

**SENATE**

*Monday, October 23, 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. Damian Lyder who is ill. Hon. Senators, this Senate will revert to this item of business later in the proceedings.

**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023**

[Second Day]

*Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 20, 2023]:*

That the Bill be now read a second time.

*Question again proposed.*

**Mr. President:** We had 12 speakers on the last occasion. Hon. Senators, on the last occasion of Friday, October 20, 2023, as I indicated there were 12 speakers on this Motion. Sen. Lawrence Hislop utilized 13 minutes of his speaking time and therefore has 27 minutes remaining. Sen. Hislop.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** Thank you, Mr. President. I want to continue my contribution, Mr. President, just slightly on where I left off on Friday as it relates to some of the comments made by my colleague opposite who unavoidably is not well and my best wishes on his speedy recovery, Mr. President. Mr. President, Sen. Lyder kept trying to make the point that our manufacturing sector, some way or the other, was in decline and that our manufacturing sector was dying and I just want to touch on a couple of points. I know the Minister of Trade and Industry will treat with those

in a little more detail. But, Mr. President, when we talk about—how could we talk about collapse, when it was clearly stated that non-energy exports increased by 15 per cent, from TT \$15.6 billion to \$17.9 billion. We keep making statements without having the necessary facts to back it up and the numbers have clearly been stated, not only by this Government, but by the independent agencies that the manufacturing sector continues to do well. The manufacturing sector along with the energy sector—

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:**—has been key to this country's economic good fortunes in the last of couple years, Mr. President. And I also want to touch on a couple of things as it relates to micro, to the assistance that the Ministry of Trade and Industry gives to our micro-manufacturers, if you want to put it that way, because the information that I have is especially for Tobago and Tobago is not left out by the Ministry. The information that was presented is that, there was a mission to China and three micro-manufacturers of what you may consider Tobago's delicacies was part of that. The manufacturers may not have been on the trip but their products, Mr. President, the Ministry was on point to assist them in packaging, in teaching them how to package their products, giving them the assistance and there are micro-manufacturers in Tobago who have gotten to the tune of \$250,000 in grant funding to assist them in taking their business to the other level. And so I think that we ought to compliment in the Ministry of Trade and Industry for the work that it has been doing—

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:**—not with our major manufacturers but our medium and micro-manufacturers as well, Mr. President. I want to use my time left to treat with a place that I love and I know a lot of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago have a

special love for Tobago.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** I believe that there will be a number of our brothers and sisters from Trinidad who will be making the trip over this weekend to participate in the Tobago Carnival. And so Tobago continues to be the place to be, whether it is just for relaxation. I have some colleagues who say, the only time they sleep most comfortably is when they are on island of Tobago. Yeah?

So, Mr. President, Tobago is or has been given an allocation of \$2.58 billion. And on that note I just to single out my two sisters in the other place, the Members of Parliament for Tobago West and Tobago East who continue to be champions for Tobago and for the people of Tobago.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** And the Minister of Finance broke down the allocation \$2.298 billion is carded for recurrent expenditure, \$260 million for development, \$18 million for URP, 9.2 for CEPEP. And he made it very clear that the \$2.585 billion, Mr. President \$64.2 million more than was allocated for fiscal 2023. And I want to do something that we grew up in Tobago knowing, to say thanks. We want to thank, I want to thank the Minister of Finance behalf of the people of Tobago for the allocation. I also want to say, that even though we are saying thanks, we understand that there will always be a desire for more. There will always be a desire for Tobago to receive more of the national allocation. But, Mr. President, the administration in Tobago refused a guaranteed 6 per cent in the autonomy Bills. And my maths may not be that sound but 6 per cent of a \$59 billion budget, Mr. President, is about \$3.54 billion which is what Tobago would have been guaranteed as en bloc if those Bills were accepted by the present administration in Tobago and accepted and voted into law but we know where that is. The

administration decided to throw out the baby with the bath water, had the opportunity for a guaranteed 6 per cent and are now complaining that we are only getting 4.30 per cent.

And, Mr. President, I was very deliberate when I said that the allocation was to the Tobago House of Assembly and not Tobago as the Minister also stated because he said that beyond the budgetary allocation to the THA, an additional \$678.5 million is allocated to Tobago through various Ministries and agencies. And we have seen over the years, Mr. President, that the Tobago population has been able to receive two bites of the cherry because more often than not, services that are offered to the citizenry in Trinidad, is also offered in Tobago through the Tobago House of Assembly. And we ought to understand that as Tobagonians we sit in a very comfortable place. We ought to be, you know I might get in trouble for saying this, but we ought to be grateful, we ought to be thankful that we received our allocations as we do. And on top of that, that the central government spends significant money in Tobago.

The percentage, Mr. President, of 4.03 or about of the national budget is consistent with what the THA has been allocated over the years. And we in Tobago have always made the call, as I said, for more. But I want to say that, when we make the call for more, it must be made in the context that we are treating with whole fiscal pie for the country. And the reality is that, every Ministry and every Minister, Mr. President, every municipality and every corporation, every citizen wants more and in a lot of regards, deserves more. But when we all get more, the reality that we have to face as a country is then, there will be no more. So when we keep clamouring for more, we have to clamour for it in the context that we are all pulling from one pool and we ought to be mindful of the country's circumstances, Mr. President.

You know, Mr. President, I actually want the present administration in Tobago to do well. I actually want them to do well and the Government has given that commitment as well that it wants the THA administration to do well. And we could always look back at the fact that, yeah, we lost the election in 2021. And a friend of mine says, we ought not to call it a loss but a steep learning curve. And I remember in my maiden budget contribution, Mr. President, I shared some information with this House and told them about what is taking place on the island of Tobago with regard to the management of the island. And I believe it is my responsibility as a Member of this House to be truthful and lay the facts, as they are, that Tobago's affairs are not being properly managed by the current administration in Tobago.

You see, Mr. President, the island, Tobago, was being built out following a well-crafted comprehensive economic development plan and of recent vintage, the medium-term policy planning framework. But that work that was put in, Mr. President, is now being systematically and unceremoniously destroyed. A foundation that was laid in 20 years has taken the administration in Tobago 22 months—22 months to destroy. You know, the words of the father of the nation, Dr. Williams, he said the alternative to the PNM is chaos and confusion.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** And sadly, that is our experience in Tobago. And you know, I do not usually challenge my seniors but I want to challenge the advice that the Minister of Finance received from the Tobago House of Assembly, that Tobago is bouncing back from the slowdown of the pandemic.

**10.15 a.m.**

That is not the case. Because the people on the ground, Mr. President, are not seeing that. The reality is the Division of Finance's own information said that

immediately after COVID there was a 4.2 per cent growth or 4.2 per cent recovery immediately after COVID, and that was under the previous administration. But what we have experienced after that is a 2 per cent decline. And this is not me pulling facts out of thin air, this is the information that is available to us from the Division of Finance, that Tobago's economy declined by 2 per cent.

Every single industry, every single area of Tobago's economy has been in decline, from construction to agriculture to tourism. So whilst the national economy, Mr. President, is growing, Tobago is dying a death by a 1,000 cuts, because we had cuts in construction, cuts in employment in Tobago House of Assembly. You are now faced with a situation that if your contract is up for renewal you are concerned that your contract may not be renewed, an expectation that was afforded to the average Tobagonian over a 20-year period.

You see, Mr. President, each administration before this one experienced an allocation thereabout of 4.30 per cent. Each administration did what it had to do with that allocation. And I want to say, Mr. President, that previous PNM administrations were able to do significant development on the island with the same percentage or even less, because the data shared or showed us that from 2001 to 2021 the national allocation was in the vicinity of about 3.9 per cent, 4.0 per cent, 4.30 per cent. And when you look at what was done with that allocation, and if you permit me just a historical backdrop, with that allocation previous administrations were able to conceptualize and build the cove industrial—the Eco Industrial Park, a park that now can be very instrumental to Tobago's diversification. We have a significant investment in it, in a farm, Berrycove that is able to produce high quality vegetables.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** High quality vegetables in an environment that is pristine because

they are using the greenhouse and hydroponics and that sort of thing. And that is geared towards an export market or even reducing our food import bill in terms of strawberries and all of those nice fruits that we like to use. And if the people of Tobago, Mr. President, remember how Canoe Bay used to be before 2001, it took you 45 minutes from the Claude Noel Highway into Canoe Bay before that place was developed. Now it is something that we take for granted that you drive into Canoe Bay in five minutes. The natural gas plant, the power plant, all of those things are there and all of that was done with the same—around the same allocation, the percentage allocation, and Tobago contractors were involved in the development of Cove.

Mr. President, built and repaired schools. I remember in Mr. London's second year in office he was able to build the Mason Hall—start the Mason Hall Primary School, a school that was there since eons ago. I think it was the same building that the Prime Minister attended, and it was in the second year of Mr. London's tenure that that school was started, and I could go on. Community centres, multipurpose facilities, health centres galore in Tobago, and even the present Chief Secretary had to admit that the percentage of, that when you look at it per capita, Tobago sits in an area that is above most throughout the Caribbean in terms of what it has, what facilities it has per capita. And this, Mr. President, was done with the same sort of percentage allocation.

They talk about Shaw Park and all of those things. All of those things, all of that, the THA took on board. I do not know if Tobagonians remember Shaw Park was a place where, when you go, you will get wet if it is a concert that you are attending, and now it is a premier concert hall, premier multipurpose facility. All of that was done by the Tobago House of Assembly with the similar percentage allocation. But, Mr. President, since this THA administration assumed office in

2021, they have received the net increases year on year, more than any other previous administration. And for the two years, the 22 months around that they have been in there we have not seen any significant development on the island. *The Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*, Mr. President, shows that the Assembly is receiving their allocation but we are not seeing the equivalent work being done on the island.

The Minister of Finance has said over and over again that Tobago has received 100 per cent of its allocation. There is no 90 per cent of what is allocated to them or 80 per cent. They have received 100 per cent of their allocation from this PNM administration. And if I am to look at the figures, the Personnel Expenditure, \$652,776,126 that is 2021, Actual Expenditure 2022 approved, \$671. The 2022 Revised Estimate, \$660; 2023 Estimates, \$686, an increase, Mr. President, of \$14 million for Tobago year on year.

Goods and Services also increased, and we are calling on the administration in Tobago to use your increases to the benefit of the population of Tobago. Personnel Expenditure has increased by \$50 million, Goods and Services increased \$15 million, Minor Equipment Purchases \$3 million, and when you ask the question why am I going through those figures? But the reality, Mr. President, is that the Tobago House of Assembly is the only entity within the Government system of Trinidad and Tobago that when it receives its allocation of \$2-point-how-much billion can move the money as it sees fit for the benefit of Tobago. So even if you get \$1-point-how-much billion in Recurrent Expenditure and you think that your development is short changed you have the ability as the Tobago House of Assembly to move, to curtail, or let me put it another way, to choose your priorities. You could choose your priorities. But we have an administration that has spent \$1.2 million on a stage in the sea, has increased its travel, and when you



ask the administration about accounting for the expenses they tell you that you are not part of the Executive Council. So basically they are telling you cannot question them.

The fact is, Mr. President, we moved from \$300 million to \$260 million on the development side. And yeah we accept the fact that \$260 million as you look at it at face value would not be enough to do all the things we want to be done in Tobago. But the reality is you can choose your priorities. The Scarborough Secondary School falling into the sea, and we have not heard anything about what is taking place with that. I heard the Chief Secretary, Mr. President, speaking at an Executive Council town hall, saying to the audience that they have less money to pave roads. But, Mr. President, the fact reveals that the THA got \$400 million last fiscal for development, they got \$300 million at the annual budget and a \$100 million at the mid-year review, and it was specifically—the \$100 million was specifically for upgrades of roads and repairs of roads. But the sad part about that is that we have not seen any of that \$100 million being spent in the repair of roads.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** Thank you, Mr. President. And that is the situation we face. As I said, out of that \$400 million, \$1.2, \$1.3 million was used to build a stage, \$19 million was spent on a road that the experts say to us could have been done for \$7 million, \$65 million committed to build a road that the Ministry of Works and Transport was willing to build to the new airport in an arrangement that they had with PURE, and the sad part about that road, Mr. President, is that they moved the road from a dual carriageway road to a single lane road for \$65 million, and that road is now paused because of an EMA situation.

The thing about the school, and I just want to just take “meh” time, I know I am short on time, but, Mr. President, Scarborough Secondary School was a project

that under the previous administration, the site was already found and there was an arrangement with the Caribbean Development Bank at that point in time, I do not know if the arrangement has changed, but at that point in time the Caribbean Development Bank was willing to support the project to the tune of \$250 million, designed and constructed, once format approval was given by the Ministry of Finance. Mr. President, we have heard nothing in the last 22 months about the Scarborough Secondary School, in the meantime the school is falling into the sea.

And as I move quickly along, tourism, I touched on it on Friday. Tourism is in a bad state not because of this PNM administration in Trinidad. And I just happened to have a conversation with some taxi drivers this morning, I was coming through the airport, and they had to admit to me, a place that I spent some time, I spent about two years working with them, that nothing is happening with tourism in Tobago. And persons have to understand that tourism is a Fifth Schedule item of the Tobago House of Assembly Act, which gives the THA sole responsibility for tourism on the island. The marketing, the airlift, all of that is the responsibility of the THA, not the central government. Tobago House of Assembly is responsible for tourism on the island, and every other territory that is—There were days Grenada was behind in Tobago, Mr. President, in terms of its tourism product, now Grenada is way ahead. Flights, hotels, all of those things, and Tobago, sadly, has missed the boat.

Mr. President, as I close off, CAL continues to give yeoman service on the air bridge. The figures will show it, in excess of \$25,000 on a monthly basis, but there are times that we hope that this service can be more seamless, Mr. Presidents. And I ask, or I look forward to the service for being par excellence on the interisland air bridge and our international connectivity as CAL embarks on its restructuring and fleet and route expansion. I look forward to the service being

second to none on the air bridge and our international connection. The sea bridge, Mr. President, has continued to be an excellent service. An excellent service that has been rebuilt by this People's National Movement.

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** Two fast ferries, a cargo vessel that is above capacity, and as the Minister of Works and Transport said, as soon as the other fast ferry is back in service, the *T&T Spirit*, you will have a surplus of space running between the two islands.

And as my colleague Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy touched on the Registrar General's issue, Mr. President, I know the Attorney General is working assiduously to get that situation rectified, and I pray to God that it is done as quickly as possible so we do not have a situation on the island where persons are unable to bury their dead, persons are unable to register their children's births because of whatever the issue may be. Mr. President, I have one call to make to the Chief Secretary and his Executive Council, change your narrative. It is not about developing Tobago on your own, but it is about partnering with the central government for the benefit of the whole. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is here to support the Tobago House of Assembly, let us get the work done. The good book says:

“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him much shall be required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”

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

**Sen. L. Hislop:** Mr. President, I endorse these fiscal measures and I salute the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Planning and Development and all public servants involved. Mr. President, I thank you.

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

**10.30 a.m.**

## **VISITORS**

### **Caribbean Youth Fellowship**

**Mr. President:** Before I call on the next speaker, I now invite hon. Senators in joining me in welcoming to the public gallery the Caribbean Youth Fellowship, under the University of the West Indies, Global Campus in collaboration with the International Republican Institute. Welcome.

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

### **APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023**

**Mr. President:** Sen. Dr. Ibrahim.

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

**Sen. Dr. Muhammad Yunus Ibrahim:** Good morning and many thanks, Mr. President, for recognizing me in this and it gives me great pleasure to contribute in this Finance Bill at hand. I begin in the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful. The Bill at hand is:

“An Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2024.”

Mr. President, before I go into what I would have believed was my planned preparation, I would just like to make a couple of responses based upon the newly minted Independent Senator who brought up some issues that I believe need a certain level of clarification and expansion, within her maiden contribution. And within that contribution the good Senator spoke about health and well-being, tackling issues such as non-communicable diseases, spoke about the local content of our food bill which was dealt with very well by the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. the Hon. Avinash Singh, and she had also brought up, you know, something very pertinent with respect to budgeting and

planning with respect to climate change.

Allow me a couple of moments just to ventilate a bit on the matter and let me start by responding with what the Government has done and is doing in meeting its goals in tackling non-communicable diseases. As you all know the health sector receives one of the largest shares of the pie of the budget and in so doing by committing to spending efforts of prevention now, will definitely yield the reward in the saving of sums of money when it applies to preventing disease instead of spending time in hospitals, hospital beds and management of cases.

The Ministry of Health has pioneered a programme of diabetes in pregnancy programme. It is a national screening, one in which women are tested twice during their pregnancy and their diabetes is managed. What effects does this have for non-communicable diseases and cost to health care in the whole sphere of spent?

Children born in a position of what we call in medical terms, in a condition of gestational diabetes, first and foremost, can be diabetic themselves. That is number one. Number two, central nervous system and other system developments for these said fetuses are put at a challenge in development in utero, within the womb of the mother. Managing diabetes within the context of prenatal care is a form of getting to the non-communicable disease management even before it has started. And I must commend the Ministry of Health in taking such measures and leading to less maternal deaths and proper development of young babies in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Another initiative that the Ministry of Health has taken for non-communicable diseases is that they have moved towards a 10 per cent rate to a 95 per cent rate of breastfeeding within hours of birth. We grew up on the—well, I grew up seeing flyers all over, everywhere, medical doctor offices. It was

run by an organization and I still believe is current and pertinent and present, called TIBS and that is the Trinidad and Tobago Breastfeeding Society. TIBS pushed a slogan that says, “breast fed is best fed”. We have moved as a society to a level of convenience and we have moved to a society following nutritional supplementation for children, but when it is we encourage at the health centres, at the health care, at the hospitals and it is trained for immediate post-care of children, the best connection to the mother, the best connection for the purpose of nutrition. The most important way to not face nutrition deficits for the development of the child is to be breastfed. And we must commend the diabetes in pregnancy programme and the breastfeeding initiatives for that.

The school feeding programme has also been in consultation with the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Health has also banned soft drinks in primary schools. Soft drinks being loaded with sugar is one of the chief causes of diabetes and obesity signaling a strong message and training from young, that sugar and loads of sugar in the forms of high fructose corn syrup and a lot of carbohydrates is just not the right way to go. So we have a mixture of two points with respect to the involvement of the Ministry of Health in the school feeding programme, feeding nutritious meals, recommendations with dietitians on board for feeding of children of the nation with nutritious meals and more importantly, and even as important, local content.

As recent as, within the last, I would say three to four months, the Ministry of Health has also launched its TT Moves initiative. The TT Moves initiative is a wellness model where they partner with the population and start to engrain health habits. It moves around as a caravan promoting exercise, promoting an app that pushes individuals to do at least 4,000 steps a day which is basic to most people inside the Chamber, and substituting sugar-sweetened beverages with water,

consuming more fruits and vegetables, and TT Moves pedometer app actually can calculate these steps for you. And you will see this moving around from location to location in the future.

With respect to climate change, Minister Sinanan, Minister of Works and Transport has spoken to the development and the changing out of certain designs of bridges because of climate change. So there is a developmental thinking and also a capacity thinking when it comes to addressing climate change as it comes to infrastructure. I can tell you as a member that I sit down on Land and Physical Infrastructure in a Joint Select Committee, Chaired by Sen. Deeroop Teemal, that one of the major interactions that we have and one of the most pertinent bodies who attends meetings is from the Ministry of Planning, Town and Country Division especially. And we are as a non-partisan joint select committee, we approach these individuals and we ask those questions, what are we doing for planning purposes for the Trinidad and Tobago, and islands that have major developments on coastlines? What is being put in place for mitigation of the flooding, what is being put in place for land slippages and also when—coastal protection and so on. So be rest assured that both sides in the JSCs, we work towards demanding and asking of the Planning Division, and they are on top of it. They are not giving out any new developments to any areas that are coastline and it is foreseen in the next five to 10 years that a couple of centimetres might be taken, because of the sea taking it back.

Mr. President, as I move back on to what I would like to call, what was the Bill at hand, which is really and truly based on what the Minister of Finance presented in the other place and to the nation, it was entitled, a budget presentation: Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth. Now, it is very interesting to note the title of this particular Budget Statement which is for fiscal year

2023/2024, and I would always encourage Members on all sides and members of the community to take their time to understand what goes into the planning of budgets. For us to reach to a position of, Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth, we had to pass through some serious rough waters.

In fact, if one chooses to follow the Minister or the Ministry on social media, and I recommend that the nation and the listening public, they do that, not just the Minister of Finance, but Ministers in all Ministries, because it creates a level of connection, it creates a level of information that when we hear policy changes or policy initiatives it does not come as a surprise to us, it does not come to a surprise for the nation.

When you hear the—and you read this budget you recognize that it is not just an isolated initiative, it is an initiative and a movement based upon the past. It is very much like, as a child playing dot to dot, because the figures are in front of us, the planning is in front of us, the vision and the leadership is behind it and we are able to deliver to the nation capacity building initiatives based upon previous budgets of building resilience and encouraging several communities and several initiatives across the strata of Trinidad and Tobago to put themselves in a position where we can actually now diversify and build capacity. The figures are there, Mr. President, creating a dot-to-dot pattern. It is actually very easy when we plan and I would like to commend the Minister of Finance, I would like to commend the leadership of the Government—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—I would like to commend the Cabinet and the Minister of Planning and Development particularly as well, for collectively coming up with these initiatives, seeing Trinidad and Tobago not in a tunnel vision manner, seeing Trinidad and Tobago with the potential of where we can be, and delivering goods



and services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And you know in the game of cricket you “cah” make a century in five strokes. You have to sit down and bat, you have to read the pitch, you have read the environment, you have to look at the breeze and you have to look for the weather that is coming.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** So, the reality is that we have been running—this Government has been running the country based upon many, many, many, many, many, changes in the international environment, within a changing world, within new challenges that have been coming up with respect to wars, supply chain issues and every so often you have to be prepared for a googly, because if it is you “doh” plan, prepare to fail, and if you fail to plan, prepare to fail.

**10.45 p.m.**

Let us start connecting some dots. Mr. President, it takes confidence in the economy to present an estimate of real GDP with a growth of 2.7 per cent, in a backdrop of last year where actual GDP was 1.5 per cent in a global environment, where it is suggested that GDP is going to decrease globally by 3 per cent. It takes planning, resilience, and it does so whilst claiming that the energy sector will have minimal or flat growth. This is because of the foundation, Mr. President, of the incentives created for the non-energy sector over the last three years and in the past as well.

According to real statistical data—and I would like to make a plug here for the purpose of the phrase that I used, saying, “real GDP”. And we have also recognized the change in language from the Minister of Finance throughout this budget presentation of the use of the word “real GDP”. Up to Friday, Sen. Lyder, who is not well today—

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Wish him well.

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Wish him well—he once again came back with the past rhetoric. Because, you know, when it is you have a budget that you have no new taxes, no hardships, no removal of any subsidies and no closing down or hinting of closing down of any industry come forward; when it is that those on the other side and the other sceptics may have predicted doom and gloom, and a budget comes forward that has broken all expectations from what was being pushed in the press before. You come here with prepared speeches and old rhetoric, because what can you say positive but encourage? So the choice of words to say that the Minister of Finance actually does nominal GDP and hoodwinking the community, that is sometime of the past. That argument does not hold—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—because this budget is based upon real figures.

It will be interesting to know that the figures have come in from our CSO. Our CSO has done a lot of work and it has come a very long way. Our CSO is right now up to international standards, whereby they can give—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—data with real-time information within the normal limit of a six-month window. We can receive in September accurate figures up to March and April, and we can continue—

**Sen. Roberts:** Real-time standards.

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Real-time standards, yes. That is within standards of the international industry.

**Sen. Roberts:** That is PNM standards.

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** I understand what you are saying.

**Sen. Roberts:** [*Inaudible*]*—real time and wait six months later.*

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** According to the real statistics and real data, the

economy grew, for the first quarter of 2023, by 3 per cent: 0.3 per cent was in the energy; 4.2 per cent was due—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—to the non-energy sector; the manufacture grew by 7.6 per cent—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—textiles, wood, paper and printing, 31.5 per cent—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—accommodation and food services grew by 17.5 per cent. And, Mr. President, we ask ourselves, what can this be tied to? How can accommodation and food services grow and what is the cause of all of this? Not as bleak as the figures mentioned by Sen. Hislop, previous to me, about the sister isle, but tourism activity in Trinidad and Tobago has increased nearly 300 per cent for the same period of January to April this year, as opposed to last year for the same period, from a mere 69,000 to 198,000 arrivals in Trinidad and Tobago. What also has been complementing this and fuelling this is the decrease in the supply chain delivery times. Supply chain costs have also decreased, which has led to lower shipping cost.

Mr. President, allow me to remind the public that the effects of COVID and COVID was real. You know, in light conversation with colleagues and owners of businesses, owners especially of the service industry businesses, I had a conversation recently, just over the weekend actually, with a very longstanding provider of IT and support services for retail businesses, and I asked him, I said “How is business now?” He said, “From 2020 to 2022, it was like crickets in the office.” Only as of this year have they seen an uptick of hauls and there is no need to close down business on an earlier time for the day. And this is because it takes

time and it took time for certain service industries to come back up.

When it is global supply chain has come to a halt; when it is the cost—when I used to bring in a container, I used to pay about US \$2,500 for a container—when that cost escalates to TT \$90,000 because of shipping costs, not because of government procedures and policies; when it is that supply and demand have gone askew because the demand is there and the supply could not have happened; when it is that raw materials within the pandemic had to be redirected out of caution and fear to create different products and services, supply chains were affected tremendously and there is the economic spin-off of those types of activities internationally.

Let us take a look at some of the indicators. We have local indicators and we have external indicators. Our own Central Bank reported for 2022 that there was broad-based recovery based upon prudent management—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—based upon the principles of our monetary policy, our fiscal stability, our increase in efficiency of internal operations in 2022. Another major indicator that slips under the carpet when it is said is when the Minister of Finance posts and announces current account surpluses. If you have more remaining in your account if you are running a business than you have leaving, if it is your export versus your import leaves you in a positive manner, you are doing something good. There is no deficit. There is no negativity. There is no negation to the economy.

The external ratings came, as you know only, a couple days ago, two weeks ago, from the Caribbean Information and Credit Services Limited, CariCRIS, and Standard & Poor's, straightforward, two As, A-A, and that is based upon our high level of credit worthiness and our attractiveness as a sovereign country for

investment.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** It must be noted that we were the only ones who have been hailed as an investment grade economy in our sovereign Caribbean.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Kudos to the management of our economy, and this does not come by “voops” and this does not come by “vaps”. This comes from planning, vision and consistency.

Mr. President, one of the most noticeable things in this budget was the shock that came to the general community who were worried. Nothing was taken, nothing was removed, nothing was increased—maybe a couple things were increased, such as the minimum wage—but it is based upon what we have done and what we have managed to plan, and building on past budgets, policies and decisions.

Let us take a look at the uptick of these facilities that has led to this. Let us take the marker and indicator of unemployment. In January to March of this year, 4.9 per cent was the unemployment rate. In April to June of this year, it has declined to 3.7 per cent. That is amazing figures. Some economists might argue, when you reach the 1 to 1 and 1/2 per cent, that you reach full employment levels. And that is because they will always have a percentage of your community and percentage of your country who are unemployable, and it does not mean that they are out of the net. That is where the social services come in, where we have unemployable people who need the hand of the State to exist. But in the previous year, it was high as 8 per cent; 2021 figures were bleak. This is evidence of turning the economy. This is evidence of availability of jobs. When we take a look—

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:**—of the pushes that have been there on the past budgets and we look at namely the SME loan guarantee programme, this was designed to provide a stable and favourable debt market for small and medium enterprises.

The SME Loan Guarantee Programme, Phase 1, has attracted 262 loans to the tune of \$24 million, Mr. President. Mr. President, the SME Loan Guarantee Programme, Phase 2, has an uptake of 733 loans to the tune of \$153 million. And the government agent administered loan by loan guarantee scheme, 47 loans to \$50 million.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Thus far.

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Yes, thus far. Correct. And what we see here is the community, and the business community, and the investing community seizing the opportunities that have been laid out in this budget, appreciating what has come in past budgets, and this is where we get building of capacity. That is why we can use such bold statements when we make the labelling of this budget and where it is we are going. That is the evidence in the turning of the economy.

Mr. President, allow me to delve into the seventh increase, I believe, of the minimum wage. Taking a look at the history of the minimum wage, in April 1998, it was put down as \$7 an hour; January 2023, \$8 per hour; March 2015, \$9 per hour; January 2010, \$12.50 an hour; January 2015, \$15 an hour; December 2019, \$17.50 an hour; and by January 2023, with a 17 and a 1/2 per cent increase to \$20.50 an hour.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** We have to consider, we have to understand what minimum wage is. Minimum wage really and truly, in my perception, is a protection tool. It is not a sub-intervention. It is not a quick fix. It a minimum

level at what an entry-level employee should get, who does not have gross qualifications, who has only secondary school education or an entry-level job.

I have had the pleasure in my business career to be part of these levels of discussion through associations with the Government when we were called as an association to comment on certain matters. I have been blessed to run labour intensive markets, 200/300 employees at any given time on payroll, to five and six for microenterprises.

**11.00 a.m.**

Could the minimum wage have been increased before? Yes. Would the market been able to sustain it? No. It takes planning and decision of the timing of instruments of decisions like this. Take into consideration the last three years of our economic existence where headline inflation was booming based upon market forces and global international forces. Putting in a minimum wage increase then, it would have been lost with inflation pressures from external markets. Putting in a minimum wage increase would have done nothing when the cost of transportation for those who the minimum wage serves would have done nothing. What is the flip side? You can only do these things when it will benefit the user. Minimum wage is not something and it is not a benchmark, it is a minimum.

When it is you have situations whereby our employment rate in the country, Mr President, reaches to levels of 3.7 per cent, businesses are investing more, companies have taken up the incentives of past budgets of hiring individuals for tax benefits. All incentives, all base, all strategy. How can we move from almost 10 to a 3.7 in two years? The Government last year put in measures and incentives for taxation for the purpose of knowing what they were doing, planning it in forward. Giving the incentives to employers to be able to hire and get a tax break. Guess what? It is working. Our unemployment rate is dropping. The dignity of

the most indignant in the country where they can get between \$500 and \$900 a month more in their pocket, which goes a long way.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** That is timely delivery. Yes, that is timely delivery when it matters.

When we take a look at—and as a past employer of a few people, well a couple hundred at a time, you know, the increase was labelled “ah sweet spot” increase, a sweet point increase. People would say give us 30, Mr. President. Some would say it should have 25 but you must calculate the minimum wage so that it does not drive inflation, but it can seek benefit. If it is you put it up for what was asked for, \$30, a 30-something per cent increase, a 50-something per cent increase, what you are asking to do and what you are realizing is that you are asking industries that depend upon entry level job positions such as supermarkets, pharmacies, gas stations—well it cannot happen to the gas stations because the gas station prices are not very flexible. Service industries, the young boy whose parents, one passed away, one is at the home; the young lady who has to come and work and support a single mother. Those are the individuals that it affects. It affects, I believe, somewhere 200,000 people or 150,000 people in this country.

When it is you have something put up so high, what it does, it drives the inflation because labour-intensive industries have anywhere between 7 to 9 per cent of their spend is in labour. The labour-intensive industries, when it is you have low volume, low mark-up businesses such as supermarkets and others that I mentioned, it makes it difficult to manage your dollars and cents because you have to deal with many other factors and the average mark-up is between 25 to 30 per cent and your spend is about 20 per cent. But when it is you increase it with such timing and ease on a time when it will count for the consumer when their pocket



was strained for previous years because of other costs going up, it is of benefit to them and I must commend the Government on its timing and its calculation.

Does someone have to stay there? No. Does someone have to stay there? Absolutely not. In this budget, the Minister of Finance announced that there is an adult financial literacy programme to assist and guide for savings and planning for all employees and \$5 million is put aside for that programme in conjunction with the Central Bank. So what we have here is a generalized increase across the board but remember and coming back to a point I was trying to make, Mr. President. When it is you have a 3.7 per cent unemployment rate, what do you think is going to happen when it comes down and down?

