

SENATE*Tuesday, November 28, 2023*

The Senate met at 1.30 p.m.

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

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne, Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon, and Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC, all of whom are out of the country, and Dr. Sharda Patasar, who is ill.

SENATOR'S 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. MICHAEL SEALES

WHEREAS Senator the Honourable Dr. Amery Browne 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

UNREVISED

44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you, MICHAEL SEALES to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 28th November, 2023 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said Senator the Honourable Dr. Amery Browne.

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 28th day of November, 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: MS. YOKYMMA BETHELMY

WHEREAS Senator the Honourable Paula Gopee-Scoon is incapable of performing her duties as a Senator by reason of her absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you, YOKYMMA BETHELMY to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect

Senator's Appointment (cont'd)

2023.11.28

from 28th November, 2023 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said Senator the Honourable Paula Gopee-Scoon.

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 28th day of November, 2023."

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. NDALE YOUNG

WHEREAS Senator the Honourable Reginald T.A. Armour, 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)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you, NDALE YOUNG to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 28th November, 2023 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said Senator the Honourable Reginald T.A. Armour, S.C.

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 28th day of November, 2023.”

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. FRANCIS LEWIS

WHEREAS Senator Dr. Sharda Patasar is incapable of performing her 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)(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 effect from 28th November, 2023 and continuing during the illness of Senator Dr. Sharda Patasar by reason of illness.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 28th day of November, 2023.”

AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE

Senators Ndale Young and Francis Lewis took and subscribed the Affirmation of Allegiance as required by law.

UNREVISED

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senators Michael Seales and Yokymma Bethelmy took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

SESSIONAL SELECT COMMITTEES

(APPOINTMENT OF)

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, in accordance with Standing Order 79(2), I have appointed the following Members to serve on the sessional select committees of the Senate for the Fourth Session, Twelfth Parliament.

Standing Orders Committee

Mr. Nigel de Freitas	Chairman
Mr. Laurence Hislop	Member
Dr. Amery Browne	Member
Mr. Wade Mark	Member
Dr. Sharda Patasar	Member

House Committee

Dr. Amery Browne	Chairman
Ms. Donna Cox	Member
Mrs. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing	Member
Ms. Jearlean John	Member
Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy	Member

Committee of Privileges

Mr. Nigel de Freitas	Chairman
Mr. Reginald Armour SC	Member
Mr. Randall Mitchell	Member
Ms. Jearlean John	Member
Mr. Deeroop Teemal	Member

Statutory Instruments Committee

Mr. Nigel de Freitas	Chairman
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Mrs. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal	Member
Ms. Jayanti Lutchmedial	Member
Ms. Sunity Maharaj	Member

Business Committee

Mr. Nigel de Freitas	Chairman
Dr. Amery Browne	Member
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	Member
Mr. Wade Mark	Member
Dr. Paul Richards	Member

PAPERS LAID

1. Beekeeping and Bee Products (Amd't) Regulations, 2023. [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein)*]
2. Trinidad and Tobago Special Economic Zones Regulations, 2023. [*The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell)*]

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**REPORTS****(Presentation)**

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

**Maintenance of Community Swimming Pools by the Ministry of Sport and
Community Development**

Fifteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament, on the Examination of a Follow-up inquiry on the maintenance of community swimming pools by the Ministry of Sport and Community Development.

Food Security in Trinidad and Tobago in

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger.

Sixteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament, on the Examination into Food Security in Trinidad and Tobago in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger.

**Management and Operations of the Secondary Road Rehabilitation and
Improvement Company Limited**

Seventeenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament, on the Examination into the Management and Operations of the Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company Limited.

URGENT QUESTION

Licensing Office, Caroni

(Action Taken to Improve Security)

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Mr. President. To the Minister of Works and Transport: In light of the early morning arson attack at the Licensing Office in Caroni, which destroyed 14 vehicles, can the Minister state what immediate action has been taken to improve security at the Office to prevent the recurrence of such

attacks?

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

1.45 p.m.

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan):

Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, before I answer the question as put on the Order Paper, if you would just permit me to extend condolences to one of our stalwarts in local government, Mr. Terry Rondon, who has passed on. On behalf of the Government and myself and my family, I just want to extend condolences to the family of Mr. Terry Rondon who would have done yeoman service to this country at the local government level.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Thank you. Mr. President, the license office at Caroni currently has armed security 24/7, which conducts periodic and random patrols during the course of the day and night. In addition, the compound is currently outfitted with CCTV cameras to detect instances of wrongdoing. In spite of the rigid security mechanisms we have in place, the Ministry continues to analyze whether there is need for additional security. Currently, an assessment is been done with the assistance of law enforcement agencies with a view to ascertain what additional security may be needed and to make recommendations for the way forward. I thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Yeah. Can I ask the hon. Minister, given what has happened a couple of hours ago, is the Ministry considering, Mr. President, taking some interim security measures to prevent any attempt whilst the assessment is taking place by

the police, any attempt by others who may have that ambition, can I ask the hon. Minister?

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Sure. Mr. President, security has been beefed up at the license office and because this is an active, a very active police investigation I do not want to say more on this topic at this point in time, but security has been beefed up at the licence office and very soon some major announcements will be made.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Mr. President, can I ask the hon. Minister, given the gravity of what has taken place at the licensing office at Caroni, what time frame is he anticipating for the conclusion of the assessment that is now being undertaken by the police service into this arson attack?

Mr. President: Minister of Works and Transport.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Mr. President, as I did indicate, the assessment is being spearheaded by law enforcement agencies and I cannot give a timeline on this. All I can say at this point in time is that the security has been beefed up and the recommendations once submitted to the licence office, will be implemented immediately. Thank you.

Mr. President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell): Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, there are seven questions for oral answer, Government is prepared to answer six, we are seeking a deferral on question No. 51.

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, the deferral that the Acting Leader of Government Business seeks is so granted. Sen. Mark.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following question stood on the Order Paper in the name of Sen. Dr. Paul Richards.

Repatriation of Nationals from Refugee Camps in Syria (Update on)

51. Sen. Dr. Paul Richards asked the hon. Prime Minister:

Can the Minister provide an update on the work of the Cabinet-appointed Committee to address the repatriation of nationals from refugee camps in Syria?

Question, by leave, deferred.

Regional Security System Aircraft (Cost to Taxpayers)

7. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Can the Minister provide the costs incurred to taxpayers for the use of the Regional Security System (RSS) aircraft that transported four (4) officers of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to Barbados to detain and transport Mr. Brent Thomas to Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. President: Minister of National Security.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very warmly, Mr. President. According to information received from the Commissioner of Police, no costs were incurred to taxpayers for use of the Regional Security System aircraft, as suggested in this question. Thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Mr. President, since no cost was incurred by the Regional Security System and the aircraft—that aircraft, rather, can the Minister indicate as National Security Minister, what role did he, the Minister, play in authorizing these four police officers to board this regional security aircraft to travel to Barbados?

Mr. President: That question does not arise, Sen. Mark, next question.

Sen. Mark: Mr. President, can the Minister indicate which country or which government took up this cost for this Regional Security System aircraft to land and to take off, come from Barbados and then move out of Trinidad back to Barbados?

Mr. President: Minister of National Security.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: As is obvious by the intitulement of the system of which the Senator speaks, it is a regional organization. I thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Since the Minister is a member of a CARICOM system that deals with security matters, is the Minister conscious and aware of this activity involving the kidnapping of Brent Thomas?

Mr. President: So Sen. Mark, we spoke to this already on an earlier occasion, once again, that question is not allowed. Please be careful how you are phrasing those questions, next question.

Sen. Mark: Mr. President, four police officers of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service were involved in this expedition and adventure. Can the Minister of National Security who is in charge and has responsibility for the direction and control of the Ministry of National Security, can the Minister advise this honourable Senate, what knowledge he, the Minister, had on this whole transaction involving these police officers who were transported from Trinidad to Barbados

and back? Can the Minister indicate to this Senate what knowledge if any he had of this development?

Mr. President: That question does not arise. Sen. Mark, next question on the Order Paper.

Sen. Mark: Can I—okay.

Heritage Petroleum Company Limited

Net For Exchange Earnings 2019 to 2022 –

8. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries: In light of the May 2023 announcement of a \$1.1 Billion net profit by Heritage Petroleum Company Limited, can the Minister provide the net foreign exchange earnings for each year during the period 2019 to 2022 in relation to the export of crude oil by the Company?

Mr. President: Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Mr. President. Mr. President, the following figures are the net foreign exchange earnings by Heritage Petroleum Company Limited for the various years in question. For its first year 2019, US \$687,264,108; for 2020, US \$631,943,901; for 2021, US \$883,530,947; for 2022, US \$1,332,200,648. Those are the net foreign exchange earnings by Heritage Petroleum Company for the various years in question.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Paria Fuel Trading Company Limited

Forexchange Spent to Import Refined Products -

9. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

Can the Minister provide the amount of foreign exchange spent by Paria Fuel Trading Company Limited to import refined products for each year during the period 2019 to 2022?

Mr. President: Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Mr. President. Mr. President, the following are the amounts of foreign exchange spent by Paria Fuel Trading Company Limited to import refined products, petroleum products, fuel for local consumption, for each year during the period of its existence from 2019 to 2022.

In 2019, \$487,854,949.83, US dollars of course; for 2022, \$506,160,876.47; for 2021, \$581,984,541.94; for 2022, \$986,332,229.25.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can the Minister indicate in terms of the re-exporting of these refined fuel products, can the Minister indicate what amount was realized to the citizens and to the country during the said period?

Mr. President: Could you rephrase that question again, Sen. Mark, just for clarity?

Sen. Mark: Mr. President, I am asking that this was the expenses incurred by Paria to import these products but Paria also re-exported these products. So I am asking the hon. Minister, if he can share with the Senate the amount Trinidad and Tobago is going to gain from the re-exportation of these products to the region, as they have indicated in their bulletins and in their statements?

Mr. President: Okay, that is what I thought. This question does not arise, Sen. Mark, next question.

Sen. Mark: Can the Minister indicate whether he is aware of any swapping of our crude oil that is exported to a company called BPF Holdings on the eastern seaboard, whether he—

Mr. President: So Sen. Mark, I do not even need to hear the end of that question, it does not arise. Next question.

Sen. Mark: Can the Minister indicate to this honourable Senate exactly which company the Government through Paria imports its refined fuel products as outlined by the Minister for the period 2019 to 2022?

Mr. President: Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much, Mr. President. Mr. President, Paria has a number of contractual relationships with persons who trade in this area, for example, one would be Trafigura, there will be others, the Shell Trading arms. I can tell the country recently, just last week, I had discussions with the CEO and President of Aramco Trading to see if we can establish new relationships with them through our Saudi Arabia visit. So there are numbers. For each cargo, I suspect it will be different companies that are providing fuel to Paria, they will seek the best prices they can and this is how fuel trading goes.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the hon. Minister whether he can share with us from his knowledge, whether Heritage that exports crude, has any relationship with the companies outlined by your good self, Shell and Trafigura to refine our products via the exportation of our crude, and we have to purchase the same back from those companies, can the Minister clarify that?

Mr. President: That question does not arise Sen. Mark. Next question on the Order Paper, Sen. Lyder.

**Developing Regional Value Chains
(Status on)**

34. Sen. Damian Lyder asked the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry:

Given that the Ministry has undertaken a study on developing regional value chains for the manufacturing sector aimed at enhancing production sustainability and integration which was announced to be completed by August 2023, can the Minister provide a status report on this programme/initiative?

Mr. President: Acting Leader of, well, Minister of Public Administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, this study on regional value chains for the Trinidad and Tobago manufacturing sector commenced in February 2023 and comprised four deliverables as follows:

1. Deliverable one, work plan and inception reports. The inception report for initiation of the project was submitted in February 2023 and finalized with comments from the Ministry of Trade in March of 2023. Following this, face to face consultations were held over the three-day period May 31 to June 02, 2023, with stakeholders from selected manufacturing sectors in food, beverage, building construction, materials, furniture, printing and packaging, and industrial and household chemicals.
2. Deliverable two, diagnostic report on imports into manufacturing needs and output of CARICOM was completed.
3. Deliverable three, proposed framework for a map of the regional value chain. Deliverable three was submitted to the Ministry of Trade in August

of 2023, and following comments by the Ministry, a second round of virtual consultations were held over the period September 06 to 15, 2023.

2.00 p.m.

