary schools, and tracked them by educational district to when they left school, and early and late secondary schools. 1,300 of those left during the secondary level.

So, the problem in dropout primarily is at the secondary level because of the issues they face at primary level when they are mechanically moved forward without being competent enough educationally to cope with Form 1, 2, 3 work. It is complete and utter madness. When you think about it, it is unfair to the student to move them from primary to secondary school when they score 30 per cent. What does that tell you, 30 per cent competency in any discipline?

They cannot cope with Form 1, so then you tell them they are a failure in SEA at some level, and then you tell them they are a failure at Form 1, and then at Form 2, and then at Form 3, and then at Form 4, and then they fail CSEC, and the society has told them they are a failure for 5/6 years. What do you think will happen to that mind? “I turn my back on society, and I going where I getting validation in the arms of the gang leader.” And that is what is happening. It is not even novel academic science or research anymore, it is pervasive all over the world. If you do not intervene in the education sector, you will have to intervene in the police station.

Among the reasons why students dropped out were poverty, and a UNICEF

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report of 2021, called:

“Generation Unlimited: the Well-being of Young People in Trinidad and Tobago...”

—tracked the major issues facing young people that in some way may have contributed to them dropping out or underperforming.

“In 2020, according to UN population projections...”

—Mr. President, how much more time do I have?

Mr. President: Ten minutes.

Sen. Dr. P. Richards: Oh, my.

“...about 35,600 or 12% fewer than in 2010.

...17% of people in”—T&T—“were living in poverty...”

17 per cent in 2016 were living in poverty, this is a UN report—United Nations—UNICEF report, sorry.

“...17%...were living in poverty and 1%”—of those—“were indigent (indigence entails living in a level of poverty in which real hardship and depravation are suffered and comforts of life are wholly lacking).”—T&T—

“...poverty rate is higher than the average of 23% for the Eastern Caribbean.”

—and we are supposed to be one of the richer countries.

“In 2004, 12% of lower secondary...age adolescents were out-of-school; lower than the average of 7% for the Eastern Caribbean.”—By—

“...comparison, in 2018-2019, 30% of boys and 25% of girls were out-of-school at the upper secondary level; this is higher than the...21%...average for boys and 20%...average...for girls in the Eastern Caribbean.”

—who are underperforming.

“In 2010, the primary school enrolment rate was 99%...”

We have a very high enrolment rate at primary school. The problem starts at SEA and the fall-off and the dropout rate at SEA. I am going to have to go past many of these pages. The issues include alcohol abuse, drug abuse, suicide—which is very profound—peer violence.

12.20 p.m.

I want to sound a cautionary warning by quoting from an article called:

“...Crime and America’s Dropout Crisis”

—from 2008.

“America faces a dropout crisis that poses a significant threat to public safety. Nationwide, an estimated three out of ten high school students fail to graduate from high school on time...”

HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO TURN TO CRIME”

Their high school is our secondary school.

“High school dropouts are three and one-half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested, and more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated. Across the...”—US—“...68 percent of state prison inmates did not complete their high school...”—education.

We are not that different to the other parts of the world, you know. So we are seeing the explosion of crime on the street and we have a crisis of dropout that we are not remediating.

“CUTTING DROPOUTS SAVES MONEY AND LIVES

America’s dropout crisis not only threatens public safety, it also damages America’s economy. Dropouts earn less, pay fewer taxes, and are more

likely to collect welfare and turn to a life of crime. If America could raise male graduation rates by 10 percent, the country would save over \$15 billion every year..."

Now, this is America, this is not us, but there are lessons to be learnt.

Mr. President, I am going to have to cut this into pure edits now. Dr. Malisa Neptune-Figaro, criminologist and lecturer in criminology and criminal justice at the UWI, St. Augustine campus, presented at the Government's recent symposium on crime as a health issue and she interviewed 39 interviewees, three returnees and:

"Although..."

Her article—her presentation or her research states that:

"Although Trinidad and Tobago was not recorded as having the most Muslims in the western hemisphere per capita, the country has been reported as having the highest number of persons per capita joining ISIS..."

Her questions were:

"Why was ISIS successful in recruiting such a relatively high number of Trinidad and Tobago nationals?"

And:

"Why was the youth population vulnerable to ISIS recruitment?"

The main reasons were:

"Religious Rhetoric";

"Socio-economic Opportunities";

"Marginalization"—in the education system and other sectors;

And:

"Escaping Legal Matters".

There is so much more I could say on this because I know I am running out of time. The victims of crime in Trinidad and Tobago, from a crime and violence—“IDB Series on Crime and Violence in the Caribbean” by Dr. Randy Seepersad, also from UWI, focused on the victimology and the perpetrators of murder. So I will go past the victimology and read from the data between 2001 and 2013:

“...94.9 per cent of perpetrators are shown to be male...5.1 per cent female.

With respect to age,”—and this is profound—“the majority of perpetrators were between 15 and 24...(34.5 per cent) and 25 and 34...(33.8 per cent).”

So that cohort that has just come out of school, who are alienated and marginalized, are the ones who are ending up on the wrong side of the criminal justice system. Are you seeing a continuum or a trend here? We cannot just sit by and allow this to continue to happen.

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

Sen. Dr. P. Richards: Thank you, Mr. President. I want to quickly deviate to social services and indicate that I think, and I heard it mentioned before, I may not have heard this in the hon. Minister of Finance’s presentation or any of the other Ministers, but this country needs a national survey on poverty, socio-economic status and people living below the poverty line, so we could have official data to intervene in many of these issues, particularly focused on young people and the challenges they are facing, to come up with sustainable solutions to deal with this issue of the shortcomings in the education system.

And I made a point at the start of this contribution of saying that I do not think the education sector is in shambles. I think that is an overly dramatic statement because there are huge success stories. But we cannot continue to ignore

the glaring examples and red flags of underperformance at the SEA level, which translates to underperformance at secondary level and dropout, which translates, in many instances, into incursions into the criminal justice system.

I cannot even touch on many of the issues—I wanted to talk about brain drain because how many of the graduates we are investing in at the tertiary level are staying in the country; underemployment; the TTPS, that is a whole day; public transport and public safety; the issue of technology implementation in national security; and the enclave that is Customs and Excise in Trinidad and Tobago, which seems to be part of the “Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Customs”.

Mr. President, with those few words, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing.

Sen. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing: Thank you very kindly, Mr. President, for recognizing me and for allowing me to join in this debate on budget 2024. Mr. President, please permit me to identify with the remarks of Sen. Dr. Paul Richards in welcoming the new Independent Senators to this Chamber—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:—in thanking the four outgoing Independent Senators, as well as in congratulating Ms. Keiba Jacob-Mottley in being appointed the Acting Clerk of the Senate—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:—congratulating our former Clerk, Mr. Brian Caesar, on his ascension to the substantive post of Clerk of the House, and our sincerest gratitude to Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel who served with great distinction as the Clerk of the House.

Mr. President, before I get into a discussion and share my thoughts about what has been described publicly as a brilliant, outstanding and prudent budget titled: Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth, I join with the vast majority of the population in congratulating the Minister of Finance for his excellent management of Trinidad and Tobago's economy—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:—not only in the past three years, but over the past eight years. I also extend my congratulations to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, for his excellent leadership, and to the Minister of Planning and Development, the hon. Penelope Beckles-Robinson, who herself was integral. And so I congratulate the entire Cabinet, Mr. President.

And I want just put a quotation from Ernst & Young in its post-budget review where it said:

“Trinidad and Tobago is not in an economic crisis...”

And it goes on to say:

“...we must remain vigilant and act proactively to secure our nation's future with the hope of continued stability and growth.”

Mr. President, what does that mean? It simply means that Ernst & Young has recognized, according to its own publication, that the Government has kept this country on a path of growth and on a very stable path of growth, and so I congratulate the Minister of Finance for that, Mr. President.

And you know, I heard Sen. Wade Mark talking about champion—he was quoting DJ Bravo and I want to say then, therefore, if you want to quote DJ Bravo, this Government is the champion of Trinidad and Tobago.

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama Lee-Sing: This Government is a champion. Hon. Colm Imbert is a champion. Dr. Rowley, the hon. Prime Minister, is a champion. Hon. Dr. Amery Browne is a champion. Paula Gopee-Scoon is a champion, and that is what this Government identifies with, Mr. President.

Mr. President, there were two speakers before me, and I also wish to identify again and commend Sen. Dr. Paul Richards for his excellent nation-building discourse presented to us a few moments ago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama Lee-Sing: Sen. Dr. Richards has, over the years, shown his commitment to the development of the education sector in Trinidad and Tobago, and I want to thank Dr. Richards for that contribution. And I want remind him, the Senator, that this is a government that listens, and later on I will show you where we have taken a lot of what you have said into context, having addressed it previously and being deliberate about addressing it in the future. And so I want to thank Sen. Dr. Richards for his outstanding contribution. I look forward to many more valuable contributions of a similar nature coming from the Bench opposite.

However, Mr. President, having heard the contribution that preceded Sen. Dr. Paul Richards, not the Minister of Finance's, Sen. Wade Mark's contribution, I was really—Mr. President, I cannot tell you how taken aback I was, and I do not want to use any unparliamentary terms here but I would like to say that that contribution really was—it is a recycled contribution. We have heard this contribution year in, year out, for—I am not sure how long the Senator has been a parliamentarian, I would suspect maybe about 30 years, and for 30 years, save the years he sat on the Chair and save the two or three years he served as a Minister,

that has been the constant rhetoric coming from this Senator.

It was so funny that I stepped out of the Chamber for a little while and without having listened to him, I knew exactly what the Senator would have said.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama Lee-Sing: It was about—yet again, the contribution was that we were on a path of national destruction, and preaching fire and brimstone, and gloom and doom, and the sky is falling, and the big adjectives, and the conspiracy theories, and that the Government is the big bad wolf, and the overly descriptive exaggerative adjectives. Let me just let Sen. Wade Mark know that the sky is really simply not falling. Had we had an alternative government, the sky would have been falling. But as it stands under this PNM Government, please stop misleading the population, please stop trying to gaslight the population, Please stop trying to invoke scare tactics into the minds of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It is quite frankly really tiresome, Mr. President, and I understand why the population is so weary and just tired of this destructive Opposition rhetoric that we hear day in, day out, Monday night, Tuesday night, Wednesday night, every night. It is really just very, very, tiresome, Mr. President.

Sen. Mark talked about the stock exchange. Before we get to the stock exchange—let me get back to my notes here. You know, Sen. Mark talked about the declaration of war on the people of this country, and the budget scandalized and pauperized the people, and the soul hijacked, and the parasitic oligarchy, which coincidentally described his former colleagues and not the people of this Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama Lee-Sing: Sen. Mark talked about pregnant with major

challenges to stability, and it is clear to me that Sen. Mark cannot identify with what is good and what is not good, because this is a budget that is pregnant with possibility for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Mark sat here and listened to our Minister of Finance talk about the advances in the health care systems; talk about the development of the hospitals in Arima, Port of Spain, Point Fortin. And he still would stand up here and talk about an inadequate health care and he would make this country seem to be the worse; talked about high levels of illiteracy, when in fact it is the opposite. We have some of the highest levels of literacy but yes, there are spaces where we need to fix; but yes, we do not have these high levels of illiteracy.

He talked about the production of natural gas collapse and he went on to talk about the Dragon gas. Mr. President, in yesterday's newspaper, a former Member of Parliament, Dr. Bhoë Tewarie, published an article titled:

“Seize this 7-year window now for T&T”

—and it is published in the *Guardian* newspaper. And there is one very succinct line that I think summarizes everything, and somebody who shared it with me said to me, you know, he was certain that the Opposition probably was feeling sick. And I want these words to continue to haunt the UNC and the Members there:

“...credit is also due to the T&T Government for its dogged pursuit of T&T's national interest.”

Mr. President, that is an acknowledgement that this Government is very sincere in what it is trying to do, and that this Government is really trying to develop this country and the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Mark talked about the stock exchange. One of my friends was promoting an upcoming Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange Capital Markets

Conference 2023, and the language that he used on his social media was:

How do we transform analogue mindsets and systems to succeed in the inevitable digital future?

And Mr. President, that statement is just so relevant to the debate today, particularly in light of the statements of Sen. Mark. And it is clear that without a shadow of a doubt, there are analogue mindsets in this very space, hell-bent on thwarting any progress for this country, any progress towards digitalization, any progress for advancement.

12.35 p.m.

And so, I wish to remind the people of Trinidad and Tobago that this Government is dedicated to fulfilling its mandate of achieving our country's strategic plan, which is Vision 2030. And speaking of Vision 2030, the strategic plan, that strategic plan is aligned with those objectives identified by the Sustainable Developmental Goals.

Sen. Mark talked about the Sustainable Developmental Goals and I think he was trying to create the impression that Trinidad and Tobago was falling behind in the Sustainable Developmental Goals and achieving those, but I wish to dispel that immediately and I want to remind Sen. Mark that COVID was not exclusive to Trinidad and Tobago. And not only COVID has been something that has been challenging the achievement of the Sustainable Developmental Goals but there are some G20 countries, for instance, that are also experiencing some stumbling blocks for this fulfillment. We are midway to the achievement of agenda 2030.

Just last month from September 18^h to 19, the President of the General Assembly, hon. Dennis Francis, distinguished Trinidad and Tobago national that he is, convened the 2023 Sustainable Developmental Summit in New York, and we

are halfway through that time. And so, that international summit was convened, so that all governments can come and see where they are, and see where they are in the grand scheme of things, Mr. President. So Sen. Mark, really and truly, presented a whole set of noise here today. Scare tactics, typical UNC disinformation, deliberate to scare the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Deliberate to say the sky is falling, and sadly put on the performance that was not deserving of the girls of St. Joseph's Convent, Port of Spain who were seated in that public gallery, and I was very disappointed to see that performance coming from a very experienced Member of Parliament, Mr. President.

But Mr. President, I want to also remind the Opposition that or rather as I take my contribution forward, a political manifesto, in some instances in this country known as the Fyzabad Accord, or its remnants, a political manifesto is not a developmental and strategic plan, Mr. President. And as we talked about the SDGs, we have to talk about Vision 2030. Vision 2030 is our strategic developmental plan. And there are two things I want to say about it. There are times in the developmental path of a country when extraordinary challenges demand an equally compelling response. And Vision 2030 also builds the pathway to the future that will transform Trinidad and Tobago into a developed country, sustaining growth and development and optimizing the quality of life for all citizens.

And why do I point that out? I need to remind the national community as we speak about Budget 2024. I need to remind the national community and particularly the young people of Trinidad and Tobago, who are now coming into their political and national senses and identities, about how we got here to this point in 2024 and where we are going. And so, this is the story of eight years of

development of good solid governance provided by the People's National Movement to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, with a clear and keen focus for development for every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. President.

And please permit me to place into the *Hansard* the five major themes that came out of Vision 2030, and I have to speak about that because the budget springboards from Vision 2030. Putting people first, nurturing our greatest asset, and I will discuss that later on in my contribution. Theme two, delivering good governance and service excellence. And you will hear these things coming from other presenters from the Government Bench. Theme three, improving productivity through quality, infrastructure and transportation. Theme four, building globally competitive businesses, and theme five, placing the environment at the centre of social and economic development. And so, Mr. President, this, therefore, is a clarion call to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago—to all those who are 50 and under really and truly—to pay close attention to our country, to our economy, to the developmental thrust, and to actively participate in this march towards achieving development status and towards achieving certain goals by 2030.

And Vision 2030 recognized certain national challenges and I must identify them because in recognizing them, remedies have been prescribed in the strategic plan and later on in each successive budget presentations for these national challenges. So, of course, we all know that our dependence on oil and natural gas is one of our challenges, an ageing population, food security and sustainability, low productivity, dependency and entitlement, and corruption, weak institutions, crime and criminality, climate change and natural resource management, rapid advances in technology and managing a diverse society. And Mr. President, I must place

these on the record because later on, you will hear on how this Government is treating and addressing all of these and the vision, of course, is really and truly to take this country from the present into the future, to inform the country's future developmental cycles, and to provide direction to Government Ministries, private and civil sector, et cetera.

There is something that we need to—oh, before I get to that. One of the things identified, one of the themes identified, in the vision is that this country will be one in which young people—the same young people, Mr. President, to whom I am speaking at this time—will feel confident in their own ideas to seek out and create their own opportunities, engendered by an education system that encourages entrepreneurship and innovation and prepares learners to take advantage of opportunities in a rapidly changing global environment. And, Mr. President, this is exactly what this Government has set out to do in Budget 2024 and in previous budgets.

Now, Sen. Dr. Paul Richards talked about education and the gaps in the education system, which we recognize and we acknowledge, because in the Vision 2030 document, we talked about our values, attitudes and behaviours. And please permit with me to quote where we talked about:

Moving to more evidence based decision making.

And in it, the Government acknowledges:

We must reverse certain aspects of our current approach to education.

This is evidence in the numerous consultations that are happening as we speak, conducted by the Ministry of Education and led by the very, very brilliant and dynamic hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly and the hon. Lisa Morris-Julian, the two Ministers with responsibility for education. And stemming directly out of that is

that our work ethic, our achievement, orientation, and productivity are another set of cultural factors that restrict our ability to fulfill a number of our Vision 2030 goals. And so we are speaking about plugging those holes and ensuring that we have a better environment for our young people to develop, for our education system to be more effective on the young people and for our nationals to really thrive.

Sen. Mark tried to scandalize as usual, the budget and started to scare the people about the macroeconomic policies and talked about all these different things. But the Government's decision about the collection and use of public funds because he likes to try to scare people and talk about big bad property taxes coming. As my Prime Minister has repeatedly reminded the population, property tax is not a new thing. There may be a new name, but land and building taxes was always a thing that the people of Trinidad and Tobago paid. And when you pay the taxes, of course, the taxes are then reinvested into you in this system in Trinidad and Tobago. And so all these scare tactics about macro economic policies and the use of public of public funds, it really determines how people live, Mr. President. And so, some of these things are necessities and therefore, the decisions taken by the Government to both stimulate the economy and to reinvest are things that are done really untruly for the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Government also talks about being enablers to successful implementation, and some of the things that the Government has done over the years is the introduction of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service and the Ministry of Digital Transformation. Because the Government recognizes that the extent to which we are successful in achieving our national

development goals depends on our ability to integrate our budgetary planning systems, identify and formulate appropriate projects and programmes and execute them efficiently, which is why you would have seen a shift in how the PSIP has been allocated and we acknowledge that there were things that needed to be changed. And the Government recognized that the PSIP had become replete with proposals that were not necessarily aligned to national sectoral priorities, which is why I go back to Vision 2030 and talk about the strategic plan, and talk about all the decisions that have been taken in Budget 2024 are much more closely aligned to those goals identified in the Vision 2030, and the developmental strategic plan for Trinidad and Tobago.

So we are aware that in budget 2024, the State Enterprises Investment Programme has been looked at, and the state sector will continue to look at the economic infrastructure of the country, which includes things like energy and agriculture; communication; electricity; tourism; transport; social infrastructure; education and training, and administration, which is public order and safety and public administration. And similarly, the Government is continuing to invest in the Social Sector Investment Programme through the various Ministries, which you will hear throughout. So permit me, therefore, to speak directly to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago as to the opportunities that are available to them, which have happened over the past year and coming into the future through Budget 2024.

Mr. President, as we are speaking about communities, community development, one of our developmental pillars is building strong, sustainable communities and we have seen a number of community centres that have been established. Over the past year, \$66 million have been spent in the provision of

community infrastructure throughout the country, and community centres such as Cascade and Belle Vue 100 per cent complete, La Horquetta, Harmony Hall, Corinth a certain percentage complete.

What is the importance of community centres, Mr. President? It is not just a matter of having a pretty building, it is not just a matter of saying we have a community centre, the community centres have been placed in communities to help develop the people of the communities, Mr. President. It is not only a venue for you to be able to go and have your wedding, it is a place where classes can be conducted, it is a place where you can come and make new friends, you learn skills. There is a heavy thrust towards digitization, and ITC in all of these community centres, Mr. President. It is a space for strengthening your individual capacity, thereby making you a more productive citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, because if you have acquired these skills, if you have participated in these classes—in these sessions, if you feel you have a responsibility to your community, you will be less inclined to participate in any sort of criminal activity, Mr. President.

Under the community development as well, we have seen this Government has been very focused on upgrading corporation grounds, on upgrading multipurpose stadia. So we know that in 2023, the upgrading works were completed for Hasely Crawford Stadium and permit me to congratulate the very dynamic Minister of Sport and Community Development on the successful hosting of the Commonwealth Youth Games 2023.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: And we have seen where our athletes, put in front of a home crowd, thrive tremendously. It was the first opportunity for them to

participate in an international competition in home grounds and you would hear Nikoli Blackman, who is our gold medalist in swimming, talk about feeling the presence of the home crowd cheering him on, and the importance. And that Trinidad and Tobago was able to host such an international event, is of tremendous import because it speaks to the Government's seriousness about developing the young people through sport; sport as an avenue for development, sport as an avenue for business, sport as an avenue for crime reduction.

We had also seen of course, upgrade works taking place in the Ato Boldon Stadium and the Larry Gomes and Manny Ramjohn Stadia and the upgrade of the Mahaica Oval in Point Fortin. And as we move forward, \$700 million will be allocated for construction and refurbishment of other community facilities throughout the country, Mr. President.

12.50 p.m.

And under the Trinidad and Tobago National Policy on Sport 2017 - 2027, and the two themes, “enriching lives through total participation” and “excellence in sport”, the Government is clear in its mandate to have or to fulfil its pivotal role in nurturing a vibrant sporting eco-system that enriches the lives of citizens. And so, Mr. President, in the year coming forward, \$30 million will be allocated to enable payments for works—more work at the Hasely Crawford Stadium. There would be more work done to the Jean Pierre Complex, Ato Boldon Stadium, Mannie Ramjohn and Larry Gomes; \$21.8million will be allocated for the upgrade of works to the Brian Lara Cricket Academy, mindful that we will be hosting the Men’s T20 World Cup in 2024. Mr. President, \$10 million will be allocated for the payment of work at the Bourg Mulatresse Recreation Ground and the commencement of works at the North Eastern Recreation Ground in Sangre

Grande, and the much-needed work in the Arima Velodrome.

A further \$10million allocated for upgrade works of corporation grounds, Aranguez, Grande Riviere, Marac, Park Street, Morvant, Todds Road in Caparo. Fourteen million dollars will be allocated to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government for the upgrade of recreational facilities throughout the 14 municipal corporations. And of course in Tobago, which my colleague will speak in more detail to, \$4 million will be allocated for payments of works completed in Phases 1 and 2 of the Dwight Yorke—the heavily-used Dwight Yorke Stadium in Tobago.

Now, Mr. President, in 2020, a new Ministry was introduced to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, which was the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. It was a very deliberate and intentional Ministry set up by the hon. Prime Minister so that there could be a direct focus—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:—on the young people of Trinidad and Tobago. And so that the young people can see that the Government is willing to be its partner or their partner in their development. And we are having conversations about national service which you will hear about coming.

So in 2024, MYDNS, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, will continue with upgrading and refurbishing these youth developmental centre. Now, it is critical for us to talk about what these different things are and what they will be doing for the young people of Trinidad and Tobago. The youth development centre is not a place for young people to just go and lime out or drink. It is a space where they go to actually develop themselves. They learn how to write CVs, learning how to dress for interviews, and they learn how to conduct

interviews, amongst other specialist training things.

The Youth Career and Education Caravan, which I have seen on the road, and once I jumped out of my car to stop and see it and to participate, and when I saw the young people—I was on the Lady Young and I jumped out when the caravan was passing and I went to join the team from the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. And while they were on the road, the young people who were resident in the housing communities along the Lady Young Road, came out in their numbers when the caravan was passing, and then later on, at the final stop of the caravan, which was just at the Never Dirty flyover, there were hundreds of residents, young and old, coming to seize these opportunities. So this Government has recognized that we have to decentralize everything and so they have been taking all of these different programmes to the different communities, and that is what the youth, health and career, education caravan is all about, and it is about engaging the young people.

Another programme from the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, the Skills for Work programme. National services centres, Mr. President, these national service centres have the objective, and this is very important, because we talk about losing our sense of national identity. In Jamaica there is something called Garveyism, which is a civics course taught to all Jamaican students in primary schools in Jamaica. And I am not certain that we have any civics course, and I have no name for what the civics course should be, whether it be “Williamism”, or otherwise. But we talk about civics, and when you teach a civics module, Mr. President, you really impart a sense of national pride, a sense of self, a sense of identity, a sense of responsibility to your country, and these are the little things that will shape our young people, shape our nationals and let them be

patriotic and loving to their country and thereby minimize the potential for them to participate in crime and criminal activity.

And so the national service centres have been established with the objective of fostering civic-minded, self-reliant graduates who are fully productive and contributing members of society, ready to make meaningful contributions to national development. And so in fiscal 2024, the Ministry will complete the construction of the Mausica National Service Centre and begin Phase 1 for the Beach Camp, Palo Seco National Service Centre. And this means that in the south-west peninsula and in the east of Trinidad and Tobago there will be spaces for young people to really build and develop themselves.

We heard in the other place the Minister of Education make an impassioned contribution when she spoke about the need for the national service programme, and this is clearly identified for fiscal 2024, and the national service programme aims to engage young individuals with a primary focus on civics, personal development and the enhancement of technical and soft skills. So it is not just going to learn about being patriotic to your country, but you are also going to learn certain skills so that you are employable or that you are able to become an entrepreneur. And speaking about entrepreneurship, this Government must be commended for its deliberate efforts to invest in widening the entrepreneur group or category in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: There have been conversations, and it is a reality, that there are certain groups or there is a perception that being an entrepreneur is exclusive to only certain groups, and certain people cannot become entrepreneurs and cannot own, run, manage successful businesses, and so we seek to dispel this

misconceived notion perpetuated in part by some people who keep referring to certain things and ensuring that there is a percentage divide in this country, which you hear very strongly coming from the Opposition Benches. But this Government is very clear in its thrust towards entrepreneurship, both through the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service and through the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. But through the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, and the Minister of Finance spoke about it, there is the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme, and I think they are going into cohort two. It has been oversubscribed.

