

SENATE*Tuesday, October 24, 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. Anthony Vieira SC, who is out of the country, and Sen. Anil Roberts, who is ill.

SENATORS' APPOINTMENT

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

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. FRANCIS M. LEWIS

WHEREAS Senator Anthony Vieira, S.C. is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(c) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, FRANCIS LEWIS to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with

UNREVISED

Senator's Appointment

2023.10.24

effect from 24th October, 2023 and continuing during the absence of Senator Anthony Vieira, S.C. from Trinidad and Tobago.

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 23rd day of October, 2023."

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: DR. TIM GOPEESINGH

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

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section 44(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, do hereby appoint you, TIM GOPEESINGH to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 24th October, 2023 and continuing during the absence of Senator Anil Roberts by reason of illness.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the
President of the Republic of Trinidad and

UNREVISED

Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 24th day of October, 2023.”

AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Francis M. Lewis took and subscribed the Affirmation of Allegiance as required by law.

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Dr. Tim Gopeesingh took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

PAPER LAID

Third Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Point Fortin Borough Corporation for the financial year ended September 30, 2002. [*The Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne)*]

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT

**Finance and Legal Affairs
Legal Aid and Advisory Authority and Public Defenders' Office
(Presentation)**

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

Seventh Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament, on an Inquiry into the accessibility and quality of legal representation provided by the State with specific focus on the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority and the Public Defenders' Office.

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEES (APPOINTMENT TO)

UNREVISED

The Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Mr. President, I beg to move the following Motion:

Be it resolved that the Senate agree to the following appointments to the Joint Select Committees:

1. On the Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (Including the THA), Ms. Sunity Maharaj, in lieu of Dr. Varma Deyalsingh.
2. On the Human Rights, Equality and Diversity, Mr. Helon Francis, in lieu of Mrs. Hazel Thompson-Ahye.
3. On the Public Accounts Committee, Mrs. Hazel Thompson-Ahye, in lieu of Mrs. Cherrise Seepersad.
4. On the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee, Mrs. Hazel Thompson-Ahye, in lieu of Ms. Amrita Deonarine.
5. On the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee, Dr. Sharda Patasar, in lieu of Ms. Amrita Deonarine.
6. On the Joint Select Committee on Energy Affairs, Prof. Gerard Hutchinson, in lieu of Ms. Cherrise Seepersad.

Question put and agreed to.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023

[Third Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 23, 2023]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Mr. President: We have had on the first day 12 speakers and on the second day we have had another 12 speakers. Sen. Lutchmedial.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial: Mr. President, I thank you sincerely for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on this Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2024, or as someone told me yesterday, it should be really called, a long-drawn-out display of self-congratulatory mindset by a group of persons suffering from what they call, “perfection perception”.

Speaker after speaker from the Government Bench, Mr. President, has stood here and they heaped praises onto themselves as though they are trying to convince themselves first that outside of these walls, people are not desperate to survive, wondering where they will find the money to pay increased utility rates, property taxes and to deal with the rising cost of food, while simultaneously living in fear that gang members, who are working for drug lords that have taken control of entire communities in this country, would probably have the opportunity to shoot them while they sleep in their beds at night.

They try to trivialize the suffering endured by persons who lose their possessions, livestock, crops, vehicles, appliances and those same beds every time you have more than 30 minutes of rainfall. Why? Because according to them, it is climate change. That is the excuse that we hear, but not one speaker has actually set out a plan that this Government has to address what we know to be the inevitable effects of climate change. All over the world, if you look at government policy and plans, they speak about how they intend to cope with and mitigate against the risks posed by climate change. We have had 24 speakers so far, many of them from the Government Bench, and I have heard nothing about a substantive plan to address the issue of climate change. What I hear is just an excuse for the failure of Ministry after Ministry to properly treat with the issue of flooding.

We have not heard about proper plans being put in place to deal with

flooding. We have not heard about proper plans to really treat with the issue of compensation. We have not heard about proper plans to build retention ponds or have simple things being put in place to alleviate the suffering of our citizens, and that is what we came here expecting to hear from the Government. But we are reminded at every single juncture when we come to this place that this Government is an uncaring government that will come here and proffer excuse after excuse, without any real plans.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

10.15 a.m.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: So they will come here and tell—you know, let the peasants “lotayla” in the flood water because it is not their fault. The failure to repair flood gates, install proper functioning pumps, and actually switch on those pumps when it is necessary. Mr. President, we—and I think my colleagues and I want to adopt what was said by my colleague Sen. John about the fact that the UNC is always down on the ground listening to what people have to say.

I have had the experience this year, during this financial year, of visiting one of the places that I heard both Ministers in the Ministry of Works and Transport speak about in south Trinidad where a simple switch to get a pump activated at the Tulsa Trace Picnic Site in south Trinidad could not happen until I actually saw a cow stuck in flood water, a cow, after a little bit of rain fall. And I saw students who had to go and write CSEC examinations sitting in their living rooms with water up to their thighs. But you know what I saw in the middle of all of that hopelessness created by this Government? I saw UNC councillors arranging with private—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial:—citizens to bring trucks to pick up those children and take

them to school. And the next day I stood in this House and a question was posed by Sen. Mark asking what arrangements were being made to treat with the issue of children who had to miss exams because 21 children were picked up on trucks provided by private citizens through the goodness of their hearts at the request of our councillors who were on the ground and taken to write their exam, but many of them missed it and what we were told on that day? “We still collecting information, we still collecting information.”

I can tell you today that some of those children who were not able to write their CSEC exams have received absolutely no proper feedback as to where they will stand when they write the CAPE level one and how they will be graded and so on because they live in rural parts of south Trinidad. On an entire day when rain fell and somebody from the Ministry of Works and Transport could not ensure that a pump was activated and those children had to roll up their trousers and jump on a flatbed truck and go to try and to write exams their exams while watching others who were inaccessible, stay home and not write their exam. We have Ministers who will come to this House and say, “we still collecting data” because 24 hours is not enough time to even put something in place to even assist those children. And then they stand here and say they are doing everything to increase education because education is the passport to prosperity and so on. Education is something, it is a passport out of poverty and a passport towards prosperity but it should be for everybody.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: And that is why you had a UNC government that tried to be the great equalizer when it came to education. We created access to education using technology, we tried our best to put the same access in the hand of every child.

Under this Government and their failure to manage catastrophes that we could anticipate like flooding, because for months and months and months councillors write letters that riverbanks are broken and need to be repaired and it is not done. They cannot anticipate the challenges that would be faced and put things in place to ensure that every single child—you “doh” even have to give them a laptop, you “doh” have to give them the textbook grant, you “doh” have to do anything, just make sure the children can go to school and write their exam and that is something that this Government has failed to do.

In this debate, a Ministry that receives over \$2 billion a year has spoken about all sorts of grand plans, and congratulated themselves about opening a highway that was started by somebody else and was somebody else’s idea and that they could not get it off the ground. But they are here to congratulate themselves of the job that they say they have completed which we know to be untrue minus a big crack that we “doh” know how much it is going to cost to fix just yet.

But they have not actually told us about the \$11 million spent so far for a Commission of Enquiry that cannot start; \$11 million spent. And you know what I realize, that it is convenient for them to not start that enquiry because they know that if we have an actual commission of enquiry, a serious commission of enquiry, the UNC will be vindicated.

10.35 a.m.

The guns are not being made here, we are allowing them in. But if you want a legal firearm well, you are in trouble in this country. If you are a businessperson in this country you are sent through the ringer in order to acquire a firearm to protect yourself. It is the first duty, it is a fundamental part of the social contract between the State and the citizen that the citizens sacrifice certain rights and freedoms and pay their taxes and do what they are supposed to do and in exchange

the Government will provide you with your—you know, try to secure your basic fundamental rights, the biggest one being the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to the enjoyment of your property, and we as citizens of this country under this administration we are being deprived of those rights due to government incompetence. And I do not even think it is incompetence, I think they just do not care. I truly believe they are complicit in what is happening now, because you cannot tell me that from 2021 you sat down there and talking about RFP and Central Tenders Board, and you need to get some scanners working on our ports when you know the guns are coming in. But when you went to Australia, you were operating like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, “Yuh eh want one, yuh want two boats”.

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

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: You bypassed procurement. “Yuh geh ketch” bypassing procurement for your \$3.4 million symposium and had to come here now and fix your illegality, and you see, that is probably why we have such a lawless society because we have a lawless government.

Sen. Nakhid: “Yeah. Oh, gosh, speak.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: We have a lawless government that will bypass procurement and when they “get catch”, come here and ask us and say, “Oh God, procurement so hard, it so bad”. Back to back we came to this Parliament to ratify and fix illegality, once putting off an election, and the other time basically pelting out—and it is a form of dishonesty and thieving.

Sen. Nakhid: Pilfering.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: That is what it is, when you avoid—

Mr. President: Just—

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: I apologize, that is not parliamentary. It is a form of avoiding any form of accountability and transparency and ducking under the line and doing things behind the backs of the citizens when you spend money.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: But to spend money on tendering for scanners and getting scanners here, getting sole select and getting the scanners working to save the life of a 13-year-old child who went to report that she was raped. They will not do that. They have to go RFP and Central Tenders Board and so on because those lives do not matter. What matters is that on the eve of an election they could spend \$3.4 million with no accountability.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: So the CARICOM lime and the \$3.4 million was urgent, but getting functional scanners on our port is not urgent for this Government to keep—to save the lives of children, to save the lives of our mothers.

We had a tender for CCTV, 2020. I think when I came into the Parliament we were dealing with that issue, one set of things, tender cancelled, this one reopened, bobol, somebody announced an investigation. What happened to the investigation? Silence. It is significantly easier for a criminal to get an illegal firearm than for a law-abiding citizen to get simple non-lethal weapons like pepper spray for their own protection.

In living up to the real name and identity of their political party, “promises never materialize”, to date, what was touted as a simple process with no bureaucracy that would allow citizens to access pepper spray, because they were under pressure at the time when we had the death of a couple of young women in this country and the citizens started to rise up against them, they came here and the passed a law and said, “Oh, gosh, it have thing and you print your code and you

walking in/out, it is like a prescription, and you leave the police station”. Tell us how many licences have been given to importers and retailers and users who wish to purchase pepper spray, to date? I think it is a question on the Order Paper by Sen. Richards, and I am anxious to hear. Two years later how many people can actually have—we know you do not want “to give no FUL to nobody”. You are auditing. Okay.

Sen. Mark: To their friends.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Okay, I say their friends. While they are auditing, people are dying, people are being—elderly couples being tied up and beaten in their homes and so on. All right. But you audit. But pepper spray? Pepper spray is such a difficulty? So we had all of those promises never coming up. Never actually producing any results to improve the safety and security of citizens.

Self-protection is being thwarted by the State and meanwhile they cannot keep citizens safe. The problem with crime, Mr. President, is that this Government does not understand about prevention, detection and rehabilitation, and they do not understand how to treat with all three in a way that would bring down crime and result in a reduction in recidivism. If you ask them what is the plan on crime, you know what the plan is? “We want to deny bail, you know, but the UNC would not support us.” Again, intellectual laziness. Intellectual laziness and incompetence, that the only thing they could come and present to this Parliament that they say will help them reduce crime, is no bail. So whether you are innocent, you are guilty, you are a first-time offender, you are a repeat offender, they want to restrict your access to bail when you are supposed to enjoy a right to reasonable bail. When you are supposed to enjoy the presumption of innocence. But it sounds nice and it sounds nicer to blame the UNC, so that is what—

Sen. John: Yes, “only them innocent”.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Yeah, “only dem innocent”, but everything else, deny bail, deny bail. But you know you can fool some people some of the time but you “cah” fool all of the people all of the time. And I am happy to say that it was not just the UNC in this House but it was also the Independent Bench that said, listen, you have not come here with sufficient evidence to show that this is in any way effective to treat with the crime problem. Go back, rethink your strategy, come up with different solutions, and what?

Sen. Nakhid: Go back. Yes.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Nothing. The murders going up and nothing, nothing from this Government to treat with crime. What they will say, blame the UNC. The UNC passed electronic monitoring legislation, first introduced it in this Parliament. They said they had issues, they wanted to make changes or whatever, they brought amendments and so on.

Electronic monitoring is internationally recognized as not a broad-brush approach to restrict people’s liberty whilst it takes them 10-plus years to have their day in court, but that they can continue with their lives. The cost to the State of maintaining the prisoner in Remand Yard is significantly reduced, the family life of the individual who is accused but not yet convicted is preserved. I marvel sometimes when I hear the same police officers, some of them, Members opposite and so on, they talk about we have this problem with single mothers and absent fathers and so on. When you impose a restriction on bail you know what you do? You create a single-mother household. You create a single-mother household, so the supposed plans and policies that you all come up with, with you intellectually lazy approach to governance is to create single-mother homes.

You create families with children who do not see their parents, who do not see their father for 13 years, and in 13 years when he comes out of prison, because

he is not convicted, because we have no DNA, we have no CCTV, the witness who was in witness protection left, “or dead” or never got into witness protection or refused to give evidence, the child has not seen the father for 13 years. The child did not grow up with a father to guide them. The father is isolated from the community. He is told at the end of 13 years, “Sorry, the State does not have enough evidence—

Sen. Nakhid: “What they care? Is black families. Dey doh care about black people.”

Sen. John: That is normal. That is normal for them.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial:—“against you, go home”.

Sen. Nakhid: Neo-colonial—

Mr. President: Senator, Senator, have a seat. Sen. Nakhid, you are not right now on the floor carded to speak. You will have your turn. Your colleague is the person on the floor who is recognized. Sen. Lutchmedial.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, it pains them because they love to come here—when I first came to this Senate, I remember the former Attorney General, “Akili Charles, Akili Charles, Akili Charles”. Akili Charles spent a decade of his life fighting to prove his innocence. A woman by the name of Debbie Jacob was so moved by his story that she wrote an entire editorial about it in the newspaper about the type of person that he was. But when Akili Charles was told, after nine years, “We have no evidence against you, you know, okay, you free to go”. He picked up his one rubber slippers and went back to the area that he came from, which is still riddled with crime and criminality and gangs—

Sen. Nakhid: Their constituency.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Yes, your constituency, a PNM-controlled constituency.

Sen. Nakhid: “All yuh doh care about black people.”

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: And for nine years got no education, or nobody would hire him because he came out of Remand Yard, everybody in the community knew that he was in Remand Yard. He had not seen his family and lost all connection and support. that social support system. If you have electronic monitoring, and anybody who thinks, who is not so lazy that they actually think about the benefits of putting on an ankle bracelet on someone who is accused of a crime, and giving them the opportunity to continue to work, take care of themselves, we have to allocate money in this budget to feed and house and try to clothe and give medical and dental and all the other support that is needed in the Remand Yard, you can cut that expenditure and buy electronic monitoring bracelets—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial:—and let people continue to see their children and have a relationship with their family so that in the event that they are after nine years and 13 years, told, “We have no evidence you know, go back home”, their lives are not destroyed, and that the State does not have to continue to bear the brunt of what is taking place with them. Where are the plans and the policies and the procedures within this budget to treat with those issues?

When the Akili Charles matter was going to the Privy Council the State asked for a stay, they came before the court and said the Electronic Monitoring Unit “hah” no bracelet, they have no monitoring, “dey hah” no staff, they have nothing. Imagine they put that on an affidavit in a court matter as though that is something to be proud of, and say we cannot use electronic monitoring and therefore you cannot allow bail.

Why have we not heard about the establishment of a proper parole system? You know when COVID hit they had to start identifying people willy-nilly and

trying to figure out who we could get out of jail quickly because if COVID breaks out in the prisons we would have a problem. If we had a proper system of parole we would not have that problem. And I do not know if they do not buy papers and they do not read the newspapers, but you see all the time that judges sometimes interact with young people who went to jail for very serious offences, but those children get into the system and they are models—because they are probably removed from the very bad environment that caused them to be caught up in criminal activity in the first place and they become, you know, they are model prisoners and they are released back into society. But when we release them back into society what are we giving them? What are we doing for them? Do we have a psychologist who will sit and work with them and deal with the trauma of being imprisoned for nine and 10 and 12 years? Akili Charles, God rest his soul, never received any support from the State when he left prison, and he met an untimely death because he went back to a community riddled with crime and refusing to join a gang, he was murdered.

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

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: Mr. President, there is so much that you could say about the wastage of money in this country and money not being put into what is the critical needs to keep us safe as a country. We could talk about the \$55 million wasted on a building which was not fit for purpose, and which nobody did because, you know, “hurry, hurry come for curry”, when an election was coming in 2020 they went and shook hands and had a big ceremony to hand over keys and now they are trying to put the blame on the office of the DPP.

We could talk about the \$11 million wasted on a commission of enquiry that has never started. We could talk about the damages that the Government continues to pay out of—it was in the newspaper this weekend, and I am sure everybody saw

it, the damages that they have to continue to pay for unlawful dismissals. We could talk about the amount of money they have to pay for default judgments, and when I asked a question in this Parliament I got an answer which I was able to refute by producing just two matters where the amount that the Attorney General said their office paid as a result of default of filing a defence when we had the \$20 million scandal with the Vindra Naipaul-Coolman matter, and they do not even have the information.

Nobody is monitoring what is taking place at the Office of the Attorney General with respect to how many matters they are losing, how many matters they are failing to file a defence, how many matters they are failing to file even an appearance, but they will blame everybody and then make up—because, you know, the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, as somebody was telling me, is now the Ministry of magic. And I do not know if you follow the Harry Potter series, within the Ministry of magic you have a department called “magical accidents and catastrophes”. Well, this was the year of magical accidents and catastrophes in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs while a file grew feet, walked out of a Ministry and then came back in, and right after that they had a cyberattack, and now every Minister has come here and talked about “we building ah app for this and there is ah app for dat”, but what they have, they cannot even secure.

For weeks we had state attorneys appearing in court in this country saying that they had no access to their email, they had no access to certain files and they could not continue with litigation in this country. We had a Companies Registry that crashed and went down, and the Minister of Trade and Industry trying her, you know, doing the most, trying to increase and improve the ease of doing business ratings and so on, for the country, but something as simple as access to the

Companies Registry and being able to file your returns and incorporate new companies and to do business, went down this year under the watch of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs.

10.50 a.m.

When are we going—and, you know, the fact of the matter is that nobody takes ownership of what happens. Everything is swept to the side and swept under the rug. I heard the Minister of Digital Transformation get up and say, “We have found local companies that could do well.” And the Attorney General, nobody else get the memo, but he started pounding the desk loudly and nearly broke the desk because he is so happy that somebody apparently, I do not know, locally, can fix their problems. Well, I do hope that they find the accidental magic reversal squad from Harry Potter that could come and fix all the problems plaguing the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs because this is the worst—absolute worst management of legal affairs—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial:—in this country. And I say that as someone who has been a practitioner for close to 20 years and I grew up in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, and I have never seen so many catastrophes after catastrophes, wastage of money and the absolute production of zero results. Something as simple as getting our consolidated laws, we have not had consolidated laws produced in this country since 2016 and please “doh tell me is COVID”, because it is long before COVID that this has been due.

Mr. President, what the country is facing, apart from a threat to your life, your safety and security, is you are facing an increased retirement age. The captains of enterprise and members of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce apparently sat down and thought it was a great idea. Well, go and tell that to the

57-year-old woman who is now an AO IV in the Ministry and has been working since she is 18 years old, and travelling from Barrackpore every day to Port of Spain, looking forward to sitting down in her hammock and rocking her grandchildren, that she now has to work five extra years before she could access her pension. Go and tell them that, because you all do not live that life—

Sen. John: They do not even ask anybody.

Sen. Nakhid: They do not care.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial: And you do not care and you do not listen to the people. I—and Sen. John—and I will wrap up by saying, one of the best things that I have done in my entire life but since entering this House was listening to the mandate of the political leader and having those pre-budget consultations. I sat in a room with no air conditioning unit and listened to people, fishermen, taxi drivers and others complain to us about real problems. And the day this Government decides to come out of their ivory towers and do that, they might actually produce a budget that has some results for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and some use.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Teemal.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Deeroop Teemal: Mr. President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate before this House. And first of all, as a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago and one who follows the Hindu tradition, I must condemn the act of desecration of the Ramleela grounds in Tarouba, Trinidad, that took place some days ago.

Sen. Mark: I join you in support of it.

Sen. D. Teemal: And following that, several days later, a couple of days after, there is a school that is housed within a temple complex in Beaucarro, in Trinidad,

and there was a function going on and stones were thrown, damaging vehicles and raining stones on the structure itself. Mr. President, why I raise this is because over the past, particularly over the past three years, there has been a string of incidents regarding desecration of temples; a string of incidents.

Now, reports have been made to the police and reports have been taken. But from what I have gathered, by interacting with those who use these facilities—I personally visited a couple of them after the desecration—is that—the thing is that the police is being dismissive of these incidents, and that it is a vagrant or it is a mentally disturbed person who is doing this. You know, that is the sort of general message that is coming across. But what we need to note is that to take alcohol and to take meat into a temple deliberately, to desecrate a temple, it calls for really a high level of organization and thinking from vagrants and mentally disturbed people.

Sen. Mark: Is the PNM—

Sen. D. Teemal: So I think that we should not continue to be dismissive of it, because history would show us, not only in Trinidad and Tobago but all over the world, that these things may start as trickles but they can really mount into serious problems, and as a nation we need to bear that in mind, and—

Sen. Mark: The PNM has been doing that?

Sen. D. Teemal:—and appropriate steps be taken.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark. One second, Sen. Teemal.

Sen. Mark: My apologies, my apologies.

Mr. President: As much as you are apologizing, the disturbance has occurred. Please, all Senators be reminded that when a Senator is on their legs, they have the right to silence whilst they are speaking and contributing. Continue, Sen. Teemal.

Sen. D. Teemal: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, the theme of the

budget statement this year, as put forward by our Minister of Finance, is: Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth—within a world of challenges. And, you know, I have looked as much as possible at the budget statement and all of the well-prepared documents that came with it and really to assess, from what has been presented, what is the diversification that we are aiming to build capacity for. It is a bit difficult because it is scattered throughout the documents and there is no clear—at least I did not find it—concise diversification road map, if I am to coin a term, that clearly tells us this is what the Government intends with regard to diversification, the areas of diversification, the goals of those areas of diversification, what are the objectives that we are trying to meet, and clearly identify a pathway of diversification.

And the reason I raise this, Mr. President, is because we have been hearing about diversification for decades and decades and decades, governments come, governments go, everybody speaks about diversification, but yet still as a nation we have not been able to grasp, we have not been able to concretize exactly what aspects of diversification we are looking at and how are we going to get there. So if we are building capacity, that capacity has to be linked to a pathway, a definitive pathway, and I am sure it exists. It is just that in order for us to really assess all of what is being presented here in the context of diversification and to provide the necessary support as a legislative body for whatever policies need to be implemented, whatever actions need to be implemented, we need to relate that to a clear policy, we need to relate that to a clear road map, so that we would be able to support the Government in their quest for diversification for the benefit of the nation.

Also, Mr. President, with regard to what has been presented, is that for the average citizen, and I count myself as an average citizen, I would hear about GDP

ratio, debt-to-GDP ratio, inflation ratio, all sorts of ratios, and percentages increased, and all of those things, but as an average citizen, is the average citizen really interested in that? Because at the end of the day, the bottom line is, what disposable income do I have in my hand, do I get in my hand coming out of the budget?

Yes, there are some measures—there are some fiscal measures outlined in the budget that are going to increase disposable income for some of our citizens but at the same time, whether that increase, when we look at it, is it going to be able to make up, is it going to be able to meet the slew of increases that we keep getting all the time? I mean, there is going to be an increase in rate for electricity, possibly water later down the road. The cost of living, although the inflation rate is being touted at 4.7 per cent, the average citizen who goes to the grocery to buy food on a regular basis, 4.7 per cent, they are trying to rationalize 4.7 per cent because grocery bills and food bills have increased tremendously over the period of time.

So what we are giving—I have heard it said, you are giving in one hand but taking it back through the other hand. And the reality is, how much is the budget connected with the reality of our citizens in terms of the hardships that they are facing and the many, many, challenges in keeping their children in schools, meeting the cost of living, transportation cost and all of these things? And I think we need to bear that in mind that although macro-planning and macroeconomic indicators tell us a certain story, it is whether that story that is being told by the macroeconomic indicators and the development indicators, whether that is really connected to the reality of what is on the ground. And I think we need to bear that in mind.

Mr. President, in terms of the property tax, the Minister of Finance did go

into detail in explaining the various categories and the impact. Generally, what is coming across is that the figures are much less than what is being touted with regard to the property tax. What I have to ask is, and I would have liked to get some information on is, what is the time frame for the implementation of property tax for commercial, industrial and agricultural land, property? Because for some reason the first grouping are the residential properties, so we are coming back to the same grouping of persons reeling under all the hardships to add this tax, whereas we are leaving the commercial, agricultural land, industrial alone for the time being.

We should indicate specifically a timeline for the implementation of property tax for all categories of users because by taxing the residential users, the commercial users, the industrial users are benefiting from that tax, because a lot of them are located in communities that use the roads. Heavy containerized cargo use the roads that have to be maintained by the local corporations and we are taxing the residents in order to enhance the maintenance of these facilities. So we need to urgently look at bringing commercial and industrial and also agricultural on to the tax net, the property tax network, so that it is more equitable and the brunt of it is not carried by the residential classes.

Mr. President, before I move off property tax, in his budget presentation, the Minister of Finance, and I quote, stated on page 32:

“For more significant and larger properties that rent for \$10,000 per month, the property tax would be \$3,000 per annum or \$250 per month, which is quite affordable for owners of properties in that higher range.”

11.05 a.m.

Mr. President, I would tend to look at it a little differently than the Minister of Finance. Two hundred and fifty dollars may seem to be not within the means of

persons who own properties of this size. But, I think if we take into account that a lot of these homes were built when the families had several breadwinners in the family, they were in the hey day of their career, their income was a lot more, and they got into constructing properties and constructing homes, understandably so, to cater for probably larger families and because they had the means and the wherewithal to do it. And later down the road, a lot of those persons would have reduced income because they may have retired, pension is not equivalent to the income earned during their career, and they are dealing with a situation of reduced income.

So when I reflect on the statement of \$250 per month being quite affordable, I would beg to differ on that. Because this \$250 a month could well be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel back when it is added on to rising cost of food, cost of living, potential increase in rents, increase in electricity rates, and the increase in water rates which is to come.

Mr. President, I would just briefly like to touch on the issue of crime. Minister of Finance states in his budget statement and I quote:

“At the top of our crime-fighting agenda is equipping law enforcement with state-of-the-art tools. In addition, accelerated levels of police training, improved police performance. We envisage that crime and public order would be effectively addressed within this framework and public confidence in law enforcement would be appropriately enhanced.”

Mr. President, to be effective state-of-the-art tools require a state-of-the-art TTPS, and we are far removed from that.

You know whenever the issue of the TTPS comes up, I would notice a lot of us choose to tread exceedingly carefully for some reason or the other, like if we are walking on eggshells and we do not want to offend anybody. The intention is not

to offend, but in terms of where we are, where the TTPS is, I think really honest assessment and honest evaluation it leaves much to be desired. In the budget statement the Minister of Finance goes on to say there is no avoiding the fact that:

“...public confidence in the police and police legitimacy is essential. We recognize that in many instances the lack of trust between the police and the community constrains effective crime intervention. The TTPS is now establishing trusted and vetted police units within the police service staffed by higher paid officers have proven integrity. We are aiming at improving police accountability, re-establishing trust and credibility between the police and the communities...”

Mr. President, if that statement there is not an admission of the corruption that exist in the TTPS, I do not know what is the intent of this statement.

Imagine we have to form special units within the TTPS of vetted police officers, pay them more in order to do the job that the police service is supposed to be doing in the first place. It is an admission of corruption because it means that there are corrupt police officers in sufficient numbers in the police service to affect the performance of the police service. I often hear about we have a few bad apples in the police service, I disagree with that statement. What few bad apples are we talking about? We have numerous bad apples in the police service that—it needs to be addressed. We cannot be talking about crime without talking about police reform. And in all of what has been presented, I do not think other than this statement here, what is being done to reform the police service.

We are sinking billions of dollars every year into the police service and we have seen patterns have developed into the service. And sometimes I think, maybe what the thinking is, that the police service is untouchable that we have to pamper, we have to coerce, for a service that we are paying for, that taxpayers are paying

for. The reason the trust is not there is that the public do not trust the police service because of the corruption. It is clear.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Teemal: You talk to the average citizen outside there, they are scared stiff of making a report to the police. They are scared stiff because they would tell you that the person they are making the report to, they do not know what connection that police has with the criminal elements in this country. And that is common talk there. It is not unique.

So it is either we face this problem with the police service head on and, of course, I am not saying that—there are very good aspects of the police service that are working, because the good ones are the ones that at least keeping the situation you know under some semblance of control. And we thank those police officers for their dedication, and their commitment, and their loyalty to Trinidad and Tobago, but we need to face the fact that we have to address police reform in a structured meaningful way so that it can contribute to our fight against crime.

Mr. President, local government. The entire local government campaign of the Government was based on local government reform arising out of the passage of the local government reform legislation, and I am a bit puzzled when I look at the budget of 2024. I am a bit puzzled because in the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*, under the heading of Implement of Local Government Reform, \$14 million has been allocated to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and \$1.5 million has been allocated to each corporation under local government reform. Now why I am puzzled is I know, yes, a lot of moneys are spread across other areas of expenditure and other areas of development, but if we are looking to implement local government reform in the way that is intended by the legislation, Mr. President, to effect the administrative changes, to effect and

to bring about the reorganization of all the corporations, even that planning stage, that initial stage of laying the framework for local government reform, I really cannot see how \$14 million is enough for the line Ministry and just \$1.5 million would be enough for the regional corporations. I really do not understand how we arrived at those figures. In my view and my understanding of the intended local government reform, if we really need to accelerate it at the pace that it should be done, those allocations need to be reviewed.

Mr. Vice-President, I would like to go to, just to share some thoughts on the ease of doing business.