The revised deliverable three was submitted on September 23, 2023 and is currently being reviewed by the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

4. Deliverable four, regional value chain map and policy recommendations.
Deliverable four was also submitted on September 28, 2023, and discussions are being held with the consultant to finalize the reports.

Thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: Can the hon. Minister indicate that given that the Ministry stated that in a media release in the *Newsday* on the 5th of June, 2023, that the study would have been completed by August, 2023, can the Minister share with the Senate the reason for this delay and what is the new completion date of those last two deliverables?

Mr. President: Minister

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Mr. President. It was flagged that it was necessary to have a second round of consultations that would have pushed back the process somewhat. The final report as I indicated is in, that would be completed during the month of December and we plan to launch the initiative early in 2024.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder

Sen. Lyder: Can the hon. Minister indicate that, given that the idea of these regional value chains include the specialization of products with our regional neighbours, will this serve as a possible threat to SMEs in Trinidad and Tobago for certain industries? Does the Minister see that as a possible threat?

Mr. President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Mr. President, we do not anticipate that being a threat. What we are trying to do is strengthen our SMEs locally while we develop and grow our relationships with our Caribbean neighbours. So that what the initiative is proposing to do is replace the import of materials from outside of the region with input among the region, to strengthen the CSME initiative, while we develop the competence and ability of our local people to create.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: Could the hon. Minister tell us in the Senate here, if this also could potentially cause an effect on the level of protection we have for some of our manufacturers today on specific products?

Mr. President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: The majority of the protection that we have for our local manufacturers would be extra-regional and this initiative is intended as I indicated to benefit the region.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Grant Fund Facility for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

(Details of)

35. Sen. Damian Lyder asked the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry:

As regard the Ministry's Grant Fund Facility for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, can the Minister indicate the following:

- (i) how many proposals have been received and considered as part of this programme; and
- (ii) how many applications have been successful in receiving funds?

Mr. President: Minister of Public Administration.

The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Mr. President, as regards the Ministry's grant/fund policy—sorry. Under the grant/fund facility, eligible small and medium sized enterprises can access funding for 50 per cent up to a maximum of \$250,000.00 of the cost of new capital requirements/expenditure, excluding working capital and land and building cost including leasing. From November 2017 to September 2023, approximately 84 applications were received, of which 33 were approved; 23 were rejected due to their inability to meet the eligibility criteria governing the facility and seven are currently being processed and 21 are still pending, awaiting outstanding information for further assessment.

As at the 30th of September, 2023, 33 approved applicants have benefited from the facility with an accumulated disbursement of \$7,080,473.49. The funding has aided expansionary projects in the following sub-sectors: printing and publishing, one; cocoa processing, including the manufacture of chocolate, three; food and drink processing, including agro-processing products, 12; manufacturing of packaging materials, three; fish processing, one; manufacturing of textile, garments, footwear and headwear, three; manufacturing and construction materials, two; manufacturing of beauty and personal care products, two; manufacturing of chemical products including cleaning items, four; software designs and applications, one; and financial services, business process outsourcing, one. Thank you, Mr. President.

2.05 p.m.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. President. To the hon. Minister, can the Minister indicate what would have been the selection process in choosing those successful applicants who you indicated? I believe it was 33 approved. What would be the

selection process?

Mr. President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Mr. President. I do not have the full details of that but we have criteria for the selection. The size of the agency involved, how impactful we think the contribution of the grant funding will be, whether it is likely to achieve success in promoting export because that is the main focus. So those would be the main criteria that would be used. There are others that we could provide details on separately if need be.

Sen. Lyder: Thank you. Thank you.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder or Sen. Gopeesingh.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Thank you, Mr. President. Hon. Minister, would you be kind enough to give some degree of information as to the method of evaluation and monitoring of the success of these businesses that you have given the funding to? Is there a fixed period of monitoring and evaluation of whether they are becoming successful or not and what does the Ministry do in such cases?

Mr. President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: The Ministry maintains a very close relationship with its stakeholders. It does have a monitoring programme to ensure, one, that the funds that are disbursed are used in the manner contemplated and that there is a positive impact in respect of the use, both to determine whether any adjustment needs to be made to the programme and the selection process, and also to determine whether any intervention is required with the stakeholders.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Time frame?

Sen. The Hon. A. West: I do not have a time frame with me. Mr. President, if you would allow me to go back to Sen. Lyder's last question, the information that you requested is online under the Ministry's website.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. President. Could the hon. Minister indicate, given that the funding was meant for the eight eligible sectors—I heard that she mentioned some—would the Minister be able to provide in writing a breakdown of the funds by sector so that we can review how the money has been disbursed by sector?

Mr. President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Mr. President, if an appropriate request is made, I am sure the Ministry can easily provide that information.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: And, Mr. President, to the hon. Minister, can the Minister provide a list in writing of the companies that were successful for the purposes of transparency and accountability?

Mr. President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: That information was also readily available, Mr. President.

Sen. Lyder: Yes. Thank you.

Regulatory Framework for Cryptocurrencies (Measures to Address)

36. Sen. Damian Lyder asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

Given that the International Monetary Fund's assessment of Trinidad and Tobago's existing lack of regulatory framework for cryptocurrencies may be limiting the country's ability to develop alternate-currency business models, can the Minister indicate what policy measures, if any, are being taken to address this issue?

Mr. President: Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, I am always amazed at the ability of the Opposition to pick and choose what aspects of statements that may have been made by the IMF that they like and ones they do not like. So when the IMF says that we are doing well, the IMF is a PNM party group. When the IMF says something that they have a personal interest in, they are very interested. So this question I find quite astonishing that Sen. Lyder would want to know what we are doing about alternate currency business models in the context of cryptocurrency.

The IMF in fact has published a paper in February 2023—and I would urge the Senator to update his records—and it is a G20 Note on the Macroeconomic Implications of Crypto Assets, 2023. In that document, the IMF sounded a series of warnings under the theme that the adoption of:

“...unbacked crypto assets”—such as Bitcoin and—“stablecoins”—will have stark—“implications for macrofinancial stability”.

They went on to explain why, that:

“...the...adoption of crypto assets could threaten the effectiveness of monetary policy”—transmission and sovereignty.

“...crypto assets...without credible backing may pose financial stability risks due to their volatile prices.”

And where:

“Declaring a crypto asset legal tender may create fiscal risks”.

This will cause risks to public finances. In terms of external stability, the entire international monetary system can be put at risk by the adoption of crypto currency.

In terms of capital flow stability:

“Crypto assets drive higher gross foreign capital positions, and more

volatile capital flows.”

In terms of the structure of financial systems:

“...crypto assets with an open architecture...”—is extremely risky because anybody can contribute to these crypto assets.

They are:

“...prone to fraud and market integrity risks”— and it could destabilize the entire international banking sector.”

Cryptocurrency is also the currency of use of drug traffickers, money launderers and persons who operate on the dark web, and therefore I found this question astonishing, but there is more.

Let me just highlight some failures in the cryptocurrency sector. In May of 2022, TerraUSD, a large cryptocurrency exchange, collapsed, causing a loss to investors of US \$45 billion. In June of 2022, Three Arrows Capital was forced to be liquidated, causing a loss of US \$3 billion to investors. In November 2022, FTX trading, quite famous, collapsed, caused a loss to investors of up to US \$50 billion. Now, all of these things were either serious flaws in the algorithm or fraud as occurred with FTX trading. In November 2022 as well, BlockFi collapsed, causing losses of up to US \$10 billion to investors. Genesis collapsed in January 2023, causing a loss of up to US \$11 billion, again associated with fraud. And the latest, like this month, is Binance, which has a pending \$4 billion fine because it violated bank confidentiality provisions.

Now, TerraUSD is very interesting because it was an algorithmic stablecoin pegged to the US dollar; it declined rapidly. It caused bank run and wiped out over US \$400 billion in market capitalization. So you have a situation where the whole world knows that cryptocurrency is dangerous, the whole world knows that cryptocurrency is the preferred currency of criminals, and the whole world knows

that crypto assets are backed by nothing. Why on earth would a question come to me, as Minister of Finance, therefore as to whether I may be wishing to develop alternate currency business models? The answer is, we are not doing that. We are not getting involved in cryptocurrency. It is dangerous and as the custodians of the Treasury and the public purse, we are not putting the country's assets at risk.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: Mr. President, thank you. I thank the Minister for that very long-winded response that really did not answer the question, but it will force me to ask the next question. With all that being said, has the Government considered, or does the Government intend to bring legislation for alternative energy to the Parliament in the near future and when, given that you are not supporting it?

Mr. President: Minister—

Sen. Lyder: Sorry. Sorry. Cryptocurrency. Sorry.

Hon. C. Imbert: I know that I act as Minister of Energy and Energy Industries from time to time but I am not responsible for alternative energy. We are not supporting cryptocurrency full stop. Stop pushing it.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: So, Minister, say if you are bringing legislation to outlaw cryptocurrency in Trinidad and Tobago because people are trading in cryptocurrency currently?

Mr. President: Ministry of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, I am sure Sen. Lyder knows that cryptocurrency is not legal tender in Trinidad and Tobago. If Sen. Lyder and his associates wish to go on to international dark webs and trade in cryptocurrency, that is his business—

Sen. Lyder: Through TSTT—

Hon. C. Imbert:—but it is not legal tender in Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: You could do it through TSTT.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder, there is a process. If you wish to ask another supplemental, you are now invited to do so. Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: Thank you, Mr. President. Can the hon. Minister tell us, if we wish to do it, can we do it through TSTT?

Mr. President: That question does not arise, Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: Yeah. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. President: That is it?

Dragon Gas Field in Venezuela (Development of)

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, in accordance with Standing Order 39(2), I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas the United States Government has granted a licence allowing Trinidad and Tobago to develop the Dragon Gas Field in Venezuela;

And whereas it will cost some US\$100M to build a 17-kilometre pipeline from the Dragon Gas Field in Venezuelan waters to the Hibiscus Platform in Trinidad and Tobago waters;

And whereas there are many other issues that remain outstanding in order to bring gas from the Dragon Gas Field to this country's shores;

Be it resolved that the Senate call on the Government to provide a detailed account of its approach to this project involving entities such as Shell, the National Gas Company, Venezuela and the US Government;

And be it further resolved that the Government provide this Senate with quarterly reports on this critically significant project.

Mr. President, the Motion that we are about to debate is of grave and profound historical significance, not only for our country and its immediate interests but our very future. It also holds significant implications for political stability and peace in our region. Mr. President, there are some major signpost markers, even milestones that we would need to pay attention to during this debate in this honourable Senate today. Mr. President, 48 hours from today, on Thursday November30, 2023, the United States Government has stated publicly, through a statement issued by the Assistant Secretary of State, that the US Government will take concrete measures to reinstate all sanctions against Venezuela if it fails to hold free and fair elections by the end of November30, 2023.

2.20 p.m.

Another key marker that we have to debate and look at, Mr. President, is a public referendum scheduled to take place on Sunday 3rd December, 2023, in which the people are being asked in Venezuela to vote in favour of annexing two-thirds of Guyana and to make that region, called the Essequibo region, the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth Venezuelan State. Mr. President, these are matters that we need to explore because they do have implications for what the essence of this Motion is all about, that is, the Dragon gas project. And in this debate, we look forward to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries providing clarity for the people of Trinidad and Tobago on this entire issue of the Dragon gas field.

Now, the Motion before us seeks to elucidate matters pertinent to the development of the Dragon gas field, which is totally in Venezuelan waters and which has been a major pillar of the energy policy of the current administration since 2016. It is no secret that our energy sector is in serious trouble and faces serious challenges. Our energy sector is in crisis, and almost in a collapsed mode and that has come about, Mr. President, by the policies that have been pursued over the past eight years. All the data shows that production of natural gas has collapsed resulting in plant closure, loss of jobs and the contracting of the sector because in looking at the Dragon gas arrangement it has to be seen, Mr. President, against the background of falling natural gas production in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Central Statistical Office, through labour market data, has shown that in the third quarter of 2015, there were some 22,500 persons with jobs in the energy sector but by the end of the second quarter of 2023 that figure had collapsed to some 8,200. Mr. President, something is fundamentally wrong when our leading economic sector loses some 64 per cent of jobs in the short space of eight years and this is where, Mr. President, we have to go to the natural gas crisis.