I think the capacity is 200 persons and these have been oversubscribed. When you go in you enrol for a two-year programme, you learn skills, and then eventually you are given a certain space of land where you become an agri-entrepreneur. There is a Youth Aquaculture Project—and it is important for me to identify all of these because the young people need to know what are the opportunities available to them, because the UNC is drowning out or trying to drown out the good work of the PNM by saying, “no opportunities, the country falling down, the sky falling, pauperism”, all these other things and just trying to distract the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and block the young people in particular. And so I am identifying these clearly so that the young people are aware of opportunities for them. The Youth Aquaculture Project, it is an entrepreneurship programme, again, in which a one-year aquaculture certificate is given to students who participate, and this will start in October 2024.

We have heard about the Youth Agricultural Shade House Project, and they will continue, and they are in cohort two right now and we will hear more of that

coming later on from the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. The Youth Entrepreneurship Hub, this will be established in fiscal 2024 where the nation's youth are engaged in entrepreneurial retail activities, and there was funding that was requested to customize and equip two facilities for these youth entrepreneurship hubs. And then of course there is the youth business incubator programme that will be done by MYDNS, which will provide a physical space for young persons with an intellectual property guidance.

Little things that we take for granted, Mr. President, so many young people go off with this beautiful vision, but there are little things that are missing along the way and so their plan for their vision cannot be fulfilled because they are missing certain elements. And so in this youth business incubator programme, not only will you have a physical space for the entrepreneurs to be developed, but there are intellectual property guidelines, product development planning, marketing and legal services, and so for fiscal 2024, the Ministry requested \$6 million for the implement of this project. The Government continues to be of great service to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Government is steadfast in its effort to create a transformative and empowering landscape that fosters growth and potential for the young people of Trinidad and Tobago, because this Government is very aware, Mr. President, make no mistake, that the young people play a critical role in driving social and economic process. People may want to label young people as idle or good times or happy or non-productive or non-contributory, but the young people of Trinidad and Tobago—and I want to commend them, the vast majority of young people in Trinidad and Tobago have the potential to make this country even greater than it is. So once they maximize on the opportunities presented to them by this Government,

we will see Trinidad and Tobago ascending to even higher heights with proud citizens who identify clearly as children of Trinidad and Tobago who wish to be productive citizens, Mr. President.

I can go through a number of the things that have been put through here for the young people, as well, I am just going to quickly name a few of them. So there is the National—well, there is the implementation of the National Youth Policy which had been something in limbo for—

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

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing: Okay—which is something that had been in limbo for a number of years, the National Youth Policy, but there is now a National Youth Policy, that is 2020 to 2025, and it is to prioritize youth economic participation. And under this National Youth Policy you have a number of programmes, leadership training, the establishment of the National Youth Council, Youth Week. We know Youth Week has been happening. There was a fantastic celebration of youth on stage which happened at the Queen's Park Savannah and it was wonderful to see the talent of the young people of Trinidad and Tobago, because, make no mistake—make no mistake, the arts and the creatives, or being a creative and being a participant in the arts really is an avenue for self-development and for economic stimulation for the country and for the individual as well.

And so, in the Youth Week we have a number of young people coming forward to really put their skills on display and it was a fantastic one, and I want to congratulate the Ministry for that. Of course there is the YTEPP which continues to be a flagship programme in Trinidad and Tobago. There would be more refurbishment of youth training facilities, such as the one in Laventille, California, which is in central Trinidad, and Los Bajos in south Trinidad. The redevelopment

or refurbishment of the Youth Development and Apprenticeship Centres, there are three that have been done, Chatham, Presto Praesto; Chatham and Presto Praesto have already been—work has already commenced on those, Mr. President.

Now, we take for granted—sometimes we, the people of Trinidad and Tobago can take for granted the need for social spaces or home spaces, rather, for young people, and so the transition homes are critical. I know particularly of the great effect of the Josephine Shaw house for girls that is having on the lives of some young people who have such great potential, but family circumstances and other circumstances do not allow for the person to thrive, and they have been able to go into these transition homes and they are thriving and I wish to compliment the Government on its insistence—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:—of the reintroduction of these transition homes and the upgrade of these transition homes.

So there is the Sevilla home for the girls which will be completed in November of this year; it should be completed, and the expansion of the Ste. Madeleine Transition Home, the refurbishment and expansion of the former St. Michael's School for Boys. These are projects that should be completed within the next year. Of course, NEDCO continues to be a flagship enterprise as well in Trinidad and Tobago, and there are a number of other youth social programmes. So you have AMPLIFY, STEP T&T, Skills for Technological Economy and Youth Productivity in Trinidad and Tobago, and of course there is ALL SET, and ALL SET is limited up to age of number—up to age 35, and a number of persons who have been—who are over the age of 35 want to go because ALL SET teaches you to learn how to drive a tractor, how to manoeuvre a backhoe, and all these different

skills, things that we take for granted.

I used to laugh when my mother told me after she got her driver's license she went straight to get her taxi badge, because you need to learn how to be self-sustainable. If one thing does not work out for you, you have something else to fallout on, and that is what ALL SET is all about. It gives you some other training skills. And so this is a clarion call for the young people of Trinidad and Tobago to rally behind your Government, to take active participation in the governance of this country, to take advantage of all of the programmes that have been put in place for you courtesy the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

This, Mr. President, this is what the Government is offering to the people. The PNM Government is the best thing to happen to the people of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Lezama-Lee Sing:—contrary to the deliberate misinformation and disinformation put out here earlier today by those opposed to good governance, Mr. President. And so in conclusion, this takes—development of Trinidad and Tobago takes an all-of-government approach. So I would have spoken to some of the youth programmes, some of the entrepreneurship programmes, and some of the community programmes, and you will hear from the other Ministers who will speak about how transforming the Government's vision for sustainable development of the society into tangible programmes and projects fall under this budget.

We are in 2024, we are six years away from *Vision 2030*, and we must not allow the work, the drive, the vision, the passion, the blood, the sweat and tears that have been put into this *Vision 2020* to fall to the side. We saw what happened

with *Vision 2020* when the PP administration came in here and dismantled any form of plan of governance for this country, and we found ourselves in shambles in 2015, and the Government scurrying to pull together to try to build this country, Mr. President. And so with these few words, I fully commend budget 2024. I compliment the Minister and I thank you very much for allowing me this time to speak here today, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

1.05 p.m.

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to contribute on this budget. Thank you, Members, for the support and I want to start by complimenting the Minister of Finance for yet again presenting to this country a budget with a vision, a budget with hope, and a budget that will transform this nation into that First World status that we so strive for.

I also want to compliment the Minister of Planning and Development for the support that was given to the Ministry of Works and Transport in our submission in this budget. And also the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago for endorsing this budget and allowing us to do our part in the development of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President let me just start by giving an indication as to how wide the portfolio and the responsibility of the Ministry of Works and Transport takes up: We are responsible for the national planning of roads, drains, and transportation which includes, air, sea, and land; construction and maintenance of highways, major and secondary roads, construction and maintenance of major waterways and drainage systems, land reclamation, and coastal management in collaboration with

stakeholders; advice on, as well as, construction and maintenance of government buildings and facilities and Ministry of Works and Transport buildings and facilities; advice on maritime related matters, advice on the purchase, repair, and maintenance of the transport fleet of state agencies; traffic management, registration, clarification, licensing and inspection of vehicles, enforcement of laws under the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act; management and control of shipping within Trinidad and Tobago waters; registration, licensing, surveying, inspections and certification of ships, enforcement of the maritime laws, negotiation and monitoring of the air services agreement. The Ministry is structured with 12 supporting units, 14 implementing units and has 14 state agencies under its remit.

Mr. President, in 2023 the Ministry received an allocation of \$3,425,318,000 with an allocation of \$2,231,318,000 under Recurrent Estimates, and \$1,194,000,000 under the *Public Sector Investment Programme* for fiscal 2023. As with all Ministries, a number of challenges were faced in particular as it relates to the implementation of the recently enacted procurement legislation. However, based on practices initiated in the Ministry, as we pursue the implementation of projects with the mantra of value for money, accountability and transparency, I am pleased to report that we were able to request up to 90 per cent of our allocation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. President, I open with this because at the Standing Finance Committee, I wanted to put on record the effort made by the staff of the Ministry of Works and Transport and for that I compliment them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

1.10 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. President, the Ministry of Works and Transport has its challenges, but we are working consistently to bring about changes in the systems and, where necessary, transformation. Further, we intend to continue to adhere to the principles of good governance and transparency, ensuring the existence of clear plans and programmes in our operations to enable success in the execution of projects as we move forward.

At this onset, the Ministry has stressed the need to operate within a framework. We have taken the directives from the *Vision 2030* document and translated that into a strategic plan and a targeted approach for each sector. A major step during the 2023 financial period was the start of the comprehensive national transportation plan. Working with the assistance of the Andean Development Bank, a consultant has been engaged to develop a comprehensive national transportation policy, which will further be developed into a national transportation plan for air, land and sea, providing a road map for investment and sectoral growth.

Mr. President, I just want to remind the population, the national transportation plan was the plan of 1967. Since 1967, we have been operating with the last approved national transportation plan and this Government has taken the decision that it is time we review, have a new plan, and that process would have started after a considerable amount of decades.

Some of the other key deliverables include, under that plan, a high-level situational analysis of the current state of the national transportation sector, inclusive of the relevant regulatory management framework in the context of international best practice; recommendations for the establishment of a governance schedule and management framework to coordinate, manage, regulate the three

sectors, again, the land, sea and air; recommendations on an institutional strengthening plan for a training programme; coordinated national transportation strategy road map for land, sea and air sectors, which include the identification of a high-priority transportation operation and infrastructure project.

Mr. President, worldwide, according to the Global Infrastructure Outlook, more than US \$2 trillion of transportation infrastructure investments will be needed each year until 2040 to fuel economic development. In this global framework, I will now go into some of the work undertaken by the Ministry of Works and Transport under the road and drainage sector. I identify these, in particular, based on the area covered by the Ministry and the time allocated. And at this time, I would like to also congratulate the Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport, Sen. Richie Sookhai—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—and he will be dealing with some of the other areas. As I indicated, the Ministry is quite a large Ministry.

Hon. Senators: Yes.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. President, under our road sector, although we have a national transportation plan being implemented, we have devised a method of our road sector into three main pillars. The first pillar is the continued build out of our major highway net, the upgrade and maintenance of the secondary road network, and the execution of traffic alleviation initiatives.

Mr. President, let me just go into the highway network. Earlier this year, the Ministry was able to commission the Valencia to Toco highway, the first phase that we promised the people in the eastern quadrant.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And for those of us who would have seen the finished product and have utilized that area, that is the sort of standard we are looking at going forward.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: So, I want to again congratulate the team at the Ministry, the PURE Unit, for having that work executed. That is the first phase the Valencia to Toco highway, and we intend to take that standard all the way to Matelot, so we will have an upgraded highway all the way to Matelot. It will be similar to the Claude Noel Highway in Tobago, which is a single lane built to international standards; a single lane with shoulders, lights, areas that you can park off the highway, and that will continue until we reach to Matelot, so the people of that area can look forward to a continuation of that work.

Mr. President, the Churchill Roosevelt Highway Extension to Sangre Grande, as you are aware, we are on the package two of that segment and we are expecting that by the end of April in 2024, we should have access on that Churchill Roosevelt Highway to at least reach to Guaico. Works continues on that highway. That highway has been promised, I think, it is about 60 years now to continue that highway to Sangre Grande and we are on track, that by 2024, there will be an additional route to enter Sangre Grande. So it should eliminate the bottlenecks and so getting in, through the Valencia stretch, into Sangre Grande; three new routes to get into Sangre Grande. Mr. President, the Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension to Point Fortin—from San Fernando to Point Fortin—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—the largest project ever done in Trinidad and Tobago.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2024)
Bill, 2023
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

2023.10.20

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And I will speak a little more about that later on. This is something we in the PNM, we are very proud of.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: It is only the PNM that could have a vision for a project like this. And this project—out of the 1967 plan, this project was mentioned. The design, the route, everything was there in the 1967 plan. And, you know, on the opening of that, we did have a display of that document, that plan. I found myself speaking about it for quite a while and I had to ask them to find it. We did find the plan and we had it on display. But in that document, 1967, commissioned by the founding father of this nation, Dr. Eric Williams—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Great is the PNM.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—he envisaged a highway all the way to Mayaro. That is in that plan, the highway from San Fernando to Point Fortin, a highway from San Fernando to join Mayaro. And that was the PNM's vision. And it was mentioned again, in 1981, in Dr. Williams' budget speech, and today the PNM could deliver on that highway. That is vision.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Despite its challenges—and we will speak about that later on. Mr. President, the Diego Martin vehicular overpass, again, this Government initiated something called the East-West Corridor transformation plan, where the vision is to remove all the traffic lights, all the way to the new highway, so that when you are on the highway, you do not have to stop at traffic lights.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2024)
Bill, 2023
Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

2023.10.20

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: It started with Barataria, then we went to Grand Bazaar, we went to the Aranguéz, we did the Curepe. Our next stop basically will be Macoya, and then we will go on until we could get to the point where you can drive on the highway, just like you can drive from Port of Spain to San Fernando on a freeway. No traffic lights, that is our vision. And the Diego Martin interchange, again, is one project that we are hoping to commission, if not by December, by January.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And I must remind the population that when we did the Curepe Interchange, we did it for half the price that was anticipated by the previous government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And I did indicate that the savings on that, we will get another interchange in Diego Martin. So far, we are on track for that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: We got two for the UNC price of one.

Ms. West: Value for money.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: We recognize the challenges faced by our road network. The historical evolution of certain areas, rapid community development and our soil types are areas, we have stated before, and issues we continue to deal with. Mr. President, our work programme is not just about highways. The second part of our programme, as I said, is broken up into three areas, continuation of the highway network, upgrade of the existing road network. Under the upgrade of the existing road network, this year, the Ministry has accomplished over 500 road

rehabilitation projects. Never before has that happened.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: So what we are doing is that, if you go around Trinidad now, you will see road paving happening. You will see landslips being repaired, you will see bridge construction taking place, culverts being replaced because we know the challenge we have where most of our infrastructure has aged. A lot of our roads have evolved over time. Roads that were agricultural access roads are now major thoroughfares for commercial vehicles as well. Those roads were never designed like that and the lifespan of the roads have expired. All cannot be done at the same time but our programme, which started in January of this year—the Prime Minister did indicate to the population that a massive Road Rehabilitation Programme was going to be initiated. That started in January of this year and as we speak, there is road paving taking place around the country; as we speak. Normally, you will have a lull for the budget period because money has to be allocated and things like that. Based on the roll-out that we had, you have road paving going on around the country where we intend to rehabilitate every single road in Trinidad on a programme and on a phased basis. And even in downtown Port of Spain, you will see the amount of paving that is taking place in the city—

Hon. Senator: Yes.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—because we think that if the city—the roads in the city cannot be something that you are proud about, then something is wrong with us as a country. So we have taken the initiative to look at all the roads in Port of Spain, all the major cities and on a phased basis, we implement the reconstruction of the road network. So we have a major Road Rehabilitation Programme going on around the country.

But then we have the third part of the programme, which is traffic. We all face traffic from time to time and a major part of our programme this year is how do we start to address this traffic problem. We cannot build ourselves out of traffic jams. No country in the world could do that. A major part of that is how you have mass transportation because mass transportation is definitely an answer to traffic alleviation, because the more highways you build, the more road space you get, then that is an encouragement for more people to come on to the network. It is a demand and supply.

So my colleague, Minister Sookhai, will speak about the transportation part of it and how we intend to utilize PTSC and the maxi-taxis to improve the public transportation and the encouragement we will put into that. Because one of the problems we have is the efficiency of our public transportation system, you cannot depend on it and it is not encouraging to use. And unless we can get that, buying buses is not necessarily the solution. The solution is a transformation and that is what we are attempting, and Minister Sookhai will speak more on that.

However, in terms of the road network, we are pursuing a number of traffic alleviation measures, including, one, widening the Churchill Roosevelt Highway from Andrew Lane to O'Meara. That is one project. We launched that just recently. We have a highway network that operates three lanes all the way to that Arouca area but then it comes down into two lanes and then you have that bottleneck.

And then you have the access into the O'Meara Road. Arima is a very busy area. So we have project now where we will be widening the highway down—to take the three lanes down to O'Meara. And also, we are upgrading the interchange, that O'Meara traffic light. So you do not have to reach down to the

traffic light if you are going into Arima. So that is one project and we are widening the O'Meara Road, so you will get more access in and out, at least up to a certain point where the busy area—because that road has been transformed. It is a major commercial city now; major commercial city.

1.25 p.m.

So that is one project, the Churchill Roosevelt Highway widening from Andrews Lane to the O'Meara project and the O'Meara upgrade. Tumpuna Road is similar. If you try to go into Maloney, sorry La Horquetta. on an afternoon it is a bottleneck. You have two lanes on the highway trying to get to the light, so it is a major upgrade there. Because if we could move the traffic from the highway into some of the smaller roads and have the traffic moving a lot freer, because we do have some space where we can utilize. So it is an entire upgrade of the Tumpuna Road network. This is a traffic alleviation project.

Sangre Grande, we are bringing the highway now into Sangre Grande, however at this point in time we should reach up to Guaico. What we “doh” want to do is to create a bottleneck in Guaico. So there is a major upgrade of all the internal roads in Sangre Grande. So that you can actually, if you want to go to Mayaro/Manzanilla, if you want to go to Foster Road you “doh” have to come into the town and then divert. So we are building and upgrading and widening some of the roads that could take you out of the traffic, take you out of the town and take you to your destination.

The Endeavour Interchange upgrade: We know the challenge in Chaguanas. Chaguanas needs major overhaul. Chaguanas needs an interchange. At this point in time we have to manage a budget, so what we are looking at is to enhance that Chaguanas area so depending on which direction you are going it will be much

easier for you, especially coming out of all the malls, and so you do not have to make one block if you want to get back east and so.

So we have a project for that, and those are traffic alleviation projects. Munroe Road Interchange, again, problems in Chaguanas, so we are on an increment basis trying to upgrade the infrastructures in these areas. The Solomon Hochoy Highway from Chaguanas to Chase Village, again the plan is to widen that highway all the way to San Fernando. Because sometimes what you see, you see traffic on the highway before the Grand Bazaar Interchange, and a lot of the traffic is because when you have this heavy flow going to San Fernando, you are coming off the interchange from three lanes, you are going down to Chaguanas, but then you have a bridge that everybody has to bottleneck and then come back down into two lanes. So the idea is to expand and continue that on a phased basis. It all cannot be done at the same time. But this year, our projection is to move from Chaguanas to Chase Village, and that will free up some of the traffic in the Chaguanas area as well.

Maraval, another area that—trying to get out of Maraval on a morning or trying to get in on an evening is craziness. Because, again, you have the bridge there that it comes down to one lane and bottlenecks on either side. There is a project there that we should be starting maybe in the next month where that bridge will be widened into a four lane, and the idea is to then widen the road with three lanes, on a morning you have two lanes coming out, one going in. And in the evening you have two lanes going in, one coming out, because there is a challenge for land access in that area.

So, that is another project. San Fernando Bypass, the Tarouba Link Road, another project, and then the Indian Trail overpass there where you are trying to

give better access and safer access there. Those are the projects we have identified for this financial year to get started, and this will continue until we look at the entire country to make sure that wherever we can improve on the traffic flow, that will be done.

Mr. President, I just want to touch on something that I know within the—two days ago when we had the flooding in Port of Spain this is something that has been on the drawing board for a while, and it was called for again where people speak about how do we evacuate Port of Spain in the event of these emergencies? Normally when you have these floods, or it could be other disasters, there is always a bottleneck and lockdown trying to get out of the city. Our traffic management team has been working on a plan to evacuate Port of Spain. But this is not just a Ministry of Works and Transport project, a major part and the driving force is really Ministry of National Security with the ODPM. But we do have a plan, we do have a build out, a framework that we are trying to now plug so finally we can have an evacuation plan, because flooding is not the only disaster that could happen in Port of Spain and we will need to evacuate Port of Spain in a systematic way.

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

I mean one of the suggestions I saw coming out of the plan, obviously this is a framework plan, is that in the event of a disaster like that we use the Lady Young or one way, so you could have flow coming out. Because we have three accesses basically in and out of Port of Spain, and then you also have the Santa Cruz area. But because you have the Maraval traffic, you “doh” really want to use that to have more people going into that area. So we have the bus route, we have the Lady Young Road, and obviously we have the highway. And the plan is to manage

these roads with proper law enforcement so that we can—when traffic has to come out of Port of Spain the majority of the road network is used to bring people out of Port of Spain. So, there is a plan, a proper plan that is, and consultation is taking place to make sure that once and for all we could have that in place. This morning I spoke to the director and he gave me the assurance that he will have a draft ready for me, which then will be sent to National Security because they would be the ones who will be championing that evacuation plan.

Again, Mr. Vice-President, in terms of our bridges programme, we have commissioned a lot of—we have about 92 bridges on our programme that have to be upgraded in Trinidad, and the plan is to continue with that until all our bridges are up to a certain standard. We have a programme to eliminate all the wooden bridges in Trinidad. We do quite a lot every year. Last year I think it was about 14 bridges were done under that programme. This year we have another 12 added to the programme, and we are in the design phase for another 12. It is a programme that is ongoing until we could remove all the wooden bridges in Trinidad and all the dilapidated bridges, through the inspection process, that have to be rebuilt, we will rebuild.

Mr. Vice-President, under our Landslip Programme, that is a major challenge that we have, because of the soil type in certain areas. Because of climate change we do have this problem, especially on the central range and certain parts of the island where we are experiencing now in the rainy season some serious dry spells, and what that is causing is cracks on most of the clays. When we get the downpour, and we do get the downpour, water gets into these cracks and those increase the volume of landslips. We have had within the last two years, probably about 300 landslips, new landslips, being formed, and if you look at the

areas it really has to do a lot with the soil type.

And I know some of the engineers in the Chamber will understand what I am speaking about. That is why in certain areas you have certain Members of Parliament will just be complaining about the amount of landslips in their area. It has nothing to do with neglect. It has nothing to do with that. It has to do with the soil type in the area, all cannot be done. Landslips are very expensive. The Ministry, we use several different techniques dealing with landslips, because landslips are not one size fit all, and certain landslips—certain systems you use in certain areas cannot work in other area. Every single landslip you have to do soil test, you have to do the designs. We are not living in a country where you have one soil type throughout the country.

As a matter of fact one professor told me when he was doing his thesis, Trinidad is one of the few places where you can drive within a short distance and find three or four different soil types. So that is the challenge we have with landslips, but we do have a major landslip programme, this year we commissioned about 35 landslips, and these are major landslips. In the next financial year I understand there are about 33 landslips that will be tackled. So it is a major landslip programme taking place. I have the listing of all the areas, but in the essence of time it does not make sense reading out the areas that we are going to be tackling this year, because it is quite a lot of work taking place in the Ministry of Works and Transport.

Mr. Vice-President, in terms of the drainage programme, the Ministry continues to adopt a multifaceted approach to treat with flood management, and in so doing we have explored several strategies, including, again, for the first time, the completion of its Strategic National Drainage Plan to guide the work of the

Ministry. So the Ministry is not just getting up and saying, let us clean that river today, because we recognize with climate change, desilting watercourses is not necessarily going to be the answer. We have to have a national drainage plan at how we are going to deal with flooding now and going forward. So, we also have an upgrade for existing infrastructure through our programme of upgrade existing drainage pumps and gate inventory, cleaning of the river mouths to facilitate the free flow of water. Our annual desilting work to maintain capacity of and the execution of relevant studies to ensure that the solutions we utilize, are technically sound.

Mr. Vice-President, let me speak a little bit about the national strategic drainage plan, because this is something we have been working on since 2018. Trinidad and Tobago would have had a lot of studies, a lot of studies: the Oropouche Basin study, the Nariva study, the Caroni study, a lot of studies. The Ministry has a room full of studies, but there is no plans to execute anything, and there has never been any plan. So every time someone decides, look, we need to—there is flooding there, do a study, and we pay a lot of money for these studies and then they just go on a shelf. Nothing to execute. In 2018, again, I was approached to do a study, and my suggestion from the institution that wanted to fund the study was that you do the study, and if you accept the study and you are willing to fund the study, we will take it from there. Because what we met at the Ministry in 2016 was a study commissioned by the IDB where a loan for US \$135 million was taken, and we spent money from that.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: What did you say, \$135 million?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: US \$135 million that was approved by the IDB for flooding in downtown and other areas. When the IDB came in, and we paid for

this study, the IDB and the engineers recognized in 2016 that that study will not solve our problem, especially in downtown Port of Spain, because they came up with certain suggestions but there was no study ever done to Port of Spain.

You see the Port of Spain flood problem is what occurs because of the St. Ann's basin. A lot of people would think it is the Foreshore flooding, Independence Square flooding. It is a basin. The water from St. Ann's comes all the way down from the Savannah. So the study has to be a broad study, and that project failed. That project failed. So what we did, we told the Andean Development Bank, look we have all these studies here, we will give you the studies but you come up with a plan for us how to execute the work coming out of it. That plan has been handed to us, so we now have a document to work with. Coming out of the plan we have several projects, some of which were projects at the Ministry, the upgrade of the pumps and so. So we did not have to wait for a plan to start. We started. As we started to work with them from 2018/2019/2020, certain projects were identified, and that is why we came up with this to upgrade all the pumps in Trinidad.

Because we have pumps operating for 35 years in Trinidad. The flow on some of these pumps were like 6,000 gallons. What we upgrade now to like 30/40—20/30,000 gallons per minute pumping out. Because we recognized the water flow in Trinidad has changed, around the world has changed. So several projects coming out of those plans have started to be executed, and the areas that were studied, like the Oropouche Basin, several areas, we have projects now happening on the ground. All these projects being funded by the Andean Development Bank.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And this plan is what is going to take us into the future. We have just commissioned the PEU Unit which is a unit to manage the projects coming out of this plan, and one of their main focus is downtown. Because we saw what happened a couple days ago. Now what we experienced is a worldwide phenomenon, where you get a downpour of rain in a very short space of time and the infrastructure cannot handle that. So within a half an hour or so the water will run off, but it is something we have to look in terms of how we could minimize that from happening. How we could minimize that?