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Thank you. I am guided, Mr. President. It puts competitive pressure on the labour market. By placing competitive pressure on the labour market, it means that to retain the best that you have trained or the best that you have accepted into your industry, it means that for them to stay because labour will be less than availability, it means that the wage will have to naturally go up. So that is what happens by market forces and business forces within an industry.

Let me quickly, in my remaining time, point to two levels of deliverables that I believe this budget points towards. In past deliberation, Mr. President, we have had over the last two years local government reform. Local government reform, part of it not introduced through this budget but in past debates was the property tax which is not a new tax, which is not a tax based on the capital value of a property but by the rental value of a property as low as 3 per cent. So you are watching between \$500 and \$1,001 for over 50 per cent of the housing community and that comes down to anywhere between \$42 and \$92 a month, extremely nominal amounts of money to part with for the purpose of the greater good, for the

maintenance of your burgesses, your streets and in the new structure of local government, it allows the corporation to manage its funds but goods and services only.

So if it is that every corporation is going to get an average of \$10 million in their coffers reasonably per annum to give this level of development and maintenance, couple that with the PSIP, 6.8 to \$6.9 billion, more than 10 per cent of the budget allocation has gone into PSIP. This is where the country has to look forward with these pools of money available for the turning of the economy in the engagement of contractors, in the engagement of services, in the hiring of individuals and the further reduction and the maintenance of a low unemployment level.

So Trinidad and Tobago really and truly has to look forward, based upon our past struggles over the last few years managing poor conditions of revenue with respect to oil and gas, in some cases, it went to even negative to the next year and a half or two, and beyond, to a lot of development, infrastructural maintenance and things that we have as a nation, as citizens been begging and asking for.

Something I would like to end on, and that is what Minister Singh spoke about, is how serious we are about the alleviation of poverty and the mechanisms putting place for the purpose of maintaining lower food cost by one, promoting local; two, committing for a tax-free agricultural sector.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** Can you imagine from seed to fertilizer to finish? We approach agriculture in a tax-free manner, you have shaved off 30 per cent to 40 per cent of the cost to the farmers which can be passed on to the consumer. That, by itself, is amazing. Coupled with that is the fact that all the other programmes of homesteads, training. You see this whole thing, you cannot listen to a Minister and

a Minister alone, you have to see the whole picture, you have to see the whole vision.

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

**Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim:** So one end, we have food reduction and food security, we have coupled with that, growing with that is the non-communicable and price reduction and maintenance of local content and market. We have nutritional local produce. Feed that into the school feeding programme, feed that into the box programme, feed that into mandating hospitals and hotels, local and foreign chains to use local and you build yourself an economy.

So, Mr. President, I want to thank you for recognizing me. I want to recognize and I do say follow Ministries and “take yuh time” and follow it and you know, as Dr. Dillon-Remy said on last Friday, let us all try to view this with some clear lenses. Mine are, I am sure your own is as well.

Mr. President, I thank you.

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

### Visitors

#### National Assembly of the Republic of Suriname

#### (Delegation from)

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, before I call on the next speaker, I ask that you please join me in recognizing the esteemed delegation from the National Assembly of the Republic of Suriname who has joined us briefly for today’s sitting of the Senate. Welcome.

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

### ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, I also crave your indulgence to revert to Item No. 3 on the Order Paper.

**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: DR. CARSON CHARLES

WHEREAS Senator Damian Lyder is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section 44(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, do hereby appoint you, CARSON CHARLES to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2023 and continuing during the absence of Senator Damian Lyder 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 23<sup>rd</sup> day of October, 2023.”

**UNREVISED**

**OATH OF ALLEGIANCE**

*Senator Dr. Carson Charles took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.*

**11:15 a.m.**

**Sen. Jearlean John:** Mr. President, thank you for giving me the opportunity to join in this debate. Let me begin by thanking the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar for her historic, historic response to budget 2024 in the other place.

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

**Sen. J. John:** I commend her timely intervention, her presentation of clear policies, plans and her specific blueprint and call to action, which demonstrated that with the right leadership, Trinidad and Tobago can indeed be a place of equity, peace and prosperity. Mr. President, I just listened to our Sen. Hislop and—

**Hon. Senator:** The outstanding.

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

**Sen. J. John:** But he is a Tobagonian. He is a Tobagonian. If it is one thing, all Tobagonian's love Tobago, okay.

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

**Sen. J. John:** We come built like that, we have that commonality that we all love Tobago. But in talking about the 4.03, this percentage of the national budget, I hope you know this was confirmed, and approved under a United National Congress government.

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

**Sen. J. John:** So at least the Tobago administration can be very predictable. This was fought for by Mr. Hochoy Charles and others, and you know, we really have to—when we are speaking on a topic, I think we must bring the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Because I will also include—

**Hon. Senator:** We do not want half of the truth.

**Sen. J. John:** Well I will also include that—you see this PNM, I like to say this PNM and differentiate—

**Hon. Senator:** Correct.

**Sen. J. John:**—believe that politics is of government is a zero-sum game, and that they show up here and they are here forever. It is a relay, so therefore, the former Prime Minister would have been a part of it and then when Mr. Panday came in, they just continued and they got this amount, this predictable amount approved at the time. Now I know the hon. Senator, I mean I cannot speak for the current Tobago House of Assembly because it could be post-traumatic stress, I too have suffered from that, I used to. So, I understand, you know, what is probably happening, but at least I think one must commend and congratulate them for doing a differentiated product in terms of having a Carnival in October, when there is a Carnival in Trinidad in February or March as it were. So, we must wish them all the best because we all love Tobago as it was.

Now, the other point, there is another point raised by I think Sen. Ibrahim when he was talking about the increase in I think arrival here, some kind of 300 percent. And I do not know, maybe we are missing something on this side, maybe we are the ones living in Trinidad and Tobago, and the others are living in some La La Land somewhere, but 300 per cent, that is all relative quite frankly. Because—and I am not blaming the Minister of Tourism either because “they take the seat”, you understand, he has no control over these things, these are about government business way above his pay grade, you know. There is an increase of arrivals from 68,000 to 198,000 and these folks who have dumbed down our expectations, you understand, have us literally wining below the white line in the road, in the terms of having, setting low expectation, want us to clap for that. Yes, 300 per cent

sounds big, but when you compare that to what is happening in Singapore after the—what you call it—after COVID, because that is—Singapore has a population of over 6 million about, 40 per cent of that are expatriates.

They are expecting—they have projected 68 million arrivals for this year, all right. Where 100 planes are coming in there and 240 destination connections. Why that cannot be us? When you look at where we are in terms of, I mean Mr. Conrad Aleong used to talk a lot about hub and spoke and so on, that is available to us, and we have to build our expectations. Similarly, in Dubai—the same thing is happening in Dubai—where they too have 100 airlines coming in, they are expecting—they had predicted 83 million arrivals, you know what they put it up to now?—85 million.

**11.20 a.m.**

And to me, I mean to say, since the year 2001, when that airport was opened, the throughput was supposed to be 3 million. We are 2.5. We should be pushing. This is over 20 years, and we are still here talking about 300 per cent, being what, 250,000 or some kind of arrivals like that. No, we should not quote those statistics. I think really and truly, we have to do a lot better than that. We are better than that, and Trinidad and Tobago has a lot to offer. Everybody could find something to do in this country; something of interest. We are rich in so many things. And that is not because of the PNM; it is because of all us as a people.

So, Mr. President, we find ourselves at this inflection point with many families in our nation struggling to put food on their table, to pay bills, and to find a job; Mr. President, to find a job. The speaker who preceded me, he was talking about the minimum wage. But I ask him to go and live on 17.50 per hour. Before they increased to \$20.50, you had to work a whole hour to buy a loaf of bread in the bakery; you understand. People who have better, they are doing better, they

are living lavishly, want to tell people that they should be satisfied with \$20.50 an hour, because that is all they deserve.

**Sen. Mark:** Imagine that.

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

**Sen. J. John:** That is all they deserve.

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

**Sen. J. John:** That is what the PNM wants to tell us. That is all we deserve. And I think that is really a shame. We should not come here and do that. We should not come here and try to justify things that make no sense, when we know, we do know that our people are suffering out there.

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

**Sen. J. John:** They are suffering and this is not doom and gloom.

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

**Sen. J. John:** Many people are all of the above, Mr. President. Yet the Government, they make no connection, not with their policies, not with their processes, their articulation. Because they all come here and “la-di-dahing” and talking about how great they are, and so on. Nothing demonstrates that they understand, neither do they appear to care about what our citizens face every single day.

Mr. President, the UNC was mandated by the Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar to attend consultations all across the country, because we are not afraid of the people. We go to the people. We are not afraid.

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

**Sen. J. John:** We “ain care what dey say”. “Dey does cuss us up sometime, just the way dey cuss up the PNM.” But we go out there to the people. I mean, I remember the Hon. Minister of Finance in the other place saying, “UNC talking to



deyself”. You know why? Because “the PNM feel UNC people eh worth nothing”. Our people, 300,000 who voted for us, they are not worthy of consideration. But at least we go out there and we speak to the people. We are not going to come here with policies that are not reflective of the people. And that is why “dey doh know people suffering, yuh know, because dey doh talk tuh anybody”. When you see them, they are hustling going with their security guard and their blue lights, and so on. So, they do not know. They do not know. So they are the ones talking to themselves. So, Mr. President I did not come here to talk for me particularly. I came to speak for those who really are not able to talk for themselves. They cannot come here because, as our leader put it, in this highfalutin place.

*[Device goes off]*

So, Mr. President—You see, they sound the alarm.

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

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

**Mr. President:** I understand.

**Hon. Senators:** *[Crosstalk]*

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark. Members, Members. So, just as a reminder—

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

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

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

**Sen. Roberts:** *[Inaudible]*

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

**Hon. Senators:** *[Crosstalk]*

**Mr. President:** Let there be silence in this Chamber. I am on my legs. All I expect is silence.

**Sen. Mark:** I apologized—

**Mr. President:** All I expect is silence! We are well aware of the rule in relation to devices going off in the Chamber when Members are contributing. At this point in time, my only intention is to remind Members of such. The next time we would just follow the rule as has always been the case. As for the crosstalk, I do not expect to have any. We have been doing quite well during this budgetary process, and I expect it to continue. Sen. John, continue.

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

**Sen. J. John:** Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, Sen. Lezama, on Friday reminded us that indeed the Government had a *Vision 2030*, which caused me to look it up, because like it is the world's best kept secret and none of the colleagues have been kind of aligning it with their contributions. And that was in an attempt to find the context. Because the budget statement, as usual, has no accountability, no clear strategic intent and as Sen. Bacchus told us, his mother had urged him: When you are leaving home you have to know where you are going. Similarly, we say in management, if a ship does not know to which port it is sailing, any wind will take it there.

What you would have expected in this Government's seven years, I am talking now about in terms of their goalpost with their *Vision 2030*, because they are halfway there, that in every budget there is embedded a status, in their annual presentation, that shows us that we are going further along. Because, Mr. President, contrary to their stated views that the Opposition is about doom and gloom, nothing could be further from the truth.

When a government is in office for eight years and counting, having spent half a trillion dollars, and they have nothing to show, “even when dey run down de road posing and ting about dey open highway, you know”, they are not only

wasting the country's time and resources. So, once a government assumes office democratically, every citizen should wish them well. Because my grandmother used to say: A rising tide raises every boat, and "even if the devil bring it, is God send it". So, we are happy for it, you understand. We wish them well.

So, Mr. President, the Government has identified the challenges facing the country as follows, and I will not read all. I urge them to go and read their *Vision 2030*. I would just treat with what is relevant. And they started by saying:

"Following a review of Trinidad and Tobago's past and current performance against selected countries"—I do not know which countries—"in key..."—because if they are comparing themselves, they are arriving 68,000. I do not know who they—I do not want to call any of our Caribbean neighbours or what have you—who they are comparing themselves to or whatever.

"the NDS presents the main challenges which Trinidad and Tobago faces"  
And it had:

- Expanding exports and increasing foreign exchange earnings and employment;"

That is a good challenge. They are correct. So one will want to know in 2023, halfway into your promised land, where have we reached, in terms of this one: increase in foreign exchange, your quest to increase in foreign exchange and employment. And this has nothing to do with this bogus 3.7per cent that has been put there, you know.

You see, my God is real. Then you have on the Saturday papers a thousand people show up at C3 for some 48 seconds ad, not for jobs; for the promise that maybe, could be, "we go take down yuh name". Yet they are in here. And I think I heard the Senator before talking about the 3.7per cent. "How yuh got dat?" That is literally full employment in economics. What that means is everybody who

want “tuh work get a work”. You understand? And employers are looking and looking. But there you are having—and the jobs are not even in Port of Spain, you know, or in Toco, you know. The jobs are where? In Guyana, a thousand. “Block up de road, traffic jam, and so on, police has to come.” And they are repeating this thing. It is bogus. It is not true. It is not true.

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

**Sen. J. John:** They had no full employment.

Because prior to that, I mean, even if as a Minister somebody had given me that, prior to that I would have seen people sleeping overnight in front of NAPA to get a job on a cruise ship, you know. For a few jobs in the prison service, people all over the pavement. It tells you something is not right. So then, who has to tell them is the guy who was organizing the arrangements, says it must be that there is an issue with employment in Trinidad and Tobago. Better the Minister of Finance forgets these CSO people and “go and talk to dat fella” who was organizing those jobs, right. I think he has it right.

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

**Sen. J. John:** So they have on their challenges:

- “• Reversing the non-progressive values, attitudes, and behaviors such as low productivity and poor work ethos;”

Where are we with that?

- “• Undertaking constitutional and institutional reform;”

Well, good luck with that.

- “• Addressing the impact of shale gas...”

And one is seeing where America is now the largest producer basically, and so we have some real issues in terms of the price of gas.

- “• Discouraging the culture of dependency and sense of entitlement among

the population”

What they have done, Mr. President, essentially, is to wean the vulnerable off the Treasury and instead siphoning—you know, they are parachuting their friends, family, and financiers. That is what they meant by discouraging the culture of dependency, and so on, and so on. I recommend that the Members go and read their challenges.

So, Mr. President, after the Minister in the other place would have read his budget for four hours, really and truly, I saw nowhere where they are mitigating against these challenges. I saw his budget is named Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth, but nowhere in that rehash, nowhere is there any reference of alignment with this Government’s vision, no cohesive plans for diversification and growth. Just a rinse and repeat of proposals and intentions from prior years, none of which has really materialized, none. And when they even go and open a lil piece of the highway, before they say thank you, Kamla, they stand up for two hours talking God knows what. Just say, “thank you, Kamla”. “Yuh understand?” Because without her they have nothing to open.

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

**Sen. J. John:** They have nothing to open. Without the UNC, they would have had no Arima hospital, they would have had no Point Fortin hospital. And even when the key was on the desk of the Prime Minister when he walked from Mason Hall to White Hall, they did not do that until there was COVID, and that too was a major part of a bigger plan, because health care is big business. It creates good paying jobs and a big earner of forex. “Forex eh go just jump on yuh head, sit down and dance with some dragon”, just waste—well, I mean, it might come through, I hope it does. But I am saying, we have to put other things in place whilst we wait on the Lord and we are being of good courage, Mr. President.

Mr. President, the Leader of the Opposition in her legendary and historic response—

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

**Sen. J. John:** Legendary and historic response!—to the budget, told us—

**Hon. Senators:** [*Continuous desk thumping*].

**Sen. J. John:**—she told us—she told us that there can be no prosperity without security.

**Hon. Senators:** “Yeah, man.” [*Desk thumping*].

**Sen. J. John:** Honestly. And that is a fact. There cannot be. So, last year a record of 600 of our citizens were brutally murdered. That is the statistic you have to be looking at, not 3.7. The statistic is 600 of our citizens were murdered of which, of which the police are saying they are—what is the detection rate—12 per cent. So it means that out of every 100, they are solving 12, and then you have 88 walking with their ghost waiting to kill again; living nice. And that is the statistic we have to look at, because without security there can be no prosperity.

So worse still, Mr. President, brazen home invasions are now a daily occurrence in our communities. It has become an everyday occurrence where criminals are breaking down citizens’ doors, mothers are beaten, teenage daughters are raped. That is our reality. The reality “eh no” 3.7 per cent unemployment rate; that is the reality.

You know, when they murdered nine-year-old Jomol Modeste, what was he guilty of? The little boy was playing in the savannah in Enterprise; that is what he was guilty of. And that is what we are putting up with today and the Government sits there in their shoes and they wonder. So I have to say now, if this Government “eh” doing anything about it, they have to be complicit.

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

**Sen. J. John:** “Dis cah be right. You cah tell me you coming here and sit down and talk all this confusion and yuh not telling me when we getting de pepper spray, when we go have, what yuh call it, de cameras.” Because these are simple things that the Government could do.

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

And worst of all the scanners; somebody is letting the guns and the cocaine pass. The police are saying that 85percent of the crime is committed by, what? Guns. And they are passing through where? The legal ports; and we know that, every one of them know that, and they are allowing that to happen. Shame! Shame!

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

**Sen. J. John:** Six hundred murders last year, and the statistic is we are on track to meet and beat that this year. This year. And we come here, talking about 3.7 per cent? We are on track to beat that. They killed a little nine-year-old boy, six-year-old Kylie Maloney in her bed, where every six-year-old girl should be at 2.05 a.m. in the morning, safe, supposedly. “Who break in? Gunman break in.”

Long ago I remember growing up in Tobago and they will force you on Christmas Eve night to go and sleep because Santa is coming and you are looking forward to Santa and Dancer and Prancer. Now it is Santa, Dancer, Prancer, and murderer to little children. That is what is going on in this country and those are the statistics, those are the markers we have to be looking at, not this fake thing to make who feel good; because people know. We are in here hearing about the rate of employment really is full employment and “it have 1,000 Trinidadians all in the sun looking to go Guyana”.

So, Mr. President, people are not born to kill other people. As President Mandela had said, people are not—people have to be taught to hate. So how did

we get here? Now that we have found ourselves in this hopeless place, what are we to do?

Sen. Sunity Maharaj, and I commend her for her intervention last Friday, she made a point that we have to get to the source, the fundamental. That is what we in the UNC have been advocating. It takes work, hard work, necessary work. Sen. Paul Richards spoke about the document. Again, when they show up in the compound that was there, the Youth at Risk was there. They never used it. Because what do they do? They take all the work of the Opposition, the then government, Opposition, for malevolence, for hatred, for spite, for some kind of fake vengeance. They weaponize it to do things that make no sense.

Alternatively, when Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Hon., was Prime Minister, and knew that the people who visited the San Fernando General Hospital were sleeping in the corridors of San Fernando General Hospital—four days you are there just like it happens at Mount Hope. I mean, you have a little “la la” now about, you know, how wonderful it is in health care.

But they were sleeping on the corridor. What happened?

**11.35 a.m.**

There was a base building that had been constructed by the previous Prime Minister. Did she tear it down? Did she demonize it? No, she did none of those things. What did she do? She said, let us repurpose this and create a bed tower. And out of that, in 18 months, there was a bed tower with 216 beds to serve the people of this country.

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

**Sen. J. John:** That is what you do with power. Right? “Yuh doh” sit down and talk and trade insults and so on. People “doh study dat”. You know, we will go toe to toe with you all any day. We are about the people’s business. The



government of the day created a bed tower and it was completed in what? In 18 months, on time, people were moving in there.

On top of that, at the base of that building has 40,000 square feet of teaching space. So there was an arrangement with the Royal College of Surgeons, I think, Ireland or Wales to provide training—post-graduate training for the medical staff. What that is? Health care is big business. That is forex. People from all over would have been doing that. I “doh know what dey doing dey now. Dey must be have “ol” mattress and bed pans stored there”, if I know this Government, right? Forty thousand square feet of space.

Similarly, with the Couva children’s hospital, that was another remarkable facility, complete, right? It was at the stage of commissioning, binders were being handed over—had been handed over as a matter of fact, with warranties and guarantees and so on. And they kept that locked for five years—

**Sen. Mark:** Bad-minded people, wicked people.

**Sen. J. John:**—as if they were doing the Opposition something. It is the people of Trinidad and Tobago you are doing something.

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

**Sen. J. John:** Because while that is closed, the people in the surrounding areas, they have to “fight up” in Mount Hope and San Fernando, passing this spanking new hospital, and what do they do? They take somebody who must be a friend to what?—give a consultancy to tell them what so do with the hospital. What do you do with a hospital? You open it. And because it already had all the furnishings and equipment—it was fully, fully, fully, outfitted—you could not then repurpose it into a hotel or a university campus, you had to keep it as a hospital. So all you had to do was open it. The staff was being trained, nurses, doctors, other ancillary staff were being trained to work at that hospital and they just kept it closed, whilst

the Government of Trinidad and Tobago—well, the people of Trinidad and Tobago had to continue to pay for it and suffer. You know, it makes no sense, Mr. Vice-President.

So in the budgetary allocation, the Ministry of National Security has been allocated \$6.912 billion. Last year, it was \$5.798 billion, so they are not starved for funds. And, Mr. Vice-President, we have to be upfront with the public with respect to crime. I know that there have been a lot of commentary and varied opinions; opinions about who is responsible and what the Opposition should be doing. The hard truth is the Government is responsible for safety, not the Opposition. It is the Government. The Parliament, Mr. Vice-President, gives the UNC no power, no authority and no resources to fight criminal activity. What we do have is a moral responsibility as elected officials to come up with plans and ideas that we can share with the public and the Government, and this we have been doing. We have been doing so all over the country from constituency to constituency.

Mr. Vice-President:

““They killed my children for nothing””

The gut-wrenching cry of the mother, Ms. Anisa Mohammed, her four children were killed in their bed. Again, it appears as if a bed is a most dangerous place for any child in Trinidad and Tobago to be; killed them. And we are still keeping the borders open. Something has to be wrong. We are still coming here and talking about people and jobs, because jobs is a crime-fighting tool. I do not know if this Government feel they could shoot their way out of crime or they could pray their way out of crime, but it is a lot of work, and the work was started a long time ago.

And as I said, this particular piece of research with prescriptive measures was an excellent piece of work. As I said, Sen. Dr. Paul Richards spoke about it. I

had spoken about it prior. It had—chaired by the honourable, now deceased, Prof. Selwyn Ryan, and they said:

“The recommendations addressed the need for economic equity, differentiated curricula, the importance of basic life skills and the holistic development of the individual. It calls, in particular, for a continuation of the work that was initiated by the Ministry of Justice...”

There is no longer a Ministry of Justice, right? It has a “Ministry of vengeance”.

“...that seeks to...”

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

**Sen. J. John:** Yeah. “Dais wha dey have, Gaza” because the Ministry of Justice was important in this fight, you know. And that it:

“...seeks to liberalize the prison system to make it more humane. The Committee”—that Committee—“presents a comprehensive model of educational reform that features national service and service training, along with strong parent and community involvement in schooling.”

And it goes on and on. Very, very, detailed report. What did they do? I do not know if they threw it away. What did they do with it? But was an important document, a good jump-off point. But everything that—as I said, they believe that they just show up on the compound and they now reach and basically “dey large and in charge”, you know.

Mr. Vice-President, the fallout is all around us and yet, like the hapless ostrich, the Government continues to bury their head in the sand. In yesterday’s newspaper, that is Sunday, it was reported that there have been:

“...Over 10,000 reports of child sex abuse in eight years”.

And I did not put the “eight years”, that is what the papers said, you know. They cited eight years as their baseline.

Mr. Vice-President, educational psychologist, Dr. Margaret Nakhid-Chatoor, another Nakhid here:

“Children and teenagers are exposed to physical assault,”—this is in Trinidad and Tobago—“sexual victimization, maltreatment, and in many homes, they may witness violence against family members. Repeated exposure...places children at a greater risk for repeating these behaviours...”

And then, you know, they go on to say:

“Official statistics show that between 250 and 300 rapes occur every year in Trinidad and Tobago...”

Something is wrong with us. It looks as if we have to close down Trinidad and start all over, because these things are just going on and there is no concern—no apparent concern from the Government.

Last week, another semi-nude body was found in the highway. At the time, it was believed to be a 22-year old. They have reference to a name in the papers but I would not do that here. Because although the body was found and some kind of gold chain was next to it, the mother in yesterday’s papers was saying, she is hoping the child comes home; 23 years. And this is just a regular occurrence where we find our young women cut into pieces like chicken, decomposing in the road and this Government “doh” care about anything because they passing you “voosh with dey security guard and dey blue light hustling me around the savannah when ah walking, yuh know”?

Yet the Government prefers to leave the Debe campus closed with vines growing all over it. That is a next piece of infrastructure that they should have just said, “Thank you, Kamla.”

**Sen. Lutchmedial:** Correct.

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

**Sen. J. John:** That was there for academics. Not all parents could pay for their child to travel up to St. Augustine or pay for accommodation for them. It would have made it more equitable that children from another part of the country would not have had that burden. But even more important is that a major part of that facility, that infrastructure, was to train Trinidad and Tobago Police Service officials, train them in forensics, train them because our police need to be trained, you know. And again, training, education, is a major earner of foreign exchange. Because when you have the redundancy, what do you do? You sell it. “Yuh doh” sell it? What do you do? You throw it away?

**Sen. Nakhid:** For them, yeah.

**Sen. J. John:** For them, exactly. People all over the world are showing you how you do this business. It is not something you have to think about. It is something that people are doing all over. It is there for anybody to copy but it takes all of us, Mr. Vice-President, committed to the ideal that we are better than this.

And:

“Finally...”—that same “Youth at Risk” Committee—“places its deliberation and recommendations for development in a concept of human and citizen security, noting that violent crime brings with it a critical cost to society...”

It:

“...brings a critical cost to society through its loss of human, industrial and social capital...”

So everybody paying a price for this crime, you know. It is not only the T&TEC rate increase, you know. This security is a big bill.

In St. Ann’s, for instance, they had some security that probably was—I

“doh” know, and they had two hold-ups. You know what is their response to that now? They are locking everybody outside the gate, so you have to wait until after 7:00 to drive in. I will watch them to see what they will do for Christmas. I hope the Minister of Trade and Industry gives Gervais a call. Because they do not care, the people suffering. You know why? They are following the Government. This is not a government of empathy. And again, as we say, in management, an organization takes on the DNA of the leader. “So de leader eh care, so nobody eh care. Nobody doh think they have to care.”

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

**Sen. J. John:** Because nobody is holding them accountable.

**Sen. Nakhid:** Nobody “eh” care.

**Sen. J. John:** Nobody is holding them accountable, you understand? So they just do not care. I want to make one last point about that work. They had that wonderful piece of work chaired by the eminent professor. They did not use it.

When you had that eruption in Morvant, I think in 2022 or thereabouts, of course the Government start—well, spoke to people, it was the UNC. I “doh” even know what we have in Morvant. But when the thing—it was spreading all across the urban areas. Well, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet then decided they are going to have some group, calling themselves—they had some group that they put together, saying that these people are going to be the ones to:

“...Community Recovery Programme for areas in Trinidad and Tobago requiring special attention.

That is what the goodly Dr. Rowley says.

“...Dr. Rowley said he understood the frustration felt by protesters. Referencing a programme unsuccessfully set up in in 2004...”

And he announced he will relaunch the programme. He said:

“I will not be dissuaded...”

“He said the programme won’t just focus on East Port of Spain, but that’s where it will start.

‘I will not be dissuaded by any person who believes that this has to do with race, religion, or geography. This has to do with peace, security, and good order and opportunity for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago,’...

Dr. Rowley says it is only right that residents in those areas get a fair shot at success; something that has been far from their grasp so far.

‘Most people’—again, the hon. Prime Minister—“in those areas have the same ambition, require the same service, require peace and prosperity. So, hotspot and dismiss is not how we’ll approach this, We’ll approach it as special areas requiring special attention,’...”

Anything was done?

**Hon Senators:** Nothing.

**Sen. J. John:** Nothing was done.

Sen. Roberts: His cousin get 10,000.

**Sen. J. John:** Well, nothing has happened. True to form, these people were let down by their Government, just empty words and short-term grasping at straws—

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

**Sen. J. John:**—just to distract the national consciousness because, as with everything with this Government, nothing happens, nothing is done, especially when it is something to help our most vulnerable citizens in crisis.

Now, whose fault is that? These folks who have voted solemnly and loyally for the PNM since Independence have now found themselves between love and a hard place. And I hope in 2025 or before “dey go remember nuh feel sorry for maga dog because maga dog does tun round and bite yuh”.

The long and short, Mr. Vice-President, the only jobs available, the only jobs where it has full employment is grave diggers and funeral agency people because that is the only thing that is so going up, murder. Last year, it was a 12 per cent detection rate with a murder rate of approximately 605 victims. This means 72 were solved and the families of 533 victims are still awaiting closure, as in the case of Mr. Junior Emmanuel who randomly called me, I think, in 2020 because his 20-year-old daughter, Sharday Emmanuel, disappeared after leaving home in 2018.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, Prime Minister says he is damn vexed, and I am not being unparliamentary, I am just repeating what was said in the other place. I walked in the rain—me, not the Prime Minister, me. I walked in the rain in Mamoral with the family of Sharday Emmanuel, not that I knew her, but the family is in pain. And the only thing I could have done, they were having a walk-through with lights, candles, to see if they could catch the Government's eye. Why? The young lady disappeared in 2018; 2020, they were still waiting—they had found some piece of material which the father identified as being her skirt and they were waiting on forensics two years after.

**Sen Lutchmedial:** Still waiting.

**Sen. J. John:** And two years after, and four years after, and five years after, just to give that family peace of mind, this Government of complicity will not even raise a finger to do that; nothing, nothing, nothing.

Last December, Marilyn Emmanuel, the mother of Sharday, in a newspaper interview said, if she had one wish for Christmas, they would ask the same thing she wanted for the past four years at that time, to see her daughter again.

**11.50 a.m.**

This Government, this Government could find a phone—



**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator—

**Sen. J. John:**—yes?

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

**Sen. J. John:** Jesus Christ, this time went so quickly. [*Laughter*]

**Sen. Nakhid:** I enjoyed it.

**Sen. J. John:** Eh? They could find a phone, a phone more important than Shardai—

**Sen. Mark:** Yes.

**Sen. J. John:**—you understand—

**Sen. Mark:** Yes.

**Sen. J. John:**—they could find a phone—

**Sen. Mark:** Yes.

**Sen. J. John:**—they mobilized all the resources of national security—

**Sen. Mark:** Yes they had to find a phone.

**Sen. J. John:**—to find a phone and not only their family phone, you know, “dey find friend phone” also after, not too long after, some member of the media. You remember dat?

**Sen. Mark:** Yes.

**Sen. J. John:**—who got a big job at TSTT? Family, friends and financiers this is all that consumes Government. As long as they are good, they are good.

**Sen. Nakhid:** “Dais it.”

**Sen. J. John:**—Shardai’s mother could jump every time a car pull up. Every time the phone rings. It does not matter to them.

Ms. Mohammed: They killed my children for nothing.

Four children and we do not care. We are not hearing it in terms of how what you have to do in your Ministry will help to resolve this problem. We cannot just be

spending money because as the mother said, she knows: Shardai is not alive. Because if she was alive, she said, they were so close, she would have called her, she would have come to her.

Mr. Vice-President, the same with Ms. Anisa Mohammed, the same with the little girl 13 years Andrea Lallan, terrible, went to report a rape, and then they killed her and her uncle. And this is what this Government is telling us is so wonderful, that we should celebrate, is a good budget and we vex because they have a wonderful budget, you know [*Laughter*]. The hon. Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Vice-President, in the other place said very eloquently, very, very eloquently. She stated:

Budget 2024 ignores the realities facing our citizens completely. The brutal violent crime crisis was mainly ignored. This Government fails to understand that there can be no prosperity without safety and security.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition said:

The budget is irrelevant. It is irrelevant because even as I speak today, even as we are here, comfortably ensconced in this Chamber talking highfalutin talk about the economy, some innocent citizen will be robbed and murdered and that is our reality. There is a war on the outside. Criminals are at war with innocent citizens whom the Government have left the citizens to fend for themselves. There can be no prosperity without safety, and our people are not safe.