Natural gas production has collapsed to around 2.5 to 2.6 billion cubic feet per day and from all indications will likely fall even further in 2024 and beyond. This is all manmade. The companies involved in gas activity have not been properly incentivized by the administration to drill and to explore and here is the reality as it relates to this position. Drilling has collapsed by 63 per cent when compared 2015 to 2022 and in 2023 we will see the same downward trend. Oil production is now heading to under 55,000 barrels per day, the lowest since the early 1940s.

Mr. President, in a few days' time, we will be marking on the 30th of November, the fifth anniversary of the worst economic decision in the history of the Caribbean, the closure of the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery. Even in today's *Express* experts are now saying that that was a fundamental error and mistake by the Government and they are yet to explain to the population properly its decision. Our LNG industry is a mere shadow of its former glory. From four trains, we are now down to three and these three are all limping. LNG production is down by 37 per cent in 2022 compared to 2015, Mr. President. It is in the face of this mess, which the Government has created, that the Government's plan has been to turn to Venezuela for relief and therefore since 2016 they have been pursuing the Dragon gas deal. That is their economic strategy and policy since 2016. They claim that but for the sanctions of the United States Government, that Dragon gas would have been here already.

In January of 2023, the United States Government issued a licence that allowed for this country, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela to do business in respect to trade in natural gas. This licence did not allow for payment to Venezuela in cash. In October of 2023, the United States Government removed the last obstacle to the Dragon deal and allowed for cash payments. Up to this time, the people of Trinidad and Tobago are yet to see these licences.

2.30 p.m.

What we do know, Mr. President, is that the licence has been extended to October 31st, 2025. The Dragon deal was described in a previous budget statement as one of the "game changers of this PNM administration", others included, "the Sandal's Project", and of course, "the La Brea Dry Dock". Mr. President, we are waiting for the game to change.

It has been years that this Government, led by the hon Prime Minister, and his Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, have been pursuing this Dragon deal. While we admit that attempts to get natural gas to this country are welcome, we cannot turn a blind eye to the risk associated with same. So, I want to say that we recognize, Mr. President, that there is a gas short fall in Trinidad and Tobago. We know that the maximum processing capacity is about 4.2 billion cubic feet, today we are just about 2.5, 2.6 and we are falling. Therefore, we would be failing in our duty as the alternative Government, if we did not flag some of these risks associated with this Dragon gas deal.

The hon Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, is a frequent visitor to Caracas. We have read and we have heard, and we have seen press conferences held by the Minister, on this whole Dragon gas matter. The Minister has purportedly signed a number of the agreements with Venezuelan authorities, around this Dragon deal. Ask the Prime Minister. Just last week, the hon Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, was in Venezuela, and we understand that he had with him, the President or the CEO of the Energy Chamber.

Mr. President, no one knows, not the President of this Senate, as far as I am aware, not any Member of the Senate, as far as I know, and I am aware rather, nor the citizens, what commitments the hon Minister has made on behalf of the people Trinidad and Tobago, whom the Minister claims he is negotiating on behalf.

2.35 p.m.

Mr. President, people in this country, and very influential people, tend to applaud every time the Minister signs something in Venezuela, but no one can say what they are applauding for because no one has seen what the Minister has signed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: And all the Minister tells us over and over, Mr. President, he is negotiating on behalf of Trinidad and Tobago and its people. I will come to this question about policy making and negotiating because there is a distinction between policy making and negotiating, and we need to clear the air on that. So, there are some questions we would like the hon. Minister to address. When the Minister rises to speak in this debate we would like the Minister to tell Trinidad and Tobago and this Senate, what agreements have the Minister signed that has bind or bounded Trinidad and Tobago? Give us a detail account of every agreement that the Minister has signed on behalf of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Let them tell us. What has the hon. Minister committed Trinidad and Tobago to? We do not know because everything is done in secrecy, and they use the fig leaf of commercial confidentiality to hide and to deny the people accountability and transparency. So we want the Minister to indicate these things when he gets up. We do not know what the Minister is doing, what he is signing. I want to remind the hon. Minister, there was a chap in the United Kingdom called King Charles I, who felt he was the law and the law was him. In fact he came up with a famous statement, “Rex is Lex”. So whatever he wants to do, he can do, Mr. President. But that same King Charles had his head removed. You have to be accountable to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: You cannot be taking decisions without the people knowing. How will Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. President, benefit from this Dragon gas deal? Nobody has told us. All we know the Minister like a frequent flier up and down

Venezuela and at no time he shares with Trinidad and Tobago how we stand to benefit from this Dragon deal. How? How? You know we are getting information more from Curtis Williams when he is producing pieces in Reuters, we are getting it from him. We are getting it from oil news, and I will quote some of the things we are being told, not from our Minister. We would like to know, and the Minister must tell us, when you get gas here will you be collecting taxes and royalties? No. Is the President of Venezuela and the people of Venezuela who will be collecting taxes and royalties? Because the Dragon gas is in Venezuelan waters not in Trinidad and Tobago waters.

So, Mr. President, will the Dragon gas be landing at a—in other words, Mr. President, the Minister must tell us what is the pricing mechanism he is working out? Is the pricing mechanism that is being worked out for us to purchase gas at Point Lisas, when this thing comes to pass, would that price be a competitive price that would make sense for these plants to live, or would they be overly expensive? What would be the role of the Nation Gas Company and Shell? The Minister needs to give the country information on these matters. We do not have any information. Reuters has reported that Venezuela is demanding a signature bonus of US \$65 million, Mr. President. If that is so, when the Minister rises he must tell Trinidad and Tobago who will foot that US \$65 million? Would it be NGC? And if that is going to be NGC's stake then what is NGC going to be exposed to? What would be NGC's exposure?

Mr. President, we would like the Minister to indicate whether Venezuela has awarded a licence to Shell to develop the Dragon field. If not, when can this award be expected? We do not know. We are in the dark. Mr. President, when can we expect this natural gas to arrive in Trinidad and Tobago? The Minister needs to

tell Trinidad and Tobago that, the Parliament. We are being told in 2026, we are being told in 2027, we are being told in 2028. When will the gas from the Dragon gas field of 4.2 trillion cubic feet arrive in Trinidad and Tobago? We are reading that 300millioncubic feet of gas will go to the Point Fortin Atlantic LNG plant when that gas begins to pump, and only 50 million cubic feet will go to Point Lisas. That is what we are being told. Is that true? Is that not true? We do not have answers and that is why we are asking, Mr. President, raising these questions.

When can we expect, Mr. President, the Government to tell this country that they are risk associated with putting all our eggs in one basket? We need to get from the Government, Mr. President, what is the state of play with the Loran-Manatee field? We control 27.3 per cent, approximately 2.7 trillion cubic feet of gas, which is our gas, which is not under sanction, which the Government of Venezuela has told us to go ahead and send to Trinidad. What is the state of play with our 2.7 trillion cubic feet of gas in the Loran-Manatee field, and why has that not been given priority over the Dragon gas? That is what people are asking and they want some clarification from the Minister, Mr. President. So come and tell us.

And, Mr. President, I know the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, he is in charge. He is large and he is in charge. But, Mr. President, given the veneer of competence does not mean that you are competent. I do not know of our Minister of Energy and Energy Industries having any training, any background, his credentials do not convince me that the Minister knows what is doing, and who will pay the price? It will be us. But the Minister appears, and this is why I am asking the Minister to come clean with us. What is the role of the Minister in these negotiations involving commercial matters of natural gas price? Why is the

Minister getting involved in matters of natural gas price? Does the Minister have the capabilities, the competences to deal with natural gas prices? What is the role of the technical people? Are they involved? Is his Ministry involved, or is he a lone wolf?

I do not know, we are asking questions. What about the term sheets, Mr. President? Who is negotiating that? Is it the Minister? Every time I see a picture on Dragon gas, I only see the Minister. The Minister is policymaker, the Minister is negotiator, the Minister is leader. So is the Minister involved in negotiating natural gas prices? Term sheets, licences, contracts? What is the locus standi of the Minister in these negotiations? People are asking questions, and that is why I have brought this Motion.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: This Private Member's Motion is to get answers from the Minister since they are not talking to the people. They are more flying than they are talking. Mr. President, is the hon. Minister negotiating on behalf of the National Gas Company? The Minister needs to tell us this. But, Mr. President, if that is so then the Minister is in clear violation of the very cornerstone of company law which gives the board of the National Gas Company and its directors primacy over, and ultimate responsibility, for the affairs of that company, and not a Minister. How can a Minister be negotiating on behalf of a company when the Minister has no power over the company?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: It is unlawful, it is illegal under the Companies Act for a politician to insert himself and begin negotiating on behalf of a company. That is the role of the board of directors. Where are they? We are not seeing them. All

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we are seeing is the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, he is in our face day and night, night and day.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: These are questions, Mr. President, that people are asking. Mr. President, is the hon. Minister negotiating on behalf of Shell?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: These are questions that people are asking and they want clarification.

2.50 p.m.

What is the locus standi of the Minister? I ask, is he negotiating on behalf on NGC? He cannot. He does not have the locus standi to do so. So, the next question I am asking on behalf of the United National Congress and the people of Trinidad and Tobago is, whether the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is negotiating on behalf of Shell? If so, is he acting as an agent of Shell?

If this hon. Minister, who is charged with the responsibility, with the regulation of petroleum operations in Trinidad and Tobago under the Petroleum Act, the question here, how can he be stepping into the shoes of Shell and NGC? How can he be the regulator, the negotiator, the policymaker, all in one? That cannot be. Let us be real. There is a subversion and a contamination of the whole process that is taking place and the question that people are asking, what is behind it? What is in it for these people who purportedly are negotiating on behalf of the people and they cannot?

Mr. President, the reason why I tell you I have some challenges with my hon. Minister, I say “my Minister” because he is the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. But the question here is that he, the hon. Minister, that is, because he is

very thin-skinned, and I use that word, advisedly—

Mr. President: Senator—

Sen. W. Mark: All right, I withdraw that, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Senator just, just—

Sen. W. Mark: All right, thank you, thank you.

Mr. President: Just be careful.

Sen. W. Mark: Okay, thank you. Mr. President, let me go on. Mr. President, the United National Congress, the official Opposition and the alternative government, is extremely concerned, and we would like the Minister to clear the air on this matter. In a few days from today, Venezuela will be holding a national referendum on the matter of the Essequibo. What Venezuela will do after December the 3rd is anyone's guess, but we cannot rule out any possibility. How does Venezuela's claim over the Essequibo region off Guyana impact on the dragon deal?

Sen. Mitchell: Mr. President, please, 46(1), please. There is nothing in this Motion that deals with Essequibo.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark, as much as you are making or about to make a connection to this with that matter that you just raised, understand that whatever happens there has nothing to do with this. So you have asked your question, that is where your connection came, leave it at that. Do not go any further.

Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President, I raised two points earlier in my contribution and I want to repeat them, because it may have missed you. There are some key markers and benchmarks that you and I cannot escape from paying attention to.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: And we cannot become ostriches and hide our heads in the

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sand. We have to face reality. And the reality that we are facing today is this, Mr. President. I have indicated to you earlier, and I will quote for you the article, just for the record.

Mr. President, there is an article in a document called "*OilNOW*". It is dated November 18th, 2023, and the headline is:

““All”—A-L-L—“U.S. sanctions ‘are on the table’ if Venezuela reneges on agreement for free and fair elections””

This is what is in a news article. And I want to tell you—

Mr. President: Senator you have five more minutes.

Sen. W. Mark: I want to tell you in this news article that:

“Brian Nichols, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, declared that all options are under consideration, including the annulment of licenses allowing the export of Venezuelan oil and gas.”

And he is quoted as saying:

“If they do not fulfill the agreed-upon steps, we will revoke the licenses we have issued”—including oil and gas licences.

Mr. President, this is frightening. This is not coming from you, you know, this is not coming from me, this is coming from the United States. And they say if by Thursday midnight the President of Venezuela does not guarantee the United States and the Opposition forces in Venezuela, the holding of free and fair elections they are going to re-invoke every sanction that they have recently removed, including the Dragon gas deal license. That OFAC licence will be revoked.

So we have to understand that the matter involving free and fair elections in Venezuela is critical for our future. We have to understand that if Venezuela

annexes Guyana that will impact on the Dragon gas deal.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: And that is why, Mr. President, this is a very serious matter and the Government must take it seriously. We are facing a national tragedy if we are not careful and the Government must come clean on these matters and be very frank and open with the people. Let the people know what you are about and what this thing is about.