I do not know any part of the world that they can solve the problem of flooding. The Dutch right now they are suffering from the same thing that we are suffering and they are supposed to be the experts. We saw what happened in New York recently. It is around the world. However, we just “cyah” sit back and say this is happening around the world and we are not supposed to do anything about it. So we do have that plan, that unit is being set up now, and the major part—

Hon. Senators: *[Interruption]*

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. Vice-President, I know the population wants to hear about it. If they do not want to hear about it, if you could just protect me on that?

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: That is right.

Hon. Senators: *[Desk thumping]*

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. Vice-President, that plan now, the execution of that plan and a major part, because we never had a study for downtown and the western peninsula and the San Fernando area, the non-structural part of that project is to complete those studies and to get boots on the ground with solution for the areas. We cannot just sit idly by and say, “Port of Spain accustom flooding” and

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leave it like that.

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Mr. Vice-President, I am hearing somebody whispering “eight years”. I just want to remind the population it was those who were whispering who took the loan of US \$130million—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: “Ahhh haaa.”

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—spent part of it on a plan that that plan just had to go in the garbage, because when the lenders of the money came, they said “aye” that money cannot—that plan that you have “cyah” solve the problem. We had to dismantle the team—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Pie in the sky.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: We had to dismantle the team—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Sinanan, Senator, you have five more minutes.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

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

Sen. Mitchell: “Ent” Jack Warner built a duck pond with that? A duck pond by South Quay.

Hon. Member: Yeah, \$250 million.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. Vice-President, under our Drainage Programme this year—five minutes, I wish I had five more hours but I cannot. Mr. Vice-President, this year the Ministry, under our Drainage Programme, did 636 desilting programmes. Never before has that been done.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: 636. Mr. Vice-President, as we speak we have

projects, river walling, improvement of the drainage channels, all different types of projects. This year the Ministry was able to accomplish more drainage work because we anticipate what is coming. This climate change is something that is serious. However, desilting, river walling, is just part of it. We have to look in terms of additional capacity, we have to look in terms of how we can store water and all that is part of our plan. A major project going forward, I think work would have started, if not the preliminary is going on, where we will be desilting the river mouths: the Diego Martin River, the Caroni River, major overhauls on these rivers and this will roll out until we do all the rivers in Trinidad where a concentration will be on the mouths of the river. Again, that is to take the water off the land smoothly.

Mr. Vice-President, pumps and gates. We have upgraded so far Tulsa Trace pump house in Penal, upgrade of the St. Augustine gates, Sadhu Trace, gates at Trinidad Point, Woodland, Fyzabad—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. Vice-President, and all these areas are not areas that have PNM MPs, because we recognize these areas are prone to flooding. You cannot put a flood gate in Diego Martin because they do not have—that is not the area for that. But we are doing work in all the areas in Trinidad. This year upgrade of the Bamboo No. 1 pump house gate, Bamboo No. 2, Sadhu Trace, William Street.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. Vice-President, I know my time is running out, but before I close I must again reiterate to this country what happened on the San Fernando to Point Fortin Highway.

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Sen. Mitchell: Yes, come back to that.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Right. I just want to spend a little time on that, a two minutes. Mr. Vice-President, that and I want to use a word here so we could understand, that was the biggest corruption—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Yes.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—that was ever perpetrated on the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Mitchell: Yes. Wicked UNC.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. Vice-President, what is amazing on that, the company that was doing the work went and filed for bankruptcy, whatever term they used, bankruptcy, in March. This is a company who was giving the government in writing at the time, “we in problems, we cannot finish this, they moving time, they moving this”. The then government, between the time they filed for bankruptcy to the time the contract was terminated, paid them \$983 million—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Good Lord. Taxpayers’ money.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—and then the contract was terminated. But what is most important in September—

Hon. Senator: NiQuan.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—mere days, two days before the election, the Friday evening, election is Monday, took out a clause in a contract that allowed you to terminate them on that. That, Mr. Vice-President, whoever did that—

Sen. Mitchell: Scandalous.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—whoever did that and gave the instruction to do it, have serious questions to answer in this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And whoever was leading the country at that time have serious questions to answer.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:

Mr. Vice-President, this Government brought that project to completion. I must admit they opened two phases, one in 2013, because that was the time when the population started to up-rise on the highway. You know what they did, when the foundation went down on the road they tell them to put down something dark—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—and they went and they opened the highway. Up to today the highway has never gotten the final paving and “we pay” for that up to today. They opened another phase just before, an uprising again, and just where they have the function they put the final coat and everything else leave it like that. We just had to spend \$218 million to complete that phase.

Sen. Mitchell: Shame, shame.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Next phase we have to do later. Mr. Vice-President, I thank you for the contribution. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Well done, well done.

Mr. Vice-President: Before I call on the next contributor to the debate, I would like to remind our Members of 51(1) (e), silence in the Chamber while the Member is making his or her contribution. Sen. Sunity Maharaj.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Sunity Maharaj: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I would like to start off by congratulating the Minister of Finance for what is possibly the most disarming budget statement I have ever heard. By the time the smoke and mirrors had cleared the merry magician has gone on his way, but we are here today. And he has projected—it was the fourth of his eight budgets that he emphasized growth. And judging from geopolitics, the geopolitical conditions right now, he may very well surpass his growth projections for next year depending on how long that crisis in the Middle East lasts. In fact, people are projecting oil prices at \$150.

So to use his own words, he may very well have money coming out of his ears this year. He would achieve if it plays out as people think it will. Israel is indeed saying that they expect a long war. The question for us is, even if we achieve that growth would the sociopolitical economic conditions that are on the other side of that budget, would it be alleviated? Now, I do not know about the price point of the Minister's projections are. There is a point at which the price of oil and gas can go so high that it brings into play tremendous inflation, imported inflation, and you have to try to balance that as good as you—So there is an optimum point at which you really do not want the price of oil to go that high or you do not want it to stay that low. So I do not know what the price is that he works with.

However, I do not see anything in this budget that tells me the expenditure on those issues, crime, homelessness, a high import bill for food, \$7.5 billion, the illiteracy problems, I do not see how the expenditure allocated to those items—and there are others like NCDs, we are among the top three in cancer, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, diabetes. I cannot see the relationship between the

expenditure and a change in those.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. S. Maharaj: And the possibility exists that if we get even more growth this year, if more money comes into the country, some of those may actually be exacerbated. And the reason I cannot see it is because the Minister did not provide, and I do not know if the portfolio Ministers will, the strategies by which allocating X number of dollars to a problem fixes it. We need to know what is the strategy.

What I saw, the Minister's approach was that he had a cake and he sliced off each—I guess, every Ministry sends their order, what they would like to do, how much money they want, and people get a slice of the cake, some get a smaller slice, a bigger slice and so on. What we need, we need a targeted approach to problems that are urgent and burning so that they do not get worse and do not create new problems. What we need is not growth, we need development and what I would like the Minister to consider for his next budget is budgeting for development. You budget for development and you have to look especially at the people who are so outside of the growth process that they cannot be meaningful contributors.

And you know the Minister happened upon a point that is so crucial to the solution of some of our problems and I want him to think again about what he said and I want to quote him here. He was referring to the market box. He said:

“This will provide a guaranteed market for farmers, ensure that the money spent on food support actually goes to the provision of food and will boost agricultural production.”

Now that was a moment of genuine insight and wisdom. Because he made the connection between Government expenditure on a burning issue and how the

guarantee will change the equation. The Government giving a guarantee that we are going to buy X amount, it makes all the difference. And the seminal point with that is to revise the perception of support of vulnerable and underemployed groups, not to see it as funding and grants, we need to see it as investment. And if the Minister were to extrapolate from this point about the market box and consider how much money the Government is spending on food—Let me give you some figures.

Well we know, I think the School Feeding Programme, he gave us \$268.76 million, make it \$269 million. There is another \$68 point million in food for just the Ministry of National Security, the police, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, that may be counted in the growth box, and the Ministry of Youth and National Services, \$68.4 million and add to that all the money spent on workshops, conventions, conferences, celebrations. And the government bill, the amount of money spent on food could very well come close to a billion dollars.

Now if the Government, if the Minister of Finance were to see that is a substantial sum of money that can be used to move the economy, to move the agricultural sector, that there is a policy, it is policy driven, where you can say for every dollar spent on food by the Government—we do not have to go and force anybody else to change their minds, private citizens who want to do their own thing. The Government can say for every dollar spent on food X per cent must be local. And that is how the market box is doing that on a pilot project basis and that is what is going—When farmers can get—when food suppliers can get guaranteed contracts, they can go to the bank, they can say—And farmers can go to the bank and they can say, we need to get some freezers. Of course we know what the problem with farmers are, their food spoils, it rains, nobody buys, they throw it

away, you make a lost. And in that you are trapped in that cycle.

But when you can start to move from that low level of operation where you are just—you do not know if you are going to have money for the next season, the next crop season but you have storage, you have facilities and you have a guaranteed market—incentives are important, but guaranteed market is the one thing and the Government has it in its hands given the amount of money it has to spend on food, for prisoners, for patients in the hospital, for all kinds of people, the Government has that. And I want to apply that same principle to the other sector, which is the small and medium enterprises sector, which is a powerful sector where we are handing out grants all the time, and a little bit of this and a little bit of that and it takes people nowhere.

People are living from paycheck to paycheck and what we have to a significant degree in this country is a gig economy. These are the freelancers, the musicians, the writers, a large number of people who do not have a guaranteed salary. They live on—and they are very popular, some of them, you know, living the high life and so on. It looks so but that is part of—“you have to make it till you fake it”, right.

And so we have to see that category of people, that is actually our secret weapon in the economy, because this is not the kind of country that wants somebody to come and set up a data entry processing operation and tell us stay, behind the computer and punch in things whole day. We want to sing, we want dance, we want to think, we are people who like to express ourselves and we are prepared always to sacrifice for the things we love. That is our passion and we have to see that. That is a community, that is not individuals and we have to reconsider what we consider an SME.

Because most people who hear the Minister talk about support for the SMEs, they are shocked to discover that in many cases it is available to people whose annual turnover is the minimum of \$500,000.

1.55 p.m.

In some cases it is \$8 million. For us, the people who consider themselves small business people, they do not save \$500,000. They cannot get a bank account, they cannot get a—well, tell them about audited accounts. We have to get real, find out who are the people we are talking about. We call them micro, how could they even be micro if they cannot even—and give them a limit of \$500,000. We have people who have ideas and they become the burden on the State as we say, because they will not let go the job in the public service or wherever because—they do not want to be there. They want to be in this thing that is their passion project, but there is not the infrastructure to help them move from one level to another because we are not seeing them. We are seeing a template that we have and we borrow it and we keep talking about small and medium enterprises.

The other thing is that we have to be careful that bigger businesses are not coming into that space by setting up small companies, and they are the ones getting the grants and the incentives. So I think we need some penetrating analysis on who we are talking about when we talk about small and medium enterprises. We also need policy support. We ought to have a quota. Government expenditure on any contract, any business must say X percentage must go to small business. We are already seeing it with the school feeding programme where we have a lot of caterers. We have a whole community of caterers and they are close in their communities and they are sustaining their businesses. If we say that there is a big contract, we cannot just leave it to chance. We cannot just say, “Well, people in

the area will get". It has to be policy driven that X percentage must go to the SME sector.

We must also have protection for the SME sector that they must be paid within a given time because they do not have the resources to call the bank and say, "Well, I ain't get my cheque from the Government yet, so can you run me ah million dollars"? When they do not get paid they fall apart because they start to use their personal funds, they are borrowing money. By the time they get that cheque they just have to pay debts. So we have to put policy measures in place to protect the sector that is going to be the sector when we come to the point as we will, that the State has to be leaner that it is. We should not have to be worrying about having to send people home. People would be wanting to go home and be in their business and you can have a seamless transfer, but people will not let go these jobs that a lot of them do not like because it is the only source of a pension or a salary. That is why they are not working as hard as they can. It is not that they are naturally unproductive. It is that they want to be somewhere else. They are probably working whole night on their business, their sewing, whatever.

So the small and—I also want to suggest for that gig economy, I want to make a link to the education system. We are talking over and over about the need for transformation of the education system. We are putting children in warehouses. Are we surprised at all that disconnecting them from their life and the world and saying from the age of three you are in early childhood and you go right out, and you come out at the other end of this tunnel at the university and you know nothing about your country? You know nothing about how to fix the problems here. And so you always have to get some consultant from abroad, and this one, or that one. The fact is we need a transformation that educates us about

this part of the world, our country, our place, our region, and learn about the word “anchored” from here into the world.

Our education system is not doing that. People do not even know—some people live in the west and all they know is the airport. Some people in south, and people have told me when I say, “Why don’t you go to the Ministry in Port of Spain and the Ministry of social welfare”. They say, “I don’t know how to get to Port of Spain”. That is now because they live in these enclaves. This is a small island and we do not know each other. Are we surprised at the divisions in the society? And so, the education system is a critical instrument for getting people to know the country, each other and know the place like the back of your hand. It is not enough to say the modernization of the system is by putting all these books online. It is the same book.

What we want is an experiential education system where you experience the place, the people, the culture of everything. And I want to suggest that a meaningful project that we should all consider is to bring these creative persons, the writers, the singers, the dancers, the musicians, the pan men, the tabla people, the tassa, put them together with the pedagogical minds in the country—that is the people who understand education, the curriculum development, and let us take the information that we are trying to teach people in school, the history, let us turn them into audio visual material that has animated history that they could watch it and they can see my favourite person is Baucunar, the indigenous chief from Cumucurapo. They can watch their history. We can put these people to work. Again, that is another example of creating something that gives people ongoing work. Writers guided by pedagogical leaders can create material. There is material from the Caribbean only we can create, mostly, geography, history,

culture, all the social sciences. There are some programmes we can just buy wholesale, physics maybe, chemistry, various things.

Our children need to enter the 21st Century learning environment where they can touch the real world and they can have it transform on their screen and they will love learning. Our children are being drilled in their heads with the kind of rote learning. The world is more exciting outside. No wonder they are on their phones all the time. So the education system, we need a bold project for education. Not a version of what we have, and I am saying that there is place in that to activate the creative sector with the educational minds and create new content that not only we can use here, but in the same way people sell us physics and chemistry educational packages, we could sell them that. We do not need to wait for somebody else to come here and turn all our history as they are doing, and give it back to us and say, “Why, don’t you all buy that”? “You all the consumers, we are the producers.” No, let us turn this thing around.

So the other—I want to talk about the crime. Last night there was a murder right opposite me. It took a little while—and I think the family did not know—to hear the chilling screams. At first I did not link the two at all. I thought this was—because it was a street, the person was walking down the road and then this young woman was screaming. I only found out much later that they were related. But the chilling screams, to have that experience, this is a country of the walking wounded. The trauma we cannot—trauma breathes trauma, damaged people will damage people. To think that a thousand policemen, recruits and—the police association person said this is actually filling 1,300 vacancies. In other words, I have to wonder whether the vacancies in the police service all this past couple of years is not partly responsible for the crime problem we have now.

So my suggestion here, or my point here I should say, is that we are dealing with crime at the wrong end of the problem. We have to deal with it. This is an urgent—we need an intervention. The police need to be strengthened. Everything that we can do, the technology needs to be put in place. I did not see much of an allocation for technology, and I am not seeing anything that tells me that recruits—because the Minister probably has the analysis and the data that told him that recruits are the solution. But I would have thought maybe we need a lot of senior level people, great detection skills, but I do not have the data so I will not make that point. So we have to do what we can do right now. But just remember those young people who we are seeing, and we can go on Facebook and so on and we can see them, how they are talking, you wonder where they came from. We do not recognize them. You wonder if they ever went to school.

They have dropped all their language that they learned and they speak in, just cussing, “just me and meh dog alone, and sort of dah, dah, dah, dah”, and we want to know what happened to them because they were born little babies, innocent, beautiful. All the hope in the world, what happened between that and now? How? Did they go to school? Did they have teachers? They must have, because it is the law that you have to be in school. What happened? And they are going to have children. There is no stopping them from having children. What is going to make them the kind of parents that will bring up children even minimally better than themselves or even as they are? One person will have more than one child. So you can see how the problem is going to be exponential. We have to disrupt this. Whatever is causing this problem needs to be disrupted at root. And where is the root? The earliest point at which the State has a chance.

Now we can blame parents and we could blame this one and that one, but

blaming is not getting us anywhere with that because the parents—we do not even know how to help them at this stage. They are terrified of their own children, but the State has the magnificent early childhood care centres. We have 168 of those that the State runs. We have several hundred more that private entities run, and we have Servol and we have state-assisted. The point where we can reach little minds, and the point where the parents actually come—because the parents bring the little ones to school. That is the point. When they get a little bigger, no parent.

I want to suggest that we see in the early childhood care and education centres the possibility of an intervention where we can twin, not just education, but the social services where we can locate the social services at that centre so that when the mothers—and a lot of single mothers may be involved here as well—or the fathers, or whoever comes with that child, there is a location there that they can bring their problems. They are not going to come to the Ministry offices, but it is a nice gentle place to bring their children. They may want to talk, maybe they have no food, they have been beaten, domestic violence, they are in trouble, whatever it is, let us use that resource to also reach the parent because the parent—“dem” criminals out there, what do you think they are going to do with their children? That is what we face. There is no option except to deal as quickly and as strategically as we can, but the problem is one at source and in all cases my worry about the expenditure is that they are pointing at the problem, the symptom of the problem and not the cause of the problem.

It is the same thing with the NCDs, mind you, because, yes, it is a good idea to get the country moving, let us get T&T moving and so on, but the people who that is pitched at, they already have the problems. Their lifestyle has been set. The point at which you deal with lifestyle is from childhood, and again early childhood,

the school feeding programme is a critical programme for introducing children to food in an interesting way. One of the things children do not like, is they do not like fish because you know the bones, and parents do not want to even give them because of the bones. But you can make nice little nuggets and you could make little animals, and you could make whatever. You could entice them. They like vegetables. Some parents even tell you, boast, “my child doh eat vegetables”, but we can make cute things with vegetables. Challenge our creative minds, the cooks, the chefs to come up with things that children want to eat. The school feeding programme is where we can introduce the values that the budget should subscribe to which is local, healthy and environmentally sound when they are packaging and so on.

2.10 p.m.

Those values should be embedded in the use of the country’s funds. And on top of that, those same values, outside of the school system, should be introduced in every area that the Government spends on food. But I am saying when it comes to children, particularly that point of early childhood, we are overlooking that magnificent investment and resource for disrupting, getting that child—the other point about crime is we absolutely have to invest in guidance counsellors and testing of children. Who knows how many of these young people who are breaking out of school, cannot stay in school—you know, it has been documented, I do not have to go over that, but they have learning disorders, they are dyslexic, they have all kinds of things, right, and they need to be assessed and we need to treat the problem when we find it. We do not need for it to become a problem to the society later on. So the point is, if you have limited funds, we really have to think, where do we deploy those funds? We deploy them in the most urgent

problems and the ones that can have—be like solving a simultaneous equation, it deals with a few things at the same time. It deals with health, it deals with violence and so on.

So another issue I want to touch on is tourism. So I want to congratulate the Minister of Tourism. The numbers are coming up, they are not yet at the point of pre-COVID-19, but they are coming close and there is no reason to believe that it would not keep going. However, I think we need to break out a bit about the traditional idea of what tourism is because a very much unaccounted area of tourism is academic tourism, intellectual tourism, cultural tourism, outside of Carnival. This country is a source of intense fascination to academics around the world. They want to understand burial rights of the Orishas, of the Hindus, of the—people come to study that. They go through all the—they spend months here, they come out of it with a PhD, as—a PhD book on all about this.

They want to find out about pan over and over. They find the people. They want to find out all kinds of thing. So that is a—and so a lot of schools, I do not know what the numbers are now post-COVID-19, but a lot of schools have a study abroad in Trinidad. These are young people, a lot of them come from very well-to-do families, they come to spend, there is a lot of money put into their safety and security because we are a so-called crime place—not “so-called”, we are. And that is something that needs to be captured to add to what constitutes income from tourism.

Then we have other things, very deep investments that we have made. And I want to cite the Couva, Preysal, the sporting facilities there, where there is a combined investment of well over \$1 billion between the velodrome; the aquatic centre; of course, there is the Ato Boldon; and then the cricket, right? And not too

long far up the road, there is Brian Lara. But what we have—if we were to pull back, what we will see is that we have an economic pole. Those facilities there, that is an intense amount of investment in sport, and we cannot see them as just one sporting—you know, this one is velodrome, this is one is cycling, this one is—this is a combined investment and interestingly, it is located in a sports mad part of the country. I went to Preysal Government School and I lived in Balmain. And I can tell you, when it comes to sport and there is a match on, especially cricket, you do not even have to put on your radio, everybody is listening and you will hear the match, the coverage, anywhere you go. So you have a natural repository.

Now, in that area—I have heard so many times about the plan is to attract athletes. These are world-class facilities and we can attract athletes and the trainers and so on, and bring them. When they come to those places, where do they want to stay? Do they want to stay in Port of Spain and go there? Are we waiting for somebody to come and put up a hotel? Because athletes do not stay in big hotels when they have a long period of training. Those are locations to see the possibility for a bed and breakfast, to engage the community and find out who wants to get into that and help them and encourage them to see the possibility. But we, of course, have to be bringing the athletes, but we need to tie the resources of the community to the work that is going on there.

These are opportunities, these poles of economic growth that we have—and we have it in Chaguaramas, what we need to do first thing is we need to map the skills of the community, we need to identify what people have, what they need to have for what we are developing there, and we need to train them. So that they ought to have first take on job opportunities. Once it is there, they should be the

first people getting the opportunities. We should never lock ourselves into any contract from any contractor to put up a building and I say, we want the job for maintaining and so on. No, no, no, that is the kind of thing we reserve for our people.

And so we have to look at—bring a holistic view to development and this is how the diversification is going to happen. Bear in mind, it has been 50 years since diversification was put on the agenda by George Chambers in the 1974 budget, just as the oil money began to come in. And immediately the Government knew—and it was restated in '76 budget by Dr. Eric Williams who was then Finance Minister—that the money that is coming in from oil had to be put into long-term investment for diversification of the economy, and that was stated. Fifty years later, we are talking about it because we are still trying to figure it out. But I know the Minister had made the point about how the non-energy sector is thriving but I would like to see more details about that breakdown to see exactly what is being counted as non-energy sector and what each has brought in. I am not hopeful of getting that but I will still put it on the table.

I would like to just deal with two more things before—three more things actually. One is the University of West Indies. It is about now that we should be hearing about an update about the mini crisis that developed last year, when the university went with a request to increase fees, I think, by 20 per cent. That was rejected by the Government. And the Government also, at the same time, dropped a 10 per cent cut in the subvention to the St. Augustine campus. Since then, we have had all the ongoing industrial relations problems at the university, where the lecturers are now, again, threatening to withhold grades. We are hearing about the staff, people are leaving, that there is a high proportion of contract workers, full-

time lecturers are leaving, vacancies are not being filled and contract people are coming in at a lower level.

And so, at the same time—so I mean, we were told that a study would be done, cost benefit analysis of the UWI's operations and so on. We have not got that. And there does not seem to be any indication as where is this problem going to go. Is it just going to be a running sore and people are just going to leave? Is the university being pushed into a position where we will have to cut a number of its courses because, you know, the Government has said that is what it should be doing. I think they have about 300 courses. But you cannot be cutting courses while people have signed up for them. I mean, I would hope not. It may happen. But if they have been bringing people in—people coming in for three years at least.

So I think that is an update that we need but I heard in the budget from the Minister of Health about the central block at the Port of Spain General Hospital, the new block, is going to be a teaching hospital and that an MOU has been entered into with the UWI, I suppose, to operationalize the teaching aspect of it. Now, bear in mind that we have been told that UWI is to handle the Couva Hospital and Multi-Training Facility, that UWI is to handle the Debe campus. The operational cost I think for Debe—is it Debe? Is what? Two hundred and forty million a year. UWI has nothing like that. How are those things going to happen? These are massive investments and they cannot—I feel that they are being palmed off on UWI, I might be wrong. And if I am wrong, I mean, I would love to be corrected but nothing is going on.

And so we heard in other contributions about the state of Debe and so this cannot be—we are not so rich that we could afford to keep building things and having them, you know, like the hotel that—what it is? NAPA which, fortunately,

we were able to use it. I think the Cuban nurses stayed here. But generally, a whole hotel just sitting there. Remember, the British had Caura, built a whole dam and just walked away because of corruption. Well, we followed suit. We have, I never forget, \$200 million in steel still buried off the highway from the Caroni race track. People closed it and walked away. Caroni Limited, a whole lot of buildings just going into the decay. Right? Well, we did it with Chaguaramas, right, all the buildings in decay. So this habit—

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

Sen. S. Maharaj: Yes. So this habit that has to be broken.

My last point I want to raise—really, I think the Minister of Works raised almost all the points that I would have had to make, but he did not go to the extra point, which is climate change. We are afraid to say “climate change” in this country because we feel somehow it will distract from the need to get as much oil and gas, and now you stay on the gas path. We need to learn to chew chewing gum and walk.

We need to deal with the reality of climate change and not in any short-term way to say, well, you know—the entire civilization is not designed for what is already being experienced and what will come. It is not a simple matter of, well, get more fans in schools or air-conditioning. We have to reconceptualize buildings, we have to reconceptualize the clothes we wear, including the silly rule about women always having to be wearing sleeves to go into government buildings. It is about time we get over that.

We have to rethink where the—we have to have a policy, we have to have planning. We are talking about Port of Spain. We have moved the capital of this country in the past, we may yet have to move the capital of the country—the

capital from Port of Spain if the problem—sea level rise is occurring. We have an enormous amount of work that has already been done and is sitting on shelves. The sea level rise is already occurring, coastal erosion.

Let us remember, 70 per cent of our population live on the coast, 80 per cent of our economy resides on it, whether it is Point Lisas, whether it is ports, whatever, it is on the coastline of this country. And Tobago, almost its entire economy resides on the coast, in terms of tourism beaches. We have seen what sargassum has done, we have seen what is going on with the corals. Where is it going to get an economy from?