So, Mr. Vice-President, work is a crime fighting tool. It has no magic in it. Education is a crime-fighting tool and this Government has literally closed down the construction sector and just about every sector is under pressure, the oil and gas sector and with the coming increase in the T&TEC rates, Dr. Vaalmikki Arjoon said:

“The exacerbated cost of living through these rate hikes means part of the added purchasing power coming from the increase in the minimum wage for those in the lower income bracket will be eroded.”

**Sen. Mark:** Um-hmm.

**Sen. J. John:** So they give with one and they have taken back. They take several times over. People are in crisis, Mr. Vice-President.

So as I wrap up, the Minister of Education has said that there is some plan, some partnership with the private sector—I tell the private sector doing good is good for business, and profitability and development are not incompatible. On the contrary, private enterprise should apply the ingenuity, innovation, entrepreneurial drive and goal oriented approach employed in commercial pursuit to national and regional development, not just sit down and take concession from the Government and mop up all the forex. Right? Give back. Why? Because we are all in this together and there can be no prosperity without security, Mr. Vice-President, I thank you.

**Sen. Mark:** Yeah man.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Sharda Patasar.

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

**Sen. Dr. Sharda Patasar:** Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for the opportunity to present, contribute to this debate. Sen. John, for that. very spirited contribution had started—Sen. Hislop said something very interesting, the idea of changing your narrative.

And I wanted to begin mine with a story that I felt was pertinent to the trajectory of my contribution.

So it begins with the approach of Columbus' ship to the island. And some of the First Peoples on the shore, it was a story that I heard a long time ago, I cannot remember where. At first, all they could comprehend was that the rhythm of water had changed but they could not figure out as yet what was going on until this shape appears to them. A vessel approached, these strangers jump on shore and then they begin to grasp this must be some majestic canoe. This—it is something that begins to make sense in their worldview. I begin with this anecdote to underscore the value of perception because the way that we perceive things is the way that we act, the way we manage resources, the way we optimize the way that we prioritize. We also start with the First Peoples, because I felt that it was important to start with people who were first here, because in a sense, we are all interlopers and it allows us to look at culture with a sense of humility, because we are all strangers here.

My contribution will take a more philosophical approach, because I am not an accountant, I am not a financial expert, I come from the position of culture I come to this debate, as a musician, as a writer, as an intellectual, and when I say the word philosophical, I think that it sounds, you know, airy-fairy to people. But it is applicable because when we look at a document like the budget, when I look at a document like the budget, the question I am asking myself is, what story is it telling? What story is it writing? The allocation of resources to specific cultural activities, to aspects of education, to security, is an act of laying a structure for the kind of world that we want to inhabit. We are currently what is described—we are in a globally crisis. So this is not a Trinidad issue, this is a global issue. On the UNDP Strategic Innovation page, this is a collaboration between the United Nations Development Programme—bureau for programme and policy support strategic innovation unit and inclusive growth and one project. It is entitled Global

Polycrisis as a Pathway for Economic Transition, written by Zach Walsh, and I quote:

“The global economy has been in a state of overshoot over half a century, gradually diminishing its resource base and its capacity to regenerate. Globally, it has surpassed six out of the nine planetary boundaries that delimit a safe space for societal development...as the costs to maintain society increase, the availability and quality of energy and resources needed to maintain it are decreasing. Meanwhile, greater centralization of wealth is continuing to produce rampant inequality and injustice.”

On the other side, some factions believe that this is a meta-crisis and I am on the side of meta-crisis. There are two different approaches to different ways of perceiving the same event. One points to the series of crisis happening simultaneously across the world and we all know what they are, we have crime, we have refugees, we have food insecurity, rising sea levels, Russia/Ukraine, Israel/Palestine. The meta speaks to the root, it speaks to the crisis. It is a civilizational crisis. It addresses the notion that says that this current system that we have is not working, the economic, the social, the way that we think about it, because it is dual and that duality is inherited from a European structure.

What it is calling for is a move back to an indigenous way of looking at things. It acknowledges that the people are different, human beings are different. They have different ways of being in this world. So, it has given rise to a lot of theories, a lot of academics who are currently looking it. There is Arturo Escobar, who is a Colombian-American anthropologist, who is suggesting a pluriversal politics that speaks to how do we govern, how do we manage these multiple differences. Dr. Bayo Akomolafe—is another prominent thinker. So my focus is

on meta because of the focus on harnessing the strengths of difference that each culture brings, as another perception of how we might cultivate survival and that is particularly relevant to Trinidad.

So my contribution starts with the National Cultural Policy hite aper 2020 to 2025 and how the budget synchronizes with the objectives, and I believe that that policy is due to be re-examined in year four, which is next year, I believe 2024. But before I go to that, I think it is necessary to define culture, because that is going to be important to how we designate funds. Cultural confidence as the policy states, it is based on two interrelated terms—culture taken to mean ways of life, and the cultural and artistic expressions that emanate from those ways of life, and confidence, which is the belief in one's ability.

In my view, that definition boxes us in, it is too much of a narrow definition, because it is also time bound. There is also no recognition as well, that this culture is a living thing. It keeps moving, it keeps transforming, and I do not envy people who are trying to make a policy that is a national policy. Right? It cannot be equated or reduced to national identity, because national identity as well is a moving target. And I will give you an example, it is simple, because coming out of my own research, when I asked chutney singers for example, how do you define this music? There were so many definitions of it, people said that they defined it by:

A real chutney was perform with traditional instruments and sung in traditional language.

Another said:

It was defined by electronic instruments and sung in English.

Right? So, the traditionalist said that:

No. That one is chutney soca, this one is chutney but if you are singing chutney in English, and you use traditional instruments.

**12.05 p.m.**

So you see the problem of definition and that is a real problem, but you need it if you have a competition like the national chutney competition, the national—where you need to define. Right?

The other issue that—the other point that I felt that the policy did not take into consideration was this idea of tangible and intangible cultures, which are two different types of cultures and they require two different approaches. Intangible cultures deal with the music, the oral traditions, those things that constantly change; dance, theatre, food, tangible-built heritage. So when we talk about a Trinbagonian authenticity, how do we define that? That becomes problematic because authenticity is going to change as well. So what does the culturally confident person, citizen look like is a consideration. What does that look like across ethnicities, across communities, across religions? Though I do recognize that a policy document has to pin down culture, we have to keep in mind that it is fluid. So how to work with that is really the challenge.

There are cultural symbols that have evolved as national representations of a culture because of its longevity. There are those that represent a sufficient part of the whole. For those that are in a state of underdevelopment, how can they be supported to reach their maximum potential? Those should be the considerations. So the clarity on that issue of culture has to take place before we think how do we build this economy. The orange economy is a big thing now but I also see that as a category that boxes us in because we are now trying to flesh that out as a society. And I would like to support Sen. Maharaj's contribution last Friday that consultations with practitioners because practitioners are the ones who know what

they are doing. They are the ones involved in the process and I feel that a lot of process discussions do not take place; how do you do what you do, and it is the thinking behind this.

So, going to the budget, I looked at the festival market development, the application of \$5 million for that. My question was, who are the stakeholders? Is this one aimed at the issue of inclusion that the policy takes? Is it diversification? The allocation for a Festival Market Development and Tourism Festivals, what is the difference? Is one looking at visitors? Is one looking at the local market? The Item on Diaspora, Visiting Friends and Relatives, that was not quite clear. I was happy to see the allocation for the sugar heritage museum because that has been long in planning. And I know that there are documents and photographs at Brechin Castle's compound that are in decay. They are being damaged. So what would that \$1 million be allocated to and is there some urgency to preserve the existing documents and photographs? And as we speak about culture, it brings me to the idea of spaces, and here is where I feel the—and I know there is collaboration across Ministries, Youth, Community Development, Education, Culture, I feel Ministries that can work very tightly here.

As part of cultural development is a way that we would use available spaces, and not only spaces but safe spaces. I have experience with this, personal experience with how spaces impact on people's creativity. In 2015, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, along with IDB, and the UWI Research and Development Fund, embarked on a project called, Leveraging Built and Cultural Heritage for Economic Development. It was part of an inner-city development programme, and I was the lead researcher on that for cultural heritage. We spent at least six months in Laventille, up the hill, interviewing, going to people, in the Orisha yards, going to the panyards. And what we found is



that there were a lot of creatives, including Despers panyard that had to move from the hill, because nobody wanted to go up there, to Port of Spain. Several creatives who had to move their businesses out of Laventille so that—and they actually moved out and began to live wherever they were creating because it is a hot spot.

My suggestion was that community spaces—those are spaces that are already available; a lot of them struggle, so it might be a useful consideration to utilize these places because they were once places where people could go. The pan yards came out of up there. There would be places people could go to have a meal. So if you are hungry, people from the community went there; the temples, the mosques, those places functioned like that. I feel that utilizing those, developing those and developing across the country is a useful space for having initiatives, and that way you build community involvement and community inclusion in spaces that people also connect with. Now, I know that there are religious places so it gives you the option; you would either go to those or you go to the community centres. All right?

Culture, education, youth development, entrepreneurship, those initiatives could be helped here. How this can be done would involve consultations with practitioners and the current caretakers of those places. And that moves on to the next burning issue of crime because without that being addressed, I cannot see how we develop this economy because the most, in my opinion, we will accomplish is limping, limping through that process. And crime ties right into the wellness agenda that the Minister of Health mentioned that the Government is trying to push. It is definitely mental health, creative health; those are all tied into those two initiatives.

The police service, which was raised in the youth debates, and I bring this to you that the youths felt that this was not so much a matter of increasing the

workforce, but focusing on training, focusing on areas like forensics which speed up crime solving. Another issue that was raised, and this comes back to the cultures of violence and—was the issue of how we as leaders behave within the home, and this was a concern for the youths who said that, and I quote them that:

The tribal politics is not attractive to us. What we want to know is what the issues are and how we are going to deal with that.

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

**Sen. Dr. S. Patasar:** And the Speaker of the House also said to them at the Youth Parliament, at the opening of the Youth Parliament, that they have to be the ones to change it, but my question is, what systems do we have in place for their voices to be heard, as well as how do they go about trying to change people who they see as elders and leaders leading them through?

I feel that emotional and mental well-being is directly related to our production potential and maximizing our creative capital, the ability to think freely without fear of personal movement or fear of thinking big, and that others will also respect the originality of difference that we bring. So as change-makers, I feel that we have to be the first people to embrace the change, and we have a House of very intelligent people who I think are capable of doing that. And on my final note actually, if I have to pick the top three Ministries that require leaders who have a feeling of empathy, it would be Health, Security and Finance. That is it. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** I would like to recognize Dr. Patasar's maiden contribution to the House.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister of Trade and

Industry.

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

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

Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President, and I too will want to congratulate Dr. Sharda Patasar on her very sobering, steady and thoughtful contribution.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** And she deals largely with culture, and so on, and I know that the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts would respond to you, but it was a sharp contrast to the previous speaker where the contribution was very helter-skelter and scattered, and so on. I do not know who would be so—anybody who would have an issue with the Archibald-De Leon Highway which was just opened a week ago and which are going to provide endless socio-economic benefits to the people of the entire south-western peninsula.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Great indeed is the PNM. But, Mr. Vice-President, I am very grateful to contribute to the Senate today. I had a bite in the other place but very grateful to contribute once again to this fiscal Appropriation Bill for 2024. And indeed, I thank the hon. Minister of Finance who has done steady work, great work in ensuring that this budget is in a good place—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:**—this economy is in a good place. And it is very much evident by the recent report which we have from CariCRIS, again reaffirming Trinidad and Tobago's high credit worthiness, and so on. And with that, I also thank the hon. Prime Minister for his guidance and leadership and taking us through some very difficult periods.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** I want to say as a government, we are very committed to diversification, to stimulating the economy, and so on. And whilst we are seeing the outcome of our diversification efforts, we are seeing some outcomes, we are not stopping there at all, and there are various Ministries in this Government at work on this development agenda. But in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, we will continue to do our part in the growth of the non-energy sector through the implementation of our very targeted programmes, and also working very closely and collaborating and consulting with all of the business houses, the chambers, to which I thank them, the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the TTMA. All of the various chambers from Sangre Grande to Point Fortin, again, we thank you for the close collaboration in the work that we do.

In the other place, Mr. Vice-President, I would have spoken a lot about the significant investment and job creation that had been achieved by this Government. I got a chance to speak about investments. I would just repeat a few figures because I want it on the record that I think that we have done extremely well. I want to thank the InvesTT for the job that they have done, and also the Investment Directorate in the Ministry of Trade and Industry to the extent where we closed in fiscal 2023; in terms of closed investments, \$1.5 billion, generating 1,453 jobs. And then other operational jobs—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:**—and not to overlap between closed and those that were made operational, as I said, these are what we have done work with. There are other investments ongoing in the country that we would not be aware of; these are private sector ongoing investments. But again, operational investments on the non-energy side to the extent of another \$264 million generating 529 jobs.

And I spoke about the reinvestments by the manufacturing sector, 40 or so reinvestments that I am aware of, all recording to the tune of \$1.4 billion, which is quite significant, Mr. Vice-President, and expected to generate another 923 jobs.

**12.20 p.m.**

So all together those that we are involved with, through the Ministry of Trade and Industry and through InvesTT, more than TT \$3 billion in investments on the non-energy side, and if I were to break that down in terms of foreign direct investment, \$1 billion, and local direct investment, local investment, \$2.2 billion and all amounting, contributing, sorry, to 2,905 jobs. And many of these investments, many of them are, I would say, will be the newer investments in the BPO industry and I will speak to that later—the Business Process Outsourcing industry which is hiring a lot of young persons as well and there are also a slew of investments in the pipeline again. But the evidence is there and I know that they question the figures that we bring to the table, the evidence is there.

If you go to the Central Bank report, there has been steady growth in private sector credit both by the non-bank financial institutions, 17.7 per cent, and by the commercial bank, 6.9 per cent. In fact, private sector growth has grown by \$6.9 billion from \$64.1 billion in June 2023, to \$68.6 billion just a few months later. Again, a testament to a very healthy economy and of course from a stable government.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** I will just say a bit, I did not think that I would have to speak about the manufacturing sector and export performance again because I dealt with it extensively in the other place and I have other things to talk about, but I will repeat it because again, I heard Sen. Lyder and he is very confused. I think he has fallen—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:**—very, very confused and I am very worried about him, eh, Mr. Vice President. Especially with the state of affairs on that side with the different leaders emerging and so on, I fear that he will fall through the cracks—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:**—right, he might be on one list but I suspect that he may fall through the cracks. On one hand he is saying the manufacturing sector has collapsed, and on the other hand he is acknowledging the growth and saying that, you know, it is the private sector behind it, so he is betwixt and between.

But I make the point again, non-energy exports increased by 15 per cent from \$15.6 billion to \$17.9 billion over the period 2021 to 2022 and those figures are minus petrochemicals, methanol, urea, and ammonia which they like to accuse us of saying—using the energy products to bump up the non-energy export side, I have not done that. And I will tell you and I am very pleased in particular about the growth in the food and beverage sector which is—alone just that small sub-sector valued at \$3 billion increasing by 22 per cent from 2021.

But I compared the performance of the previous government because, you know, Sen. Lyder in fact wanted to praise the work that had been done by them and I will tell him the facts, these are CSO figures we believe in CSO figures, they are real figures. And I looked at the non-energy manufacturing sector and I used from measuring the output, I looked at output and GDP at current prices and I can tell you that in 2015 the figure was \$11.4 billion. The figure in 2022, \$15.7 billion, a 38 per cent increase in output in the non-energy manufacturing sector. How could you appear to want to trivialize that? And if I compare the food and beverage sector, that increased by 54 per cent between 2015 and 2022.

**12.25 p.m.**

And I will outline then all of the very strategic programmes and initiatives supported by exporTT, which would contributed to the growth of manufacturing sector and the overall non-energy sector. But today I would like to focus my contribution a little bit on SME development and services, and the ease of doing business, and digitalization through the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and I will also speak to some institutional reform.

So as I go into SME development, we will all acknowledge that SMEs are the backbone of our economy and the architects of our nation's future. Without a doubt, they are integral, SMEs, the work that they do and so on throughout all the sectors. They are integral to this country's economic prosperity through job creation, revenue generation, foreign exchange earnings, but also in terms of sustaining livelihoods, to sustaining communities as well, and in particular among the women, among the youth. And I want to commend, again, the Minister of Finance because this was SME-focused budget.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Right? So broadening the access for business start-ups and those existing micro businesses and small businesses, that will continue to grow with the kind of support that is being provided within that SME ecosystem.

And I want to make the point as well, and not to sound political, that all of our policies and our programmes focus on all of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and they aim to breakdown any foundations of inequality or exclusion or so that would prevent citizens from becoming entrepreneurs. And can tell you what we want—because of the success that entrepreneurship can bring and the influence on the communities and families, the ability to create jobs and so on, and

to take production away from just primary production into the valued added and so on, and the inherent benefits in that, I want to say that we must look forward to the day when there is an entrepreneur in every family in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** That is what we are working towards. And I know I was criticized in the Lower House about the Moruga Agro-Processing and Light Industrial Park. And again, it is the point that they do not understand, that in these rural areas the focus really was just on primary production. And the model that we are building in Moruga with this agro-processing park is one where we are transitioning from primary production to agro-processing, which is moving up the value chain and as I said, with the inherent opportunities that will come with that.

So there is no need why anyone should be—the Opposition, as a matter of fact, should be trivializing—I get it a lot from the MP for Moruga/Tableland. I cannot understand why they should be trivializing that kind of product. I mean, it is a direct response to growing entrepreneurship, particularly in our rural areas. And again, anybody who criticizes that kind model is really steeped in short-sightedness—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:**—and I want to reemphasize that that is the way we must go in developing our rural areas.

And so as we speak about livelihoods and the well-being of families and communities, I want to really speak to, again, that entire ecosystem. And I must say that under successive PNM governments, we take pride in the fact that we have done quite a lot in developing this ecosystem that exists and that will allow for the growth of these micro and small and medium-sized businesses and in this particular budget, again, we close the gap even more with some of the products—



some of the initiatives which we introduced.

So, as I said, the domestic entrepreneurial ecosystem, I give credit to successive PNM governments that have really allowed citizens to take their ideas—to move from their business ideas stage all the way to export markets under this Government. And in my last budget contribution, I would have mapped out the range of support that was available for our SMEs from inception to maturity. And again, we are actually seeing the surge in very new and innovative products on the markets.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Right?—very local products and services that are emerging from the very creative minds of people of Trinidad and Tobago, and I am including our micro businesses in that. And as I said before, we are further strengthening—in this budget, we are further strengthening the ecosystem and I will name a few of them—of the initiatives.

For instance, you would have heard my Cabinet colleague, the Minister of Youth Development and National Service, I think Sen. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing would have spoken to a number of initiatives for the micro and small businesses, such as the Junior Achievement programme which was introduced, which is a component of practical entrepreneurship but that learning takes place in the primary and secondary schools.

The Minister also would have spoken about the youth entrepreneurship programmes, including the Youth Career and Education Caravan. This is where it starts with the young individuals. And my colleague would have also taken us through some of the programmes that are available at NEDCO, the proposed programmes, including the youth business incubators which will cater for the very young entrepreneurs, the youth business parks that the Minister with responsibility

of youth development would do in conjunction with the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

The formulation of these youth business parks, they really provide a platform for youth in manufacturing and trade-related activities. And, of course, there are these youth entrepreneurship hubs that will also be on the cards as well and would provide a space as well for even those youths involved in retail activities. And my colleague, Sen. Avinash Singh, would have addressed all of the youth in agriculture programmes, so there is no need for me to go through that and again, I take pride in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the number of youth apprenticeship programmes that we have on the cards—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:**—in terms of the manufacturing sector and as I would have said, that apprenticeship programme would cater to more than 300 youths. As it is, more than 100 of them are already engaged in private sector companies with their internship programmes as well and there is also the youth wood manufacturing as well.

And gaining momentum also for our women is our SheTrades programme. I am very happy for the progress which we have made through the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Again, our Government is focusing on promoting gender equality, empowering women again through the SheTrades movement, connecting women to global markets and building a strong trade network for them, and we are beginning to see the outcomes of this particular programme. And again, use—and not only this particular programme but all of our other programmes that we provide opportunities for women. And utilizing data, again, published by from CSO, female unemployment, Mr. Vice-President, has fallen from 5.8 per cent in the first quarter of 2023 to 3.9 per cent in the second quarter of 2023.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Our focus is on ensuring that our women are employed. But again, speaking about our SheTrades hub, I mean, some notable accomplishments, over 700 women are now registered on that platform. And the first physical event, which took place earlier in 2023, we had more than 400 women in attendance; about 106 of them have been trained during this year in export readiness, and export planning, and identifying and accessing export markets; 17 of them from the agricultural sector were actually represented at the Madrid food festival, and there were about 15 leads generated from them; 29 female entrepreneurs, 19 from Trinidad and 10 from Tobago.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** They were able to sell their goods at the Export Centres Company Limited's Christmas market and so on, and they are getting repeated sales. And, of course, 17 women participated in this year's trade and investment convention. Now, we supported them. I understand that they got so much business that this time they are already arranging and they will be paying for their booths for themselves on this occasion. So progress for our women entrepreneurs.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** I am very happy. And so much so, when the TTMA had their last mission to St. Lucia, I can tell you that we supported three of these female entrepreneurs again and they reported favourable leads. They had several business-to-business meetings and so on, so I am very, very pleased at the progress which is being made with women in business.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** And I can tell you, based on the success with

Trinidad and Tobago SheTrades platform that the CDB, Caribbean Development Bank, in conjunction with the International Trade Centre, has now launched a SheTrades Caribbean Hub in September of this year, building a regional network. And I can tell you that is based on the success on the work that we have done in Trinidad and Tobago—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:**—and our women will also benefit from that regional hub. And we will continue to ensure that these women are allowed to participate in all of the trade missions, which we do, but Sen. Lyder criticized all these trade missions that we are doing but we will ensure that we do all the capacity-building programmes, all of the coaching and mentoring that is important for them to succeed. That is our Government, we will focus on our youth and our women, as well as the other businesses.

But I want to—as I speak about SME development, I cannot help but to also speak about innovation because we are shaping a future. And so that one of the initiatives that signifies a pivotal shift in our approach to small and medium-sized business development, which focuses on innovation and why innovation is so important—because of the ever shifting global market conditions, it remains very important to provide the ability to adapt and to thrive in this very dynamic situation.

So apart from the Research and Development Fund that is available at the Ministry of Trade and Industry throughout exporTT, there is a key—and I am only not—when I speak of innovation, I am speaking to other things that are being done by other government Ministries. So there is a programme done under the Ministry of Planning and Development, spearheaded by the EU and also the IDB Lab, also CARIRI is involved, and under that Innovation Challenge Facility, eligible

businesses with innovation projects can access funding.

And I will tell you, there is in one area where small and medium-sized businesses can access some US \$75,000, and in the second phase, Inclusive Business Innovation Solutions, you can actually access up to US \$500,000. And I want to say that since November 2021, there have been calls for proposals and for beneficiaries and there have been beneficiaries actually in all areas, including agriculture, manufacturing, ICT, fintech, education, health care, creatives, renewable energies and sports, and so on. And thus far, there have been—no. I think there have been 34 beneficiaries and we believe there is another 30 or so that are likely to benefit under the third call for proposals, and there will yet be another fourth call for proposals later this year.

I want to also speak, again, within the ecosystem and where there is extensive government support, that Scale Up Business Accelerator Programme which we do at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, in conjunction with the Unit Trust. That is an excellent programme which is done through a US-based entrepreneurial firm, where the benefits—the participants benefit from tools with which they can scale-up their businesses and it surrounds the three Cs of cash, capacity and customer. And the immediate impact of cohort one was 25 to 75 per cent growth in revenues, a 25 to 80 per cent growth in exports, and additional jobs were created. The second cohort actually graduated in February of this year and again, we are supporting the Unit Trust, we are doing this together. There will be a third and yet fourth cohort in this 14-week programme in 2024. And there are success stories. One of them is our own Ecliff Elie in February 2023.

**12.40 p.m.**

And we all know Ecliff Elie, he is a local fashion designer and so on. On account of this SCADA programme, I can tell you that his increase in retail sales

have gone up by 66 per cent compared with the prior years.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** He has also expanded a now store. I do not know if you are aware of Ecliff Elie, Senator? He has done a new store in Tobago and he exceeded his targets by 400 per cent after the first two days of opening.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** And that is through this SCADA programme. And I am taking my time to talk about the growth in small and medium size businesses because it is worth it. And in the area of services I can speak to Newtown Medical Centre. In September 2023, New Town Medical Centre, which is a private medical centre but they provide medical services, and they are expanding their medical tourism portfolio. They would have had an overall increase in revenue by 33 per cent.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** NCS Software Limited is a software company and so on, identifies regional expansion as one of their goals, and they have gone through to SCADA programme as well, and as a result of this, programme MCS sold 20 new databases across 11 islands in the region and seven of which were new territories to them and their sales revenue would have gone by more than 45 per cent.

Again, we are continuing because we see the success of this programme and we have gone a little bit further with the UrpreneurPlus, another new programme under this budget where we will give support to the extent of \$15 million. Again, this is a closing day in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and of course developing our youth entrepreneurial. Again, this is a programme between the UTC and UWI ventures, and really it is to enable the launch of innovative new enterprise

technologies for our young people, but those who are the university graduates. And there have already been eight graduates, eight companies from this—benefiting under this programme and they would get funding up to \$1.5 million. But as I said that \$15 million which we are injecting will benefit a 100 small and micro-enterprises.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** So again, more development for SMEs. And again further closing the gap, and I know it is a concern for many businesses also deny SMEs that access to foreign exchange, and I know—Sen. Lyder had the audacity to come—no, he went on a radio programme to speak about foreign exchange and that he is dealing with five banks and getting foreign exchange from five banks and that one bank along that they had given him US \$10,000 and was going to continue giving him US \$10,000 per week. I mean, what is your contribution when that is what you are going to give to the population, showing that I can access FX wherever I can. Really? Really, he is amounting to total irrelevance and I am not surprised.

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

**Hon. Senator:** “Ooooh”.

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** He was the one who was chosen to be replaced today to allow for a seventh speaker. Right? And it is because of that kind of silly—those kinds of silly contributions that he has given and he did that in the public space.

**Hon. Senator:** Yeah, surprised?

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** But I want to again congratulate the Minister of Finance for recognizing that SMEs will also require foreign exchange.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** —and recognizing the pivotal role that they will continue to achieve in terms of economic growth and increasing our export and so on so that there will be this new programme introduced, particularly for the SMEs as well. I want to say and clarify again to Sen. Lyder, I want to remind the population, and I take it straight for the contribution of the Minister of Finance in wrapping up on the Appropriation Bill when he spoke in the other place, 84 per cent of the 158 manufacturing companies that received foreign exchange from the EximBank are in fact SMEs. Right.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** I want to misspell all of the misconceptions that have come from Sen. Lyder, and we are taking care of all businesses at all levels.

I know I would have spoken last year and I will come back to this again. I spoke about the two programmes that we were doing, not two programmes rather, but two studies that we were doing on strengthening sectoral linkages in Trinidad and Tobago, and also the one region on regional value chain for the manufacturing sector. I want to just tell you that we the release reports in September 2023. The study on sectoral linkages we see as very important for developing these forward and backward linkages, and finding and exploiting a way forward in terms of how we can really benefit particular subsectors, and so I can tell you the study has already revealed linkages in the poultry, fish, the cocoa, the film, the fashion, the music, the food processing and so on, and subsectors, and, of course this will be of much focus with not only the Ministry of Trade and Industry but I will be collaborating with all of my colleague Ministers to ensure that these linkages will yield to greater results for our economy, and for, in particular, the SMEs. Again, on the regional value chain there are several recommendations related to poultry and cocoa and juices and so on, and we are going to be targeting those studies so



that we can see some improved results along the entire food and other value chains. I want to speak—how much time do I have?

**Mr. President:** You have 11 minutes remaining.

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** I want to speak a “lil” bit about the services sector because that is a driving force as well in shaping—that is a significant driving force in shaping our landscape, and it is actually across all countries, and so that I will tell you that for Trinidad and Tobago our data from Central Bank reveals that in 2022 the services sector would have contributed to more than half of our GDP and as much as 87 per cent of our labour force. Unfortunately though, our exports of services are just 5.1 per cent, so that it is going to be a focus for us especially under the new agency, the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency. And we have to note that across the globe as well that global trade in services is actually going faster than global trade in goods.

So there is much more room for growth and there will be much focus by us on it, having a three-pronged approach on the collection and dissemination of trading services data, also on sectoral support, and we will do that through several Ministries, and we will be looking at several types of services: Tourism services, maritime services, the creatives, the ICT services sector as well, financial services, professional services and so on, energy services, education services and so on. But overall and most importantly I want to say that all of these different services, subsectors will require support, sectoral support if they are to operate at a quality standard and if they are to increase market penetration and so on, and that is where our focus will be on the capacity building as well, and really pushing the sector across, especially through the export promotion of our services.

I am very pleased—I mean I would not go into the fintech, I think it is very important to merging that fintech of financial technology services area, I would not

go into it. I am sure the Minister of Finance perhaps could elaborate because they are doing good work through the TTIFC, but I will speak a little bit about our business process outsourcing which has grown by leaps and bounds. It is rapidly growing. I mean we are late into the industry in comparison to the rest of the world, but we have now more than 20 call centres in Trinidad and Tobago which include several major international players. And I speak here, it is so very important because operationally at this time within that DPO sector we have 1,865 jobs, but I will tell you that by the end of fiscal 2024, those jobs will grow to 5,270 employing our youth, employing our professionals as well.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** We have several DPO investors in the pipeline as well. And if I could single out any of them: iQor which has locations in Tamana, in Chaguanas and Barataria, currently they are hiring 1,700 persons. They will go to 3,000 by the end of fiscal 2024. Teleperformance which offers remote—they do not have any locations, they do all of their work remotely, but they are going to change their model somewhat. Right now they are new to the game in Trinidad and Tobago. They have about 60 work-from-home participants but they are going to go hybrid by the end of 2024, and employ 1,000 persons; Nearshore Teleservices which has come to us from the Dominican Republic they are by the end of 2024—they are new, and by the end of 2024 they are projected to hire something like 800 young persons. And there are a number of them in the pipeline, we have Clear Harbour out of the USA, they are expected to make a \$13 million investment, and they would in fact hire 500 jobs by the end of 2024. This sector is doing exceedingly well and we look forward the further growth of that particular subsector.

Let me mention a “lil” bit as my time is closing in on me, the yachting

sector. Our vision is really to return it to a very buoyant sector. So as you know our borders closed with COVID, however—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Yes. However, in 2022, we would have had 461 arrivals for the first nine months of the year. We have already surpassed that figure, we are up to 504 and three months left, so we are looking forward to really having a bit of a gain there. But there is much work to do and of course we are at this time focusing on the strategic policy interventions which would really help them in terms of financing and promotional activities, and capacity building and so on.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Thank you. I want to tell you that our grant fund facility they are all micro and small business, some medium-size businesses in that sector. We have approved \$2.3 million supporting 93 persons, 93 small businesses in that yachting sector since March 2022 and we are continue to promote through several programmes. The campaign is going to be yet even more aggressive. But the big thing that we are doing is we are starting our Yachting Marine Apprenticeship Programme, which is up to a nine-month programme. We are engaged in technical/vocational courses, on-the-job training, preparing the workforce for the marine sector. The programme would involve in the first instance a cohort of a 150 young persons. And just recently a MOU would have been signed with Caribbean Fisheries Training and Development Institute and the MIC to start that programme, and you would hear more about it before the official launch.