So, I know you told me a short while ago that my time is limited. Mr. President, I sought to ask this honourable House to do the following, to assist in achieving the following. We need clarity, so that is why we have asked the Minister to give this honourable Senate the Government's position in its approach to this Dragon gas deal and the entities that are involved, PDVSA in Venezuela, Shell, the National Gas Company and the relationship between the United States Government, Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago on this matter.

And the second thing that we have asked for in this particular matter, we have asked, Mr. President, that the Government provide this Senate with a quarterly report on this critically significant project. The Government cannot be engaging in secret negotiations without our knowledge. We are not asking to give us everything you know, but the Government has enough knowledge to know it has a responsibility to hold up the light so people can see. Let us light up the place and let us bring transparency to the process. And we are calling on the Government to engage in transparency—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark:—to engage in accountability, to be more open with the citizens. Let us know, Mr. President, what are our opinions.

In closing I want to remind the Government of the alligator story. You remember the alligator story, Mr. President, when we were at primary school? The monkey wanted to cross the river and the alligator say, “Come on my back, ah go take you across”. And whilst they were going across the alligator sunk into the water. Monkey drowned but in drowning the alligator swallowed the monkey. We have to be careful that we are not swallowed up and we do not become the monkey seeking a ride on somebody else’s back. We must be able to stand on our own two feet and defend our sovereignty and people’s independence and not be beholden to anyone. Mr. President, I beg to move. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Senator.

Sen. John: Mr. President, I beg to second the Motion and reserve my right to speak at a later stage.

Question proposed.

Mr. President: Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Mr. President. Mr. President, I can start my contribution here today by giving an assurance, without any fear of contradiction whatsoever, as not the only past actions will show as at this stage, but also in the future history will show that this Government has never done anything to jeopardize the energy sector in Trinidad and Tobago that it painstakingly began building many, many decades ago.

Mr. President, I thank you for the opportunity and the Members of this Senate for the opportunity to spend a few moments here today providing some

necessary details. I think the best way to start is by just putting things into context so that we can understand exactly what it is we are dealing with. First of all, we in Trinidad and Tobago have a very long history in the hydrocarbon sector. We have been exploiting, that is, exploring and producing oil on a commercial basis for well over one century.

Gas, natural gas. Natural gas, we began using for power generation, first, in 1953, and by the end of the 1950s, Mr. President, it was being used in the production of cement and ammonia. In 1975 the National Gas Company that we have heard referred to a few times today was incorporated on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and thankfully today under good stewardship and leadership it continues to do its job on behalf of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

So, Mr. President, in a nutshell, for over five decades we have developed a very sophisticated natural gas sector. That natural gas sector, meaning all of the natural gas that is currently produced in Trinidad and Tobago and for the last few decades goes into one of three places. It either goes into the production of liquefied natural gas, LNG, at Atlantic LNG, it goes into the production power generation, and we are one of the only countries, well the only country in the whole CARICOM region that 99.9 per cent of our electricity is generated by natural gas and then it goes into the production of what we called PETCHEM, Petroleum Chemicals in Trinidad, ammonia, methanol, urea, UAN.

Trinidad and Tobago, Senators, is globally recognized, globally recognized, for its well-developed gas-based industry and sector. I am quite proud as a citizen from my experience in the last eight years, the number of countries that turn to Trinidad and Tobago for guidance, and for us to express our experiences to them, including within recent times, a number of our African sisters and brothers who

come here on study tours of Trinidad as they begin to find and, hopefully for them, exploit their hydrocarbon resources. They come to us to ask, how was it built, how do you negotiate, what are the pitfalls to look out for?

3.05 p.m.

Mr. President, it was in 1979 that the Government took a decision to capture and monetize flared offshore gas from the Teak, Samaan and Poui Field, and this is the birth of what has become and developed into this globally recognized gas-based industry. Power generation and growth and development of the PETCHEM sector really took place and spurned from the 1980s with ammonia, methanol, urea and steel production.

The gas value chain that we discussed that, Mr. President, through you, we in the population need to understand is you start by the extraction of gas from the well. Those are the molecules of gas. That is done in Trinidad and Tobago by a number of multinational upstream players. Shell is one, BP is another. Two of the largest in the world. We have smaller nimble but well-recognized companies like EOG, the giant from Australia, Woodside, and I would like to say that we need to protect our relationships with these multinationals because we never—unlike Malaysia who developed PETRONAS—developed that ability decades ago to do the exploration and production offshore of gas in these fields that we have had.

So we must protect very, very carefully the relationships we have with these companies as they continue to invest globally. We are always competing globally for their capital to be invested in Trinidad and Tobago. And they protect and they very jealously guard their brands and their brand protection. However, I am also proud to state that this Government's record is that we do not stand in fear or apprehension, but only respect of these companies. In fact, in 2018, the record

reflects we took them on. We said, we need fairer gas prices, fairer gas deals; we do not think we are getting our fair share; there is enough for everybody to get returns, for us for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and for them and their shareholders. And we have successfully renegotiated over the last five years much better terms and conditions for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is a fact and something I am very proud of.

So this is the context within which we are operating. The point is natural gas is the feedstock for this gas sector that we must do everything we can to protect, but always to ensure we get the best returns for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And that is something that we believe very strongly in and on in this side of the Government for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Our energy sector accounts for over 35 per cent of the GDP, the gross domestic product of Trinidad and Tobago, and over 80 per cent of our country's exports, that LNG, that ammonia, that methanol. In fact, as at 2021, which is the year that they last had the global statistics, Trinidad and Tobago is the second largest exporter of methanol in the world only behind Saudi Arabia, and the second largest exporter of ammonia in the world only behind Russia—2021—and the feedstock for both of those products are natural gas. As I said, we have been exploiting our natural resources for well over a century. We are a small province. We do not have the expanse of a Saudi Arabia, even of a Venezuela, a United States, a Canada. So within our boundaries when you have been exploiting your resources for over 100 years they are going to decline.

It is critical that we the citizens do everything we possibly can to protect Trinidad and Tobago's reputation and creditability at every step in the way, and that is something I personally take very, very seriously and we will jealously

protect it and guard it. And in the energy sector, this is what you trade in literally at times, a person's creditability and a person's reputation, meaning the country's reputation and its creditability to uphold sanity of contracts, to uphold what takes place in a very competitive sector. Because you see, this is not like the grocery where it is one grocery competing with another on the corner. We are in this global energy sector, that you have other countries competing with Trinidad and Tobago to attract the resources of these multinationals, to attract their capital. So you are constantly competing with other countries as to whether you can bring the capital to Trinidad and Tobago, or whether it goes elsewhere in Qatar, in Australia, in Malaysia, and elsewhere, and the component of confidentiality.

No matter how we try to water it down is a reality of these contracts. And just to give a brief explanation as I am sure all of the Senators understand, but for those, Mr. President, who may be listening, why confidentiality is critical in this competitive environment is—and we can just use our industrial estate here, in Point Lisas where you have different producers, for example, of ammonia—if Plant A that is owned by A, and plant B that is owned by B go to NGC as they do—our National Gas Company—for gas, you will negotiate different prices with them. There are different factors that you take into consideration. One plant may get a better price than another. And if these things are now made open and you breach the confidentiality, it will lead to disarray. I can say here without fear of contradiction because I have been the one tasked with the very difficult task at times of going to Venezuela and maintaining the relationships. So all those trips that we heard about and never for me personally, but it is for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

We can tell you in the height of sanctions, the worse of the sanctions against

Venezuela, when I had gone there and you are driving through the streets and you are seeing the actions taking place on the streets, the people lining up, because of the difficulties put on the people of Venezuela by sanctions it was not a good feeling. It was not a good experience, but it was an experience, and I can tell you now that sanctions that have opened up. Within recent times, United States, the Treasury Department, have issued what you call a general OFAC license. It does not affect us in Trinidad and Tobago as I will come to in a short while. So when you heard the Opposition and the Opposition agents recently come out and say, Trinidad's license will expire in April of next year, and as I just heard the previous speaker, Sen. Mark, talk about doom and gloom if certain things do not happen that our OFAC license will be affected, that is simply not true.

But now that the United States has issued a general licence that expires in April of next year, as compared to ours that I will get into in a short period, when I go to Venezuela over the last few months, I will say since the beginning—since the end of the first quarter of this year, we are no longer the single game in town. You come out of the negotiation room, for example, at PDVSA and you see global energy players—I would not call their names here, but global multinational energy players waiting to enter into the same room to negotiate deals, and that is the reason why this is so critical to be protected, the confidentiality. Because the deal that we will get from Venezuela will differ to the deal that a European company will get. And I can tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago here, without fear of contradiction once again, but this deal that is not yet across the line but we are very, very close, has only happened as a result of the management by this Government of its relationships, for example, with the United States and of its relationship with the Government of Venezuela. And that is why we were the first

after Chevron to be granted a license, an OFAC license by the United States. That is a fact. No amount of screaming can change that. And Chevron's initial licence was for three months.

Trinidad and Tobago's initial licence—and I will get to it—the OFAC licence, was for 20 years which is the maximum with the US Treasury Department through the OFAC Department grants. That says a lot and that only came about, as I will get into some level of detail, as a result of this Government's careful strategic planning and implementation of the political conversations and the other conversations we had with the broadest spectrum of the decision-makers in the United States, starting from the President, President Biden, Vice-President Harris, come down as I will give some level of detail. So Senators, respectfully, we are not trying to hide anything. At every single stage that the Government can provide information, the record shows that we have.

A certain Senator told me a short while ago that they read a speech that actually took 14 hours to write that was delivered in Miami this year and it was very lengthy. It took almost two hours to deliver, but it is a chronicle of what has taken place in the energy sector in a great level of detail from 2015 to now. At every time we can provide information we engage the population, in this instance, from the highest level, the Prime Minister, to myself as the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, and I will give the examples. It is very important; we heard a lot about gas production. So I have said that gas is the feedstock of this industry. If that disappears, the landscape and our lifestyles in Trinidad and Tobago will be drastically changed. We have become accustomed to living on a hydrocarbon-based economy and the Government from day one, in 2015 to now, has worked hard for no less a level than the highest level, the Office of the Prime Minister, to

ensure that this future is maintained. Not to say—sorry.

Sen. Vieira SC: Sorry to interrupt you, Minister. Just for my own edification, I think I would like to draw your attention on some of these, what I say are the key issues coming out of this Motion and what Sen. Mark has said. I do not see much traction about the closure of Heritage. That is really not part of the debate Motion. I do not see anybody is going to argue about the need for confidentiality and the need to maintain sensitive information whilst negotiations are ongoing. However, I think Sen. Mark has raised issues. The US has granted a licence, is that licence imperiled if Venezuela invades the Essequibo region, or it fails to have the general elections as was agreed. I think that is a matter we need to hear.

Secondly, what is your role as lead negotiator on behalf of Trinidad and Tobago, and whether or not that extends to being able to speak on behalf of companies which are not part of the State but are companies in their own right and separate? So like National Gas Company—

Hon. S. Young: Sen. Vieira, with the greatest of respect, those are issues that will be addressed and I will certainly address them.

Sen. Vieira SC: Thank you, Sir.

Hon. S. Young: Thanks a lot. Thank you and thanks for the guidance as to where your thought pattern is. So Trinidad and Tobago, we have been exploiting our resources for over 100 years including the use and commercialization of gas for the past five decades. Let us put it in context. Our gas production in 2006 was 3.8 bcf, billion cubic feet, a day. In 2007—2008, it went up to 4.086 bcf. In 2009, 4.2 bcf. In 2010 it was the highest level of gas production Trinidad and Tobago has ever had at 4.3 bcf. A point that needs to be appreciated and I am certain it is appreciated by those in the Senate and also the population, is when you negotiate a

gas contract, a gas sales contract, a production sharing contract or an E&P license, it does not happen today. The production does not happen today.

So you have to constantly be working on where will future production come from and that does not depend on incentives provided by a government which directly affect revenues. So in other words, if you fail to negotiate gas sales contracts, you fail to negotiate for future drilling, et cetera, and you go through a period where that does not take place or it is not set up for the future, there will be additional declines in addition to natural declines. So in 2010, we are at 4.3, the decline began immediately. In 2011—2013, we dropped to 4.1. That is 200 million scuffs of gas a day dropped off. That is going to affect plants. That started in 2011. In 2014, it dropped to 4 bcf. In 2015, 3.8; the decline was going on and nothing was being done to arrest that decline. The decline could not immediately be stopped because, of course, if nothing is done there is nothing coming down, no pun intended, through the pipeline. So I put us in that gas context.