Hon. Senator: Mr. President

Sen. D. Teemal: Oh, sorry, Mr. President, my apologies. And sometimes we would think that the ease of doing business is about being able to register companies easily through improvements in our digitalization, and aspects like that. But really those are, to me, a bit lower down on the scale because those are questions of procedures that if we bring to bear and we continue with our efforts of digitalization, we are going to address all of those in an effective and meaningful manner. But I would just like to raise a couple of issues that I have been raising in my past budget contributions, that I continue to see having a debilitating effect on the ease of doing business, and the first one is, of course, statutory approvals.

We would be aware that depending on the type of development that you want to engage in, sometimes you would need approvals from statutory bodies and agencies up to 14 entities at a time depending on the—and in the previous budget for the year 2023, our Minister of Finance did indicate that he actually put a time period to it. He said, 254 days it takes to get all our approvals to enter into any sort of development here in Trinidad and Tobago. And he did say that that is going to be addressed. Come this year in the budget, no mention is made of it directly and I

am wondering in terms of, where we are going with this.

Mr. President, the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, again, has allowed \$3 million for the National Planning Authority which is a requisite for the proclamation and operationalization of the Planning and Facilitation of Development Act of 2014. Mr. President, it is now nine years since this Act was legislated, and I am asking: what is the delay in getting this Act operationalized? The country has been suffering under this whole thing of statutory approvals. A whole industry has been created where building inspectors have become architects in their private capacity and corruption pervades the system of approvals. The first thing—I am in the industry—somebody asks you, “Boy, you know anybody in Town and Country Planning? You know anybody in WASA?” And you hear a litany of woes, and this is for decades that this is going on in this country. Why can we not get it sorted out?

We have the Act that was legislated in 2014, and you know when we look at the proposed local government reform and the role of planning and development, a lot of it being transferred to the local government bodies. And the role that they have to play in planning, and approvals, and development, and yet still we do not have this Act proclaimed, I really wonder how we are going to integrate all of this. Local government reform calls for extensive reform with regards to how we go about planning and approving of development and building approvals, and here we have an Act since 2014 stuck. One is depending on each other to move forward, and I see it as a serious problem if we really do not get this thing together, get it sorted out. I am humbly suggesting to the Minister of Finance that \$3 million is not going to take us home with this national planning authority.

Three million dollars is not going to take us home during 2024. And how much more can we just give phases, and phases, and phases for this, when this to

me is a priority item that affects the ease of doing business, not only for local entities but for international entities seeking to do business in Trinidad and Tobago. And one aspect of the statutory approvals that I feel obligated to bring to the attention of this Senate is the role of WASA. Now a lot of times the focus is on WASA as a supplier of water and a provider of wastewater services, but a lot of times we do not recognize the role of WASA in the development process in Trinidad and Tobago. Because under law all your developments, certain residential, commercial, you have to receive approval from WASA and certification from WASA before you could get connected legally.

11.20 a.m.

And WASA has people—the only thing people are not doing is crying blood in this country when it comes to the new services department, “eh know”. I know of developments and people with finished projects waiting two years for a connection from WASA, two years. We are talking about the ease of doing business and the new services department at WASA, I do not know what the problem is, because we have been trying to fix that problem for the longest while. The whole department was fired years ago because of corruption. They were replaced, they are understaffed.

Imagine you have a project going on, you have resources on site, you have materials, you have equipment, you have labour and when you have to cover up pipelines in certain developments, you have to wait on WASA. Imagine the cost of having to wait on WASA for two weeks and three weeks and four weeks and two months for somebody to come and do an inspection. All of that cost is transferred to the taxpayer who is purchasing the properties arising out of development and it drives up the cost of our development. And really and truly, we need to zero-in on what is causing the problem.

Mr. President, could you indicate to me how much—at what time do I finish?

Mr. President: You end at 11.32.

Sen. D. Teemal: Okay, so I will come to—Mr. President, Sen. Paul Richards took an approach through education that resonated with me because it is the same approach that I am going to take with some of the points regarding land and physical infrastructure in looking at expenditure and a question of whether we are getting the results from that extensive expenditure. And the question I am asking is: Are we getting value for money with regard to our considerable expenditure in infrastructure?

Now first I would like to look at our drainage programmes, and the Minister of Works and Transport did outline in detail some of the efforts being made by his Ministry with regard to drainage. He mentioned a national strategic drainage plan which is definitively a step in the right direction, because, you know, at least we have some strategic direction to how we go about solving our drainage problems.

Now, what is happening, at least from what I have seen of the programme thus far is focus on desilting, focus on pumps and sluice gates and those control mechanisms that would allow us a fighting chance to manage the flow of slump water. He also mentioned about river walling to some extent and yes, I think these are good projects that are going to help the situation. But in terms of the desilting and the major river programmes, you know what I have seen, you know, along the lines of what Sen. Richards was talking about for education, you know, with infrastructure, we are not moving in the direction of integrated planning and implementation.

Now why I say planning integrated and implementation is because the progressive nations all over the world realize that all these problems are multi-

sectoral and it stretches across many disciplines and the only hope to be effective with whatever moneys that we spend to have a telling effect on the problems that we are trying to solve is that multi-sectoral integrated approach where we look at, identify, and we take into account all factors that contribute to our problem.

In fact, even with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, we have 17, but over the last few years, the United Nations is putting a lot of emphasis on integrated approaches and integrated approaches across the SDGs and not for them to stand alone, because each one affects the other and it is the same thing with drainage. The hon. Minister of Works and Transport mentioned that the flooding in Port of Spain is not just about Port of Spain, but it is because of the river basin that Port of Spain is in and all of the water from St. Ann's all comes down into the Port of Spain area. Port of Spain is the last—is at the bottom of the whole catchment area or the whole basin area.

And I am happy he mentioned that because I think yes, strategic drainage planning and all of those things but integrated planning, integrated flood management planning has to take place. Integrated river basin planning has to contribute to the direction we take; because we are talking about desilting. You know desilting is not sustainable? It is not a sustainable investment because we go, we desilt, we have to go back two, three years down the road, we desilt once again. And in desilting we are destabilizing the banks of the channels because sometimes you see them collapsing, right, and all of those things. And in desilting as well, we are reducing the gradients because we are removing all of the silt that builds up over a period of time.

So the integrated approach would ask of us, from a river basin management point of view, where is the silt coming from? What are our measures that have to be taken to reduce, minimize the amount of silt that is being generated that is

coming into our water courses? And that is where—

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

Sen. D. Teemal:—the entire river basin study has to be done, it has to be done because then sedimentation basins would come into effect, or combined sedimentation basins and retention basins would come into effect and then we begin to see a holistic approach to the whole thing. And I think as a nation, we need to really bite the bullet, invest our moneys into these integrated approaches. It would cost us but at the end of the day, we are going to be rewarded by the benefits of integrated planning.

The other thing is, of course, in the limited time I have, climate change. I must mention climate change. Mr. President, respectfully, climate change cannot be continued to be addressed by the various Ministries in the silo approach that prevails at this point in time. It is a recipe for disaster, it is a recipe for disaster. Climate change requires, in addition to other challenges that we are faced with, you know what it requires? It is no longer an us-and-them approach to the challenges that we have in this country. Our challenges are beyond us and them. We have to have a totally integrated approach to solving the problems.

Climate change, our Multilateral Environmental Agreements Unit within the Ministry of Planning and Development, has been focusing on climate mitigation, reducing carbon emissions, right, and a lot of the efforts of the Government thus far and through that agency have been mitigation. What about adaptation? We are guilty of not focusing on adaptation enough, and because of that, it is on our doorsteps and I am telling you we are not prepared. Despite all that I am hearing, we are not prepared. What we are seeing is just the tip of iceberg, we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg.

We are talking about flooding, increased temperatures, bushfires, the

increase—rise in temperatures of the water, the effect it is going to have on our marine lives. The corals in Tobago are already bleaching because of increased temperatures and all of these things. It is a huge problem. And to me, we need to consider, and I would respectfully submit to the Government, once again, because I did it last year, that we need to establish a climate change adaptation unit—to me, it is most suitable within the Ministry of Planning and Development—that would be given the powers to connect with all Ministries—Ministry of Works and Transport, Ministry of Local Government, ODPM—all of the stakeholders in the climate change process. Let that adaptation unit be staffed, be given the resources and be given the powers to engage all so that we have a fighting chance when it comes to climate change. To me, it is a necessity and it is a must and I urge the Government to please take this into consideration.

And in ending, Mr. President, just to join my colleagues who spoke about culture, Sen. Francis and Sen. Patasar and to add to what they have said, they are artistes, cultural practitioners. I am also a cultural activist, more on the administration side, I wish I could be on the performance stage as well but my talents are limited. But to endorse what they have said, I think what they have said, it reminds us, you know, of the role of the artiste and the practitioners in the development of tourism and culture.

And I would just add, last year I spoke about we are transitioning from a monocultural model of culture that prevailed from the days of Independence, but we are moving more towards a multicultural model and we have to think much more broadly about culture and I had suggested it to the Minister of culture at that time last year, that a lot more emphasis, in an effort to move more into a multicultural approach, break some of the paradigms of the monocultural that have dominated the culture over the years or the State's input into culture over the years

that we should focus heavily on the national festivals and funds development and consideration should be given to increasing those in a meaningful way.

I thank you Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

VISITORS

Providence Girls' Catholic School

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, before I call on the next speaker, permit me to ask you in joining me in welcoming the Providence Girls' Catholic School to the public gallery. Welcome.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023

[Third Day]

The Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs (Sen.

The Hon. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal): Mr. President, I thank you most sincerely for the opportunity to join in this debate. You know, Mr. President, after—I mean I am coming very, very low down in the batting order, we are at the close of this debate by the end of today, so much has been said but after observing one Opposition Senator after the other getting ill immediately after the Government dealt with them, really and truly, all that is left to say is: Mr. President, I beg to move. But unfortunately, that is not my responsibility, this is not my Bill, that is what our hon. Minister of Finance will do. Of course, to that end, again, joining so late in the batting order, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the Minister of Finance for his stellar budget presentation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: But what I also want to do is to congratulate every single Member of the Government Bench—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—Minister after Minister, who came to this Senate and represented the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the represented them well and so, I want to begin by congratulating all of my colleagues on this Bench. I want to congratulate my colleagues on this Bench for being prudent in the way in which they manage their Ministries.

Each and every Minister here responsible for leading their charges and their mandate, and implementing in their own way cost saving measures in their individual Ministries. And because I am coming so low in the batting order, I want to take this opportunity to also express as a citizen of this country my gratitude to my colleagues who sit in Government and our steadfast leadership of this country over the past couple of years.

11:35 a.m.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Mr. President, I want to also take the opportunity to wish our hon. Prime Minister, a leader phenomenal, a happy birthday.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Because our Prime Minister, had it not been for his leadership, Mr. President, we would not have been here as one united team. And, of course, it would be—you know I would fail if I do not also take the opportunity to congratulate our new Senators, our newly minted Independent Senators on each of their maiden contributions. All I respectfully submit to you is to remember your oath and your promise to the people of Trinidad and Tobago when you deliver in this hon. Chamber. Remember that our children are looking on, so sometimes—so we have to remember that our behaviour must also be that

which is parliamentary so we can truly be leaders for our children who are looking on at us.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: With that being said, Mr. President—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—with that being said, Mr. President, I would now jump—

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Have a seat. Sen. Mark—Sen. Mark, you just entered the Chamber, we have had an hour-plus of quietness.

Sen. Mark: I better leave again. On account—

Mr. President: Whereas you are welcome to enter the Chamber as you please, just maintain the level of silence that we have as you do so. Continue, Minister.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Thank you Mr. President. So, Mr. President, before I get into the crux of my contribution, there are certain statements, of course, that were made by the hon. Senator, Sen. Lutchmedial, that I would of course take the opportunity to address. And I would also want to touch on some of the statements made by Sen. Teemal, you know, and I will start with Sen. Lutchmedial.

You know, Sen. Lutchmedial like many Senators expressed, of course, her concern with crime, the spiralling you know, and the high levels, the alarming levels of crime in Trinidad and Tobago. But what Sen. Lutchmedial went on to speak about was that she suggested and expressly stated that this Government has been very lazy in dealing with crime. And more so, she has highlighted—she highlighted in her contribution that the Government has failed in dealing and treating with the issue of crime.

Mr. President, for the benefit of the listening and viewing public, contrary to what the other side attempts to promote, whereby they constantly, their rhetoric is that this is an uncaring government, and we do not care about crime. Mr. President, a few minutes ago you recognized a group of school children that entered into this honourable House. One of the young ladies that is sitting in that Chamber, Mr. President, is a 16-year-old young lady who happens to be my daughter. And contrary to what—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—contrary to what—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—and she is looking on at me right now. And contrary to what the other side tries to promote, I am a mother too, and I have a daughter too, and I have children too.

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Your child is probably four years, “mines” is 16, so she understands what is happening.

Hon. Senator: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Alright, have a seat. Let us—Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark and Members, let us keep it cordial.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: And why I raised the issue, Mr. President, is being a mother and being a Member of Government, I am not oblivious to the fact that there is a high level of crime and criminality in this country. But what I can go on the record and say is that it is absolutely false and erroneous to even suggest that this Government is not deeply concerned about the issue and the rate of crime. And I will get into some of the initiatives by the

Ministry of National Security as it relates to border protection, and border control, because Sen. Lutchmedial raised the issue of guns coming into Trinidad and Tobago. But before I do that, before I do that, in the Senator's deliberation about when she made—when the Senator made the point about this Government being lazy, of course she raised the issue of bail.

11.40 a.m.

But I will call the Senator a spin doctor, because what the Senator did in her deliberation, Mr. President, was that she attempted to justify why they did not support the Bail (Amdt.) Bill. And she spoke about the bail amendment, that we are lazy, the Government is lazy, and we blame bail and we blame the Opposition's lack of support for bail as a fundamental cause of crime and criminality in this country. So she went on to speak—the hon. Senator spoke about that and accused, again, the Government of being lazy by its reliance on bail.

And then, of course, the Senator spoke about the Akili Charles matter. But what is sad, and I said it across—I did in crosstalk, respectfully, mention to the Senator, while she was on her legs, that same Akili Charles, Mr. President, two days—almost two or three days after the Privy Council decision, was gunned down—not the Privy Council decision, sorry, the Bail Bill failed in the Senate. Almost two or three days after the Bail Bill failed in the Senate, he was gunned down. He was gunned down in a community in Trinidad and Tobago.

And perhaps—and the reason why I raise that issue is that I do not know if the Senator wears that as a badge of honour now. Because probably, who knows, maybe if we had the Opposition's support for that Bail (Amdt.) Bill, by now in Trinidad and Tobago, we may have been able to see some of

the benefits to be derived from that piece of legislation. And let me tell you—and maybe Akili Charles would have been alive to tell his story.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Mr. President, I want to raise an issue on legislation.

Mr. President: Just have a seat, Minister. I do not want to hear anymore crosstalk for the remainder of the Member's contribution. Let this be the last time I am on my legs. Continue, Minister.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Mr. President, in my contribution, respectfully, my very small contribution on crime, there is just a narrative and a conversation that I want to have with the people, respectfully, Mr. President, of Trinidad and Tobago, who is no doubt paying attention to this sitting of the Senate.

Mr. President, do you know why this Government will often speak about the need to have Opposition's support for certain Bills when it relates to dealing with crime? Because oftentimes, Mr. President, what we require to deal with crime is what we may term as draconian pieces of legislation; legislation that locks down the rights of citizens and the rights of the accused even. So, for example, a legislation about searching without warrant. So you have information that there is ammunition in a place and without a warrant—you have the ability—police have the ability to go in and search without a warrant. I am not advocating these pieces of legislation, mind you, “eh”. But what I want to suggest and remind the people of Trinidad and Tobago, when we speak about the need to have Opposition's support in the fight of crime, legislatively, it is because, Mr. President, most respectfully, there are certain pieces of legislation, that if we really want to put a handle on crime, will

require us as a Government taking draconian—adopting draconian measures, which may very well be trampling on the rights of an accused. And that is why I just used, as a simple example, a hypothetical situation, searching without a warrant.

For example, I heard in the public domain, how come the Government is not allowing us to lockdown communities—go and lockdown communities when it has crime and criminal activity in certain communities? Mr. President, to lockdown a community is trampling on the rights of a citizen, their freedom to move; that same right, that right to life and that liberty the hon. Senator spoke about.

Governments—if we—so, let us say we decide that is the solution to crime, pass a piece of legislation to lock down communities, my question is, to the hon. Sen. Lutchmedial, will you all support it? And I will answer myself, and the answer will be no because they will not support. They will never support. Because that is what the Opposition is known for doing, talking from “two side ah dey mouth”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: One minute they will come here and they will speak about—this Senator, Sen. Lutchmedial, I will never forget the day, sitting in this Senate when the Bail Bill was debated, and the Senator spoke at length about the rights of the accused and the pail in the prison, and you would swear it was God himself in that prison cell.

Now, mind you, I represented the accused in a previous incarnation, you know, Mr. President, so I understand, what it is and sometimes what the conditions are in prison. I understand that the rights of criminals are equally important, or the accused is important. But my simple narrative is there are

certain pieces of legislation, that if it is to really and truly deal—pieces of legislation that could perhaps really and truly deal with crime and criminality in this country, those pieces of legislation will require a special majority. And it will require a special majority because, again, and I want to reiterate the point, it will trample on the basic fundamental rights of even the accused, even the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

I have heard in the public domain, “one shot and done”, “why de police cyah have de power tuh”—you know, especially when they are spreading the narrative about promoting a previous Commissioner of Police and his approach to crime and criminality. Mr. President, if we are to implement legislation to give the police—or if you want to implement legislation to give the police the kind of combative power and rights in law to deal with criminals, that piece of legislation will require a special majority. And I am most certain the day we as a government create, sit, or the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs sit and we create that piece of legislation, we come to the Senate, “de kinda licks we going tuh get”. Because these same Senators who speak about crime and criminality, at that point they will speak from “de other side ah dey mouth”. They will want a balancing act; balancing act. Sometimes to deal with crime, you cannot balance the act.

Sen. John: What?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Sometimes to deal with crime, certain serious measures will have to be taken that will require, as a Parliament, we sit and we put the public’s interest before our personal interests and pass certain pieces of legislation.

And I heard Sen. John say, “What?” Well, that is the answer. The

point is that there is—and I need to reiterate that point, Mr. President, because as a lawyer, as an attorney-at-law, who previously served as a defence lawyer as well, Mr. President, trust me when I—and again, a mother, a citizen of this country, I understand that the rate of crime is alarming. But again, when the Opposition comes here and they suggest that we are lazy as a Government by making reference to bail and by always saying the Opposition does not support, and the Opposition does not support, this is why we say we require the Opposition's support when it comes to the passage of certain Bills that may have a tangible impact on dealing with crime and criminality in this country.

Because those pieces of legislation, I will reiterate for the last time before I move on, may very well be legislation that will trample on the rights of the accused, that will trample on the rights of citizens, and the only way to pass that piece of legislation will be with the support of the Opposition. So the Opposition has an equal responsibility, Mr. President, when it comes to the passage of legislation that could perhaps bring substantive change to the way in which we deal with crime and criminality in this country, Mr. President.

Mr. President, you know, Sen. Lutchmedial also mentioned—I know she has an obsession with the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. I thought it was because of other reasons, but today she mentioned that she grew up in the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. And her statement was that this is the worst in her history—because she grew up in the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. In her history, this has been the worst managed Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. Mr.

President, for the benefit of our new Senators and, of course, the listening and viewing public, and to debunk what the Senator placed on this record, I want to remind the public of a few things.

In 2015, Mr. President, the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs saw the amalgamation of three Ministries: the Ministry of the Attorney General, the Ministry of Legal Affairs, and the Ministry of Justice. So, in 2015, under our leadership, our Prime Minister's leadership, three Ministries were amalgamated into one Ministry, which is now the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, and I will get into the expenditure—that is a next *kahani*, a next story I will get into just now. But the Senator spoke about the worst management—this has been the worst management under our leadership. But I want to remind the goodly Senator, in 2010 to 2015, the Ministry of the Attorney General had a—there were constant changes in these Ministries, mind you, eh. But in 2010 to 2015—half of 2015, there was Attorney General, Anand Ramlogan. In 2015, in the Office of the Attorney General there was a switch because we know about the fiasco that took place. There was then Garvin Nicholas who came in as another Attorney General. So they changed up.

In the Ministry of Justice—well, that was another story by itself. From 2010 to September 2012, this Ministry was led by Mr. Volney. In September 2012 to September 2013, it changed again, Christlyn Moore. Then we had Emmanuel George from 2013 to 2015. There was a next change in the leadership of that Ministry. And this is a Senator who comes here and speaks about the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, this being the worst managed Ministry, right. And if we go through the history of the AG's office, the legal affairs' office, the justice's office, the record will

reflect—the UNC’s record will reflect what mismanagement is—

Sen. Lezama Lee-Sing: And instability.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—instability is.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*].

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: I want to place on the record—because the hon. Senator spoke about the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs being so poorly managed. In 2010 to February 2015, poor Prakash Ramadhar tried his best and he managed legal affairs. But then, by 2015—by February 2015 to June 2015, Mr. Ramadhar, because everybody now “fire dey wuk” in the Ministry of Justice, he was also given the responsibility to manage Justice and Legal Affairs. And that is the UNC’s record, that is not the PNM’s record. So when this Senator comes here and speaks about her childhood memories in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, and speaks about “she mudda, and she growing up”, and that this is—**Hon. Senators:** [*Interruption*]

Mr. President: Listen, listen, listen, listen, one second, one second, again.

Sen. Lutchmedial: My mother is a Senior Counsel! My mother is Senior Counsel!

Mr. President: Sen. Lutchmedial. Again, that is not a line, Minister, that we go down.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: I apologize, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Continue.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: But the very simple point is that the UNC’s record speaks to mismanagement; mismanagement. So they had three Ministries to do what is currently being done under one umbrella Ministry.

And then, let me get into the expenditure part of it, Mr. President, because

we are here to discuss a finance Bill. We are here to discuss a finance Bill.

11.55 a.m.

Mr. President, for the period 2010 to 2015, the three separated Ministries incurred an expenditure in a sum of \$4.585 billion in comparison for a six-year period 2015 to 2021, the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs expended the sum of \$2.129 billion. So that was what the UNC would have spent compared to what the amalgamation of these Ministries resulted in.

Mr. President, if we do the maths, this Government would have achieved a savings, Mr. President, of a sum of \$2.456 billion in expenditure, Mr. President, and this is by the amalgamation of these three Ministries. Now on top of that, when you have three Ministries you have three Ministers—well in the UNC's case it had 100 Ministers because they were giving away Ministries like Oprah Winfrey. A Ministry for you, a Ministry for you, right. Anyway—

Sen. Lezama-Lee Sing: Everybody get “ah” Ministry.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: An Acting Prime Minister for you, “ah” Acting Prime Minister for you. But Mr. President, what we had is that on top of that when you have Ministries, you have Ministers, you have three Ministers or sometimes in their case 100 Ministers that running these Ministries. That was also a cut in expenditure that our Government was responsible for. So we have the hon. Attorney General who is also the Minister of Legal Affairs, and I have been blessed and privileged, Mr. President, since my entry into politics to serve as the Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, two persons that are now responsible and charged with the responsibility, Mr. President, of guiding the Ministry forward.

And that, Mr. President, as simple as it may seem that is also an expense-saving mechanism that has taken place through the amalgamation of these

Ministries. And you know, I believe it was necessary to place that on the record especially because, you know, the hon. Sen. Lutchmedial spoke about the Office of the Attorney General being the worst managed since her recollection of the Ministry. So, Mr. President, those were just two of the areas that I wanted to focus on.

With respect to the issues of crime as well, Mr. President, on the issue of crime and issues raised by Sen. Lutchmedial, I want to place on the record, you know, the Senator spoke about foreigners coming into Trinidad and the porous borders, and the borders being exposed and all of that. I want to remind hon. Senators, because I paid close attention to the delivery made in the other place by the hon. Minister of National Security, and just for the purpose of the record, Mr. President, as it relates to the protection of borders and the protection of our borders, Mr. President, it goes beyond just the scanners, and the availability and procurement of scanners. There are other initiatives that the hon. Minister in another place spoke about as it relates to the protection of our borders.

And for example, Mr. President, the hon. Minister, in another place, spoke about AIRCOP which is a multi-agency project based on the corporation between UNODC, INTERPOL, and the World Custom Organization (WCO) that is aimed at strengthening the capacities of participating international airports in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East to detect, intercept drugs, other illicit goods, high risk passengers in its operations at Piarco. And this is to simply remind members of the listening public that there are other mechanisms, it is not just the scanners but this works in tandem with another mechanism that this Government is putting in place in order to deal with the issues of protecting our borders, recognizing how important it is to protect our borders from the influx of illicit goods and guns.

So it is not that this Government is sitting by lazily and idly, and not doing anything, Mr. President. I also want to place on the record the SEACOP Programme which is another border protection mechanism that has been implemented by the Ministry of National Security. It is a marine version which is also in operation. This was in a partnership with the EU's Global Illicit Flows Programme. It provides, Mr. President, for ongoing training and it is an inter-agency unit which involves, Customs, Immigration, defence force, police and other elements of national security fabric. Another mechanism that this Government is trying and has put into place in an attempt to deal with the influx of illegal firearms.

So yes, we are far from winning the battle we acknowledge that we have a long way to go, but to come and suggest to this country that we are lazy, to come and to suggest that we are uncaring and we do not care about the people, and the safety, and security of our country, is the furthest from the truth, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: And therefore I had to take the opportunity to speak to also other mechanisms that have been put into place. Mr. President, the National Maritime Information System has been established to promote the sharing of other CCOP Units around the world. Mr. President, that is an initiative which will also benefit in border protection of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. President. So we are not, I reiterate, we are not sitting by idly, we are not sitting by lazily.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: We are working and trying to put mechanisms in place, Mr. President. And beyond what the UNC has said, we do care about the life of every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Mr. President, there is also the Joint Maritime Control Unit and Maritime Interdiction Unit, Mr. President. This has been put into place by the Ministry of National Security. Mr. President, what is this unit? It is a coordination by our National Operations Fusion Centre in conjunction with TOCU, phases one and four completed, and Trinidad and Tobago has signed an MOU, Mr. President, between the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and Expertise France to participate in a phase five of this programme.

Mr. President, 15 million—and then added to that, Mr. President, we have had a 15 million injection for 10 additional TTPS riverine crafts to be acquired, which will continue the work of course those programmes that I spoke about, Mr. President, the AIRCOP and SEACOP and it will bolster those processes.

Of course, I do not want to speak out of turn and bat out of my crease because certainly, I am not speaking for the Minister of National Security, but I can speak on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, as I refer to the comment made by the hon. Senator, which attempts to suggest that this Government is not doing anything and that we are lazy. And I simply want the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, yes, we on the Government Bench acknowledge that we have very far to go in our fight against crime. We have very, very, far to go but your Government cares, and your Government, we are asking for the support of the Opposition when it comes to certain pieces of legislation that may very well have to trample—that may trample on the rights of the accused, that may trample on the rights of citizens, that could benefit in the fight against crime. We are asking for the Opposition's support, even your support Sen. Lutchmedial, we are asking for the support of the Senators opposite.

And beyond that, Mr. President, there are mechanisms that have been put

into place by the Ministry of National Security, and yes, we may not have seen the rewards of that just yet, but I believe that Rome was not built in a day, but we have to start somewhere. And what this country could rest assured on is that we have started. The Ministry of National Security have started and they continue their work in the fight against crime.

Mr. President, with that being said, Mr. President, you know I heard Mr. Teemal, I want to just refer briefly to certain comments—

Hon. Senator: Senator.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—Sen. Teemal, I know the hon. Senator also spoke about, you know, crime and corruption in the police service. I know he spoke about planning issues. What was brought to my attention, and I have the benefit and the privilege of sitting with the goodly Senator on a JSC and what was brought to my attention hon. Senator is that there is currently now DevelopTT. I know you had raised some planning concerns and there is now the coordination of an entity known as DevelopTT, which is the Ministry of Planning and Development which works in tandem with the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and that entity honourable Senator, deals with some of the planning concerns and issues you raised.

Now of course, I will bat in my corner because I am not very familiar with DevelopTT, but what I could respectfully suggest, hon. Senator, is perhaps that may be an area we would want to explore in our JSCs where we could look at DevelopTT and have them come before the JSC and explain to us the role that they have been playing together, because it is a joint effort as I said before, and see you know—and probably as a Committee make our suggestions and recommendations as to how they can deal with some of the concerns you would have raised hon. Senator in your contribution. So with those few words, Mr. President, that is just

some of the points that I wanted to rebut against. I wanted to, you know, speak to.

In my substantive contribution—Mr. President, can you tell me how much more time for full time?

Mr. President: You end at 12.13.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Okay. So very briefly Mr. President, you know this is an opportunity when we do this when we debate on the Appropriation Bill it is always an opportunity as Ministers to deliver on what, you know, what role they have played in their Ministry, their projects and all of that.

Mr. President, at the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, which I have been privileged to serve in since 2020, in the Ministry there has not really been a streamlining of responsibilities between the hon. AG and myself, and I am grateful for that. And I am grateful for it, Mr. President, because I have the opportunity to learn as much as I can in various areas of the Ministry, which I believe as a relatively young Member of Parliament it best positions me to learn about the operations of the Ministry in its entirety. And I want to go on the record by sincerely thanking my hon. AG for the opportunities that he has afforded to me during his tenure at the Ministry in certain projects that I will now report to Trinidad and Tobago on, as it relates to my involvement and what I have done or some of the ventures or projects that I have been involved in for the last fiscal.

Mr. President, of course, everything that I speak to is with the blessings of our hon. AG, and again I want to thank him as his junior Minister in the Ministry for the opportunity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Mr. President, at the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, constant training of our staff is

critical. The Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs as I indicated from the get-go go is an amalgamation of three major Ministries. It is a mammoth Ministry, Mr. President, with almost 19 and more departments that fall under our charge and our care. So it is very huge, Mr. President, and at the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs training is critical and it is very, very, important to us, Mr. President.