So there is a lot more work for us to do as a government and I would admit that through the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Finance we are going to put in place the sale clay system which will allow for easy access for our

yachties and also from exits for Trinidad and Tobago. We are below the hurricane belt, but there is a distinct advantage in term of the quality of personnel that we have to service the industry and therefore we are going to continue to do all that is possible to ensure that this industry is successful.

Our creatives have done exceedingly well both in fashion, film and music. I am very pleased to note that more than 170 designers have benefited in fashion from this year's programmes. They have now gone on trade missions to the US and the UK, and many of them are having success stories already. Someone who attended the US Trade Mission already has orders from three stores in the US, and there are others as well. There are two local designers that have finalized contracts with a UK distributor for the supply of fashion products for the spring collection in 2024. Doing really well in film and music as well, and all of these programmes will be now captured on the new Trade and Investment Promotion Agency.

I came in the last budget and I said that we were going to enhance our TTBizLink platform, and that we have done. So we in fact now have this enhanced TTBizLink Platform for 36 existing services, I could not speak about them now but I will in fact do a release on it. But again, in fiscal 2024, and I hope by January 2024 we would in fact have another 14 new eservices added to that TTBizLink platform, and again all of these enhancements are expected to lead to greater time and cost savings. Very happy with the work that we are even doing a bit trade licensing unit where all of our import licences are processed within a day and on many occasions within an hour. So that is the kind of progress that we have—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** —using cutting-edge technologies and making sure that our businesses remain on the competitive edge and so on.

**12.55 p.m.**

DevelopTT, again we have done tremendous work and at this stage the e-service was launched in Tobago and in 2024 we will launch the four final e-services which would include the variation e-service, the mining e-service and the advertisement e-service and so on. That programme which was done with the Ministry of Planning and Development and the Ministry of Trade and Industry has worked very, very, well I can tell you. The Town and Country Planning Division has approved 4,800 final planning permissions on that DevelopTT platform and 920 building permits and so on.

Pretty soon, as I speak about technology, we will be having deliverables from the implementation of our port community system in Trinidad and Tobago. You would in fact have five deliverables within this fiscal year even though the entire port community system will be ruled out over the next two years. You will also have our e-commerce strategy which will be in place for 2024.

I want to thank you, Mr. Vice-President, and again as I said this Government is committing to ensuring that we do our part to ensure that this economy remains vibrant and is projected to grow even further in 2024 and years to come. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Anyone? Sen. Dr. Carsen Charles? Sen. Roberts.

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

**Sen. Anil Roberts:** Thank you, thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I had planned to respond to the cumulative, chaotic, cacophony presented by the hon. Minister of Finance for four hours and seven minutes, another 45 minutes, and elsewhere. However, sitting quietly listening to the contributions in this honourable House, in this debate, I think it requires urgent attention and intervention. You know goals

and dreams, every individuals would have different goals and dreams in life, some of them motivated by the drive for success. Champions, for example, champions hate to lose, while losers praise themselves. The PNM are losers. This budget is a eulogy of the politically dead PNM.

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** This PNM budget is a thesis of an uncaring government, an illustration of incompetence; a testimony of a pathological entity; a pathway to pain for the people; an exercise in futility and a hodgepodge potpourri of muddled, confused ideas collated by a cognitively challenged Cabinet. Let me deal with some of my honourable colleagues who spoke before me. The hon. Independent Senator, Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy said that, she looked at this budget with red glasses, red lens, yellow lens and a clear lens, yet throughout her contribution of 40 minutes, maybe she was time constrained, all I saw in her analysis was that this budget made no sense and did not present the necessary resources to solve the ills that were important to her.

So, I looked at this budget with a yellow lens, I looked at with a clear lens, I looked at it with a red lens, I looked at it with a camera lens, I looked at with a microscope lens, a telescope lens and I even look at it with a shade lens and through all the lens this budget looks like the same, an all-out attack on the pockets of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** Imagine an entire four hours and seven minutes presentation and nothing about crime, not a plan, not an intervention, not an allocation, not a discussion, no hope for the people out there who are at the mercy of criminals.

**Mr. Imbert:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Sen. A. Roberts:** You know as a coach—he could talk, I “doh”—the hon.

Minister of Finance could never disturb me. He does not have what is required which is the intellect. So he could talk from now until thy kingdom come I will continue, Mr. Vice-President.

So as a coach, you know, I thought this Government, when you have an athlete that is disciplined, when you have an athlete that is talented, gifted, hardworking and puts the time in, they listen and they are consistent and they follow all your programmes and your prescriptions for success, as a coach of Olympic athletes I get frightened at that time because it is so difficult to get an approved performance when an athlete is doing so well, when things are going well, it is difficult. So I get nervous and I try to dig deep into the recesses of mind and body and spirit to get some ideas to improve their performance. But when an athlete is lazy, not intelligent, incompetent, useless, then you could relax as a coach because it is “eassy” to improve.

So with the crime situation with this Government would a Minister of National Security like the hon. Fitzgerald Hinds, which is the most incompetent human being ever to grace a Cabinet, a National Security Ministry I would have thought that solving or improving the crime situation would be easy because of how woeful his performance is.

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

In a word you move hon. Hinds and you would immediately see some sort of improvement, but this Government seems happy to be mediocre.

The hon. Senator from Tobago, the hon. Hislop, he made some comments that I will have to deal with because he is a very intelligent, respectful Tobagonian. Being a half Tobagonian I will have to just set the record straight. First of all he boasted that manufacturing exports between 2021/2022 increased from TT \$15.6 billion to TT \$17.2 billion. That is true but he boasted as if that was an

improvement. You see you cannot decimate a sector, reduce the productivity and then when you get a paltry improvement in your decimated low level boast that you have done something well, because back in 2015 the number was up at \$20 b-b-b-billion. So you are still short \$2.8 billion. I never see a group of people who can diminish performance, lower the bar, then raise it back an “oomph” and say, “ayyyyye”, great is the PNM, we do better.

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** It is simply amazing and they do it and they shout it from the mountaintops. He said—the hon. Sen. Hislop said, that there is a steep learning curve in the PNM after they lost the Tobago election. Well I would like to let him know, when a steep learning curve comes up against an abyss of PNM incompetence, arrogance and PNM corruption the result is chaos, suffering and pain. There is no learning curve that can overcome such incompetence of a group of individuals in the Cabinet of the PNM. He actually boasted in Tobago that there is one special farm now growing vegetables and so on, in some new capacity and technology, not understanding that he comes from an island that was the food basket of the entire Caribbean.

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** Tobago fed Trinidad for over 50 years, all the food that Trinidadians ate came from Tobago and the excesses were exported to the Eastern Caribbean. I have a Tobagonian brother here now boasting it “ha” one farm. “Ah” surprised that he did not boast about his hon. Prime Minister farm, because then I would have asked a lot of questions. Sen. Hislop also said, and I must correct this record, and for all Tobagonians and for the people of Trinidad and Tobago Sandal Resorts and the PNM Government of Trinidad and Tobago at no time in the negotiation, discussion or possible appearance of a hotel, beaches and Sandals in



Tobago was Sandals going to spend one red cent.

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** Not one red cent. The hon. Minister of everything, the honourable now Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, hon. Stuart Young who usurped the portfolio of Minister of Tourism, hon. Shamfa Cudjoe, back then, was at great pains to say—and the hon. Prime Minister, the Member for Diego Martin West, that they would give the land which was in Tobago, that beautiful piece, they miss out “ah” piece and then that caused some people some problems, No Man’s Land called, the Buccoo Estate. And that the Government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago will finance the construction of the hotel, would finance the architectural plans and then Sandals group will come in and manage.

So the benefits to Trinidad and Tobago would have been in the actual construction, some construction jobs while it is being constructed and then workers, such as, maids, bartenders, them fellas who does put on gloves and go with the VIP room and so on, we would have gotten some jobs like that and may be some purchases from agriculture, but without a PNM agricultural policy in Tobago with one farm making cabbage we could not have benefited so much from that.

So for the hon. Senator to stand here as a man from Tobago and say, people run investment out of Tobago is totally false and I know that my honourable colleague would not knowingly mislead this House. So I would recommend to him next time, read, research and come and talk facts. Not one dollar was being spent by Sandals to invest that. In fact, the people of Trinidad and Tobago would have had to take a loan for \$7b-b-billion at an interest rate of 6.16 per cent and when I did the calculation we would have broken even if all the hotel rooms were full for 365 days per year without lull, we would have broken even in 99.5 years.

At that time I also researched, at that time in 2016/2017 when this Sandals hotel thing was being talked about by the hon. Prime Minister and the PNM, I researched globally how many hotels were under construction, and at that time there were 12,798 hotels under construction. I researched to see how many of these hotels were being built with taxpayers' dollars, government dollars, and the answer was a big fat zero.

So to come here and pretend that somebody ran some investment out of Tobago, it had no investment. Sandals was getting a gift, they were getting something that no other human being would have given to them. Sandals had built hotels in St. Lucia, they have three; Barbados, they have two; Antigua, they have two; St. Kitts, they have one; Grenada, they have one and a next one coming; Jamaica, they have three, but they spent their money. You would see when the Antiguan Prime Minister speaks he speaks about Sandals, well he did not like them so much because he had something bad to say in Parliament, but the investment you would hear US \$200 million spent. In Bahamas Sandals spent \$280 million on one hotel, there are three hotels. I see the hon. Minister googling, google it fast and check and see how many hotels were being built with taxpayers' dollars.

So, I just want to correct the record on behalf of the people of Trinidad and of those in Tobago that Sandals was not bringing one dollar of foreign direct investment, it was your taxpayers' dollars going to build hotel, give land and give Sandals a gift in their hand and you will have to ask the now Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the hon. Stuart Young, to explain that to you all.

The collapse of tourism in Tobago occurred, hon. Sen. Hislop, when the PNM Government came into central government. The numbers in 2014 and 2015 for arrivals into Tobago, international arrivals, 2014, was 97,000 landing in Tobago and during that year the domestic tourism, especially during the months of

June to August was up at 659,000 people Trinidadians going across and coming back. But after 2017 and the collapse of the seabridge by this PNM Government as they sent away the Canadians, as they gave a contract to the “sarubai” of a board member on the Port Authority, Magellan, to manage the *T&T Spirit* and the *T&T Express* they started to shut down and collapse. The seabridge fell into total decimation and then we saw the advent of what the hon. Prime Minister, the Member for Diego Martin West described as crooked money with Bridgeman’ bringing a seabridge with a “cobo star” and “ah ocean stem” that never arrived. The decimated tourist sector was done by the PNM.

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** By 2017 and 2018, the numbers of international arrivals in Tobago went down from 97,000 in 2014 at a high to 20,000 in 2018.

And the domestic tourism, because of the collapse of the sea bridge during June to September, went down from 659,000 down to 158,000.

**1.10 p.m.**

In any mathematics that is failure, that is decimation, that is collapse of the Tobago economy by the PNM who held not only central government, but the THA. So for my honourable young Tobagonian senatorial colleague to come here and espouse some sort of virtue of the tourism sector now, and criticize the current THA, is a bit disingenuous.

Sen. Muhummad, the hon Mr. Vice-President, Dr. Muhummad, said that the improvements shown are glaring, but then I realized I had to break this down for the people who are listening. The PNM, it is like for 87 years you stop exercising; you eat poorly; you eat plenty oil; you eat plenty fat, fried chicken and things; you drink sweet drink. You gain 100 pounds, you get diabetes and high blood pressure under the PNM. Then just so, you win a lotto like a war in Ukraine or something,

and the price of oil and things go up, and you lose 10 pounds out of the 100 pounds that you put on, you lose back 10. The PNM comes and says, “Well, we fit”. “We looking good. We ripped. We have 12-pack, we have six-pack, we have cuts.” That is what this PNM does. But you still have diabetes, you still have high blood pressure, you are still “going and dead of heart attack”, but “dem” celebrating a reduction of 10 pounds from the 100 you put on. That is PNM.

This budget is nothing was taken—Dr. Muhummad, the hon. Senator, said nothing was taken, no new taxes. Well, I am sorry for laughing in the honourable House. But after “yuh” done take everything for eight years, what else “all yuh” want to take? And now you want to even come to say the property tax that they “eh” pay, and it—new name and new calculation, and you are trying to tell people do not study that. “All yuh ha no wok”, never mind we say we are full of employment—“ah” coming there too. But we “eh” take nothing. We take your fuel subsidy, five, six, seven times, and the Minister laughed at all you all, but we did not take “nothing” this time. From the fisherman you “eh” take regular gas. Fishermen had to fill boats with super. Cannot run down fish because if the fish move, fishermen have to come back empty because they would not dare burn gas and go looking for fish.

They take food cards. You take GATE from a high of \$726 million in 2014 for 59,000 students. You take that and down to \$289 million to 27,000 students, but you said you “eh” take “nothing”. You even take food out of the school children’s mouths. In 1981 when Dr. Williams created school feeding programme, they produced 51,000 meals for children. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh and Kamla Persad-Bissessar took that up to 76,000 meals, breakfast—the PNM may prefer “breakfasts”—and lunch. Do you know as soon as this PNM came in pre-COVID, they cut the school feeding?—food in children’s bellies.

They went and said, “Listen, we need to cut back”. “We still have to rent that building from the Attorney General, so let us cut something. Oh gosh, look at what we could cut. Food from poor people children. Let us cut that from 76,000 down to 48,000 meals.” Do you know this version of the PNM in 2016, 2017, 2018 is worse at feeding children than Dr. Williams was the year he died in 1981? That is how deadly this PNM is. That is how heartless they are. How could you take food from children and say that is a budget cut, but you are renting buildings—

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:**—and paying \$55 million for a building that is not fit for purpose.

The hon. Independent Sen. Maharaj talked about Couva and the sport facilities there, the Ato Boldon Stadium, the cricket centre, the national Balmain centre, and then the aquatic centre, and the cycling velodrome. And she took note and said, but this is a great opportunity, potential and so on. Let me allow and tell the hon. Senator, that was the plan. The reason the aquatic centre went there, the reason the cycling velodrome went there, the reason the BMX Olympic centre was going there, was to create an economic growth pole.

If you go back to the budget document of 2013 read by the hon. Larry Howai, sport was spoken about in the first 10 minutes of the budget. Because diversification, sport tourism, growth pole, the advent of all these facilities and being open to the people in the area who love sports, who love fitness, who love family, and while the children are swimming the parents could be exercising; while the children are riding the parents could be liming or relaxing and, therefore, entrepreneurs would have come up and put a hotel. Now the football federation put a hotel but it was to inject and create a situation where businesses, private sector would come and see. “A-A”, 10,000 children coming through this pool

every week because taxis and buses are bringing children, because the Kamla Persad-Bissessar led-government was going to make swimming compulsory for primary schools eight years and under so that children would not drown in buckets or down by the beach, and all over the place. But then came the nightmare which is the PNM.

So the entire growth pole and the concept—if for the aquatic centre, for example, from November 26<sup>th</sup> which is Thanksgiving in the US and in Europe when it starts to get cold, the aquatic centre which we have here in Couva, there is not one like it in the entire United States of America. That facility boasts two 50-metre pools and a 25-metre diving well, deep by 15 metres, plus dry diving capability and so on. In the winter months we envisaged as a UNC government that with university teams, national teams running from the snow from Europe, Canada and the USA, that they will come to this magnificent facility, spend money, stay there, US \$5 per hour, per swimmer, per lane. So each team would have 20 swimmers, that is, two hours training in the morning and two hours. So they are spending US \$20 per swimmer, per day, and their average stay would have been 14 to 18 days and nights, as well as hotel accommodation, transport, food and so on. We envisaged that the pool alone would have made US \$1.2 million to \$1.8.

In that period from November 26<sup>th</sup> to January 13<sup>th</sup>, when universities and so on were on holidays. And then, of course, we also envisaged that every 10,000 human beings that we got to come to Trinidad and Tobago on an annual basis for sport tourism, with an average stay of six days, we would increase the GDP by \$1 billion. This was the plan. This was the science. This was the maths. Then comes the PNM, and do you know in 2022 the hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts puts out a request for a proposal for a sport tourism plan? Please come and

give us an idea. Here we have the national tennis centre, we have all these facilities. We have been in charge since 2015, please somebody come and give us a plan. All he had to do was say, “Douglah, come nah man”. “Tell meh what to do”, and I would have helped.”

Do you know that up to now, not one child has dived in that world-class diving facility? Why? Because they do not have a diving coach. Diving is a very specific scientific thing. I left a Cabinet Note there for Chinese—we have good relations with the Chinese. The Chinese are the greatest in diving. When you have 10 Olympic medals, they might win nine out of 10. So we needed diving coaches. We had that approved, but it is UNC so do not bother with that. Throw it away just like the Couva hospital. Do not bother with that. The Minister of Sport was from the UNC so leave the pool. Do not dive. Let the dry foam area, where the children could flip and thing and fall softly in the sponge, let that dry rot. Leave the board there for pigeons to sit down and lime and take a view of Nikoli Blackman training. That is the PNM.

They also locked off the whole facility. The whole idea of the facility was also to get healthy people. Citizens walking, running, exercise—they locked out the facility. When I became Minister in 2010, I was shocked and horrified to know that for Intercol football, the last PNM government was charging each school \$5,000 to use Larry Gomes, to use Ato Boldon, to use Mannie Ramjohn. The UNC came in and said, “But this is the people thing. No fee”. These are the things that encourage and inculcate an atmosphere and culture of healthy population so that the now Minister of Health would not have to go be dancing out of timing to say he is fighting NCDs in the savannah because that was painful to look at. But I just wanted to let you know that there was a plan. Unfortunately, this Government came in and they have no plan as you could read in this document, four hours—

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:**—and seven minutes of abject, total nonsense. I mean, it is unbelievable. Sen. Paul Richards, my hon. colleague, came and maybe it was a time constraint too. He was talking about education, he is very passionate, but for some reason decided to use cumulative numbers on the education and he went in 2015, Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government, \$10.2 billion in education; and then the PNM came and in 2016—off the top of my head, what he said was, it went to \$8.4 billion; and then by 2017 it went to a low of \$6.7 billion under the PNM; and then it started to come back up and it finished at about \$8.2 billion this year.

Well, I would suggest to the hon Senator, not to add up all because some was under the UNC, and you all must analyse the investment under the UNC specifically and apart from whatever they put in it. Because the PNM and UNC are not the same. Because under the UNC investment you would see by 2014 after coming in on May 24, 2010, they were the best results in SEA, CSEC and CAPE—

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:**—in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. You would also see the highest enrolment at tertiary level. And after the advent of this PNM “emailgate” regime, even though they—they did not lower the investment because they have to wean the people off their own money, but the consequential diminution in performance occurred to a point where in 2018, 810 children got zero in SEA. Until last year we were hearing about 50 per cent of those who took the SEA got less than 30 per cent, and that we were having to have remedial classes and we spent a set of money but nobody showed up. And this PNM continues at this pace without a plan, without opportunities, without encouraging our teachers, without motivating, without doing anything, just accepting that we are going down lower and lower every year.



Now we have to look at Guyanese students beating us in all sorts—we are the champions. Trinidad and Tobago, we are the brightest and the best. Even back in the days of Dr. Williams with QRC, never mind QRC, I really—even though my father went there, when you go to Fatima you do not want to hear anything from QRC nor CIC. However, the performance was incredible, but under this PNM merit does not matter. That is why they take away scholarships and say it is a bursary. What is a bursary? Means you have to go by Balisier House and somebody has to like you. Nobody knows how you get a bursary. But a scholarship is something based on merit, that every child will have an equal opportunity. When you look at the Constitution everybody must have an opportunity. What is wrong with competition? What is wrong with merit? Why is the PNM against merit like this?

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** Sen. the hon. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing, implored the children to take up the opportunities offered by this special Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, while the Minister of Youth Development and National Service has plenty questions to answer about Venture Credit Union, special branch, and all kinds of things. That is an aside. But she said there were many programmes. Even though when you check the numbers in the budget and the eight previous ones, the PNM cut—[*Senator lifts document*—Sorry, I would not display it. Nah, I should not display that also. People do not want to see that. But the PNM cut investment in youth, sport, culture, from little children up to university level, across the board. They cut every programme and funding to every programme, and then the hon. Senator comes and says, “Come and take part of these programme that we have. Implore the youth to come”. Well, about 17 youths messaged me on WhatsApp and they asked me to ask the hon Sen. Laurel

Lezama-Lee Sing, “where is the programme where you could get 500,000 scholarship to go and study and fail”. They want that one. They want to be in that programme.

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

**1.25 p.m.**

“Dem eh want no lil small programme, dem want de half ah million programme. So yuh understand?” And I told them, well, I will ask her.

Sen. Rohan Sinanan, the hon. Minister of Works and Transport, he stood here and I nearly fell off this comfortable chair. He said, the PNM—look how great the PNM is. Since 1967, Dr. Williams said that he wanted to build a highway to Point Fortin and he boasts that it now “kinda finish”, nearly piece, “it reaching”. In 2023—

**Sen. Lutchmedial:** Minus the crack.

**Sen. A. Roberts:** Minus the crack—he comes to say that the PNM had an idea in 1967. They were unfettered in government for 30 years but the thing “eh build”. He thinks that that is a badge of honour, you know. He started to boast about that, that it now “start to finish”. Somebody else will deal with all the other things that he said.

But he also said that we cannot help flooding because Netherlands has flooding, New York has flood, “Japan geh flood”. I am not interested in all of that. We are living right here. I am living here since '69 and all I know is that right now, when it rains for 22 minutes, you could get flood anywhere. “Lagoon move from wherever de PNM say was lagoon, all in Goodwood Park is lagoon, all in Ariapita Avenue—yuh want to go and eat gyro, hot dog or Chinese food, if it rain for 22 minutes, make sure yuh have on yuh Wellington or make sure yuh driving ah SUV”.

It rained for 25 minutes and I had to take three hours to reach from St Ann's—well, I went to check some of them, obviously after checking them on the budget—to Mandela Courts and they are talking about they cannot do anything. They are now discussing after eight years that they are now going to desilt the river mouths, they are now going to fix drains. They used to laugh at the UNC, “we is box drain government”. Yes, we are proud of box drains because “box drain does stop flood”.

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** The hon. Minister of Works and Transport said the Point Fortin Highway is the biggest stain of corruption in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. Even though this PNM Government has paid \$11 million for a commission of enquiry that “eh start, yuh know—it eh even start, it not even on yuh marks, dem eh even gone down” but \$11 million gone. But the hon. Minister of Works and Transport had the unmitigated gall to say that the Point Fortin Highway, which the contractor was selected by the PNM, OAS, before May 24<sup>th</sup> and negotiations—based on the *Hansard* of the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East back in 2016 would show the negotiations with the contractor that began in January and was completed in a week—somebody else will deal with that. I do not have time to deal with that.

However, I must address the hon. Minister of Works and Transport, the biggest corruption and his hon. Prime Minister used a very vile term. He said it was “rape of the country”. I mean, that is the Prime Minister, I do not know why he likes to use that word or what he knows about that word. But let me ask the hon. Minister of Works and Transport if he has ever heard of something called the Brian Lara stadium that was budgeted at \$175 million and ended up at \$1.3 buh-buh-billion; that the entire complex was budgeted at \$850 million under the PNM

to include a cricket stadium, three astro turfs, a 50-metre pool, gym, cafeteria, hotel and now the stadium alone, the average cost per seat is US \$130,000 per seat. Every citizen that goes there to watch a CPL match should look under their seat and see if they get a diamond ring from that PNM. And they are talking about corruption?

What about—we are still looking for “de horse and dem” in the Caroni racing complex. Where “de horse and dem”? “Ah want to put ah bet”. You talking about the greatest corruption? Caroni racing complex, over \$200 million. When “ah million was ah million”, if you equate that nowadays, “dah is \$1.6 buh-buh-billion and not ah horse eh run, ah horse eh even canter”.

Bridgemans, NGC’s Atlantic Train 1, \$233 million, when everybody “tell yuh doh spend no money” and you talking about corruption? Scarborough hospital, the financial complex, fake oil—“just so ah man say, listen, I was producing 200 barrel ah day, now I gone up to 12,000 barrel ah day, ohhh, they come and boast in de Parliament”. Well, if that was true with the fake oil, then their former senatorial colleague and Rowley’s best friend should have been—the Prime Minister, sorry—the hon. Prime Minister’s best friend should have been given all the land acreage in Trinidad to drill for oil since he was so good. If it was not fake, if it was high performance—I believe in merit. If a man and his company and his technology is so good to increase the production on an oilfield by 600, 800 per cent, I say, “geh him all” because the people will benefit. And in the United National Congress, we are here about the people benefiting—

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:**—not recusals, not Ministers renting out buildings, not friends and family and financiers getting \$55 million because a building is not fit for purpose and then blaming the DPP.

Project Pride, \$400 million. Where “de” pride? “De river eh even move. It was to move ah river to put ah airport, they have no airport, the river eh bend” and the \$400 million disappeared. But they are talking about corruption? PNM really—

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** “Oh good. Ah cyah talk about PNM corruption in five minutes”. BWIA, Lock Joint, Mount Hope, Tesoro, Mosquito crack, Skinner Park, \$131 million to move a FIFA football field down to a small sweat, NAPA, SAPA, Shaw Park complex, rapid rail—I have to pause. “Ah nearly get asthma with that”.

Rapid rail, that hon. Minister of Finance was the Minister of Works and Transport during that period, when somehow the hon. Prime Minister and Member for San Fernando East, Patrick Mervyn Augustine Manning, was put on a plane, a Bombardier jet and just so the press found out where he went, how they fly, what he ate and so on, and then there was something called Trinitrain that was below Bombardier but the Prime Minister went on a Bombardier jet and boom, TriniTrain Consortium came up to win.

Do you know that TriniTrain Consortium, part thereof was paid for \$481 million for a feasibility study to say, boy, the train, “if it go move”, what speed it should move, where it should pass, how it will go, should it go up or should it go down; \$481 million and this PNM Government has the audacity to talk about corruption? What about the four vessels that they purchased, when the Minister of Finance was then Minister of Works and Transport, that never sailed a day and they spent \$65 million to try and fix it. “Dey all tie up there and four ah dem sink, one holding up de next three”. And “Iwer want to buy it, he win ah tender” and then they said, nothing for you, Iwer. That is the PNM.

Central block, they finished a beautiful building—I must say the building is

beautiful—around the savannah; the administrative complex for people to manage the health care system. Now, you cannot get a Panadol, you cannot get your oncology drugs, you cannot get dialysis, you are sleeping in the hallway. When rain falls in the hospital, “orderly taking nurse on dey back and pushing wheelchair” but PNM built a beautiful building. Now, it has no parking but “it sweet”, it is lovely. But when you look pass it, you look about 600 metres so and you look up, you see a shell that their UDeCOTT Chairman said will be completed by February next year but nothing is in it, just some red steel that looks similar to the steel by Balisier House, and they are talking about corruption? Central block, nothing for the people but building “gone up with favourite contractor”.

World GTL and NiQuan, “well, boy, ah doh have no time nah”. World GTL, Malcolm Jones. Malcolm Jones’ lawyer is the hon. Stuart Young. Let me just put a small pin right here to say that that NiQuan fiasco is the most corruption in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, and the PNM should never be talking.

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** And it now embroils one of the greatest banks in the history of the Caribbean, it now involves Republic Bank because somehow “NeeQuan”, NiQuan, however, you want to pronounce it, was able to get US \$120 million loan on assets that were questionable. The people of Trinidad and Tobago are now holding the PNM bag because ministerial gas went to it, the assets were sold to NiQuan for US \$10 million cash and \$25 million in preference shares. Well, we would prefer not to have the shares because the shares “eh worth nothing”. That is PNM and they have the audacity to come and talk about corruption—

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:**—with a road that exists, that a road that people could drive on, that people could move and reach? That is PNM.

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

**Sen. A. Roberts:** Las Alturas, Renaissance, Tobago, \$120 million—“I like race”, swimming, football, running race, anything. I even like race because “I is ah dougla”, Indian-African. But “dem build ah \$120 million goat race track and talking about corruption”. Once a year, “some goat hold it and run down dey, dey does go and dance and play crab race. Ah 120 million” and this PNM have the audacity to talk about corruption?

I am running out of time but what I will tell you is the PNM, they mismanaged Petrotrin, “de people fired”, people have to pay. They mismanaged the NIS, people who now were looking to retire, “ha tuh say, boy, ban yuh belly and wuk harder”. They mismanaged NGC, no big thing, that is a plop, they will make back that, says the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. They mismanaged the economy, they increased taxes and said, we did not take everything from “all yuh”. They mismanaged the foreign exchange, they come and tell you it is greater demand, when they know that there is no demand greater than it has been in the last 20 years. It is a supply problem from their mismanagement. They mismanaged roads and drainage, people suffer in flood. They mismanaged roads and drainage, “people in gridlock, people car stick in sinkhole”. PNM changed the word “pothole” to “sink hole”. PNM created a new level and category of pothole. They mismanaged the Government and people pay by the negative impact of crime. They even though mismanaged wardrobe and a Prime Minister has to be in Canada in a track suit.

I thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Sen. Helon Francis:** Thank you, Mr. President. I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to present my maiden contribution. I would also like to

thank the Commander-in-Chief of our nation, the hon. Christine Kangaloo, for allowing me the honour to serve.

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

**Sen. H. Francis:** Mr. President, one could only be optimistic when the theme of a budget is entitled: Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth; capacity meaning the maximum amount that something can contain and diversification meaning to enlarge or to vary or range in products. I could only ask how deep does this capacity go and how wide shall the diversification spread? Would it be distributed in an equitable manner? Shall it focus on the most vulnerable segments of society while incentivizing the private sector to invest in local, our people, our products and services, our resources? Without that context, much of the projected will be wasted, or worse, fuel further marginalization and crime.

But looking at the positives of our budget, there were some promising areas in this year's budget that, if utilized correctly, may impact the society and economy positively, like the \$1 billion disbursement in back pay to public servants. This is an injection into the economy that will surely jump-start economic activity. However, we should not pretend there would not be side effects, especially if it is not well managed, but in general, we must acknowledge the economic positives.

Similarly, it is encouraging to see the agricultural incentives and strides toward teaching our youth about agriculture, like the Youth Agricultural Shade House Project. But please remember, we are still very far from making our farmers feel secure. So this has to be just the beginning.

Another great initiative is forging a financial literacy strategy with the Central Bank. But in my opinion, Mr. President, if we intend to develop a truly frugal nation to assist the poor and the vulnerable to break generational curses of poverty, then financial education should begin at the primary school stage, between



the stages of Standards 1 and 5.

**1.40 p.m.**

If we allow financial education to be integrated into our school systems, by the time students are leaving secondary school, whether they took P.O.A, P.O.B, or economics they would have enough education to be financially literate citizens, in return, creating the type of citizens we all want.

Moving on to social development, our country has never been short of social development initiatives or grants, and our initiatives are hardly ever short of funding when most of our programmes fail it is usually as a result of poor execution and tenacity. Also, when our grants provide opportunities for recipients to earn and to learn, it can enable them significantly better in the long run when compared to a government handout.

Going forward into this budget year on social development, as we try to transition the economy into the post-pandemic era, I did not see similar focus on definitive plans or programmes specifically to help transition those who may have lost their jobs or even fallen into poverty as a result of the slowdown during the pandemic. Or what about our teenagers whose households now expect them to become income earners, despite having missed the last two years of their secondary school education. We hear it in the narrative but it does not stand out in the numbers.

The hon. Minister's budget presentation, he highlighted the experience of students who spent two years away from the physical classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic with an associated learning loss pointed to the urgency of the need for transitional programmes. Perhaps the most vulnerable segment of that student population, Mr. President, would be those closer to graduating secondary school in Forms 4 and 5. Many of those have never re-entered the education

system, and were forced to move on to alternative forms of education and job opportunities to survive. You could only imagine their scope of legitimate earning opportunities and how it has narrowed now.