3.20 p.m.

So we are now faced with a situation where, what can you do in the short-term to get additional gas when you are a mature province. And immediately upon coming into government and realizing that we had been hoodwinked, because we are being told that it was maintenance when this decline began in 2011, and realizing it was not maintenance but it was actually a set decline and a trajectory that would continue going downwards, the Government began to look around and decide what needed to be done. And the answer is literally next door. Venezuela sits on the largest oil reserves in the world and they have significant proven gas reserves. So with the Dragon field, you do not need to go and do exploration, you do not need to go and test, you do not need to go and see where you can find the

gas. We literally know where that is and you will see how critical that then becomes.

So in 2015—late 2015, in 2016, the hon. Prime Minister, I was part of it, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries at the time saw the need to begin planning for the future, if we are going to continue having a future in Trinidad and Tobago, and we began planning with respect to Loran-Manatee, which is a 10 tcf field, as well as Dragon, which is what we call a cross-boarder gas. It has never been done in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, and we focused effort not only on Dragon.

I heard Sen. Mark ask about—tell us about Loran-Manatee. The population would be aware because it is there, we have said it many, many times, we are pursuing Manatee. The irony of that is if you go today and you do a quick search, you will see just today McDermott has announced to the world that they have gotten the contract from Shell to build the infrastructure—construct the infrastructure for the gas from Manatee. That is a direct result of the work we have done. I said two years ago, when we completed the negotiations of a new PSC, production sharing contract, with Shell from Manatee, it was going to be done then. I said before then, the Prime Minister said before then. We had negotiated with President Maduro to be permitted to deunitize Loran-Manatee when it came under sanction. So the Venezuelans agreed, “Go ahead and pursue Manatee without the Loran side.” That too was remarkable political negotiation and an achievement for Trinidad and Tobago.

So today, you have one of the largest companies in the world, McDermott, saying they have been granted the contract, they have been awarded the contract by Shell and we are proceeding with Manatee, and I expect in a very short time frame

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we will hear about FID from Shell for Manatee. So let us not pretend that that work has not gone on because it has and that Manatee gas will come.

Loran, a few weeks ago, as I will mention in a while, when I signed that contract on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago at the end of September in front of President Maduro with the Minister of Energy, I said at the time as much as I could say—because every single one of these contracts contains confidentiality clauses, especially on pricing. I said at that stage, “This is a more than Dragon.” So we have already began to look at the Loran side. And for Venezuela, it is the first time that there are offshore gas—looking to export offshore gas in this type of arrangement. So again, you are doing things in that context.

This OFAC licence that this Motion is about, when the United States put sanctions, the only people who can give permission for you to operate without you attracting sanctions—and the truth is, there are two categories of sanctions. There is the first level and the second level—secondary. It is the Americans and American citizens, American companies who attract the sanctions at the first level. We are at the second level, so we do not easily attract those but it is a huge risk and no one will do business whilst that is taking place.

I hear a lot of talk about the amount of trips that are made to the United States and to Venezuela. It is for a singular purpose. The only purpose of those trips is that we were always advocating on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago for a future for Trinidad and Tobago. And thankfully, it has met with a great measure of success. You will recall the Prime Minister in one of his transparent press conferences not too long ago saying that it is as though you are pushing a boulder up a hill.

3.25 p.m.

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Fortunately, a few days later—a few weeks later, the end of September, we got the agreement from Venezuela. You would recall, and I am reminding the population, that every step of the way, as we make progress—and I will give a quick history here—those on the other side tried to undermine it, they tried to pull it down, they ridiculed it.

In 2016, we began in earnest pursuing Dragon. The first thing we did, as you do in these arrangements, is sign a government-to-government agreement. We signed one with the Government of Venezuela. For the first time, they were prepared to export gas out of the Dragon field. We then spent time negotiating.

And let me answer Sen. Vieira's concern which is a legitimate one. I do not act on behalf of NGC, I do not act on behalf of Shell. I am an elected representative of the people of Trinidad and Tobago for a constituency and that is who I am acting on behalf of, the Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young: At no point in time do I have the authority to negotiate on behalf of NGC or Shell and nor would I dare do so. I am there to provide guidance. I am there because I am the Government representative who negotiates with the governments. So when, as I will tell you in a short while, I made eight trips to the United States last year, several of them with the Prime Minister, it was pursuing this business. So when I sit in the Department of State or the Department of Energy or the Department of Agriculture, which was part of our strategy, recognizing that we are a huge producer of ammonia that is needed in the world post the Russia-Ukraine crisis and war, that is the strategy we are implementing on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This is not vaille-que-vaille, this is not wake up in the morning, and we pursued that. And I am sitting as a

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representative of the Government, a representative of you, the people, saying Trinidad and Tobago has something the rest of the world does not have, and I said it on international TV as well. At the time, people did not understand.

Trinidad and Tobago has immediate capacity to produce LNG, ammonia, urea, UAN, which are all fertilizers based on and necessary, and methanol, and we are next to proven reserves 17 kilometres of pipeline away in Venezuela and that is what picked up traction. So when Europe and other countries need LNG and ammonia, we have an immediate solution, not today for today, but we will fill a big global void in the need for LNG, ammonia, urea, UAN if we get access to proven reserves of gas that is 17 kilometres of pipeline that can be done in a very short time frame in the scheme of things.

So you will recall when I went on CNN International with Richard Quest, that was the message. At the time, it was not understood but it was part of the strategy and it was understood where it needed to be because we ended up with an OFAC licence that no one else has and that is part of the delivery from the very careful strategy for Trinidad and Tobago.

You will recall in 2016, we negotiated that first memorandum of understanding. Very quickly, in 2018, we had a commercial term sheet. We had agreed with Venezuela the price of gas, the allocation of gas, and that gas was set to come to Trinidad and Tobago by 2020. The next thing that happened, unfortunately in the world of geopolitics, as small as we are, we are caught between Venezuela and the United States, sanctions came under a certain US administration that shut that down, otherwise the gas would have been here in 2020 and we would be having a completely different discussion.

Fortunately, we did not stop there, we then negotiated. Well, let us deal with

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Manatee on our side. We have been pursuing deepwater gas with Woodside and formerly, BHP, and we continued, but we did not give up hope on Dragon. I remember the headlines: Dragon cannot dance, making mockery. I remember in the middle of sanctions when a sovereign government—sorry, this Government recognized, along with the rest of CARICOM based on the UN Charter, that there was one President in Venezuela. The UN General-Secretary, after a visit from CARICOM leaders Dr. Rowley, Prime Minister Mottley and the Prime Minister then of St. Kitts and Nevis who went to the UN when they saw what was happening between Venezuela and the United States, and went to the UN General-Secretary, the UN said they recognized one leader in Venezuela and it was not President Guaidó.

Today, history has proved us correct by sticking to principles and that is the UN principles of non-intervention, non-interference. There is no President Guaidó. We stuck with those principles that come from the UN but we could not pursue the deal because the operators, Shell, would go nowhere near it because of fear of sanctions. We did not give up. We very quietly came up with a strategy that we implemented as soon as possible, a change of administration in the United States, all of the time maintaining our relationship with Venezuela.

When we were in the middle of COVID and our borders were closed and the Vice President of Venezuela, who remains the Vice President today, Delcy Rodríguez, wrote to us diplomatically and said, “I would like to come to Trinidad and Tobago,” and I as the Minister of National Security, on the advice of the Prime Minister, allowed the Vice President of Venezuela to come Trinidad and Tobago. The Opposition led the charge on behalf of President Guaidó, who they do not know where he is today, to say that the Prime Minister—they wrote to the United

States Government that Prime Minister Keith Rowley and Stuart Young should be sanctioned. That is the behaviour of the Opposition, to undermine what is being done for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We pressed on.

In 2022, we made our way very quietly. I started going to Washington, finding the right lawyers. How can we get a waiver from sanctions so we can pursue Dragon? Because we know what is coming down the road and there is this need for this feedstock of natural gas. The Prime Minister made trips, along with myself accompanying him, to Washington, D.C. We met with people on both sides of the House. We met with the most vociferous advocates against Venezuela in the Senate who have been in the headlines in the news within recent times. We met with Republicans, we met with Democrats. We met with members of the Department of the Treasury, the Department of State, Department of Energy, Agriculture, a whole variety. You have heard the Prime Minister say a few days ago, he gave five speeches in one day, it is true, to advocate that they must allow Trinidad and Tobago as a sovereign and as a friend of the United States to pursue this natural gas, proven reserves into our existing capacity. It culminated in June of last year at the Summit of the Americas meeting with President Biden and Vice President Harris. They listened and so we began furthering it.

In January of this year, we were the first country—and we are not the only ones who want to pursue the Venezuelan resources along with them—but we were the first to get a licence in January of this year. What was the attitude of those on the other side and the Opposition unfortunately? After a short while of silence and being in shock that we now had authority to go ahead as a result of this OFAC waiver, “Oh, yuh cyah pay for the gas in cash so Maduro would not accept it.”

I can tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago here today, through you, Mr. President, in 2018/2019, I visited Venezuela on the instructions of the Prime Minister on a number of times. In 2022, the majority of the visits were to the United States but still made four visits to Venezuela, and that is to maintain the relationships to make sure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela benefit down the road. For this year, 2023, I have made a total of 10 trips to Venezuela and at the start in January, when we got the OFAC licence, the cry of the Opposition was “Oh, it would not happen because yuh cyah pay in cash.” Again, silence.

We worked quietly, we continued our conversations with Venezuela, continued the negotiations and on the 8th of March of this year, 2023, and the 15th of September, 2023, we made applications on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago because again, your government, always being strategic, applied for the licence, not on behalf of any company, no matter the companies that wanted, we applied for it as the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to give us the room, if we needed to change operators, to be able to do so. Even though we were under pressure to have joint applications with companies, the licence from the United States to Trinidad and Tobago is to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

So in January, we got the first one—24th of January. Who is it that told the world—was the first to tell the world about the licence? The Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. He had a press conference. We were discussing it with the White House, we were discussing it with the highest levels of the American Government and we had agreed a time for the press conference and the Prime Minister announced what had happened as a result of diplomacy by your Government and negotiations by your Government.

We then made two further applications for amendments and on the 17th of October of this year, we were granted an amendment that allows us to pay in cash, to pay in different currencies, if necessary, for the gas. Because, of course, that was the cry of the Opposition at the time. Remember they wanted us to be sanctioned. They were saying, “Yuh could not do it,” President Guaidó who no longer exists. And now the cry was, “Well, dey cyah proceed because dey cyah pay for de gas in cash.”

Well, we did what we had to. Very quietly, very efficiently, with competence, got the licence amended and now the licence expires for Trinidad and Tobago on the 31st of October, 2025. It is not the general licence that expires in April and unfortunately, I cannot answer with the level of detail the question that Sen. Vieira just asked, what happens if Venezuela does not do certain things. I can tell you that up to a few weeks ago, the White House reached out to me and had a conversation with me and gave me a good sense of assurance. But I cannot put anything, not a fingernail on a block for anything because none of it is in my control, but I am not going to stop and wait. I am going to press on for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, as we are doing.

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

Hon. S. Young: Thank you. So, Mr. President, one of the simple points is that every step that the Government can tell the population anything, we have come forth and we have told you. We cannot disclose pricing because right now pricing is in the middle of negotiations and nor will we when we get the licence from Venezuela be able to talk about pricing because you just cannot do that in these contexts. But what I can tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago without fear of contradiction is working along with the technocrats at the Ministry of Energy and

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Energy Industries, working along with the experts at the National Gas Company and the whole global organization of Shell, their traders and everyone, we are negotiating the right types of pricing for it to make sense for Trinidad and Tobago. So to answer that other red-herring, no, I do not decide pricing, I do not decide term sheets, et cetera, there are experts who do that but somebody has to be respected at the helm, somebody has to be respected to lead the discussions and the negotiations, and I do it with the technocrats.

So on the last visits when we have gone to negotiate, you have the President of NGC, you have the commercial managers, you have the lawyers, you have the Permanent Secretary from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, you have Shell and a whole team that has been put together by Shell globally to negotiate this, and they are the ones doing the work as to where we move the pressure points. But you need someone who, as a result of respect and a relationship with the Government of Venezuela, can walk into the door and through the door and have those discussions.