I have had the benefit of, Mr. President, in the last fiscal to work with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution, Mr. President, on a workshop on plea discussion and plea agreements. Mr. President, this was a workshop that took place from the 18th of October—

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

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—to the 20 of October. Thank you, Mr. President—2023. And this workshop, Mr. President, that dealt with plea bargaining is one of the mechanisms that we believe can assist in the improvement to the criminal justice system and in dealing with the backlog of cases that plague our system. That workshop, Mr. President, was geared towards teaching our prosecution attorneys of utilizing the skill and the tool of plea bargaining, so not trialing matters out of a list but bargaining matters out of a trial list, Mr. President.

Mr. President, this workshop allows prosecutors to enhance their skills and contribute to the development of a robust plea agreement system and it furthers the administration of justice system in a fair and efficient manner, and more so, Mr. President, in examining the critical importance of preventing delays and reducing case backlog.

And I want to go on record and thank the Director of Public Prosecution who worked so well with the Criminal Justice Unit, and the Office of the Attorney General, and the AG in the preparation and the execution of this particular

workshop, Mr. President. Of course, go on the record and thank all of our officers from the Office of the DPP for the work that they continue to do in managing the prosecutorial arm, Mr. President, of the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs.

Mr. President, I had the distinct pleasure to also represent Trinidad and Tobago in BalACLava, Mauritius in November 2023, for a law Minister's conference again with the blessings of our hon. Attorney General.

12.10 p.m.

And, Mr. President, this conference was so critical, and this is why I am so upset and sometimes even emotional when I see the Opposition sits here and they preach doom and gloom on Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. President, I had the privilege of sitting amongst Commonwealth colleagues before the General Secretary of the Commonwealth, and heard from the lips of the General Secretary of the Commonwealth applause for Trinidad and Tobago for child marriages, our dealing with child marriages, Mr. President—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—through the Miscellaneous Provisions (Marriage) Act, which is an Act by the way the Opposition did not support. But I sat before Attorney Generals and Ministers of the entire Commonwealth, and heard the Commonwealth recognize Trinidad and Tobago for our steadfastness, and our innovation, and our way of dealing with the issue of child marriages.

Mr. President, at that very said conference Trinidad and Tobago was applauded for the use of suppression orders. Mr. President, and for those who do not know, this was further to our country being part of the experts working group which began in June 2nd 2021 and ended in June, 28th 2022. The expert working group, Mr. President, produced a report recommending that law Ministers consider

requesting the Commonwealth Secretariat to begin the process of developing a model law, on the enforcement of suppression orders. And why Trinidad and Tobago was highly committed because out of the entire Commonwealth, Trinidad and Tobago was the only nation that had so far since that—to the date of that conference, had benefited and proactively took part in this training that was offered by the Commonwealth. And I felt so proud to be representing Trinidad and Tobago Mr. President—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—at that conference. I felt so when the Opposition comes here and they speak about doom and gloom, Mr. President, sometimes what it takes for us to do is to step out of Trinidad and Tobago to recognize how much we are valued, how much our worth is valued—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—on the international stage, Mr. President, and again, I thank the AG for that opportunity.

Mr. President, I also had the opportunity to attend the United Nations High Level Debate of the General Assembly where I had the—through again, the blessings of the hon. AG—it was always my dream to appear before the General Assembly of the UN so, that is one check off on my bucket list. But I had the opportunity to appear before the General Assembly of the United Nations, Mr. President, and again, present on the work that Trinidad and Tobago have done so far, through the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority of the Office of the Attorney General with the creation of the Public Defenders' Department. The Public Defenders' Department, of course, speaking about the work of the Public Defenders' Department, Mr. President, was a critical part of my presentation before the General Assembly. And, of course, it spoke about—I spoke at that

presentation, Mr. President, we presented to the world, of course, that the PDD, which is the Public Defenders' Department, has displayed their unwavering commitment to advocacy, legal advice, courtroom representation, and empowers individuals, regardless of their economic standings. And this is pretty much where, by speaking to the work of the Public Defenders' Department, we spoke about the role of the Office of the AG in dealing—being the voice for the voiceless. And there is so much more, Mr. President.

Mr. President, as I conclude, I just want to thank our permanent secretaries, all of our heads of departments and public servants for their continued dedication to the service of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Who is next?

Sen. Mitchell: Where is the Opposition?

Mr. President: Sen. Gopeesingh.

Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh: Yeah, all right.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Senator: Always ready.

Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh: Thank you, Mr. President. I take this opportunity, first of all, to congratulate you on your elevation.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Sen. Gopeesingh, have a seat, have a seat. [*Mr. President waits for silence in the Chamber*] Continue, Senator.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Thank you, Mr. President. At this time, I take this opportunity to warmly congratulate you on your elevation to President of this honourable House. I know you will always strive to apply wisdom, neutrality and

rationality in your management. Congratulations, Mr. President. **Hon. Senators:**
[Desk thumping]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I also want to say congratulations to the four new Senators, Independent Senators, one of whom is my colleague, Prof. Gerald Hutchinson, who we worked together at the University of the West Indies for years. I wish them a successful journey in their political and parliamentary career. It is my immense pleasure to once more join all Members of this House in a very significant task of debating the annual budget, which as we all know, is perhaps the most important policy document of a government in its running of a country. I want to sincerely thank the Opposition Leader, the brilliant and compassionate, hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, for affording me the opportunity to speak in this august Chamber.

Hon. President, it is a very painful issue to see yesterday circulating on blog sites rumours of the former Prime Minister, present Leader of the Opposition, and soon to be next Prime Minister again.

Hon. Senators: *[Desk thumping]*

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: There is no doubt about it. The people are speaking of the vicious rumours perpetrated—

Hon. Senator: By UNC activists.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—we understand, by paid bloggers, and we ask: Who are these paid bloggers? Is the paid blogger one of them being supported and paid by this Government?

Mr. Imbert: Point of order, 46 (1), we are debating the Appropriation Bill.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: NLCB?

Sen. Mark: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. President: Okay, so, Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark, a point of order has been raised and I am about to rule on such. Senator, you just begun your contribution. We are dealing with what is commonly known as the budget process before us. Make sure you tie it into that. I understand that you are creating your context, but you need to be relevant. Continue.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Thanks for the guidance hon. President. It is in the context of the expenditure of the Ministry of Finance, and the National Lotteries Control Board to be paying one of the bloggers in Trinidad and Tobago, who continue—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh:—to spread rumors, false rumors. And we ask what is the Government doing about that? We understand that there are certain bloggers who are being paid by the State and this is money coming out from the budgetary allocation for this year as well, and came out from last year as well. So what is the Government doing about it, in terms of the viciousness and the dirtiness that is being spread by this paid blogger? And the Ministry of Finance has a lot of explanations to give and particularly the National Lotteries Control Board, which has an expenditure on it as well.

So I thank the hon. Opposition Leader and I want to briefly comment on a news item in the media today which reflects ongoing malicious falsehood and propaganda against her. Every week—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. President, point of order—

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—I must defend—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. President 46(1)—

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—I must defend the Opposition Leader—

Mr. President: One second, one second—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. President—

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—sit down and take your seat.

Mr. President: No, no, no. Senator, Sen. Gopeesingh

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Senator, Senator, no, no, no, no.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—vicious.

Mr. President: No, Sen. Gopeesingh, number one, number one, when I am on my legs, there is no commentary to come across the floor. Number two, we do not make the kind of comments that you just made even as you took your seat across the floor. Number three, when a Member raises to their legs to raise a point of order, they are allowed to do so, so that I can hear it. The Member speaking is to take their seat so that said point of order could be raised. I then rule on that said point of order and we continue as according to the process. Member raise your point of order.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you very much, Mr. President, perhaps I did not make myself clear previously. We are debating the Appropriation Bill, 2023 for the service of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the fiscal year 2024. That, in my opinion, is 46 (1), irrelevant.

Mr. President: Okay.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: So Sen. Mark, I have already spoken as to the procedure that is what we are doing. Senator, I am listening to what you are saying. I have already indicated that you are within the early parts of your contribution, however, it must remain relevant to what is before us. So be very careful about the line that you are

going down and what you are saying because I am listening for the context to tie in to the budgetary process that we are going through. Continue.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I am always guided by the Chair, hon. President. I am guided. But he is so short I did not even see when he stood up.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senators: Oooh. [*Laughter*]

Mr. President: Have a seat, have a seat, have a seat. All right, Sen. Gopeesingh, you are a seasoned politician in the Parliament, the entire Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. You are well aware that those comments will not pass muster. So just temper them and continue your contribution.

Sen. Nakhid: “President eh easy at all”.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. President, it is important for us to speak as parliamentarians on the issues that occur nationally and what guides people’s behaviour and we should be the forerunners of making examples of what should be out there in the public. And when we facilitate and support, things that are wrong, and radically wrong, we hold ourselves in shame.

I, as a medical doctor for 49 years, I cannot come to this Parliament today, without commenting, and my colleague, the Leader of Government Business on the other side, Minister Dr. Amery Browne, my two colleagues here, Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy, and Sen. Prof. Gerald Hutchinson., we all stand by a Hippocratic Oath and we uphold the dignity of the profession and medicine. When people in the national community begin to go down the route of making media trolls and attempting to spread blatant very disturbing untruths on a person’s health—

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. President, on a point of order as a colleague of the hon. Senator opposite 46(1). What he is presenting is not relevant to the Appropriation Bill.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Okay. Sen Mark, Sen. Mark, I am not going to continue to ask for the process to be adhered to. Again, for the very last time, a Standing Order is raised, I rule and the process continues. So, Senator, as we have indicated before, there is a whole budgetary process, documents, statements. So far, every Senator that I have spoken to things that have been said in the statement, or in rebuttal to comments that have been made before by Senators that have spoken. I understand that you are creating a context, but where you seem to be heading has not been spoken to before, based on what I have heard since I have been here, nor have I heard it in terms of the budgetary statement. So, even though you are creating that context, it must be relevant to what is before us. Understood.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Sir, hon. President, am I not be able to speak on an issue which I saw on the newspaper today, which revolves around the whole aspect of the budget debate?

Mr. President: So, one, we do not brandish the papers. Two, you need to make that connection. So all I am hearing is you speaking to an issue that is in the papers today. I have not heard what the issue is, you need to state what that issue is, and it needs to be relevant to the budget.

12.25 p.m.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Okay. I continue. All I want to say on that point, Mr. President, is that members of the public should not go through and spread malicious falsehood and propaganda—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Imbert: 46(1), Mr. President, he will not stop.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: All right. All right.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Okay. Okay. Sen. Mark—all right.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Before we get into—no. So this process is starting to break down. Let me try and guide Sen. Gopeesingh as to where this is going awry. So the context that you are trying to create and the statement that you are making is almost immediately creating an air of imputation before you make that statement. Like I said, I still have no clue what the issue is that you are alluding to but you started off by indicating it is misleading, and to the average individual, given that this is a budgetary process led by specific individuals, it can be taken as imputation straight out the gate. So that is why I am saying it has to be relevant to the budgetary process that is in front of us and you have to be careful when creating that context and the connection to that budgetary process. Understood?

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Okay. Mr. President, I would close that point and say that, based on the falsehoods that have been perpetrated, the hon. Leader of the Opposition is quite fit and healthy and strong. There has been no—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk and desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Senator, have a seat. Members, I will try again, and I will choose my words carefully. You cannot begin by imputing, so my advice at this point in time, just move to the next point. Do not even close off that one, just leave it, move to the next point.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]—Mr. President, that the Leader of the Opposition is strong, fit, healthy and raring to go.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I want to move to the next point.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Just move on. Just move on.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: The next point I want to follow up on what Sen. Teemal spoke about earlier, and that is the desecration of what he spoke about, the—I want to quote from the newspaper today, daily *Express*, Tuesday 24th, October:

“The...”—desecration—“...of a Hindu effigy last Sunday is a twist on previous incidents of desecration involving mandirs and other places of worship.

The...effigy of the Hindu demon king Ravana was to be erected at the Tarouba Ramleela ground in Marabella, but unknown individuals set fire to the structure on Sunday morning. Ramleela celebrations have been taking place at this location for over half-a-century, and the organisers say this is the first such occurrence they have ever had.”

I expected the hon. Sen. Sagransingh-Sooklal, who is a Hindu, would have spoken about it and condemned what has happened, but obviously she belongs to a government that has failed to condemn these acts of perpetration of desecration. Sen. Teemal condemned it. I, on behalf of the Opposition, condemn these acts of desecration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And we call upon the PNM Government to also condemn it, and they failed to do so, and we listen to see whether the hon. Prime Minister will condemn it or the Minister of National Security will condemn it.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Lutchmedial: They will put on a sari skirt for Divali.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I want to just continue for a minute on this:

“However, this attack is in line with previous cases where mandirs and churches have been desecrated. In September last year, temples at Penal and Carli Bay were vandalised, as was another mandir in Williamsville last month.”

So, Mr. President, you have these acts of vandalism indicating a new wave of activism amongst them as stated in the editorial:

“As regards the first, the police have basically made no headway in any of these incidents.”

We call on the Minister of National Security to direct his team to search into what has happened and come up as quickly as possible with the answers and ensure that there are strict penalties for desecration of these religious practices and rights.

“The Ramleela is a sacred event in Hinduism, signifying the triumph of good over evil, and should be respected as such.”

This is the editorial of today’s *Express*.

“...desecration can metastasise...”—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Spread. My colleague:

“...into more violent acts. This trend must therefore be nipped in the bud, starting with the police finding suspects and making arrests.”

So we call on the Government, Mr. President, to immediately condemn these acts of desecration and to immediately go in search of those who commit, continue to commit these rights, these acts of dirtiness against religious organizations.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. President—

Sen. Nakhid: Like you yesterday.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—on the newspaper as well, “Do Trinidadians respect each other’s religious beliefs?”, and there are lots of comments on this. So this is of national importance and this is of importance for the Government’s consideration, and I ask the Government, what are your views on this and what are your statements on this? We on this side condemn these acts of perpetration.

And the Constitution, Mr. President, the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and it says in Chapter 1, “The Recognition And Protection Of Fundamental Human Rights And Freedoms”:

“It is hereby recognised and declared that in Trinidad and Tobago there have existed and shall continue to exist, without...”—of rights and—
“...discrimination by reason of race, origin, colour, religion or sex, the...”—
freedoms—“...following fundamental human rights and freedoms, namely:

- (a) the right of the individual to life, liberty, security of the person and enjoyment of property and the right not to be deprived thereof...by due process of law;
- (c) the right of the individual to respect for his private and family life;”

And most important:

“(h) freedom of conscience and religious belief and observance;”

It is in the Constitution, Mr. President. And every religious body has a right to continue and perpetuate their own religious beliefs and customs in freedom as defined in the Constitution.

So this is a constitutional issue, Mr. President, and there is a silence, marked silence on this part of the Government. And we can ask the question, is there something deliberate in this?

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. President, Standing Order 46(6).

Sen. Mark: But what happen—*[Inaudible]*

Mr. President: Sen. Mark—Sen. Mark—

Sen. Mark: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. President: Sen. Mark—

Hon. Senators: *[Crosstalk]*

Mr. President: The two of you, I am not—that is it, I am not going to raise to my legs to treat with a point of order and have to ask Members to be quiet. The next time I have to do that, I will just be taking action. Senator, you cannot impute improper motives along the context of what you just generated. I get the point that you are responding to and reinforcing what has already been stated by Sen. Teemal. That point has been made. I am indicating to you that you have gone too far in that, which means that you are no longer reinforcing what Sen. Teemal has said but you have gone further and crossing a particular line. Senator, continue. Stay away from imputing improper motives.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I do not think that I have ventured there, Mr. President. I do not think that I—all I am saying, it is a society we live in now and we have to be very careful about what is happening, and so we raise and alert the national community with things that are occurring which are not right and which are not proper, and the Government has a responsibility to speak about it and condemn these acts of desecration.

Hon. Senators: *[Desk thumping]*

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So the Minister of Finance wants me to speak about the budget, I will speak on it now. So I will touch on two areas of health and education if I have the time.

So two of the sectors of major concern to every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, health and education, which are two of my own, I would say, areas of

expertise. I mean, I have been a lecturer at the university for over 35 years and I have trained almost 3,500 young doctors and about 50 to 100 postgraduates. So my colleagues will know that, and my colleague, the Leader of Government Business, he was my student as well.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I respect him. I honour him. He is doing a great job and we are great friends. In this budget, Mr. President, out of an overall allocation of \$57 billion, the hon. Minister of Finance has allocated approximately \$8 billion to the health sector and \$7 billion to education. So about \$15 billion have been allocated to these two Ministries, which is about 27 per cent of the budget out of \$57 billion.

So over the last eight years, over \$114 billion have been spent in these two sectors which is approximately one out of every \$4 spent by this Government has been spent on health and education. But when we ask, “Is there anything tangible that they can show for it? You search for the last eight years to see what has happened in education and in health, and both sectors, education and health, have been crumbling, have been decaying and are becoming worse, Mr. President. Over the last eight years the health sector has deteriorated tremendously, and so when the Minister of Finance, delivering his ninth budget presentation for over four hours in the other place, I realized that he spoke about the health sector for just about six minutes in his 137-page speech.

The Minister dedicated just about 700 words to the health sector and this is after spending approximately \$56 billion on the health sector in the past eight years, because he has nothing good to say about it. He cannot show that they have done anything. He knows in his own brain that they have failed the country, they

have failed the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and so the worst state of the health sector now is in our nation's history with broken promises. Mr. President, I make no apologies for saying that today the sector health and health care management are the worst ever in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. The facts indicate that our hospitals have now been turned into disaster zones for health care where patients are dying from preventable causes because of mismanagement, inefficiency and incapacity, and the incapability under this Government, and of course supervised by the hon. Minister of Health who is now being fossilized in the eight years that he has been Minister of Health.

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

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: He lacks any vision. He lives in the past. And I would say boldly, he does not know one iota about health care management because he has failed, failed from day one and failed after eight years, and I will come to some of the things.

Sen. Lutchmedial: I think he failed as a pharmacist.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So over the past eight years—somebody just indicated that he failed in two pharmacies. Our citizens have been entering hospitals as patients and emerging as corpses.

So many families have had to suffer the immense pain of losing their loved ones in the very place that is supposed to cure them, that it is not only heartbreaking but frankly inhumane. And every year, including this one, their budgets are consistently filled with failed and rehashed promises of yesteryear and no tangible measures to improve the quality of life.

They said in 2016, Mr. President, that the Government will expedite surgeries, that was seven years ago. Today, thousands of patients across the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago are waiting for their surgeries to be

performed, even basic surgeries; things like breast lump biopsy, things like a little hernia operation. They have to wait two to three years to have this done. People are waiting two years for clinic appointments. What type of health care we are providing? My colleagues and us, we have been through the health system. We worked in hospitals and what we are seeing now is a direct contrast that what we used to do in the hospitals, look after patients, work with the patients. It is not happening now because of absent leadership and bad management. It is not for the lack of funding, it is because of incapacity and mismanagement in the health sector.

12.40 p.m.

And hundreds—look in south, my colleagues, the other day, mentioned hundreds are waiting for cataract surgery. A cataract surgery could be done in 10 minutes and one simple machine that is not—that is cost very—now no cost to it at all, no big set of money to spend, a Phaco Emulsifier. A Phaco Emulsifier is a little apparatus that sucks out the cataract lens from your eye and if you do not have that, you could create damage to the entire eye. So they have been waiting for that for four years and the operations are not being done and postponed.

There are critical shortages of CDAP drugs. In budget 2016, they promised to expand the CDAP programme. Today, however, over 200,000 patients and citizens must endure a critical shortage of drugs and medical supplies. The reality is that most of these drugs—I spoke with a pharmacist today, one of the 250 pharmacists, over 10 out of the 50 drugs that are on the CDAP programme are absent and patients cannot get them. So what is happening to the 200,000-plus citizens who depend on the CDAP programme for their drugs and cannot get them? They become sick, they become unhealthy, their complications worsen and eventually they die, and it is basic things like diabetes and hypertension. And we

asked the hon. Minister of Health, a few years ago, is he going to change the medication for the treatment of diabetes and hypertension? He promised to do it a few years ago and today, nothing has happened. So our patients are receiving pharmaceuticals that are not as effective and efficacious as they ought to be and therefore, complications are arising.

There are insufficient and inadequate surgical supplies, Mr. President, for things like orthopaedics and neurosurgical procedures. Doctors now, consultants working at the hospital, the regional health authorities are buying these drugs from—these supplies from these doctors. So when one orthopaedic surgeon gets the equipment from another orthopaedic surgeon's supply, he does not want to do the procedure, there is conflict of interest. And this has to be looked at right and nipped in the bud immediately. So patients are waiting for K-nails for the femoral fracture and for ankle surgery to be done and so on, and cannot get the equipment and the supplies that are needed for it to be done. In neurosurgery, you have to buy a whole set of aneurysm clips when you have to do a neurosurgical procedure.

I remember when I was Chairman of the North West Regional Health Authority and North Central Regional Authority, in '97 to 2000, I was doing the surgery myself and the nurse told me, Dr. Gopeesingh, Port of Spain General Hospital is on the line. I said, I will take the message. They said, the neurosurgeon is asking whether to buy an aneurysm clip because he is in a brain and has to clip an aneurysm. I said, where is he going to get it? He said, well, one of the local places that supply. I said, what is the cost? I am doing surgery here but the nurse is—he said, 180-something thousand. So if he does not get that clip, a patient will die. So I said, go ahead buy it, buy the entire thing, the others could have been used subsequently. But these things are not present in the hospital—these surgical supplies and so on are not there, so people are not getting the type of attention and

medical treatment.

Look at chemotherapy. I am an oncologist since 1988. I was the first Caribbean gynaecologist from 1988, until Dr. Narayansingh came in, in 2003—my colleagues know that. I was trained at Princess Margaret hospital for a year, in five of the hospitals in Canada. In fact, Mr. President—I mean, this is no boast, I have worked and trained in about 18 hospitals around the world and I have trained at four universities. So when I speak today, the Prime Minister recognizes that and—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—he said that—[*Inaudible*]*—*to Dr. Gopeesingh. And it is not—I mean, I am senior now, I do not need any accolades or anything, but I am a senior person, I want to see that the health sector is good. I do not want to see any of my colleagues having to suffer. Sometimes they call me and I have to try to help, despite the fact I am not in the health system. So when I speak on health and so on, I speak with some degree of authority and knowledge, and we are there to help all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. No one must suffer needlessly.

And, you know, Mr. President, when they talk about this parallel health care system during the COVID thing, that has been a failure. Parallel—nothing. Paralleling what? Parallel is two lines vertically or two lines across, but it means then that the main system has to be working well, and that was not working well, so they could say they paralleled that because they paralleled incompetence and something is not working.

Sen. Lutchmedial: Incompetence parallel.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Yeah, incompetence parallel.

12.45 p.m.

Patients were waiting for surgical procedures and were not getting it. Some of them died waiting for their surgical procedures for particular things like cancer,

things like heart surgery, breast lumps and all of that, they were not getting it. So they were suffering and dying. And now, Mr. President, we have 10 hospitals in Trinidad, nine district health facilities which are supposed to be opened 24 hours a day, 105 health centres. We have 10 private hospitals, nursing homes which are of high standard. Why should people have to be lining up in an emergency department on trollies and on wheelchairs for three days waiting to be attended to? The doctors and nurses and they try, they try their best but the system defeats them because when you have patients waiting on trollies and cannot get a bed in the wards to transfer these patients or cannot go to the centres where they will do the interventional treatment and surgery, the whole accident and emergency is filled and people die after waiting two to three days on trollies and on wheelchairs.

Mr. President, I invite any one of you here today to go the Port of Spain General Hospital Emergency Department, and when you see the see the overcrowding and people on trollies crowded together and you hear them crying, “Nurse, nurse, doctor, doctor, ah thirsty” and then some of these elderly citizens just die in the emergency department. How painful it is. They are dying there in the emergency department with 50 of them crowded together. This is why I say, the Minister of Health has failed and this Government has failed badly on the health sector management in this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And they continue with the broken universal health insurance and promised since 2016, they promised universal health insurance saying that by December 01st, 2018, a national health insurance system will be in place and operational. That has come and gone. 2017 they said the same thing. The Government will collaborate with private sector investors for the most appropriate health insurance model. 2018 came and went with no national health

insurance. 2023 today, five years after they started speaking about it, no national health insurance. In 2019, they rehashed the same promise saying, our goal of achieving health coverage is quickly becoming within our reach with every citizen having access to first-class health care with specialist health services being provided. To date, nothing, Mr. President. Yet another PNM rehashed broken promise.

And today, I just saw on the daily *Express* big plans for central block. Deyalsingh: Facility to train specialist doctors. Mr. President, Couva Children's Hospital and Multi-Training Facility has been there from 2015. Eight years now where this Government could have started the training of specialists and sub-specialists by working with international institutions. I recommend to this Government now to begin some talks with Mount Sinai Hospital, MD Anderson Texas Cancer Center, John Hopkins University, University of Miami Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, to begin some discussions and use the Couva Hospital as a centre of excellence for cases of cancer, orthopaedics, neurosurgery and some renal dialysis.

Instead of having all these things orthopaedics, neurosurgery in the four different hospitals across Trinidad and Tobago, bring them under one umbrella so the citizens know if you have an orthopaedic problem or a neurosurgical problem you go to the Couva hospital. But for spite and malice, anything that the UNC brought and produced, they decided they are not going to open it. Eight years this population should—you know, they have stifled this population. They have dealt a serious blow to this population. Eight years an institution which has some of the best equipment you will get in the world—

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

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Wow. Wow. Some of the best systems in the world

and best equipment have been laid to waste. So let me just deal with this thing what I saw on the newspaper. I could have gone on to tell you about the achievements of People's Partnership Government for 2010 to 2015. It is on social media, 421 pages of the People's Partnership Government's achievements and I could send them a copy of our achievements in the health sector.

And of most important I want to—is the Children's Life Fund. That was the second Cabinet note that the hon. Prime Minister at that time in 2010 brought forward for approval and the Children's Life Fund where the Prime Minister contributed 10 per cent of her salary and Ministers contributed 5 per cent of their salary for five years, 135 infants' lives were saved during a three-year period.

So, Mr. President, I want to just read what Minister Deyalsingh said. He said, currently specialist doctors got their training from abroad. We have 20 specialist areas in Trinidad for the DM, the doctorate of medicine. I trained two of them in obstetrics and gynaecology in the 1980s for their doctorate of medicine. There are 20 disciplines but they have now been reduced because they are not getting the support of the Government and so they have had to curtail the amount of DM programmes, the doctorate programmes.

So what is he talking about going abroad. We have it here. But you want to develop specialists, the doctors have to start from an intern to a house officer to a junior registrar to a registrar in their training programme to become a consultant. It takes six years and you have 400-plus young doctors without jobs wanting to come into the hospital system and are unable to get a job, some of them selling gasoline, some begging for jobs in the private nursing homes and you are talking about specialists and what—but you had Couva Hospital to do all the specialist training for years. For eight years you did not do anything with it and you are now talking about having the Port of Spain hospital as a training centre and having specialist

training. Trying to fool the population again, myopic in their vision.

And the hon. Member, Sen. Jearlean John, with UDeCOTT signed a memorandum of agreement with a British organization, a British firm, in fact a government to government—let me just see if I can find it, for Port of Spain hospital. It is a memorandum of understanding between the Government of the UK and Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the health care sector of Trinidad and Tobago signed Port of Spain 28th day of October in year 2013 in duplicate. And signing at His Excellency Arthur Snell British High Commissioner and the hon. Winston Dookeran, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

And the project, the priority project identified under the signed government framework was a turnkey redevelopment of the existing 560 bed Port of Spain hospital into a 750 bed medical campus with international medical training centre identified by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. And they had the scope of the turnkey hospital project. And that was going to take five years if we had been retained in government 2015 to 2020. That would have been finished. Now this central block at Port of Spain General Hospital was given to Shanghai Corporation in 2019. It is supposed to be finished in 27 months. And still today the hon. Minister of Health and the Prime Minister is talking about the completion of the central block in 2025, and we will be back in government and we will have to finish the work at the central block at the Port of Spain General hospital.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. President, there is much more for me to say but I want to just conclude by saying that—

Mr. President: Senator, your time has expired.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: All right. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Hutchinson.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Prof. Gerard Hutchinson: Thank you, Mr. President, and thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, and notwithstanding the previous exchange, to be a participant of this very fascinating process. Firstly, I have to congratulate my fellow newly appointed Independent Senators for their sterling contributions—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Prof. G. Hutchinson:—and generally the support and camaraderie that I have experienced from the Independent Bench has been very stimulating and encouraging. I also want to thank the Parliament, the Office of the Parliament's staff who also have made the introduction to this honourable Chamber a very seamless and positive experience, and I think they serve as a beacon for the public service in terms of how effectively and how efficiently things can be run.

Thirdly, I want to thank or acknowledge the work that is being done here. From the outside it did not seem as intensive and as expansive as I have seen it to be and I think both the Government and the Opposition Benches deserve our total support and encouragement for the work that they do, their attention to detail and indeed their passion.

I think it would also be remiss of me not to also acknowledge the Minister of Finance and his team who in spite of the criticisms has presented nine budgets in difficult times, both in terms of the plunging oil price, as he mentioned and the COVID-19 pandemic. And while the ship of state might be sometimes considered shaky, I think the thing is that it is still afloat and I think we have to acknowledge that work and not take it for granted, as I said, criticisms notwithstanding.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Prof. G. Hutchinson: So what I have to say in the context of this debate on the appropriation Bill and coming as Sen. Sooklal said so late in the day and way down in the batting order, I think it is really a kind of more summative assessment. I also—and should apologize after I see Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh looking at me and, again, forgive me, he, in addition to us working together, he also taught me when I did obstetrics and gynaecology a long time ago and we should always honour our teachers, and I honour him for the influence he has on me and also we have remained quite good friends over the time and, of course, became colleagues subsequently. And the same applies to Sen. Dillon-Remy next to me who was also one of my consultants when I was doing my internship in paediatrics.

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: Wow. A long time.

Sen. Prof. G. Hutchinson: So a long time ago but I need to acknowledge them. So going back to the contribution and I think in listening to the debate and in acknowledging what I have heard, I think the key issue to me is, how does the budget appropriation speak to the quality of life of our citizens. And I think that while there would be debate as to the effectiveness of policies and the means to which those policies can have a positive impact on the citizenry, the issue of the quality of life, I think, is a critical one and is one that also can be measured. And I think this is something that we have to pay attention to. In other words, how does what the Minister and the Ministry of Finance what they do, what the Government does, how does it impact on people's perception of their life. Now quality of life is a very complex and variable construct and it speaks to two things in the main, psychological wellbeing and satisfaction with life. And several scientists who have been struggling to work out how best to measure that, we will talk about that in a little while.