While we are speaking of the youths of our country, Mr. President, I recently attended the Youth Budget Talks on the 4<sup>th</sup> of this month. And while I sat there, a young lady by the name of Yokymma Bethelmy from the Caribbean Women in Leadership Group posed a question towards the young moderators and she asked,

What are your thoughts on the increased pension age? As a young professional coming out of COVID, there were a lot of people who used up their savings for a down payment on a home, and now some time has gone by and they have reached a certain age, their rates may be higher, their mortgage may be higher, and they have an added five extra years. What are your thoughts on that, and what it does for young persons purchasing a home?

Well, youth moderator, Khaleem Ali started to fidget, and eager to respond he said, I think this is a very interesting thing that effects every young person in Trinidad and Tobago, and being quite frank, raising the retirement age might just be a plaster solution, because realistically, if we are to raise that age because of the aging population, while healthcare, medication and innovation manages to progress, there is nothing to stopping us in 10, 15 or 20 years from now, from returning to the same position. What should be focused on is finding ways to make the fund itself more self-sustaining like making investments or leveraging their own resources to bring money back into the fund, and to address the gap. But—  
“The solution is not increasing the contributions...”—the gap—“...will always re-emerge.”

In relation to housing and how it affects young people, the reality is:

“If a person is employed for five years longer, what is that going to do to unemployment?”

In the—

“...public service, for example, that employs such a large volume of people, until someone moves out, we cannot have a space created...”

**1.45 p.m.**

So if you are adding five more years for someone to stay in the workplace, you are essentially telling young people you have five more years to wait until you could enter into the system and get a job. That affects your ability to get a loan, it affects your ability to establish credit, it affects your ability to get a car, and it affects your ability to get a house.

When he was finished a second moderator took her time to speak by the name of Rakia Scott, and she said:

Understanding your reality is very important, and Trinidad and Tobago has an ageing population and so do many of our Caribbean neighbours as well. There have been conversations about raising the retirement age. There are some countries who have even gone to 70 years old, and we are an ageing population. But does it mean we need more people to work, or can we talk about the fact that they are so many industries that are operating but do not pay the taxes necessary?

We also have a section of our population that we refuse to integrate into our labour market such as our migrants and refugees. So we have to start thinking about that. It also speaks to lower wages as well, because the amount you are paid reflects in your tax.

Trinidad and Tobago's wages have not gone up—she said—since 2013; so that is also a problem. There are its pros and there are its cons, but it magnifies them and opens up other issues. So integrating these other regulated industries is something we should pay more focus on, because we do have a problem and there is a gap that needs to be filled.

Also, we need to do something about these wages in the public sector because they are not livable. I was shocked to see where the salary started on the workload; it is unimaginable. We need to focus there a bit more.

End of quote. That is what she said.

Mr. President, this is just a piece of the Youth Budget Talks. Our young people in our country have so much to say. And I think if we pay more attention to them our nation could progress positively.

Moving on to culture, arts and tourism. Mr. President, while listening to the Finance Minister's contribution on culture, arts and tourism industries, I could not help but have mixed feelings as a cultural practitioner. My journey within the industry is well-documented and my opinions are not based on the laws of debate, but from my life's experiences.

Understanding that this year's theme is Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth, I thought immediately I would see large changes in the culture and tourism sector, with indicators towards artiste development, the entertainment sector, and sustainable and fortified cultural brand. Instead, what I did see was hotel improvements, resort improvements, marketing promotions, increase in air support following the exit of LIAT, maintenance of performance spaces, and an increase in the numbers of international visitors since the COVID-19 pandemic, which simply expressed that we are slowly

but surely returning to normal. But even pre-pandemic, Mr. President, that was not satisfactory. We could only imagine how much needs to be done now.

What was admirable was the maintenance and the additional performance spaces, which I will commend the present Government for, like the Southern Academy of Performing Arts, the National Academy of Performing Arts, Queen's Hall, and also Desperadoes and Shell Invaders Pan Theaters. I will admit, these upgrades are useful to our creative industry. However, however, it is of great importance to note that establishing new initiatives and outlets can assist significantly in improving our orange sector.

Mr. President, I am a bit puzzled by this section of the budget because I see the capacity being built for tourist preparation, but nowhere do I see the capacity being built for what brings our tourists here in the first place; our culture. Why do you think these two are part of the same Ministry? It is because they dwell hand-in-hand, one assisting the other. Yet, every time a Member of Parliament speaks about tourism, they speak as though the tourists are going to come here to spend their money at MovieTowne.

Without the infrastructure for beyond Carnival cultural products, we may be doomed to falling into the regular pattern, which is usually waiting for Carnival, but that would not be good enough if there is a desire to one day move away from this dangerous and misleading energy hubris which we suffer. Believe it or not, our culture is loved by the world. There has not been a place where I have travelled, whether for performance or for leisure, that our extreme charismatic and hypnotic energy is not loved. We sit on a melting pot of gold that seems to be cherished by everyone else except for us. As Jesus said, Mr. President, a prophet is without honour in his own country and

his own home. This is my opinion, Mr. President, on how we care for our culture.

The rest of the English-speaking Caribbean looks up to us, even the great Jamaica, who has branded their capital, Kingston Jamaica, the capital for reggae music, with a brand that stemmed from one artiste, similar to our cricket brand, which we have built off of Brian Lara's success for many years. But I say this just to explain that our creatives need our help.

Many Caribbean islands have successful tourism industries like St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, and the Dominican Republic, and none of these countries have oil and gas reserves. There is an opportunity here but only if we can capitalize on it. We have musicians who have travelled all over the world. They go to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, St. Lucia, St. Kitts, and Barbados. Barbados, by the way, has a very vibrant music industry.

Mr. President, I say all of this just so we can acknowledge the struggle of our artiste in our own country. Our land is too rich in culture, it is too rich in resources, and it is too rich in brilliance and ideas for the way that many of our loved icons and legends pass on in financial struggle and immense poverty, after dedicating their life to Trinidad and Tobago and our culture. And, Mr. President, when they are gone, as a default response, we put their names on a street and give their children a medal saying to them mummy, or daddy was great. That is not good enough, Mr. President, that is not good enough.

There are so many things we can do to enrich this section of our society and in return, enriching Mother Trinbago. Many of our icons still have the desire to manage and care for themselves through their craft, but they cannot afford to pay for NAPA, and SAPA, or Queen's Hall. Mr. President, why not

give them the support they need? Allow them to have consistent cultural shows at our greatest performance centres and their iconic status will do the rest while introducing young artistes as well.

Mr. President, why not remove tax on imported instruments to promote a healthy live music ecology for both musicians and music business owners, while creating small entertainment venues for live music and shows? Mr. President, why not turn Port of Spain into our entertainment hub for our tourism industry? But a project like that, a project of that magnitude, I know may not happen unless we deal with our next point, which is crime.

Mr. President, our style of politics is to put the blame wherever it is convenient. However, crime is not the fault of any particular administration, but the cause of habits that we have accepted as a nation. I am sure you have heard of the saying it is better to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission. At this point, Mr. President, the nation could agree, permission is not needed to deal with crime. Do you need 1,000 police officers? That is fine. You need more vehicles; that is fine. But when picking police officers, please pick the best, dedicated and educated officers, and ensure that our pool of officers does not come from the same corrupted pond. Equip our officers with new psychological strategies for engaging our population. Use our young, local social scientists and specialists in fields of ballistics and forensic science.

A lot of our young and brilliant minds are leaving our country because they are often underutilized or we are not even prepared to pay them what they are worth. Every patrol officer should be equipped with body cams. And I would commend the Minister of National Security for ordering 3,120 additional body cams aiding in the fight against crime. I will commend him

for that. It is the only way we can improve our police patrols. And it would also bring comfort to the population against the claims of police brutality. But according to Dr. Wallace, Trinidad and Tobago seems to be tranquilized—sorry Dr. Wendell Wallace. Trinidad and Tobago seems to be tranquilized by the drug that we call gradualism. So, I urge the Minister and the Government to please make haste.

We live in a time of extreme technological advancements, Mr. President, with the black-market technology beyond your wildest dreams. Our police service needs to be technologically equipped. We cannot fight this war against crime with a shovel and a pickaxe, because, Mr. President, whoever has the better machinery in this war is going to win.

That concludes my contribution. Thank you very much.

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

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, permit me to congratulate Sen. Francis on his maiden contribution in this Senate.

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

**Mr. President:** Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox):** Thank you, Mr. President. I also would like to join in congratulating Sen. Francis on his maiden contribution.

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

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** Mr. President, I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation 2023/2024 Bill. I wish to congratulate the Minister of Finance for presenting yet another successful budget 2024, that is focused on Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth.



Commendation must also go to the staff of the Ministry of Finance for their contribution to the preparation of this budget. I also wish to thank the Minister of Planning and Development and her team for their contribution as well with regard to the PSIP.

**2.00 p.m.**

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has been positively transforming the lives of the people of this country through the provision of quality social services to the elderly, men and women, young children, orphans, persons with disabilities, widows, socially displaced persons, victims of substance abuse and families. We touch the lives of citizens in this country who are poor and vulnerable and are in need of assistance. Our social grants and programmes are vital to maintaining the stability of families, and that is why we applaud any initiative that can help, empower, and transform lives.

Mr. President, there are many social programmes implemented not only by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services but others as well, and this represents the Government's investment into the lives and welfare of our citizenry. It is material to note that many of our social programmes involve the entire life course of our citizens and seek to address both emerging issues and temporary shocks, such as a natural disaster or economic downturns, as well as their root causes. By providing a safety net, especially to our most poor and vulnerable, we seek to promote human capital productivity, which in turn will facilitate economic growth. And this is achieved by helping to lift persons out of poverty as well as protecting the livelihood of many more.

Some of the initiatives in the budget that will be implemented in fiscal 2024 and which we applaud include the funding for the Adult Literacy Tutors Association to expand remedial education; strengthening the technical and

vocational education component of our school system; providing book and uniform grants to students in need. And we welcome the introduction of the 1,000 School Supplies and Book Grant which will assist our families who are poor and vulnerable, and we will continue to sustain existing Public Assistance Grants and programmes.

As a government, we will continue the support for the school feeding programme while providing guaranteed markets local farmers also with the return of the Market Food Box initiative. The Market Food Box programme is being reintroduced, a total of \$60 million has been allocated in this fiscal for the resumption of the programme. Beneficiaries would be identified from the poor and vulnerable on our database, and we look forward to working with NAMDEVCO and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to reintroduce this initiative. Farmers will have a ready market for their produce and the nutritional health of our clients will be met.

Increasing the minimum wage by 17 per cent or \$3 per hour, the minimum wage is currently \$17.50 and will now be increased to \$20.50 per hour, and this measure will benefit approximately 190,000 persons in the workforce. And let me restate this, 190,000 persons will take home more money to support their families. And this is additional money in their pockets of course. It also means that the minimum wage that any employer offers to their employees cannot be under \$20.50 per hour. And these are just some examples of the initiatives that will be implemented by this Government.

During the last fiscal year, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services maintained its focus on our mission to positively transform the lives of the people through the provision of grants, the social services and programmes. The cost of providing grants and other services to our clients, Mr. President, was

approximately \$5,600,000,000 as at September 2023. So Mr. President, in the last eight years we spent close to \$45 billion on social grants that are issued to our poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. President, there is a saying, those who respect the elderly pave their own road towards success. And we here at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services do not take these words lightly.

As at September 2023, there were 111,735 senior citizens in receipt of the Senior Citizen's Pension, and of this figure, 9,814 persons were added to the database as new beneficiaries in fiscal 2023. At the close of fiscal 2023, the total expenditure stood at \$4,462,487,545. In addition to this grant, all the recipients now have the opportunity to submit their completed life and residential declaration forms via TTConnect. The completion of the Life and Residential Certificate can be conducted at any of the 11 local public assistance boards or seven TTConnect offices.

This initiative is a collaboration between the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the National Information and Communications Company Limited, iGovTT, through TTConnect. This service allows senior citizens to utilize TTConnect's 800-TTCN toll-free number and e-appointment system to make an appointment to submit their completed life and residential declaration forms.

In fiscal 2023, the Ministry recognized 81 centenarians in keeping with its National Centenarian Programme. And this programme was launched in 2021 as part of the Ministry's commemoration of International Day of Older Persons. Older persons who have attained the age of 100 years and over are recognized, honoured, and celebrated. There are several sponsors that partnered with the Ministry to successfully execute this programme, such as Kiss Baking Company

Limited, NAMDEVCO, Ultra-Pharm Marketing Limited, and the Ministry of Health has also been a significant partner because medical staff from the regional health authorities continue to visit the homes of centenarians to provide health checkups. So we express sincere thanks to all our sponsors and partners who stayed with us on this journey to recognize our centenarians.

Mr. President, today I invite other companies and agencies to join the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services as we continue to honor and bring joy to the centenarians who contributed to the development of our country. I also want to take this opportunity to encourage all Members of this House, relatives, neighbours, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, NGOs, to identify and register centenarians in our programme. You have a valuable part to play in assisting the Ministry to identify and register the centenarians in your constituencies, or communities so that they can be placed on our list of persons to be celebrated during their 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and beyond.

You see, because our database with the centenarians only would contain the names of persons who are on our senior citizen's pension list and not every centenarian is on that list, not every centenarian is a recipient of the Senior Citizens' Pension. So we ask that once there are persons in your area, then register them, please.

I move to our Community Care Programme. This was established to treat with the issues of vulnerable persons who had no other living arrangements available to them. In some cases, these persons who are 18 years and over were abandoned by their relatives while they were in the hospital. When this happens the Government takes up the responsibility to have them admitted at a home for older persons under the Community Care Programme.

Patients who are categorized as level one to three and are warded at a public

hospital under the five regional health authorities, are placed at a home for older persons. These persons also often do not need urgent hospital care but are in need of accommodation and social support. Currently, there are 17 Community Care Programme homes across Trinidad and a total of 90 clients in this programme. The average monthly cost for the care of the clients in the programme is \$323,633.34, and the total expenditure as at September 2023 is approximately \$3,602,181.

Additionally, between October 2022 and September 2023, there were 18 new placements in the programme: five socially displaced persons, two individuals from private residences, three persons who were decanted from the North Central Regional Health Authority, and eight individuals from the North West Regional Health Authority. And we want to encourage persons to take care of their loved ones because it would be surprising to know how many persons are abandoned in our hospitals. We work with the Ministry of Health and we try to move them into a home.

The Ministry's Older Persons Information Centre—called OPIC—help desk provides information on activities, initiatives, programmes, services and products for older persons in Trinidad and Tobago. The OPIC is currently accessed by seniors and members of the public through e-mail, telephone, which is 800-OPIC, which is 6742 and walk-ins. For fiscal 2023, the Ministry received 466 requests, of this figure 228 were requests for information about the Senior Citizens' Pension, home placement for senior citizens, referrals for geriatric services and questions on ageing. Provisional data for fiscal 2023 revealed that there were 182 reported cases of elder abuse in private residences and 34 in homes for older persons. A total of 260 cases were reported in fiscal 2022 at private residences, and that is a decrease of 78 for last fiscal. In 2022 there were 37 cases reported in homes for

older persons, a decrease of three persons.

So the Ministry intends to conduct additional public sensitization programmes for the general public and operators of senior citizens' homes. We intend to conduct a review of the policy on ageing to strengthen the programme for social inclusion, education and training. We will continue to engage in increased collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to ensure that reported incidences of elder abuse are thoroughly investigated.

The Ministry is currently reviewing legislation with a view to obtaining full responsibility for older persons' homes. Our legal team has been having discussions with the Ministry of Health on this. The review of the Homes for Older Persons Act and Regulations, as well as the revision of the accompanying draft policy, is near completion by the Ministry's internal legislative review committee. We have received comprehensive feedback from the Ministry of Health with regard to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services proposed amendments to the Act. The recommendations have been considered with a view to incorporating them into the revised legislation. The Ministry has also met with key stakeholders such as the Trinidad and Tobago Residential Care Association. The Ministry will further engage with other key stakeholders to finalize the review process for both the Act and the Regulations.

Mr. President, in fiscal 2024 in demonstration of our commitment to providing a continuum of social support services for senior citizens, the Ministry aims to resume the operations of senior activity centres. We are thankful for the allocation of \$1.3 million which will help us to resume this important programme. The centres are multi-service facilities where older persons can come together. Specifically, the senior activity centres facilitate interaction through educational and recreational activities, exercise, outings, and social events. The centre allows

persons to engage in several interests such as cooking, gardening, mentorship, physical exercise and craft. And we believe every person deserves to age well with self-worth, dignity and purpose. And through the involvement in the senior activity centres older persons are encouraged to lead healthy, active lives. And we will open centres on a phased basis starting with those areas that already have the appropriate facilities.

Support for persons with disabilities. During fiscal 2023, particular emphasis continued to be placed on persons with disabilities. It is with this in mind that the efforts of the staff of the Ministry have been focused on leaving no one behind. As at September 2023, there were 21,828 persons in receipt of the Disability Assistance Grant. And this grant was distributed to persons over the age of 18 years with a disability, 1745 persons were added in fiscal 2023. The total expenditure as at September 2023 amounted to approximately \$551,955,238.

### **2.15 p.m.**

For the period October 2022 to September 2023, a total of 3,483 children received the Disability Assistance Grant (Minors). And of this number, 756 persons were recorded as new clients of the programme, so it was 756 new children were added for this fiscal. The total expenditure on this grant for fiscal 2023 was \$64,299,945. So, overall, with regard to persons with disabilities who are adults and children, a total of \$661,255,183 in support from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services went to persons with disability.

During fiscal 2023, the Ministry conducted a careful review of the clauses of the disabilities Bill. The Bill contains clauses that specifically focus on protection from discrimination; protection from exploitation and abuse; access to information, education and training; access to equal standard of health care; access to public buildings and parking; access to public transport; right to employment;

redeployment of a person with a disability to other duties if the person becomes disabled; rights to obtain insurance; duty of health care providers; duty of caregivers; standards for service animals; and the establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago council of persons with disabilities, and many other clauses.

The Ministry also invited organizations that work with persons with disabilities, government Ministries and the University of the West Indies to provide feedback. Persons with and without disabilities were able to provide feedback through this process. To date, 15 Ministries, nine organizations that work with persons with disabilities, the University of the West Indies, and one person with a disability who made an independent submission responded.

So, Mr. President, I want to emphasize that we do not believe in a top-down approach and we believe that persons with disabilities have a voice and must be heard. We believe in their motto, “Nothing for us, without us”, and this means that they must be included in the discussions about anything that is being proposed or implemented for them. We value their opinion and that is why we took the approach to hear from them. It is our desire that when the Bill is brought to the Parliament for debate, it would have gone through a rigorous review, so that it is unanimously passed by Members of this and the other House.

I want to speak about the National Therapeutic Resource Centre, which is also for persons with disability. In fiscal 2024, the Ministry intends to complete the refurbishment and finalize the outfitting of the National Therapeutic Resource Centre with therapeutic equipment to facilitate the free treatment and rehabilitation for various categories of disabilities. Mr. President, the centre will serve as a multidisciplinary resource centre for persons with disabilities, providing free assessment, free therapy and free training for persons with disabilities who are poor and vulnerable and are unable to pay for therapy.



A community-based therapeutic approach will be used in order to improve the quality of life experienced by persons with disabilities and they will receive adequate and effective, free habilitative and rehabilitative services. The suite of services will be offered in phases. In phase one, it would be speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and behavioural therapy. In phase two, aqua therapy, physiotherapy, music, art and drama. Further, parents and caregivers will also be equipped with the necessary skills to continue therapy at home, and students, social workers and therapists will have the opportunity to be trained at the National Therapeutic Resource Centre.

Additionally, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services recently signed a memorandum of agreement with Digicel Foundation on Friday the 29<sup>th</sup> of September, 2023, and this agreement will see the foundation donated approximately \$600,000 in equipment to outfit the National Therapeutic Resource Centre. This equipment would be used to furnish the pediatric and adult gym areas, the daily living suite, and the innovative smart lab, which will provide accessible technologies to persons with various disabilities, allowing them the ability to use computers and access the Internet.

The Ministry is in the process of awarding a tender to facilitate the infrastructural upgrades and work will also be undertaken to install a 7-foot by 7-foot elevator at the centre because we recognize that, from our consultant, the elevator that is presently there is not suitable for persons with disabilities. We needed a much bigger elevator.

The Community Therapeutic Services survey was conducted to assist the Ministry with designing a suitable therapeutic programme for persons with disabilities. The proposed programme is expected to provide affordable, safe and

sustainable therapeutic service in a community setting to meet the needs of persons with temporary or permanent disabilities.

The scope of the survey was also revised to include a qualitative component to supplement the results of the research conducted in 2022. The relevant focus group sessions were completed in May of this year and the findings, when analyzed, will also guide the operations and services to be offered under the National Therapeutic Resource Centre.

Our Disability Affairs Unit also engaged in a data collection exercise geared towards recipients of the Disability Assistance Grant and the Disability Assistance Grant (Minors). This exercise sought to evaluate the client's experiences when interacting with the Ministry, address issues that may have occurred when applying for the grant, as well as the impact of these grants on their living situations. The exercise was completed in August of this year. The data analysis is still being conducted.

The Ministry has supported a study commissioned by the Caribbean Development Bank to assess the situation of persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia, Grenada and Jamaica. The study was undertaken by researchers from the University of the West Indies and further to this, consultative workshops were held in Trinidad on August the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of this year and on August 18, 2023, a virtual workshop was held for persons with disabilities in Tobago. Representatives of non-governmental organizations that provide services to persons with disabilities also attended.

The preliminary findings of this study were presented at each workshop and it is envisaged that the final report, when completed, will enable the social sector to formulate more robust policies and programmes, initiatives and legislation to address the contemporary issues affecting persons with disabilities. We are

committed to working with and for persons with disabilities, and we eagerly await the completion of the legislation and the implementation of more programmes and services that will help them to live more independent lives.

Mr. President, we believe that the family as a foundation of society contributes to its growth, development and stability. As a result, the programmes and services offered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services are designed to support and empower families. As at September 2023, there were 16,269 individuals in receipt of the Public Assistance Grant, of which 2,410 were new beneficiaries. The total expenditure for this grant, to date, is \$324,602,811. As at September 2023, there was 17,235 households receiving food support. The total expenditure on food support grants, as at September 2023, amounted to approximately \$132,679,420. A total of 737 persons were added to the Food Support Programme for the period October 01, 2022 to September 30, 2023.

During the fiscal 2023, the Ministry approved a total of 1,632 applications under the general assistance programme. Approximately \$28,812,130 was expended on this grant. The General Assistance Grants are available for persons who are vulnerable and in dire need of temporary assistance due to crisis and/or emergency situation. And some of these grants include the Clothing Grant, Dietary Grant, Education, Funeral, Medical Equipment, Pharmaceutical, Prosthetics, Rental Assistance, and the School Supplies Grant.

Mr. President, \$19,452,700 were distributed the flood victims for the replacement of household items destroyed during the floods. A total of 2,504 applications were approved, impacting 8,811 beneficiaries. 258 children received the School Supplies Grant, a total of \$302,200 was expended on the School Supplies Grant. Now remember that these grants are for persons who would have

had a disaster and there might have been some kind of disaster like a flood or fire, a situation like that, or a natural disaster.

Some of the major challenges experienced in processing the disaster relief grant applications, particularly with regard to flood relief, include: the applications lacked critical information needed for effective processing, such as inaccurate or incomplete address information, missing household member's information, copies of the identification for the applicant, missing photographic evidence of damage, and some of the applications had limited information. At times, there was an inability to contact the applicant due to change in contact information. In the case of persons who were renting, sometimes they were relocated and could not be found. Multiple claims for the same household: we found many persons from the same household applying for the same grant.

There were applications from persons who were not impacted directly or who do not reside in the area that was impacted. And these claims, upon discovery, are being forwarded for further investigation by the relevant authority. So we have had persons applying for the Flood Relief Grant and did not live in the area at all. And there are those from the same family who would have been applying for the same grant and, of course, that would have clogged up the system because you now have to go through and assess them on a case-by-case basis.

The National Social Development Programme is a social intervention that seeks to improve the standard of living conditions of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago through the provision of basic infrastructure so that their general standard of living at their home is improved. The Minor House Repair Assistance Grant provides up to \$15,000 in materials only for the repair or upgrade of dwelling houses, and up to \$20,000 in materials only to effect repairs or upgrades in the event of a disaster. The Sanitary Plumbing Assistance Grant provides up to

\$15,000 in materials only under normal circumstances and in the event of a disaster for the repair or upgrade of toilet and bathroom facilities for a dwelling house. And this grant also allows for the upgrade of outdoor toilet facilities, better known as latrines, to indoor facilities where space permits.

The House Wiring Assistance Grant assists with the wiring or rewiring of dwelling houses under normal circumstances and in the event of a disaster, where the electrical wiring of the house has been impacted. And we have been having discussions with the Ministry of Public Utilities because they have a similar programme, so that we can decide most likely the Ministry of Public Utilities will handle this grant. So in fiscal 2023, 231 households benefited from this grant at a cost of approximately \$1,014,252.

With an eye on building capacity and increasing empowerment of our clients, the Ministry continues to fund its Sowing Employment through Entrepreneurial Development Programme, which provides a mechanism for citizens who are considered vulnerable but have an interest in starting or improving their businesses. Many existing clients of the Ministry who receive welfare grants have been able to start micro-enterprises, which foster positive values, such as independence and self-sufficiency. For fiscal 2023, 59 beneficiaries received grant funding in the sum of approximately \$194,974.

**2.30 p.m.**

So, Mr. President, this is certainly one of the Ministry's success stories as one of our primary objectives is to ensure that as many clients as possible be weaned off grants as their circumstances improve, thereby allowing more persons the opportunity to get assistance. The Ministry is in the process of realigning our Adult Education Programme, and this programme will be aligned to our Step Up Programme. What we have found is that we had the Adult Education Programme

and then when we looked, we realized that some of the other Ministries are providing the same courses that someone can just apply and go to. So we are now realigning this programme with regard to our Step Up Programme, and “step up” of course means persons stepping up from where they are. It is not just about receiving grants but also becoming more self-sufficient and independent.

So, we help individuals and families through the provision of grants but we will also empower through the training and development they will receive in this programme. There is no doubt the mother who receives a grant from our SEED Programme and who enrolls in our adult education or Step Up Programme would also benefit from the budgeting, report writing, project management, and other courses that will transform the way in which she does business, manages her daily affairs and even help find employment. And this is just one example of how the Step Up Programme can empower and transform life. So we intend to hear about many of our clients stepping up and becoming financially independent so that they no longer need to be on food support or public assistance, or other grants offered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, but then they will also now be empowered.

The Ministry continues to prioritize the strengthening and supporting of families with the understanding of its role in enabling long-term solutions to issues, such as poverty, crime, domestic violence and child abuse, among others. To this end, in fiscal 2023, the National Family Services Division remained unwavering in advancing its mandate of promoting healthy family functioning through preventative, developmental and remedial programmes and services. As of September 2023, our Family Services provided psychosocial support to 7,216 individuals by way of counselling. There was an increase in counselling cases accounting for approximately four persons or individuals per household by way of

counselling. There was an increase in 1,377 cases compared to 5,839 cases in 2021/22.

So in addition to the aforementioned services, the Division regularly engages in parenting workshops, both virtually and in-person. In fiscal 2023, the Ministry continue to host a variety of virtual and community workshops in parenting. During fiscal 2023, 577 participants took part in these workshops, covering topics such as parenting and family violence, parenting for men, co-parenting, and grandparenting.

In June 2023, the Ministry launched our national suicide prevention hotline, 800-COPE. This 24-hour crisis hotline is operated by specially trained personnel to efficiently address crisis issues related to suicidal ideations and other critical challenges faced by citizens. As part of the whole-of-government approach and whole-of-society approach, collaboration with several stakeholders is being maintained through a referral system. Monitoring of this new hotline will also facilitate data collection regarding the number of persons who attempted suicide, experience suicidal thoughts, as well as other family crisis issues. This data will be used to inform policy development and initiatives, as well as identify gaps to be filled and the relevant interventions and strategies to be identified. In fiscal 2023, the hotline has received 1,628 calls.

During fiscal 2023, the Ministry turned the sod for the construction of an assessment and temporary housing facility for socially displaced persons in South Quay, Port of Spain. We at the Ministry acknowledge that each socially displaced person belongs to a family. They are our fathers, our sons, our daughters, our abuelas, our abuelos, our maamoos, our daughters, our brothers, and they need our help. Some of them may be substance abusers, deportees, persons with mental health issues—

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

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** Thank you—elderly, ex-prisoners who have been socially displaced, and yet others may be fine but just without a stable place to live. The assessment facility will serve as a sanctuary of hope, healing and restoration. Within its walls, our socially displaced will not just have a bed to sleep in or a roof overhead, but the opportunity to rebuild their lives with dignity, restore their self-worth and gain a sense of purpose. The centre symbolizes our unwavering resolve to uplift lives and offers a second chance to those who need it most.

Mr. President, as I have limited time, I will have to skip some of my work here and I would just like to move straight into the way forward, because I think that that would be very important. Every one of us has accepted the challenge to develop and transform our Ministries, and as a result, every Ministry is in a better state than we met it. We, at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, are aware of the number of persons who rely on our services and have committed to digitize and simplify our processes and procedures so that our clients can access our services with less challenges. We established a model office which consists of staff from the National Family Services Division, Social Welfare, our National Social Development Programme, Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development, and it is supported by the transformation and change management professionals in the areas of information technology organization and process design, change management and project development.

The Ministry is one of the biggest supporters of Government's overall national agenda for a digitized public service, and has continued to prioritize the digitization of its social services, delivery system for greater efficiency and management. In order to expand and improve its customer service delivery and to enhance convenience and access to the public, the Ministry will be opening an



additional centre in Arima for the fiscal 2024. The Tunapuna Public Assistance Board will be split and some of our clients will now have to go to Arima, and this will positively impact our clients who will no longer have to travel to Tunapuna.

The Ministry touches citizens in this country who are poor and vulnerable and in need of assistance. We remain committed to help empowering and transforming lives. Digitalizing our systems and process will not only deliver more efficient services to our clients but also close any gaps or loopholes which may enable corruption, fraud or error. We remain resolute in our efforts to ensure that no one is left behind as we continue to work for the poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago. So I thank you, Mr. President, and Members of this House for the opportunity to contribute to this debate for the fiscal 2023/2024. I also thank God because he is worthy of our praise. I thank you.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Dr. Charles.

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

**Sen. Dr. Carson Charles:** Thank you very much, Mr. President. Mr. President, I miss my colleague. I miss my colleague. I really wanted to look him in the face today, but I missed him. The Minister of Finance, the hon. Minister of Finance, once upon a time he was an engineer.

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

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

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** You see how few engineers find themselves in this business of politics that we have chosen to be in; few do find themselves in this, and that is because the rules are so different. And that is why I said I miss him because I wanted to remind him of the rules that we used to follow once upon a time in this profession which plays a role in the development of nations, especially young

nations like ours. And I remember a time which was, I was never politically associated or aligned with his party, but I do remember fondly a time when some engineers, like Ken Julien and others, played major roles in taking us from one point to the next, and I thought I could tease him to end his silence on some of the things being said by the current Minister of Works and Transport.

You see, everything is connected. I have some family members, my wife and her family, trying to get a property under the RPO, which was there long time in their family, for decades and decades, so there was never a dispute as to ownership, but you have to go under the RPO to have good title. They have been trying to do that for more than 10 years. I am sure the hon. Attorney General is so much aware of these things, and I wonder how it is connected. In this country you can still get charged and if you cannot find money for bail, find yourself in jail for 15 years waiting for trial. No big deal. We are talking about flooding in Port of Spain, for how many decades? Now we are talking about evacuating it? Something about evacuating Port of Spain when rain falls? You know any city in the world that could evacuate in an hour? What roads are you going to build to evacuate the city in an hour? You “cyah” build any. You cannot come up with any traffic plan for that.