So we need long-term planning, we need to come to terms with climate change as a fact. While we argue the case with the rest of the world as to why—they created the problem. The industrialized countries created—yes, they did. Yes, they should pay but that does not mean that we are going to wait until they pay because if we wait, if we do not do what we can do—and the first thing is to come to terms, where are you going to put your house? Our children—if we do not deal with it, in our lifetime, our children and grandchildren will become climate refugees.

I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: I would like to recognize the maiden contribution by Sen. Sunity Maharaj.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I would like to start my contribution by extending my personal congratulations to Sen. Maharaj on her maiden speech, very compelling. But I would just like to make a couple comments in response to what you said.

Many people complain every year that the Minister of Finance's budget speech is too long but yet he does not cover all the issues that they are expecting him to cover.

2.25 p.m.

A budget speech can only be for a particular period. So we cannot expect to hear everything that needs to be said in the budget speech. This is why the budget debate extends for almost a month, and the Minister's colleagues come before the Parliament to explain what their programme is, and how they are contributing to the budget, and the development and growth of Trinidad and Tobago. So that the Minister of Finance may have had limited contributions in respect of crime, but the Minister of National Security would have dealt with crime.

We appreciate that crime is not just crime, so that we have a programme that is all encompassing and it involves the Ministry of National Security, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, the Minister of Gender Affairs in the Office of the Prime Minister, because we understand you cannot just lock up criminals and expect to solve the problem. So we do appreciate your contribution to that and we are working towards a comprehensive holistic solution to the problem.

Homelessness: The Minister of Social Development and Family Services will follow shortly in this debate. She would have dealt with some of it in the other place, and she will treat with that issue as she comes to speak. The food Bill, Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will tell you when he comes to speak that we do have a plan for 25 by '25, where we are working with Guyana and the rest of the Caribbean to reduce our collective import bills by 2025. We have made

that commitment, and we are assiduously working towards that to replace imported food with usually more nutritional and tasty local food. So we do have a plan in place. And NCDs, that is a focus of the Minister of Health, he would have dealt with it and he—in his budget contribution and he will continue to deal with that. So there are a lot of things that the Minister of Finance has not said but that does not mean they are not being addressed by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

We do appreciate that we need to improve and develop entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago, and we are working toward that, moving people away from jobs, do business, the Minister of Youth Development and National Service is all about that; training our youths, giving them opportunities, providing them with land and resources to get into their own business. So that is a focus of that Ministry and others. So there are tons of things that you mentioned there Senator, that would not have been raised by the Minister of Finance directly, but rest assured that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is working on it and trying to take a holistic approach to development and growth of Trinidad and Tobago. The Minister of Trade and/or the Minister of Tourism will deal with support for the artistes and so on. So, I do not think there is anything that you mentioned in your contribution that has escaped the notice and attention of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and as we continue with the debate, and as we continue through the year to deliver on our programmes, we will continue to keep the public updated as to what we are doing in the various areas.

So having said that, let me get into my substantive contribution. Every year, we take this time to take stock of what we have achieved, to understand where we are, and to chart our course for the future. When we look at successive budgets, our mission has always been to put measures in place that would allow for the best

chance for the country to face complex global challenges, recover in the face of volatile global socio-economic circumstances, and above all else, improve the lives of our citizens. I would like to express my appreciation to my colleague, the Minister of Finance, yet again for his stewardship over the last eight years, nine budgets. I would also like to express my thanks to the Minister of Planning and Development, for entertaining our request for capital budgets, and supporting us to get as much of our request as we can. And I will especially like to express my gratitude to the esteemed Prime Minister, the hon. Keith Rowley, for the outstanding leadership that he has provided us over the past years since 2015, during challenging times.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Under the PNM administration, we have witnessed a remarkable combination of steady guidance, sound fiscal policies, and unwavering stewardship.

2.30 p.m.

So where have we been? The PNM administration has had the responsibility to navigate through perilous times, characterized by drastic shifts in economic outlooks, with oil prices moving from \$100 in 2014, to \$25 in 2016, and there was a point in 2020 where the oil price actually went to negative. We worked tirelessly to right the ship and just when we were coming out of the problem in 2019, the global pandemic hit in 2020, and we immediately had to regroup and devise a strategy to deal with this new complex challenge that lasted for two, almost surreal, years.

In 2022, the Russian-Ukraine war erupted, and is still raging. More recently, the Israel-Palestine conflict reignited and this Government has had to treat with all

those issues and the fallout from all those issues, as we continue to steer the ship of Trinidad and Tobago towards development and growth. I can only say that I am happy that this is the Government in power during these challenging times, or I would be very concerned for Trinidad and Tobago.

Where are we now? A review of our economy shows that we are well on the way to recovery. The future of our energy sector is promising due to the critical work done by the Minister of Energy and his team under the astute guidance, leadership and direct involvement of our esteemed Prime Minister, who has led discussions and negotiations with titans of industries across the globe, as well as global leaders, on the world stage representing Trinidad and Tobago with distinction, and emerging with wins for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. At this stage, those discussions have culminated in significant advancements in our quest to finalize a deal with the Government of Venezuela for the exportation of the dragon field. Minister Young has explained how significant this is. And while Sen. Mark seeks to throw water on this advancement, we are hopeful that it will materialize in the not too distant future, and will be a significance fill up to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. So we look forward to that.

But even as we seek to extend and strengthen our role in the energy sector, we are also seeking to harness the benefits of renewable energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to the point made by Sen. Maharaj, regarding our concern with confronting the climate change issue, we are not shying away from that. It is something that we are tackling being led by the Ministry of Planning and Development. We do have a policy in place and we are seeking to implement the policy because we do know that it is a real problem and we have to contribute to the solution.

So, when we look at our annual budgets, you can see that this Government recognizes the importance of investing in our people. Those opposite would like the public to believe that nothing is happening but the facts are there for anyone who wants to see, to see. So, if you look at this year's budget you would see that our highest allocations are for the benefit of our people. In Education and training, the amount allocated is \$8billion, Health \$7.4billion, National Security \$6.9billion, Social Development \$5.5billion. Our people are our top priority and we continue to invest in them. So, where are we going, World Economic Forum describes the Fourth Industrial Revolution as:

“...a fundamental change in the way we live, work and relate to one another.”

It goes on to say, and I quote:

“The speed, breadth and depth of this revolution is forcing us to rethink how countries develop, how organisations create value and even what it means to be human. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is about more than just technology-driven change; it is an opportunity to help everyone, including leaders, policy-makers and people from all income groups and nations, to harness converging technologies in order to create an inclusive, human-centred future.”

2.35 p.m.

In the age of digital transformation virtual interaction is becoming the norm. Social media algorithms anticipate our wants and needs. We expect to receive goods within two days or less. We expect to access services immediately on our mobile devices. The demand for expedient public service delivery is no different. In fact, due to the necessity of these services our expectations that our needs should

not only be met but anticipated, and provisions made to ensure that that occurs not in two days, not tomorrow, but now. This is the demand being placed on our public service, as it is being placed on all providers of services.

Therefore, as a government, we continue to invest in our digital transformation efforts to improve the lives and livelihood of our citizens and provide them with efficient public services.

That requires of the Ministry of Public Administration, which I have the pleasure to lead, certain concrete and active and proactive activities. So the Ministry of Public Administration is regarded as the Ministries' Ministry because we provide services to the other Ministries so that they can serve the public. The public service therefore needs a strong fit for purpose Ministry of Public Administration. We recognized that in order for Ministries to function optimally we needed to strategize and reorganize ourselves. The Ministry conducted a strategic planning exercise with the assistance of the IDB where we identified three critical strategic objectives, creating an agile and client-focused public service, enabling a proactive public service culture, and championing a results-oriented and performance-driven public service.

At the Ministry of Public Administration, our mission is to improve service delivery throughout the public service by improving the environment for public administration, by building the capacity of Ministries, divisions, and agencies through learning and development, by building an electronic human resource management across the entire public service, by enhancing the client experience, and by providing appropriate accommodation for MDAs and their clients. We are in the process of reviewing and updating our organizational design, structure, and systems to serve our clients better and improve public service delivery.

However, even as we fix ourselves the work must go on. So permit me to provide some insight into what the Ministry has been pursuing and where we are going. First, property and real estate management. The Ministry has been steadily digitalizing its services beginning with the Property and Real Estate Services Division. The Ministry is responsible for the provision of government accommodation across the public service. We launched our property management information system during the last fiscal. This allows landlords and property owners to register their properties with the Ministry for lease or sale, and at the same time allows Ministries, departments, and agencies to record and track their requests for accommodation. This project involved the documentation of current processes, identification of gaps in those processes, and redesigning new processes that would allow for greater efficiency and effectiveness, the digitalization of 5,500 files, training and development of staff, and consistent stakeholder engagement.

To date, 151 property owners have been registered on the system and we are working with the Association of Real Estate Agents to increase this number. We have also to date registered 27 MDAs who we will be serving through the portal. And we have several more applications in the pipeline.

We have supplied the staff of the Property and Real Estate Unit with mobile devices so that they can have access to the system from the field so that they can instantly upload/request information, pictures, and reports. And I have now challenged them that since we have given you the tools to more efficiently do your work, that you need to reduce the timeline for satisfying requests from Ministries from where it is in excess of two years now, down in the first instance to six months. So I am monitoring that during the course of this year to see how we are delivering on that mandate.

And even as we seek to achieve that objective, we are also seeking to expand our resources to allow for more effective and efficient maintenance of our real estate assets, because this has not been an area in which the State has excelled. We build lovely buildings, we have not traditionally properly maintained them, and therefore they do not last as long as they should. But we are putting things in place to change that.

Starting in 2024, we have a robust maintenance programme that is planned to start recovering and refurbishing our existing assets. We are also digitalizing the services in the Public Management Consulting Division, which is the division that advises the State on organizational structures and staffing for all the Ministries, agencies, and divisions. The intention is to get more strategic in assessing and planning for our evolving human resource needs.

Next item that we are treating with, our next project, you will recall in previous budgets that I highlighted the complexities of managing human resources in the public service, having regard to the fact that the responsibility for management is spread among three main entities: the service commissions with the Service Commissions Department supporting it, the Personnel Department, and the Ministry of Public Administration. So what we have done was reestablish what is called the Strategic Human Resource Management Council, with the leadership of those three agencies involved to ensure that there is a coordinated and strategic approach to human resource management in the public service.

Matters of critical importance that the Council has been looking at and will continue to look at include public service leadership and development, improved public service legislation and regulations, public service performance management, a pet peeve of mine, and improved human resource management.

As the Minister of Public Administration, I am committed to the development of the right solutions to address these critical matters. The council has begun its work and has proposed some solutions which we hope to implement in the near future, which should have some discernable impact on the performance of the public service and the management of its human resources.

But even as we recognize the need to improve the way we manage and treat with our HR issues, we recognize that much of what dictates the way things work and often do not work, are archaic legislation that does not cater for efficient operations and service delivery. So among the three agencies that comprise the SHRM Council, we have started looking at the legislation with a view to modernizing same for the promotion of greater efficiency. So we plan to complete that work in this fiscal and to come to the Parliament as necessary with a suite of legislation for change for improvement of the operation and performance of the service. The objective is to design policies and regulations with our citizens in mind ensuring that we are innovative in our thinking and people-focused in our implementation.

Focus on change management and communication. As Ministries, departments, and agencies all undertake transformation efforts which we are all in the process of doing, there is a need to manage these transitions effectively. We know that we all want to change but do we want to change? For some of us, the status quo is easy to handle but for many of us, the status quo is an overbearing frustration. Those tasked with this responsibility must be able to manage the change effectively.

So during the last fiscal, the Ministry launched its change management strategic framework which included change management capacity building for the

following six Ministries: Ministry of Planning and Development, Social Development and Family Services, Youth and National Service, Sport and Community Development, Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and of course, Public Administration. So generally we have found that the participants were fully engaged and participated actively.

As part of this programme, we will be carrying out ongoing coaching with the participants on their chosen projects. We are establishing a community of practice in the public service on change management. This will allow members of the public service to learn from each other and build on the experiences of others as we implement these transformation programmes.

In the next fiscal we will extend this programme to the remaining Ministries in two cohorts to build change management capacity throughout the public service. In addition, this year we will be developing a change management tool kit that members of the public service, and even those outside of the public service can apply to their organizations as we introduce new projects and new services throughout the public service.

A particularly significant programme that we are seeking to implement this year is the e-human resource management across the public service. The Government is the largest employer in Trinidad and Tobago. As a whole, if you look at the public service and the public sector, the Government employs over 150,000 members of staff, across 400 organizations. However, even as we do this we have not successfully deployed a digital human resource management solution across the public service. The Ministry of Public Administration has taken on the mammoth task of bringing public service human resources management into the 21st Century. Over the last year, we have been laying the groundwork for the

upgrade and full implementation of appropriate EHRM solution.

Having gained significant experience in the PRESD and PMCD digitalization projects and having just found a home, we are about to deploy our digitalization team at full throttle to work with the other Ministries to expedite the digitalization of their HR records, to allow for an incremental roll-out of all the modules of our HR solution within the next two years.

We will be working with all Ministries, departments and agencies in digitalization of the HR records, reengineering of business processes, and implementation of the new system which we will introduce during 2024 with adequate support and training. In 2024, we plan to launch the core modules of the solution. The Ministry's approach to the rollout of the solution will be collaborative and user-centric. This will be done through the provision of dedicated resources.

2.50 p.m.

Then we look to improving the citizen experience and public sector performance. Improving citizen experience in the delivery of services is critical to our development as a nation. It requires understanding citizens' needs and tailoring our services to meet those needs. So we will be working with our key stakeholders to deliver technological solutions to improve citizen engagement and enhance access to government services. This solution is intended to give our clientele easy access to a platform that will allow them to register their queries and complaints, and receive feedback on pending matters. Efficient service delivery has to stop being about who you know and be an expectation of all.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Training in the public service: The Ministry of Public Administration is responsible for the learning and development of public servants, more so in a rapidly changing environment marked by ever increasing complexity and technological development, as well as man-made and naturally occurring threats. We need to ensure that our public servants are adequately equipped to face the challenges and deliver the services demanded of them. In this context, continuing capacity development is essential. We would have reported in 2022, in collaboration with the IDB, that we completed a training needs assessment which covers the entire public service.

During the last fiscal, unfortunately, in seeking to move the programme forward, we had two RFPs to identify a consultant to assist us in designing the—redesigning the academy for more efficient and effective delivery of training, and for the development of a more holistic curriculum. Unfortunately, those two RFPs failed. So that in fiscal 2024, while we adopt a different approach to further our attempts to secure an appropriate consultant, we have begun high-level discussions with a view to entering into a memorandum of understanding with one or more of our tertiary education institutions to propose and deliver on a more efficient curriculum with a much wider reach that can be accomplished by the limited resources that comprise our academy, and they will shift their focus to management rather than delivery of our training programme.

In 2023, we trained only 1,658 public servants. When we consider that the core public service is made up of 40,000 people, training 1,600 people in a year is insufficient, which is why we want to redesign and expand our programme, and that is what we plan to do. So we will focus on the skills our public servants need to do their jobs efficiently and effectively in the age of digital transformation. We

will be investing in skills, such as project management, change management, business process reengineering, innovation and design thinking, and user experience design to provide our employees with the skills they need to do their jobs efficiently.

As we digitalize our services, our public service employees must be equipped to manage these services in a digital domain expertly. Also, as we digitalize and we relieve our resources of the need to focus on functional activities like, for example, processing leave applications, we need to train them to think more strategically for the further development and advancement of the public service and of Trinidad and Tobago. So that is the plan for the revamped training programme for 2024 and we hope to kick off this expanded revamped programme in January of 2024.

Remote Work Policy: The Remote Work Policy is perhaps the most anticipated of all our initiatives, even more so than we hope that the electronic human resource management programme will alleviate the problem of delays in computation in settlement of pensions. So we understand that the country is keen to see where the Government is heading in exploring new ways of working. It offers the opportunity to explore flexible working arrangements in applicable circumstances. It also carries the conversation forward on what it means to work in the age of digital transformation. It offers the possibility of reduced traffic, fewer latchkey children, a better work-life balance, and if managed properly, greater efficiency.

Members of staff of the Ministry of Public Administration, just this week during my walk around, and last week, were telling me, many of them, that they have to leave home at 3.30 a.m. every day to come to work in Port of Spain

because they live in areas like Princes Town and Siparia and Point Fortin. That is no way for our people to live. So those members of staff, in particular, are understandably eager for the introduction of the Remote Work Policy and I would love to deliver this to them. But let me caution public servants, again, that the Government is not prepared to introduce a system that will reduce productivity. So even as we look to work from home, we have to continue our drive to improve productivity and the employees who want remote work need to commit to that vision.

Not everyone will be able to work from home, we need to acknowledge that too. It will require a change in the way we manage people because we will no longer be able to look over somebody's shoulder to see if they are working, so we have to change the way we manage. And it will require staff to embrace and assist in expediting the digitalization of our various services. So as the staff clamour for remote work options, they need to work with the Government to ensure that this can be introduced and can be introduced successfully.

So as we recently indicated, we are currently in negotiations with the selected candidate. And to the *Guardian* reporter who implied without specifically stating that we should have been further along in this process, since I indicated about a month ago that a successful bidder had been identified, I would remind you that the new procurement legislation, for which Trinidad and Tobago clamoured, requires us to halt the process of procurement for a month after the successful bidder is identified to allow other participants who wish to challenge to do so. So we were in a holding state. We have now come out of that holding state, which is why we are into negotiation. We are seeking to expedite that negotiation to bring the consultant actively on board to deliver this policy within this fiscal and

hopefully, once it is acceptable, to roll it out during this fiscal. I am working assiduously towards that and my team is in full support of me on this issue. That is—and I want Trinidad and Tobago to bear in mind that we are talking about a Remote Work Policy, not necessarily work from home and I will deal a little more with that as I go on to another area of our activity.

Workforce Planning: There is a critical need to develop and implement a strategic workforce plan—

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

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President—for the public service and the Ministry is working assiduously on that.

Enhancing government accommodation, bringing services closer to the citizens: The Ministry is responsible for government accommodation, as I said, and the State has built and acquired several properties. We are focused on repairing and bringing these properties up to proper standard. The main facilities that we have are the admin complexes—other than the buildings in Port of Spain—in Siparia and Tunapuna. We have started the refurbishment work on that and during the course of this year, we hope to complete that and to bring those facilities up to a proper standard.

In addition to that, we acknowledge that admin complexes are critical to bringing key services closer to our citizens. So the Government has taken a decision to expand this model of government service delivery and we have engaged UDeCOTT to deliver on two new admin complexes, the first in Point Fortin and the second in Arima. The Point Fortin admin complex will be developed using a building owned by the Heritage Petroleum Company, which they no longer need. We will refurbish this building in 2024 and provide citizens

of Point Fortin and its environment with a facility where they can receive key government services closer to home in a one-stop shop approach. The Arima facility will be constructed and we are hoping to break ground on this in January of 2024. Even as we design these complexes, mindful of the pending remote work policy, we are proposing to include in those facilities hubs to allow public servants, living in the vicinity of those complexes but attached to offices further afield, to book and work out of those locations periodically. So that will support our remote work programme.

Public service transparency and integrity: It is something that we are also working on. We are seeking to put in a platform that will allow people to anonymously, if they so choose, report on matters of concern for the attention of the State. And we are hoping to roll this out in 2024.

So as we continue to deal with challenging times ahead, it has become even more critical for us to put systems, structures, competencies and facilities in place to provide the highest quality of service our citizens demand and deserve. As the Minister of Public Administration, I will continue to take concrete steps, together with my key stakeholders and the team working with me at the Ministry, to improve the way we operate for our citizens, improving service delivery, accountability, transparency, integrity and innovation.

I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Avinash Singh, Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. the Hon. Avinash Singh): Thank you kindly Mr. Vice-President. It is my distinct pleasure to join this debate for this 2024 budget cycle. I want to begin by congratulating the hon. Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert, for his efficient, very effective delivery for yet another budget, his ninth for this PNM administration, geared towards Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth. I also want to take the opportunity to thank and congratulate our Minister of Planning and Development for the assistance to all of our Ministries in developing the PSIP projects and the path ahead for progress.

Mr. Vice-President, I want to express my sincere gratitude to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. The Hon. Haji Kazim Hosein for his continued guidance, leadership—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. the Hon. A. Singh:—and mentorship at the Ministry. And I want to wish him, my friend, a very speedy—and Almighty's blessings—speedy recovery to my hon. Minister.

Mr. Vice-President, permit me to also extend my heartfelt appreciation to our country's Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, for his continued mentorship throughout my political career and almost my 10-year anniversary as a parliamentarian. Mr. Vice-President, the multiple shocks from the 2020 to the 2022 COVID-19 pandemic, and we have heard most Members here reflect upon that time, but it really dealt disruptions. And the impact on commodity markets and agricultural inputs of continuing and new international conflicts, toppled with the those impacts of the COVID-19, really caused worldwide shocks and worldwide

problems, and not withstanding climate change, which is also causing a lot of problems on our food supply chain and this has led to higher food prices globally.

Mr. Vice-President, while the Food and Agriculture Organization showed some steady price decreases up to September 2023, food prices continue to be higher across the world.

3.05 pm

The surge in agricultural input prices experienced over the last three years, has raised concern about global food security and the rising food insecurity levels. In this regard, food prices, I dare say, are expected to—we are hoping that it stabilizes over the coming period.

Mr. Vice President, when you look at the regional context, food and nutrition security in terms of the regional context, the Caribbean Food Security and Livelihoods Survey, conducted in May 2023, revealed that 3.7 million people, or some 52 percent of the population of the English-speaking Caribbean, remain food insecure. This is a 10 percent decrease, when compared to 4.1 million people, in the previous August 2022 survey. The findings underscores the growing financial hardship and challenges, due to the rising cost of living, in the aftermath of that pandemic.

In this complex, socioeconomic environment that is vulnerable to climate change, the priority of CARICOM and national governments to make food accessible amidst these shocks, is very important and very critical and therefore, we really need greater collaboration across agriculture, social services, education, the finance sectors, to name a few.

To improve our livelihood and the opportunities and contributions, to achieving affordable and nutritious food for all of us—in fact, Mr. Vice President,

just this week, our hon Prime Minister was part of a CARICOM team in Canada, for a three-day summit with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, to fight climate change and address the impacts in the Caribbean.

Mr. Vice President, we have gotten some commitments—that team that went there—of CAN \$58.5 million from the Caribbean Development Bank, which is going to help us in Caricom, also Guyana, who holds the lead in CARICOM for agriculture. The work continues towards achieving the goals of reducing the regional food import bill by 25 percent by 2025. And there was another commitment with US \$100 million in support of the region, from the United States of America's Government, which includes support for the region's food security.

Mr. Vice President, the region was also able to host the CARICOM and Caribbean Agri-Food Investors Conference in June 2023, which will see a return on our investment into our communities. There has been significant progress in achieving this vision, this 25 by 2025 initiative, domestically, and we have seen some significant investments in various agricultural sectors throughout our country. And I also, you know, see quite a substantial investment being made now, in climate smart agricultural models. The National Shade House Project, which is being conducted by our sister Ministry, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. We also would have developed a memorandum of understanding on agriculture between Guyana and Trinidad. Some of these, I will speak a little bit later on.

Mr. Vice President, in the region significant work is being conducted in the removal of non-tariff barriers and the de-risking of the agricultural sector. In fact, Trinidad and Tobago, continues to support, the regional implementation of the CARICOM trade policy for animal and animal products; the Caricom regional

agricultural health and food safety policy and national framework; the 19 special sanitary and phytosanitary guidelines; the SPS settlement mechanisms for Trinidad and Tobago, and access to technical and financial support in these areas to help CARICOM's target.

Mr. Vice President, when you look at Trinidad and Tobago, our national context, while we accept that food imports are required—a major goal of this Government is to continue the thrust towards attainment of food and nutrition security.

In this regard, even as we fight poor consumption patterns, the Government remains committed to boosting agricultural production and the output, in the various subsectors and at the same time, remains focused on building resilient and adaptive agricultural system.

3.10 p.m.

And this issue, Mr. Vice-President, always sparks the conversation about our food import bill. In fact, you know, I have heard it in different spheres that while you judge the agricultural production levels based on your food import bill and the productivity of the sector, I want to profess here today, what is your food import bill? In fact, who contributes to the food import bill? And I want to put all my colleagues on notice here to check within your own fridge, your own shelf, your own pantry when you go back home. You directly impact the food import bill. In fact, downstairs while we had the fruits, you know at, lunchtime, the apples, the grapes, the pears. Not that it is bad, I mean, at the end of the day, we directly impact the food import bill. We have manufacturers—and I want to commend the Minister of Trade and Industry in this country. I want to commend Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon for the impact the non-oil and gas sector would have contributed to

our country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Singh: I really want to commend, because the manufacturing sector really drives the economy, our small and micro-entrepreneurs, our small manufacturers help us, but when we choose to eat different and alternative supplies of food, we are really putting a dagger to the backs of our local manufacturing sector, and that is why I am asking all of you to, when you go home, look in your fridge and think twice. Look in your pantry and think twice, and before you look to condemn and cuss the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the Minister of Trade and Industry, the Prime Minister about the food import bill, cuss yourself for the choices of the food that you consume directly impacts.

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

I dare say, we have some cereal manufacturers in this country in Point Lisas—I would not call any names, but choose the local cereal, choose the local pepper sauce, choose the local products that are produced right here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Singh: We have ketchup produced right here in Trinidad and Tobago that directly impacts the employment of our local economy. While you can taste the others, choose local to the greatest extent. So when you talk about the food import bill, when you dissect the food import bill, alcohol is also included in the food import bill. In fact, oils. In fact, fats. Items that are imported to be further processed and then shipped out also form part of the food import bill. So in dissecting the food import bill, my friends, my dear colleagues, let us look within to really make the change within first. Welcome, Mr. President.