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

But I think that the COVID-19 pandemic showed us that there is a very intimate relationship between wealth and health. And according to the World Health Organization there is no health without mental health. And the pillars of mental health according to the World Health Organization all speak or three of them, three of the four pillars speak to economic activity. The four pillars that they describe are, one, the ability to optimize or realize one's abilities. Two, the ability to live, work and learn well. Three, the ability to contribute positively to your community. And four is the one that kind of speaks more directly to mental health but is a function of the first three which is the ability to cope with the stressors of life.

1.00 pm

And in the aftermath of the pandemic that has been certainly brought to bear. And while it is necessary and important to focus on numbers, the evidence is pretty strong that the numbers alone both in terms of individual lives and in terms of societies and populations, do not address fully that issue of well-being and life satisfaction. In fact, in South Korea, where there were startling increase in income and housing and standard of living over a 30-year period, they measured the quality of life and interestingly people found they were less happy although they were making more money, had better housing and were enjoying, in terms of standard of living, better lives, and of course, they also there were less crime than there is here.

But the point is that what they deemed as important when they were asked what made their quality of life meaningful were social constructs. They talked about social cohesion, social empowerment, social inclusiveness and social economic security. And I think we have to bear those in mind in all the policies

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that are discussed and implemented, and I think if we look at the Sustainable Development Goals the first four speak to, no poverty, no hunger, good health and well-being and quality education. And as Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh, just said, health and education are fundamental pillars in all the constructs that revolve around the quality of life, well-being and life satisfaction.

So, we have to recognize the value of these, and going back to the numbers, in talking with some of my colleagues yesterday we noted that, that could be reflected in terms of somebody who might have a healthy bank account but who cannot go to the bank or the ATM to withdraw money because they are afraid they would be robbed. So the presence of a lot of money in the bank, unless you have online banking, unless you have a debt or a credit card, means that you to put your life at risk to withdraw you own money. So, again that ability to enjoy your quality of life based on what you have becomes compromised.

In 2007, some academics in Australia, who holds some of the pioneers of this well-being on life satisfaction study, published a paper, a paper called “Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well Being.” And they identified the things that they think were important in terms of helping people appreciate their well-being and the satisfaction with life, the ability to engage and enjoy the goods and services they bought to satisfy their needs and their desires. Again, their health and the ability to deal with illness, the ability to find meaning in their lives, and the ability to build and develop healthily social relationships. And how these things impacted is in greater life expectancy, which again is a health measure and a population health measure, and in societies where these things apply there was much less inequality. And I think the key issue there is that all of these constructs are bidirectional, they influence each other and are in constant conversation.

1.05 p.m.

So, I think looking at the budgetary allocation, one of my observations was that how do the allocations really apply to these constructs? And while I know the philosophical drive, if you will, is the *Vision 2030* document which dovetails with the sustainable goals, I think it is important that the measures are seen to tie in with these goals and to reflect in tangible targets, how they are being met and who is being held accountable when they are not met. I think this allocations primarily, and I think significantly go to administrative function, and I was telling Sen. Richards yesterday that the money that is given to education really goes to the Ministry of Education and a large part of that is really for the administrative function in the Ministry as against the concept of education itself, and that is something that we have to address because the people who have to administer the construct of education, their quality of life is impacted by all the other budgetary issues, inclusive that of crime and health and finding meaning in their lives

Again Sen. Maharaj talked about people who are working in jobs but they are not fully there because they want to do something else, and this is a concept in human resources known as “presenteeism”, and it has been found that presenteeism is a much more dangerous and much more profound influence on economic function than absenteeism. Because people who are present are there and tick off the box for being at work but they are not functioning optimally, and as you will recall one of the things about mental health is to be able to function optimally and realize your abilities. And in the United States it has been found that \$150 billion is lost every year, approximately of course, to presenteeism, and a lot of that is due to the presence of depression and anxiety and people just not being happy. In other words, their quality of life is compromised and it expresses itself in them not being able to fully deliver what is expected of them at work

And we have done some research as well in Jamaica in my earlier years, and again

we found that health variables were closely linked to psychological wellbeing, whereas as social circumstances, things like crime, friendships, relationships were related to life satisfaction. So we have to marry those two and marry them in a way that seeks to optimize the development of our people.

I think my other concern related to the budgetary allocations is the question of accountability and the question of when something is allocated if it will be done; two, how it will be done? Meaning the absence of corruption and the absence of factors that would make its implementation somehow comprised; and three, perhaps most importantly, how well it is done and is it fitting the need that it was designed to fit, and is it delivering for the people what they require? And, I do not know enough to know how well those accountability systems are in place. When I hear all the crosstalk about the various accusations and allegations of waste and corruption and projects not being completed or not being completed properly, I think it is something we have to address critically if the development agenda and the ability to meet the sustainable goals is going to be met.

I think the issues in education were quite comprehensively dealt with by Sen. Richards, but I think it is important as he was making a very critical consideration that there is a connection between what is happening in education, the issue with SEA, the issue with special needs, the issue with disabilities and the issues of crime. And on the subject of crime I wanted to say that we have heard a lot about the challenges of crime but we have not heard about the criminals. And as Sen. Maharaj said, these people were all born as innocent babies. They were not born as criminals, and we as a society have to take responsibility for them becoming criminals, and any strategy to deal with crime has to deal with that, because guns do not kill people, it is people who kill people, and we have to identify why young people would be turning to crime in the ways that they are, and killing each other,

and, of course, robbing and damaging the society and the reputation of the society with their behaviour, and I think education is at the core of that and it has to be addressed

I think in specific reference to Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh's contribution, I think there are a lot of issues in the health sector. I see the hon. Minister of Health is here. But I think in balance there have been some successes, the reduction of maternal deaths is one, and I think that shows the benefit of setting a very specific target and trying to address it. Similarly, I talked about life expectancy and under his tenure life expectancy has increased. There was a dip during COVID, according to the available data, and life expectancy has increased. I think right now it stands at 74.9 and it went up by point five years from last year, and it still stands at 1.5 years below the regional average, Latin America and the Caribbean average, and below places like Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Grenada, but also above Bahamas and Jamaica, according to macro-trends and the CIA fact book.

So, there have been some successes but the problems remain. I think we have to acknowledge the problems, Mr. Vice-President. And going back to the point of the people in identifying these problems is that, again, I keep hearing about the building of hospitals and the presence of these hospitals as indices in terms of improving health care, but hospitals do not deliver care, it is the people who work in the hospitals that deliver care. It is the material that they have to work with, the resources they have to work with, and I frequently hear from health administrators that there are funding issues with regard to hiring staff as well as the purchase of new equipment, so that has to be addressed.

And Amartya Sen who is a Nobel Prize-winning economist 1998 from India, he said that poverty is not just about money. He said that poverty is about capability deprivation, and I think the title of the budget, Building Capacity for

Diversification and Growth, but I think we really should consider incorporating the idea of capability in that description, because capability is what speaks to the realization of our potential, realizing the potential of the human resources and the other resources that we have, and to be able to go from the state that we are in now, particularly with regard to things like crime, and with regard to the other social problems that we face, that human capability will be critical and central to that process

There are a lot of issues that suggest that distress is around, wholly outside of crime. Another former teacher of mine, Prof. Daisley, who works in the Pathology Department in San Fernando General Hospital, has pointed out that there is a startling increase in suicides. In 2015 there were 24, in 2022 there were 62, which is about 150 per cent increase. And the other very interesting thing about it is that the method that people are using—20 years ago most people who were engaged in suicidal behaviour would drink poisons, would ingest poisons, now many of them are hanging themselves. And again suggesting a kind of distress that comes out of a sense of physical violation.

There is increasing inequality. I have spoken in other arenas about low trust and that Trinidad and Tobago being a low-trust society, and in low-trust societies people have little faith in institutions, they have little faith in the structures that protect and inform their behaviour, and in low-trust societies you see high crime rates, you see high corruption, you see a lot of antisocial behaviour. And again, the Minister of Finance talked about collecting, I think, about \$10 billion in unpaid taxes, and in low-trust societies people do not pay taxes or tend not to pay taxes because of their lack of trust in the institutions

Again, another distress sign in the North Central Regional Health Authority, where I work, we set up a stress relief centre in 2018 with one psychiatrist and a mental

health nurse, and in that period, of course, given the increase in demand because of COVID, the idea of the centre was to have a space where people could walk in and seek help without having to make an appointment, without having to have a referral. And in the five years since we have set it up, we have seen such a startling increase in demand for the services where we now have seven psychologists, two psychiatrists, a GP, two mental health nurses, and a waiting list of three months. So, we have had to markedly increase staff, but yet the demand continues to outstrip the supply. And I think the population in response to the challenges, perhaps because of COVID, perhaps because of all the issues that they face, I think pivot between two poles, one of hedonism on one hand, and the other of nihilism. And the thing that connects the two is that at both poles they do not really care. The people who are hedonistic just care about having a good time, the people who are nihilistic do not care about anything, and as a result in between we lose productivity and we lose the capacity to develop ourselves, and I think that is really the tragedy of our circumstances.

With specific regard to mental health, the Minister has championed the calls of decentralization which is really praiseworthy, but at the same time resources need to be addressed to issues such as homelessness, the abuse of the mentally ill and the less advantaged. While we have reduced maternal deaths the issue of maternal mental health needs to be addressed because postpartum depression is a significant problem. We estimate about 25 per cent of mothers who deliver babies have postpartum depression with a negative impact, both on them, their relationships, and of course their children. The issue of cannabis decriminalization, while it is something that I had supported has also seen us see a marked increase in young people, especially coming in with cannabis related psychiatric problems, and resources need to be identified to address those where increasing rates of drug

abuse, especially in women, and again these are new problems that are emerging and will require specific attention.

Internationally, there is a lot of attention being paid to what I call adverse childhood experiences, and as some of the speakers have mentioned, there are high rates of domestic violence or intimate partner violence, as it is called; high rates of childhood sexual abuse; and a whole range of other problems that children in our country face. There was an article in the newspaper recently about the two children who were found in a house in Arima. And I think we have to recognize that while overall segments of the society are doing well we have to protect the vulnerable, because the vulnerable are the ones who really provide the measure for the society. And a problem as one academic said, a problem well stated is half solved. So we have to identify what the problems really are, what are the targets, and how we can relieve suffering

I want to make a special mention to social services, about social services and their support of the disadvantaged and the challenges again, I think Sen. Maharaj spoke to this, where organizations, NGOs that are involved in the delivery of necessary support to the disadvantaged are not getting the kind of subventions or not getting subventions at all. I refer specifically here to Lifeline which is the only suicide hotline in the Caribbean—I think certainly in the English speaking Caribbean, and they have made repeated attempts to get subventions and have not been able to get it, partly because of the need for certain requirements which they are unable to meet. And also because of the increasing cost of mounting the service. When it started, it was started by one woman, there were volunteers who then helped her but now the people who “volunteer” want to be paid, and it has meant that the service has suffered and is now cut off at certain times because there are not enough people to man the phone lines.

1.20 p.m.

Similarly, there is an organization called GROOTS, which is Grassroots Organisation Operating Together in Sisterhood in Trinidad and Tobago. They provide shelter for victims of domestic violence and I have seen—I have been in their company when the Ministry has called them to get help for affected woman and yet when they have applied for subventions, they have been refused. And I think there should be a mechanism to help organizations like that get the tools to do what is needed in order that they are able to meet the requirements for subventions.

Again, in the budget, we heard about the housing programme in Moruga, the Market Box Initiative, all of which I think are noteworthy, but again, we have to ensure that they are able to meet the needs of the appropriate people and are used, as Sen. Maharaj pointed out, to challenge issues like nutrition and farmer sustainability.

And I think one concern I had was looking into the future and I did not think that the Appropriation Bill spoke sufficiently to that. I think one Ministry that needs even more money is the Ministry of Digital Transformation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Prof. G. Hutchinson: Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh talked about many issues in the health sector, and one of them has been the digitization of medical records, which I have been hearing for about 20 years and which is yet to happen, and it is something that I think—one simple thing that could really transform a lot of the problems that we face in the health sector.

Recently, a friend of mine, her son went off to university abroad and I was asking her about buying books and she said there is no booklist. All the courses come with a reading list, all the books and the articles required can be downloaded

for free through what the library in the university purchases. I know we talked about the provision of books and the cartel surrounding the publishing of books when things change, but we have to think about how we can go past all of that and provide resources that would allow for the use of technology to reduce cost and to improve the issues that we already face in the education and in the health sector.

I think there should be—and maybe the time has come for multi-sectoral allocation to solve specific problems. I think Sen. Teemal spoke about silo thinking and I think for some problems, particularly those like crime and education, there needs to be the involvement of several Ministries and maybe there should be allocations that allow for that, so that the problem itself can be addressed and solved in a way that would ultimately benefit the Ministries themselves but, of course, also the citizens.

And I think—finally, I would say that that whole quality of life thing, of course, is also a personal thing and we have to ask ourselves that question, in terms of when we leave this Chamber and we walk out on the street, how do we feel: do we feel safe; do we feel happy; do we feel worried; do we feel anxious—[*Device goes off*—do we feel frustrated; do we feel depressed, and be able to analyze that and work on how best we can address those feelings because those, in turn, will determine both our economic activity and our social activity.

I will end with two quotes—well, three quotes actually. The second one I only happened upon today, but the first two is by a guy called Thomas Huxley who was a biologist in the 19th Century, and he said that:

“It...”—does—“...not”—matter—“who is right...”—what is important is—“...what is right...”

And I think that we have to—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. G. Prof. Hutchinson:—get to a place where, because we are working for the benefit of the country, who is right does not matter, but we have to identify what is right. The quote I had prepared was that, he said:

“Perhaps the most valuable result of all education is the ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not; it is the first lesson that ought to be learned...”

And he says:

“...however early a man’s training begins, it is...”—usually—“...the last lesson that he learns thoroughly.”

And finally, C.L.R. James in *Minty Alley*, which I read recently. He said:

“...‘Why are you chasing...’”

The quote in the book:

“...‘Why are you chasing your tail so? Said the kitten, “‘I have learned that the best thing for a cat is happiness, and that happiness is my tail. Therefore, I am chasing it: and when I catch it. I shall have happiness.’”

The cat said:

“...‘My son, I, too, have paid attention to the problems of the universe. I, too, have judged that happiness is in my tail. But, I have noticed that whenever I chase it, it keeps running away from me, and when I go about my business, it just seems to come after me wherever I go.’”

Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: I would like to recognize and congratulate Sen. Prof. Hutchinson on his maiden contribution to the Senate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Minister of Health.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. Before I start, may I heartily congratulate all the newly appointed Independent Senators and let me say, we look forward to your learned contributions in the coming months and years. And you will be well guided by Sen. Dr. Paul Richards, Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy and all the other more experienced hands.

Mr. President, we are here because we derive our authority out of the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. And in that Constitution, it provides for a Senate and it provides for six Opposition Senators, but as we see over the years, the Opposition always does not apply the spirit of the law by getting in other speakers. And it is par for the course now because we know that the Constitution many not mean as much to others as it means to us on this side.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Sen. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal spoke about the child marriage Act and that was one of the most painful episodes in this Senate, because the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar saw it fit to bring two old men here, two octogenarians, to speak against the abolition of child marriage, an abuse of the Constitution to support the abuse of our little girls.

Sen. Mark: Standing Order 46(5).

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark, the hon. Minister is responding to what was debated within the remit of this debate this morning.

Sen. Mark: I am referring to 46(5), Sir. You read 46(5)?

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal was the one—

Sen. Mark: No, he referred to the Member, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, as Kamla Persad-Bissessar, you do not do that.

Mr. Vice-President: I stand corrected. Hon. Minister, Members are referred to

from this place and the other place by their correct names.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—the hon. Leader of the Opposition who saw it fit to regale this country with the views of two octogenarians who wanted to continue the unconstitutional rape, statutory rape of little girls.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: That is their record. Mr. Vice-President—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Hon. Vice-President, I stand on 46(6), imputing improper motives to the Senators who were here.

Sen. Mitchell: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: 46(6).

Sen. Mark: Mr. Vice-President, Standing Order 46(6), he has to withdraw that statement.

Mr. Vice-President: One at a time.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark, only one person is allowed on their feet at one time. I have taken into consideration what Sen. Gopeesingh has raised and I ask that the good Minister abide by the language and proper use of English within the Chamber.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Thank you. I will leave that point.

Sen. Mark: Mr. Vice-President, under 46(6), we call on the Minister to withdraw that statement and apologize to this Senate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Mark: He cannot accuse the Opposition of constitutional rape. That is a dangerous thing. He has to withdraw that and he has apologize.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark, I am on my feet.

Sen. Mark: He has to withdraw it and apologize—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark—

Sen. Mark:—or leave the Chamber.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark—

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid—

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid, I am dealing with this.

Sen. Nakhid: He has to withdraw it.

Mr. Vice-President: In your contribution, and recognizing the unparliamentary language that we may have said, I ask that you retract the statement and let us move forward.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: So withdrawn.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Apologize as well.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. President—

Mr. Vice-President: I have ruled.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. President, it is now my unfortunate duty to respond to the codswallop spoken in this Chamber by one of the speakers before me. It was codswallop, codswallop and more codswallop, and—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—when you thought the codswallop had ended, they came with more codswallop.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Codswallop simply means nonsense. That is all.

Mr. Vice-President, the temporary Senator, Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, spoke about COVID, which is one of his favourite topics, and spoke about the parallel health care system is this, the parallel health care system is that. Do you know one

of the most famous patients to get treated in the parallel health care system—and I will call his name because he put his name in the public domain. That person is none other—and he owes his life to the parallel health care system—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—no applause yet, no applause. He owes his life to this person he calls a “failed so and so”, he owes his life to Dr. Roshan Parasram, ORTT; he owes his life to Dr. Maryam Abdool-Richards, Chaconia Gold; he owes his life to Dr. Avery Hinds, who he accused of only having bars and charts, Chaconia Gold; he owes his life to Dr. Christine Carrington from the University of the West Indies. And that famous person who put his name in the public domain, so I am not breaching patient confidentiality, who owes his life, is Dr. Tim Gopeesingh.

Hon. Senators: “Ohhh” [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Hon. Vice-President—

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: He was the—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: I object to it, under 46(6). He is imputing improper motives.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: I never said that. Is he God? Are these people God? I owe my life to God, not to them; not to them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Gopeesingh.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: I owe my life to God, not to them.

Mr. Vice-President: Senator—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: They are a waste of time—

Mr. Vice-President: Senator—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh:—all of them.

Mr. Vice-President:—you had your time to contribute; 46(6), under the context, is upheld.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. May I quote Rickie Ramdass, December 19, 2021. Dr. Gopeesingh said:

“The medical team headed by Chief Medical Officer...Dr Roshan Parasram is also to blame since they refuse to seek the advice of specialist doctors but were only relying on guidelines from the...(WHO).”

WHO has specialist doctors. I will not take advice on COVID from a gynecologist.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I am sorry.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Vice-President—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Vice-President: Senator—Senators, Senators on both sides, kindly allow the good Minister to have silence while he addresses the Chamber.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you. Mr. Vice-President, you know what the solution to COVID was for the UNC, as led by the hon. Opposition leader?

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Sunshine, hydroxychloroquine, and let me quote from a *Sunday Express* editorial of July 25, 2020, with your permission, Mr. Vice-President:

“While extreme exaggeration is a known feature of electioneering, the

UNC leader's comparison of the Government's Covid-19 repatriation exercise to slavery and indentureship is odious and insulting, and betrays a deep lack of historical knowledge. Further, her defiant insistence that 'sunlight will kill Covid-19' is nothing short of ignorance writ large and stands right up there with Donald Trump's advocacy of hydroxychloroquine."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Do you know that was the drug, hydroxychloroquine, that was recommended by the UNC, with Dr. Gopeesingh, when they met with the hon. Prime Minister? And we must take advice from them about COVID?

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Mr. Vice-President, 46(6) again. He is imputing improper motives and not stating facts.

1.35 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President: Have a seat.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: The Minister—

Mr. Vice-President: I have had—you have raised your point of order.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: I said—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Gopeesingh? Sen. Gopeesingh, please have a seat. I am on my feet.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Sure.

Mr. Vice-President: You have raised your point of order. He is quoting legitimately. Minister, continue with your contribution please.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. So Dr. Gopeesingh—"ah", Senate, sorry. Temporary Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh went on and on about COVID and blaming us for the death rates about COVID. Do you know that 90 per cent of COVID victims who died were unvaccinated? And let me tell

you something, Mr. Vice-President, the anti-vax sentiment in Trinidad and Tobago was started by comments of the hon. Member for Oropouche West, Dr. Roodal Moonilal. When we brought down the vaccines he say, “We should not be guinea pigs.” What signal does that send to the population? What signal?

My colleague, Sen. David Nakhid said that he does want to be vaccinated because he does not want to live in a communist state, after Russia and Cuba developed their own vaccines. What message does that send to people who want to be vaccinated? So sunshine, we are going to be guinea pigs, and we are a communist State. And they want to ask about COVID? Mr. Vice-President, they took us to court over 100 times.

Sen. Mark: This is the comedy hour—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark, as much as the contribution is humorous to you, you need to keep your volume down. Proceed.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Vice-President, they took us to court over would 100 times over COVID. They will not support anything that the Government did, but it came to head in the Privy Council, Dominic Suraj and four others, a unanimous decision out of the Privy Council, and this is my last intervention of COVID. They said:

“The uncontradicted evidence of the Minister of Health, Mr. Terrance Deyalsingh, and the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Roshan Parasram, was to...effect that the Rules were introduced on the basis of expert scientific advice...”

Expert scientific advice.

“...which indicated the severe impacts would likely to be...if no action was taken.”

That is the last say on Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh’s contribution on COVID and I

leave that there.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: I never spoke about COVID. You must be dreaming.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Vice-President, Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh spoke about shortage of CDAP and chemotherapy drugs. I checked with the principal pharmacist before coming here, there is no shortage. But there is constant cry that we do not have this, we do not have that. The hon. Senator also praises himself and he always brings up his chairmanship of North West RHA whenever he speaks.

Mr. Vice-President, could the hon. Senator tell this House, seeing he is so noble, seeing he is erudite, that whether the \$1.6 million stolen from the coffers of North West RHA when he was the chairman, that went \$400,000 into his four friends' accounts, has that taxpayer money ever been refunded?

Sen. Mark: What going on here?

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: 46(6), he is imputing improper motives.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark. Sen. Mark, one of your Members is already on his legs. Allow him.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Hon. Vice-President, I asked him to withdraw that statement and apologize. Withdraw it and apologize. It is not—

Sen. Mark: You have no right to call the man a thief.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Yes, so we will—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Mark. Sen. Nakhid. Sen. Tim Gopeesingh.

Sen. Mark: You cannot do that.

Mr. Vice-President: Everyone, I am on my legs. Can we move on from that point please?

Sen. Mark: No, he has to withdraw.

Mr. Vice-President: No, he does not. No, no.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Vice-President: I am on my legs. I am on my legs. Sen. Gopeesingh, I am on my legs. Sen. Gopeesingh, I am on my legs.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: I ask for—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Gopeesingh, I am on—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh:—him to withdraw it.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: I stand on 46(6).

Mr. Vice-President: Minister, do you speak from public record?

Hon. Senator: No!

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: That is in the courts of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Vice-President: Okay. Silence please. Minister, retract that statement and proceed with your contribution please.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I retract. No problem.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Because you are lying. Apologize.

Mr. Vice-President: It is being retracted and there will be silence here henceforth in the Chamber. There will be silence in the Chamber henceforth.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Vice-President, the Member spoke about his qualifications and nothing is happening in the health care sector. As a ob-gyn, also in partnership with another ob-gyn who was the Chairman of South-West Regional Health Authority—

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. Vice-President, a point of order. Standing Order 51(e), (f) and (g). I am really having difficult in hearing the Minister of Health. There is a

running commentary—

Sen. Mark: You were doing the same [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Silence in the Chamber. Sen. Mark, all that has been raised has to do with excessive crosstalk, running commentaries and silence. I do not even have to look at my book to figure that out. All of us know this very well. This is the last time, especially during the Minister's contribution, that I will tolerate outbursts. After this, I am going to ask whosoever is breaking the silence to exit the Chamber. Allow the Minister to continue.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. If one listens to the temporary Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, one gets the impression that nothing good is happening in the health care system, and I do appreciate the words of Sen. Prof. Gerard Hutchinson who gave a very balanced view of where things are.

Mr. Deputy Speaker—Mr. Vice-President, sorry, I apologize. When we came into office as a Government in September 2015, the major health issue facing this country—and people forget because it is eight years now—the major number one issue facing this country was the unacceptable rate at which pregnant women were dying in our hospitals under the UNC. The maternal mortality rates were through the roof. And in that Government, you had Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh ob-gyn who lectured in 15 universities and 1,000 students, and has this, and has that, and has the other; you had Dr. Lackram Bodoie ob-gyn, Chairman of South-West Regional Health Authority, and those two experts did not find the time, courage, or bring their expertise to bear on this vexing issue of why under their tenure women were dying in child birth at the rate of one per month.

When I became Minister of Health in my first week we had a maternal mortality. In my second week we had one. I remembered it distinctly, I was being interviewed on the *Morning Brew* by Hema Ramkissoon right after becoming

Minister of Health, and Ms. Ramkissoo asked me, “Minister, what are you going to do?” I say, “I am going to assume the post of director of women’s health now and bring an end to this.” I did it, and by March/April, 2016, seven months into my tenure as Minister of Health, the rates of maternal mortality started to drop precipitously.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I did it. Not my friend opposite. I did it. Then we got the director of women’s health to come on board in March 2017. And do you know how many women have died in childbirth for 2023 in the 10th month of 2023, Mr. Vice-President? The grand total of zero.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Not one, but you would not hear that. You would not hear that from the world famous ob-gyn. You will think that will be his passion. You will think he would laud us for that. But we achieved our SDG goals for maternal mortality rates which was supposed to have been achieved by 2030, we achieved it in 2018, 12 years ahead of schedule. Not one woman has died for this year.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Children’s mortality rate. Under my friends opposite children were dying in childbirth at the rate of 15 per 1,000. You know what it is now? Five point six per 1,000. Which means to figures, 80 to 100 babies survived now as previously. Is that not progress? Does that not speak to a health sector that is doing something right? But you would not hear that. You would not hear that from the world famous OBGY—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—who lectures in 15 universities, and lecture to Dr. Amery Browne, and lecture to this one, and lecture to that one because the truth escapes

them.

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*] while you were in the shop in Pasea Road.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Vice-President, we have taken note of the scourge NCDs. And in the few minutes I have left, we are tackling NCDs at source because there is talk about why we do not tackle NCDs at source. Mr. Vice-President, for the first time in this country under my tenure which I pushed, we launched something called the diabetes in pregnancy project, because as the doctors will tell you, a diabetic mother who is obese, that child being developed, that foetus being developed in that environment, what we call a obesogenic environment, stands a good chance to being born obese and stands a good chance of being a juvenile Type I diabetic. They had no plan to deal with that. None.

We launched the diabetes in pregnancy project in 2018, where for the first time every pregnant women in our public hospitals are screened twice a year for diabetes. They are given glucometers, they are given advice, and that has dramatically dropped the rate of diabetes in our pregnant population. But what is more important, it would drop the rate of diabetes at source for our babies born out of diabetic mothers. That is progress. That is tackling NCDs at source. Coupled with that, Mr. Vice-President, we developed the national breastfeeding policy in 2020, but policy as I always say, is useless until you implement it. Prior to the policy—and we all know breast feeding is best—the rate of breastfeeding in our public hospitals by mothers, after giving birth, was 10 per cent.

From 2020 to now, you know what rate is? That rate has increased from 10 per cent early initiation of breastfeeding, even with mothers delivering by caesarean section from 10 per cent to a whopping 95 per cent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Our women for the first time in Trinidad and Tobago are breastfeeding 95 out of 100 within 24 hours of giving birth. And what we would like is for the mothers after being discharged to continue that practice at home for at least the first six months.

We know two years is ideal, but we know women have to go to work. We know that. But everyone knows a breast fed baby stands a lower risk of developing diabetes and everything else. That is what we did, but we will get no thanks from my colleagues opposite.

1.50 p.m.

My friend spoke about my plans for Port of Spain hospital to be a teaching hospital. Let me say it again, we are working with the University of the West Indies. Nothing has been signed as yet, as I have said in my budget debate. We are working with the University of the West Indies, and I gave the timelines in my budget debate. I do not have the details now, but, the committee is at work and we hope by October 30th to get an interim report about where we are going with that project to hopefully sign an MOU sometime in 2025.

But, my friend said: why did we not use Couva Children's Hospital to teach all these specialists and subspecialists? Mr. Vice-President, how on earth, on this God's green earth, could you run a post-graduate programme for maxillofacial surgery in a children's hospital? How on earth can you do that and all the other specialties? Mr. Vice-President, you see as far as they are concerned the central block should never had been built. And it galls me when I hear the UNC talk about the central block. They faced a crumbling building, when the price of oil was \$100 and north of \$100 and just told the people of Port of Spain and environs "Go suck salt. We not giving yuh a hospital even though it is a risk to your life and limb."

Mr. Vice-President, let me explain to the population what would have befallen this Government if we had not pulled down central block. Let us look at some figures. Central block, 400 beds, that is 400 patients, add another 500 nurses and doctors and wardmaids, that is 1,000 people. Suppose the earthquake had happened during visiting hours, and let us say two patients—two visitors per patient. That is 1,800 to 2,000 persons who could potentially have lost their lives if central block had fallen down during an earthquake and they knew that. They knew that and they ignored it when oil was \$100 plus a barrel. We are building it. We are building it. My Prime Minister is building it—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—and this country should be thankful that you have a Prime Minister like Dr. Keith Rowley who has the health agenda high on his agenda.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. President, Prof. Hutchinson spoke eloquently on stress and so on, and, as you know, I have been an advocate for the decentralization of mental health services. And Prof. Hutchinson spoke about intimate partner violence. We developed the first intimate partner violence program in this country last year. We launched it with the help of the Spotlight Initiative with funding from one of the UN agencies. Professor also spoke about GROOTS. GROOTS is one of those agencies that we have in our FindCareTT website.