You see, we either want to build a nation or not. If we want to just continue with this tinkering and just slam the other side. Whenever you have a problem you cannot solve you bawl, “corruption”. It is the most common word to use now, “corruption”. Everything is corruption, “Dey tief, dey tief”. I have never seen a former Prime Minister get battered like the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, everything. If “yuh bounce yuh toe, is Kamla fault”, because it is so easy to just throw, pelt obstacles, pelt objects at people. But if you want to build a nation you would recognize that these things are all connected. We do not have the ability

under this administration, as far as I can see, to tackle any big problem. Everything is tinkering. So you keep on talking about it and talking about it forever but you will never solve it.

You will talk for the next 20 years about the justice system and you will still be spending 15 and 20 years in jail. In fact, every year it gets worse. You would spend more time and more time in jail, and if you look at the number of you who are processed by the system, you will realize that the lines will get longer and longer. It is a queue. It is going to get longer and longer, so it is going to get worse and worse in terms of what is justice, because what is justice after 20 years. And you cannot see the connection between that and the numerous potholes everywhere. You cannot find a solution to any big problem. Every single one has a connected. I heard the hon. Minister just speaking about social issues, and so on, I say, “All wonderful”. It is very easy to convince ourselves we are doing so much work by reading out all the little things that we are doing about all kind of little things. And you are doing all these little things and everybody is busy, all the public servants are busy, and we have to praise them, they are working hard. But what is the result? Just step out there and you know the result, because I am sure we are not always inside of here.

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

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** You know what kind of country we have today, we have an angry country; we have a frustrated country. We have a country in pain.

How is all this tinkering dealing with that pain? Are you doing any infrastructure works in all these little communities where we used to have all kinds of things going on that will keep the guys occupied? When one of our heroes, Brian Lara, lost a friend the other day, you know, he spoke about the fact that in his community—and I live in Santa Cruz—in his community, “youths doh have

any skill, you do have anything to do”; all they have is what they are doing. A lot of communities like that, all they have is what they are doing right now. Who is teaching them, you cannot just do it in the schools? These young people are going to be with us for the next 50 or 60 years, they are not going to go away. So you cannot say you are going and teach in the school. What are you doing about the young people and upgrading their skills so they could do something?

You know when we were building the highway—I have so much I could say, I could speak for days here, and I know that is not allowed. I am a Rip Van Winkle, I does come back here after a long time and all the rules different, you cannot talk for too long anymore, so I have to try to fit into 40 minutes. But, you know, I do not know if the Minister is aware that we could not even find skilled workers. A lot of things happened in this country, you cannot find welders that you need, the number of welders you need. We could not find the number of operators of heavy vehicles for the highway. We had to bring people from abroad in here to drive vehicles. We had to ask the Transport Commissioner to give a dispensation to allow people with a lower rating in terms of heavy vehicles to drive a heavier vehicle. If we tried doing anything on a based skill, we do not have the people to do it. We do not have the systems to do it.

So I would say, Minister of Works and Transport, congratulations on opening a section of the highway. Wonderful that you opened an eight-kilometre section of the highway. I personally love it, the fact that he did reach Point Fortin. I would have liked to be there when he reached Point Fortin, but I find the comments amazing. It is like a man praising himself for putting in the doors and windows or the electrical and plumbing in a house that somebody else built from foundation.

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

**2.45 p.m.**

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** You “doh” have the decency to praise the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC for starting that foundation, for having the guts to say let us go and build the biggest project. Because it is okay to talk about it—

**Mr. President:** So Senator, just as a reminder we use titles when we are referring to Members of Parliament, we use titles. So, it is Member of Siparia or the hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** The hon. Member.

**Mr. President:** Yeah.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** My apologies. So you have to have that decency to recognize those who—

**Sen. John:** They have no decency.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:**—built the foundation of the house, built all the walls, put on the roof so you could actually get to put in your doors and windows and your electricals. So when you are praising yourself for that, how dare you condemn them? I have to spend a little bit of my time here definitely speaking about the highway because maybe I took too long to talk about it. But I will tell you something, I did start off answering some questions back in 2016 and what I found was every time I answered a question, about five Ministers followed up repeating the same thing that they said before. How could I personally compete with five Ministers all repeating the same thing, even if it not true?

**Sen. Roberts:** That is PNM.

**Sen. Nakhid:** Double down on propaganda.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** But I am going to spend a few minutes on it.

I want to start by saying that, yes, it is the biggest project that we have ever done in this country and that we ever attempted in this country, this project. And

we had a lot of challenges, but we went at it. That is why I said we need to praise the former Prime Minister who did in fact have the guts to go at it. Or we could even say a word for the man before who thought—that is to say the hon. former Prime Minister, hon. Patrick Manning. We can even say a good word for him because he thought he should take on three highways one time, three \$5 billion highways one time without any idea where the money coming from right?

You know, we took on this highway project, and in 2008 there was a Cabinet decision to proceed with the projects and so on, and in 2009 I think Trintoplan Consultants Limited was busy working at it. In 2010, there was a flurry of activity, in February 2010 they issued the request for proposals, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010. They had a pre-submission meeting on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, tenders closed on May 7<sup>th</sup>. Tenders closed on May 7<sup>th</sup> that is the middle of the campaign right? Election was what? The 24<sup>th</sup>?

**Sen. Roberts:** “Mmhmm”

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** Tenders closed on May 7<sup>th</sup> and they had three entries for that particular highway, China Railway Construction (Caribbean) Company Limited, Construtora OAS and GLEBE Construction, their bids ranged from \$5.28 billion to \$6.36 billion. The Tender Evaluation Committee recommended on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010 that NIDCO enter into negotiations with Construtora OAS after submitting their recommendation to the Ministry of Works and Transport. That is why I wanted the former Minister of Works and Transport to be able to smile at him because he was there. It was sent to his Ministry on May 13<sup>th</sup>. So you close tenders on May 7<sup>th</sup>, by May 13<sup>th</sup> you already evaluate, and you sent it to the Ministry and you already get back the response and gave out your recommendation and so on and OAS was written to on May 25<sup>th</sup>.

**Sen. Roberts:** PNM special “yuh know.” They special.

**Sen. Nakhid:** What?

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** May 25<sup>th</sup>, one day after the election.

**Sen. Roberts:** “Kamla ain’t even swear in yet.”

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** May 25<sup>th</sup>. No Government “eh” swear-in yet. May 25<sup>th</sup>. “Yuh pelting stone. Yuh have glass house but yuh pelting stones.” On May 25<sup>th</sup>—

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

**2.50 p.m.**

**Sen. C. Charles:** Within that period of a week or two, you do all the evaluations in a hurry. And by May 25<sup>th</sup>, a day after the elections, you cannot wait and you send out instructions to three different contractors. You think it is OAS alone? Three contractors were awarded. One for the highway to Point Fortin but two others for the one to Manzanilla and the one to Mayaro through Princes Town, all in the same range of \$5 billion. You send out awards to all three of them a day after the election. Nothing wrong with that, right?

**Sen. Roberts:** PMN, boy. Oh, God.

**Sen. C. Charles:** And the Minister of Finance that we have of today, he does not say a word. No matter what is said on this highway, he says nothing. I have all the Cabinet notes here to show all the progression, all the acquisition that they want to have, all the acquisition committees they want to have. I am still waiting on it so long, six years now I am waiting on it. So that we have a forum, a neutral forum, not a political forum, a neutral forum where professional people can actually stand up and speak to each other about what went on with this project which is such a challenge for our country. Our small country decided to take on a project of this magnitude. You will not reach anywhere as a country if you do not learn how to take on projects of this magnitude. You will continue tinkering—

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

**Sen. C. Charles:**—with problems, with big problems, will little things all the time and never could get anywhere. That is why I made the point about the fact that up to now you still have to spend 15 or 20 years in jail because you cannot solve anything. You cannot solve anything big, you could only tinker. When faced with a big challenge, the people who take on the challenge, all you have to do, all you have to say about them are dirty words. Dirty words, the worst kind of things as though they are big crooks and thieves—

**Sen. Roberts:** Lies.

**Sen. C. Charles:**—as though we so love OAS. Who is OAS? I have no idea who they are. I did not know who they are. I met them for the first time in 2010.

**Sen. Roberts:** “Dem choose OAS. You was not dey”.

**Sen. C. Charles:** For the very first time in my life—

**Mr. President:** Senator, one second. One second. Members.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. President:** Sen. Roberts, Sen. Charles is making his contribution, and can we temper the crosstalk on both sides to allow Sen. Charles to make his contribution. Continue.

**Sen. C. Charles:** Thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Sen. C. Charles:** It comes from a time we loved crosstalk. But sorry.

**Sen. Roberts:** Santa Claus.

**Sen. C. Charles:** Yes, Mr. President. So I am saying that, you know, all these things that had to be said, all these dirty words had to be said, do not help us as a nation. I really thought I was so privileged in 2010. I did not want the job as President of NIDCO. I really did not want it but I took it because I am disciplined person so I said, I will do it. We will go at it. And then I felt so privileged because



I said yeah, I have the opportunity to take a project that was conceived under the previous administration, tendered under them, awarded by them—

**Sen. Roberts:** Say that again.

**Hon. Senator:** Say it again.

**Sen. C. Charles:**—and then I get to build it.

**Sen. Roberts:** I “aint” hear that part.

**Sen. C. Charles:** You cannot reach anywhere as a nation if you do not learn how to take on big things and carry them from administration to administration.

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

**Sen. C. Charles:** What do you think you can do in five years?

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

**Sen. C. Charles:** What problem you could solve in five years as a country if you really care about the people in this country?

**Sen. Nakhid:** Continuity, I love it.

**Sen. C. Charles:** You have to take up something and be able, be mature enough, be disciplined enough, be honest enough to take it from administration to administration. You could criticize each other as you go but why are you calling us all these kinds of things when none of it is justified.

Now, the previous Minister and in his team even had the wisdom of bringing to this country a company called AECOM, at that time the largest engineering consultancy in the world and we kept them here on the job and they are still here on the job. And why I called the name AECOM, this American giant—

**Sen. Roberts:** It was awarded by you, PNM.

**Sen. C. Charles:**—because they are the ones who had to certify every single payment made to OAS without exception must be certified and come from AECOM. And AECOM, as indicated in writing, at no time was OAS overpaid.

Why you keep on saying that they were paid \$5 billion and the job only reached half when that is not true. When the total amount of money ever received on the job was \$5.1 billion, half a billion gone for acquisition, how much, \$100 million gone for AECOM themselves, how many \$100 million gone for other things like the oil wells and all these things. How could OAS get that, when that was all the money that was received? Why are you making these things up?

**Sen. Roberts:** Dishonest.

**Sen. C. Charles:** You see, Mr. President, my problem is, how are we going to build if we start on this level? I do not want to use the wrong language, you see. How are we going build if we start on this level?

We know that the highway had reached 61 per cent completion. How do we know that? We know that because NIDCO and AECOM came to the Parliament, reported to a Parliament committee and said so. I understand a certain Minister was upset after that and he ran down to NIDCO office afterwards to “geh on” down there because—

**Sen. Roberts:** With short steps.

**Sen. C. Charles:**—he did not like the fact that they said that they reached 61 per cent.

**Sen. Roberts:** Yes. He ran with short steps.

**Sen. C. Charles:** But at the end of 2015 they had reached 61 per cent. It is all there. There is documentation there to support it. They had reached 61 per cent and they had been paid 61 per cent, because AECOM could not do otherwise. They are the ones who have to certify the payment. If they certify more payment, then they can be taken to task for that. So stop saying that we overpaid. We paid exactly for the work that was done. How OAS is not any company that we were all in love with, because as I said, we had no idea who they were. How they got

here. Why you selected them to invite them to tender? Maybe they can explain that. Why did you select OAS to invite them to tender since we do not know them at all? But you may have had a good reason. The previous administration may have had a good reason and the Minister of Finance who was the previous Minister of Works may have had a good reason for inviting them to tender.

**Sen. Roberts:** We “doh” want to ask you. We want to ask “he”. Yes. Just like the *Su* and the three other boats.

**Sen. C. Charles:** They came and they tendered and they had one contractor they chose as the one to have to be the sole contractor for all local work. They had one. They signed a contract to have one contractor as their subcontractor. Imagine that? They tendered and they got the award and in their proposal one contractor was allowed to be the only, he had a deal to be the sole subcontractor on this job.

**Sen. Roberts:** Huh. Wow! Is one “ah dem who building” Balisier House. “Dais one. You go find—”

**Mr. President:** Sen. Roberts, again.

**Sen. Roberts:** All “de” commissions of enquiry—

**Mr. President:** Sen. Roberts, Sen. Charles is the only one on the floor right now making a contribution. It does not mean that there needs to be crosstalk between anybody who is not on the floor speaking. Allow Sen. Charles to make his contribution. Continue.

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

**Sen. C. Charles:** Thank you, Mr. President.

**Sen. Roberts:** “De Minister ask meh ah question.” Sorry. Sorry.

**Sen. C. Charles:** Yeah. So I do not want to say anything along that line really, just to say that, this is an amazing arrangement to have and we could not go with that arrangement, of course, and we ended up having a lot of local contractors

work on the job.

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

**Sen. C. Charles:** Lots and lots of—Why you fell out of love with OAS? Why they fell out of love with OAS, I do not know but they obviously did because there was so much venom directed towards OAS.

**Sen. Roberts:** “Dey did not sit on de red couch.”

**Sen. C. Charles:** So much so, they wanted us to fire them because they filed for judicial reorganization. I spoke about that issue before. So because you filed for judicial reorganization does not mean that you have to be fired from a job. What is the meaning of judicial reorganization if you have to be fired from all your jobs? Then it will lose its purpose. Under judicial reorganization what they call “Chapter 11”, you are allowed to continue your works and your obligations are managed under an arrangement that is before the courts. So you meet your obligations and then you can continue restructuring your company and so on. That is the purpose judicial reorganization.

If when you file judicial reorganization, all your contracts are terminated, then it has no purpose. But in countries where they value business entrepreneurship, they have the laws that allow for judicial reorganization for a company that is in difficulty, not just to be sent into bankruptcy. And we would do well to introduce such laws in our country if we want to be a progressive country as far as business entrepreneurship is concerned.

All these entrepreneurs you want to see, Minister of Trade and Industry, who was just speaking about business entrepreneurship, all those business entrepreneurship you want to have, those are the things that they do to facilitate it. So when people are in financial difficulty and they do not have a godfather, they do not belong to some particular privileged group or something like that, so they

do not have a godfather but they are in difficulty, they would not just crash and be in garbage for the rest of their life because when you are declared bankrupt, you are garbage for the rest of your life. Chapter 11 allows you to protect yourself when you are in difficulty and to work your way out of it, meet your obligations under an arrangement with the courts. And that is what they did. So you do not have to fire them.

Instead the same consultant was asked, and it is again in writing, whether that company is in a position to continue the works. And they said, yes, under certain conditions and they were able to continue the works. All we did was to make sure, again on the advice of the same consultant, they are paid exactly for what work they did. Until they got to the point where we said, listen, we do not want to extend the contract any further. We have a certain period of time your contract will come to an end, we will put in place a number of nominated subcontractors so major local contractors in the country can complete the job as subcontractors to the main contractor.

I am not saying that what we did was perfect. We were faced with a unique situation, the first ever in this country to manage a project of this magnitude in four years. And people worked, all these Ministry of Works and Transport officials that the Minister likes to praise, many of them were on the same job and the people who were at NIDCO themselves, some of them came from the same Ministry of Works and Transport, including the person who was the head of engineering and the man who was head of the highway. All those people came from the Ministry of Works and Transport. Engineers who had their careers in that field in the government service that rallied towards getting this project, this great challenge that we had, delivered to the people in record time.

They did tell the Minister about the capping of oil wells, about the relocation

of pipelines. That highway section they just finished. You know how far we had gotten for you to be able to finish that now? Surprisingly, I do not mean you but—

**Sen. Roberts:** Tell him.

**Sen. C. Charles:**—the hon. Minister. Do you know how far we had gotten with those things in order for that to be finished? Did the Minister have to cap any oil well? “How much oil wells you had to cap?”

**Sen. Roberts:** “Answer, nah.”

**Sen. C. Charles:** “He doh know about dem things.” You know, Petrotrin could not even find their pipelines?

**Sen. Roberts:** He was down in “Palmzanilla”.

**Sen. C. Charles:** The pipelines were old, even old on their maps because remember we have an old oil industry in this country going back to how many years before Petrotrin and Texaco and whatever. They could not even find all the oil wells on the map, so we would go out there and work and they will “bounce” an oil well or they will “bounce” a pipeline. All that work. That is why I say, the people built the foundation to build the house, they put on the roof and then you come and put in the doors and windows. So great. Pat yourself on the back. You did great. But what about the house that was built? How did you get there?

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

**Sen. C. Charles:** Instead of all these dirty words, appreciate the effort made to take on this magnitude of a project and the people who were bold enough to do it and let us learn some lessons from it. So what you really ought to have had was a professional setting in which people could actually learn some lessons. Those same officers in the Ministry of Works and Transport could have mounted a professional setting, you do not have to invite Carson Charles. You could invite the officers or the people in NIDCO who were working on the project, the project

manager and the head of the highway and the chief engineers and so on, to tell you what they had to go through, to tell you the lessons they learnt.

We took the top people at the university as our consultants, Dr. Gay and the now deceased Raymond Charles, tops in the country in road asphalt works and so on. Right? And former lecturer at the university. We took them all as our consultants. All the top people we could find in Trinidad, we took as our consultants to work on this project to try to deliver it for the country.

**3.05 p.m.**

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

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** And I praise the former administration as well as the current one; the current one that was able to continue it in part. But I ask you, what about the segment from Penal to Mon Desir? What about that segment? I did not come up with that segment. The original consultant for the highway—if you are talking about the 1967 plan. The original consultant, Trintoplan Consultants, they are the ones who came up with that. They are the ones who said, this is where the actual highway will pass. That section down the creek is an upgrade of the road on the creek. And the highway, the main highway, is supposed to pass through Debe, Penal, Siparia, Fyzabad, Mon Desir, and down the road to Point Fortin.

**Sen. Lutchmedial:** “Dey voting UNC”.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** And that—that is in writing—that is in writing as well. So I ask the question, if you think you finished the highway, what about the segment from Penal to Mon Desir? Are you going to build it?

**Sen. Lutchmedial:** “Dem does vote UNC dey eh finishing dat”.

**Sen. Roberts:** “Nah it have UNC dey”.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** If you are not building it, it is all right. If you do not have the money, say so. So let me come to the money part.

**Sen. Roberts:** “Richie going and read something, ah wa”?

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** This billion-dollar talk—

**Sen. Roberts:** Richie.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** —and this clause that was removed from the contract— you know fully well that no clause was removed from the contract. An addendum did not remove any clause. I have said it over and over, what happened? No clause was removed.

**Hon. Senator:** “Dey setting you up, you know”.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** No, no I am telling you—

**Hon. Senator:** “Dey setting you up”.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:**—the clause was not actually removed.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Interruption*]

**Sen. Roberts:** Ignore them “nah”.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** What happened is that—

**Hon. Senators:** [*Interruption*]

**Sen. Roberts:** 51(1)

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** There were consequences to entering into negotiations and to deciding that you are going to continue with the works. The obvious consequences are that, so it is not a matter—some kind of simple matter of removing a clause, no. There are consequences to deciding that you are not going to terminate under what you think is bankruptcy or judicial reorganization, and you think you want to terminate under that, which is optional. But you decided that you are not going to do it, you will have to find a different way to terminate if you want to terminate, and there are ways to terminate a contract. If you terminate the contract by first starving the contractor of money and after “he eh geh no money and he cyah work”, you then terminate him for a non-performance, well, you could



probably estimate what will happen after that.

**Sen. Roberts:** Well, they did. They lost. They lost the case.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** I would not have to say what happened after that. But I could tell you, I was there until December 2015, and we did not get a red cent from the new administration for the highway. I doubt very much they got any money after I left, so I do not think the contractor was paid. I do not want to go into the shoes that are before arbitrators and courts and so on. I am just saying that there are ways to terminate and if you choose to terminate in a particular manner, you will have to face the consequences of how you chose to terminate. Why did you not consider other ways of terminating?—or even maybe if you were not so angry and upset at the time, you may have had some consultations, some discussions, you might have found out some kind of ways of terminating if you wanted to terminate. It was always optional. But you chose to terminate in a fashion which has led to some consequences. What are the consequences? This talk about a billion dollars that the people of the Trinidad and Tobago have to face, and people's children and grandchildren and thing, what is that? That is a lot of rubbish.

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

**Sen. C. Charles:** When you terminate it, what happens is that you seize the bonds. You seize their bonds, the bonds that they put up. It is their money you took. You seize bonds which the arbitration panel then said, "You should not have seized, give it back." Why you saying that there is some billion-dollar bill that we have to meet? They simply said that you took the people money, give it back, because you terminated it in a way that they do not agree with. I am not commenting on whether your termination was the right way or the wrong way, I am just saying that there are different ways to terminate. And the one you choose to use to terminate, the arbitration panel did not agree with, so they said, "The bonds that you seized,

give it back.”

**Hon. Senator:** Give it back.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** Now, how were you able to seize bonds and now people are telling you to give it back? You were able to seize bonds because we put in place a revocable and unconditional guarantee. We put those things in place. We had the experience before, not in my time but from reading the history, and the officers explained that they had the experience sometimes of having contractors put up bonds. You remember what happens is that contractors, you pay them 10 per cent, 20 per cent—in the case of VINCI Grands, I think they paid them 35 per cent, but they are making a lot of noise now about the 20 per cent.

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

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** But they paid VINCI Grands 25 per cent—

**Sen. Roberts:** Yeah, “doh” worry with dem.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:**—advance payment. I have no argument about the percentage you paid because the percentage you paid is covered by bonds. It is fully secured. You pay that percentage because the contractor estimates a certain level of risk.

**3.10 p.m.**

So you say, all right, if you going to have that amount of money upfront you “gonna” have to put bonds in place to cover it. You put in place bonds and then there was the experience previously where when you went to seize the bonds, the banks began to raise all kinds of questions about whether it is justified or it is not justified about the bonds and so on. With that experience in hand we took action, appropriate action, including sending our legal team to the United Kingdom to meet with consultants as well. Legal consultants, because the matters have to be addressed in UK court, under the contract it is very clear matters of dispute are to be addressed in UK court. The contractor from Brazil, we are here in Trinidad and

Tobago, that was the agreement. Right?

So we sent our legal team to go and ensure that they have the understanding of the courts of how it will be viewed in the courts in the UK in case the matter becomes contentious. And we were satisfied that the wording of the securities that were put was such that the bonds were unconditional and irrevocable. It meant that when you go to seize the bonds the contractor has absolutely no say in it, even if you are seizing them unfairly. Because you wanted that people of Trinidad and Tobago to have that protection for the 20 per cent advance payment they were putting out. All the bonds, performance bonds, retention bonds, all of them, unconditional and irrevocable, it did not mean you could just go and grab them. It meant you had to use them responsibly. But when you went and took them you were within your right to do so, but do not pretend it is Trinidad and Tobago's citizens' money or something that you have to pay. It is OAS money that you took.

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

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** And if you are right you will get to keep it, and if you are wrong you will have to return it. It is simple as that, and I really wish we could get a lit more—

**Sen. Roberts:** Truth from them.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** It is frustrating, why we have to do it this way?

**Hon Senator:** Well their Prime Minister is a liar yuh know.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** Mr. President, the project was executed against tremendous challenges. Oil wells gas corridors to cross, pipelines removed, major T&TEC facilities in that part of the country to relocate, highway reroute movement, acquisition challenge. I challenge them—

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

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** Thank you. I challenge them to tell me, if we were able to acquire 500 properties in about three or four years, how many you acquired in the past eight years?

**Sen. Roberts:** [*Laughter*] Tell them to answer that.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:** The former Ministry of Works and Transport is the man who knows about acquisition because the acquisition process we followed is the one that he went to Cabinet in the previous administration—here he is he comes and give them a speech—

**Sen. Roberts:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Sen. Dr. C. Charles:**—is the one that he went to Cabinet to have them approved, understanding the challenge of acquisition and the importance of doing private treaty. He went to Cabinet to have them approve that and that is what we put in place, the same private treaty arrangement which I am sure you have to come back and use no matter how much you do not want it. I am sure you have to come back and use private treaty. It is always a challenge otherwise you cannot get so many acquisitions done and in that period of time, you would take forever to do it. The Commissioner of Valuations is just not able to handle that workload.

So the decision to do private treaty was not done by the administration under the current Member for Siparia, it was a decision taken prior, and we stopped it because it made sense. So at least own up to it, take possession of it. Take possession of what you put in place, which I thought was a good idea. Take possession of the OAS that you brought here, which you would know if it is a good idea or not, that they brought OAS here, take possession of the award you made, if you are going to take possession of the opening up of the highway to Point Fortin. This is all I say, Mr. President.

There is a whole world of things in infrastructure but I only want to end on

one note, which is, I really think that we should be more mature now to the point where if we look at the scale of the problems facing us in this country, we learn to put aside all of the mud throwing, all the petty squabbles, stick to the facts, express difference of opinions honestly, so we could find answers to what we are facing. But what we are facing in every possible sector in this country is a nation in pain, a nation under virtual siege, and if they cannot really do anything about it, well—

**Sen. Roberts:** We can.

**Sen. C. Charles:**—it would not take too long again.

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

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Thompson-Ahye.

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

**Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye:** Thank you, Mr. President, for this opportunity to speak in this budget debate. It is my fifth to date. I would like to welcome the new Independent Senators on the Bench and congratulate them, save one who is to come, on their maiden contributions.

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

**Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye:** I always look forward to reading the theme of the Finance Minister's budget statement. This year it is the "Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth". Impressive. I almost said aspirational, but that would be unkind, though our motto is "Together we aspire, together we achieve". I know our watchwords too, you know: "Discipline, Tolerance and Production", so "ah doh" have to go now, I can continue.

With his characteristic grin emanating from his Puck-ish sense of humour, he delivers, and I say to myself, this is a man who thoroughly enjoys his job that affords him a starring role, though everyone focuses on him while he enjoys his

moment in time. Curiously, the hon. Minister described his budget as an interesting budget. It seems as though he was viewing it objectively from outside, and I wondered if he had engineered the budget.

I will focus on a few areas of the budget. I begin with the one which is headlined “Safety and Security” but which I term “Crime and Criminality”. As we have come to expect the Ministry of National Security has again received the lion’s share of the budget. The lion is the king of the jungle and we citizens believe it is a jungle out there when it comes to crime in our society. The embolden criminals sings—[*Senator sings*]—“In the jungle, the Trini jungle, the lion sleeps tonight”, while citizens like lambs being led to the slaughter feel unsafe on the streets, in their workplaces, cars, sanctuary of their homes and wonder if, how and when this lion share of the budget will devour our crime problems.

In his budget, the Minister has delineated his proposals to enhance safety and security. He began, “at the top of our crime fighting agenda is equipping law enforcement with state-of-the-art tools”. Mr. President, the police cannot be encouraged to even use the body cameras. I wish them luck with the state-of-the-art tools. The Minister spoke of accelerating levels of police training to improve police performance to effectively address crime and public order and enhance public confidence in law enforcement. What is meant by accelerated levels of police training to enhance performance? Last time I checked accelerate meant to move more quickly. So is it that we would be fast-tracking the period of training? It seems to me, police need longer and more intense training, not less, to be more efficient and effective. So, perhaps, there can be clarification on this.

It goes without saying that improved police performance would effectively address crime and public order and enhance public confidence in law enforcement. The Commissioner of Police, as well as other senior police officers, has repeatedly

urged members of the public to come forward with information to help the police to solve crime. Mr. President, the public will only come forward if they have confidence the police. Can the police be trusted? A senior citizen told me quite recently she had reported to the police that she was being disturbed by loud music late at night, the next day she was met by the responsible party and approached in a menacing manner, she said she has not been able to sleep comfortably in her bed since, but was relying on constant prayer to see her through.

A wife called the police complaining of domestic abuse, a few days later her husband came to her and say, “You called the police on me, hmm, wait and see if anybody coming”. The police never came. On another occasion she went to the police station and she made a report. She got a receipt which was signed by the police officer to whom she had given the report. The receipt bore her name, a report of the threat, the name of the perpetrator was missing from the receipt. He was a police officer. A suspect in a murder trial gave a statement to the police. The police questioned a potential witness who contradicted the suspect’s statement. The police told the witness they would return to take his statement, is a few years now and they are yet to return. When asked the reason they have not followed up with the witness who had credible evidence contradicting the suspect's statement their response was, “Lying is not a crime”. The fact is there are crimes, police have no interest in investigating because of who is involved.

I was pleased to learn that the Government recognized that public confidence in the police and police legitimacy was essential and that the lack of trust between the police and the community constrains effective crime intervention. I look forward therefore to the establishment of the trusted and vetted police units within the police service staffed by higher paid officers of proven integrity. The other proposal being advanced is tripling the intake of police recruits to bring the

police service back up to full strength. I trust that all of the processes will be strictly adhered to, and all the checks and balances will be done. There are rogue officers who slip through the cracks and later bring the police service into disrepute.

Mr. President, it is known that in quite a few cases successive generations of a family join the police service. “Nothing wrong with dat”, but I warn about nepotism that can demoralize the police service. I think there is an invisible sign on my forehead that reads, “Tell me your problem”. As I am frequently approached by people with problems. A police once confided in me that he had made a complaint against a junior officer for non-performance. The young officer was closely related to a senior officer, instead of the officer complained on being disciplined, the complainant to his distress was transferred. There was a town meeting in my area a few years ago, as I was leaving, my egress was blocked by a posse, a friendly posse, my husband asked, “Hazel, who are all these old men wanting to hug and kiss yuh and give yuh snack boxes”? I explained that they were all retired police officers from the Tunapuna and Arima Magistrates Court.

When I was Director of the Legal Aid clinic at the law school, they used to call me from the Bar table into the witness room to tell me their domestic and professional problems. They had not seen me for years, as I had been living abroad, and they were happy to see their favourite lawyer. I recalled one Saturday a squad car stopped in front of my home, I thought the police had come to update me on their investigation into a burglary at my home. It turned out that the senior officer wanted me to advise his junior about bringing a protection order against a fellow officer’s boyfriend. I have said it before, the police have confidentiality concerns and are wary of using the designated agencies, and I say again, confidentiality is a serious issue in this country.



I strongly advise that there should be a provision made for police officers to see a counsellor of their own choosing. An officer with emotional problems can be a walking powder keg. It was very sad to see two police officers in a love triangle lose their lives recently. Had there been a trusted counsellor available the problem may have been resolved. The next proposal: embedding the latest technology in all police stations to enhance safety and security. Technology can certainly help in solving crime. But again, this must be accompanied by proper training in and supervision of the technology to ensure it is properly utilized.

As an educated, talented and creative people we have lots of ideas, many solutions to the crime problem, not only as almost everyone wants Minister Hinds to be fired, but recognizes that this is not likely to happen. It would seem that everyone wants to be that Minister's advisor on crime. Many fellow citizens have given free advice on solutions to the crime problem as well as the root causes of crime to the Prime Minister, the National Security Minister and the Police Commissioner. The fact that they have not studied criminology or sociology has not deterred him at all. Their lack of knowledge is compensated for by sheer enthusiasm and willingness to share their magic formulas to solve crime.

I am disappointed that no one has suggested the police be compelled to watch *Castle* my favourite show to learn how to investigate crime. A strong possibility of the detection is a deterrent, and Castle always finds the killer. The description "poor and polite" may have been synonymous with a by-gone era, but it is not characteristic of present day society, which more readily equates poverty and crime. The popular view is that crimes are committed by poor black boys. White-collar crime which has a devastating effect on our economy does not seem to generate the same degree of abhorrence as petty theft, house breaking or larceny. The structural violence of the rich against the poor, which is widespread and gives

rise to crime, is not sufficiently addressed in our society, but seems to be perpetuated and facilitated by successive governments. How can banks that declare millions in profits annually, in good conscience, deduct \$15 monthly from the account of a customer whose balance falls below \$15,000?