And again, with full transparency, we have nothing to hide. They put it out on national TV, we leave that to them. At every step that we can say something, I give the people of Trinidad and Tobago the assurance we will but there are going to be certain aspects, we cannot get into the details. For example, you have heard us talk about, and me in particular and the Prime Minister talked about the one deal that the UNC negotiated between '10 to '15 in the energy sector that up to today is still costing NGC billions of dollars annually because it is a bad deal. I have never called the name of the company. I have never said what is the pricing of gas that the UNC agreed to that is so disastrous for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. You cannot do those things because you have to protect the reputation and the

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integrity of Trinidad and Tobago and the sanctity of contract, but you could try to negotiate, you could try to renegotiate, as we have done.

So, Mr. President, as I come to a close, I give the people of Trinidad and Tobago the assurance that we will continue to do, no matter how difficult it is, what is necessary for a future for Trinidad and Tobago, and part of that future must include a cross-border gas which is what we have been pursuing. I told you the Loran-Manatee is on the table, we are doing Manatee, that gas is coming. We are pursuing Dragon. After Dragon, it may very well be Manatee next and there are other initiatives that we have begun discussions on.

I would like to say to the population, through you, Mr. President, that anyone who wants this type of information out in the public domain falls into a category of—you have to be careful not to be irresponsible for the reasons I have set out. You do not know what you are talking about is another category or worse case, and I do not ascribe this to anyone, you could want to destroy the future for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

3:40 p.m.

And what I find remarkable is there is no genuine interest by those who have brought this Motion to see a better energy sector, a better Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young: It is all the snide comments and all the snide remarks always looking to undermine. How could you write to the United States when your Government is following UN principles of non-interference, non-intervention and say, “sanction the Prime Minister and the Minister because they have allowed the Vice-President of a country in”? Run to the OAS to get the OAS to say we are in breach of the Rio treaty which we were not in breach of. And as the record

reflects, I stood right here in the Senate when I answered that question that was misquoted, unfortunately, and that was jumped on by the Americans but they later accepted that there was no breach of the Rio treaty and all of that “hullabaloo” was for nothing.

So, Mr. President, the simple points are as follows, we will provide the information as soon as it is available and as soon as we are permitted to, as we have done. Look at the record, you will see immediately when I was notified on the 17th of October, that we had been granted an amendment that allowed us to pay in cash, I reached out to the Prime Minister who is actually in Ottawa in Canada, and he said go ahead and tell the population immediately rather than it leaks from somewhere. We will provide the information, and I can assure you that we are negotiating and fighting hard in different countries for what is best for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Maharaj.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Sunity Maharaj: Thank you, Mr. President. I rise to thank Sen. Mark for putting this Motion before the Senate, and I want to thank Senator—well, MP, the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries for providing an assurance to the country and to the public to be as open as possible on this issue. It is often said, and I have heard it repeatedly that people do not—the public does not understand how important the energy sector is to their own future. That we as a people want money to spend, we want services but we do not understand what it takes to keep the energy sector ticking over, and how much of our future depends on the energy sector. And we know why.

We know that the energy sector developed as a completely offshore sector, the people who started it, Walter Darwent in the 1860s and the Randolph Rust and Mr. Lee Lum. And these people came to Trinidad and Tobago and they pursued a fairly novel industry in the world, a very new industry in fact, because there is always talk about who was first, was it Trinidad and Tobago or Pennsylvania. They could see the oil in certain places in south: Aripere, in Guayaguayare. They could see it and they saw the potential and they had skills, and the rest of the population were barely out of enslavement, the majority of the people. Their role was simply labourers.

And so that has set the tone for a sector, a very important sector, a sector that became critically important in the twentieth century, of alienation from the energy sector. And it has been our job as an independent nation to build that relationship between the people and the sector, so that we could walk every day with a sense of how important this is to us. There are countries in the Caribbean for example, they know that their lifeblood, their economic lifeblood is tourism. I have colleagues in major tourism islands that will not put crime on page 1 because they have incorporated that in their DNA, that that is important—not to the government but to me. Trinidad, we do not have that issue when it comes to the energy sector and that is because so much work remains to be done to give people a genuine stake. Now, if you are from south Trinidad you understand the energy sector, you are likely to because people in Point Fortin knew, for example, when they got for so long, free gas running to their stoves and so on because that came from the oil company.

Maybe, you might in central Trinidad, the population understands what happened at Point Lisas. I lived in central Trinidad and I saw how the place

transformed when Point Lisas began to develop. And people who might have normally stayed and you know, carried on the tradition of being involved in cane cutting and so on, their children began to get jobs as technicians and welders, and various things in that sector. And you just have to pass through parts of the country of central Trinidad and you see the housing, you saw what happened. But I do not think that enough has been done to really help us to understand and that is also—that is a failure, public communication is also a failure of the education system.

That being said, I return to the Motion and frankly I see, there are things we may quibble about in that Motion but it is a basic Motion seeking transparency and accountability. We may wonder, the Minister may say or the mover of the Motion might wonder what it means—what is Sen. Mark referring to when he says detailed accounts, because I think we are still trying—still to get that defined, and whether or not a quarterly report. I think the Minister did not respond to whether, he said, “as soon as he has information”, which is—I do not see a problem with a quarterly report. You may say, “I had nothing to report, I will give it to you”. The real challenge with—well, may I make the point though, that the starting principle in any democracy is that governments are trustees and managers of the assets belonging to people. We must never forget that these assets, natural resources belong to the people and the peoples’ right to know and to be aware of, and to be satisfied that these assets are being managed to the highest level, and in their interest.

So, we can start with that principle of their right you know. That being said, the actual realities may make it difficult or not timely to say certain things. Not—and so it has become very common place for government Ministers of all

administrations—no particular party has a lean on this—to say, “prices, we cannot give that, confidentiality”. Now, this is—the trend in the world is towards transparency. The EITI of which we are a member, recommend highly contract transparency. In fact one of the biggest oil companies in the world, Total, in 2018, put out a policy saying that they are going to provide transparency along the value chain. And that has been—that is the trend and sooner or later we are going to be—it is a recommendation from a lot of the international agencies, IMF and so on. Sooner or later people are going to ask, insist that you subscribe to that. So, I think we need to begin to acclimatize ourselves to the idea of greater transparency than we are practicing right now.

But I think in this case or, and I think in this case, the Government’s challenge is deepened by geopolitical considerations. It is not going to be easy, and I do not envy anybody who has to negotiate the waters that are beginning to bubble around us, I think the International Court of Justice has announced today that it will give a ruling on Guyana’s case against the Venezuelan referendum, they are going to do that on Thursday. Yesterday, the Opposition in Guyana and Barbados joined forces, put out a statement taking Prime Minister Mia Mottley and Ralph Gonzales to task for what they consider to be a tepid statement on the Guyana/Venezuela issue that they felt should have come down strongly on the side of Guyana.

Now, I do not know what would be our position if at the ultimate moment we are asked by Mr. Maduro to come out with a statement supporting Venezuela. We wish never to come to that pass because we have so much riding on these negotiations, and on the gas from Dragon and from Loran-Manatee and so on, because we have found ourselves in a position where we have very little choices.

3.50 p.m.

We have failed to develop the economy and we have to deal with the hard fact that if the plug is pulled—we are in tough times with our gas supply. We do not have enough gas for our own industries, so we need it. This is not the time to say who is responsible, and I think everybody probably will have to say they are responsible. But we are in a tough position. We have to hasten to build out the economy. At the same time, we have to try to carry this ship to safe harbour , as much as we can, although I am fully agreeing here with the Minister that almost none of it is in our hands. We cannot—we do not—we are not in the position to force anything, and we can only have to hope that Mr. Maduro becomes a tiger that can be tamed.

I certainly do not expect—if in Guyana, a case is upheld, I do not expect the President of Venezuela to back down on his referendum. We could expect, because he has already challenged the court's jurisdiction on that matter. So he will go ahead. And what would happen after that? Well, there would be some sabre-rattling. He will probably start issuing citizenship to people in Esequibo.

I am inclined to think that a lot of this has to do with elections in Venezuela next year and so there is nothing like a talk of war to rally or support across the board. We have seen what has happened in Israel with Netanyahu, a very unpopular leader, and he has that support. So I think it may have a lot to do—we are in perilous waters until the situation in Venezuela plays itself out. In that context, we have to keep the population close to us for them to appreciate the nature and to understand how challenging it is going to be and how impotent we are in the situation.

As I mentioned geopolitical and Israel, let me just call on the Government to finally recognize the State of Palestine. We have no political or moral authority to

talk on that issue until we do that.

Mr. President: So, Senator, as much as you spoke to one issue as it relates to Venezuela and Guyana and tied it to this, I would ask that you stay away from the other one to which you speak now, which would put you completely outside of relevance to what is before us. So continue, but you do not need to go down that road that you just went down.

Sen. S. Maharaj: I thank you very much. My maiden column, I must remember what it was on. Thank you very much. So, on this issue, not just Trinidad and Tobago but CARICOM, is walking a very, very fine line. I plead with all parties here to think through the scenarios, the possibility. Venezuela may find themselves in a position that it does not have elections. It may very well work. We know the challenges. I do not want to go into the Venezuelan issue too much, but we know the issue with the person who is likely to be Opposition candidate for the President being under a ban, cannot participate. They may actually go through the Appeal Court, and we know the court, they may uphold the ban and then it may look like it has been laundered. At the same time, however, I think they also know that the United States needs Venezuelan oil right now, so that may be the only card in play.

So I want to just leave my contribution at that point and to simply say, when it comes to this Motion, I support the call for transparency. I think the Minister made an attempt today and the assurance that he gave, I welcome it. I frankly see no reason for anyone to object to more transparency. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Gopeesingh.

Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh: Thank you very much, Mr. President. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this Motion presented by my colleague, Sen. Wade Mark, on what, which is most importantly, an aspect of the energy sector from which Trinidad and Tobago derives the greatest benefit, in terms of the financial benefit and the running of the country. And we all have recognized that the energy sector, with the oil production over 100 years and within 50 years of gas production, Trinidad and Tobago benefitted tremendously from it. But when we see the collapse taking place of the energy sector, it is very sad to see what has been happening between 2016 and 2023.

So, Mr. President, after hearing the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries speak for 45 minutes, and having spoken about the amount of trips he has made to Venezuela and the amount of trips that he has made to the United States with negotiations, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are still furthest away from an appreciation and an understanding of where we are, in terms of the Dragon gas deal particularly. And so this has been going on since 2016, and seven years later, we are still in this conundrum of having to determine where we are with the Dragon gas deal, and many questions are being asked as far as this is concerned.

So I want to proffer that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago deserve concrete assurances that negotiations, which the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is undertaking, would be done in a manner not only to protect the interest of taxpayers, deliver value for our investments into this field, but also birth a deal which is insulated from any instability or unfair advantage that can harm the equitable benefits of our citizens. So the precipitous collapse in our production of gas over the last eight years means that any new gas is vital. So the new gas from the Dragon deal is vital, the new gas from the Loran-Manatee field is very vital but this must not be a reason to drop the ball on finding more gas deals from other

avenues.

So this Government, from 2016, has focused on this Dragon gas deal and it has eluded this country for seven years. And based on what is happening in the geopolitical atmosphere now, we are going to be many years away from conclusion on anything on this Dragon gas deal.

So while we are debating this, other things are happening. My understanding is that the President of Guyana went with officials from the United States Army within the Essequibo region yesterday. And so we do not know whether the United States will be coming into Guyana at any time, and what will happen as a result of all of this, with the Dragon gas deal. So the geopolitical situation, which my colleague raised, Sen. Mark, and briefly mentioned by Sen. Maharaj, is important for the Government to understand and appreciate and make some comments of where we are, while the Barbados Prime Minister has gone and made some statements about it and we are part of the CARICOM region, which we have to be sensitive to.

So I would not go further away with that but indicate that the Government must not place all focus on Dragon but hasten to remake the faltering fiscal regime of the upstream sector so as to ensure deepwater gas, which already exists within the borders, is also monetized. The Minister made an attempt to indicate what they are trying to do but the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

While the Government's talking point will be this Dragon development, this will not negate the grave challenges facing our downstream sector at this very time. We have at this time seven companies within Point Lisas that are down. So while the Minister speaks about Trinidad and Tobago being second to other countries, in terms of the production of methanol and urea, we know that we

need—what about the other companies now that are operating and they do not have enough natural gas to carry on their activities?