Let me explain to the population. Mental health, anxiety, depression suicidal thoughts, suicides ideations, need a different approach, and for that we have worked to develop a programme called FindCareTT which is a hotline—a helpline—for over 30 types of services. It links you to the Children's Authority. It links you to GROOTS. It links you to all the RHAs where you need help. It links you to 24-7 suicide hotlines. So, I ask people to make use of this. Prof.

Hutchinson also spoke about one of the novel programmes we introduced, the walk-in stress clinic at NCRHA. We did that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: So you no longer have to make an appointment, but the service now is so over-subscribed that we have to find ways of ramping it up. What we have done with the new Diego Martin Health Centre we have converted the old health centre to a mental health clinic. You have a new mental health in Aranguez, and what we are doing, we are trying to expand our reach for mental health services, because post COVID-19, it really exacerbated people's level of anxiety and depression. So that is what we are doing.

1.55 p.m.

Prof. Hutchinson also spoke about the need for digitization. I can tell you that we have worked with the Minister Hassel Bacchus, the Ministry of Digital Transformation. We went out for an RFP for this project, the RFP closed early this month and now the tenders are being evaluated to do exactly what we want, electronic medical records and I look forward to the day when we could launch that.

Mr. President, my colleague also—sorry, I take that word back.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Sen. Dr Tim Gopeesingh.

Sen. Mark: “He say he g take back the word.”

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I take that back, please.

Hon. Senator: “You not a doctor.”

Hon. Senator: Take it back, take it back.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: He spoke about orthopaedics and you see, for those who do not inform themselves, it is easy to speak. Let me tell you what this person, what

this Minister of Health is doing for orthopaedics. Everyone knows we have problems with orthopaedics and we speak about conflicts of interest. We spent about six months working with a team of non-conflicted orthopaedic surgeons because if we had to go out for tender, these people had to be non-conflicted, they have must no shares in any company, no association with any company. It took us six months to do that and I want to thank those who helped us, Dr. Kimani White and his team.

Based on that now, there is a request for proposals. Request for proposals for public tender for joint procurement of a consignment arrangement for orthopaedic implants for total joint replacement for a period of two years for the four regional health authorities in Trinidad. That is what we are doing, doing it ethically, doing it morally, doing it with no kickbacks because that is how you solve problems, by management. The same way management solved the maternal mortality issue. One day, I would like to tell this country how I did it. It will make good reading for a management text because we solved a medical problem with management techniques.

Hon. Senator: “Is Kamla do it.”

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Hear them, “is Kamla do it”, yeah.

So, Mr. Vice-President, those are some of the responses, especially for those who are unaware of the truth. You see, it is easy to get up and speak and spew codswallop and fool people. And we know the type of politics that the UNC is now following.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We know the type of politics that they are following. You say the untruth once, people might dismiss you. You say it twice, they might still dismiss you but by the fourth, fifth time, people start to say, you know, something

here might be true. It is called the big—but I cannot use the L word in this Chamber, but that is the modus operandi of a particular political party, just mislead, mislead, misinform and hope that Trinidad and Tobago fails so that they could succeed.

But under the hands of the People's National Movement, under the hand of my political leader Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, we stand with 1.4 million people and under our leadership, Trinidad and Tobago will not fail, we will succeed. Thank you very much.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Senator, let us have a moment please. Sen. Mark?

Sen. Mark: Yes, Sir?

Mr. Vice-President: For the last three days, we have been following address and response.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Okay, sure. I think it is the rightful time. Sen. Nakhid.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. David Nakhid: In the name of Almighty God, the most gracious, the most merciful. Mr. Vice-President, I would like to go straight into it as there is so much to deal with but I would like to thank the PNM for allowing the Minister of Health to come and give us that comedic relief that I think, after three days we very much needed in the Chamber. I will completely discount his contribution which was personal and in a time of so much suffering among the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I think we have more pressing issues that I will henceforth address.

You know, it is indicative of this Government to talk about people doubling

down on propaganda and therefore it turns into what we perceive as mendacity. This Government who was in power for 30 uninterrupted years, unprecedented wealth and achieved virtually nothing for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, except skeletal health care systems, educational systems and eventually closed down our most prized asset Petrotrin.

And not only doing that, I refer to the comment and I know the hon. Senator meant it in the most nostalgic of ways when the Senator said Trinidad is nice, Trinidad is a paradise. She was referring to what is an ideal because when has Trinidad been a paradise for the people of Beetham? When? When has Trinidad been a paradise for the people of Laventille where my mother came from and who I have witnessed a steep decline over the years, over the decades, directly represented by that party—by that party—since 1956? When has Trinidad been a paradise under this Government when our Indo-Trinbagonian brothers and sisters were politically, economically and socially discriminated against? When? When has Trinidad and Tobago been a paradise for our Shouter Baptist brothers and sisters who this Government discriminated against and the UNC had to rectify that situation?

Sen. Mark: Of course.

Sen. D. Nakhid: When has Trinidad been a paradise for the people of Mt D'Or where I grew up, for the people of what we call "**Zone, ShavHill**", Trinbagonians, what we call them, "'gonians", the Tobagonians who were treated as second-class citizens, I know that myself and I hear people refer to here as they come from Tobago and I come from Tobago too. Because this is Trinidad and Tobago, I consider myself a Tobagonian as much as anybody, and I will speak on the issues of Tobago.

Sen. Mark: Of course.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: So to hear this Government come now and double down on the propaganda that they espouse every time that they are in government, forgetting or hoping that we the population forget, that they have been basically in power for 47 years, 47 years, they controlled the Treasury. What did they do? I will not deal unparliamentary language—

Sen. Lutchmedial: Misappropriate.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—but I would say that the “squandermania” and wastage is recorded and documented. But before I go into my substantive contribution, I want to just clean up a few things that need to be addressed. When I heard the Sen. the hon. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal, I would not even address it because comparing her contribution to the hon. Sen. Lutchmedial, chalk and cheese, chalk and cheese, chalk and cheese.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: But when she went into the issue of child marriages and speaking about child marriages, well, I perked up, I was so happy, I thought then eventually she will transition into the child abuse.

Sen. Lutchmedial: “Oh, nah, dey doh talk about that. It have an award for that?”

Sen. D. Nakhid: The child abuse that has been rampant, documented by the Sabga report which implicated directly PNM operatives who were criminally functional, in case they want to know the difference between the two words, leading to what? Direct evidence of their operatives being involved in the brutal rape and murder of Akiel Chambers, the murder of Simeon Daniel, Antonio Francois which spawned what we now call the Justice Judith Jones Report. I was a witness to that report and that report came about when I was mandated by our honourable political leader Kamla Persad-Bissessar and our deputy political leader Jearlean John.

Based on what I found out, that Justice Judith Jones report came about. Do

you know that they sit down here talking about child marriages when that report has been laid on the Prime Minister's desk and nothing has been done to address the issues indicated in that report? Abuse continues at the homes. Homes that basically have not attended to children remain being paid, getting money. Who is getting that money? The Children's Authority now have issued, now have issued it, you see. If you see something that is visionless about foster care and people will be paid if they take care of children, well, expect lines like we saw in C3 because people will be looking for money and we do not know what will happen.

So I advise this Government, before they look at the speck in someone else's eye, look at the big boulder in their own because that issue of child abuse was not only perpetrated by some PNM operatives but until now it continues.

Sen. Renuka Sagrainsingh-Sooklal disputed whether this was the worst mismanaged Office of the Attorney General. What can I say? If the head of that Attorney General's office is an internationally-acclaimed perpetrator of mendacity, thrown out of a court—

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. Vice-President, Standing Order—

Sen. Mark: “Dais ah fact.”

Sen. D. Nakhid: But it is a fact.

Sen. Mitchell: 46(6).

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. Vice-President, I am moving a point of order.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I want to hear, and it was brought up.

Mr. Vice-President: Members on the other side, there is a Standing Order being raised, please allow the process to happen please and Members on the Government Bench, it is just one at a time.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. Vice-President, Standing Order 46(6).

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Yes.

Mr. Vice-President: 46(6) points towards imputation of improper motives. I ask that you move on in your contribution please. Let us go on.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Mr. Vice-President, what I have stated is a fact. Our Attorney General at present was thrown out of a Miami court for what could be considered mendacious activity. That is a fact.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: I am not making that up. That is documented.

Sen. Mitchell: Point of order please, 46(6) and 46(4).

Sen. Mark: It is documented—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. Mitchell: You are uncharitable, have some decorum.

Sen. D. Nakhid: No, no, no!

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. Vice-President: 46(6) recognized. Senator, kindly continue with your contribution.

2:10 p.m.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I will continue. Thank you. I am guided, Mr. Vice-President.

Sen. Lutchmedial: It “have ah” judgment.

Sen. D. Nakhid: There was a judgment. They like to give but they cannot take.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. Vice-President, once again, 46(6):

“No Senator shall make an imputation of improper motives against any other Member or an offensive reference to a Member’s private affairs.”

It is plain English, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Both sides.

Sen. Mark: But it is a public judgment.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Yes, Sir.

Mr. President: I have recognized the Standing Order and I ask that you move on. What you have not done is moved on. You have made your statement. I have not asked for a retraction, I have not asked for an apology. I have asked you to move on. Please move on without dragging the point further.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Mr. Vice-President, with all due respect, I have stated a fact, documented. It is not because it makes them uncomfortable that I will stop to make that fact—

Mr. President: Sen. Nakhid, Sen. Nakhid, I believe the point is actually on the *Hansard* today at least three times. You have made your point. I ask that you move on with your contribution. That is it.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Guided, Mr. Vice-President, that the point has been made.

Also, in addition to what happened in that Miami court, we have an issue of that Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs with the Vincent Nelson matter, where it has been proven that bribes were paid to a witness to implicate UNC officials in illicit activities. That is a fact as well. So I think when Sen. Sagramsingh-Sooklall seeks or sought to defend the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, she did herself no favours nor did she do the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs no favours.

Mr. Vice-President, I did not want to dwell too long on the issues that came up from the representations on that side because, as we know, we are so beset with the issue of crime in Trinidad and Tobago, and this Government obviously has no solution for it, other than deflection—

Sen. Mark: Deception.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—deception and plain outright misinformation. And that

misinformation, it is not new to the People's National Movement, it is not new at all. And I reference the MP for Tunapuna who, in his contribution—which I was so happy. I was so happy that finally that the MP for Tunapuna made a contribution after eight years and spoke about Tunapuna. I will tell you why. Last year, it was—excerpts of his speech last year, in the last budget, were plastered all over PNM platforms, only to find out that he never contributed in last year's budget debate; something that is very common to this Government, where they try to make people who are hapless, hopeless in their portfolio, they try to give them some kind of credibility. So he finally made a contribution, which he read poorly, over 49-odd minutes. But I had to listen. And it sounded very much like the Sen. Sookhai's first contribution in the Senate, which was cringe-worthy.

But the MP for Tunapuna went on to state that Tunapuna, a community that gave us some of the most brilliant politicians, some of the most brilliant sportsmen, the most brilliant thinkers, he told that community after eight years that what they can look forward to from him was a \$1,000 grant and \$3,000 back pay. That was the extent of his contribution. And what was sad is that in his whole time, he never mentioned in the eight years that he presided over Tunapuna, one development policy that he instituted in Tunapuna.

2.15 p.m.

He did not present one sporting policy. He did not present one community-building policy. As a matter of fact, in their manifesto, before the election of 2020, they spoke extensively about renovation of the Tunapuna Market. All we have now, after three years, is a market where parents are running around, from week to week dodging bullets from bandits in Tunapuna. What we have is every two days, as a matter of fact, just up to yesterday, and I think Sen. Sunity Maharaj mentioned it when she spoke, somebody had been killed on St. John's

Street in Tunapuna, murdered. And just yesterday the same thing happen in Maingot Road, somebody again killed. So, instead of Tunapuna being a place, an arena of ideas, a field of discussion, it has turned into a killing field. Tunapuna has turned into a killing field. Do you know why? The PNM continues to put people out there to represent the people, based on how they look, what they appeal to, the most common denominator; people lacking substance.

And I ask myself, you know, because—let me rephrase that. You will find among the weeds, a couple roses. I say that clearly, like my colleague from Tobago who I genuinely admire. But other than that, the landscape is sparse. The cupboard is bare. Listen to their contributions, listen to their contributions, personal attacks.

Listen to the Minister of Health who came in just to launch attack after attack, personal. You could hear it. What did he tell us about the health sector? What did he really tell us about the health sector that we could go away here feeling comfortable, giving us some sense of hope? Is he going to deny to us, we do not have our own sense of sight? Is he going to deny to us that we do not see what is going on in the hospitals?

The RHAs were conceived under the NAR, conceived under them, and, of course, Patrick Manning brought it to fruition. But it was conceived under the NAR. The idea was that every community, which is a First World idea, will be self-sufficient in health care. What a noble idea. What a noble idea. That is how it should be. What have they done? You go to those health centres, they are skeletal, machines missing. Invariably, as you go in, after half hour they send you to Mount Hope or Sangre Grande, where it is overburdened, already overburdened. So what do we have a health care system for? What is the budget for health care? Doc?

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Eight billion.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Eight billion dollars, no machines for dialysis, no scans. And then they come here to talk all kinds of rubbish, basically, about what they have done. What have you done in 47 years? You have squandered money. Can you deny that? You have not proven anything about honourable in how you have addressed the people. And again your appeal continues to be to the most basic of our instincts. But the people are fed-up.

And I bring it back to the community, Mr. Vice-President, and I repeat it again and again. And maybe it will sink in to them. Why is it that the crime rate in the constituencies that the PNM control is higher than everywhere else? What are they going to tell us, that is not the case? But every statistic shows that is the case. Why is that? And funny enough, the party that portrays itself as the party of the black man, but “black people suffering the most in this country. Black people suffering the most in this country.”

And our Indo-Trinbagonian brothers and sisters should be the first one to thank Dr. Williams for sidelining them. It forced them to work by the sweat of their brow to realize their dreams and not depend on this Government. Because the people who are depending on this Government, look where they are. In every social and economic index, they are at the bottom of the ladder. Do they care about? Do they care about that? They cannot deny it. They cannot deny it. It is fact. But they could sit down here and smirk and laugh and pound the desk with venom because “dey making ah money.” They are doing well. They are coming to tell you take 350 extra, and they are telling you that with pride. Because for them, that might be every five minutes of work. And by the way, “none ah dem distinguishable eh. Take dem outta politics, dey unemployable. I saying that confidently.”

I know I made my name before I came into politics. David Nakhid was

David Nakhid by his mother's and father's insistence on education. How many of them? As a matter of fact, coming into politics has ruined some of their reputations. So, for me to hear, Mr. Vice-President, the party that every time we hear them speak, they do not speak about the things that matter. They will speak about the UNC. They will speak about—and hear what, not only that they will come as Senator—another one. I must say I like him. “I doh talk with him. I ain talk with none ah dem. Me ain care ‘bout none ah dem.” But I must say I like to hear him. But he come yesterday totally unprepared and talk about revisionist history. “Who more” revisionist than this group here; this present Rowly-led group? “Who more revisionist?” All right sorry, the Prime Minister. Who is more revisionist than them? As a matter of fact yesterday, in 20 minutes they revised the whole history of the OAS, in 20 minutes.

Dr. Carson Charles came with a document stating in December 2015—correct? December 2015.; in 15 minutes they hustle up a paper, gave it to somebody who could barely read and talk about April 2015. Come on! That is the politics they are involved in? “People suffering, people getting shot in their bed, people cyah even go to the police station and make a report. By the time dey reach home, dey getting killed.” Black people until now—

Let me tell you a story. My grandfather, David Benjamin Harris, I was named after him, came up in, let us say a middle-class home. But he married Emelda Charles. That is Rudolph Charles from Despers, that is my grandmother. He married her and took her out of Laventille. And one of the first, it is documented, what we called cocoa brown black people to start a business. That is turn of the Century. He started a business, but was getting real pressure, so he made an association. He was a bit of an activist. He took an association of black businessmen to put money together and they began their business. But of course,

with expansion, he reached a point in time where they could go further. They needed help from the banks.

Sen. John: Republic Bank eh givin' them no money.

Sen. D. Nakhid: The French Creole merchants blocked them, bankrupted all of them.

So, after he took my grandmother out of Laventille, lived down near Sacred Hearts, down in town, a big improvement at the time, he was bankrupted. He died heartbroken, fighting against the system. Has anything changed for black people in that regard? Can a man from Laventille go and get financial access like other people in Trinidad and Tobago? Would they address that? They destroyed small and medium enterprises in the last eight years.

Sen. Lutchmedial: But NiQuan could get.

Sen. D. Nakhid: But NiQuan could get millions of dollars. And when the Prime Minister is asked to address that, he giving us talk about “maga” dog and “maga” dog. You are responsible. All that money that you gave to favoured communities, to elevate favoured communities, but the major stakeholders, the African and the Indian stakeholders of Trinidad and Tobago still fighting to survive in 2023. And then you all come here and talk like you all have some kind of authority or moral authority on the UNC. You all must be mad. The UNC is the party of the poor.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: You know how I know that? Because I am on the street. You all do not go on the street. The party of the poor, the UNC is the party of the poor, and I say that without fear of contradiction. And if they are the party of the poor, again I say, why all the people in their constituencies mostly are above the poverty line?

I just had something sent to me that almost 30 per cent of black youths in

Trinidad in and around the poverty line, just sent to me. In Tunapuna for sure, youth unemployment almost close to 50 per cent. And then you all want to ask why is it easier for a black youth to find a gun than it is to find a job under this Government? Instead of crying shame on yourselves, you all are content to sit there and come in Parliament and laugh and feel like it is some joke, we trade insults, you trade insults. I am not interested in none “ah allyuh.” I thought you all would have come, at least with something to educate and uplift the population and put some meat on that boney thing that you all call a budget. But none of you all did that. You all just content to insult.

Is it any wonder, Mr. Vice-President—do you know that in some constituencies controlled by the PNM, that some of the residents refer to their community as the Gaza? Do you understand the gravity of that statement; that some residents of their communities, PNM communities, refer to themselves as the Gaza, they live in the Gaza? What does that tell you? That tells you they feel besieged, they feel locked in, they feel excluded. What is more telling than that, that they are excluded from the process?

I heard the MP for Tobago West, who is now the Minister of Sport. I listened to her, painful, painful. She spoke for about 48 minutes, generalities. Eight years as Minister of Sport, she could not point to a programme. She lauded this one. All of the people she lauded, they had no part in that development. She could not come with one modality, not one sporting modality, to tell me how you will take me—and they are responsible for that, by the way—how you will take a seven-year-old child through 14, which is the first modality. I will help “all yuh out a bit,” so listen up; how they will take them from seven years old to 14 years old, and then from 14 years, how they will take them into the second developmental modality. Nothing. “She come and talk about some events they put

on, about some money they gave in the elite.” But when people reach to elite—

Do you know what Keshorn Walcott said? He said it is not about the money, you know. He said when he is training he wants to be sure that if something happens to him and he gets injured, he has a certain infrastructure he can depend on. He said he does not have that. That is what he said. But they are content to come and tell you they gave money to this one for the elite assistance programme, and they gave that, but they are not concerned. Their job is development.

2.30 p.m.

I became an elite footballer, not because of them. I was developed because of the civility, the good heartedness of people in Trinidad and Tobago who spent their time mentoring me. We “doh” have that, people “doh” have time. “Dais” the job of the Government. But you go in Mandela Park, and you had to wade through the bottles and the rubbish which they seldom clean; you have to wade through the used condoms. Sorry for the language, but that is the fact. All “ah” that on the ground because they have nothing suitable for purpose. They have no ideas how to take Sport from Trinidad in 1956 to 2023.

They have a savannah basically unused. I bring anybody here from Europe who has an idea about sport, and they say, “wah going on here”. Have a million uses, but I would not go into that with them, because they would not know what to do with it. But I will give you an idea because I do not want to be like you all, and just come and talk tripe. I want to help you all, because people are dying, and sport is an avenue, and community development is an avenue, to take people from here where they have the idea of turning to criminality, or going into a productive live. You have a savannah there that you cannot continue to use like “yuh” in 1956. You can break it up into individual sectors that are self-sustainable for every

community around the savannah. It is right there, it is right there, if you use your brain a little bit. That is the intellectual deficit we talk about.

Sen. Lutchmedial: Laziness.

Sen. D. Nakhid: And then you can make every community in charge of every one of those sectors; you can make them generate income. That is generating employment. But you have no ideas, and that is me in five minutes. You had eight years, and you cannot do a thing. And, then again, we speaking about community development.

Tell me one community that has developed under you all, under the PNM. One. You all cannot say. Not one community have you all developed, but then again it is right there. We have 41 constituencies in Trinidad and Tobago. Let us say, in eight years, well you all might have 10. Let us say, we develop every year four communities. No, no, no, let us not get greedy here, two, because you do not have a lot of bright people on that side. Let us say you develop two communities every year. In the eight years you had, you would have 16 communities through sport, through social support. But you all had no integration of what portfolios—because you all do not understand the thing. You all do not know what it means to govern. You all understand destructive politics.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: About this one do this, this one do that, this one do that. I do that. In 2010, they do that. What residence that has, with the people of Trinidad and Tobago? You all had somebody coming here—he is a doctor? Minister of Health is a doctor? No, no? Well then again, you have somebody coming here, and speak about how they save lives and thing. Instead of talking about the life, you talk about the life, you say—we are very happy for that—talk about the over 400 and something murders until now. The 600 last year and 500 before that. But

you all are content just to score political points.

But I think the people of Trinidad and Tobago are really and truly fed up, certainly my Tobagonian brothers and sisters are, and no matter how you all will try to paint them, they would not forget that you are 21 years uninterrupted. They would not forget, and what did you do? You did nothing. You collapsed the sea bridge, the air bridge, tourism, and you all coming here to talk about— You all collapsed that. And, I feel sorry for him. I really feel sorry for the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. Because how, for somebody like him—he is a lawyer, I think he is a lawyer, to come and being praised of our Trinbagonians rushing to get employment on a cruise ship, and claiming that as policy.

2.35 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President—

Sen. Lutchmedial: “Dey” proud people want to leave.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—you know I mean, that is really scraping the bottom of the barrel looking for some kind of resonance in their policies. Come on.

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

Sen. Mitchell: Why did you not stay in Trinidad and play football?

Sen. D. Nakhid: And hear what he said—I like how he asked me that. Why did I not stay in Trinidad and play football?—that question—Because you all have no pathway to professionalism.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: You all have not been able to create that so I had to go outside—

Sen. Lutchmedial: PNM was in power.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—like so many hundreds.

Sen. Lutchmedial: When PNM in power everybody leaves.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I had to go, as a matter of fact, do you know right now, Mr.

Vice-President, I train, as Sen. Jearlean John will know, I train disadvantaged youths. Of course, some who can afford but I like to bring them together. Every one of them to a man some from Sea Lots. I get help from people who are—some from Sea Lots and every single one of them they “cah” wait to leave Trinidad and Tobago. “Coach, organize a scholarship, coach”. You know why? You all do not have any pathway, you all have not in 47 years of governance given anyone a pathway to excellence.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: What you all do, you all come and covet that, people reach excellence by their own. By their own.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: No help.

Sen. D. Nakhid: You give no one any help of meaning. And listen to this, after 46 minutes, or a little less, of absolute nothing from the Minister of Sport and Community Development, she went on her usual or the PNM usual M-O—

Hon. Senator: Who is she?

Sen. D. Nakhid:—modus operandi. MP for Tobago West, thank you. It is the first good thing you said all session.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: What did she do? What does the Minister of Tourism do?

Sen. John: Nothing.

Sen Mitchell: Tourism?

Sen. Lutchmedial: Sport.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Sport, sorry. What does she do?

Sen. Lutchmedial: You might have been a better Minister of sport—

Sen. D. Nakhid: Come and talk about UNC lining up, listen to this, UNC lining up Africans and Indians in rows. That is the go-to of the PNM. Always has to

appeal to race. Lining up, well, I want to ask a question. All the people in C3, those pictures we saw, African, Indian, we lined them up too? The thousands of people that ran to C3, and for the prisons officer job, we lined them up to?

Sen. Lutchmedial: Yeah. The cruise ship.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I mean how reprehensible you all can get? Everything you all have to try and appeal to our lesser angels. But I think we have had enough. In closing, Mr. Vice-President, I would like to point out to you that what this budget basically represented was what we call, you know the old people, I used to hear my grandmother and they talk about going in town and doing some window shopping. How many minutes I have? How many I have left?

Mr. Vice-President: Two minutes.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Doing window shopping. You all know that, “some ah dem wouldn’t even know what dat mean”. Window shopping means you “cah” afford. So you go, pass by, Glendinnings, I have it right? Remember Glendinnings, Kirpalani’s and just watch in the window “buh yuh cah go inside and buy nothing”. That is this budget. All the goodies inside and who can go in the store is only who the PNM lets in, their friends and financiers, but no goodies inside for the poor and working-class people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: So all we can hope for is that people continue to wake up like they did in the local government, realize that this Government has done nothing for the people of Trinidad and Tobago in eight years and will continue so to do. And we look forward, Mr. Vice-President, to bringing true governance to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lewis.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Francis Lewis: Good afternoon, Mr. Vice-President, Members. Listening to this debate both on television and today, I would ask for a little bit of charity for this contribution, I hope. The contribution and the focus is on the budget, and in looking at the budget I had to figure out how to analyze it. I decided to use a very, very, simple analytical technique no less powerful for its simplicity. It is colloquially called traffic light analysis. It starts by asking what is good in the thing that you are looking at? And almost always there is good to find. What needs to be fixed? A traffic light analysis because you start with the green, green is not perfect, green is that which is good on which you will build for the future. You could always improve it. Red is not failure. Red is that which perhaps used to work, needs to fix, needs to change, for it to be brought back and made relevant. And the yellow, the amber of the traffic light, Mr. Vice-President, is what are the innovations and changes that you would like to approach it with. Now, the trick with this form of analysis is always start with the green.

Mr. Vice-President: One moment please, one moment, please. Officer at the rear, there seems to be some noise coming from those exiting, deal with it, please. Continue.

Sen. F. Lewis: Thank you very much. The trick with the analysis is to always start with the green because what the research shows is that if you start with the red you almost never leave the negative, and negative comments tend to stimulate their own momentum.

So let me start with a review, my very simple review of the budget starting with the things that I think are positive. One, is I think the economic fundamentals noted by the Minister provide a very good batting wicket. It is quite frankly more favourable than I have seen in many a year. I think with the budget there is clarity,

and this can be seen from public reaction, not just my own views on it. I think the assumptions seem reasonable but as with all things they are assumptions. So things can change often with a moment's notice, but there is continuity which provides for a degree of predictability which is necessary in any kind of policy-making whether in business, whether in individual life, certainly whether in government.

It is not bad, not bad at all as a first cut, and I do commend the teams at the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning and Development, but I also look forward to the mid-year review because one of the things I have learnt is that course corrections are almost inevitably required. Sometimes budgets become obsolete even as we start to implement them having built a few myself over the years. Creating a good budget is about a complex balancing exercise. The budget ought to reflect a plan and I do very much take the comment, I believe it was in one of his submissions of the Minister of Finance is that:

If I had to put every single backup and data to every single point, I will be talking for 10 hours, not three.

And I do take that point. And a plan is about finding the balance and about making some very hard choices as to priorities because if resources are limited then we have to make some very hard decisions sometimes about what we will put money into. If we simply take the funds and we scatter them across programs you end up not achieving very much, except the initial satisfaction that everybody got a little something.

And the other part of it is looking at data, it is amazing how different people could see things in quite different ways. An issue that I have been hearing continually in the comments within the House today, and certainly in the earlier contributions, has to do with the raising of the retirement age from 60 to 65. And I

could not help but reflect that, is that not just a necessary thing from the finances of the National Insurance Board, but is it not also a positive reflection of successive governments over multiple years where the average life expectancy in Trinidad is 74? It was not always that. The fact that one is able to talk about raising a retirement age is itself a positive reflection on other aspects across the society. And I think that kind of balance is important.

Just a quick historical note that might be useful. The very first social security programme ever put in in the world was put in by Germany by Otto von Bismarck in 18—I think was 1879. The original age was 70 for receiving a state pension, 27 years later it was reduced to 65, and that is where 65 became this magic number around the world. At that time less than 10 per cent of the population lived to age 65 much less to receive a state pension, which was very small in those days. The simple point is we are the recipients of a history but we also make our history, and that history is balanced on many factors.

Finding the right balance can be challenging. And in listening to many of the comments of colleagues, it has been a focus on necessary issues but often issues of allocation. My heart goes out to the Senator whom I looked at yesterday, the hon. Donna Cox, speaking of her Ministry and of the initiatives and programmes, and it is an absolutely necessary part of our society. But I wanted to speak not on allocations, I want to speak on revenue. Because “yuh cyah spend wha yuh eh have”.

In all my years of working as a management consultant, more often than not I have to start with what is the top line of the organization, then we could talk about expenses. And if you have to constrain expenses or you have to channel it, that is one big issue, but first, let us figure out how we can move revenue.

The budget, and these are things to be cautious of, the budget is a deficit

budget. The projections are that we would spend about \$59 billion and about 5.2 billion, about 8.8 per cent of the budget will come from borrowings. Deficit budgeting is not problematic. It can worry a little bit but it is not necessarily a bad thing. Particularly, when you come out of difficult times or you are dealing with difficult situations. I mean, the reason we use reserves is to be able to get past the difficulties, but the challenge is how to return a budget first to balance and then to surplus. Because you have to build the surpluses because I am sure as hell, sorry—I am sure as heck the future will bring challenges that you cannot anticipate at this point in time.

So, when I looked at the revenue projections, and the question I have been asking is how to move the top line. It is good to be very conservative in your projections but it is also good to set stretch targets to raise the aim so to speak, and the challenge facing the country would be how to generate increased revenue. And this is increased revenue and I do take the point made several times by the Minister and in the budget statement itself, it is not through increasing in taxation but it is through increasing in economic activity.