**3.25 p.m.**

Are they Robin Hood in reverse? Why do banks make it so difficult for youths to open bank accounts? Do they not realize that this facilitates the youths being defrauded at times? The head of a reputable institution that cares for children and youths informed me that children who took part in the notorious sports programme had to sign as having received a specific sum of money but in actuality were given less cash than what they had signed for and what was due to them. What did these supervisors teach these youths about honesty, fairness and justice? Follow the leader, leader, leader? Then these same youths are blamed for being dishonest. Who thought them? You did.

“The New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference:...Pastoral Letter...”—titled—“Creating New Hearts: Moving from Retributive to Restorative Justice”—which you may have heard me quote here, ad nauseam, states, and, Mr. President, may I be allowed to quote from that pastoral letter?

**Mr. President:** Once you identify it and name it, the source and everything, it is fine.

**Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye:** Yes. And I will also provide it to Hansard as I usually do. And when you hear New Zealand think of Trinidad and Tobago.

“In every society, crime and issues of law and order loom large in public consciousness. New Zealand is no exception. Fair and just dealings...among people constitute the heartbeat of a good society. We all need to feel safe in our homes, on our streets, in our communities. In recent

years crime has escalated. Murder, street violence, sexual assault, burglary, theft, domestic violence, car conversion, and white collar crime have become more widespread. Yet the traditional means of dealing with such crime seem unable to bring about reconciliation and healing. Reoffending rates remain high. The prison industry is expanding. Fear of crime dominates too many lives.

It is time to re-evaluate what it is we need for true justice to flow throughout this land. We are called by God to be the stewards of creation, to protect the land and enhance the dignity of all its people. Crime traditionally escalates most where social injustice prevails. There remains much social injustice in New Zealand. In particular, there is a desperate need to provide affordable housing, adequate benefits, good health care and more employment. Deprivation in these areas forms a type of structural violence against the poor who are often left inadequately fed and in poor health, with little by way of shelter, money or hope. These are all areas the government should tackle as a priority.

But social deprivation should not be a cause for personal lawlessness and crime. Poverty may provide the environment for some crime, but it should not provide an excuse. Greed and selfishness are also principal causes. We are all called to act responsibly and peacefully towards our neighbour. Violence of any form toward another is a denial of the teachings of Christ, and an affront to the dignity of people. Traditionally in our society, the police are held responsible for maintaining law and order. This can only ever adequately be done when they have the respect of the community. That respect is in danger of being eroded if basic injustices are not tackled and if

the police are called upon to maintain the law in situations of continued perceived injustice.”

Mr. President, too frequently we speak of crime as being the preserve of poor, black disadvantaged miscreant boys. The police are quick to arrest them. A boy in a uniform from Russell Latapy High School is more likely to be arrested than one from CIC or QRC. If the boys who were made to lie in the mud at Sea Lots were of a different hue or class, they would not have been treated like that. All children without the exception are entitled to be treated with dignity. It is not only the poor and disadvantaged who commit crime. Have we forgotten that a son of a former senior Minister committed an act in full view of the public? And what of the other Minister whose son was arrested for unlawfully killing another youth? Hopefully these boys would have reformed.

Is father absence one of the root causes of crime? One of the hurts that receive very little attention is father absence. I will forever remember Wayne Chance who served time in prison and who later did so much work to rehabilitate prisoners through his NGO, Vision on Mission. I was very fond of him. He called me, “My Senator”, and I called him, “My son”. Wayne came to my Parish Hall and gave his story, including his search for his dad. Some parts of the story were hilarious but the pain was there. Thank God his father story had a happy ending.

One day a mother brought to me in the Legal Aid Clinic her son who had been charged with a serious crime. The 14-year-old related to me his frustration over his stepfather taking the money that he had earned working in a garage because he said, “he minding him”. A few days later a gentleman came to my office and said he was that boy’s father and was going to arrange legal representation for him. I think he believed I probably was not good enough. He

was a police officer. I wondered where he had been all those years when his son needed him.

Not all who suffer from father absence commit crime. Some do very well but they still bear the pain. Shortly after he was called to the bar and had a wonderful call party, one of my mature law students from another country told me he had been sent to serve a document at his father's office. His dad a well-known lawyer had never acknowledged him publicly. When the father saw his son in his office, fearing he would mention their relationship, he shouted at him, "What you doing here? Get out!" My student was nearly in tears when he told me that story.

Every teenage boy should be taught before he becomes a father the responsibilities of fatherhood and especially the importance of the identity, self-esteem and security of a child that this child be acknowledged and cared for by his father. It affects girls as well. A young lady told me once, "I do not have a father you know Miss, I have a sperm donor". We have to break the cycle of parental neglect, particularly father absence, if we are to change the society. Hurt people, hurt people.

One of the popular solutions that has been offered up on the altar of suggestions for dealing with crime is the execution, pun not intended, of the death penalty. I am against the death penalty. The empirical evidence does not prove that as a deterrent to crime. That is another debate in itself. Singapore has been cited time and time again as a country that has a low crime rate because of their use of the death penalty mainly for murder and drug-related offences.

You would be surprised to learn that Singapore has been moving towards a more rehabilitative type of justice and has amended some of its death penalty laws to a discretionary approach and has been embracing restorative justice for some years now.

Whenever I attend the annual conference of the Institute of Restorative Practices in Pennsylvania, I meet a young man and a woman whom I call my Singaporean children and they update me on their work. A few years ago they shared with me their brilliant modification of the social discipline window which is used to let persons like teachers, managers, parents, assess their leadership style, whether it is authoritarian, authoritative, neglectful or permissive. I used it when I paid an impromptu visit to a secondary school along the East-West Corridor that was reported to be experiencing serious disciplinary problems. I was amazed at how readily the secondary school students with whom I interacted understood and enjoyed restorative practices principles. I regretted not being able to spend more time with them. I just had two visits but I was in the middle of my studies for my Master's degree in Restorative Practices.

Another solution that has been advanced is the "stand your ground policy". This has been wrongly condemned by many. I do not condemn it. After all, the Bible advocates it. See Ephesians Chap. 6: verse 14 and I quote:

Stand your ground with truth, a belt round your waist and uprightness a breastplate, wearing for shoes on your feet the gospel of peace and always carrying the shield of faith so that you can use it to quench the burning arrows of the evil one. And then you must take salvation as your helmet and the sword of the spirit that is the word of God.

But where the proponent and I differ is in our understanding of the biblical "stand your ground" policy. It is not an eye for an eye, kill before you get killed principle that allows a person in the US law to use deadly force in self-defence without first trying to retreat, but one that advocates for peace. Let us stand our ground to save our youths, to turn them away from a life of crime, from a path leading to destruction and set them on the road leading to salvation.

To get the true sense of a principle we must understand it holistically or else we would be like the school boy, who, when the school supervisor visited his school and asked him to recite the five times tables, he sang, “huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh”. The supervisor say, “What nonsense is this?” And the boy responded, “I do not know the words, Sir, I only know the tune”.

I turn now to the education system. Education is a protective factor. Let me explain for the purpose of our listeners who sometimes may not grasp the meaning of the terms we use. Forgive the school teacher in me, I cannot escape it. I left teaching but teaching has not left me. Protective factors are the opposite of risk factors. We hear a lot about risk factors for delinquency, such as physical and emotional abuse; neglect; lack of parental supervision; learning disorders; low IQ; history of aggressive behaviour; involvement with drugs; alcohol; high emotional distress; family conflict; low self-esteem; deficits in social cognitive or information processing abilities and anti-social friends.

Protective factors are those which set you on the correct path in that they reduce the likelihood of a negative outcome. Some examples are a stable family life; positive self-esteem; school attendants; physical and psychological safety; positive peers; involvement in sports and other activities. School is a most powerful protective factor and it is for this reason it is important to keep children in school. I will return to this issue.

Are we spending enough time and money to repair the psychological wounds, the hurt that is inflicted on children both at home and at school? I have heard that more social workers and guidance officers have been hired. I do not know if they have taken up their duties as my latest information was that there are not enough social workers and guidance officers in our schools. In one class alone there might be multiple children in need of intervention. We still have in some

districts one guidance officer with responsibility for three schools. Teachers must be sensitive to signs of distress in children and make the referral but there must be sufficient qualified personnel available to attend to their needs. Guidance officers tell me that sometimes the necessary referrals are not being made.

I once had a girl with sad eyes in my classroom. One day I asked her to remain behind. In our chat she shared that because her skin was lighter than that of her siblings her dad had rejected her saying she was not his child and when he brought home snacks he did not give her any. What a burden for this young girl to bear. How could she learn? She said her mother insisted that she was a throwback. I can well understand that as when my second daughter was born she looked pure Chinese. I swear you had to see it to believe it.

With corporal punishment being banned in school, and despite public objection, I fully support the ban as a positive move. However, it seems verbal abuse by teachers has escalated. As a primary schoolteacher, I witnessed poor children being verbally abused. Once a senior teacher entered my Common Entrance class as it was then called and said to me, "I doh know why yuh killing out yuh self with these chirren, dey so duncy dey cyah pass nutten."

There I was trying to build their self-esteem and a senior teacher destroying it. The irony is, that teacher was born and grew up in a poor area but clearly showed favouritism for middle class children, especially, "brown girls in the ring, tra-la-la-la-la". Was it self-hate I wondered? Does that still exist today? We learnt of the Tranquility rant, the teacher who verbally abused her class, we read of the principal from south who told the children that they did not pass anything, the Government sent them there. When children are abused both at home and at school they have no safe haven. This verbal abuse and insults meted out to



children daily by some teachers need to stop. Some teachers have helped to create angry children and they and others are now reaping the whirlwind.

I have heard the term zero tolerance being proffered as a solution to school misbehaviour here. That was very disturbing coming as it did from a source which has had the foresight to promote restorative justice which is close to my heart. Zero tolerance is at variance with restorative justice. It makes for a good political sound bite and signals an intention to eradicate violence and indiscipline in schools. It lulls the public into a false sense of security that will effectively end acts of indiscipline and serious misbehaviour in schools. However, the research from Wachtel and other reputable researchers refused this and deemed zero tolerance policies an ineffective and harmful remedy for school violence and serious misbehaviour. A zero tolerance task force review of the American Psychological Association in 2008, after examining an extensive:

“...data base on school discipline”—concluded—“that, despite the removal of large numbers of purported troublemakers, zero tolerance policies have...not”—provided evidence that such approaches can—“guaranteed safe”—and productive—“school climates”—for other members of the school population.

At the 21<sup>st</sup> World Conference of the International Institute for Restorative Practices researchers St. Claire and Ramirez presented their research that such policies:

“...disproportionally targeted poor and minority students.

Particularly students with a history of abuse and neglect, students with special need...”—it—

“...stigmatized students, enlarge the achievement gap”—and—“increase the dropout rate.”

It—“Fails our students by not offering them a chance to be accountable and correct their mistakes.

...impacts...”—not only—“...the student...but community morale.

Creates a tense and negative school environment.

Help to trigger gang involvement.

Creates a void of healthy and supportive relationships in school”

Results in—“...suspensions, expulsions and arrests...”—which—“...push students out of school and into the pipeline to prison.”

### **3.40 p.m.**

Restorative practices, on the other hand, encompass both proactive and reactive responses to indiscipline. I find it more than passing strange that the Ministry of Education which recently embarked on a programme of training in restorative practices, did not apply restorative practices principles, but proceeded to expulsion of the child in the widely reported case where a child was reported to have wrongly abused a teacher. It was reported that the child had apologized to the teacher. This meant she was taking responsibility for her action. A restorative justice conference could have been convened and an agreement reached where the child and the teachers and so on, and the school, would agree on how the harm was to be repaired. Because what happens is that restorative justice looks at the wrongdoing as a breach of the relationship, and that relationship has to be restored.

The agreement could have been the child carry out some cleaning in the school, give a public apology to the student body, in addition to the counselling that she would receive. The wrong was not only to the teacher, but to the school and its reputation. I have read of the various agencies that are to assist the child. How is that to be enforced? What sanctions are there for non-compliance? Was the Children Court personnel asked to play a role in this situation? These are

questions that I would wish to be answered.

A disturbing aspect of this case is a breach of the child's right to privacy. It is not sufficient to hide the child's face from public view. Once you have displayed the name, the photograph and/or address of the child's parent, you have released information likely to lead to the identification of the child. This is wrong and the media will continue to do these things with impunity unless there are consequences. Our Government at the Caribbean Conference on the Rights of the Child in Belize City in 1994 thereabouts, vowed to obey the letter and the spirit of the convention, and they must be vigilant to ensure that all aspects of children's rights are protected.

I have taken note of the Minister's request for the police to be present and active in certain schools. Police should as far as possible be kept out of the schools. Having the police in schools strikes a note of desperation. It can create more problems than it will solve, and in fact can push children more quickly down the pipeline from school to prison. We do not want a repetition of what happened in the International School some years ago.

The hon. Minister said that some children are completely uninterested in education. Learning is so exciting. There are some aspects of learning that these same children will find exciting outside the curriculum. Why are they not interested? Has that question been asked and answered? Some teachers are bored and their classes are downright boring. Some topics are boring. How can the children be interested if the teacher is not making it interesting?

I was teaching a Standard 5 class and I said, "Time for religious knowledge," and the class chorused, "Miss, that so boring". I thought to myself, I should try another approach. I usually train the children for arts festival, prose and verse, and choral speaking, so I decided to enlighten the lesson and have them act

out the religious lesson. They became so keen, they changed their tune to,” Miss, is not time for religion yet”? The teacher next door had to say to me, “Close your door when you are doing religion, too much noise”. The children were so excited and happy.

When the junior secondary school children were about to enter senior secondary, I was invited to teach during the vacation period to fill some gaps in Language and Literature. On my first day about 80 per cent of the boys in the technical vocational class were absent. On enquiry, I learned they were hiding among the lockers. I went in search of them and marched them back into the classroom. One of them turned his back away from me when he reached the classroom, staring at the playing field. I swung around his chair and he rose as if to strike me. I could not let him see the fear in my heart. He towered above me. I gave him my fiercest stare and he subsided into his chair. I spend the rest of the class explaining to them why even tradesmen should learn to write English and to spell, and I gave them an assignment to see how many signs they could find with bad spelling when they are travelling home and coming to school in the morning. One afternoon I was on Frederick Street and heard someone shouting, “Miss, Miss”, and waving to me. It was the same boy what wanted to strike me.

When some cousins who were living with us went to join their parents in the US, they left behind their books which they had used at Bishops Prep. At the time there was no social studies text in our school and I decided that I would use the books that were being used at Bishops. At the end of the term, everyone did extremely well. I was concerned and went to the principal telling him something seemed wrong because I expected a bell curve. We were taught at teacher’s college, at the end of the test you have the students who did exceedingly well, most of them will be in the middle and a few at the top and the bottom. But no one had

scored below 75 per cent. Not even a boy who seemed to have a learning disability.

My principal reminded me that he had reviewed the question paper before I had given out the test. He said nothing is wrong with the test. The children were well taught. But I believe the children were so excited by the learning material and the pictures in the book, they had paid special attention and enjoyed the class and had remembered what they had learnt. Things that make them happy are things that you find they will better be able to remember.

I was very pleased to learn from the budget presentation and from the contribution of the Minister of Education to the debate, of some exciting plans for education in this coming fiscal year. It seems to me that there are serious plans for spending the \$8.022 billion allocated for education. I must say at the outset, though, that it never ceases to amaze me that for a supposedly literate population, where so many have enjoyed free primary, secondary, in some cases relatively free tertiary education, that so many could be unaware of worldwide trends as to unjustifiably criticize the Minister of Education for learning loss during COVID-19.

Mr. President, learning loss is a worldwide phenomenon, not peculiar to Trinidad and Tobago. The World Bank, UNESCO/UNICEF report of December 06, 2022, has estimated that learning losses from COVID-19 could cause this generation of students close to \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings. The McKinsey & Company report dated April 04, 2022, details how COVID-19 caused a global learning crisis. Our focus should be on finding ways and means to alleviate the effects of the learning loss so that our children, our country's hope, can have a brighter future. I welcome the remedial programmes and the school supplies and

book grant. I am particularly pleased about the plans for technical and vocational training for the trainers, and those who will benefit from such training.

As a then member of the Board of the Children's Authority, I visited the youth camps that had been closed and saw the youths literally lying around idle. I heard from the staff of the success of their past students and wondered, what was the thinking behind closing down such a successful programme that has benefitted so many. But, Mr. President, what has pleased me no end is that finally there is a recognition that all is not well with our teachers, and professional development opportunities were being provided for teachers.

The Minister of Finance spoke of teachers in primary schools being trained in new classroom strategies, but much more than that is needed. I was heartened to hear the hon. Minister of Education say that they did specific training for the teachers in remedial math, writing and English. I hope this course recognized the fact the teachers are themselves sometimes very deficient. You cannot give what you do not have. There is a crisis in education as far as English language is concerned.

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

**Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye:** I do not know what will happen, but our spoken and written English are poor. I have said it many times here in this Chamber. Our main concern is indeed fear of crime. We cannot have prosperity if security is not assured. When I was planning the conference, the International Society of Family Law, the question of travel advisory on crime, I had to deal with that time and time again. I see some positive signs in the discovery of more and more guns. Like others, I am concerned at the lack of arrests following those discoveries. I do not think all is lost in my beloved country, but we must pay greater attention to the inequities in our system of governance.

The budget could have contained more family friendly policies in the workplace and government. According to the Community Tool Box, a family friendly policy is one that takes note of the importance of family to society and acts to meet directly or indirectly the needs of children, parents, especially disabled members of the family and the oldest generation. A work from home policy being explored by the Minister of Public Administration can be one such policy. A tax break for businesses which provide onsite day care is another. Flex-time which allows people to choose when to work as long as they put in their required hours, as well as part-time work and shared work are other options.

One problem I have raised every year and has to be resolved is government assistance for parents to meet the specialized needs of children with autism. The Autism Society of Trinidad and Tobago advises that 1 per cent of Trinidad and Tobago, about 14,000 people are on the autism spectrum. That it is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. Autistic persons see, hear, and feel the world differently to other people. If you are autistic you are autistic for life. It is said that the total cost of autism varies per person based on the severity of the spectrum and which services the individual requires. And they said that the earliest appointment that a parent was given at the Mt. Hope Clinic for diagnosing your child was 2026, three years away. So we find that families are experiencing problems receiving a diagnosis and there is a high cost of psychoeducational assessments. Many parents cannot afford, and these autistic children are part of our population and that needs to be addressed.

I have seen some progress with migrant children, but I need to remind the Government that its immigration regulations remain at variance with the Constitution and needs to be amended. We must also remember the ISIS children

that need to be repatriated. I understand from the defence force that there is expertise there and they were dealing with the issue of de-radicalization and they will be willing to assist in that area.

I would want to make a plea for the nurses and doctors who provide urgent care and for their terms and conditions. When we went to get our vaccine I asked the nurse, “When you going off duty”? She said, “I should have been off duty hours ago”. I have met doctors who are on contract, they say they have no vacation leave and they have no sick leave. So they are in dire circumstances and they provide for us. There is a lot that needs to be done in the society.

In closing, I wish to quote from the sermon, preached by Lord Abbott Pereira at the 5.15 a.m. mass on Sunday, October 8<sup>th</sup> at Mt. St. Benedict. He said that:

As a people we were rich in human resources and pray that God will help us to yield the harvest of justice and right-thinking people.

He observed that:

Had these schools been forthcoming, violence in homes and on the streets would not have escalated but integrity, righteousness and respect for all cultural groups will prevail.

He said:

We need to build a nation in which we produce fruits which reflect the soil in which we have been planting. God bless our nation.

Mr. President, I try to practice discipline and keep within the time, and there has been production and you have exercised tolerance. I have to go now. Thank you

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

**Mr. President:** Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport.



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

**The Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Richie Sookhai):** Good afternoon, Mr. President. I thank you once more for this opportunity to contribute to this honourable Senate especially towards the Appropriation (Financial Year, 2024) Bill, 2023. Mr. President, before I begin my contribution, I would to recognize the passing of a valuable member of the business community, Ms. Nazarene Ali who was one of the matriarchs of the Nick's Café in Chaguanas. Established in 1955, Nick's Café has become a household name. A lot of you all will understand where the traditional bread and channa, bread and chow mein, bread and cheese would have come from. It was actually in Nick's Café. They were actually featured in several blogs, for instance, at both local and international blogs like David's Been Here and Mark Wiens, and many others. And I would like to acknowledge her contribution. I think recently last year she accepted an award from the Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce for longstanding service and also their contribution to building the society and the people of Chaguanas.

**3.55 p.m.**

So, I would like to say, you know, aunty Naz would always with be remembered for her kindness, her sweet demeanour and she served every customer with a loving smile and she will be missed forever.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** On a lighter note, I would like to take this opportunity to recognize and thank Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel for her years of service to this Parliament and to the country. I remember entering here and meeting Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel for the first time, and that lovely smile with that dimple on her cheeks, it was warming and it actually brought a sense of comfort

coming into such an environment.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** So, I thank Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel for her contribution and building our nation to what it is today. Also, I would like to congratulate Mr. Brian Caesar and Ms. Keiba Jacob-Mottley for assuming their new respective parliamentary roles.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Congratulations to our newly minted Senators. Again, I would like to give you a piece of advice that was given to me at the very beginning, enjoy the ride, you will certainly love it. You know—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:**—speaking as the Minister in the Ministry of Transport. You know, hon. President, I was really, let us say, heartfelt when I saw a fellow engineer, colleague and Senator, Dr. Carson Charles enter into the Chamber. I was eager to hear his piece of contribution. And as an engineer myself, I would like to remind Dr. Charles about an oath that engineers take, just like doctors and lawyers. We take an oath called the Order of the Engineer, a society that you join, and they give you a certain ring. The ring was made from is a bridge that collapsed due to faulty engineering. And as an engineer, we must remember to always maintain integrity—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:**—maintain composure and put our best efforts into enforcing the truth to the population that we serve.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** So, it brings me to the point when Dr. Charles—

**Hon. Senator:** Senator.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Sen. Dr. Charles, thank you. Thank you, hon. leader—when he stated first that 61 per cent of the work was completed during his time. And then—I would not blanch the document. I know my hon. Minister is advising me and I would be mindful of that, but I have a document here—

**Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:** You could hold it. You could hold it.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** I have a document here from NIDCO.

**Sen. Sinanan:** Who was the Chairman then? Who was the President?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Well, the Chairman at that time was—

**Sen. Sinanan:** The Chairman.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** The President, sorry. The president at that time was a one, Dr. Carson Charles.

**Sen. Lezama-Lee-Sing:** What? Which one?

**Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:** Wow.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** This document is dated Wednesday, April 29, 2015, that stated 35.7 per cent of the work was completed.

**Hon. Senators:** Wow!

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** I did not learn that type of engineering, so I do not know how 35.7—

**Hon. Senators:** [*Interruption*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** How 35.7 per cent does not compute in my piece of engineering as 61 per cent.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Sen. Charles spoke about this Government selecting and awarding the contract—

**Sen. Sinanan:** [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Thank you. I have to thank my hon. Minister for

guidance because he has been a pillar of strength during my journey here so far.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** If it was not for the Minister, Sen. The Hon. Sinanan, I am sure I would be eaten alive. But thank you Minister Sinanan for your guidance. And it was—I have these series of events. From January 5—14, 2011, this contract was negotiated.

**Sen. Sinanan:** Who was the President?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** And the President then, again, a one, Dr. Carson Charles.

**Hon. Senators:** “Ohhh”.

**Sen. Lezama-Lee:** It cannot be this one. It is the other one. It is the other one, not this one.

**4.00 p.m.**

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Wait, wait, and you know what? On July 4<sup>th</sup>, Mr. President—

**Hon. Senators:** [*Interruption*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

**Mr. President:** Senator, have a seat. All right.

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

**Sen. Mark:** Sookhai—

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark, I am on my legs. So the Minister is making his contribution and I get the concept of rebuttal, I get the concept of debate, but nonetheless the Minister has the right to speak and he has the right to make his contribution in silence in the Chamber. Continue, Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Thank you, Mr. President. So on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011, we are not celebrating the Independence Day in the US here, this is July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011:

NIDCO did their own celebrations because they entered into the agreement to this contract, right, under again the stewardship of the then President, Dr. Carson Charles.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** And you know what? If—the evidence is right there, I saw the documents there.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Interruption*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Right, I have the evidence right there, right, and it is all stated and it is right there during his tenure, so if it is a fallacy, I am sorry.

**Mr. President:** All right, so I again, the crosstalk cannot be louder than the contributor. Minister, just a bit of guidance, if you are referring to Members who happen to be in the Chamber at the time, we use their titles. Continue.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Thank you. I am guided. Sen. Dr. Carson Charles, former President of NIDCO. So I come back again now where Sen. Charles spoke about the use of a single contractor, that this Government is using a single contractor to complete the works. I would like to clear the record that five local contractors were used to complete this work—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:**—and paid in TT dollars, because the record would show that the then contractor was paid all valuable US dollars, so you would want to know where haemorrhaging took place.

**Hon. Senator:** [*Interruption*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** So yes, that is true, we went local, we kept to our mantra and we built local capacity. So in light of that, I really thought that the hon. Senator would have been here today to deliver an apology—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** —for what was done during that period but I guess not everyone was cut for the order of the engineer's ring.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** So, Mr. President, I start my contribution and if you allow me to recognize the Minister of Finance and the Ministry of Finance for presenting a very comprehensive, meaningful and prudent fiscal budget 2023/2024.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** And let me also thank the Ministry of Planning and Development as well as the Minister for their invaluable contribution towards our national development.

Mr. President, before I bite into the meat of my contribution, although I am a vegetarian, I know it—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge some of the highlights of the 2024 national budget that as Chamber President, I would have lobbied then and I do welcome the introduction of it now. One being the increase in the minimum wage and the second being the increase in the retirement age, both warranted for the majority and was widely accepted by what our community wanted at that time. As a former chamber head and a business owner, I can appreciate the delicate balancing act the Minister of Finance had in pegging a suitable minimum wage and I believe the rate selected which is \$20.50, it is appropriate. It is something that will build capacity and also not cut or be sort of erroneous on business owners.

If you will allow me to quote from the *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian* article dated the 13<sup>th</sup> of August, 2023, the headline being:

“Minimum wage hike is justified, but can't be excessive”

This is where economist Dr. Vaalmiki Arjoon stated:

“The intention behind any increase in the minimum wage is to improve the purchasing power for those in the low-income brackets, their overall quality of life and help combat poverty. It is also intended to stimulate further economic activity in the private sector from additional spending...”

—due to the trickle-down effect will then bolster and have the wheels of the economy turning. However, he noted that:

“...too high...”—of an increase—“could”—have—“a negative effect...”

And this is exactly what the Minister was doing and he did perform his balancing act beautifully.

More so, I would like to also talk about the retirement age. And I could remember holding the hat as chamber President then—I saw the hon. Member, Mr. Manning, was here recently but I think he just left, where he held consultations concerning this, and in that room with the consultations as chamber head, we saw all various NGOs and we all agreed that raising the retirement age was a positive sign. It is something that will augur well as a business owner that employs a lot of highly-skilled individuals. I knew a lot of them, when they reached that age, they were willing to move on and work even more because they knew that they had more to offer at the end of the day. Right.

And coming back to a point where Dr. Arjoon actually stated in the *Newsday* article dated September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Dr. Arjoon stated that raising :

“...the retirement age...”—is—“a progressive step for the NIB fund and wider economy.

He said NIB inflows came from employer and employee contributions, and investment.

‘For some time now, the benefits paid out have increased, given that more

persons are living longer, but the inflows of the fund are not growing quickly enough to adequately cover these benefits' pay-outs.

Arjoon said workers could earn a salary for a longer period, and so maintain their lifestyle, increase their savings and contribute more to boost their pension plan.”

Mr. President, this is very important because as a population, as a business owner, as a person in society and even encouraging my own employees, that it is important that the working population understands the importance of saving and putting towards a pension plan will augur well in the future, so encouraging our population to save, to have that little nest egg, it is vital and important. More so also, I understand the glut that there is in terms of capacity. Actually Sen. Dr. Charles, he alluded to that, that we were looking for capacity in terms of engineers, in terms of specialist for the roads and different technical areas we were looking for.

So when you hear mass unemployment and no jobs available, I am quite shocked. Do you not think that that is quite a contradiction? Because to me, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Services is doing what they can do to assist the youth in this country by providing them with the necessary tools and opportunities—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** —so that they can access these said jobs that are available in and around and out in the Ministry and in the business sector.

Mr. President, I would like to quote from an article in the International Journal of GEOMATE:

“Assessing the Impacts of Climate Change on Road Infrastructure”

This article was dated on October 2017 and it is by Dr. Erwin Oh of the Griffith



University of Brisbane, Australia and it is interesting why I used Australia because in some parts, they share a somewhat similar climate.

“There is an increasing evidence that the earth’s climate is changing with some of the changes attributable to transport infrastructure. Climate change can have impacts on road infrastructure. The direct impacts can be due to the effects of the environment. Temperatures can affect the aging of bitumen resulting in an increase in brittle failure of the surface seals that represent more than 90% of the rural...roads in Australia. Further...”—increased—“rainfall changes can alter moisture balances and influence pavement deterioration. Brittle failure of the bitumen causes the surface to crack, with a consequent loss of waterproofing of the surface seal. The result...”—of the—surface water will enter the pavement causing potholing and will cause rapid loss of surface condition. More frequent reseal treatments will overcome the problem, but this is at a higher cost to road agencies.”

My point behind this is that the population understands that climate change is real and it is affecting our infrastructure and our roadways.

And as I am on that, I would like to just read out a bit of the rainfall that we have had recently and this is the rainfall for 2021, 2022, 2023 and I will say it by the respective months from January to date: 2021, January, 60.9; 2022, 41.1; 2023, 53.9; we go on to February: 64.7, 79.5, 31.9. We continue again, massive into the month of June: 16.5 in 2021, 414.8 in 2022; 221, it shows clearly that our climate is erratic. There is no way to predict some of the excessive rainfall that we have been experiencing.

However, it is not an excuse that we at the Ministry of Works and Transport and I can tell you and I attest to this. Because coming into the Ministry, I

understand that we had planned projects in place. The Minister spoke at length about the national drainage plan. And what does that mean? You think that we sit down in ivory towers and look and laugh at what is going on? No, we understand what is going on.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** We understand and experience the suffering and we are there boots on ground. I am pretty sure if you go in the Minister's van or even in my van, we have boots on ground to go and assess what is going on and we do try on a very regular basis to ensure the maintenance of these river courses and that they desilted, that our landslips are taken care of and they are monitored. You know, Mr. President, I know that the hon. Members on the other side would have heard about the upgrade to our pumping station and I just want to read a little bit.

The Ministry of Works and Transport has invested in upgrading the electrical pumps to help alleviate the flooding condition and the reason why I want to reiterate this, I want people to understand how important and how key these upgrades are. Because while we know that there are issues with pumps in certain areas, we are upgrading the most contentious areas and then going down to the other areas because it is a planned process.

But not only that, we are not using the older technology, we are adapting newer technology into it and we are looking to have it censored, controlled, monitored remotely, eventually in a plan. All of this will comprise what a national drainage plan which this Government is seeing the need for and that is why we have a comprehensive and a systematic approach to how we do this.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** In the Ministry of Works and Transport, we are in the business of affecting positive changes, change in every aspect of our operation to

maximize the welfare of our citizens. I assure you that the Ministry of Works and Transport is about acknowledging the shortcomings, we understand there are shortcomings but acting on this knowledge to effectively remedy the same.