Mr. President, in alignment with *Vision 2030*, the priority areas for development of the agricultural sector to 2030 involves supporting the increased use of modern and innovative technology, equipment and practices in agriculture, improving infrastructure for farmers and fisherfolk, increasing financial investment in agricultural research and development, providing enhanced incentives for the agricultural sector, improved administration of the fisheries sector, improved consumption of local foods and agricultural products, improved production and high value-added commodities, and increased regional export of local food and agricultural products.

Mr. President, employment in the agricultural sector is critical because as you go through all the farms in this country you will notice that all farmers cry one cry, that labour is always a problem. I dare say that the labour force in the agricultural sector in Trinidad and Tobago in the agricultural fraternity contributed an average of 3.8 per cent of the total labour force and this, colleagues, this suggests that there are serious opportunities for employment creation in the agricultural sector as the country seeks to achieve food and nutrition security and increase economic growth in the non-energy sector.

In fact, Mr. President, the latest Central Bank data shows our earnings in non-oil sector is doubled—and has doubled, and opportunities to expand the labour force is vital as we place greater emphasis on increasing primary production from value chain developments, agro-processing, import substitution and export. Mr. President, in accounting for the fiscal spends at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for fiscal 2023, we have been able to target areas including infrastructure, land tenure, improving irrigation in major food-basket areas, improving service delivery, increased focus on the youth in agriculture with the

Ministry of Youth Development and National Service taking a great responsibility in shaping the next generation farmers, improved access to grants for agricultural development and encouraging the adoption of technology and innovation to drive agricultural production.

Mr. President, the approach in developing the sector has involved several strategic interventions and I take this opportunity now to share some of these. In relation to the work that we have been doing at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries as it relates to legislative, Mr. President, and you would be very much aware in your different incarnation in relation to the work you have put down in relation to the Fisheries Management Bill, I am happy to report to you, Mr. President, that— I want to also acknowledge the hard work and effort and dedication that my dear colleague, Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon, would have done in relation to assisting the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in facilitating significant progress with respect to the Fisheries Management Bill.

I also want to acknowledge all the members of the joint select committee in relation to the Fisheries Management Bill because we have a finished product, which is now, as we speak, being delivered and consulted upon by the major stakeholders of the fisheries sector. And why do I say this, because I know my good friend, Sen. Roberts, you know, is very much aware in terms of what the Fisheries Management Bill means for Trinidad and Tobago in relation to the recent red card Trinidad and Tobago would have received. So we dare say, and I take the opportunity now to ask and humbly request the support of the Opposition and the Independents in getting this legislative agenda through all the necessary stages because the country depends on it.

Mr. President, we also look at the Beekeeping and Bee Products

Regulations, and I know every time I mention the word “bee” my senatorial colleague, Sen. Vieira, you know, he always reminds me, “Minister, you all need to stop spraying, stop spraying for mosquito because it also kills your very important insects in relation to pollination”. And, you now, Sen. Vieira, I am always so touched—I mean, you always give us excellent advice, and I have translated that advice to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in our bee abatement efforts. When the Ministry gets calls from members of the public in terms of a bee issue, and you all know that sometimes you have swarms taking place—and, I, no better person than myself, Mr. President, to talk about this because I know the impacts of being stung over 300 times and spending a good two weeks in hospital almost in a coma, but simply to say, bees are probably one of the most important aspects in terms of food production worldwide.

Bees are probably the number one pollinators, and when we talk about bee and the bee industry, what we have done is we have looked to review the Beekeeping and Bee Products Regulations but in a different context in opening the doors and removing these non-tariff barriers in relation to CARICOM for import and trans-shipment opportunities. So this opportunity will now be available to CARICOM. And I also say that I would have mentioned to the administration at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, every time you get a bee call now, you know, call someone in the apiary industry first. Let them respond because they can harvest the bees and put it on their agricultural project or their farm, rather than going and spraying and outright killing the bees. Of course, there are certain instances where there are lives at stake, human life at stake, and we do appreciate the need for, you know, taking the necessary steps to ensure human life is preserved.

Mr. President, we are also looking at revamping the state land management. As you know, having served some time there, state land management is critical for this country. It is critical for the farming industry, critical for every industry, because everything in this country that talks about development starts with some form or sort format where land is concerned, whether it is the brand new spanking highway that I was so fortunate to drive on thanks to the Ministry of Works and Transport and Minister Rohan Sinanan, last week—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senators:—or all of the industrial parks that Minister Gopee-Scoon is actively pursuing throughout the length and breadth of this country, or my friend, Sen. Hislop in Tobago, the agricultural interests he has there, and my dear friend, Sen. Browne, who also has agricultural and, you know, fisheries expertise. It starts with land, both inland, and whether or not the land is under the water. And, Mr. President, you are more experienced in this area to know all of these land matters require a certain degree of management, and the Ministry of Agricultural, Land and Fisheries recognizes this and we are certainly looking to treat with the provisions in the Miscellaneous Provisions State Land—and State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act, as we go forward in this year to treat with some of the issues, treat with some of the land tenure issues our farmers have been crying out for in terms of accessing their leases to be able to be registered farmers to then access all incentives and subsidies.

Mr. President, agriculture cannot take place without finance, and related to finance, the provision of capital to farmers and fisherfolk is a longstanding policy of this PNM administration, dating back to even the creation of the Agricultural Credit Bank, which was established in Tobago in 1963 in response to Hurricane

Flora. Today, the Agricultural Development Bank has granted half a billion dollars in loans over the last period—in the five years, October 2019 to August 2023. And I want to repeat that, over half of a billion dollars have been made available, very reasonable interest loans, 3 to 5 per cent to our farmers and fishermen throughout our tenure to assist in their production, to assist in their upgrades, to assist in their agricultural projects. Mr. President, \$527 million—\$527,247,872.43 made available in the last five years to our agricultural sector.

Mr. President, the Agricultural Development Bank contributes to sector development and this is evident, and when you break down the level of investment provided by a sector, the agricultural services sector would have occupied \$149million in the last five years; food crop production and expansion, \$206-plus million in the last five years; the fisheries sector, \$65.9 million; and very, very interestingly, and I am happy to report, the agro-processing industry, which is now taking route and expanding, \$51.5 in the last five years. So, Mr. President, the Agricultural Development Bank held the substantial market share averaging 68.35 per cent of agricultural credit market and provided 755 loans to farmers, the value of \$94million this year alone. And out of the 755 loans, 339 were for development of food crops, 267 were for the approved agricultural services, and this is includes marketing, machinery, equipment, and 106 for the fisheries subsector.

So, Mr. President, over the fiscal 2023, the ADB continues to support the involvement of youth in the agricultural sector in alignment with the Government's priority focus. The increased participation of youth, and this is the age 18 to 35, and women, is critical to the development of the agricultural sector. And over the period October 2022 to August 2023, the ADB approved 216 loans valued at approximately \$28.2 million targeting youth. Additionally, 144 loans valued at

approximately \$17.3 million were approved for women, accounting for 19.1 per cent of the bank's approvals over this period. Mr. President, mitigation of the impact of disasters in our farming community is also a main priority for the Agricultural Development Bank, and 29 loans valued at over \$2 million—just under \$2million to clients affected by disasters which ranged from adverse weather conditions to even COVID-19 pandemic would have assisted some of these persons.

The banking mobile unit also, Mr. President, not all our farmers are inclined to come to a bank and, you know, interact with staff and whatnot at the establishment, and we have been able to really target our rural farmers utilizing this mobile banking unit. In fact, not to copy but to compliment the work of the Ministry of Works and Transport in also having their mobile unit visit rural communities and offer all Government's goods and services that the Ministry has to offer, so too the mobile banking unit of the Agricultural Development Bank continues to go through the country and, you know, reach the persons who would not normally come to the bank.

3.25 p.m.

When you talk about markets and marketing, Mr. President, the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Company, NAMDEVCO, remains committed in providing critical marketing services to our stakeholders along the value chain, and maintaining oversight of three packing houses, four wholesale markets, nine farmers markets and two new farmers markets that were established this year, one in Moruga/Tableland and one in La Horquetta.

Mr. President, these farmers markets, the vending spots increased from 357 in '22, to 391 in '23, and we intend to ensure that grows as we go forward. What

is also important, the consumer flow also increased during the period from a monthly average of 13,000 to 19,000 in 2023, and now our monthly average consumer flow through these markets is 21,000 persons per month in these markets in 2023 and it is expected to grow. And I want to thank all members who utilize our NAMDEVCO Farmers Market, as you know it is extremely positive where you the consumer get to interact with your producer, you can question your producer, you can ask them what chemicals did they use, if at all, if it is organic and it is across the board throughout the length and breadth of this country and is successful; very, very successful.

Mr. President, when you look at the commodity value chain development, agro-processing and value chain development services to the agribusiness sector were significant for NAMDEVCO in fiscal '23. The number of agro-processes and clients accessing the services from the NAMDEVCO Piarco Packinghouse doubled in fiscal '23 and exports to the United States increased significantly. So I really want to commend the work—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—of NAMDEVCO led by the chairman and the board and CEO and all the staff at NAMDEVCO who continue to work in the interest of all of our farmers so that we access those foreign markets, our local farmers can export and generate foreign currency. The processing and delivery services, Mr. President, did not stop there alone, this NAMDEVCO initiative allowed our local farmers to access some of the major foreign franchise restaurants in Trinidad and thereby when you go to these restaurants you will get locally produced commodities being served in some of these facilities.

Mr. President, I am most happy to hear about the reintroduction of the

Market Box Initiative to be led by a very instrumental Ministry, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and NAMDEVCO. This will really provide a guaranteed market as my dear colleague Sen. Maharaj would have mentioned, for the farmers, and aid in boosting agricultural production in targeted commodities including root crops and vegetables, even reached down to eggs and chicken, local meat, Mr. President. Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and NAMDEVCO successfully previously partnered, as most MPs will know, most persons in the public will know, during that Phase 1 and Phase 2 initiative, 2020/2021, utilizing the fresh local produce during the pandemic. It was very welcoming and I dare say, hundreds of farmers from almost every constituency benefited from that programme because they were able to access the market, the guaranteed price, the guaranteed market and be able to employ persons in their communities and they were really thankful and grateful, thanks to this PNM administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: So, Mr. President, we welcome the continuation of this project and the farmers simply have asked me, the 30,000 registered farmers in this country have asked me to say thank you to this PNM administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, when you look at risk mitigation and adaptation—you know, yesterday in the Standing Finance Committee in the other place, Mr. President, you know, a lot of questions came about risk mitigation, flood relief compensation, incentives, and subsidies.

3.30 p.m.

And this, Mr. President, has always engaged the attention of this administration, the Agricultural Incentive Programme, the disaster assistance flood control programme, the pest and disease management programme, and the programme to treat with praedial larceny; all interlinked and all extremely critical and all being pursued by this administration.

When you look at the Agricultural Incentive Programme, over the last five years, 2019 to 2023, a total of \$107,983,659.33 was paid to farmers in support of their agricultural activities. For fiscal '23 alone, payments amounted to \$19,582,892.19. On average, over the last five years, they amount to a yearly payment of \$21,596,000 and this figure is expected to increase in going forward, in terms of—because we are currently reviewing the entire Agricultural Incentive Programme, which affects both farmers and fisherfolk. We are currently reviewing to see how we can upgrade those because some of those incentives are quite old and I would daresay expired in relation to the 21st Century.

Mr. President, the disaster assistance model assists farmers and fisherfolk to restart their activities in the shortest possible time after a natural disaster and over the five years, Trinidad and Tobago has been impacted by weather-related hazards, and we all know, such as strong winds, floods and drought-like conditions. The average payment made under the Ministry's disaster assistance programme for the last five fiscal periods, 2019 to 2023, was \$28,463,170.46. And, Mr. President, for fiscal '23 alone, payments in compensation to farmers was \$8,350,024. And I want to say, Mr. President, at present, all claims received by the accounts division of the Ministry for fiscal 2023 have been paid out to farmers and fisherfolk.

So, Mr. President, persons question, in terms of this programme, it is not an entitlement, it is not compensation, it is a relief offered to farmers. After you are at

the worst end of a natural disaster, you get flood. This programme is made available by the taxpayers of this country for you, as a farmer, to not get compensation, 100 per cent compensation, but it is available for you to get back on your feet and start your production over. And the payment ranges from, you know, all different sums based on your agricultural production. Of course, the criteria is you have to be a registered farmer, and proof or evidence of the damage of the crop must be seen within the two-week period.

So simply put, a farmer, you get flood; you visit your county office where you live; you make your claim; you produce your supporting documentation, whether it be your ID card, your farmers' registration card; and subsequently, you will be contacted by the county officer in charge of your area. This person will visit your plot, verify that it was really five acres of pawpaw you lost and whether or not it is really damaged, and it is not on a hill. Because we have seen under United National Congress' tenure where farmers have been paid compensation and when audits were conducted, farmers' land size changed, you know, overnight and some farmers were on the hilly terrains of Paramin and Tabaquite where some of the locations, you know it is not flood prone, but also they, you know—some questionable payments were made, especially in some areas under that 2010—2015 period. I guess it is thank God for the People's National Movement coming into office. We have removed that level of corruption in that area and we strive for the best spend of the taxpayers' dollars.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, the impact of pests and diseases on crops and livestock production continues to challenge all farmers throughout the world. At the same time, it is natural occurrence felt around the world. Integrated pest

and disease management interventions are critical in restricting the potential of spread and the importation and transmission of disease. Integrated pests and disease management interventions are critical to ensure that the potentially widespread threats of pests and the importation and transmission of diseases remain under control due its potential threat to the agricultural sector.

And when you talk about the pests and disease, Mr. President, I think every child, boy, girl, everybody in this country now knows what the Giant African Snail is. Mr. President, the threat of the Giant African Snail has become an increasing issue for farmers across the country, in fact, I daresay across the world. It is the most invasive, it is the most destructive pest in the world, Mr. President, and we have sought to create projects around alleviation and risk mitigation.

Yesterday I would have reported the procurement of 8,000 packets of the snail bait that will be distributed to farmers and residents, free of charge, courtesy the Government in due course. In the coming weeks, members of the public can see increased activity. But, you know, I heard my friend today, “Avinash, you know, you would not believe the amount of Giant African Snails I have in my compound”—Sen. Lyder. And I said, “Sen. Lyder, you know, during the crop season, the population is quite low”, because this—if you know how the life cycle of this pest is, in the rainy season they tend to balloon. They tend to multiply by the millions and it is nature, it is God’s work. But what we have done is, we have put mechanisms in place to time the life cycles of the pests and thereby create the enabling environment for our farmers to access the insect bait that will be distributed to assist.

And for those who want to, you know—iron phosphate, metaldehyde, these are some of the treatments you can use. And if you do not want to spend some

much money, simple salt water solution or chlorinated water and you can try to assist yourself. But I am very, very empathetic, I sympathize with the farming population because I know the destruction it can do and I give you the assurance by this Government, we are taking all steps to ensure that we reduce the population and thereby we control this pest once and for all.

Mr. President, we turn to the vaccine—the rabies vaccination efforts of this Government. I cannot tell you the last time a government did a widespread rabies vaccination drive, certainly not during 2010 and 2015. This Government would have went on a national campaign and we vaccinated—10,338 animals vaccinated in 832 farms throughout the entire length and breadth of the country.

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

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Thank you, Mr. President. And when you look to witches' broom disease in the cocoa industry, we have a programme geared towards that.

Praedial larceny: This is a topic that always tend to cause much harm and despair, and I am in support of the farmers when it relates to the destruction praedial larceny causes because it affects their bread and butter issues. I always use the opportunity to say, a bunch of plantain to a farmer is no different from the item on somebody's grocery shelf, the vehicle in some company's garage or anything of value to anybody. Because when a farmer loses that bunch of plantain—in fact, he would have already did his—because a farmer is an accountant, a scientist, a doctor, he would have already accounted for the sale of that bunch of plantain to buy groceries or books for his children. And when you go and interfere with a farmer's bunch of plantain, it is not yours, leave it alone. I am calling on farmers to please, you know, work with us, report and let us work

together to really deal with this praedial larceny issue.

And we have made significant steps in fiscal '23 recruiting 76 officers, comprising 61 constables, seven corporals, six sergeants and two inspectors to fully ensure that the strengthening of the unit takes place. These persons are all currently active in training and they will be out in terms of the public very shortly.

We have procured four vehicles at the cost \$1.5 million that will be delivered in this fiscal to assist in the mobility. We also looked at all the locations, the Chase Village, Craignish office that will be rehabilitated and refurbished for our officers to have proper housing and to effectively conduct their work.

And, Mr. President, I also want to thank my colleague, Minister Bacchus, for the drone under your tenure, Mr. President. You know, the drone is there for us at the Surveys and Mapping Division to assist in land management, in terms of the Land Surveyors Act, to really implement spatial information management which utilizes the technology. NAMDEVCO also utilizes the drone technology and digital initiatives to monitor their farmers, to ensure that farmers are, you know—to give some level of predictability, in terms of production levels.

Mr. President, we have conducted training exercises. It continues in 2024; 4,285 persons trained in all various activities around agriculture. We continue our collaborations with ECA, FAO, CARDI and the EU. We have made significant strides in terms of our collaboration for risk mitigation, climate-smart technology by the direct intervention of these agencies.

Mr. President, Guyana: I have spent some time already talking about that, in terms of the country's refocused approach to increasing our local rice production. We have purchased 200,000 pounds of grade 1 high-yielding varieties of rice seeds, which were distributed free of charge to all of our rice farmers. I am happy

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to report that close to 1,000 acres of rice is currently on the ground—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—and we will reaping. It will not be used for dog rice. I give the assurance. Unlike the UNC's tenure, they used it for dog rice. We are not going to be using it for that. Mr. President, 5,000 plants bought from, got, donated from Guyana.

Mr. President, a lot is going on in agriculture and what I want to close and say is that, I reiterate in fiscal 2024, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will continue on the path of strengthening the agricultural sector. As we seek to increase sustainable food production, we intend to reduce our food import by creating the enabling environment and I daresay I want Members to take what I say as serious. Look at your grocery shelves and you be the judge. We intend to support our increased local demand for locally grown foods. I encourage people to support our NAMDEVCO's Farmers' Markets.

And in closing, Mr. President, what I want to say, I want to really thank the Ministry of Finance for understanding the needs and giving us an increased budgetary allocation. I did not even get the chance to go into infrastructure. Thank you for the \$150 million that will be used under Palo Seco to assist the farming population in infrastructural works, access roads, irrigation channels and so on. And I daresay this is probably one of the best budgets in my 10 years in this Parliament. Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Dillon-Remy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy: Thank you, Mr. President, and good day to you

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Bill, 2023
Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy (cont'd)

2023.10.20

and to all my colleagues in the Chamber and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I am grateful and humbled to contribute to the Appropriation (Financial Year 2024) Bill, 2023, otherwise known as the 2024 budget, a Bill which:

“...seeks to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2024 by authorising the issue from the Consolidated Fund...of Fifty Thousand, Seven Hundred and Forty-Five Million, Two Hundred and Fifteen Thousand, Nine Hundred and Ninety-One Dollars...”

Before I go any further, I would just like to congratulate Sen. Sunity Maharaj on her maiden contribution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: And I would like to also let you know, Mr. President, about an experiment that I undertook. I wanted to go through this budget—I had to go through it with a fine-tooth comb. So I started with—I put lenses on my glasses. The first lens I put on was red. And under the red lens, I saw sliced bread jumping up and the thing looked so good, the best thing after sliced bread. So, I said, okay, let me try another lens. I looked through some yellow lens and all I saw was darkness. Nothing good was in this budget. So I decided, Mr. President, with this experiment that I will try to get some clear lenses. And when I got the clear lenses, Mr. President, I was able to see things in the budget that were good, I was able to see things in the budget that were not so good—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy:—and I was able to see things that could possibly improve. And, Mr. President, this is what I have heard from all sides of the Benches so far, and I do really thank my colleagues from the Independent Bench

who tried to see the budget with clear lenses.

3.45 p.m.

What is there that is good say it, and have no problems with saying it. You may be called whatever, say it. What is not good say it! Again, you may be called whatever, but at the end of the day please make sure that we look at what is there and seek to look at it—listen, it is Trinidad and Tobago that we are dealing with. So I would like to—probably, Mr. President, you could try the experiment too.

As I was preparing for this budget, it was impressed upon me to consider this budget amidst not only the proposed measures of the Bill before us, and the planned implementation thereof, nor solely against the backdrop of what currently holds in each department or facet of our social and financial construct as a country, but rather to anatomize the overriding objective of this budget which seeks to, and according to the Minister of Finance, “the budget seeks to Build Capacity for Diversification and Growth”.

And in examining each of the areas I wish to highlight I seek to take a more panoramic view of the first word stated in the overriding objective, and understandably where most of the effort should and will be concentrated on, in realizing the aim of this budget, and that is in building. I want to concentrate on building our society. Regardless of the current state, my understanding where we can build from today, or some people will say we will continue building, but there are some people who will think that we have to get to the ashes before we can build, I am not of that view. I think that regardless of where we are right now, we can build on what we have.

I appreciate the Minister of Public Admin, her contribution where she talked about what is happening within the public service, the digitalization of the public

service, and putting in change management systems, work-from-home policies, et cetera. Minister, I wish you could use the Parliament as an example to show people how it is you can work in the public sector efficiently, and not going anywhere to learn about it but right here. But what I have understood has happened within the Parliament in terms of the staff, is that the people are inculcated with some values that are considered appropriate for nation. Rather than it is, this is what I am doing for whoever is in power at the point in time, they are about nation building.

And as you seek to develop systems in the public sector, I am just asking please make sure that we think of developing the people within the public sector, not just in the systems. The people, I am talking about in terms of development, in terms of what kind of person do you want to have. What kind of person do you want to have in a country like Trinidad and Tobago? Yes, creative and innovative but they must have the values to go with it. So I am just asking as you do the public sector management and the change management, please ensure that we seek to build robust individuals in it.

Mr. President, it is the first time I am starting a budget contribution talking about crime and that is because, as I sought to look at what are our significant problems that we have in Trinidad and Tobago, and how is this \$59 billion budget going to deal with it, in terms of our spending over the next year, all I could think of is the impact that crime is having on our society. And we enter another budget where the word “crisis” lingers in the public conversations. Only this time it is not relation to COVID-19, but rather to the public enemy, crime. One that is threatening just as COVID did, threatening the life, threatening the safety and livelihoods of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Crime has become, as far as I am

concerned, a national pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago.

3.50 p.m.

The hon. Minister of Finance summarized the state of affairs regarding the crime situation when highlighting the untenable level of murders within the society. He stated, and I quote:

“Crime and violence remain pressing and troubling problems that severely undermine our citizens’ welfare.”

Crime is indeed an issue of great proportions in our country, and in crafting my contribution and topic I reminisced and reflected for a moment before I allowed myself to predict and envisage what Trinidad and Tobago has in store for 2024, in light of the financial provisions being proposed with the budget, and, Mr President, you know what came to mind? [*Senator sings*] “*Trinidad is nice Trinidad is a Paradise*”, according to Brother Valentino. That is what we knew in the past. Well, it is not like that anymore.

We were considered a cosmopolitan paradise, a melting pot of many races and cultures, the place with the best vibes in the world. That is how we were once described. And, as many of us know right now what is being said about our country. As we know the US Department of State, they have issued a Level III Travel Advisory Status with a warning to tourists to reconsider travelling to Trinidad and Tobago due to crime. Now we know that many tourists still do come, but that is the advisory that is out there. The worldpopulationreview.com ranks Trinidad and Tobago as having the sixth highest crime rate in the world, noting that our:

“...government faces several challenges in its effort to reduce crime, such as...the negative influence of gangs, drugs, economic recession and an

over-burdened legal system.”

Now these are things we have heard about time and time and again, but my concern is for 2024, as we look at the budget and the spend on it, how are we dealing with these issues that we have been facing, and not just facing in terms of the intensity, but actually in the past, but the intensity is actually growing. Even our Tobagonian calypsonian Rose was quoted in an article in the *Guardian* newspaper by Malissa Lara and she said, and I quote:

“...in the criminology field T&T has gone way down. ‘The criminals have taken over the country with criminal activities and criminal minds.’”

And the list goes on, murder after murder that has plagued our headlines and pained the heart of many. But, Mr. President, the worst for me happened recently, and I know that it affected many people too, where the incident in September where four children were executed in their sleep. Another incident followed soon after where a child and a physically challenged adult were murdered in Mayaro. God help us when children are hunted and killed like lambs to the slaughter. All of life is valuable, but the cause for concern is amplified even more when even the most vulnerable in society now seems fair play.

The budget statement disclosed data issued by the Crime and Problem Analysis Branch of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and the Central Statistical Office, which showed that the numbers of murders in 2015 recorded at 420 and we know that it rose to 605 in 2022, accounting for 4.7 per cent of serious crimes. The incidents of the murder rate is running about the same level in 2023. I do not think anybody has a question in their mind as to what is our biggest problem within Trinidad and Tobago, and that is the problem of crime. The impact in every sector of our society is significant. The soul of our nation is dying. The TTPS has

recorded some small percentage decrease in serious crimes, and that has been— There was even an article in the papers today, where they talked about the Western Division that is seeing a decrease in serious crime. But every time they say it, and they may be right, in terms of the statistics, that pales into insignificance based on what we are seeing on a day-to-day basis in terms of our brutal murders

It would be remiss of me, Mr. President, if I did not commend the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service for their efforts. I do not take for granted that there are many men and women who risk their lives in the service to citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and today I thank you and I salute you for your service. However, whilst I am pleased with some of the crime-fighting efforts, for instance those where the defence force is helping the joint patrols, et cetera, and that may be doing some— well, I would imagine that it is doing some good in terms of combating gang-related crime on the island as well as the recent finds of arms and ammunition in Santa Cruz, and many other efforts such as these. Certainly we are—I am sure that more needs to be done, and I look forward to a greater number of persons being charged followed by speedy convictions. And we know that just saying those two things, charged and followed by speedy convictions the two of them do not necessarily go hand in hand.

In an article in the *Guardian* newspaper titled, “Crime and violence must be treated as a public health issue”, the Minister of Health—it is dated April 14th, 2023. Minister of Health, Mr. Terrence Deyalsingh reportedly explained that:

“Addressing violence and criminality as a public health issue follows the same principles.”