The three considerations, when you approach it that way, become what should be the role of a government, any government; how should this role evolve over time, because how you start is not how you are going to end up because the role needs to evolve; and most especially, how do you build the necessary ecosystem that will take over from whatever the initial initiative is and will carry the thing forward to success? So that the focus is how do we generate the revenue?

There are many areas that we could look at but I want to speak and offer some thoughts for consideration in three areas. One has to do with diversification, the second has to do with innovation and the third has to do with exporting and concomitantly, the development of our SMEs. In the area of diversification, we

will probably get absolutely no disagreement on the need for an economy to be diversified and the reason is very simple. You do not want to put all your eggs in one basket. As noted in the budget statement we are a small open economy and commodity prices even in the best of times can be notably volatile. So you therefore want to find the counter balances to that.

2.50 p.m.

There is a concern that I often hear, and I think it is not correct, that our economy is not diversified. It is true that energy has heft. And I suppose—because we all benefit from it, I say thank goodness. But when I look at the other aspects of the economy and the numbers in the budget itself, is that when you look at government financing, oil and energy generate \$16.7 billion or 31 per cent of the budget, but non-energy is \$35.5 billion or 66 per cent of the budget. What that translates to is that there is economic activity, and that is coming from somewhere, and that somewhere are the other strands of the economy that are performing.

Now, the budget statement did identify a few of those and I think they are worth noting. We have—separate from the services it provides to the economy, but the revenue it helps generate, our finance and banking sector is not bad for a small economy. And they seem to hold their own regionally and then somewhat further afield.

The jump in the last few years of manufacturing from 11 per cent—and it is a sector I know reasonably well—to 17 per cent in five years is a remarkable achievement. Now, is it enough? I suppose I might be selfish and say, no, it should be more. But it would be churlish not to recognize that that is a very real accomplishment. Our distributive sector provides real efficiencies across the country and the economy. Our services sector, in all its various manifestations, also provides quite a bit of economic heft. The goal, I want to suggest—and

because the budget statement has dealt quite extensively with the assumptions and the activities, and the plans and the projections for the energy sector. I will leave that alone because experts have looked at that. One may have a different point of view but I do not doubt the goodwill that went into the planning and the projections. And adjustments, I am sure, will be made as needed. I would want to suggest and look at, in the time I have, the non-energy sector and what can we do, what are the possibilities. Let me offer four.

One is tourism. Tourism, at some point in the past in this country, generated close to 8/10 per cent of GDP. Now, it is down to 2 per cent. Its impact on unemployment from the last set of the numbers I saw from the policy document put out by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts was probably about 17/18,000 persons. It is a sector that can take off. It is the investment that is required. And it can be staggering, and I know it is not an easy set of choices for country promotion, for product development and for the things that are necessary to grow that tourism sector so the sector can meet a different and, quite frankly, far more substantial contribution. I think it is a possibility. Choices have to be made between that and other options. But I think there is good leadership there and I think building the capabilities will be a useful thing. And it is not about trying to achieve tourism across the board. It is about moving the sector so it makes an economic contribution. Let me give a specific example.

We had Carnival this year, after two years of no Carnival. It was billed as the “Mother of all Carnivals”, which was of great fun. And it generated somewhere between, if I remember the numbers, 70—sorry, 27,000/28,000 visitors. In a very good year in the past, Trinidad and Tobago Carnival generate between 30,000 and 35,000. So 27,000/28,000 after two years of no activity, coming out of a COVID

pandemic where people were still nervous to travel, was actually not a bad performance.

The remarkable thing about Carnival is that the three basic numbers you will look at would be: how many visitors did you achieve, how long did they stay and how much did they spend. The average length of stay of visitors to Trinidad and Tobago, from the CSO's statistics, is between 11 and 14 days. The average spend, five-year trend using 2019 and before—so taking out the COVID years—was about US \$9,700/US \$9,800 per visitor over that period.

The remarkable thing with Carnival, the spend per visitor—the length of stay was about the same, the spend was something like 40 to 50 per cent higher. And I suppose what it argues is that if somebody comes for Carnival, you are taking out a costume, you are going to shows, you are going out, you are eating out, you are having a great time, the consequence to the country is significantly a higher spend than other visitor types.

Perhaps a conclusion that could be drawn from that is that if you give people a reason to travel and give them a reason to spend, perhaps there are ways to enhance and grow that revenue line. And since we get a 10 per cent hotel tax and the VAT of much of that spending, except the airline travel which happens elsewhere, that can be very, very useful to us. But giving a reason to travel would require building capabilities and, quite frankly, a sophistication that the Ministry and its agencies are in the process of building.

Among the things in looking at that sector—because I had reason to look at it recently—that I found intriguing, very interesting, is the policy document put out, the 2020 to 2030 tourism policy, which envisaged pushing tourism into communities and therefore, having local government take some degree of responsibility and hopefully benefit from the activities, which is a move from

centralized tourism to a more decentralized form of activity. But there are some activities you cannot decentralize. Nobody has the heft outside, probably, of a government to do the country promotion necessary to fund necessarily sites and attractions, whether its beaches, whether it is temples, whether it is our historic buildings. Carnival is an object lesson in possibilities.

A couple quick things: we are very proud of our Carnival, and we are very proud that Carnival generates more than 30,000 people. In looking at it, two Carnivals that come to mind, one, is the Carnival in New Orleans and, of course, the other is the grandfather of all Carnivals in Rio. Their visitor count—public records—is New Orleans generates a million visitors to their Carnival; Rio, 1.7 million. There are a little bit of ways we could go—I am not saying let us go for a million visitors, but there are a little bit of ways to go from 25,000, 30,000, 35,000 visitors. We could do better. And I suppose my theme in all of this is how do we, with nudges and with the right leverage in the right place, generate increased performance and increase revenue.

Carnival is successful as an object lesson for a couple of other reasons. Our artists are superb. You only have to look at a performance and some of our top-line artistes go onto a stage and within seconds, they have the audience in the palm of their hand. That comes from continual work and practice to sharpen their craft. I was listening yesterday to the contribution by my colleague, Mr. Francis in the arts, and what artists need, and I suppose all professionals need, is the chance to practice. You cannot get good until you practise over and over again. The 10,000 hour rule, I suppose, may be considered here.

The other object lesson of Carnival, separate from the entertainment capabilities that the country has, are the—and it is a part that people often do not see, which is great because you would take it for granted, it is the infrastructure

that we have. You want to put on an event of 10,000 people, you could go and get a stage, a sound system, a light system, a security system, a fencing, a seating. It is amazing what you can get and very often, we export that to other places that are now developing their Carnival.

3.05 p.m.

So, the technical infrastructure, the capability—many, many years ago I worked in theatre, and I worked in theatre technical, never on performance. And developing that is a very real asset, and the question that we have is, how do you take the assets that you have, tangible and intangible, to use them productively for revenue generation?

It is just an idea. When you talk to people in the sector, they tell you that their low season is between September to November. Do not talk to them in the high season, because they have no rooms, they have no flights. In the low season, occupancy drops, and they are very willing to accommodate it. So the question becomes, how do you take the experience and the management of something like Carnival to move it forward into other parts of the calendar? And it is not necessarily a carnival, it could be a range of festivals. So, whether it is a music festival, a gospel festival, a jazz festival, we have to give reasons to visit, and those reasons to visit, can generate for country's revenue.

Because of limited time, I need to move on, and I want to move on to innovation. And I want to note—because I think there is room for substantive movement and action, by the Government and by the various parts of the society to shift innovation.

The first thing I want to address is, what is the myth? In many ways the lie—in many ways the misunderstanding around innovation. Let me read from a recent report—and this is talking about Trinidad and Tobago. This is a foreign report, but

based on data we provided, so, the people are not wrong “eh”, but they are saying, this is what you say about yourself, this is the conclusion we drew. Eighty percent of—the 2019 Global Index, Trinidad and Tobago ranked 91, out of 129 participants, in that index. In Trinidad and Tobago approximately 5 per cent, sorry, 0.05 per cent of GDP is spent on research and development compared to an average of 1.2 per cent for other small commodity dependent economies. R&D averages, .9995 per cent, less than 1 per cent of sales revenue and they stay against a Caribbean average of 4.7 per cent.

I do not doubt the data—many years ago I was part of a national task force of the Council for Competitiveness and Innovation. The challenge that we found at that time, was that—first of all, innovation got defined incorrectly. It had to do with mixing up innovation and invention. Where innovation is the systematic development and marketing of breakthroughs, of services and products needed by customers. With that view, of something that is systematic and very conscious, not simply it happens by chance and invention is not innovation.

Some quick thoughts about what might inform policy. The first is to shift, from a thinking that says we are looking for radical innovation and shift to incremental innovation. All of the successful organizations I am aware of, raise that is their area of focus and quite frankly, according to research 90 to 95 percent of all innovation, all innovation is incremental.

We love the romantic image of breakthroughs. The reality is, this is where the tortoise wins the race, not the hare. It needs to have a very clear focus on commercialization. I see people doing things all the time in our country, but they really do not quite understand how to make money from it. And innovation is about how you take something and make money from it, in a very productive way. It has to be market-based and export-oriented if we could make it, and it requires

the unblocking sometimes— of regulation sometimes that are decades old, and it is about ultimately stimulating competition. Competition is the single strongest stimulus to innovation. Stimulate competition whether in sports, whether in school, whether in other places, in a positive way, you bring out the very best of people, and it creates its own positive spiral. It is about for a country, creating a very broad, a very deep, a very wide innovation funnel and the last point and I am being, I hope not unduly ambitious, but I want to ask, what would it take to change, Minister, the corporate tax code of Trinidad and Tobago? Let me explain.

The history of innovation—countries are able to say this is how much we spend, annually on innovation. Because, the numbers for spending attract, because in the developed countries and many other countries, companies are required to identify what they have spent in innovation and the tax treatment for it is different than general expenses of the organization. The consequence of that, and because there is a benefit to reporting, and quite frankly a legal requirement, they report it. Therefore, they are able to say this is how much was spent in this economy or in this country on R&D and innovation.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we are not required to do that, there is no requirement, there is no benefit, so that every innovation that the country makes, an organization makes, gets lumped in with general expenses, and we get the comment, that we under spend by a significant degree on innovation. And, I am here to say, I have worked for a number of years in consulting and that is not true. But, it is what was reported, and the end result is if you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it and you cannot lodge it forward.

And, if we want to address productivity which is a very real issue—innovation is the way to do it, because through innovation not only do you help shift productivity, but you shift your competitiveness. When we talk innovation, we

often have a bias to a techno-centric innovation, and I think it will be useful to just remind ourselves of some of the innovations this country has had, of which we can be very proud.

This country is one of the first, in the world, to establish an industrial court; that was an innovation. Now, we tend to not even think about it, because it is now part of our lives, and we established that court in 1972, and in doing that the court has a number of mandates but specifically it was also “to create an expeditious system”. I am quoting from the Act for the system for settlement of trade disputes.

If innovation is measured by its revenue impact, what is the revenue impact over decades of significantly lower strikes and locks out and all of the negative economic fallout, if you have that? Now, this is something we do not even think about as an innovation, but it very much is.

In 1993, we floated the Trinidad and Tobago dollar and we did something that many of the international agencies said simply was not possible. It was a managed float, it had never been done before in the world, at least not in that way, and guess what, it has worked, and I am not telling you that the exchange system does not have its stresses and—we get continued comments from commentators and certainly from the Minister and the Ministry, about where the foreign exchange rate needs to be. But, underpinning all of this is an initiative to say, let us try something, and this is not a government or an administration. This is something that has happened over successive governments over decades, and it has by and large worked.

3.10 p.m.

The Inter-Religious Organization of Trinidad and Tobago is one of the first organizations of its type set up, and these are simply leaders of various respective religions in a multicultural, multiracial, multi-religious society that get together

once a month and simply talk through what they see as the issues. That activity, very private, very human, has created a possibility in the country and has built our country. Not every innovation has to be profit-driven in an absolute dollar and cents drive, but some that are—there are a couple of others before I move on.

We experimented with and developed all-inclusive fetes. I remember going with my wife to the first all-inclusive fete which was put on by UWI. There were forms of all-inclusive before, but the first real genuine all-inclusive was done by UWI and then everybody followed. We did a quick calculation, some friends and I, looking and say, “Okay, how many fetes this season? How many all-inclusives? What is the attendance of the fete?” Multiply it by the ticket price and the revenue number was staggering. That is an innovation. And then we fast forward to Carnival bands. So whether it is the “wee wee” truck or the truck that repairs your shoes, or the rest and massage trucks, or the trucks to put up your feet, that is a massive innovation. We take it for granted.

I suppose it is saying something about us that others come and look at us and say, “Oh goood, I wish I could have that”, and we take it for granted. One very quick example, I was part of an innovation seminar and the concern expressed by my fellow Trinidadians had to do with mass transit, how do we move large amounts of people quickly, and there were lots of ideas floated, whether we should bring in a light rail system, whether we should increase the number of buses. I think, Minister, you spoke on that.

So in a pause in the conversation, someone who is not from here looked at the Trinidadians, myself included, and said, “What are you all talking about? I wish I could take back to my country what you have”, and the Trinidadians look at him say, “Wah yuh mean?” He said, “Let me see if I understand your system. You have a system called taxi, maxi-taxi? Mostly taxis are owned by private

entrepreneurs? So you have 22, 25, 30,000 taxi owners who own their own vehicle who respond to the surges in demand automatically?” So fellas will start work at four, five o’clock in the morning, by nine o’clock the traffic has dropped. They go and they take a rest. They are back on the road at one o’clock. They close off at seven o’clock. And his comment which stuck with me over all these years is, “Your country moves hundreds of thousands of people in relative safety, in relative comfort.”

I know we could always talk about how taxis drive, but in relative safety and in relative comfort, very responsive to the demand, without the requirement of Government intervention, except to a very light-hand touch regulations to say, “yuh cyah drive in ah vest and slippers”. You have to paint the maxi-taxi in a standard colour so people could identify you. But outside of that the Government is not getting involved in the setting affairs. They allow the marketplace to deal with that.

And the visitors from outside of Trinidad looked at that and said, “My God, you all have done a marvelous job”, and the interesting thing is that until somebody says that to you, you do not really think about it, and it could go on. I mean, whether it is pan, whether it is “doubles”, whether it is shark and bake, whether it is roti, think of the things that we have done that drive innovation and they are not capital-intensive necessarily. They are not driven by large corporations. They are not necessarily driven by Government. They are driven by individuals and SMEs, and it makes sense.

The last one I will mention, because it is a government initiative and it has happened over successive administrations, is, we used to have a thing called, the rail, the railway line; we converted it to a Priority Bus route. That is an innovation.

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

Sen. F. Lewis: Thank you very much, Sir. So the question I would ask is: How do we enhance our innovation strategy to make that possibility real? The last thing, item, I want to touch on very, very quickly is, somebody has to pay the bills and we have to generate foreign exchange, and we have to boost SMEs. The country has roughly 30,000 businesses. People often think the number is much higher; 90 per cent of them have 10 or less employees. If the vast majority of businesses in this country are what the Americans would call “mom and pop”, but that is where the strength of it is, how do we improve that and how do we move that possibility?

If you look at Trinidad and Tobago’s market, we have 1.4 million people. In talking to a Tobagonian, he says, “Boy, I am glad we are part of Trinidad, you know”. So we say, “Why?” He says, “Because Tobago is 55,000 people. I am part of a common market where I could sell into a much bigger market”. That was a view—as a Trinidadian you would not necessarily look at it that way—that guy saw it that way. When we look at CARICOM, we move from 1.4 million to 19 million, and when we look at the near abroad, which would be Central America, it jumps to about 181 million. Now, you have to learn to speak the language, but those are the realities and possibilities that we can move forward.

So in closing, how do we do better, as Stalin would challenge us? It is a truism but it is no less true for being a truism, and I think we can do better, and I would want to propose a focus on the budget of how do we move the revenue line. How can we strengthen and boost revenue in the budget? How do we move and use the strengths we have because among the intangible strengths that Trinidadians bring is a willingness to experiment and diversify and find a way? In moving forward—just some very quick thoughts—we need specific action to move revenue. I think that work can be done in terms of enhancing the diversification

that is already present in the economy, but needs to be built upon on boosting innovation that will drive productivity and bringing an urgency and a verve to exports.

The challenge we will face is—and there are two—when I listened to my fellow Senators when I was preparing this, I asked, for whom do we speak? We speak for the future. We speak for those who are going to come and say, “What did you do?” At some point energy resources are going to—not necessarily run out, but the whole complexion of that industry is going to change. Our challenge is to create the other legs of the economy now that will carry us through that race. And with that, Mr. President, I conclude, and thank you for the opportunity, and I hope some of these remarks will be useful.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Attorney General.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, before the Attorney General begins, we just probably need to congratulate Sen. Lewis on his maiden contribution in this House.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC): Thank you very much, Mr. President, and thank you for the opportunity to contribute this afternoon on the final day of the debate on the budget for the fiscal 2023/'24. Before I begin, Mr. President, allow me to make just a few personal remarks, first of all to express my personal regret while, at the same time, saying congratulations to Mrs. Jacqueline Sampson-Meiguel; my regret at the fact that we are losing access to such an enormous national treasure but, at the same time, to wish her the very best in her retirement and—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:—to congratulate Mr. Brian Caesar who assumes office in the House, and to congratulate Ms. Keiba Jacob in the Senate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: May I also offer my congratulations and best wishes to the newly minted Independent Senators and to take the opportunity as well to congratulate Independent Senator, the hon. Francis Lewis, who I know and consider a friend, and to congratulate him on his truly remarkably present and important contribution this afternoon.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: May I express in the year and a bit that I have worked in this Chamber, may I express my appreciation to our outgoing Senators whose invaluable contributions I benefited from.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: On one last final note, if I may, and one of deep regret, to put into the records of this House, my sense of loss by the passing of my dear friend, Basil Pires, who started off in chambers with me. Many persons, given the hallowed space that he has carved out for himself as a journalist, columnist, a commentator, par excellence, many persons forget that my good friend, Basil Pires, was, until the very last day, a very good lawyer and a practicing one at that from time to time.

With those few indulgences, Mr. President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to today's debate on the national budget for the fiscal year, 2024. I was privileged to sit next to the hon. Minister of Finance on the 2nd of October when he gave his and this Government's account of stewardship over the past eight years through his presentation of this budget, and I felt a genuine sense of pride to be associated with such a responsible course of management over such a difficult

period of eight years. And I stand here today to endorse the Minister of Finance's financial fiscal package and proudly to associate myself with a significant contribution to the national and economic well-being of this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: I take the opportunity, Mr. President, to share with this House and the population what can only be highlights because otherwise I would speak beyond my allotted time and all evening, what can only be highlights of the continued progress in this fiscal year, which the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs continues to make in our journey of sustainable growth and development since I assumed office on the 16th of March, 2022.

Mr. President, winning the battle against crime continues to be of paramount importance in the legislative support, which, as Attorney General, I bring to the operational and tactical efforts on the part of this Government. But I want to stress in everything that I say that when I speak to the efforts that we are making to address crime, I do not associate myself with the prophets of doom and gloom from the other side. The fact of the matter is that the world in which we live is overtaken by violence, and as difficult as some of us might conceive our circumstances to be in an admittedly difficult period that we are going through, we have to acknowledge that we are still more fortunate than many persons around the world. We only have to think today, and every day I look at my news on the international news coverage of what is happening in Israel and Palestine, I think how very fortunate we are.

So let us not persuade ourselves that we are doomed to fail, as our opponents would seem to wish to be the case, in order to vote themselves or to have persons vote them into office. Mr. President, sustained from the previous fiscal year, our

endeavours to encompass a multifaceted approach is aimed at addressing crucial aspects of societal transformation through what we try to develop as innovative crime-fighting tools utilizing a whole-of-society approach, a regional, a CARICOM-regional approach, a concentrated focus on youth development and continuing the substantial work on reforms to our criminal justice system.

3.25 p.m.

All of these are essential steps towards ensuring the well-being of our citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. It is in this regard, Mr. President, following the decision taken at the 43rd Regular Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community in July 2022, that this Government spearheaded the hosting of the Regional Symposium, aptly entitled: Crime and Violence as a Public Health Issue. This symposium brought together CARICOM and neighbouring country leaders, technical experts, academics, medical professionals, the media and civil society to conduct a macro examination of issues threatening our regional and domestic safety and security.

As Attorney General, one of the key outcomes from this symposium which has been spearheaded by my office is the establishment of a committee of my Ministry to follow through on the intended outcomes of the symposium. That committee has focused on several priority areas to be addressed including illegal guns and organized crime, an overhaul of the criminal justice system with a priority focus on the proactive management of prosecutions, balancing the rights of the individual with the public safety interest of the whole of society, examining the very music that our young minds are exposed to and the dangerous lyrics that fuel gang culture and violence with a view to recommendations for eradicating some of the drivers of violence. There are remarkable positive recent events this very month which will bring me back to the symposium and the critical leadership

position which Trinidad and Tobago continues to lead from throughout the Caribbean, but I will return to that.

Mr. President, another pivotal regional initiative led by my office involves a strategic partnership with the CARICOM Implementing Agency for Crime and Security known by the colloquial expression IMPACS, to address a number of challenges. These discussions continue to contribute to bolstering regional stability which in turn fortifies our national security.

Mr. President, stemming from these recent regional developments I will now advise on some of the priority projects undertaken by my office under the umbrella of safety and security. Illegal firearms continue to threaten our society, Sen. Teemal narrated with some accuracy his concerns concerning the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and yet, even as we express those concerns and even as we call on all of our forces to address the issues of crime, let us acknowledge and applaud the renewed and concerted efforts and accomplishments of our police service in the reported very positive results of their surveillance and interdiction work in these past months.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Resulting in substantial seizures, we have been seeing it on our front pages, of illegal firearms, the arrest of fugitives from justice in collaboration with interdiction support from another neighbour, the United States of America. Let us acknowledge even as we share our concerns and we call on ourselves to do better that we are working to improve our lot.

Early 2023, Mr. President, saw successful amendments being passed in this very House to the Firearms Act as a direct response to the regrettable execution of serving prison officers. This amendment to the Firearms Act is part of a broader and more comprehensive strategy intended to introduce regulatory measures

designed to reform the Firearms User's Licence and indeed the application procedure, and to introduce additional penalties to address issues surrounding the possession of assault weapons.

3.30 p.m.

Mr. President, we are in close collaboration with our international partners in the fight against illegal firearms. A very recent example, in July of this year, responding to a request for support from the US Department of Justice in conjunction with the US Homeland Security Investigations regarding a firearms smuggling case taking place in Miami, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, through the Office of the Commissioner of Police and other agencies, swiftly provided assistance that resulted in a significant conviction and sentencing in Miami.

These efforts are further bolstered by CARICOM governments' commitment to supporting Mexico in its illegal action against the United States gun manufacturers and retailers, with Trinidad and Tobago fully on board, Mr. President, in this collective endeavour.

I wish to highlight also, through my office, that the Government has been actively engaged with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC, in its comprehensive and overarching review of the Firearms Act. I am pleased to report, Mr. President, that this comprehensive overhaul is well underway. Along with our policy researchers and drafters of the Law Reform Commission, one of the hard-working departments of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs who have been tasked to explore with a view to developing further amendments to the Act, the phenomena of 3D printed firearms, firearm freeze and buyback programmes, all with a view to reducing the scourge of illegal firearms in circulation. My office is also collaborating with stakeholders on the storage and

disposal of expired firearms and ammunition to prevent the illegal circulation of these in the society.

Mr. President, in addition to firearms, this Government has long identified bail restrictions as a key measure in the fight against crime. My office is working on and refining a comprehensive bail reformation legislative package and has implemented a multipronged approach by:

1. Completion of a policy paper on bail for murder to align with the Privy Council's decision in Akili Charles.
2. A comprehensive review of section 5's list of offences of the Bail Act.
3. A review of the source of funds and proceeds presented to secure bail.
4. A review of sureties, with a view to better managing professional bailors.
5. Liaising with and receiving suggestions on bail reform from one of Trinidad and Tobago's leading criminologists.

I am very keen to bring this Bill back to Parliament as part of the upcoming 2024 legislative package.

Another aspect, another critical tool intended to join the crime-fighting armoury is the controlled operations Bill, Mr. President, which provides for the authorization, conduct and monitoring of controlled sting operations. Undoubtedly, this Bill has the potential to significantly assist law enforcement in combating crime, such as money laundering, human trafficking, and the trafficking of guns and drugs and firearms. In this regard, also, it is my resolve to bring this Bill to Parliament with the upcoming legislative year.

In addition to the fight on hard crimes, Mr. President, this Government has consistently prioritized the protection of women and children and vulnerable members of our society in our legislative approach. The Sexual Offenses (Amdt.)

(No. 3) Bill was laid in the Senate on January 11, 2022; sent to a special select committee of the Parliament. The Bill creates the offence of voyeurism. It is an important piece of legislation aimed at keeping pace with the need, not only to protect the vulnerable but to update our laws to reflect novel methods of criminality.

Mr. President, this Bill is intended to join with the sexual harassment Bill, which seeks to define sexual harassment and to provide redress for sexual harassment at the workplace. In October of last year, the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs held a round-table discussion on this Bill with stakeholders. The critical recommendations emanating from these fulsome discussions have assisted tremendously in reforming the draft Bill, which is now in its final stages at the Law Reform Commission. Together with the Sexual Offences (Amdt.) (No. 3) Bill, 2021, therefore, the report for which was laid in the Senate on June 14, 2022, these two Bills will be shortly brought to Parliament for final debate and passage.

Another initiative spearheaded by my office, Mr. President, is the Justices of the Peace Bill, which is a Bill not only intended as an exercise in procedural refinement, it is an investment in the integrity and the efficacy of our justice system and is on our law reform/Legislative Review Committee agenda to be discussed as early as Thursday of this week, two days from today.

Mr. President, rehabilitation and recidivism are key to tackling crime from a whole-of-society approach. Successful reintegration into society is of the utmost importance for the individual, the community and the State. The criminal records bill, 2022, which governs the rehabilitation of offenders who have committed minor offences, will provide for the expunging of an individual's criminal record once they have satisfied the prescribed criteria during the relevant rehabilitation

period. I intend to bring this Bill also during the forthcoming legislative year.

Mr. President, I promised to return to the regional crime symposium on crime and violence, initiated by the hon. Prime Minister of this country, crime and “Violence as a Public Health Issue”.

In point of fact, Mr. President, as recently as this very month, the 18th to 20th of October, 2023, the Caribbean Court of Justice Academy for Law hosted its 7th Biannual Law Conference in Barbados. The theme underpinning that conference was “Criminal Justice Reform in the Caribbean: Achieving a Modern Criminal Justice System” and was expressly held out and premised as being a sequel to the regional crime symposium hosted in April 2023, in Port of Spain, under the theme: “Violence as a Public Health issue - The Crime Challenge”.

I am very pleased to say, Mr. President, that my office sponsored the attendance of the Director of Public Prosecutions; one of his assistant directors of public prosecutions; three members of the Criminal Justice Unit of the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, led by the director of that unit, Mrs. Farzana Nazir-Mohammed, to whom I pay tribute for her hard work in the Ministry; as well as two officers of the Law Reform Commission. They were also accompanied by the Chief and Deputy Chief Public Defenders, and the Assistant Director of Gender and Child Affairs in the Office of the Prime Minister. Mr. President, that conference was attended by a number of very esteemed regional and international jurists. And the subject areas which were covered in that three-day conference could be, as I speak further on the work of the conference, as I speak further on the work of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, could be a list of the matters that we are working on in our Ministry.

The point that I am making is that the leadership that Trinidad and Tobago has been providing in the fight to improve our criminal justice system is providing

beacon to the rest of the Caribbean, including the justice system in the form of the Caribbean Court of Justice for the areas that they are focusing on. I will come to it in a minute, but let me immediately make the point that one of the areas that was addressed in that conference, that is receiving a lot of attention, is the piece of legislation that we very recently passed in Trinidad and Tobago, in July of this year, AJIPA, that is to say the legislation which has abolished preliminary enquiries and is going to end the abuse of the criminal justice system of spending 15 years waiting to get a trial without even appearing before a jury.

Mr. President, since my assumption of office, I have brought to this Parliament, and the Government has passed that law, the Administration of Justice (Indictable Proceedings) Act, 2011, with its six subsequent amendments Acts which form part of a decade-long consultative process to get it right. We have brought it home; a single and singular accomplishment, and I express my gratitude to all who have accomplished and enabled the accomplishment of this milestone.

With the removal of preliminary enquiries and the introduction of more effective case management effective process, our criminal justice system will experience a reduction in the backlog of cases, fewer hearings. Administrative processes associated with the preliminary enquiries will lead to cost savings for the legal system, and victims and witnesses will be spared the enormous challenges inherent in delayed proceedings. That Act will replace the old preliminary enquiry process with new sufficiency hearings; provide for retroactive application of its provisions; allow for indictments to be filed from the beginning of the pretrial process, with the exception of voluntary bills of indictment; and provide for police prosecutors who are legally qualified to conduct initial hearings. Mr. President, I will be bringing a Note to the Cabinet to proclaim this law to take effect from December 2023.

As part of the vital task of stakeholder preparedness, in anticipation of the proclamation of this law, my office has partnered with the Judicial Education Institute of the Judiciary of Trinidad and Tobago, the education arm of the Judiciary, under the capable charge of Madam Justice Gillian Lucky, with a view to designing and executing a comprehensive sensitization programme which ensures that all relevant parties will be well-prepared for the transition from preliminary enquiries to sufficiency hearings. This training programme is proposed to take place during the period of November to December 2023.

Key objectives of the intended sensitization include: to inform and educate key stakeholders about the abolition of preliminary enquiries; to facilitate a smooth transition and understanding of the new legal framework; to address any concerns or questions from the stakeholders. And the proposed stakeholder participants who are intended to benefit from that sensitization exercise, all of whom have already been written to, will be as follows: the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions; the Public Defenders' Department, Legal Aid and Advisory Authority; the Criminal Bar Association of Trinidad and Tobago; the Law Association of Trinidad; and the Tobago and Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. Widespread public sensitization is also being developed.

Mr. President, this is perhaps an appropriate point at which I should update this august Chamber on very important developments in the Civil Law and Criminal Law Departments, both of which fall under my remit, of course, respecting the section 90 constitutionally independent Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. I can report on the latest developments in respect of two matters which have been in the public domain in different degrees.