So it is my pleasure to talk about the transformation of our public sector transportation. When I came into the Ministry, the hon. Minister gave me a general overview but he gave me certain agencies that with his guidance, I was able to overlook.

And in doing that one of those agencies entitled, the Transportation, which would be PTSC, looking at some of our different means of transportation which is air, land and sea.

**4:15 p.m.**

The Ministry of Works and Transport oversees the operation of all local public transportation—air, land and sea except for CAL. And it includes the national bus network under the Public Transportation System (PTSC), the Tobago ferry under the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, the water taxi operated by NIDCO, and helicopter services under NSL, the National Helicopter Service. The Ministry is also to regulate the maxi-taxi operation and to enable key international travel through our airport, airport authority. The national traffic management falls within the ambit of the Ministry of Works and Transport and we are actively looking at ramping up this traffic grid or transportation grid as we have a transformation plan which is all part of our *Vision for 2030* for Trinidad and Tobago.

*Vision 2030* is based on the premise that by 2030 information and communication technology would have radically transformed the way we work, live, and play. And the rise of social media will make us more interconnected as trillions of devices will collect and exchange information. As the cost of sensors

decline and computing increases, all kinds of devices will be connected to the Internet and with this knowledge I present the transformation plan to you. But it will not only be limited to just the ICT part, but it will also be the operational part that we are looking at.

Before I delve into the agencies, I want to talk a bit about traffic and traffic alleviation. We understand that we cannot build ourselves out of traffic; that is impossible. Nowhere in the world would you find that you could have enough roads to build yourself, but we understand that by providing an efficient, safe, and reliable public service that will give the people the confidence to travel on these vessels or means of transportation, we can take more cars off the road and then by extension reducing the congestion that we currently face.

My hon. Minister speaks about this at length where he talks about the remedy that he believes will be a transformation for this entire country. And, you know, this all comes from the seed that was planted from his predecessors, Minister Imbert who is right here and he was instrumental in the water taxi—sorry Senator—sorry our Minister of Finance, Minister Imbert—he is the one who planted the seed that bore the fruit of the water taxi service that we have for today.

**Hon. Senator:** “Papayo”.

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

**Sen. R. Sookhai:** And let me explain something, you know, there is a bit of history behind it and a lot of people do not understand. you know the water taxi service in 18—I think it is 1847 I believe, when the first postage stamp was created for Trinidad and Tobago, it was actually a boat called the Lady Mc Cloud that transferred goods and services, and also postage from San Fernando to Port of Spain on that same route that our water taxi is running right now. And that was actually the first British stamp that we have for the Caribbean region and it is a

very valuable stamp. So, from that vein we laid the platform since that time, and Minister Imbert when we implemented—Minister of Finance—when we implemented the fast ferries, these fast ferries traversing from San Fernando to Port of Spain have actually improved the lives. You know, the water taxi—

**4.20 p.m.**

You know, I heard, I think it is Sen. John, in her contribution, eluded that the Government is not in touch with the people. I am pretty sure. I do not know if Sen. John ever sat—But, Mr. President, I will explain. I sat, not as Minister, because getting my Minister's blessing, I told him, I said just I am going just as a commuter. I went early that morning from Port of Spain to San Fernando, incognito, not as a Minister, no blue lights. I never had in the first place, but anyways.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** I went, I boarded the water taxi. It left promptly on time and the ride to Port of Spain was smooth. The taxi was filled to capacity. The cabins were comfortable and I had no complaints. I actually left—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** They recognized afterwards that I was the Minister, and they took me to the captain's deck where I spoke to the members there. They also explained some of the challenges that they may have. They understand exactly.

You know, for those who do not understand, when there are delays in the service it is because of several issues that we may face, one being pollution. These taxis operate with jets, water jets that feed into these turbines and blows the water on the outside that propels the taxis forward. When

polluted or pollution enters these jets, the taxis have to stop and there is a recycling process that clears these jet channels so that the service could resume. Many times this procedure takes at least 15 to 20 minutes. So, the travelling population needs to understand also that the taxi is not just delayed on purpose. It is because of many different issues, and pollution being number one, is one of the problems that we currently fight and it exists, and it creates problems through the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago.

But with that being said, I understand that there are some issues, in terms of the water taxi, for instance communication with the general population. I would like to advise that NIDCO is actually actively looking at producing a different means of communication. It may be via an app where they will provide regular updates. Eventually the app will be able to accept payments. You could book tickets, and would be coming on stream and digitized as we go forward. And with the introduction of the online payment system, as explained by our Minister of Finance, this will all integrate beautifully into an interconnectivity app for Trinidad and Tobago.

Licensing Division, Mr. President. I start with Licensing Division in the Ministry of Works and Transport, and it is one of the many divisions of the Ministry that gives 100per cent in the execution of its operation. The division is responsible for, inter alia, the oversight of services relating to issuance of driving permits, registration and inspection of motor vehicles and road traffic laws. With the Ministry's continued focus on service excellence, the division has been active in implementing new digital systems, electronic systems to improve the lives of our customers. Again, another agency under the Ministry of Works and Transport that is employing technology for the betterment of our citizens.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** I know Sen. Bacchus is not here right now. But Sen. Bacchus could even attest and understand.

**Mr. President:** The Minister of Digital Transformation.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Sorry, the Minister of Digital Transformation—thank you, Mr. President—is not here right now, but he could even attest to the work or the infrastructure being provided to support platforms as such.

In May 2023, the Licensing Division rolled out an online application process for provisional driver's licences/permits. The system is a digital platform that is designed to facilitate the application for provisional permits and endorsement to all vehicle classes. No longer do you have to line up. No longer do you have to look for appointments. It is all done via online. It reduces the possibility of errors, in terms of electronically, and it also gives everybody the accountability to have a specific time and appointment allotted to them. So, there is no more confusion. Further, the Licensing Division can pre-approve the applicant, resulting in less wait time for provisional permit transactions. The new platform now allows driving exams and regulations to be completed without—on site.

Additional measures geared towards modernization and digitization of business processes and services within the division, these initiatives are, and I would like to quote them through, which is:

- the provision of the mobile buses for renewal of drivers permit;
- the expansion of online servicing;

So right now, I would just like to explain where we are, in terms of provision. Like vehicle registration, we are at 80per cent. Transfers, in terms of vehicle

transfers, we are looking to start to do that online, and that is now—the template for that has already been set up and we will start executing accordingly in the next coming, ensuing years.

- the payment for the driving test system;

Again, once more, we are accepting electronic payment, and also the appointment system. We have 80per cent.

Let us talk about the infrastructure in some of these facilities that we have: 80per cent completion of the inspection building on Wrightson Road. We have 70 per cent completion on renovation of the building at the Wrightson Road facility. Yes, the building at Wrightson Road. The inspection station is 80per cent and the building is 70per cent complete. The upgrade to the San Fernando licensing rehabilitation facility is 25per cent done, and then the completion of CCTV for driving test surveillance and the dexterity of driving sites, 100per cent completed. The online payment for fixed penalty tickets, 90per cent in completion; and the implementation of self-service payments via the use of kiosks, 60per cent completed. There is a full implementation on fleet electronic inspection stations. So all inspection stations currently are electronically-controlled.

And, Mr. President, let me explain the benefit of that, because before, in the past, by having a sort of manual system, you had the possibilities of duplication of both the licence number, both the chassis number. You had many instances where corrupt activities could take place. And these are some of the—I remember when I was just sworn in, into the Ministry of Works and Transport, someone asked, I think I read a comment: what does the Ministry of Works and Transport have when it comes to crime? You know what? The



Minister of Works and Transport has a lot because we ensure—most of the crime is actually done with vehicles—and by ensuring that you are accountable for the vehicles that are on our nation's roads, we then lay the groundwork that could assist the Ministry of National Security, TTPS to do their work better.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Mr. President, I would like to inform this House for fiscal 2024—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** Thank you, Mr. President. I would like to inform this House, for fiscal 2024, the upgrade to the vehicle registration system, what it would entail in the roll out in terms of the Ministry of Works and Transport, and also the modernization of the number plate system is yet to come.

Mr. President, in my last couple of minutes, I just want to take a moment and talk about PTSC and the transformation of PTSC, because that is near and dear to me. Just like the water taxi, for me PTSC—under the blessing of my Minister—has been near and dear to my heart. I have actually sat in the terminal. I understand what our travelling population faces on a daily basis. And while a lot may argue, in terms of the buses that are going out, we have to understand COVID-19 was real and it actually destroyed the supply chain around the world. So in accessing parts and other commodities for these buses, it has become an impossible task.

One of the issues that we found in the Ministry, in terms of PTSC, was that there were many various buses and not one standardized fleet. So part of our transformation process is to ensure that we have a standardized fleet that

we could ensure that the supply of parts, so our value chain will always be complete and that we could provide an efficient bus for the travelling population. Likewise, it would be a digital transformation where the travelling population could then access when the bus is going to arrive, where the bus is, why there are delays.

I remember—and it really broke my heart—when I went to the San Fernando facility and there were some young, young men, students, young men and women, they were commuting from San Fernando to Point Fortin. And they were, like, “Minister, look at the time, two o’clock”, and their class finished since 12 o’clock and they are still at the terminal. I felt for them, because I knew that they were going to Point Fortin. I spoke to Minister Sinanan. He said, and in his typical way, “doh worry, we have a plan”. I did not know the plan was the Point Fortin Highway that opened and it made the commute a lot better for the people of that area today.

Mr. President, I could go on and on, and, you know, like my Minister said that five minutes he could talk for five hours. I want to thank the Hon. Prime Minister for his leadership and let the population understand that this Government is about delivering on the plans that we have and not pie-in-the-sky ideas. This Government is about utilizing what we know, utilizing technology to improve the lives and livelihoods of our citizens.

I want to thank the Minister of Finance for a well laid budget. I want to thank my line Minister for your support.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** I want to thank all the agencies, chairmen, and the CEOs of all the various agencies that fall under the Ministry of Works and Transport. I also want to thank the staff at the Ministry of Works and

Transport, our PS in particular, Ms. Sonia Francis-Yearwood, for her steadfast leadership in the Ministry of Works and Transport.

You know, Sen. Charles spoke about taking projects of such magnitudes and the lessons learnt. I will say, and according to my line Minister, we took a magnanimous project and we completed it, not 37per cent. We completed it with local content.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:** So the lessons learnt, do not ever trust the other side. I thank you.

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

**Mr. President:** Minister of Tourism.

**The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell):** Thank you very much, Mr. President. Let me start off by thanking you, of course, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this my ninth budget debate. And I want to immediately associate myself with all the sterling contributions coming out of this side.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** And I would also associate myself with the final words of Minister Sookhai.

Mr. President, I also would like to thank the Independent Senators for their contributions, very constructive and very helpful contributions. And I would also join with others in congratulating the Independent Senators, those who have spoken already, on their maiden contributions and I would welcome them to this House.

And on that vein, Mr. President, I would ask the question: with the absence of the Opposition in this debate, would we have lost any value to this

debate this year? There is absolutely nothing coming out from the Opposition this year.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Mr. President, you go through the *Hansard*, it is all recycled contributions from the last three years, all recycled.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** And I particularly feel a little sorry for Sen. Lyder, I know he is unwell today, but during the local election Sen. Lyder, I know he lost his speechwriter to the PNM. So he had no choice but to recycle all the contributions and just replay it. I mean, Sen. Mark is still on property tax. We have passed property tax.

**4.35 p.m.**

Had you been in office, Larry Howai, then Minister, he would have implemented the property tax.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** He is still talking about property tax.

But, Mr. President, I am happy to have met and made the acquaintance of Sen. Dr. Charles, but I am very disappointed by his presence here today, and I do not mean that in a disingenuous way. I am disappointed. I am disappointed because the PNM took office in 2015. The PNM confronted, as a government, the issue of the unfinished Point Fortin Highway in 2015/2016. Where was Sen. Dr. Charles in 2016, in 2017, in 2018, when we were actively prosecuting and pursuing these matters?—2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, he was nowhere to be found. I do not know if he was under a rock somewhere, but he was nowhere to be found. But as soon as the People's National Movement, Government completed the highway—congratulations to the Minister of Works—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:**—and Transport, the Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport, our Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, our hon. Prime Minister, we completed it and we opened the highway to the relief of persons in the deep south. But he was nowhere to be found. And I am disappointed because I am sure as an experienced politician, he must know that the UNC and his leadership has sent him here to be revisionist and an apologist. And now he is the face of the most disgraceful corruption in Trinidad and Tobago, and I did not want that for him.

I grew up in primary school learning who the Ministers were and under the NAR Government, I remember him as being a Minister and I would not want that fate for him. There is a difficulty in the UNC in differentiating what is functionary and what is operative, but he was not in charge, he took instructions.

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

**Hon. Senators:** Who gave the instructions?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Who gave the instructions? And we still do not know that, but we know that Sen. Dr. Charles is here as the face of this scandal.

And Sen. Dr. Charles, you spoke to us and you told us but there are some things that are missing from your contribution. You did not speak about the hundreds of employees and suppliers and service providers, citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who were not paid and left empty when OAS jettisoned and “buss it” from these shores. You did not speak about that. Who is responsible for that? I know the PNM took it as part of our responsibility and paid the workers.

Sen. Dr. Charles indicated that nobody knows OAS. But tell us whether it is standard procedure for a government Minister to fly to South Africa to negotiate a contract with a contractor, the largest contract to be awarded in Trinidad and

Tobago? He did not tell us that. And if you ask me, I would tell you who knows OAS, it is Jack Warner, it is Surujrattan Rambachan, and you. You also did not say—and this is what we were waiting on—who signed addendum 2, removing the liability from the contractor in the case of bankruptcy? Who signed it? We have the evidence here.

**4.40 p.m.**

Who put the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, the tax-paying citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, at a considerable disadvantage a few days before the election of signing that addendum removing the liability from the contractor? Who did it? Who did it?

I have in my hand here the Addendum No. 2, contract Addendum No.2, package three, signed for and on behalf of the National Infrastructure Development Company Limited by Dr. Carson Charles, its President, and Donna Brodber, the Assistant Corporate Secretary. We know you signed it. We know that by your signature the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago were disadvantaged, but who gave the instruction? That is what we were waiting to hear, Mr. President. I “doh think is you” who gave the instruction, but you are here now as the face of this scandal.

**Sen. Sinanan:** Insult to the NAR.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** We will get to that. I am not the last person to respond on this matter, but we will get to it.

Mr. President, then we heard from Sen. Roberts. Sen. Roberts said, he looked at this budget from all types of lenses, red lens, yellow lens, he started to talk about lens, trying to be funny of course. And I just thought in my head, Mr. President, there is none who are so blind as those who cannot see.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Sen. Roberts went on to scandalize Sandals in

Tobago. You know, had we gone ahead with that project Sandals in Tobago would have been completed and would have been receiving the much-needed visitor arrivals in Tobago.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** But he went ahead to scandalize the project, about he searched all over and no other place did Sandals have the host Government build for them. But then that is a model that we are accustomed to. We have the Hilton hotel here, successful, adding money, we are collecting hotel taxes, we are collecting value added taxes. We have the very successful Hyatt hotel.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Yeah, we have the very successful Hyatt hotel. We are collecting profits and taxes from that hotel. So why not construct where Government owns the real estate, owns the plant, and have Sandals bringing their very excellent management capacity and brand into Tobago to lift the tourism immediately?

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Immediately, we would have gotten in a number of airlines, a number of flights because you need that pull factor, you need that anchor hotel. And then, of course, we are connected to the airports with the capacity to receive more, but none are so blind, Mr. President, as those who will not see.

You know, and I listened to—against my better judgement, I listened to a lot of what Sen. Roberts said, and he started to speak about the arrivals in Tobago, and he is rattling all of these things off of the top of his head that during the UNC time, Tobago received 97,000 visitor arrivals. I said “dat cah be right”, so I went and I checked. In 2014, Tobago received about 25,000 visitor arrivals.

**Sen. West:** Maybe he meant for the whole period.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** In 2015 they received 21 or so thousand arrivals. In 2019, we were on the rebound, Tobago received close to 22/23,000 arrivals. And I said, next time I will know better because he is rattling all these things off of the top of his head that I know that nothing good resides in there.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Mr. President, in terms of—they continue to resuscitate this fantasy about building the aquatic centre and building the national cycling velodrome and it was all in connection with this sport tourism project. It is great. Now, every time they speak they add on another component and use the words “we would have, we would have or we could have.” Of course, there is no concept document, there is no plan, there is no project existing. They claim that the Couva Hospital would have been connected. Of course, the Couva Hospital does not have specialist orthopaedic or sports medicine units, nothing like that.

**Sen. West:** It was a children’s hospital.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** It was a children’s hospital but of course, we come to learn it was an adult and children’s hospital. Where is the hotel RFP? Where is the design for the hotel, that they said was supposed to go there for a sports tourism project? Where was that? They just make it up as they go along, you know. They make it up as they go along. There is no plan. There must be a coherent plan for all of these things to work together.

And then, Sen. John said, I just speak about this fantasy about the Couva Hospital was supposed to be conducted to medical tourism, and it has plenty money in health care. Okay, what are you saying? Are you saying that you built the Couva Hospital there with a plan to take away free healthcare and charge persons for healthcare? Are you saying that you are going to have a dual



administration where foreigners coming in, they show their passports and they will pay for health care but the citizens will go there and get health care for free? You all are just speaking things to appeal to some populist sentiment. There is no connection to reality.

In terms of a sport tourism project, you would have to have a hotel, you would have to have a space where if persons get injured, a place dedicated to sports medicine, you would have to have all of these things. None of that was there. And now I am being castigated by Sen. Roberts for now putting out and ensuring that we have a sports tourism master plan, and we have some plans as it relates to certain clusters in tourism occurring, that we can benefit from.

So let me move on to—well, I do not have much for Sen. Mark. Sen. Mark started off in his usual bluster about this budget is a declaration of war on the poor, and then proceeded to declare war on all of our collective intelligence and commonsense in here. Totally overlooking there is an increase in the minimum wage for those at the lowest rung of the ladder. There are grants for books and assisting needy people in their educational requirements and needs, understanding that education is the great equalizer. The unemployment rate is down to 3.7 per cent and our relentless combat—our relentless pursuit of combating inflation in this country. But Sen. Mark says the budget is a war on the poor. And you really expect us to take you seriously?

Here comes Sen. Lyder. Well, Sen. Lyder touched on tourism and in his contribution, attempted to seduce all of us into believing that if the UNC is put back into office that they would do a lot to develop the tourism sector. And we would be seduced if we did not see your performance between 2010 and 2015. The United National Congress cannot point to anything that they completed, anything that they achieved in the tourism sector between the years 2010 to 2015

nothing. I mean, they changed a lot of Ministers and a lot of those Ministers, all of them, spent a lot of time travelling, but nothing they can point to, to improve the tourism sector between 2010 and 2015. But we have taken it by the scruff of its neck.

Let me give you a bit of history during 2010 and 2015 in the travel sector. They have a lot to say about Caribbean Airlines so they celebrate that there is a little labour dispute in Caribbean Airlines. But here is their performance in Caribbean Airlines over the time 2010 to 2015. In 2010, the airline incurred losses of US 61 million. In 2011, US 87 million; in 2012, US 196 million; 2013, 17 million; 2014, 62 million; 2015, \$39 million. For a total loss of US 515 million. Cumulatively, we could put that at about \$4 billion over the time that the UNC was in office. That is their performance.

And now we have a situation well up until 2019 prior to the pandemic hit, we are in a position through sterling management of the airline of achieving operational profit for the first time in that ten-year period. And now coming out of COVID, we are now talking about an expansion, expansion in terms of leasing new aircraft, new ATR, new Boeing jets, introducing a new cargo business, leasing more jets where that is concerned. And that is our record. A \$4 billion hole is their record. And what were the factors contributing? Four chairmen, changing the boards of directors, four chairmen, CEOs, all of these different things, changing them repeatedly over the time, no stability. So that is their contribution.

Sen. John: well, Sen. John gave us a little statement about the airport and I know Sen. John will know a lot about the airport—

**Sen John:** Yes I was there.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:**—and giving a statement saying—and I agree with Sen. John, by the way, that you know, that we should have had you know a lot

more persons coming through the airport. I mean the airport was intended to be a hub and we are working towards getting that done. But perhaps, Sen. John, as you know, when we ought to have been concentrating on extracting the economic value that the airport was supposed to have produced, we were focused on the corruption and massive “bobol” that came out of the airport.

I know you spoke out about it but you know firsthand, but we are working on it now. And under the Minister of Works and Transport—

**Sen John:** For three years straight, best airport in the Caribbean.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:**—best airport in the Caribbean.

**Sen John:** For three years straight.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** For three years straight.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Sen. John, Sen. John. Mr. President, Sen. John, spoke and she spoke a lot, she made some comments about blue lights. Sen. John, “yuh wicked inno”.

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

**4.55 p.m.**

**Mr. President:** Let us not get too exuberant in our comments. Continue, with caution.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** I apologize, I mean—I apologize. Sen. John, perhaps you could tell us who was the person in HDC who leased the Range Rover with the blue lights to provide it for the Minister of Housing at the time? Who used to use the Range Rover to drive past everybody “whoosh” going down the highway? Who is that person?

**Sen. John:** I do not drive government vehicles.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** I know the Senator has her Benz, and she speaks for poor people—she has her Benz—

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

**Hon. Senator:** Is who lease it?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:**—but—

**Sen. John:** [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Oh gosh.

**Mr. President:** So we are debating, and we are not having a running conversation across the floor.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Yeah.

**Mr. President:** Continue Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** I do not mean to do that. I apologize, Mr. President. So, you know, Sen. John also repeats the line, you know, “there is no prosperity without security” and goes ahead to invoke all the spirits of the victims of crime, you know. It is almost as though the UNC is trying to benefit from the high record of crime in the country. And I say that, Mr. President, because over the last session we have brought a number of pieces of legislation, items of legislation that were designed to target the criminal element, of course, supported by the security forces in the country, and they do not support it. They do not support any legislation. They come here to talk about the police have no photocopier and no paper, but support the measures, but they do not support it. But they try—it is almost as though their strategy is to exploit the crime situation, just to get them in office. And as you say, “there is no prosperity without security.” I would say there is no prosperity with the UNC.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** There is no prosperity with the UNC. Sen. John also spoke about a thousand people showing up by C3 for jobs, and it is really spurious logic to connect that to people who are jobless. I mean, there are times when the UNC—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** No. There are times when the UNC would latch onto the CSO's data and times like now, when we get extremely good news that the unemployment rate is 3.7 per cent—no, no, no, CSO is a PNM party group. But if we have an unemployment rate of 3.7 per cent, and people show up to a job fair or a recruitment fair, having regard to the data, it does not mean that people are jobless, it means that there are people, like all of us in here, who simply wish to examine what opportunities there are to improve their station in life. And that is what we got when we had the very successful cruise recruitment. I mean, I know that there was disaffection—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:**—in the hospitality—I am being disturbed. But when we—in the hospitality sector, there was significant job loss during the COVID-19 pandemic and we thought, wow, all of these people. But when we interviewed the people—people just simply looking for different opportunities—different opportunities, they have jobs, they feel as though they could do with a career change, and they just wanted different opportunities. People want different opportunities, they want to improve their station in life. And that is the most accurate inference to be drawn from this having regard to the CSO's data.

**Sen. Nakhid:** [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** No, you are disconnected from logic.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Crosstalk and desk thumping*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** You are disconnected from logic. So, Mr. President, I know you do not want me to engage with them, I will not engage with them. Right. So let me get into the presentation.

So I can report on the sectors that are tourism and culture. And of course, we are coming out with the first year coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, accepting, of course, that the tourism and cultural sectors were some of the hardest hit in the pandemic. And I was just speaking about the cruise recruitment exercise. We signed just a little over a year ago, a historic MOU with Royal Caribbean and I am happy to say that it is continuing. We have over 1,000 young people, unskilled, skilled, semi-skilled persons who became employed with Royal Caribbean earning a very, very decent wage, the minimum being US\$850 per month. They go for a tour, they are trained, all expenses are paid and then they come back and they choose whether to go again. And we are very happy to provide those opportunities for young people, even though the UNC castigates the programme. We are happy to help young people, especially coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

And you know, Mr. President, the people who took up these opportunities and the cruise recruitment left a very good mark in the cruise industry, so much so that Trinidad and Tobago labour in the hospitality sector is now being sought after. Because since Royal Caribbean came, we now have Disney cruises, we now have MSC cruises and other lines coming to us asking us, can we get some of your labour force, we have some opportunities for them. And we would continue to provide those opportunities while continuing, of course, to build our local tourism sector.

And staying on cruise, over the last cruise period, which begins October, ends in April, was our first cruise season coming out of the pandemic and we have had 68 cruise calls across Trinidad and Tobago in the ports of Port of Spain, in

Scarborough and in Charlotteville, for a total of approximately 96,000 passengers. And of course, the cruise sector is very important to us because it gives opportunities for our taxi drivers, our tour operators, our craftspeople, of course, to provide and to earn some foreign exchange and to earn a very good living doing that. So we are working to develop our ability to get the cruise passengers when they come onto land to purchase and leave a little more value here in Trinidad and Tobago. So, of the 95,000 passengers there was a disembarkation rate of 80 per cent so, four in five passengers disembarked, and they proceeded on these tours—walking tours, the Paramin tour, the Maracas Beach, Fort George, Asa Wright and the Caroni Bird Sanctuary.

We did some exit surveys and the average visitor spend from the passengers was US\$50—US\$50 for passengers and US\$26 for crew because, of course, the crew also comes off and they spend their money into the economy. So, to put into perspective, let us say 96,000 passengers disembarked on our shores during the cruise season, and spent approximately US\$4 million or TT\$25 million into the economy during the cruise season, October to April.

So in the upcoming cruise season, of course, we have very good news in that we will enjoy a 51 per cent increase of the number of cruise calls over Trinidad and Tobago, we have secured an increase from 68 cruise calls to 113 cruise calls across our ports and we anticipate 212,000 passengers and 81,000 crew members to call at our shores. So using the same average of course we will work to get up the visitor spend average giving the visitors a lot more opportunities and options to spend and, but using the \$50 average and 80 per cent of the passenger disembarkation rate, we expect to receive around US\$8 million and that is TT\$56 million, or there about, over the next cruise season. So working very hard at that to

ensure that we can extract more and more value out of these cruise lines that call at our shores.

We also had a very unique opportunity; we attracted a cruise charter over the 2023 Carnival period. And they called at our shores for approximately five days. That was the Carnival weekend and we saw value in that proposition because we have challenges as it relates to air transportation coming into the island during the Carnival period as well as accommodation. We simply do not have enough rooms; we are working on that as well.

So we had this cruise charter calling at our shores and we welcomed approximately 1,200 passenger guests on the ship and they participated in all the Carnival activities during that period. They went to parties, they played J'ouvert, they went to concerts, they played carnival, they played mas. And we are very happy because we also did some exit surveys and we determine that the spend was a bit higher, US\$2,500 per passenger and for that five-day period, it was about TT\$20 million that was put into the economy of Trinidad and Tobago—US\$3 million approximately. So we are very happy with that.

In Carnival 2023, we had 27,000 visitors for the Carnival season and we accept that these numbers are lower than pre-pandemic and we are working to get those numbers up. It was not that persons did not want to come to our shores, they simply could not because the airlift situation is not at the pre pandemic levels. We are working to get it back up to those levels.

For the Carnival period, exit surveys again were done and visitors spent approximately TT\$420 million in Trinidad and Tobago, and this was very welcome revenue for, of course, the persons who are involved in Carnival, the band leaders, the promoters, vendors, taxi drivers, the hotels, the Airbnb providers.



So it was very, very welcome revenue, and we look forward to 2024 where we expect this to increase.

Again, with respect to our airlift—air lift is at around 78 per cent with our pre-pandemic levels. So anyone who travels here knows that there is a higher demand and there is supply and we are working with the airlines—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Thank you. We are working with the airlines to ensure that it is returned to the pre-pandemic level and even increased. And the good news we have coming out of 2023 is that British Airways has now announced three direct flights to and from Port of Spain, and KLM— We met with KLM in January of this year went into their offices, we met with them, we sat with them with the data and encouraged them to increase. The KLM route is doing extremely well and for the winter season, they have indicated that they are increasing the flight schedule from three flights per week to four flights per week and in the Carnival period, they will increase it to five flights per week.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** We are doing extremely well with an 80 per cent load factor, of course, Copa Airlines has also increased its weekly flight schedule to seven times per week, Jet Blue has increased its frequency of flights to seven per week and Tobago continues to receive service from British Airways, Condor, Caribbean Airlines, which was started under this Government on the Germany, London and New York routes. So, we are continuing.

**5.10 p.m.**

With respect to hotel occupancy, we are working on the accommodation sector. With respect to the room tax, I can give an account of room tax, it is in our estimates. With respect to the financial year 2023, room tax charged at 10 percent

on rooms for hotels contributed approximately \$55 million to the Consolidated Fund, and that is a figure we will be working on, to increase over the next financial year and of course, we are working with hotels to ensure that those under construction, will be completed in the shortest possible time.

We are working to improve room stock, so for the cycle 2020 to 2023, the Minister of Finance would have spoken to our very successful tourism accommodation upgrade program, and we have now 10 properties under upgrading works, to the tune of \$25 million in capital spend. These are properties that have entered the program. The program is a reimbursable program where you get 50 percent of the cost to capital works, up to a ceiling, and the hotels that are participating, Cara Hotels in Claxton Bay, Par May La's in Port of Spain, Holiday Inn Express in Trincity, Royal Hotel in San Fernando, Sundeck Suites in Port of Spain, Tradewinds Hotel in San Fernando, Coral Cove Marina and Paria Suites Hotel. So, as the Minister announced, the program would be extended for another three years, and we will do what it takes to market the program to ensure—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:**—that there are more participants in the program. In hotel development, Mr. President, I am pleased that the last budget I spoke about Asa Wright, and the renovation and refurbishment works going on at Asa Wright. And today I am proud to say that a few months ago they reopened, relaunched the Asa Wright nature eco lodge 29-room property. It was completed at a cost of \$11 million and approximately 50 permanent jobs were created.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** These projects are done in collaboration with Government under the Tourism Development Act.

Mt. Plaisir, in Grande Riviere, that is also under refurbishment works to the

tune of about \$10 million. It is a 21-room property. It has been bought by the same persons who now own the eco lodge, well, own the lease of the eco lodge, and that will be completed shortly, and of course it will create 23 permanent jobs in the Grand Riviere community. That is a unique property—with the opportunities of course, in our ecotourism space, with the unique leather back turtle-watching opportunities that they provide.

Of course last November 2022, we turned the sod to the Sheraton Hotel in Piarco. It is 152-room hotel with \$156 million investment, and construction has completed.

Mr. President, we have the Maracas Bay Hotel, we have the NAPA Hotel that we wish to get an operator for. Of course the Marriott Hotel that is getting all their approvals and so on, and there are a number of hotels.

Time does not permit me to get into everything—the tourism sites and attractions that were upgraded, Fort George, et cetera. But, of course, during the course of the year, I will take the opportunity, every opportunity to tell all of Trinidad and Tobago and the world, of all the good things that we are doing in the tourism and cultural space.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** And I thank you, and I salute, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance and everybody on this side—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:**—for an excellent budget and we look forward to fiscal 2024.

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

**Sen. Dr. Browne:** The President is on his legs.

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

**Mr. President:** All right, Sen. Mark. Leader of Government Business.

### ADJOURNMENT

**The Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne):** Mr. President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Wednesday, October, 24<sup>th</sup>—

**Hon. Senator:** Tuesday.

**Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:** Tuesday October, 24<sup>th</sup> at 10.00 a.m.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. President:** Let him finish. Put the question again please, Leader of Government Business.

**Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:** Thank you kindly. Mr. President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Tuesday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, at 10.00 o' clock in the morning.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Senate adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 5.15 p.m.*