The same public health principles as we need to be putting, and that were put into place during the COVID pandemic. Crime and violence affects us all, so therefore

the response has to be one in which everyone in communities and individuals are making sure that they are all a part of the system that is put into place.

The concept of crime as a public health issue is not a new concept and it is not a new theory. A publication in the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Disease Prevention and Human Promotion titled, “Crime and Violence”, explained that:

“Addressing exposure to crime and violence as a public health issue may help prevent and reduce the harms the individual and community health and well-being. Public health strategies to address crime and violence focus on building resilience, reducing susceptibility, building healthy gender norms, developing healthy relationships, and creating protective environments.”

In a publication on their website the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention outlined a four-step process in the public health approach to violence prevention.

- “Step 1: Define and monitor the problem
- Step 2: Identify Risks and Protective Factors
- Step 3: Develop and Test the Prevention Strategies
- Step 4: Assure widespread adoption”

In other words, a systematic approach not just throwing things because they sound good or they look good or it is in somebody’s head that this is what you should do. The approach is scientific where we define and monitor the problem.

Now, since the—I know the Minister of Public Administration spoke about a team that was already working on the issues related to crime prevention, and she talked about the different Ministries, like Social Development, Youth and Community Development, and other Ministries, the Ministry of National Security.

These Ministries were already involved in the whole process of treating crime and violence with a public health approach. I am wondering, have we as yet formulated anything that says we know exactly what the problem is?

And I am talking here not just in terms of murders, but as Sen. Dr. Richards would have contributed in his contribution, he talked very succinctly about the link between crime and violence and what is going on in our schools. Have we defined—have we reached step one as yet for defining and monitoring the problem? Have we identified the risk and protective factors as yet—not just telling people you have to stop do this, stop do this. The problem is parenting, the problem is the police, the problem is—Have we sought to look as to what the risk and protective factors are? And then of course you have to develop and test prevention strategies and then make them widespread.

I would imagine, well, these things do not take—it is not overnight, because what we have in our society here right now did not happen overnight, and we expect that things will take time. But I am hoping that this is what—as what the Government has said, this is the approach that they are going to be taking now in terms of crime prevention, that we will hear more about where that process is in terms of dealing with crime. So this is prevention. We know there are things that need to be done in the police service in terms of detection, et cetera. But what is happening with that four-step system for violence, prevention, using the public health approach?

On April 17th to 18th 2023, the Head of Government of CARICOM countries met at Port of Spain, as we know, with the Regional Symposium Addressing Crime and Violence as a Public Health Issue. Based on discussions in the public space and hints at adopting the public health approach to crime in Trinidad, I must ask, as

I said before, have we embarked on the assessment? And have we looked at the current programmes that are right now in our communities? For instance, we have these programmes: MiLAT; MYPART; we have Civilian Conservation Corps and many others. Have we looked at them in terms of what are they doing? Are they fit for purpose? Are they specifically related to reducing crime? Are they well-coordinated and managed? How are the CBOs and FBOs and other organizations that are involved? Have we made sure that—or at least are we in the process of making sure that we know exactly what is going on with them? Have we assessed whether their approach can in fact bring about the desired outcome and close the gaps where they exist? That is for the current programmes that we have.

The sum of \$6.912 billion was allocated to National Security and their initiatives geared towards prevention, detection and suppression. Some mentionables of the Government's spending for 2024 as was already talked about include, the mandate of the Commissioner of Police to triple the annual intake of new recruits into the police service. As we already heard this is just to deal with the backlog. In other words, the vacancies that are there. And they also talked about purchasing vehicles, and also about making sure that we can get inspection scanners at the ports. So these are some of the initiatives that have been put in place. And I applaud the Government for these initiatives, however, we have to look at the thing holistically.

In her contribution to the Appropriation (Financial Year 2024) Bill, 2023 in the House of Representatives on October the 11th, 2023, the hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly quoted from the Prime Minister's message at the CARICOM Summit on Crime hosted in Trinidad and Tobago on April 23rd, and she stated:

“We have all continued to be haunted by violence from the domestic

quarters at home, to our schoolyards, to our streets and our borders.”

And she went on to quote Cuthbert Sandy of Point Fortin in a letter to the Editor of August '23 where he said:

“Education is the key to preventing crime. Less educated people are more likely to be convicted and their children more likely to commit crime...

Education plays a key role in the reduction of crime.”

And again I note here and mention what Sen. Dr. Richards would have spoken about in terms of that link. I am appreciative of the collaborative efforts that are going on right now between the education sector, the Ministry of National Security in the various arms. These include the implementation of regular patrols after school, et cetera.

But these things, Mr. President, deal with children who are already being affected, and question is, what are we doing to prevent it? So there are youth mentorship programmes utilizing the same TTPS and defence force, and they are also, my understanding, using restorative practices such as forwarding information routinely about students who are at risk for expulsion, and those who have been expelled, to the Ministry of National Security, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Ministry of Youth Development, et cetera, et cetera, so that they can intervene.

Again, as these programmes are being put and the children are sent to these places, how are we monitoring the impact of the programmes? Especially given now that school violence and criminal activities in schools continue to be on the rise and almost seem to be a sensationalized activity. Again an editorial in the *Guardian* newspaper on 8th of May 2022 titled “School violence on dangerous trajectory.” The editor remarked:

“It’s difficult to differentiate which of the two evils is more egregious”—it is—“the increasing cases of school violence or the delight that young people seem to be getting out of these incidents when in positions to quell them.”

4.05 p.m.

Mr. President, I agree that the academic education is in fact key but it cannot be utilized as an independent tool. It is clear that children and youth are becoming desensitized and are losing a core appreciation for life and respect for self and others. Therefore, there needs to be an introduction of the type of education, and that was already mentioned by previous colleagues to help to influence and regulate the minds, consciences and consciousness of our youth. I am therefore making a call for institution of values programmes. I know it has been spoken about and people have said they exist, but the values programme needs to be not just spoken about but lived out in schools, including in the teachers in the school environment, not just the students. Because the values, many of the students live the values that they see perpetrated at the senior level.

As a matter of fact the publication of the U.S. Department of Health in Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Human Promotion entitled: “Crime and Violence” states:

“The Community Preventive...Task Force...recommends universal school-based programs that focus on skill-building related to emotional self-awareness and control, social problem-solving, and teamwork to reduce or prevent violent behaviour among school-age children.”

It was Frederick Douglass who once said:

“It is easier to build strong children than it is to repair broken adults.”

So please, let us “take in front” and again, I am just, this is my way of saying I agree with what Sen. Paul Richards and other Senators have said with this particular matter.

We also should be looking at what is happening within the prison systems in terms of rehabilitation. And I know Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye talks about this all the time, and a robust—we must also look at building a robust security system amongst the various arms of the Ministry of National Security as well as our leadership, one that is impenetrable by corruption schemes. The matter of dishonest police officers, customs officers, business people and also the politicians. has been mentioned by many times in public spaces, so much so that it is running joke. Corruption among these groups is said to be one of the thriving forces of criminal activity, therefore corrective measures to weed out the present ills and preventative measures to guard against future sins, need to be put in place speedily and necessary legislative aids must be implemented and enforced.

It is sad that when we hear about members from these various groups committing wrongs, but where are the convictions and we hear that all the time, “take meh to court, take meh to court”, but it never happens. And as a result the examples are not there for the young people. And as far as they are concerned if the Priest could play, “who is me”? If they are doing it, why not me.

So whilst we have some hardworking members among these groups the systemic failures and the existence of loopholes are evident and must be addressed if we are to eliminate and in some cases rehabilitate the trouble makers. In like manner, I advocate just as I talked about values programmes in the schools, I am talking about values programmes within the forces too, the forces of national security. We must begin to build confidence again to those who are meant to lead

and protect us. There are too many people taking matters in their own hands or who do not know, they do not feel safe enough to say something and yet we are telling them, “if you see something, say something”, but people are afraid.

Mr. President, it should not be the case that when we look at the examples and influences to construct for society, we see that it is so easy to grow and produce criminals, and again, we talked about it before. Therefore, as we build, I want to appeal to every single member of the society, this is our business, it is the business of faith-based organization; it is the business of the business community; it is the business of people in the judicial system; it is all our problem in terms of this crime. We cannot continue just talking about the police, police, police, alone, it will not solve the problem.

Mr. President, let me turn to Tobago. I move to building a better Tobago, a better Tobago as of right now and in the future looks like a Tobago that is a self-governed state within the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. I therefore once again take this opportunity, and I may sound like a broken record but until it happens, I will be like a broken record, to request that the Tobago self-government Bill grace an Order Paper soon, for full and comprehensive debate and then later passage thereof.

In a visit to Tobago to address the Tobago House of Assembly, the President of the Republic, Her Excellency Christine Carla Kangaloo, ORTT, attached her stamp of support to this sentiment. I trust that the Prime Minister, the Chief Secretary and the Leader of the Opposition can find common ground in ensuring that this takes place during this session of Parliament and I am sure that the Minister of Finance would be very happy because no longer will he have to come and talk about how much money he is giving Tobago in this line Item and that line

Item. He will just say, this percentage of the budget is being allocated to Tobago and then Tobago will go ahead. Mr. Minister of Finance, I am pleading for you to get a little less work as far as Tobago is concerned. All you will then do is support Tobago's development.

My advocacy for the passage of the Tobago self-government Bill is now even stronger, particularly after reviewing the budget for Tobago and finding that under the current construct the treatment of Tobago in my opinion leaves much to be desired especially as we look at the building part. On page 22 of the budget speech, the Minister of Finance said and I quote, Madam Speaker:

"I have reviewed the Fiscal 2024 Budget Statement presented by the THA in June 2023.

I take this opportunity to endorse, in principle, the policy prescriptions outlined in that Budget Statement. I believe that once properly implemented this policy agenda, with its strategic interventions and capital works, will advance the socioeconomic development of Tobago."

The THA in their budget presentation in June 2023 requested a:

"...total Estimates of Expenditure for Fiscal 2024..."—of—" \$4.54B, of which Recurrent Expenditure..."—was—" \$3.39B..."—DP—"Expenditure...\$1.15...URP...\$92.07M, and CEPEP...\$44.7M."

The budgetary allocation for Tobago for the fiscal 2024 was a total of:

"...\$2.585 billion of which:

- \$2.298 billion is for Recurrent...
- \$260 million is for..."—DP...
- "\$18 million...URP and \$9.2 million for CPEP.

The total allocation...”—for—“2024 represents an increase of \$64.2 million over the allocation of \$2.521 billion for Fiscal...2023.”

And the Minister pointed out:

“...beyond the budgetary allocation to the THA, an additional \$678.5 million is allocated to various Ministries and State Agencies to undertake and execute major projects in Tobago...”

I would look specifically at the *Public Sector Investment Programme* (PSIP) spending for Trinidad as it rose from \$4 billion in fiscal '15/'16 to \$6.2 billion in fiscal '23/'24. As I look comparatively at the PSIP spending for Tobago, it has taken a trend downwards. It was \$403 million in fiscal '15/'16 to, this year, \$260million. I am not sure how Tobago can be developed in 2023, with the requirements being more in 2023, with cost being more and Tobago already has a 30 per cent cost differential of things being more expensive there. How can Tobago be developed with a declining developmental expenditure. Mr. Minister, I would like to hear how that is going to be done.

I do not agree with a statement I heard from a Member of the Tobago House of Assembly which said that the Minister is using the budget as a weapon against Tobago. I do not believe that. However, I would like the Minister and team to fully reconsider the allocation requested by Tobago, specifically as it relates to our development.

We look at the tourism product and as we know Tobago, the tourism sector is the highest employer of persons outside the Tobago House of Assembly. We also know that right now in the Caribbean, tourism has risen significantly. There are visitor arrivals, et cetera. And Mr. Neil Walters, Secretary General, CTO (Acting) on the “Caribbean Tourism Performance and Outlook” and I quote:

“...the Caribbean tourism industry was resilient and built on the rebound that...By the end of 2022, there were 28.3 million registered tourist visits in the Caribbean, approximately 52.4% more than there were in 2021.”

There is evidence that tourism in the Caribbean is up and up, in other words, increasing, whilst in Tobago the visitor arrivals are just trickling in. And I would just say briefly here, that a member of my family had a 70th birthday in Tobago in August and he invited people in North America, et cetera, and many of them told him, they said listen, it is easier to get to other Caribbean islands than to get to Tobago. And that is the truth. I know the Minister has talked about what is happening with Caribbean Airlines and the increase in airfares, et cetera, and every time we are talk about Tobago we are hearing about the unutilized seats between Trinidad and Tobago as the Minister said in his budget speech, he said, for:

“...the period 2020 to 2023, unutilized seats...amounted to 472,801.”

Unutilized seats are going to be an issue anywhere. You will have any—go to North America, lots of people are coming out during winter so therefore fewer people will be going in. Have some kind of incentives where the people will want to go the other way. Do not blame it on that it is a unique problem with Tobago, it is not. I am thankful for the efforts that have occurred on the seabridge with the maintenance of the two, three vessels that are right now in the fast ferry and that another vessel is being sought for the cargo vessel.

Mr. President, I will touch briefly on a public interest matter that has occurred recently between the Registrar General’s Office in Trinidad and Tobago which became a matter of public discussion within the past week or so, in an article—well, we know that the problem has occurred as a result of a conflict between what is happening in Tobago Registrar General and Trinidad Registrar

General. It resulted in a member being locked out of the system and people could not get their birth/death certificates printed, et cetera. Thank God that that is sorted out, but there is still another matter that the Attorney General has said that he is seeking legal opinion on. I would just like to say that when, as the legal opinion is being sought, we have a situation where, my understanding of this matter has come about because since the decentralization of the Tobago House of Assembly starting in 1980, the legal services provided by the Registrar General's Office—

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

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: Thank you—has been, the technical aspect has been supported by the Auditor General's Office and the administrative aspect has been handled by the Central Administrative Services of Tobago, CAST, run under the Minister of the Office of the Prime Minister. So, they have had this dual system going for the last 43 years.

Clearly, there is some kind of situation going on there and it has now reared its head as a problem. I am just asking as the matter is being discussed, please, ensure that the services that are available to the people in Tobago, for those services that were, are not in any way compromised. And I am saying this because we would realize that legal services are one of the services that are to be decentralized to Tobago in the new self-government Bill. So, we have already developed some capacity over the years in going forward and I am saying this boldly, in going forward when the next year comes we would have a new self-government Bill, legal services would be one of those services that would be decentralized. So, whatever we are putting in place, please, make sure that the services remain.

Mr. President, I would just touch briefly on health and I am thankful for the services, the strides that have been made in terms of non-communicable diseases. I noted the Minister talking about what is happening in terms of screening of diabetics in pregnancy and to prevent the complications of later on. I just note that these things do take time and while they are taking time, in terms of the chronic non-communicable diseases, knowing that Ischemic heart disease is the major cause of death within Trinidad and Tobago right now, and diabetes, if the Minister would consider, just as he had a group that was putting things in place nationally to deal with the problem of the prevention of diabetes—it is a programme that is in all regional health authorities—if a similar team could be put together so that we have a programme that not just deals with prevention of non-communicable diseases, but also screening of persons with non-communicable diseases for cardiac intervention, for cardiac problems, because that is what is killing the people right now, and I am asking whether such a group could be formed.

4.20 p.m.

I had the pleasure of dealing with the service that is provided because I had two relatives who recently required cardiac care, one requiring a CABG—coronary artery bypass—and the other requiring a pacemaker. They both had to be flown from Tobago to Trinidad and then the service was provided within the Ministry of Health. But I am just asking for coordinated services so that we would note what is happening. I note the budgetary allocation of about \$10 million, which would include a catheterization lab in Trinidad, but we also have a non-used lab in Tobago that we need to talk about.

Finally, Mr. President, amongst all the negative we face as a society, I must congratulate the people of Trinidad and Tobago at all levels as we seek to continue

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to navigate these difficult times. I congratulate the Minister of Finance and note his efforts to bring relief through the disbursement of back pay to persons who accepted the 4 per cent salary increase and the increase in minimum wage by \$3—yes, it could have been more—and the allocation to the grant of \$10,000 per child to assist parents with school, but I am saying, as a people, we need to look for ways to revive the flagging spirit of our nation. I also want to appeal to those engaged on considering criminal activities at every level. We should seek to do something about it. It is not helping our nation. Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister of Digital Transformation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus): Thank you, Mr. President. Let me first, as I begin, thank the Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert, for delivering what has been widely acclaimed as an excellent and fit for purpose budget.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: It is not often when you listen on the commentary surrounding the budget where you find that the conversation is not around the measures in the budget, but around things that surround a lot of other things in the society. So that alone speaks testament to the fact that the budget is in fact, as we say, fit for purpose. So my congratulation goes out to the Minister of Finance.

With your leave, Mr. President, I also would like to welcome the new Senators. I see everyone looking resplendent and it is good to see you here. It is always good to have new people, and new ideas, and new ways of thinking. So welcome to you all. I also want to congratulate the members of the Parliament

staff who have been elevated and have new roles and portfolios, and I trust that your stellar work will continue and my congratulations to you as well.

I had the pleasure, Mr. President, of contributing in the other place. So it is interesting that when you have a Ministry like mine, you can speak for hours about the things that you have done, you intend to do or where you are going. But I started a trend there that I want to continue in my contribution today, and that is to try to relate a lot of what we do and some of the measures that are going to affect and allocations that are going to affect the things we do in the budget, and directly relate them to people, what is it you are going to get from this and why you should be concerned; if you are not the direct beneficiary, why you should be concerned about the measures and the things we are going to do and how they affect you.

So in my address in the other place, one of the things that I said is that digital technology is now ubiquitous. I think everyone here has a digital device. They use it for the purposes for which they have and that has to be something that pervades the entirety of the society. It is not just for the privileged. It is for everyone. And one of the objectives of this Ministry is to make sure that that happens.

My hope in this particular discourse that I am going to have is to really deal with three things: a clear sense of the potential of digital transformation as a driver for positive change; an understanding of the various challenges, opportunities, the type of work involved in turning the potential that we have into a reality; and, of course, the conviction that through belief, hard work and by leveraging the power of partnerships and collaboration, we can accomplish all of this. So this—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:—transformation is not a simple thing to do. And

especially when you think, as was stated earlier, this is the seventh budget of the hon. Minister of Finance—I have only been associated with the Government for three years, so this alone should tell you the task that we have and the Ministry is only just over two years old, but a lot of the tenets that really represent the good things of Trinidad and Tobago are represented in this Ministry.

I would start by saying that the Ministry is staffed predominantly by extremely young people, and these are the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: And, you know, you would tell yourself that is kind of natural, tech is a young people “ting”, but Ministries and governments are not always young people things. And the mandate that I was given when asked to construct this Ministry is to involve as many young people as we can, and we found them in all walks of life, from every part of Trinidad and Tobago, and they continue to provide and have become, in a number of ways, the voice and face of the Ministry of Digital Transformation, both locally and internationally. So compliments to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I must also compliment the Minister of Education for providing us with a number of returning scholars. There is a programme that we have where we absorb a number of returning scholars who—and it is not just in technology, in a number of spaces—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:—and we have been doing that for the last two years and we are getting a number of them again. And those people represent returning scholars who have an obligation to work for the State. But I will tell you that over 90 per cent of them, upon completion of that obligation, have opted to stay and

work within the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in the Ministry of Digital Transformation.

These are people who can work pretty much anywhere in the world and people who can work certainly for a lot more money in the private sector. They have chosen, probably because of the inculcation we have given them, the way in which we are doing it—because they have a chance to do something that not many people have to chance to do, which is to change the society and culture of an entire country. But for whatever reason they have, they have decided to commit some level of sacrifice and stay and work within the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and specifically within the Ministry of Digital Transformation.

The Ministry of Digital Transformation has some foundational principles, and I usually do not walk around with paper because that is one of the principles I try to have, that I do not walk around with paper a lot, but I do have some today and that is simply because of the numbers and I would have to have too many screens to do it. But in terms of the principles, I would just name a few of them: inclusivity.

Mr. President, every citizen, resident, and business in Trinidad and Tobago must have access to and the ability to effectively use appropriate digital technology. No one must be left behind, everyone must be able to use it. And our initiatives at the Digital Transformation Ministry are therefore focused on exactly that. So the national community must be connected, everyone, everywhere, and there is a policy that states that. I remember two budgets ago, the hon. Minister of Finance declared broadband a public good. We continue to make that so, and I will explain a bit later when I talk about some of the projects that we have there.

The other thing, of course, is not that it must be available and usable, but it

must be reliable. It does not make sense having something and you cannot use it. So it must be reliable. It has to be scalable because things are changing. It must be resilient and above all else, it must be secure. So we are going to go through some of those things as to why we do it. So inclusivity is one of our principles. Robustness, resilience and security, I do not think I need to expand on that significantly, but other than that to say, you will notice that almost every one of the contributions from this side, particularly from the Ministers, have some level—the endeavours in which they are doing have some level of digital transformation, or the use of ICT, or the use of digital technology.

What we are bringing to that table is to ensure that as those things go ahead, there are a couple things that we want to make sure that they have: resilience by design, it is not going to be a bolt on, it is not going to be something after; security by design, again, it is not going to be that they are going to say, all right, we have built this and then I wonder what will happen if something happens to it. We have started to put all those things in there: flexibility; scalability; fitness of purpose; and, of course, the applicability for the people who intend to use it. When you are finished and you built it and you think it is right, make sure the people who intend to use it can actually use it.

Another one which I think a lot of people do not like but I will continue to expound on it—and this is something that I have inculcated in the Ministry and I have put it across to all other Ministries, divisions and agencies, and I am doing it to the private sector as well by encouraging them—is that the things we do must be home-grown. The talent we have here is second to none, and we can prove it, and we are proving it every day.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: Let us, wherever possible, prioritize the development and so on of our digital systems, using our own people. The words I use are, by Trinidad and Tobago, for Trinidad and Tobago, and the rest of the world. So we are doing that and the way we can do that is because technology is such that open source stuff and things, are things that you can use everywhere, you do not need to pay for it, you just need to have the creativity and skill to be able to do it.

The last one of the values I want to touch on is partnerships. I do not know of any country, division, agency, private sector that has been able to walk this journey alone. We are a Ministry of partnerships. I say that all the time. It is absolutely true.

One of the things that I noticed when I was running through the numbers in preparation for standing finance—and I do have all my numbers there—is that there is a tendency, and I think it is a tendency in the entire society, to start with the cost of something. So I went to a function recently and the introduction from the emcee was, and at a cost of \$47 million, we have this great project that we are going to do. It was funded by such and such, and we intend that at the end of this project, we will be able to demonstrate that the money was well spent. And five minutes into the introduction we had no idea what he was talking about. This happens too frequently, that the focus is on the cost of an item.

In the ICT world, in which I live, cost is simply a commodity thing. The other thing about it is that you cannot measure the impact, the scale or anything based on the cost, and that is simply because the cost of things in the ICT, one, is going down, and the real resource required in the ICT world is in your head. In the earlier days, when you were buying proprietary hardware, proprietary software, paying for licences for things that you do not need, it was easy to attach your

ability to say that we have done this by the amount of money you spent. That is not what we are dealing with here. And in the case of partnerships, that has made that even better because our partnerships with people—so what have we done with these partnerships? Who do we partner with?

Well, we partnered with other Ministries. That is the first place to start—many of them. We send a lot of people into Ministries and what do they do? Well, my colleague here, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, we met up to yesterday with a number of people in her Ministry, and what are we doing there? We have people embedded in the Ministry helping them through their own programmes. Why are we doing that? We want to ensure that they are using the best class things that they can. We want to ensure that they are using as much home-grown things as they can. We want to make sure that they are embracing the correct technology and using it when they should be using it, so that they are not costing and expending money.

Sometimes those resources that we put into those Ministries are not paid for by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. They are available through grant funding, through some of our partners in the IDB and the Andean Development Bank. So when you look at the spend under consultants and it is this small number, does that mean that you were not able to provide consultancy services across the Ministries? Sure, we did, but we did not pay for it and it did not come out from the allocation provided by the Ministry of Finance.

Training is another one where you will find exactly things like that. “We noticed that you did not spend”—that did not mean we did not train people, and I have a training list there. If I pull it up—and this is one of the things about paper, you could have it.

4.35 p.m.

Fourteen significant training programmes, no cost to the Government, no cost to the people. Paid for by somebody else, but at no cost—because we are a Ministry of partnerships. Very significant programmes, state responsibility and regional response options, cyber-security leadership programmes, technical ethical issues in the public service, national cyber-security leadership and I can go on and on with this. These are critical programmes for which nationals of Trinidad and Tobago, participants of the Ministry and Government-wide have participated in. If you try to measure this by spend, you would not find it. This is the beauty of partnerships. Like I said we partner with a number of Ministries, Election and Boundaries Commission, the Registrar General, Immigration, Licensing, et cetera, et cetera, it is wide.

Another reason why I had to pull these numbers out is that I was asked if the spend of, or the allocation associated with the Ministry of Digital Transformation, is the entirety of the spend of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in the ICT space. That is not true and it is easy to tell that that is not true. Because, as my colleagues who would have risen and spoken about including Minister of Public Administration, the allocations for the projects that they are running and those are very significant projects, the new performance management system put in, Members, is about \$20 million.

It is not in my budget, it is there. We recognize that that number was about three hundred and something million in 2022, it went to \$437 million in 2023 and it is very much the same number in 2024. That is not the allocation under the Ministry of Digital Transformation, so if you are looking for that you are not going to find it there. I do have the list of all of them. I cannot wave it but it is five pages. That is

a number of projects that are going on in other Ministries. Yes, the Ministry of Digital Transformation involved but we are not the executing agents.

Some of them you might be interested. The Office of the Prime Minister has 14 not very large projects. You would expect the Ministry of National Security to have a lot, they have 14 including computerizing of stations, the THA has eight, the Ministry of Finance has 13. I mean again, I can go on and on about that, I will not because it is not really necessary, it is just to prove the point that that is what we have.