We recall the Shervon Peters matters, the infamous matter of missing file which brought a \$20 million judgment against the State. That matter is before the

court. We have applied to set aside the judgment, that is in train, and I will say no more on that aspect. It is sub judice. It however provides me with the pivot from which I can report on the latest developments in respect of the Justice Stanley John report. Members will recall that I advised publicly that I had appointed an investigative team of retired Mr. Justice Stanley John, and retired head of the Special Branch, Mrs. Schullera-Hinds. Their final report is dated 23 June, 2023, and has been handed over to me.

Since my assumption in office, it has also been in the public domain that the Director of Public Prosecutions and I have engaged in different respects. Out of that engagement and collaboration, there has emerged a consultant report with reference to the Criminal Law Department, authored by a well-respected national public servant. Both the Director of Public Prosecutions and I have agreed to treat this process with appropriate discretion and confidentiality.

For the record, Mr. President, for purposes of accounting to this Chamber and to the citizenry today, suffice it to say that the Stanley John report and this consultant report were placed by me before the Cabinet on the 19th of October, 2023, I will, this week, be writing to the Solicitor General, Acting, and the Chief State Solicitor, both of them being heads of those two department of the Civil Law Department; and the head of the Criminal Law Department, the Director of Public Prosecutions to invite them to continue to engage with me on these reports which I have laid with the Cabinet.

3.45 p.m.

Mr. President, one of the more important pieces of legislation that was also passed in this august House since my assumption of office is the Arbitration Act No. 11 of 2023. This Act ensures that Trinidad and Tobago is better positioned as a centre for international and regional commercial business, to build the capacity

and competence to become a seat of arbitration as Trinidad and Tobago being the preferred place for international arbitration. In anticipation of and in preparation for the implementation of this Act, through my office, stakeholder engagement and training are being facilitated literally now as I stand here and speak at my office at the corner of Richmond and London Streets.

As recently as yesterday morning, Monday the 22nd of October I was privileged to present remarks at the opening of the Fifty-third Annual General Meeting Conference and Exhibition of the Caribbean Shipping Association which continues today. I spoke to the fact that this Government recognizes that intentionally accepted best practices for dispute resolution are important in assisting industries such as the shipping industry with their mandate for self-regulation, and that with this in mind, in my first year in office I made it a priority to bring the Arbitration Act, 2023 to the Parliament for successful passage into law in July of this year.

The Arbitration Act, 2023 has not just modernized Trinidad and Tobago's legislative framework, Mr. President, in this area of dispute resolution, it creates a far more level playing for all disputants and opens our Republic to becoming a preeminent arbitration centre. I said yesterday to the members of the Caribbean Shipping Association and the Shipping Association of Trinidad and Tobago, one of its founding members, Trinidad and Tobago is open for business.

Mr. President, in addition to the Arbitration Act we are hard at work, which has been passed into law and is now law. We are hard at work on the parole Bill, we are hard at work on the amendments to the Evidence Act to allow for witness anonymity to enable better improvements in the evidence that comes before our courts. And in that regard, I wish to thank Ms. Nirana Parsan, Head of the Process Review Team of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs for the

invaluable support of her department in bringing the Arbitration Act to fruition.

Mr. Neil Ramkissoon of the Attorney General Secretariat is the ministerial frontline Coordination Manager of all noncriminal legislation litigation and coordinates together with the Civil Law Departments to effectively manage a very heavy workload, and I bring to the attention of this Parliament, in particular this Chamber, a case which my colleague mentioned this morning, that is to say the *Dominic Suraj and others v The Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago*.

That is the case which has been brought home by the Secretariat of the Attorney General's chambers which has, I dare say, and we will see it play out in the debates that we are going to have in this Parliament. It started off as an opposition by the other side to preventing vaccinations from taking place across the public for the COVID pandemic. There were any number of constitutional challenges that were brought to the courts to stop the Government and the Minister of Health's attempts to vaccinate the population in respect of the COVID pandemic. That resulted in a victory for this Government, and I believe if I am not mistaken, I have read it before, this morning the hon Minister Deyalsingh read from part of that in which Members of this Government and the Chief Medical Officer have been complimented for the hard work that they have done in that case by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.

Mr. President, another example and another area in which we continue as the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs to do considerable work is in the area of the Registrar General's Department. We are at work in revolutionizing and finally bringing on stream our Computer Registration Online System, which allows for online computer registration, and I can assure the Minister of Finance who raised some concerns with me this morning that the system is up and running and has not been down for the day at all. There were

challenges that were initially experienced in bringing the system online, because there was an old system which the new system was intended to replace.

The new system had to be brought into being at short notice to replace the failed system last year November, and we are about to, and in fact on Thursday of this week, to complete the legislative review examination of the final piece of legislation that will allow the Computer Registration Online System to go fully online once we bring it to the Parliament and get Parliament's approval in that regard. It will contribute, Mr. President, to my Ministry's contribution to the ease of doing business in the computer registration for online business in the Companies Registry.

There were challenges with the birth certificate paper. Again, the Registrar General's Department, and I can give the public and citizenry that those challenges have been redressed and have been resolved. And there has been, and I will speak now openly and frankly to this, there has been a recent impasse, and I speak now to Senator, my colleague on the Independent Bench, Sen. Remy, who I know has concerns about this, there has been the impasse in Tobago with respect to differences between the Registrar General's Department and the CAST.

That is to say, the Tobago office responsible under the Prime Minister's office for the affairs of Tobago. I said publicly that I had commissioned a legal opinion on that. I have received that legal opinion, which in my view has gone a long way towards resolving what was a difference in interpretation of the applicable legislation that governs the relationship between the Registrar General's Department and CAST, and my next step literally out of this Chamber when I leave here today and I am relieved of my obligations before this House is to invite the Registrar General and the Permanent Secretary of CAST to a mediated meeting with me so that we can sit down with the benefit of the opinion that I am now in

receipt of, in order to put a speedy resolution to what really are differences of opinion, not substantive, and which I am very confident can be resolved by earnest, honest conversations and dialogue with the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago at heart.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: We are in the process, Mr. President, of examining and bringing to this Parliament a number of other very significant pieces of legislation, the Cybercrime Bill, the Computer Misuse (Amdt) Bill, the Data Protection Act, the Electronic Evidence Act, Exchequer and Audit (Amdt) Act, Electronic Payment Bill. And that brings me to, and I could spend the entire afternoon listing the legislation that we have been spending the last year working on, but I am not doing to trouble this House with all of the details. But that brings me to the—

Mr. President: Attorney General you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Thank you very much. That brings me to speak about, in the five minutes left to me, a very significant development that has taken place, and I speak now of the cyberattack on the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs which forced to our shut down in July 2023. I wish to place on record, Mr. President, the remarkable response and recovery of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. It was led in the first instance by the immediate response of our very own Director of our ICT Department in AGLA, Mr. Roger Sealy, and thereafter—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:—on his bringing the problem to my attention, the Cabinet intervened under the leadership of our Prime Minister, the right hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, and the Cabinet immediately called into service the resources of the

Minister of Digital Transformation on a whole-of-government approach.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Sen. Bacchus along with Mr. Sealy, Director of the ICT Department and **TTC SIRT** of the Ministry of National Security got together, and supported very ably by the InterAmerican Development Bank, led by Ms. Carina Cockburn to whom I utter my most profound thanks this afternoon, and local support, we were able within two months to arrest the challenge, to get on top of it. We are back in business, and I must say for the record that we must not underestimate the resourcefulness and competence of the whole-of-government led by Minister Bacchus in assisting us, and I bow to him today.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Remarks were made when he made his deliveries earlier this week on the budget, that I pounded my desk. I pounded my desk because of how impressed I am by the whole-of-government competence that Sen. Bacchus brings to protect the entire Government from cyberattacks.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: And I will go on record to say this, we were able to look in the face and laugh at a ransomware demand that was made of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and to turn our backs on it. Thank you, Sen. Bacchus.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: We also have in the Ministry significant work, Mr. President, that is being done by the Anti-Terrorism Unit led by Mrs. Vyana Sharma; by, of course, the Registrar General's Department. I did not mention him, and that is a neglect on my part, Registrar General Bridgewater; the IPO Department. Ah, I want to make special mention of the IPO Department led by

Mr. Regan Asgarali in order to give the assurances to our new Independent Senators who have the mandate of the artist community of this country at heart, that full advisory support for artists is available through the IPO Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs for artists to register their brand names as trademarks and for establishing their modern copyright on creative endeavour.

And lastly, Mr. President, as I close on much that I would like to say, I want to go on record to thank the Members of my Cabinet, my Ministry, and in particular, to thank Minister Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:—to thank Permanent Secretary, Mrs. Natasha Barrow; Deputy Permanent Secretary—acting Permanent Secretary Mrs. Indira Rampaul-Cheddie; Mrs. Trudy Lewis; to thank the Deputy Chief Parliamentary Counsel, Ida Eversley, the Chief Parliamentary Counsel Mr. McIntyre, both Senior Counsel, and the very many other members of this Ministry, without whom I would not be able to stand here today as proudly as I do to declare that the Office of Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs is forging on to give advice and support to the whole-of-government approach in this fiscal year. Thank you very much.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Thank you, Mr. President. It is my privilege and honour to join in this debate on the Appropriation Bill. Mr. President, significant time has passed in this process, we are now in the third day of debate on this Appropriation Bill, and we

have heard from just about every Senator thus far. I listened very closely, Mr. President. But this process did not begin here in this Chamber, and we had four days of Standing Finance Committee before this, in which many Ministers and Members were engaged, and before that the other place, the Lower House engaged in a debate on the Appropriation Bill where we heard from elected Members of Parliament, including the Minister of Finance, of course. But the budget process did not begin even then, because we had the budget presentation by the Minister of Finance, and even before that there was a series of consultations and engagements and receipt of proposals and recommendations from stakeholders right across the spectrum of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago; received, processed and acted upon by the Minister of Finance and his team.

4.00 p.m.

Mr. President, during that period there was, in some elements of society what appeared to be some anxiety, some predictions were being cast, there was some forecasting and some of that ended up in the front pages of the local media where there was some doom and gloom and predictions that this budget would have to contain new taxes, measures of austerity—

Mr. Imbert: Draconian.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—draconian measures and measures that are designed to target or hurt those at the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder in Trinidad and Tobago. We saw that playing out right here in Trinidad and Tobago, all before the Minister of Finance came with his budget. It got to the extent where you had the Opposition, Mr. President, calling press conferences involving, to some extent, the Leader of the Opposition predicting something about an inheritance tax—

Mr. Imbert: In the campaign.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—during the campaign, during the buildup, all of which was a figment of the UNC's vivid and fertile imagination. All of that ended up on the front pages of the newspaper.

Mr. President, you fast-track to the contribution of the Leader of the Opposition and to the contributions made by the majority of the Members on the Opposition Bench and you have to feel a little bit sorry for them, because their predictions did not come true. The Minister of Finance disappointed them, he pleased the rest of the society, he pleased the other stakeholders, he disappointed the United National—

Sen. Nakhid: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—he disappointed the expectations of the United National Congress. And what it resulted, Mr. President, and I listened to them very closely, they were under strain to really attack the budget of this particular fiscal year. They were under strain.

So what you ended up with, Mr. President, let me tell you what we got. We got Sen. Wade Mark here opening the innings for the Opposition and you know what he gave us, Mr. President, the same old, same old—

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklall: Correct.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—the same old speech. One of my colleagues said it. Sen. Mark has been delivering the same speech in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago for decades now. And, Mr. President, the scary thing is, and you know the catchphrases, dictatorship, attack on democracy, pressurization, revolution, a hodge podge of.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Parasitic oligarchy.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Parasitic oligarchy, a hodgepodge of some—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Yes, some pseudo-Marxism some labour rights, some anti-labour, some pro-labour, a real pelau from Sen. Mark. But it was stereotypical Sen. Wade Mark, I know, I am not attacking him personally, stereotypical Sen. Wade Mark, Mr. President. And one really would consider after how many years as a veteran parliamentarian to have the temerity to come and deliver the same speech every single time, it must be a disappointment to the listening audience and the members of the national community.

Mr. President, Sen. Mark—one wonders, if he is in government, and he was in government at a particular period, it is not going to happen any time soon, it is not going to happen any time soon, but one could predict that Sen. Mark would stand up if he was on the government side and give that same speech because that is all he appears to be capable of in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. Fortunately, we had a little bit of variety on the Bench. It was not all the same old, same old.

We had a contribution from Sen. Nakhid today, Mr. President. I am not going to spend too much time, I tend not to dwell on some of the Members of the Opposition Bench. I do not think they deserve too much attention. But it really troubled me particularly, Mr. President, when we had to sit here, Members on the Government side had to sit here, to be lectured by the likes of Sen. Nakhid about the need to avoid personal attacks. To be lectured by the likes of Sen. Nakhid about the need to avoid personal attacks.

Mr. President, there will be members of the national community listening to that and those who would access the *Hansard* record and wonder if this was another temporary Senator by the same name.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Because, Mr. President, again, there are no

Sen. the Hon. Dr. A. Browne (cont'd)

personal attacks here, there are Members, there are participants in the political process in this country who have made it a calling card, their stamp, their brand, their credo to launch via social media and other locations some of the most unfortunate and denigrating and hyper-personal attacks against persons in and out of public life in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: So that would have been a classic case of pot calling kettle black.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And a gold standard example—

Sen. Nakhid: Rowley—

Mr. President: Okay, no, no, no, no, Sen. Nakhid. So I have allowed you to self-correct a bit, but it seems to not be taken. Temper the outbursts and allow the Minister to make his contribution. Continue Minister.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, again, I am not attacking him personally, but when I heard that kind of assertion and that attempt to lecture those on this side I reflect that that type of assertion is a classic case of a leper looking for leprosy. A classic case of a leper looking for leprosy.

So, Mr. President, and the other interesting aspect and I know we have a new psychiatrist on the Bench and I will get to some very positive reflections on our new Senators contribution. But there appeared to be a case in an earlier contribution of “hunting with the fox and running with the hares” at the same time. So there was a lot of shouting across isle about race and accusations toward the Government side, about race and who wanted to line up somebody, I did not get the reference because it was all jumbled. But basically there was an admonition that we should avoid talking about race. And then in the same contribution I heard

repeated, incessant, frequent references that to my ear appeared to be an effort to divide the society of Trinidad and Tobago on the basis of race and ethnicity. That is what I heard, that is what I heard, Mr. President. And I heard comments, I do not want to misquote the Senator—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And it continues even while he is at his seat.

Mr. President: Okay, so, no, no, I do not want a running conversation across the floor. The Minister is coming as the final speaker before the wrap-up. He is systematically replying to speakers that have gone before which is his right to do so. This is my final time standing, allow the Minister to do so in silence. Continue Minister.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you, Mr. President, thank you, Mr. President. And I heard, I do not want to misquote the Member at all, an assertion that in this country Indians are doing well and, what was it, black people are suffering. What is the basis, what is the motivation to bring that kind of commentary, erroneous as it is, into the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago. And I sat there and I thought what could be the motivation for a UNC Senator to be bringing that discourse into the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. And all I have to say further on this point is that we on this side and the right thinking Senators of Trinidad and Tobago will not allow anyone to stand here and divide the society of Trinidad and Tobago by race.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I heard one further assertion that I would just want to make a quick passing reference to. The UNC is the party of the poor.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—the Senator who spoke a little bit earlier. The UNC is the party of the poor. Mr. President, I do not know where this Senator was during the period 2010—2015, he may not have been in the jurisdiction at the time. But what the citizens of this country saw and witnessed was Members of the PP, UNC coming into office, some of them poor, but going out of office multi-millionaires based on the Treasury of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Nakhid: Same with you all. Same with you all

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: He is not denying it, he is saying same with somebody else. Okay. Mr. President, we will not allow anyone to divide this society on the basis of race. In fact we on this side are proud of the diversity within the society of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I just want to tell any Senator who feels that you can draw a line between ethnicities well then you would have to draw a line straight down the middle of persons like myself and others within the Chamber, it is not me alone, because we are all a mixture. And even with respect to communities, I heard talk about which constituency is an African constituency. Where is that in Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Where is that in Trinidad and Tobago? Mr. President, may be the Senator does not know. We have Indian people, Indo-Trinidadians, let me say, living in Morvant and Laventille, right now. We have Afro-Trinbagonians living in Siparia, living in Chaguanas. This is a mixed society.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: So I do not want to misinterpret the intention of the Member, I just want to caution him, I just want to caution him to be more temperate and moderate with his language and if he is not able to handle matters at that level maybe it is best to leave them alone and leave it out of the debate in the Parliament. This is my humble advice to the particular Senator.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, I just want to move on because it would be remiss of me if I did not join with colleagues in congratulating and welcoming the new Independent Senators.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Including the new, new temporary Senator.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And, Mr. President, we on this side as a concern and caring Government listened very closely when Members of the Independent Bench, when Independent Senators are speaking. We listen closely when the Opposition is speaking as well, but we tend to find more value in those contributions that might be less burdened by the political baggage of UNC ideology. And, Mr. President, I must say I will begin with the very last contribution. I found myself riveted, riveted to the contribution of Sen. Lewis, remarkable.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Enriching, balanced, there were clear recommendations and prescriptions, there was advice and there were some criticism and the same applies across the board. I was very impressed, Mr. President, this is not an attempt at flattery. This is to say that not every critic is an

enemy.

Hon. Senators: That is right. Correct.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And this Government recognizes that. Not every critic is an enemy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: But when it comes loaded with malice and an agenda—

Sen. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Exactly.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—and baggage and bile and vitriol, you cannot expect the same reception. So I was very, very, pleased. And what I heard Sen. Lewis recognized, which some may have been a little hesitant to acknowledge, is the progress across the span of the last several budgets brought by this Minister of Finance where at this stage we have an economy which is not just standing on oil and gas but also standing on the quite firmly on the non-energy sector at this time.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Remarkable. And so while some are hunting for diversification guess what, Mr. President, diversification has been occurring.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

4.15 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry, who is a remarkable Member of the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—informed this country that we currently have a \$47 billion balance of trade with the rest of the world. This same little Trinidad and Tobago, coming out of a very difficult COVID-19 experience which affected the entire developing world, coming out of the economic uncertainties of war in

Europe, now war in the Middle East, trouble even, closer within our region, coming out of numerous challenges, has been able to demonstrate tremendous growth in the non-energy sector.

Mr. President, it was recognized by some of the Independent Senators including Sen. Lewis, and I want to give credit where credit is due. The performance of our manufacturing sector, of the non-energy sector, our exporters, our young entrepreneurs, we have seen the results of consistent incentives and fiscal measures brought by the Minister of Finance in previous budgets. We have seen the results of the erstwhile efforts of the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association, chambers of commerce. We have a captain of industry here on our Benches right now.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I point to him, but it is not just him, Mr. President. This is a sector of society that has found its feet and is contributing actively. The labour force in Trinidad and Tobago has contributed to this success, and I have to revert once again to the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the leadership coming out of the Government and the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago, the hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: So, Mr. President, there is tremendous good news here. So whilst some are hunting for diversification—and, yes, more effort has to go into that direction because non-renewable resources are exactly that, even with some of the additional very promising advancements to come in gas acquisition. At some point, we are going to have to stand on the legs of other limbs of the economy, and, Mr. President, that is actually happening as we speak.

I also as I am touching on the Independent Senators, I have to make

reference to Sen. Hutchinson, who rose right after a very prominent medical practitioner, and I said, "Let me see what the Senator is going to have to say and how he will pitch his contribution". And, Mr. President, what we got here was a tremendous discourse, borne on the back of experience and expertise, and the introduction of concepts that, in my view, will be of tremendous value to the society of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: So on the Independent Bench I am very much looking forward to their future contributions. And I just want to join Sen. Deeroop Teemal, very clearly and categorically to join with my colleague and any other Member who would have spoken on this topic, and to categorically and completely condemn any attacks and all attacks of vandalism against temples, places of worship in Trinidad and Tobago of any shape or form.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Complete and total condemnation. We are peaceful loving people in this country, and we have to preserve that and protect that.

Mr. President, I have cause to speak to a lot of visitors to this country, mainly diplomats and others of various walks of life, and the first thing they say about Trinidad and Tobago is the way we are able to get along with each other. The first thing they say is how warm and hospitable we are. We have to preserve and protect that, and those types of descriptions that I heard, and the acts of vandalism, threaten that precious reality. So I join with the Senator in that regard.

So, Mr. President, I listened very closely to the Members on the other side. I just want to make a very brief comment on Sen. John. I do not normally disturb her, Sen. Jearlean John, but she made a big deal about the CSO, Mr. President. I

have been here for a while, in various chapters, and I have heard Members on the other side railing about the CSO, they do not have their act together, the CSO is in the dark ages, et cetera. Well, Mr. President, a lot of work has been done to modernize the Central Statistical Office in Trinidad and Tobago, and now when the Minister of Finance presents his data to us and he has done so, we have up-to-date real time—I use the word cautiously—real-time data from the Central Statistical Office on which Trinidad and Tobago can rely.

Mr. President, included in that data is the unemployment rate for Trinidad and Tobago, and that is another statistic that seemed to have caused great alarm and distress among members of the United National Congress. They almost appear offended that there is a relatively low unemployment rate in Trinidad and Tobago when compared, Mr. President, to the entire rest of the region. Compared to the rest of the Caribbean Community, it is relatively extremely low. I am being very diplomatic in my language because I do not like to do too many comparisons with our neighbours. Compared to Latin America, the entire hemisphere, our unemployment rate is very low. But that appears to have offended Members on the other side, and Sen. John, I mean, she spent considerable time talking about C3 in San Fernando and a gathering.

So, Mr. President, I did a little check. What went on at C3 to attract the attention of Sen. Jearlean John? Because she held that up as evidence that the CSO does not know what it is doing. So apparently, someone went on social media and promoted a jobs fair, a gathering. An opportunity where persons can come to pursue job opportunities in oil and gas. And the Senator presented this as everyone wants to leave Trinidad to go to Guyana. I said that sounds a little bit strange, Mr. President, because I, at the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, do processing for CARICOM skills certificate applications and I see many applicants

from Guyana coming in, from Jamaica, from Barbados, from St. Lucia, seeking to come to Trinidad and Tobago to apply their skills. So I said let me check this out a little bit further. Something is not sounding right here.

When you look at the actual report—Sen. John, I know you are listening. When I looked at the actual report—because you cannot take them at their word you know—Mr. President, the organizer of this event explained that the event was not geared for work in Guyana, but also in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senator: “Nooooo.”

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: So that is number one. And secondly, Mr. President, there seems to be an assumption that because persons are exploring improved opportunities in oil and gas, one of the best paid sectors anywhere in the world, it means that they are unemployed.

Hon. Senator: That is not so.

Sen. The Hon. A. Browne: Mr. President, that is, I do not want to say unintelligent, it is unintuitive. It is not logical. And to rail against the data of the Central Statistical Office, not presenting any rigour, any data, any evidence, except talk about a crowd in C3, Mr. President, I do not think that is acceptable as a contribution in the Senate. So I will have to dismiss that submission.

Mr. President, and as it stands, the data presented by the public servants at the Central Statistical Office remains standing in this Chamber until proven otherwise. Mr. President, they have to come better than that. Make a case, build a case. Always talking about evidence, put the evidence on the table. Not good enough, Mr. President. Not good enough. You can have that gathering in any country in the world and you know what the difference would be? You would not have an Opposition screaming and waving banners that that spells some sort of doom and gloom for the economy. So I will move on from Sen. John. And then

there were references in this debate from the other side.

I am not going to spend too much more time on them, Mr. President. I heard talk about the travel advisories. Who was it, Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts? There was talk—do not even worry to respond. One of our friends—about the travel advisory. So, Mr. President, there were submissions, including Members of the Independent Bench, that commending the Government and commending the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts for increased tourist arrivals in Trinidad and Tobago. You know what the counter was on that side? How can you have increased tourist arrivals when you have travel advisories from Canada?

Sen. Lutchmedial: That is not what I—

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Oh, it was Sen. Lutchmedial. She has sung out. Right, the travel advisories he did not address. Well, I am going to address the travel advisories right now, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, because the point was made that what about people going to the beach. So one travel advisory referenced crime risk of beachgoers, and the rhetorical question asked: What about people who want to go to the beach when they visit this country? Mr. President, if you go and you look at the travel advisories issued by First World countries, western countries—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, I am being disturbed a little bit. I will try to focus on my contribution. When you go and you do the research and you actually look at the travel advisories, Mr. President—you see, they only look for negatives on Trinidad and Tobago—there are travel advisories issued across the board.

So all the major tourist destinations are faced with travel advisories. The same

applies to Jamaica, same applies to islands up and down, same applies to South American nations that receive tourists all the time. And guess what? That is part of the milieu. What we do as a responsible government is we engage with our counterparts, we explain there are sometimes language, you have pointed out some of it, that is not accurate, and we do our advocacy and we look forward to the next advisory and progress and change. But we do have a crime challenge in this country. So what are you asking for? A crime challenge without travel advisories? That is part of the reality that we treat with, but guess what? The evidence was presented in this Clamber that the tourism product in Trinidad and Tobago is sufficiently attractive and becoming more attractive, that notwithstanding those other elements in the milieu, the tourists are coming and are enjoying the experience—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And we can look forward as we are seeing some progress from the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. The last few weeks has been replete in the media of advances and successes being made by the TTPS, robustly pushing back against the criminal element. We can look forward to an improved welfare with respect to our tourist arrivals.

So, Mr. President, again, crying against the sky without a sufficient robustness in their contribution. And Sen. Lutchmedial also seemed to have a problem with the amicus brief that has been supported. Now, this is with—let me explain with respect to the gun manufacturers. Private sector gun manufacturers in the United States of America, has nothing to do with the US Government. There has been a consortium develop of Mexico and a number of CARICOM states including Trinidad and Tobago, that have decided, listen, while we deal with the criminal element and the illegal gun availability problem within our jurisdictions,

let us do what Sen. Sunity Maharaj, Sen. Patasar, Sen. Francis and others have admonished us to do: go to the source. Mr. President, and those guns are not sourced here in Trinidad and Tobago. Those guns are sources in those First World countries.

4.30 p.m.

Not by Government, it is not governments exporting, it is not governments importing, it is people in the private sector, and the gun manufacturers are not taking sufficient measures to safeguard where their products end up. That is what this amicus brief is about. So I was very disappointed in my friend, Sen. Lutchmedial, that she would have a problem with Trinidad and Tobago joining in a progressive measure like that because that is us trying to address the source, as opposed to what some others may be advancing, which is just “guns for all”. That cannot be the solution, Mr. President, “guns for all”.

Mr. President, I will move on. And then the last reference I would make in this debate to Sen. Lutchmedial was, I was really disappointed in a comment she made when she referred to the 45th Regular Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community as “ah CARICOM lime”. Within that phrasing, that epitomizes the negative attitude of the United National Congress to the Caribbean Community and our regional family.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: There is no such thing as “CARICOM lime” when the Heads of Government gather here. So they would—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Mr. President: All right, so there is a low rumble and it is starting to get a bit loud. Minister, continue.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, every single Senator, I know many

Members of the Independent Bench have been presenters, have been facilitators—where is Sen. Thompson-Ahye?—and have been organizers of regional and international fora hosted right here in Trinidad and Tobago, including involvement in organs of the Caribbean Community hosted right here in Trinidad and Tobago, and not a single one—in culture and in other areas—of those events and fora and conferences can be considered a lime.

And, Mr. President, the political hypocrisy takes us back to the year 2013, when under their much adored, according to them, Leader of the Opposition, they hosted—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: No, besides that—they hosted, you know what? CARICOM's 40th anniversary celebration. Guess where that was? Right here in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Oh. Right here in Trinidad and Tobago. Do you know how much that cost the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago? Over \$9 million. That is a 40th anniversary, 10 years ago.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: You factor in inflation, the influx of time and other realities to host the 45th Heads of Government Conference here, as well as the 50th, much more significant, the golden anniversary celebration of the proud Caribbean Community right here at its birthplace in Trinidad and Tobago for just over \$7 million, considerably less than the 40th anniversary celebration 10 years before—

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—and all they can come up with is a descriptive of

a “CARICOM lime”; dismissive, denigrating, unfortunate. I condemn that approach. I condemn that lack of respect for the Caribbean Community.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: That is normal.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Yes.

Mr. President, in the last fiscal year, the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs has made every effort to responsibly utilize the allocation that has been provided by the Ministry of Finance. When I became the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, I had a very directive objective and that is to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago will build and maintain harmonious and productive relations with key partners right across the global landscape. In that effort, I have had the erstwhile leadership and support of the Prime Minister, the public service team and a dedicated team of diplomats hard at work to ensure that as we stand today in 2023, Trinidad and Tobago’s relationship with the United States of America is at a level of excellence at this stage—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—Trinidad and Tobago’s relationship with the People’s Republic of China is at a level of excellence, and I say this without fear of contradiction.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And I got a question from one of my counterparts, I would not name the country: How is Trinidad and Tobago able to balance these big powers, some of whom do not always get along, and neighbours, some of whom do not always get along?

Mr. Imbert: Skill.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: But, Mr. President, that is the skill of the Cabinet

of Trinidad and Tobago, and the leadership.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Such that you heard it in this budget presentation, Minister after Minister—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Absolutely. Minister after Minister have been referencing the resources, the connection, the benefit, the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago that have been plugged into opportunities from overseas. The Minister of Digital Transformation said it. I remember that meeting with my counterpart from India, the very distinguished Minister of External Affairs of India, and he said, “Amery, what can we do for you? How can we assist?” Weeks later, the Minister of Digital Transformation and his team are in New Delhi benefiting from the technologies of India.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Went up to Washington, DC—we have such an excellent Ambassador of the US here and we also have an excellent Ambassador in Washington, DC—and met Antony Blinken, he said the same thing, “What more can we do to partner with Trinidad and Tobago?” And, Mr. President, the resources are flowing. The Government is fully connected. That applies to all of our key development partners: United Kingdom, European Union, China, et cetera, and the African Union.

Mr. President, there are a few more thoughts in the last couple of minutes that I really want to share. I want to commend our Heads of Mission from Washington, DC, to Brussels, to Brazil, to China, to India, to the African continent—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—who have been working very hard, the staff and the Permanent Secretary. I was going to talk about the Prime Minister's attire, very unfortunately commented on by Sen. Roberts, I will leave his comment right where it belongs.

Hon. Senator: Forget him.

Sen. The Hon. A. Browne: Forget him as you say.

Mr. President, I want to end with a word on crime; I want to end because that is a very serious challenge in this country and to say that no one can be comfortable with the current reality. But, you know, Mr. President? One of the realities that we do not often refer to is crime between persons who know each other. That is a reality, and I have seen it time and time again, the issue of inheritance when grandpa dies and grandma dies, the tension that is created and it is not in any subculture, it is right across the country. And a word of alert to members of society, prepare—prevention is better than cure; seek some legal advice, do your will and help reduce the tension that often arises when there is someone who is deceased in the family.

The last words I would share, Mr. President, two lines from David Rudder's "Rally 'Round the West Indies", I will say them very quickly:

“Soon we must take a side or be lost in the rubble
In a divided world that don't need islands no more
Are doomed forever to be at somebody's mercy?
Little keys can open mighty doors”.

I thank this little key, the Minister of Finance, for an excellent budget.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: The world needs Trinidad and Tobago, the world needs CARICOM. We have a role to play. Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Mr. President. After having been in this building for last 22 days, I am thankful that we can at least, at last, draw this budget exercise to a close.

Before I go into the substance of my response, there are some housekeeping matters that I need to deal with. I get summaries from my staff of the contributions of every Senator, Opposition and Independent. Invariably, the summaries of the contributions of the Opposition Senators do not contain anything that requires a response. But on this occasion, there are some housekeeping—

Sen. Dr. Browne: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, as the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs has pointed out, they have troubled the scoreboard.

Sen. Dr. Browne: They have not troubled the score board.

Hon. C. Imbert: Well, it was zero before.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So I just want to deal with Sen. Charles. And I never thought that after we dealt with Sen. Charles 32 years ago in December of 1991, 32 years ago, that I would see Sen. Charles in the Parliament as an appointed Member. But I just want to read from a publication *BNamericas*, Wednesday, March 04, 2020, and what this publication refers is the question of a bankruptcy of a company called OAS, and it records that:

“OAS...entered bankruptcy protection in April 2015...”

Now, the election was in September of 2015, so this confirms what you already know, that OAS, the contractor on the Point Fortin—the south highway, was bankrupt in September of 2015, having become bankrupted in April of 2015, and it emerged from bankruptcy—this is the whole point of this publication—in March

of 2020. So it remained in bankruptcy for five years.

Now, just before the general election of 2015, just a few days before, the former UNC administration removed a particular clause from the contract between the National Infrastructure Development Company, which Sen. Charles was associated with at the time, and OAS. And that clause would have permitted the Government in the event of non-performance or any other issue with OAS to terminate for bankruptcy; automatic termination. There was no requirement to go through any long convoluted procedure to terminate the contract between OAS and NIDCO because of the bankruptcy clause. So NIDCO was already bankrupted, Mr. President—

Hon. Senators: OAS.

Hon. C. Imbert: Sorry, OAS was already bankrupted in—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, this cacophony—I know he has not been there for 32 years but oh gosh, Mr. President, I beg your protection.

Mr. President: So, again, now, Members—so the Minister of Finance is wrapping up obviously and he is responding to all comments that would have gone before. The only option available to you, if it is you wish to clarify something he is saying, is to ask him to give way. Shouting at him across the floor or speaking to him across the floor does not work. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Mr. President. It is a matter of record that before—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, “he start up again”.

Mr. President: Continue, Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: It is difficult. As I said, 32 years and he is still misbehaving.

But, Mr. President, in September of 2015, the UNC government removed the clause which would allow automatic termination in the event of bankruptcy of the contractor, OAS, which had been bankrupted since April of 2015. So OAS had been bankrupted for months before the general election in 2015, and they removed the clause allowing for automatic termination. No one has ever explained that. There is no innocent explanations for that.

You have a clause in a contract, it is a standard clause in international construction contracts—basic standard clause—that if the contractor files for bankruptcy or is declared bankrupted, you can automatically terminate without any other reason. It is protection for the employer because you do not want to be working with a bankrupted contractor. They removed it, there is no innocent explanation for that, they knew what they were doing.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Sinister.

4:45 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: And it is recently when the current PNM administration opened the highway to Point Fortin the hon.—

Sen. Mark: When did they [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, I do not know, it is like a stuck record.

Mr. President: Continue, continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: Recently the hon. Prime Minister opened the highway and made mention of this egregious action on the part of the former UNC government for which there is no innocent explanation. What did not the government get in return for taking out that bankruptcy clause? No one in the UNC has ever explained that. Why would you do that and what consideration did you get for that? No one has ever explained that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So, the Prime Minister opened the highway a short while ago, and they—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Okay, have a seat. Okay, so maybe I am not being clear enough. So let me be clear now, the next person to disturb the Minister of Finance while wrapping up, I will ask them to take a walk. Continue Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. There might be a lot of them, perhaps a lot of housekeeping to do. So anyway, I heard as a very weak defence to that factual matrix outlined by the hon. Prime Minister, when he opened the Point Fortin highway a short while ago, that the contract was actually awarded by the PNM. That was their defence, it is not them, it is the PNM that award the contract to OAS. OAS was the PNM contractor.

Mr. President, one of the benefits of being in this place for as long as I have is that you remember various matters that were debated. On Friday 28th of January 2011, I had cause to bring a Motion in the other place on poor decision making by the government with respect to its conduct on that contract with OAS for that highway. And I made the point that the former UNC administration in 2010 going into 2011—December 2010 into early 2011, hustled through a \$5 billion contract in a matter of days. And I piloted that Motion in the other place and the respondent was the hon. Jack Warner then Minister of Works at the time.

Hon. Senator: Hmmm, what did he say?

Hon. C. Imbert: And this it is what Mr. Warner, former Minister of Finance had to say because remember just for the last couple weeks now since we opened the highway, they were all of them running up and down saying, “ is de PNM award the contract, is de PNM, is not we.” So let me tell you what Mr. Warner said, and I am quoting from the *Hansard* January 28th, 2011.

“Mr. Speaker, I go further to tell you that I am told about the \$5.2 billion contract which was done in seven days. This amount of histrionics you come here with—it...”—is not—“...true. This matter took...two months. Mr. Speaker...as I talk to you”—now—“this matter is still inconclusive...”—this—“Motion is foolish. How can you award a contract that has not even been signed?”

Hon. Senator: What?

Hon. C. Imbert: This is Warner speaking “eh”.

Hon. Senator: This is the next year?

Hon. C. Imbert: January 2011 “eh”, '11 we came out in May 2010 “eh”, Jack Warner is talking in January 2011, the Minister of Works.

“How can you award a contract that has not even been signed? How can you award a contract for which the money has not been firmed up? How can you award a contract far more execute it if it has not been signed? They have come to an agreement that it has to go to Cabinet and Cabinet has to study it, where it is right now.”

Hon. Senator: That is it?

Hon. C. Imbert:

“Yuh have wood in your ears or what? Yuh have stick in yuh ears!”

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert:

“The contract has to go to Cabinet...”

We have not awarded it. That is Jack Warner, January 2011.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Buffing me because I had the audacity to talk about him awarding a contract in five days and his response was; “What contract you talking

about? It is with Cabinet we have not awarded it.” Those are the facts out of the mouth of a UNC Minister. So that deals with that. So, let me move on now to Sen. John. I had to listen to Sen. John say these words, “is we that created the minimum percentage for Tobago for THA”—I had to listen to that.

You know what the facts are? When Hochoy Charles was the Chief Secretary in the THA, the then UNC starved Tobago of money. The Hochoy Charles-led THA took the UNC to Court and also took them to the Dispute Resolution Commission. And, Mr. President, the report of the Dispute Resolution Commission was tabled in this place in October of 2000, Mr. President. So it is the Hochoy Charles THA that took the UNC, of which Sen. John was a member, kicking and screaming to the Dispute Resolution Commission because they were starving Tobago of money and that is how we have come up with the current paradigm where Tobago is given a minimum of 4.03 per cent and a maximum of “6 point something” per cent. That—and I am still hearing the hon. Senator saying that was under the UNC. They are gaslighting. I mean, this is pure gaslighting. This is textbook gaslighting, textbook. Good grief, good grief; starving Tobago of money, starving. And Hochoy Charles had to take them to court and “dey saying is we do it, well, yes.” I do not know what else to—I do not know how else to describe that. I do not know what else to say; textbook gaslighting.

And now, let us go to Sen. Gopeesingh, who has posted on Facebook, posted on Facebook already. Look at what he post on Facebook, Mr. President: “PNM tries to stifle the truth about the sound health of the Leader of the Opposition in today’s Senate debate”.

[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Hold on, hold on, hold on.

Hon. C. Imbert: What is that? He said, “The PNM tries to stifle the truth about the health of the Opposition Leader in today’s Senate debate”. He posted that. The Hon. Senator post that. I do not know what is going on. I came here to debate this, this. It is called:

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

Which part of this? This Bill has three clauses. The first clause is the title, the second clause is the issue from the consolidated fund, the third clause is the Schedule. Here is the Schedule: Heads of Expenditure, President, Auditor General, Judiciary, Parliament, et cetera. Which part of this, Mr. President, which part of this is the health of the Opposition Leader, which part of that? It is ridiculous, ridiculous. And, you know, this abuse of the Parliament, there are six Opposition Senators, not eight, not eight.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It is going on too long, it is going on too long. They come and they speak and then they get sick. And, you know, you know Min. Browne told me yesterday there was some confusion with Sen. Roberts talking, “like he talk outta turn, and so on. So he talk yesterday.” He told me—“ah didn’t believe him”—he say, “Dey go swear in somebody tomorrow yuh know. Roberts go get sick yuh know.” So said so done, as night follows day. It is abuse. There are six Opposition Senators, not eight. They have six times to speak, not eight times.

Sen. Mark: You talk to the President. Are you the President?

Hon. C. Imbert: So, anyhow, having dealt with House—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Minister, Minister, no. Minister, have a seat.

Sen. Mark: [*Continuous interruption*]

Mr. President: Sen. Mark! Sen. Mark, have a seat, have a seat.

Sen. Mark: You are not the President!

Mr. President: Minister, continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. This pretense of sickness, it is an abuse. That is the abuse. You are pretending to be sick. You are not sick.

Mr. President: Minister, Sen. Mark. Sen. Gopeesingh, have a seat. Sen. Mark, please take a walk for 15 minutes. You may return in 15 minutes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Gopeesingh, you have a Point of Order to raise?

Sen. Dr. Goopeesingh: Yes, 46(6), he is casting aspersions on the Opposition here, his last statement.

Mr. President: Minister of Finance, continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: “Gih meh ah chance, gih meh ah chance.” Did the hon. Senator—did you sign the sick leave for Lyder? Was it you? Look, “gimme” a chance here today. Anyway, let me move on to more important matters. So those are housekeeping matters. Gaslighting in the extreme, they are gaslighters extraordinaire. They are experts in making up stories.

Let us move on now to more important matters. And I want to start off by saying that I want to tell hon. Senators, especially the new ones, this is what we come to debate, the appropriation, okay? It contains Heads of Expenditure. This is a very important document, the *Review of the Economy*, it has 224 pages in it. It contains a lot of the answers that some of the new Senators were asking and, perhaps, I am sure you will still be here next year, because I really appreciated your contributions, by the way. I must say that off the bat. And Mr. Lewis, the temporary Senator, I appreciated your

contribution. I must say that.

And before I even move on, I had the honour and the privilege in 2004, September 2004, I had been Minister of Health prior to that. There was a Cabinet reshuffle, and I was put into the Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education. And I must say those were the two best years of my parliamentary career, I must say. So much was done. We were able to create GATE, the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses. I was able to establish the Accreditation Council. But the thing that I am most proud of, I was able to create the University of Trinidad and Tobago in September 2004.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And I am so proud today to see two graduates here of UTT, Sen. Helon Francis—I think I got the pronunciation correct—and Sen. Dr. Sharda Patasar. I am so proud; 19 years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And it was Prof. Julien who was the prime mover behind that institution, together with Permanent Secretary Jennifer Sampson, I think her name was. And the Prime Minister gave us an assignment to create this new University in one year; we did it actually in about seven months. All praise to Sen. Julien and his team at the time, and I am so proud to see two distinguished graduates of UTT here at this time, 19 years later.

So, when I look at the contributions—let us start with Sen. Helon Francis. Let us start with his contributions, because he had a lot to say. And in the notes I received from my staff, there is quite a bit about what Sen. Helon Francis had to say. What I found most interesting about the hon. Senator's contribution was he spoke about comments made at a youth budget talk with respect to the retirement age. And he recited some of the questions

and some of the answers, and it was—this is my notes. Some questions raised by young persons on the national budget presentation:

What are your thoughts on the increased pension age? As a young professional coming out of COVID, there are a lot of people who use their savings for a down payment for a home, but now there is an additional five years. What does this do to a young person purchasing a home?

And a moderator, whoever that was, I am not sure who it was, said:

Raising the retirement age may just be a plaster solution. If we raise the retirement age because of the ageing population, while healthcare, medication, and innovation manages progress, there is nothing stopping us from returning to the same position years from now.

Now, quite often these moderators, they, you know, they like to be populace, they play to the gallery, and so on, but Sen. Lewis hit the nail on the head. He hit the nail on the head. The life expectancy of a Trinidadian now is 74. I remember when it was 69. I can remember that. I am not too old to remember that, and I am sure it was less than that before. So the life expectancy of a Trinidadian has gone up by five years.

And I had an interesting encounter at a forum, a post budget forum, put on by the TTMA, and the President of the TTMA was asked the question: “What do you think about increasing the retirement age to 65?” And he made the point, and it is an interesting point. If somebody is 60 years old, one of my employees, I have trained them, they have developed, they have learnt, they are now extremely proficient at their job, they have vast experience, they have knowledge, why would I want to get rid of my best worker at age 60, if they are still healthy and all their mental faculties are still functioning

properly? And I totally agree, because that person is an asset. That person at age 60 is an asset to the company. It would be one of the most productive and efficient employees of the company at the time. I fully understand the flipside of the coin, fully understand it; that young people may see that, look, this is going to deny me entry into the public service, for example; this is going to deny me promotional opportunities, I have to wait another five years; this may limit my job opportunities. I understand all of that.

But, one of the reasons why we are thinking and we are moving towards the idea of increasing the retirement age is the fact that we have an ageing population. There is no two ways about it. I was looking at the labour statistics, and I think this is an opportune time now for me to read into the record some of the data with respect to employment. Because when the Central Statistical Office—and it is a funny thing “eh”—when something good comes out of the CSO, bound to be wrong. When something bad comes out of the CSO, bound to be right. That is the familiar refrain from the Opposition side. If the employment figures are looking good, fake. If it looking bad, that have to be right.

So, when the CSO told us about two weeks before the budget, documents were finalized, that the unemployment rate had dropped to 3.7 per cent in June of 2023, I became quite intrigued. So, I said I would like to see some more granular details. So, these are the facts; that in the second quarter of 2023, the CSO tells us that increased employment was recorded in the following categories: own account workers, so that is self-employed, by 13,100 persons; Government public service statutory boards, by 10,600 persons; employers on their own, 2,100 persons; apprentices, 1,800 persons; and unpaid workers, 500 persons. And disaggregated by sub-occupation it is

even more interesting. Small business managers, 6,296 persons; administrative associate professionals, 5,773 persons; mining and construction labourers, 4,914 persons; protective services, 4,703 persons; sales, 4,493; painters and related workers, 4,330; motor vehicle drivers and riders, 3,764; and another interesting one, architects, engineers and related professionals, 3,460. So, there are actually 20 sub-categories. I would not read them all, because of time. But what the CSO told me is that in the second quarter of 2023, there were 28,100 new workers in the labour force in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And I looked deeper into the figures and I see that our labour force has been shrinking over time. So, one of the questions I asked today: What could be the cause of that? What are the reasons for the labour force shrinking over time? And I eventually received a sort of guarded response which says the continuous long-term decline in the labour force suggests that the reason is an ageing population, no two ways about it. So, if you actually—we are doing a census right now, I believe. A census is in progress, or we are in the early stages of a census, and we would see exactly what the population is zero to 18; zero to 15; 60 and over, and that sort of thing. But based on the information that I have available to me, we do have an ageing population. With respect to our National Insurance System, which is where the issue really is, in terms of the sustainability of the National Insurance Pension Scheme, we have far more people enjoying benefits now, pension, and so on, than before, and fewer people are entering the system in terms of being registered with the National Insurance Board.

5.05 p.m.

So there are arguments for and against. And I understood what Sen. Helon Francis was saying, but I think if you look around the world you will see the majority of countries in the world have moved towards a higher retirement age, and I just want to make it crystal clear, I have said this many times before but it seems you have to say things over, and over, and over because sometimes people only want to hear what they want to hear.

Hon. Senator: That is right.

Hon. C. Imbert: It will be voluntary, not compulsory.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Voluntary, not compulsory. So if you want to go at 60, no problem, if you want to stay on till 65, also no problem. And it is not cast in stone it is just a developing policy, which we intend to firm up in this year 2023 as we finalize our consultations on the matter. But there were many other things that Sen. Francis had to say and I want to congratulate him as a young man, I think he is only 29, when I was 29 I was a full lecturer at UWI, by the way, in a post-graduate program. So I understand someone at your level, you won the Calypso Monarch competition in 2018 and since then you have qualified. I want to congratulate you, Sen. Helon Francis.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I am very impressed by your agreement to come into this place. Sen. Hutchinson, well, what can I say, welcome, a breath of fresh air.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I think that was a rational contribution. I know you did not have time to study this 224-page document, you are a busy man, but at least you put context into your discussion on the Appropriation Bill, which is the allocations to the various Ministries and Departments for the service of Trinidad and Tobago,

Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

and you put context into it. Sen. Maharaj, I am kind of afraid to say what I want to say, Sen. Maharaj. I went through your comments, very interesting I must say, very interesting, a lot of food for thought. But all I would say is that in this place—what can I say, “ah” trying to be diplomatic “it hard”, this is not a place for sarcasm when it comes to Independent Senators, that is more fitting for an editorial in the *Express*. That is the best way I could put it. But having said that, having said that, I did find that the comments from Sen. Maharaj were deep and very thought-provoking, and I hope to have many more contributions of that ilk from Sen. Maharaj.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Sen. Dr. Patasar, again you have to be one of the first graduates, PhD graduates from UTT? In creative industries is it? Or creative arts, and I congratulate you for that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And I do hope that you will bring your musical knowledge, your musical skills and your learning in that area to bear on this Senate. Sen. Dr. Richards, what can I say? You have obviously chosen education as your core and the points—we do not have enough time to discuss these things in a budget debate, we just do not. I mean, your main point you made is that we have spent \$80 billion over the last eight years or 10 years or so on education and did we get value for money, and what kind of people are we creating, and what kind of student is coming out and what sort of learning environment? And you focused as well as on the problem that all of us have at the beginning the performance in the secondary entrance examination that is where it all begins. Because—Mr. President, how much more time do I have?

Mr. President: You finish at 5.19. Ten minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay, 10 minutes. That is the issue all of us have because we all know the disappointment when the child does not make it to their first choice, or their second choice, or their third choice. You see the disappointment, the disappointment on the child, and the disappointment on the parents. And it is really something that we need, we need to deal with that problem but time does not permit us to have a full-fledged debate on that. Sen. Dillon-Remy, I just want to repeat what I said, I said to you privately, I will repeat it publicly now. All we do in the Ministry of Finance is we give Tobago a lump sum. When we do the national budget, like for example this year we finally settled on about \$59 billion—

Mr. President: Minister, my apologies, you have till 5.24.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay, great. Thank you. When we finally settled on the total amount for the budget because it is not an easy job. When we came into office in 2015, the annual expenditure was \$60 billion somewhere around there. The national income was \$35 billion, so you had a \$60 billion expectation from the population and a \$35 billion revenue stream. It was unsustainable. One of the first things we had to do was reduce it, so we cut it from 60 to 50, but that created all sorts of issues because it created arrears piling up to contractors, Sen. Teemal, because the money just was not there. So you take \$10 billion out of Government expenditure you are going to owe somebody some money. And one of the things we have been doing over the last two years or so, is trying to clear off all of those unpaid bills that have been festering there for so long.

But we had to cut out that \$10 billion and even when we cut it out from 60 to 50, even when we cut it out, we still did not have enough money. We still ran a deficit budget because what had happened when the former administration took over in 2010, annual expenditure was \$45 billion. It grew from 45, it hit a high of \$62 billion in 2014, and was at the \$60 billion level in 2015. But the revenue

never grew to meet the expenditure. So we became a population accustomed to expenditure of \$60 billion, we had “champagne taste and mauby pocket”. It was as simple as that.

So one of the things we had to do was to cut back, but you cannot keep cutting forever because you reach a point where you stifle the economy and the economy goes into a tailspin. And this is one of the reasons why we have been running deficit budgets for the last eight years, because we have never subscribed to the theory, you will hear it espoused by some of the go-to commentators in the newspapers, in the media, they had a theory, cut your budget to suit your income. There is one of them who writes in the papers every week and that was his solution. You are earning \$35 billion, cut your expenditure to \$35 billion and balance your budget.

That is the Jamaica solution. That is why Jamaica’s GDP per capita is one-third of Trinidad and Tobago. That is when you are in an IMF programme, that is what they tell you to do. That is what the IMF says, post a fiscal surplus. So Jamaica has had to post a fiscal surplus for the last 43 years. They have been in an IMF programme for over 40 years. When you post a fiscal surplus what happens? No subsidies, no transfers, everybody has to pay the real cost of commodities or even more because it is taxed. Like Barbados for example, taxes fuel. They put a tax on fuel. They do not just make their population pay the actual cost of fuel, they put a tax on it as a revenue earner. So when we got that advice, cut your expenditure down to \$35 billion. We said, “no way, we not doing dat.”

So you have to massage this thing “yuh cah” cut it down too low because the economy will collapse, “yuh cah” bring it up too high because your debt to GDP ratio will go out of whack, you get downgraded, “yuh cah” borrow money anymore, “yuh cah” finance anything. So it is very difficult. But eventually, we

arrived at \$59 billion and we said we could manage that and we are predicting a deficit of about \$5 billion with revenue of 54, and we said, “We could handle that”. We have enough spare capacity, our debt to GDP ratio is 70 per cent. It is within our soft target of 75 per cent. Our reserves are adequate. We have significant growth in the non-oil sector and so on, we could manage a deficit of \$5 billion in order to propel the productive sector in the economy because that is what you are spending the money on. You are spending \$6 billion on your development programme to propel the productive sector of your economy.

So \$59 billion, we say all right, Tobago gets 4.3 per cent of that. And that is all that happens. They decide how to allocate it. I think the confusion arose when you may have seen me, Sen. Dillon-Remy, answering on behalf of the THA. I was just repeating like a parrot. You know, I was asked a question, I turned to the officials from Tobago, I said, “What is the answer to that question?”, they tell me the answer and I just repeat it. I “doh” defend. So we do give them the lump sum and they do whatever they want with the money. And we have been giving Tobago, THA, more than the UNC ever gave them in that five years that they were in Government, Mr. President.

So let me move on now. I think I have covered all the Senators. Sen. Teemal, I think I have given you my views already privately so we will leave it there. I just want to talk about property tax, though. One thing I want to say. There is a section in the Property Tax Act, again, you have to repeat these things because somehow you say it over and over and people just do not hear it. Section 23 of the Property Tax Act states in black and white, in reader-friendly English, that if you are unable to pay because of hardship you apply for a deferral.

So that through you, Mr. President, Sen. Teemal, the person you are talking about who built their house 30 years ago and cannot afford \$250 a month, they

apply for a deferral and that is the end of it. That is old age pensioners, they specifically speak about people on fixed incomes. It refers to that and other people who are unable to pay the tax because of hardship you apply and it is deferred. And the example again, Sen. Teemal, my good friend from university days, and from working life, telling secrets now—

Sen. Dr. Browne: You had university—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Yeah, I had a lot of university friends. The people who would be paying \$250 a month is about 10 per cent of the property owners in Trinidad and Tobago. I have already made the point, 50 per cent of property owners and probably more because the HDC properties are not in there. The 230,000-odd properties we valued so far do not include any significant amount of HDC properties. That is going to lower it, but the 50 per cent we are doing them now. In the 230,000 valuations that have been done, 50 per cent of them are going to pay less than \$1,000 a year, \$80 or \$90 a month. So the vast bulk of the population will be paying a small amount of property tax.

Yes, some people may consider it a significant sum, \$400/\$500 a year may be a significant sum for some families, you apply for the deferral. I just want to make that point. At the lowest end, it is \$482 a year, at the upper end it is less than 1,000, it is \$985 a year for 53 per cent of property owners in Trinidad and Tobago.

I do not think that is a huge burden but the thing about that is that the money that the corporations will now get will allow them now to do the things that they say they cannot do because they have no money. They cannot clean drains, they cannot maintain cemeteries, they cannot fix recreation grounds, they “cah” collect garbage, “dey cah” patch potholes because they have no money. Because every one of the corporations says, all of their money goes towards personnel expenditure, wages and salaries. They have no money.

So now they will all be getting this, an average per corporation of about \$30 million a year, which is equivalent to their current budget for development, for goods and services, and for development. So we will see how they would operate going forward because the other thing in the local government reform, is that people can now question the corporation. The reform allows citizens to turn up at a council meeting and demand answers. How are you spending that property tax? How much you collect? What you spend it on? Citizens can now get an account from local government corporations.

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

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. So the way I see it, that has to be positive it cannot be negative. It cannot be—you see, Sen. Teemal, you made a point, through you, Mr. President, that what people look out for in a budget is they want more disposable income in their hand. Where is the money supposed to come from? Where would more disposable income come from? It will only come—we can only reduce the tax rate because that is what you are talking about. You are talking about reducing the tax burden on people. We have already increased the personal allowance from \$60,000 when we came in 2015 to \$90,000 now, it is a significant increase. That is a 50 per cent increase in the personal allowance from \$5,000 a month to \$7,500 a month now tax-free. And that is what those minimum wage workers will benefit from, because they all fall below the \$7,500 a month.

5.20 p.m.

So that extra \$500 that the lowest level of minimum wage worker will get or the \$900 that the security guard will get per month, an extra \$900 a month—that is not chick feed—is going to be tax free. But we do not have any more scope in the system at this time to increase the personal allowance by any significant amount again. We just do not. We have to do what Sen. Lewis was talking about, we have

to grow the economy, we have to diversify, we have to innovate, we have to get new revenue streams, but not from the population. We have decided we are not going to impose any further taxation burden on the population—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—and that is what is hurting all of them. They were looking for all kind of millionaire tax, and inheritance tax, and this tax, and that tax. And when they heard me say in the budget, we are not imposing any more taxation on the population, “dey want to dead”; “dey want to dead”. And then when we come with a \$1,000 a year book grant and an increase in the minimum wage, well, now all of them want to commit suicide, and perhaps we need to give a bigger allocation to hotline because this was not even an election budget.

So I am happy to come to this Senate. I would urge all Senators, especially the new ones—I know it is a heavy burden, I know it is hard, you now come and they gave you thousands of pages to read but next year, read the *Review of the Economy*. It will give you a lot of insight into the creative sector, into the manufacturing sector, into the innards of the economy and all the various productive sectors in the economy. And I am very happy to be able to present a budget that has not increased a single tax on anybody, that has put no burdens on anybody and that has only improved—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—the lives of thousands of citizens in this country. I beg to move, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Mr. President: Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, in accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2024, not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. President: Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Mr. President. I beg to move that a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2024, be now read a third time and passed.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

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 a date to be fixed.

Tribute to Madam Clerk Mrs. Jacqueline Sampson-Meiguel

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, before I put the question on the adjournment, I would like to take this opportunity to recognize the work of a stalwart of the Parliamentary Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: After 37 years of parliamentary service, Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel, following a period of preretirement leave, will retire at the end of January 2024. It is thus with gratitude that I seek to bring these remarks on behalf of myself and the Members of this Senate.

To personify Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel, is to speak to the commitment and leadership with which she has led this institution. Members on all sides can attest to the sense of duty and responsibility, which has imbued all of our interactions as Clerk of the House. A consummate professional, Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel has demonstrated her respect and understanding of the core democratic principles on which parliamentary democracy is founded.

Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel broke the mold, so to speak, in more ways than one. She had the distinction, in 1995, to be the first woman appointed to the position of Clerk of the House. She has, throughout the length and breadth of her tenure, served with distinction and has contributed to modernizing the Trinidad and Tobago parliamentary system. Mrs. Sampson-Meiguel not only provided sound procedural guidance in the strengthening of the Parliament's oversight functions through an expansion of the committee system, but also guided the revision of the Standing Orders, our essential rulebook.

Jacqui, as we fondly refer to her, was keenly aware of the need to make visible the work of the Parliament and undertook to make this institution more accessible for all, both in person and via our electronic mediums. To further demonstrate how this exemplar was a guiding light, it was during her leadership that Parliament commenced live broadcasts of its proceedings in an effort to reach the population via the mass media. This endeavour was yet another first for our legislature. In sum, she was conscious of the benefits of cultivating positive relationships, not only regionally but further afield with international parliamentary bodies.

In my own reflections, I can say, without contradiction, that the level of service and professionalism espoused in this organization has been honed by Madam Clerk, a hallmark of distinctive service. Indeed, she has been a pioneer in

the development of the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and for all of her efforts, we wish to extend our sincerest thanks.

On behalf of the Senate, we say thanks to Madam Clerk for her sterling contribution to the Parliament, and by extension, the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Added to that, I wish to also congratulate and thank Mr. Brian Caesar, who is now the Clerk of the House—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President:—for his yeoman service to the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago. In keeping the change and growth, I also welcome Ms. Keiba Jacob-Mottley—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President:—as Acting Clerk of the Senate. To the four newly minted Independent Senators, I say congratulations to you on all of your maiden contributions in this Senate, and I welcome you to the Senate—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President:—of Trinidad and Tobago. That being said, on behalf of the Senate, I thank the outgoing Senators for their service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 5.28 p.m.