Another thing about partnerships is that we can do them at a government-to-government level. In August I went to India with a high-level team and, within one week we were able not only to meet with, I think as many of seven of their Ministers, but to walk through almost all of the technology they have in their stacks. They have made it available to Trinidad and Tobago and I mean it is quite an extensive stack of applications and things.

These are—India is becoming, if it is not necessarily becoming, but has become one of the technological giants of the world. So when we think about technology we do not necessarily think about India do we? We think about Europe and, Estonia and, Canada and so on, India is one. And if you think of the natural historical ties that we have to India you wonder why we did not look there before. Or we have, and we have gone.

I must compliment the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs and also the High Commissioner for India who is here. But, Minister just to let you know you have an excellent High Commissioner who is well respected and regarded in India.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H Bacchus: He is, and had been able to open many, many doors for us.

What did we do? Oh, while we were there we did a couple of things. We met with, like I said, a number of the Ministries in there—the Ministers and Ministries in there. But they have a willingness to share their technology that is not necessarily shared across the globe. And when I say willingness to share, to share its digital public infrastructure and you know how many people there are in India. And they want to share not just with us but with the international community. And Trinidad and Tobago has been named in the latest tranche of the country so which they are doing that.

What we have done there is what? We have meet with the Ministry of Electronics Information Technology, and their open source solutions those things are the things that enable digital services. It is interesting that India is just further along it in same journey that I have pushed this particular segment of what we do too. They are using open source technology, there are using their own people? And because it is open source and because they are using their own people they can give it away if they wish. They own the IP.

And what have they decided to do with us? Well “We will share more than 20 technological solutions that we have, that are things that you are interested in. We will not only share it with you, we will actually have people come and help you to help your people, turn them into what you want and implement them”. It rapidly speeds up what we were trying to do. We do not have to start from scratch, and we were able to achieve a memorandum of understanding with them in seven days. Seven days.

Again, my compliments, Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, to your head

who you have now there, excellent person.

4.40 p.m.

The MOU, what does it allow for us to do? Mr. President, let me say: exchange of best practices; technology transfer; capacity building of technical personnel through training programmes; exchange of public officials and experts. They do not mind having it because some things we do better than they do, strangely enough as that is. Institutional cooperation to undertake feasibility studies and e-readiness assessments; implementation and development of solutions; scaling up of pilot digital transformation solutions, and lastly, an establishment of a joint working group to meet at least twice a year tasked with overseeing the implementation of the MOU and reviewing project plans and areas of cooperation. Mr. President, this is the type of work in which the Ministry of Digital Transformation is involved.

Why is that important to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? It means that the technology that we are building is costing us so much less than it would have cost if we tried to do any other way. It means that we are using our own local talent under guidance but it is our people who are building it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: It means that we are not paying these large amounts of foreign exchange all the time and the total cost of ownership is only what it cost our people to maintain, build and develop our own systems. That is why it is like this. It takes a bit longer. We could have brought something from somebody and put it in in four months. It takes a bit longer, we will pay for it every day of our lives and we will pay for it in a currency that we do not generate. So, Mr. President, India, strategic and good to us. We are doing a similar thing with

Estonia. We have Estonians on the ground, they are helping us with X-Road, I will speak a bit about that in where we are.

Framework for digital transformation. You have heard me speak about this many times, Mr. President: digital society, digital government, digital economy. The digital society, as we said, is really something that says broadband is a public good. It speaks in large measure to us increasing the digital IQ of our citizens, making sure that they have the broadband that they need, make sure that they have the devices that they need, make sure that they understand how to use the things that they are being given, make sure that they trust the technology so they want to use it, make sure that it makes their lives better. Digital society is all about that and there are a number of programmes under there, we do not advertise all of them but we do that. Couple of things to note going forward.

The private sector really controls the telecoms in Trinidad and Tobago. Government does not really run telecoms. It is owned by primarily the private sector. And what happens in a case like that is that you are very dependent on them and based on their own business models for you to get to achieve the things you want to get done at a national level. Fortunately for us, in some cases, the service providers have gone on and done what is required to have broadband coverage across 90 per cent of Trinidad and Tobago, in excess of that.

But you would recognize, of course, that some areas are still relatively inaccessible and in some cases, the coverage and the service could be better. Well the nice thing about as technologies change and evolve, it solves certain problems for you. We embarked on a project using TV White Space last year. We had some issues getting that going because we could not find the necessary partners to do it. As we say as a partnership Ministry, we found one now. But during that time, two

LEO providers, low earth orbiting satellite providers have arrived in Trinidad and Tobago: Neptune and Starlink. They have very different business models to the traditional providers that we have but what they probably have is universal coverage across every part and parcel of Trinidad and Tobago. What does that mean? It means that there may be options for partnerships between the private sector and those other companies or the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and those companies to ensure that we get to 100 per cent coverage of Trinidad and Tobago in areas that—in every area. I will give you an example.

We have one of our ICT centres in Marac. I do not know how people know where Marac is—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: *[Interruption]*

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: *[Laughter]* And it is one of our vibrant centres. The people there are great, the community loves it, and they use it more than anywhere else. Because of where it is, while the telecom infrastructure is there, the broadband infrastructure does not really quite adequately fill the need for that. That is where some of these things can come in. We can partner with one of these providers and give them the same quality of service that they would get as if they were in the middle of Port of Spain. Tobago, Sen. Hislop, has some issues like that as well. TATT is dealing with some of it. These are options that would be available for us.

There are some issues around affordability and again, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago aims to help the most underprivileged in the society and there are programmes that are built and doing that. I mean TATT is doing something for the blind, for example, providing subventions for them to be able to go and get equipment that would allow them to use the technology that we have and there are

many other things that we are doing. We are also dealing with ALTA. The Minister of Finance raised something like that in his introduction. I would not go through it.

These access centres that we are talking about are also very important. We have a number of them established and we get—the Minister of Finance finds it good business, I think, to allow us the allocation for that project to continue. We have a number of them working already. We have a number of them that are already outfitted but not activated. We have a number of them that are pretty much refurbished and getting ready to go. Fifteen of them, and I will call these areas just so you have an understanding of the length and breadth of where we are: Arima, as in Arima proper, Barrackpore, Bon Air Gardens, Diego Martin—and that is central and south—Gonzales, Malabar, Navet, San Fernando North, St. James youth facility is a place specifically named, Techier, Waterloo, La Pastora, Tacarigua, Matapal.

In Tobago, Bethesda, Black Rock, Castara, Glen Road, L'Anse Fourmi. All of these centres are being prepared to go to work and the ones in Tobago, obviously we are doing them in conjunction with the Tobago House of Assembly. We did not tell them where to put them. They decided where they thought they needed the most of it to go. We continue to work with that and with the parliamentary representatives for the island of Tobago. Persons with disabilities, all of those are well covered under what we are doing here.

Under digital economy, yeah, we are dealing with—basically with that is private sector synergies. What are we trying to do with that? Increase the contribution of ICT to GDP. Now, that is not a buy-and-sell business and it certainly does not involve any bitcoin mining. So if those were the things people

were thinking about, take it out your head from now. This Government is not involved in that type of business and will not be involved in that type of business. The resource that we are trying to use for this is the most populace in the country; people. That is what we are using. Where we set out, Mr. President? What can we use to do this? What has every other country done? Well effectively what they have done is taken their people, get them to a point where their innovation and talent is available. You help them by creating the environment that they need and let them go ahead and build what you need to get done and that turns into the business of itself. Singapore did it. Estonia did it.

As a matter of fact, the company that does a lot of Ministry of Trade work, that company started off as a government company in Singapore. So what did we do? Well we created this thing called the developers' hub. First of all, what is that and why are you doing it? I went to Cabinet, got a commitment for \$10 million over three years and we started the programme. The allocation for it is there, hidden in there somewhere. What does that mean? It means that we are going to ask the developer community in Trinidad and Tobago to partner with the Government, sign up with us, register with the developers' hub so we have an idea of how many of you there are and when you do that, you have access to training, certification, you have access to other developers in other places and market and it is no cost to you. Zero cost to you, Government bears that cost and our partners.

On top of that, we added a developers' hub challenge and that is where the digital economy part starts to happen. So this first part is just for that. So I wonder how many people will get to do this, "how big yuh think" it is. We launched this in July, we have over 540 developers registered on the developers' hub today, nationals of Trinidad and Tobago living in Trinidad.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: What did we do with them? So they have access to all this training and I mean training from the best in the world, some of which we pay for, some of it was given to us gratis. But what happens with that? We have created this developers' hub challenge. And what is the developers' hub? We went out to all the Ministries, Divisions, agencies and said listen, tell us the problems that you have that you believe an ICT person or project could solve and we took it and we whittled down and we put it out as a challenge to the developer community and say listen, you guys, see if you could solve this and if you can solve it, put in your submissions, we will evaluate them and of the five challenges that we have selected, we will take the top three and we will give you an award. I will tell you, it is not to use a—"mingpilling" award, it is a substantial award.

And recently, we had an independent panel do the evaluations. As a matter of fact, this morning on TV6, two representatives of the Ministry were there talking about what happened. We have the challenge done and people would think there was an award ceremony, I was present, the room was filled with, again, young people, but it is interesting. The registrants on the developers' hub, we have people in there who are as old as 80 and they are active, 8-0. These are people who have been in telecoms their entire life or have been in ICT their entire life. Retired people from Hughes Aircraft, a number of—Trinidadians living in Trinidad. This is not for big companies, for individuals and small groups of less than six. We gave them the five things, they have done what they can and they were pleasantly surprised that they came up with really good solutions. The awards are going on. Eventually that is going to lead to a product that is going to be launched.

The next phase of this is I think the phase that is also most interesting. So what we are having done here now is software being developed for use by the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, by the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and the developers own their IP. The Government can use it but they own it so they could sell it to anybody that they want. So it is not that the Government takes control of what you build, it is yours. But because you have registered, yes, we have the right to use it but you can certainly sell it.

The next phase of this is not going to be where we are going to tell you problems and you solve them. We are going to have communities say what their problems are and have them do some of them and then we are going to have the developers themselves who live in Trinidad and Tobago look around and say, you know I have something that could fix this and we are going to go through the same process and eventually we are going to come to those awards. Eventually, this may turn into the software export company of Trinidad and Tobago, the Government does not have anything to do with it anymore and those people are going to be making significant money. It helps contribute to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago using our own people.

I got a question at the Standing Finance Committee: Do I have the number of people required to administer something like that and make it work? I had to remind at that point as I will tell this august House, through you, Mr. President, that the work is being done by the actual people, not us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: Let me go to digital government because I see where that is, “is ah big one”. Digital government really has to do with the bulk of what the Ministry is doing on its own in terms of its programme and there are massive

programmes inside of there. The Minister of Finance would have mentioned a few of them: E-ID, Interoperability, et cetera. But people keep hearing about them and saying “you guys not doing anything because we not seeing anything”. Well I will tell you this, we are doing a lot of things, you are not seeing them yet but you will see them very very shortly. And the reason for that is when you are building foundational systems for a country, there are no shortcuts. There are no shortcuts. If I am building an identity system to identify everyone in Trinidad and Tobago, it better be secure, it better be robust and it better work. “Yuh could pay somebody to build one fuh yuh, yeah” but does not guarantee the things that I have just said.

What have we done? And I will identify a few things over the last year. The first thing we did is we did an impact assessment. “Is ah good place to start eh”. My mother always tell me before “yuh leave home, know where yuh going”.

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: It makes a lot of sense to do that. Consultations with Unique Identification Authority of India and the UNDP for knowledge transfer and how to deal with something like that. We did not only use our own people, we did more consultations with them including the UNCDF. We did a proof of concept. We did a proof of concept. We did a first draft of the technical specifications for a production level solution in collaboration with the UNDP. We had a technical visit by the UNDP, the UNCDF, Cgov. “Ah cyah tell yuh how many people we had.”

4:55 p.m.

That involves Ministries, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, the Elections and Boundaries Commission, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services—look, too long. Why did we do all of that? So that when we start to do the things we have to do now, which include the development of the database

capability for the profiles, to start to enable the duplication of databases via the EID enrolment—notice this is work now, that is happening—connect and operate via X-Road which is the interoperability system that the people from Estonia are here, not building for us, but guiding our own people on how to build it. When they are finished they leave. It is open source, the money that we are paying is to them to teach us how to do it. When we are finished we can develop it on our own. We can change it on our own, we will maintain it on our own, and we are paying our own people to do it that is the cost we are.

Going ahead with what we are doing, allow for people to enrol in the ID system to form proof of life and proof of presence and all of—there are a number of things that are happening now that you are going to see that are built on the solid foundation of which the last year of work which many people did not see, existed. That interoperability solution that we are talking about is X-Road. For those of you who want to find out what that is, you can google it. It is one of the most widely used in the world, the Estonians are the ones who claim credit for it. And we are working directly with them to help us build it. Notice what I said, to help us build it. We are building a modular data centre, a tier 4 modular data centre. I will tell you, Trinidad and Tobago, we are blessed, we have a number of tier 3 data centres operating in Trinidad, which is the second highest level. We use them today, we are building a new one for us.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: It is not meant to put the others out of business. It is meant because governments and certain agencies of government need to have—

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

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:—thank you very much—need to have owned and

secured places for which the technology must lie. But that does not mean that is the only place that we are going to use.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: This is supposed to be community in base and we will continue to work with and use the other tier 3s that we have in here.

[MR VICE-PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: Mr. Vice-President, Tobago is a significant part of what we do. I will say this, there is no Trinidad and Tobago without Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: Tobago is a key and important part of what we are doing. And as such, a lot of the programmes that we are doing here are replicated there, you heard me talk already about the ICT centres. But Tobago has some unique challenges it is an island that they separate from Trinidad. And currently interconnecting, it is not simple, it is done by sea, and the interconnecting cable between it is not owned by the Government, it is a private cable. And guess what, there is only one.

If you are building ICT services, can you imagine when you build that and you put a risk profile where all of the services are dependent on something that could be interrupted, and it is only one you have? That does not work. So what are we going to do? We are going to try to partner with the private sector to build another one. I had a call, even while I was here speaking, one of the providers, where they are going to get some new cables in that will help them there. We also have to look at the in-island distribution. What is happening across that terrain that specific rugged terrain that we have, we are going to deal with all of that under what we are doing in this project.

The legislative agenda is key, the hon. Attorney General is here, he knows what we are doing with the data protection and electronic transaction Acts, we debated those things in this said Chamber. And we give the commitment that we gave at that time, we will more than honour and fulfil in time before that, because that deals with the security and things about citizens' information.

Lastly, in the time I have left, Mr. Vice-President, I want to talk a bit about cyber security, because it is on everybody's lips. Cyber security is a very, very, very serious thing. And one of the things that the—in recognizing that—and I do not know how many people would have noticed it—that one of the proposed measures in the budget spoke to a tax allowance investment up to \$500,000 for companies which incur expenditure with respect to investments in cyber security software, network security and monitoring equipment. If there is any company in Trinidad and Tobago with this sort that is running anything in the digital space, take advantage of this measure. You do not want to find yourself on the receiving end of a cyber-attack. The Attorney General is smiling at me, I would not say the reason why. You do want to find yourself on the end of this, it will destroy your business, it will cost you more than you want, and you better be able to address it. The good thing about this now is that because as risks change, businesses change. There are local companies in Trinidad and Tobago that are fit for purpose, that have the skills required—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

5.00 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:—and will do what can be done. Look for them, take advantage of this and make your payments in Trinidad and Tobago dollars. I say nothing more about that. That is absolutely important.

So, Mr. Vice-President, as I close, I hope we get to deal with some other things at another time. Maybe in another debate I could talk about the learning facilities that we have: Trinidad and Tobago We Learn. We could talk about a number of the things that we are doing for end-to-end service, that you start a service online and you complete it online.

There is a lot more that I can go into but just in closing to say, the 2024 budget, as presented by the hon. Minister of Finance, provides the wherewithal for us to aggressively push the work that the Ministry began two years ago. And we are leveraging the power of technology to facilitate the rapid development of our nation; rapid, and you could understand why, and we are in full implementation mode and we will continue to ramp up what we can for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Damian Lyder: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, there can be no prosperity without safety and security.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: And I thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this, my fourth budget debate 2023/2024, piloted by the hon. Minister of Finance. And let me say from the onset, once again, listening to this budget, I got another dose of déjà vu, Mr. Vice-President. You see, the Minister continues to repeat many promises, programmes and projects that have either failed to deliver in the past or they come under new names today, Mr. Vice-President. We see many initiatives that have been poorly executed by this Government, those that have been

completed at least. But, Mr. Vice-President, let me take the opportunity at this juncture to congratulate the Leader of the Opposition, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder:—the Leader of the Opposition, for her response to this farce of a budget. The Leader of the Opposition clinically dissected, dismantled, unveiled and debunked the macroeconomic numbers, exposed the broken promises, as well as the overall mamaguy by this Minister of Finance, which he attempted to deliver to an already beleaguered nation.

Mr. Vice-President, I also congratulate my colleague, Sen. Mark, who did well, and our new Senator who joined us, who did well in opposing this Government that is without a plan, without a vision and without any mission. Mr. Vice-President, the title of this budget presentation is: Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth, and what a crisis we are in that after eight years, this Government is only now speaking of diversification and growth, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, the numbers will show you that rather than growth, this Government has provided decline, and rather than diversification, they have managed over multi-sector decimation.

Sen. Roberts: “Oh goooooood”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: You see, Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance is an expert of playing with numbers, manipulating numbers and using flowery language to try to hoodwink the population. But the numbers simply do not lie. When we look at real GDP, and not nominal GDP as the hon. Minister likes to use, we see in 2015,

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under a UNC government, where real GDP stood at \$187.57 billion and seven years later, at the end of 2022, we see real GDP decline to \$150.3 billion, which represents a PNM decline of \$37 billion. Mr. Vice-President, point blank, this Government has declined the economy by 20 per cent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: And while declining this economy, Mr. Vice-President, we see a PNM Government increase our public debt to a staggering \$129 billion. This represents over \$50 billion added to the debt since the UNC left office in 2015. And, Mr. Vice-President, we see a debt-to-GDP ratio of 70.9 per cent and climbing, whereas compared to the UNC, when they demitted office, we were at 44.1 per cent. This is more than a 60 per cent increase in our debt-to-GDP under this PNM regime, Mr. Vice-President.

And one of the greatest stunts deployed so far is the way in which the hon. Minister of Finance plays bookkeeper regarding the national deficit, Mr. Vice-President. The Minister in his budget statement indicated that in the financial year 2022/2023, this Government achieved a surplus of some 0.6 per cent, which he can say, thank God for a war in Ukraine. And then comes in this budget indicating a deficit of \$5.16 billion. However, Mr. Vice-President, we know that the Government owed some \$7.8 billion in VAT refunds. We know that there have been moneys owing to contractors piling up in the billions over the last eight years that have not been paid by this Government. And, Mr. Vice-President, we saw recently in the Standing Finance Committee in the other place, where the Minister of Finance held back moneys from various critical Ministries, such as National Security, and added to that, excluding capital loan principal repayments to the tune of \$6 billion.

So I put it to you, Mr. Vice-President, if the Government would have paid out those pertinent figures owed, some by law, there would have been no surplus in 2023, and in fact, we would see a deficit being presented today of more than \$13 billion. So this Government has held back on debt payments and disbursements, all in an effort to limit the expenditure so that they could mamaguy this population with a low deficit, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance is running from the reality of overall manufacturing collapse, opting to cherry-pick non-energy sector manufacturing. Again, the numbers do not lie. Real manufacturing sector GDP has fallen from \$30.32 billion to \$25.86 billion between 2015, when the UNC left office, and today, in 2022, under a PNM Government. This represents a decline of 14.9 per cent in this period under this PNM and then we hear the Minister of Finance boasting about non-energy exports.

But let me tell you the reality of it. In 2015, it totalled US \$2.64 billion when the UNC left office. And then the latest Central Bank figures tell us, and the Minister of Finance confirmed it today, that it stands at just US \$2.38 billion as of 2022. That, Mr. Vice-President, is a decline of TT \$1.7 billion or US \$260million of foreign exchange not coming into our shores anymore, and we wonder how we are in this forex crisis today? And adding to this crisis, we see another US \$1.5 billion in foreign direct investment exiting our shores. However, Mr. Vice-President, do not be alarmed, it will take a United National Congress government to reverse this economy and put it back to stability and growth.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: So, Mr. Vice-President, how has the PNM Government attempted to fill this gap and mitigate the losses created by this PNM mismanagement? Not

by diversifying the economy, not by fixing manufacturing, not by cutting the phantom billion-dollar projects that breed corruption and facilitate wanton wastage under this Government. No, Mr. Vice-President, the Government believes that they could come and tax the citizens of our nation out of this PNM crisis.

Mr. Roberts: Shame.

Sen. D. Lyder: You see, this Government has been a serial taxer, increasing VAT on 7,000 food items; increasing Green Fund Levy, Business Levy, and we even see a tyre tax under this Government, Mr. Vice-President. Nothing escapes. But, Mr. Vice-President, we see a Minister signalling that he is coming to the citizens of this nation with the dreaded property tax and then this Minister of Finance has the gall in the other place to stand up and say he is bringing no new tax under his Government. So what do you call this property tax, Mr. Vice-President? What is this? What on earth is this?

Mr. Vice-President, you see, we have grown accustomed to so many untruths by this Government. We had to hear Conrad Enill talk about there being a no foreign exchange crisis. We had to hear a Prime Minister tell us that he was not shutting down Petrotrin, and boom, the fridge door closed and Petrotrin shut down.

Sen. Roberts: And his suit was in the laundry.

Sen. D. Lyder: And then we had to hear a Minister of Public Utilities tell us that they would not be raising electricity after the local government election and, Mr. Vice-President, yesterday the entire country woke up—

Sen. Roberts: Shame.

Sen. D. Lyder:—to see electricity prices going up in double digits. And let me tell, through you, Mr. Vice-President, to my colleague, Sen. Laurence Hislop, in the papers today, it is the head of the Tobago Business Chamber, Mr. Martin George,

who said it point blank, and I quote:

“Ah—‘...damn vex’”

This was in the *Newsday* today. So, Mr. Vice-President, they have plunged this nation into pain and darkness by what they have done, by betraying the citizens of this country.

So the Minister of Finance has indicated that property tax on residential properties will be collected this year. Mr. Vice-President, while listening in this debate, I kept hearing the Minister regurgitate, “residential, residential, residential”. So it is only residential property pockets “all yuh” coming after? Mr. Vice-President, I remember standing in this Chamber last year and the year before that, asking the Minister of Finance whether or not they intend to bring property tax to the commercial and industrial properties. And I am forced to ask this question: Does the Government intend to only impose this property tax on residential customers and put it on the shoulders of an already beleaguered and financially compromised population? Does the Minister of Finance have any intention to tax commercial and industrial? Many of them sitting in the hands of the wealthy in this nation.

Could the Minister of Finance come clean and tell us even if the assessment has started on the commercial and industrial properties so that he could eventually tax them? You see, I ask this on behalf of the citizens of our country because these citizens want equity, Mr. Vice-President. These citizens want justice, Mr. Vice-President. You cannot continue taxing citizens while big businesses get away scot-free.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: You see, it is critical for the people of this country to know, Mr.

Vice-President, because dotted through all 14 regional corporations, through the length and breadth of this country, there are commercial and industrial properties that sit right there next to residential properties, sometimes next door to residential properties. And these commercial properties deplete the infrastructure of the environment in which they exist. Many of them add towards the pollution in the environment. They too, Mr. Vice-President, require the goods and services from the regional corporations that the citizens of the country require as well.

So Mr. Vice-President, so why unfairly tax an already struggling citizenry while the big boys get “ah bligh”? You see, Mr. Vice-President, the question is: Why is the Government not taxing industrial and commercial properties? Is there more in the mortar than in the pestle? Is this yet another example of the elitist nature of this PNM Government where the Prime Minister says, the rich will get richer while the poor will benefit? But where is the poor benefiting today, Mr. Vice-President? The poor have been abandoned in this country but fear not, Mr. Vice-President, when the United National Congress returns to government, we will scrap this property tax, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, there is more to this property tax that the Government is letting on to and once again, which also brings an assault to our democracy. I direct you to 2022, to the debate on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020, where the Government had indicated there, and again in this budget debate today, that all proceeds of property tax from residential would go to all 14 regional corporations. All right, that is fair. However, Mr. Vice-President, it was at the end of that Bill that I picked up the mischief in that Bill. You see, if you pay close attention, you will see a startling

revelation, Mr. Vice-President. You see, in clause 10 of the Bill regarding the implementation of property tax on commercial and industrial properties, the Bill states, and I quote:

“Clause 10 of the Bill would seek to amend the Property Taxes Act, Chap. 76:04...New subsection (3) would provide that the Minister of Finance may, by Order, declare if agricultural, industrial or commercial taxes may be collected by the Municipal Corporations and what percentages may be retained.”

And in this case, Mr. Vice-President, retained in the Consolidated Fund.

By this legislation, Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance, a politician, a Member of the Executive arm of the State, can decide at his whim and fancy how much, what percentage of that property tax remains with the corporation and what percentage goes into the Consolidated Fund. So, Mr. Vice-President, this opens up the door for the potential of political victimization.

5.15 p.m.

Any Minister of Finance—I cast no aspersions—can decide to put only 20 per cent of the tax collected on commercial properties to a UNC-held corporation, or he could decide to put 80 per cent of that property tax to a PNM held corporation, maybe one that they might be losing, soon enough, like the San Fernando City Corporation almost, almost got that.

But Mr. Vice-President, we continue. We continue to see the overreach of this Minister of Finance, and his colleagues throughout all the legislation passed under this governance. And yet another example of this overreach by this Minister of Finance is seen in the legislation passed for the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority—of course, I heard the Minister of Finance mention it in his budget

statement. But what the PNM Government insists on is an interpretation of the TTRA where the Minister of Finance has full power to appoint the chairman and the board of directors of this critical agency. An agency that should remain completely independent of politicians.

The Minister of Finance's appointed board can then appoint the most senior position, which is the Director General. And additionally, this director general can hire all the workers under them on contract therefore, there is no security of tenure, Mr. Vice-President. Workers are always under a threat of not having their contracts renewed. So, Mr. Vice-President, what this means is that if any Minister of Finance decides to invade the privacy of any citizen or victimize any opposing politician in this country, he can access their information through the threat of job tenure, to the staff of the TTRA, including the director general and the board of directors. And let me remind you, Mr. Vice-President, this agency is responsible for collecting more than 90 per cent of our tax revenues in this country, Mr. Vice-President, so it is completely dangerous and reckless to have any politician brandishing this level of power.

Sen. Roberts: Correct.

Sen. D. Lyder: And, Mr. Vice-President, contrary to what the PNM will tell you, we are not against the TTRA. We simply do not agree with the draconian model where this Minister has such sweeping powers. But Mr. Vice-President, it is okay. We will continue to challenge this Government to remove these sweeping powers from the Minister of Finance. And I repeat again, when the United National Congress gets back into power, we will scrap the property tax, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, manufacturing is an area that the Government uses to, most, mamaguy and hoodwink the country. Both the Minister of Finance and the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry in the other place, came back with a song and dance about non-energy manufacturing, ignoring the decline in total manufacturing and exports in this country. As I indicated earlier, the GDP of manufacturing per the Central Bank has declined by 14.9 per cent, from when the UNC left office. And the reality is that the cherry-picked figures used by this Minister of Finance, cannot withstand the realities of the day. We see the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Trade and Industry once more come to this Parliament, as they have done in previous years with a number of pie-in-the-sky initiatives, programmes and projects, claiming that these initiatives will help diversify the economy and would be the saving grace for manufacturers and businesses in general, and would help to bring prosperity to the SMEs in particular. But, Mr. Vice-President, this shows that the Minister of Finance and the hon. Minister of Trade is completely out of touch with the realities of the issues that impact manufacturers and businesses in this country today.

Sen. Nakhid: Out of touch.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, every business in this country can attest today, that it is more difficult than ever, not only to grow a business in this declining economy, but simply to survive in this environment. Mr. Vice-President, I am a businessman and when I look across on this side, with the exception of maybe one Senator, on that side, none of them has any business of noteworthiness, none of them understand how to run a business, Mr. Vice-President. And none of them even understand what are the issues of running a business in this country today, Mr. Vice-President, they do not know how to navigate through the worsening ease

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of doing business in this country that we have ever seen in our history. Mr. Vice-President, and yet this Government boasts about non-energy manufacturing and—

Sen. Roberts: No air condition for Balisier House.

Sen. D. Lyder:—increasing—

Sen. Roberts: Yes.

Sen. D. Lyder:—but this is not as a result of any initiative or any fertile ground laid by this PNM Government, Mr. Vice-President. The growth in the non-energy sector that we see today is based on the tenacity and the struggles of the private sector businessman and woman in this country who continue to struggle to grow in this declining economy, Mr. Vice-President—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Show me your growth.

Sen. D. Lyder:—well I would get to that. These businesses increase their exports in order—let me tell you why they are increasing their exports, Mr. Vice-President. They are increasing exports to supplement the PNM-induced shortfall in foreign exchange, and navigate through the worst and most crippling ease of doing business ever, Mr. Vice-President, so the PNM must take no credit for the growth that we see today. They must hang their heads in shame, Mr. Vice-President—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder:—they must hang their heads in shame. But Mr. Vice-President, let me tell you the facts here now. The World Bank measured the ease of doing business back in 2015 when the UNC was in power, Trinidad Tobago placed 67th in the world, and just a couple years ago, under this PNM administration we declined to 105 in the world, Mr. Vice-President. Now it is a complete shame that the World Bank has stopped doing this reading because undoubtedly, if they continued to do it, we would have seen this Government decline even further in the

ease of doing business, probably even to 115th or 120th in the world. And no amount of trade missions to Chile, discussed by the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry, is going to fix that ease of doing business, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, the four major areas that have been the most detrimental as it pertains to the ease of doing business, the four areas that keep coming up in our consultation with the various chambers, the manufacturing associations, and the wider civil society, you know what they are, Mr. Vice-President? Let me tell you what it is, and hopefully, the hon. Minister Trade would listen up this year. Inefficiencies that are delays in our national ports—

Sen. Roberts: “She waiting to hug Obama.”

Sen. D. Lyder:—foreign exchange shortages, Mr. Vice-President, oppressive, delays on VAT refunds, Mr. Vice-President, and everything is troubled and destroyed by the scourge of crime in this country, Mr. Vice-President. Those are the four areas that impact the ease of doing business that this Government has failed to address.

Sen. Roberts: Correct.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, the first major issue as I said, plaguing the businesses in this country is the bureaucracy and inefficiencies at our nation’s ports. Imagine that in 2023, you still cannot pay your customs, excise and VAT online with credit cards and Linx today, Mr. Vice-President, you still have to stand up in the bank to get a certified cheque or, Mr. Vice-President, you have to compromise your cash flows by accommodating or drawdown system on the ASYCUDA. Mr. Vice-President when illegal substances are found in any bonded warehouse, the entire bond is shut and shipments have to be redirected to another

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bond. This cost time and money to the importer with no—you know, why not simply put scanners in all bonded warehouses and in all ports in this country?

Sen. Lutchmedial: “It eh hah none.”

Sen. D. Lyder: What about the bureaucracy between agencies Mr. Vice-President? Customs and Excise Division, and the Bureau of Standards use two different information systems. When Customs and Excise Division has to send information via their ASYCUDA system to the TTBizlink system used by the Bureau Standards, it causes delays of up to one and two days, Mr. Vice-President, for the Bureau of Standards to complete their process. This can cause importers to incur rent and demurrage. Additionally, we see understaffing and under-resourcing across the agencies including Customs and Excise Division, Bureau of Standards, food and drug furthering frustrating the process, Mr. Vice-President. And pray you do not have to bring anything into the Point Lisas Port, because we understand today that every single container must be inspected manually.

So I call on the Government again, to place scanners in all ports, including the Point Lisas Port, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: Let us have every possible tool to catch all illegal entries, and minimize the cost of time and money that manufacturers and businesses experience. Mr. Vice-President, and then the foreign exchange supply issue, which I will speak of more in a moment, is causing further headaches at the port. Shipping companies are no longer accept payment in TT dollars, unless it is at premium price and have forced importers to pay the shipping in US or face having your shipments held.

Mr. Vice-President, this causes further delay to clear shipments, especially for the small, medium and micro enterprises who have difficulty in getting US dollars to pay these charges, Mr. Vice-President. So these delays cause importers to have rent and demurrage, and what do you think happens then? This expense is passed on to the consumer to the citizen when food prices go up, when hardware prices go up and other necessary items and important items.

But I move on to foreign exchange, Mr. Vice-President. The lack of foreign exchange has been an ongoing gripe of both the business community and ordinary citizens. We are seeing banks slash their credit card limits, but yet, we see a Minister of Finance come here and blame it on online purchases by citizens. Blame business people for not repatriating their funds, blame everyone except themselves, Mr. Vice-President, because it is the PNM who created this foreign exchange crisis, Mr. Vice-President—

Sen. Roberts: Correct.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder:—and they must accept that. They must pin it to their chest. The PNM crashed this economy and as a result of that they decimated foreign currency.

Sen. Roberts: Correct.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, and let me remind you over \$3 billion in foreign reserves were wiped out by the hands of the PNM since the UNC left office. This crisis started with the PNM when they decided to close the fridge door and shut down Petrotrin. Petrotrin, Mr. Vice-President, was a national asset that was earning more than US\$350 million per annum in foreign exchange and between 2018 and now, the PNM has been unable to replace this foreign currency that they have lost. Additionally, Mr. Vice-President, this Government has

mismanaged the gas supply, hurting downstreamers at the Point Lisas Industrial Estate, forcing them to use smaller plants or just leave T&T altogether.

Just this week in the *Daily Express*, dated October 14th in an article named “Lack of Gas”

We see Methanex announced the 2024 closure of the Atlas Plant and the privatization of a smaller Titan Plant due to the scarce gas supply. We know for a fact as I said earlier, that more than US\$1.5 billion exited our shores in recent times under this PNM Government. Companies like Arcelor Mital, Lever Brothers and one third of the Point Lisas Industrial Estate, packed up their bags and left for greener pastures, taking with them the billions of US dollars in revenue—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Who is that?

Sen. D. Lyder:—as well as the thousands—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Who is that?

Sen. D. Lyder:—amongst many other companies, taking away the thousands of jobs that they once created in this country. And I know the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry, she is getting antsy here now—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: [*Laughter*]

Sen. D. Lyder:—with her soft hands, she is getting antsy—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Sen. D. Lyder:—but the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry will come and want to speak about the EximBank.

Now, we believe—no, no, no, let me let her know that, the hon. Minister, know that the EximBank is a good initiative, it is a good initiative. But according to the Minister of Finance, they have only provided foreign exchange for only 158 export manufacturers and we know in this country that there are more than 400

manufacturers. So what has happened to the more than 250 manufacturers who not getting this foreign exchange? Many of them who are SMEs in this country, Mr. Vice-President, because we know the big boys getting the money. How many of them have been left in the cold Mr. Vice-President?

And let me tell you why I know how many were left in the cold eh. Because I do my research, I go back to the debates, I remember the debates, Mr. Vice-President, it was a Private Member's debate in March of 2022, that the Minister of Finance revealed to the Senate that as of February of this year, though, 82 per cent of companies that access forex, from the EximBank were SMEs, listen to this, only 28.7 per cent of the total money provided by EximBank actually went to the SMEs. So, Mr. Vice-President, while the big boys get the lion's share, more and more SMEs, small, medium and micro enterprises are abandoned by this Government. And then, the Minister of Finance boasts of increasing the ceiling on foreign exchange provided by the EximBank, yet conveniently omits to let us know what the ceiling is. Probably promises that never materialized, Mr. Vice-President. But Mr. Vice-President, the main thing we found out, the United National Congress, we do our research, and we found out what created the most recent and worsening issue of foreign exchange in the past few months and it was not online purchases, Mr. Vice-President.

5.30 p.m.

This Government has a history and a legacy of creating a problem, bringing the solution to the problem and then wanting you to congratulate them for the solution, and then the solution never materializes. Mr. Vice-President, this time the PNM Government created a problem—which is the third issue I am going to talk about, which is the non-repayment of VAT refunds. The mammoth problem,

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then attempted to solve it by worsening our foreign exchange problem, and it is because of the bravery of a now former Independent Senator who questioned the Minister of Finance mere months ago—I know she is not here with us today—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]*—the Government.*

Sen. Roberts: “Ummh”.

Sen. D. Lyder:—right?—regarding the state of VAT refunds going to manufacturers. The Minister of Finance admitted that as at March 2023, some \$7.8 billion in VAT refunds were owed.

This Government has almost doubled the outstanding VAT refunds compared to 2015 when the UNC demitted office. This is a multi-billion dollar interest-free loan taken by this Government against the manufacturers of this country and on their backs, Mr. Vice-President. And in response to the Independent Senator, the Minister of Finance in his classic, you know, knee-jerk reaction announced that \$3 billion would be paid via VAT bonds, an additional \$1 billion to \$2 billion will be paid back from the Consolidated Fund. And that would have been done in the 2023 fiscal year, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, let me remind this House that VAT bonds are still a loan, Mr. Vice-President. It shifts the debt from owing manufacturers to now owing the banks when these manufacturers go and cash their bonds in. And on top of that, the terms announced by the hon. Minister of Finance were 3.15 per cent interest per annum. So, Mr. Vice-President, if the bonds were fully utilized as promised, it would cost the taxpayers of this country an additional \$283 million in just interest payments to banks, Mr. Vice-President.

Sen. Nakhid: What? “Nah”, for their mistake?

Sen. D. Lyder: Yes. But before I go back to the foreign exchange, I have to ask

the hon. Minister of Finance today, how much of that \$3billion in bonds promised were actually issued?

How much of the \$1 billion to \$2 billion for the Consolidated Fund was actually given as promised? And I would like to know how much, today, do the non-payment of VAT refunds stand at today. You see, Mr. Vice-President, the Minister mentioned nothing about VAT refunds in his budget statement. Four hours spent in the other place and not one word about VAT refunds, running from the realities of their neglect while the Minister continues to stifle the liquidity of manufacturers in this country, stifle the growth, and in some cases bankrupt businesses, especially the small, medium and micro-businesses by unethically holding back these VAT refunds.

Mr. Vice-President, I come back to the foreign exchange. So this mismanagement of the VAT refunds further amplified our foreign exchange crisis. How so, Mr. Vice-President? You see, we consulted with various banks and consulted with various persons of the energy sector. We have come to learn that these VAT refunds, a portion of them, having been paid out in the form of bonds in a panic by this Government, a lot of it went to the energy manufacturers. This meant that these companies received a wash of TT dollars from these refunds. And given that these companies would normally have to convert their US dollar revenues in order for their companies to pay their local operational costs, now with this wash of money via TT bonds, there was no need for these companies to convert their foreign exchange, and as a result of that, we have seen in the last few months a complete nosedive in the foreign exchange supply in the domestic market. I am a businessman, I see it, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, and who do you think this PNM mismanagement affects

the most? It is the small, medium and micro-businesses that hurt the most. They are the ones standing in the lines in the bank waiting for hundreds of dollars when they need thousands of US dollars, and they are the ones that are now struggling to survive after Christmas. You see, Mr. Vice-President, for raw materials and finished goods to be paid, paid for and shipped in order to arrive in time for Christmas sales, these items would have had to have been paid for the shipped in the months of July, August, September. And given that this exacerbated foreign exchange crisis would have occurred during these months, many of these SMEs, being unable to acquire the required foreign exchange, would have literally missed the boat and would have lost the opportunity to capitalize on this peak period of Christmas. And in the end, in January of next year, Mr. Vice-President, many of these SMEs are going to pay the ultimate price where they join the more than 6,000 SMEs that shut their doors under this PNM after the COVID pandemic, Mr. Vice-President.

Let me remind this Senate, it is the SMEs that are the lifeblood of this nation. They represent more than 32 per cent of our GDP while creating tens of thousands of jobs for thousands of families, yet this PNM Government has abandoned every single one of them. Mr. Vice-President, it is going to take a United National Congress government to restore the dignity of these SMEs and to bring them back to their former glory.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, we look at the single biggest issue impacting this country's business community which is crime. We have seen not only crime impacting citizens—

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

Sen. D. Lyder: Five minutes. Wow. We have seen not only crime impacting citizens but the scourge of crime hurting businesses. People being held up in broad daylight, people being murdered in their stores, more than 600 persons murdered last year and on track to surpass that this year, and this comes at a great cost to businesses in this country.

The cost of doing business has skyrocketed where businessmen have to pay thousands of dollars for surveillance equipment, hundreds of thousands for security guards and money movers, and they are still being robbed and have to pay thousands in insurance. That is the reality we see every day in the media and in some cases in real life. So, Mr. Vice-President, that is why we say, there can be no prosperity in business without safety and security.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, I turn quickly to tourism. This Government's failure to diversify the economy is not only in manufacturing but it is in tourism. This Government has huffed and puffed about tourism but when we look at the numbers, tourist arrivals in Trinidad and Tobago in 2015 under the People's Partnership saw that 442,000, and in 2022 it fell under this PNM Government, 227,000. That is a decline of 48 per cent.

In 2015, according to the CSO, arrivals in Tobago stood at 22,567, and in 2022, under this PNM Government, it has fallen to 11,844. That is a 53 per cent PNM decline, and then the Government chooses to ignore these declines and has elected to spend \$1.2 billion of your taxpayers' money on an airport expansion in Tobago. The people of Tobago deserve development but they also deserve a government that has a plan and has vision, Mr. Vice-President. We heard nothing of a plan for tourism. Mr. Vice-President, no arrival targets, yet you are spending

\$1.2 billion on an airport. No news about deals with airlines like Copa and KLM that they did last year but they are spending \$1.2 billion on a wing there. Even the room stock, they come and regurgitate the same to two hotels. They “doh” even have the room stock, Mr. Vice-President, to facilitate a drastic increase in tourism, yet they are spending \$1.2 billion on a wing.

Mr. Vice-President, the country of Antigua and Barbuda, a country without oil and gas wealth like us which tourism represents 62 per cent of their GDP, before COVID brought in 700,000 tourists via cruise ship and almost 400,000 via airlift, Mr. Vice-President, because they have a government and a Prime Minister who cares about tourism. And they spent some TT \$600 million on a state-of-the-art international airport in Antigua, yet we see \$1.2 billion being spent on a wing.

Hon. Senator: Corruption.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. Vice-President, and that is why we say, when we look at the situation of crime in this country—and I heard Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy speak about our country going on advisories from countries telling their citizens not to visit us, and we wonder why tourism has declined. Mr. Vice-President, that is why we say, there can be no prosperity in tourism without safety and security.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: And, Mr. Vice-President, I do not have much time left, but point-blank, in agriculture another failure by this Government, GDP declined from \$2.61 billion under the UNC. After they screamed about dissected diversification, it dropped the \$1.8 billion, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, I listened to the hon. Minister in the Ministry in Agriculture, Land and Fisheries speak about 30,000 farmers and asked them to

thank him, well, I want to say, their GDP agriculture declined by 30 per cent. So, sarcastically, I would like to thank you for declining agriculture, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, again, I do not have much time so I will say in closing, the PNM after years with the same “promises that never materialize”, all three industries of diversification have declined as I showed you. The Government has no vision, no mission and no plan, and it is clear that the citizens of this country can take no more. But, Mr. Vice-President, there is hope, the United National Congress is coming in 22 months.

In 22 months our industries will see hope. In 22 months our economy will begin the real turnaround. In 22 months the people of this nation will finally begin to feel safe again. And just as the people in Sangre Grande and San Fernando did to them in the locals, just as the people of Tobago did to them in the THA elections, in 22 months this Government will be casted into the political cemetery where the United National Congress, led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, will start to rescue the jobs of this nation and rescue our economy.

Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance said in his closing in the other place that we are going to get diarrhoea; that is unparliamentarily, Mr. Vice-President. I will bring it to parliamentary conversation, what we heard in this budget was something called emesis and gastroenteritis, which is vomiting and diarrhoea. Mr. Vice-President, there can be no—there can be no—there can be no prosperity in T&T without safety and security, and I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Hislop.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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Sen. Laurence Hislop: Good evening, Mr. Vice-President, and my fellow colleagues. I want to thank you for the opportunity to join this debate. I believe I have very limited time this afternoon but I will—

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. L. Hislop:—do what I can within the allotted time. I also want to extend welcome and congratulations to our new Independent colleagues, and welcome to what some of you all call the gayelle. I hope that you were not too put off by the behaviour from those just under you today, and I say that very, very politely, Mr. Vice-President. I heard Sen. Lyder, and, Mr. Vice-President, what I heard from Sen. Lyder, to use my colleague's, Sen. Bacchus, Tobago colloquial slang, what I heard from Sen. Lyder was a “mingpilling”—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. L. Hislop:—was a “mingpilling” contribution—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Sen. L. Hislop:—and very few, Mr. Vice-President, will understand on that side the term. I know Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy and Sen. Jearlean John will grasp it very quickly, but what I got from Sen. Lyder was a “mingpilling” contribution.

Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing: That and nothing is the same thing.

Sen. L. Hislop: I want to say very quickly, that when Sen. Lyder spoke about tourism, Mr. Vice-President, and sought to pin the declining numbers in Tobago on the People's National Movement Government in Trinidad—well, in Trinidad and Tobago, he needs to understand that the Tobago House of Assembly is responsible under the Fifth Schedule for tourism.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: And currently the Government in Tobago that is responsible for

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tourism under the Fifth Schedule are your bosom bodies and your colleagues in the TPP. And so the reality is, Mr. Vice-President, that when you want to pin declining tourism numbers on this Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, you cannot; 2022, that is the responsibility of the Tobago House of Assembly. He also sought, Mr. Vice-President, to say that the Government is wasting money in building an airport terminal building at the ANR Robinson International Airport. And if Sen. Lyder did his research, because I think Sen. Lyder may be challenged by a human resource lack in the office of the Opposition since some persons left—

Hon. Senators: “Ooooh”.

Sen. L. Hislop:—but if Sen. Lyder did his research, Mr. Vice-President, he will understand that the airport project was part of an entire development programme for tourism for Tobago—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop:—which included the Sandals and beaches resort, which also included the upgrade of the waste—

5.45 p.m.

Mr. Vice President: Sen. Lyder, not only are you chewing in the Chamber, and eating is not allowed—

Sen. Lyder: It is a sweetie.

Mr. Vice President: Suck it, please. I ask you to temper your voice in your responses to him, you had your time to speak already.

Sen. L. Hislop: Thank you, Mr. Vice President. You see, all I am doing, Mr. Vice President, is putting the facts on the table.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: And these facts can be borne out by accounts that have been given

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not only in Tobago but in the national Parliament. The extensive discussions that went on around the Sandals and Beaches Resorts that my colleagues on the other side were instrumental along with their partners in Tobago, in literally causing the investment to run from Trinidad and Tobago. And it is something that I wanted to—

Hon. Senators: *[Interruption]*

Sen. L. Hislop: It is something that I wanted to—that I will address.

Hon. Senators: *[Interruption]*

Sen. Mark: *[Inaudible]*—from Sandals.

Mr. Vice President: Members. Sen. Mark, kindly allow the Member to make his contribution in silence with decorum.

Sen. L. Hislop: Thank you, Mr. Vice President. Mr. Vice President, I understand what is going on, you know, and that is alright. But I will continue by saying that something has to be wrong with us in Trinidad and Tobago that we will openly run an international resort brand that has a proven track record of being successful throughout the Caribbean, run them, and then when they have gone, they have taken their investment to other territories.

Hon. Senators: Yes.

Sen. L. Hislop: Curaçao has a Sandals now, and St. Vincent has a Sandals, something has to be wrong with Trinidad and Tobago but it has to be wrong with those, Mr. Vice President, who are opposite. Because, you see—

Sen. Mark: Rowley.

Sen. L. Hislop: You see, we do not govern by “vaps.”

Hon. Senators: *[Desk thumping]*

Sen. L. Hislop: We govern with a clear plan in place. When you talk about *Vision*

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2020 and you talk about *Vision 2030*, that is a clear plan in place and that is how we govern, Mr. Vice President. But you see, I do not know what is the challenge with Dr. Rowley who is a Tobagonian, spending significant investment in Tobago. Because I would have touched it in my contribution but I will touch it now. The proven information says to us, the proven data says to us that it would have increased our GDP in Tobago by 25 per cent, and we are talking about backward linkages as well. This was not just about the hotel, Mr. Vice President, this was about building out industries around this investment. You are talking about agriculture, you are talking about entertainment, these are the kinds of impacts that Sandals would have made.

You want to talk about airlift? That is the responsibility of an agency called TTAL, the Tobago Tourism Agency Limited, that is one of their mandates. It was said in the budget document that was sent, the Tobago segment of it, that one of the things they were pointing to was tourism and the increase in airlift. That is the responsibility of the Tobago House of Assembly and from after COVID what we have seen is a decline, Mr. Vice President, in tourist arrivals. We have no new—you are asking, Sen. Lyder is asking about new airlines coming into Tobago. There have been none since COVID. Every other territory, Mr. Vice President, in the Caribbean has increased their numbers, has increased flights. I saw up to yesterday that Cayman Airways is now having direct flights from the Cayman Islands into Barbados weekly, but we have heard nothing, absolutely nothing from the agency in Tobago that is responsible for marketing the island and bringing the airlift. We have heard absolutely nothing.

5.50 p.m.

What we have seen, since they have been in office, is that we have lost

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Virgin Atlantic. We have lost Virgin Atlantic and other territories have picked up Virgin—well, Virgin Atlantic has spread its wings, so to say, Mr. Vice-President, throughout the Caribbean. So till they have now—they are now seeking to make Barbados a regional hub. We have lost. And Sen. Lyder wants to come here to talk about the decline in tourism numbers and seeking to lay that at the feet—but what I could see is that the tourism numbers for Trinidad, Mr. Vice-President, have increased.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: And if could—and I hope that in the next 22 months, Sen. Lyder would still be around. He may be out of his seat before 22 months but we will see. We will see where that goes, Mr. Vice-President.

I want to touch on another thing, that when he talks about debt and borrowing and so on, the UNC took loans to put money in the HFS. They took loans to put—for savings, when on the flip side, the PNM uses surplus revenue to go into the HFS. Yeah? We are talking about the San Fernando to Point Fortin Highway. Well, that is—the Minister spoke in-depth about that today and the Prime Minister as well spoke in-depth about it at the opening of the highway. And the reality is, for you to stand in this august House, Mr. Vice-President, as Sen. Lyder just did, and seek to malign the PNM, the last people who should talk—as we say in Tobago, “every pot have to sit down on their own buttock”. But you want to sit in this place, you want to stand in this place today and accuse the PNM of A, B, C, D, E, F, G, when you have sins that you have not repented for.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: I want to compliment Minister Bacchus—because I will leave Sen. Lyder, the other—yeah, the other.

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Sen. Lyder: I rattled your cage.

Sen. L. Hislop: No. Rattle my case? Yeah.

Sen. Lyder: Tobago hurt you.

Sen. L. Hislop: I want to compliment Minister Bacchus—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop:—because what I heard from Minister Bacchus was an on point, factual and relevant contribution, and sober.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: You see, the discourse from Sen. Bacchus flew over the heads of the Opposition because it is not a sexy discussion and some of them, Mr. Vice-President, do not even understand half of what Sen. Bacchus said. Right? And it is sad sometimes that the work that is being done in the Minister of Digital Transformation is not as—I will use the term again, it is not sexy. It is not on the front page. There was no raucous in the House because they did not have anything to needle at, because they did not understand, but that is significant work that is taking place in the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Vice-President, that will transform this country. And I tip my hat to Sen. Bacchus for the work that he has been doing in his Ministry.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: My brother, keep up the good work. Keep up the good work.

Mr. Vice-President, at this point in time, I want to thank—sincerely thank the hon. Prime Minister for his continued—what would I say?—his continue belief in me as a Senator to be able to stand here in this august Chamber.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: But I want to salute also and recognize—

Mr. Vice-President: Leader of Government Business.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Mr. Vice-President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Monday, October 23, 2023 at 10.00 a.m.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned 5.54 p.m.