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

So we have fallen from a production of 4.2 billion standard cubic feet per day, to now, Mr. Vice-President, 2.5 million standard cubic feet per day. So we have fallen by about 33 per cent in the production of natural gas over a short period of time. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries gave some figures about the collapse of the energy sector in 2013 and '14 and '15, but we knew that there were difficulties when we were in government and we moved speedily to arrest this decline. But I want to let this country know, and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries know that in 2016, there was the energy sector decline of minus 9.8 per cent; in 2017, minus 0.5 per cent; in 2018, minus 3.2 per cent; in 2019, it kept on going on, minus 4.3 per cent; in 2020, 12.2 per cent; 2021, minus 2.7 per cent; and in 2022, minus 5.1 per cent. So, hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, you are seeing this happening over a 33 per cent decline in gas production from approximately 4.2 billion standard cubic feet of gas per day to 2.5.

So this is the first point that the Minister and this Government must be aware of. And what are they doing about it? Nothing. Because they have not created any major incentives and they have not put on the blocks. In fact, they had 17 areas that they put aside in 2021 or so for concessions, and so on. Only four of these blocks were taken. And in 2021, it took them eight months for them to determine who they are going to give these blocks to. But we are in 2023, and no activity has taken place. So there is no deepwater exploration for either oil or gas and this is where we are finding ourselves in 2023, with a 33 per cent decline in the energy sector.

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Now, Trinidad and Tobago—hon. Minister, you have gone and done some signing on behalf of Trinidad and Tobago Government. And so the country is asking for clarification, in terms of our OPAC licence, whether it is different from those issued to other nations. If you are in a position, you can possibly answer.

So while, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, you have placed on public record that the OPAC licence granted to the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is specific and separate to the general licence, it is important to our energy sector that you tell this population if this specific licence granted to Trinidad and Tobago facilitates a different period for the payment of cash to Venezuela beyond April '24, as is stipulated within the General License No. 44, issued on October 18, 2023.

Mr. Young: Thank you very much, Senator. Your answer is yes, I said so. Our licence expires on the 31st of October, 2025, and there are procedures for renewal and rules.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And what about the payments?

Mr. Young: That is the licence. So, yes, the amended licence does permit that all of the way through.

4.05 p.m.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So it is important to remember that Trinidad and Tobago was granted an OFAC license in January 2023, but it prevented cash payments from being made to Venezuela. Could this be a situation where we have a specific license that expires in October '25, but despite it being a separate license from the general license number 44, the window for cash payments is the same period as permitted within the general license? Well, I am glad you cleared it up, expiring in April '24.

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Hon. S. Young: Expiring?

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: In 2025. Now, hon. Minister, you said in your initial announcement—In the US allowing cash payments to Venezuela, I think recently, you told us that there are still a few hurdles, and, I remember you making that statement. What are these hurdles? And if you, in your winding up, you could probably give some important answers to the—

Hon. Senator: He not winding up.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Sorry you are not winding up, but you would probably—

Hon. Senator: I believe he is not winding up yet?

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: When “we coming” to wind up. And I do not want you to believe that these are statements being dismissed as mischief by us, or misleading, or unpatriotic, as I know sometimes you say that we are unpatriotic which is wrong, because we cannot have more patriotism than we have on the Opposition side for Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And I am sure we have—do not make those statements. These are questions important for investors, and energy sector stakeholders, and the population whose prosperity is dependent on the recovery of the failing energy sector.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Vice-President: Okay. Senators. Senators.

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]

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Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid. Sen. Nakhid! There were two initial crosstalks. I allowed it. Please leave it right there and allow the Senator to continue his contribution.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Hon. Minister, and colleagues in this House, we want to make this statement, that this Dragon gas deal is very shaky still and two months ago, this Government boasted to the population about your lobbyists securing exemptions for us to access dragon gas. But let me read the *Bloomberg* headline for you. *Bloomberg*, November 16, just a few days ago, 2023. It says:

“US Says All Venezuela Sanctions Are on Table If Maduro Reneges.”

That is *Bloomberg*, November 16. And I want this country to hear this damning part. The foreign report tells us, and I quote. And for the ears of the Hon. Minister:

“The Biden administration is prepared to revoke all licenses—” “—if Nicolás Maduro doesn’t present a path forward toward fairer elections...”— the US Assistant Secretary of State, Brian Nichols has confirmed.

“If they do not”—fulfill—“the agreed upon steps, we will revoke the licenses...”—issued.

So, Mr. Vice-President, what does that mean for Trinidad and Tobago? It means no matter what agreement or lobbyist this Government has, “in the blink of an eye”, the Dragon deal is off again. And yet again. So, from 2016 to 2023, seven years, is going to be off again. So do not pin your hopes on that.

Hon. Senator: And if the US Government changes?

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: But our Dragon problems get worse. At this present time, our CARICOM sister Guyana is in the battle to defend two-thirds of the nation, their Essequibo region, from being annexed by Venezuela. That has been

spoken about. It is important. All CARICOM nations, as well as the US Government, have officially called on Venezuela to respect international law yet the Venezuelan Government is going ahead with a referendum, as we all heard, in a few days that would seek support to claim their Essequibo region. That is the impact of that on the dragon deal. This is no ordinary dispute as:

“The Guyanese President has officially informed the global community that in the event of military action from Venezuela, their regional allies...”

—that is Guyana—

“...will not stand back and see anyone take advantage of Guyana.”

So, from that, the Dragon deal is off again. Do not feel for a moment that this will not affect the Dragon deal.

“This goes beyond...Dragon. It will call on us as a country to stand with Guyana in more ways than one.”

4.10 p.m.

Sen. Mitchell: Mr. Vice-President, please 46(1). There is nothing in the recitals here that speaks to Essequibo or Guyana.

Mr. Vice-President: Senator, whilst you make your contribution please stick to the relevant matters within the Motion and keep your discussions as tight as possible.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: The contextual aspect of that is the Dragon gas deal.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: If these things happen, the Dragon gas deal is off. Whatever happens in the Essequibo and what is happening with Maduro and his people in Venezuela, all these things impact upon this Dragon gas deal and I read what the United States Government has said already, that it is off.

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Now, I want to ask will the Trinidad and Tobago Government be willing to remain as working partners with the Maduro regime if they decide to act by seizing the Essequibo region or two-thirds of Guyana's land? That is critically important. Will the Trinidad and Tobago Government be willing to place our energy security into the hands of the Maduro Government if they violate our CARICOM neighbour? So once again, we call on this Government to stop placing all eggs in the Dragon deal basket given that there are more questions than answers.

So what is different with this Dragon gas agreement? With this country facing a gas shortage and no tangible signs of new gas, the Government has come to pin the hopes of the country on Dragon gas, and although, Mr. Vice-President, the Minister of Finance has told us in the budget, and I quote:

“As is public knowledge, our diplomatic initiatives with the United States and Venezuela have been very successful, clearing the way for September 20, 2023, signing of an agreement with Venezuela to develop the Dragon Gas Field. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries deserves special commendation for this remarkable achievement.”

That is the Minister of Finance talking on page 58 of his budget presentation. But this is not the first time that a Dragon deal has been signed. In 2018, the Prime Minister sat in the very Presidential Palace and signed the terms of development with President Maduro. Five years later, we are still looking to sign this and sign that, and negotiations going on and we are not clear of where we are with negotiations. Where is Shell in this? Where is NGC in this? What are the prices and so on? The Minister could not give any piece of information and hiding it under the context of nondisclosure agreement, NDAs.

And according to the Prime Minister's official website dated August 25, 2018,

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it stated:

“Prime Minister Dr. the Honourable Keith Rowley and President of Venezuela, His Excellency Nicholas Maduro today (Saturday 25 August 2018) signed the terms for the development of cross-border gas from the Venezuelan Dragon Gas Field.”

So this is not the first time when the Minister of Finance has come to Parliament to pin the hopes of our nation on Dragon. In the 2019 Budget, he said the same thing. In his 2019 Budget, he listed it as number one in his six game-changers. And he said:

“...strengthening our gas-based economy: on August 18th, 2018, the Prime Minister, Dr the Honourable Keith Rowley, executed a Terms of Agreement with the Government of Venezuela to secure a competitively-priced steady supply of natural gas from the Dragon Field in Venezuela. The project will commence with 150.0 million standard cubic feet per day with the possibility of that level rising to 300 million standard cubic feet per day.”

So that is the Minister of Finance speaking in his 2019 budget, but here the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is coming to say today that these details are not forthcoming. So how could the Minister of Finance tell you 150 million standard cubic feet per day is coming, in 2019 he is saying that, and in 2023 the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries says he does not have an appreciation of where we are in terms of how much gas is going to come to Trinidad and Tobago. So “dey doh” know what they are about.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: The Minister of Finance is saying something and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is saying something, and the Prime

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Minister is saying something, and they are signing agreements and having negotiations, but negotiating what? They have said nothing about any results of any negotiation that has taken place.

Sen. Lyder: Mamaguy, mamaguy, pure mamaguy.

Sen. Nakhid: Typical PNM, talking.

Sen. Lyder: Pure mamaguy.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And this is what the Minister of Finance said the:

“...supply of gas will return our petrochemical centre to full production and in the process make the sector a much more attractive source of investment.”

That is on page 8 of the 2019 Budget Statement.

So what is difference between this deal and the deal that the Minister Young, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries signed? What are the contents of this deal which is being portrayed to have resolved the grave issues that led the Prime Minister to state that negotiation had reached a stalemate in July, or more recently it is a huge diplomatic boulder, which Minister of Energy and Energy Industries alluded to, we have been pushing up a hill? So they “doh” know where they are going. It is a diplomatic boulder which they are pushing up the hill—

Sen. Lyder: Politically lost.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: —but the boulder will come right back down and take all of them back to the ground.

So it is unfortunate that this Government has seen that 2016, seven years later, 2023, they are still pushing on this Dragon gas deal which we appreciate, but going nowhere with it, and excluding any other developmental activity in deepwater rounds and in deepwater bidding for oil and gas, and this is where we are from 4.2 billion standard cubic feet per day to 2.5 billion.

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Sen. Nakhid: They selling us dreams.

Sen. Lyder: Yeah. Leprechauns and unicorns.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And seven downstream industries in Point Lisas have folded up and Train 1 has gone after we spent 450 million to try to keep Train 1 going, and Trains 2, 3 and 4 limping along and we “doh” know whether they will be submerged as well.

Sen. Lyder: Yeah, they all very limp on that side.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So is it that this Government has solved the greatest hurdle of having Venezuela agree to accept non-cash payments or has the Government received clearance from the US authorities to make cash payments? Have you received clearance from the United States authorities, Minister? You said cash payments can be made but have you gotten permission from the United States authority to do so?

Hon. Young: Thank you very much for giving way once again, Sen. Gopeesingh. OFAC is the body that grants such permission which is the United States Government Department that oversees sanctions et cetera, so the answer is, yes. The OFAC licence and amended licence does exactly that. We can pay in cash to the Venezuelan Government all the way to the expiry of the licence and the general licences do not affect us in the least. Thank you.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Okay, thanks for that clarification. You have any idea when this operation will begin on this field and the timeline for the first gas? You could answer that some time—

Sen. Lyder: The 28th of never.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—and how much gas will be received by Trinidad and Tobago, and how much taxpayers will pay for this development? And my

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colleague Sen. Mark, in his Motion, asked about what is the role of Shell in all of this, and tell us what terms we are being bound to.

So the role of Shell, the role of NGC, we are not hearing anything about that. And you are going there hon. Minister and making negotiations but we are not hearing anything about what is happening with the Shell oil because they are the ones who have to put the money forward. So would Shell be comfortable in knowing that the gas is coming from Venezuela and possibly Venezuela might say, "Well, we will control the taps in Venezuela." And when they get vex with Trinidad and Tobago, they turn off the tap and no more gas coming again.

Sen. Mark: Like the Russians.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Yeah, they are like the Russians. I wanted to speak a little bit about what the former Minister of Energy and Energy Industries had indicated and so on but I would not go there now. So he had mentioned something about without the Dragon gas Trinidad and Tobago will be able to maintain the full production and will not be in any difficulty but the reality is there now that Trinidad and Tobago is in real trouble as far as the energy sector is concerned.

So hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, your government is guilty of not focusing on other areas for gas and oil production and we have reached oil production of 55,000 barrels per day now, the worst it has been as at 60 years ago. And gas production where we are now is the worst as it has been for the last 20 years. So these are facts, the indisputable facts. So what have you been doing as a Government? You are promising the Loran-Manatee field and so on but that was on the drawing board when you came into office where 30 per cent of that belongs to Trinidad and Tobago, and the gas from that Loran-Manatee field could come through the south part of Trinidad very easily into Point Lisas and the LNG plants.

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And that has, I understand, almost 30 trillion cubic feet of gas, 30 trillion cubic feet. I see the Minister is trying to dispute that, but this is what is being written about in the energy literature, whereas the Dragon gas field is about 4.2 trillion cubic feet. So why have you not put out bid rounds for the production of gas from the Loran-Manatee? And when you succeed in evaluating the bid rounds it takes another five years again before you can get production. So if we are in 2023 now, we looking for 2028 before the first set of gas can come to Trinidad and Tobago from the Loran-Manatee Field.

Sen. Lyder: Correct.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So you have failed to act on time and you have crippled the oil and gas production, and you did some bid rounds, you delayed in announcing the deep water bids and that resulted in deeply affecting the country's energy sector and economic prosperity. Hon. Minister, and Members on the other side, the Government, even the Energy Chamber has spoken out against the slow progress in deep water bids.

In a column, August 21st 2023, a few months ago, on the Energy Chamber website, entitled:

“The need for speed.”

The Energy Chamber head chastised the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Minister, you probably will remember that for your failure to complete the deep water bid rounds. You were chastised by the Energy Chamber President:

“But saying we want to move faster...”

Which you are saying—

“...and actually moving faster are two different things.”

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Mr. Vice-President, 46(1) please, it is not about bid rounds you could look at the recitals.

Sen. Mark: Context, context.

Mr. Vice-President: As much as—

Sen. Mark: Context.

Mr. Vice-President: Senators, as much as the Minister did allude to it in his response to the Motion, I would like you to keep once again remembering what the essence of the Motion is and kindly stick to the relevant matters and questions that pertain to it.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I am focusing on two arms of the recital. The first arm there is:

“... *whereas* there are many other issues that remain outstanding in order to bring gas from the Dragon Gas Field to this country's shores;”

So I am speaking about the bringing of gas to the Loran-Manatee fields to the country's shores, and the other arm of the recital:

“*Be it resolved* that the Senate call on the Government to provide a detailed account of its approach to this project involving entities such as Shell...”—
 NGC, et cetera.

4.25 p.m.

So these are the arms of the recital which I am responding to and speaking on.

So, we all know that Trinidad and Tobago's economy is based on the production and processing of natural gas and our gas production has fallen by a third in the past decade. And, now we are speaking about petrochemical industries with green hydrogen, but that will itself need massive injections of capital. So, if

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we are unable to secure new investments for upstream production away from the Dragon field gas or oil, or new investment, our economy is going to contract hugely and the standard of living for Trinidad and Tobago and its entire population is going to plummet. Yet when I read *Vision 2020/Vision 2030*, the country's overall policy framework, I see no mention on this issue.

So, the upstream sector has been derailed by poor fiscal incentives from this Government. The poor results of the deep water bids, the delayed announcement of the deep water result, as well as the collapse in both oil and gas production has been caused by this Government's failure to implement innovative fiscal incentives in a timely manner. In the last two years, they have attempted to offer meagre changes, but even these changes have come too late. The Government knew these incentives should have come since 2015, because that is when they promised to introduce them. And, so, in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020, you promised changes, until making a meager adjustment until it is too late now in 2023.

The Government has routinely said that our province is a mature province, yet they fail to create the timely fiscal incentives to motivate energy companies to increase exploration. So, it seems as though this Government now, has to continue to rely on that aspect of the Dragon field and we are going nowhere with it, and in the future, it seems as though, that is going to be a lost deal based on the geopolitical situation surrounding Venezuela, Trinidad, Guyana and the Caribbean and the involvement of the United States.

So, I heard the Minister say that when he went to CNN and he spoke of the Dragon deal and gave a rosy picture of Trinidad and Tobago being to the forefront of gas production and in the energy sector doing very well, he could—was an

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illusion he put on through the media, knowing fully well that what he was saying was a delusion. He was delusionary in his statements; speaking to the world about the Dragon gas deal and how it will impact upon the economic and financial situation of Trinidad and Tobago. And then he also mentioned the issue of Delcy coming to Trinidad.

When United States had put sanctions on countries, not to have anything to do with Venezuela, and Trinidad and Tobago becomes a part of that, and it seems as a country that if we do something wrong, we could be sanctioned, but they brazenly said well, forget the United States, we are going to accept Delcy into Trinidad and her team. And when she came here, when the Vice President came here and her team, we asked questions who were on that team.

Sen. Lyder: They said they did not know.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: They said they do not know, but they know today.

Sen. Lyder: PDVSA. Officials from sanctioned PDVSA.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So they refused to tell this country—

Sen. John: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Lyder: Sanctioned PDVSA.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So why they continued to hide in mystery and speak untruths to the population? It is unfortunate that a government, a responsible government can go in that manner, say we cannot give you any information, you are breaking the rules of the United States not to have anything to do with Venezuela at the time, allowing people to come in, and saying you do not know who came in.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

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Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And they sat down with them, negotiating and speaking.

4.30 p.m.

Hon. Senator: Mendacity.

Sen. Lyder: The snow cone man came. The snow cone man came.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And then they go on, the Minister speaks about the Opposition trying to undermine the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The Opposition is a responsible Opposition. We have been in government from 2010 to 2015 and we have performed admirably.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Never before in the history of this county you have seen a government performed as Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar's People's Partnership Government between 2010 and 2015. So when you make the statement that the Opposition wants to undermine the people of Trinidad, we have the heart and soul of the people to the forefront of our—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Lyder: You all must say thank you to us. Say thank you.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: We believe in human capital development, that every citizen and every child, and every women and everybody in this country must benefit from the energy sector, from the gas and oil production, and which you are taking to the lowest area.

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

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So, Mr. Vice-President, I will put away my little notes, and so on, and end by saying, there are some major geopolitical issues hanging

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around this Dragon gas deal, which you all have been speaking about from since 2016 to today, and which you know is not going to be a possibility.

My colleague, Sen. Mark, in his address, spoke about the issues of this election, that this referendum that is going to take place in a few days, well, you know what is going to be the results of this referendum. President Maduro will win the referendum, and the referendum is whether they should annex Essequibo to Venezuela.

Sen. Lyder: Illegally annex.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Legally annex.

Sen. Lyder: Illegally.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Now, if that happens and they decide to annex Essequibo, where is Trinidad and Tobago in all of this? Where is CARICOM in all of this? And do you think that the United States would sit idly by and allow Venezuela to invade the Essequibo region or to take it in and sit and do nothing about it? We are already hearing about the United States army going into Guyana and this could be the prelude. So we are in for some real trouble here in the Caribbean. We are in for some real trouble.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Mark: Real trouble.

Sen. Lyder: The PNM must go.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Anything could happen.

Sen. Mark: Real trouble.

Sen. Lyder: The PNM must go.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: We might be at the brink of a little war right around our shores.

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Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Sen. Mark: Exactly. Exactly.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: This is like the 1960s and the invasion when Russia was trying to come into Cuba and President—

Sen. Mark: Mr. Kennedy.

Hon. Senator: Kennedy.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—Kennedy did the blockade. So what will happen here? So this is not about the Dragon deal alone, Mr. Vice-President, this is what is going to happen to all of us as citizens in CARICOM, in Venezuela—

Sen. Mark: Exactly.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—as a result of what is going to happen with President Maduro and his referendum in a few days' time.

So, Mr. Vice-President, we await, and this is an opportune moment for my hon. colleague, Sen. Wade Mark, to have brought this Motion because it pre-empts and it helps us to focus on what are the possibilities down the line and where does Trinidad and Tobago stand, in fact, in the Dragon deal, in the energy sector, in the oil sector, and where we are as a sovereign nation and where we are going to be in terms of our support for Guyana and CARICOM support for Guyana. These questions are left to be answered. Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy: Mr. Vice-President, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute on this Motion by Sen. Mark. I too agree that it is being discussed at a time that is very important for us all, both as a nation, and also

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as a country within the CARICOM region. I would first like to say that I do appreciate the work that has gone on by the Government in trying to negotiate very difficult international circumstances to bring us to where we are at now. As mentioned by the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries about what was happening at the time of the sanctions being made against the—United States against Venezuela, and them not necessarily just accepting that, but continuing to do other negotiations.

I appreciate even what is happening now in terms of the situation with trying to deal with the Venezuelan Government, while at the same time trying to straddle—not straddle—but trying to negotiate what is—not negotiate—but understand with the CARICOM as to what will be Trinidad and Tobago's position if indeed the situation worsens between Guyana and Venezuela. It is difficult, and I must appreciate the fact that the Government is trying to strategically work through the issues.

Now, I have two questions, the first is about the Loran-Manatee, that whole arrangement that has already started, according to the Minister, and as he said today, Shell has awarded a contract for the development of that programme. There must have been learnings from that negotiation because you had to be negotiating during a difficult time with Venezuela. You had the same players, Shell, NGC, involved during that negotiation. What are the learnings that will be taken from that whole process into what is happening with the negotiations with Dragon field?

I am saying that even though there are different projects, there must have been some learnings that would have been taken from that project that is now coming to fruition. And my understanding is that gas should be coming to Trinidad and Tobago in the year 2025/'26—it is what I had heard before—and that

is to be confirmed by the Minister. But since it is the same players you have in that discussion that has brought that discussion with the Loran-Manatee fields, the same players of Venezuela, NGC, Shell, and the Venezuelan oil companies bring—and according to the Minister in a statement that was given in—the Minister made a statement that was delivered on June 01, 2023, in Miami; a part of that statement said that:

“We subsequently negotiated with Shell for Shell to produce Manatee an investment that is expected to be in the order of US\$1 billion.”

So it is a significant investment and there must have been learnings from that which should be able to be applied to what is happening now. So in other words, it is not just Dragon alone that the Government is dealing with, but they have also negotiated to be able to get gas from the Manatee field that borders with Venezuela.

The other point I would like to make, and I think it is to support what some of the speakers before have said, and that is, as much as the negotiations would have gone with the Minister, the Prime Minister and the technical teams, there seems to have been a lot of emphasis on the Minister's role rather than the whole team's role. I think this is probably why people are asking so many questions about, why the Minister, but I must say that in a situation where you need leadership, and in a difficult situation you cannot just send any and everybody to negotiate on behalf of the Government.

So if you have—and from what I am gathering, the negotiations are bringing results—you have to have people at a certain level with the ability to negotiate, and I am accepting that. However, there has not been—and even in the articles that I have read, not a lot of emphasis was put on the role of the technical people within

the Ministry who have been a part of those negotiations. And, I would think if more of that was done or is done in the future, we would have less of the queries about the role of the Minister, as important as that role is, as I said, particularly given the negotiations and the environment in which we are working through.

I would like to say just—Sen. Gopeesingh asked that question, and I understand the Minister saying that all the details cannot be provided in terms of what he talked about—granular details. He talked about granular level of details for the pricing and development needs to be worked out. I understand that, but again, I would just say that, as soon as possible, let the information be made available to the public because that would bring some kind of comfort to the public. And the other arrangements—and I must say, I, again, I appreciate the fact that these things are happening in an environment that is literally unstable. For instance, you have happening right now what is going on in terms of all this happening in terms of whether there would be a referendum, whether there would be more sanctions on Venezuela by the United States, this environment is unstable.

I am happy that there is still stability coming from Trinidad in terms of them trying to do something for Trinidad. In other words, not just throwing up their hands and say, “Well, we can do anything because of instability.” I am happy about that, but at the same time, we have to be very cognizant of the fact that the environment is an unstable one and we do not know exactly what is going to happen. So I think with those few words, Mr. Vice-President, I would just like to say thank you for allowing me to contribute.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Vieira.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Anthony Vieira SC: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Before speaking substantially on the Motion, I would just like to commend the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Mr. Young, for his hard work and dedication. I see him as a very powerful advocate for the people of Trinidad and Tobago during a very difficult and uncertain period and set of circumstances. Public life can be very demanding and it is often thankless, and I think he is doing the very best he can and he deserves our commendation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: I also recognize that even though he may be the face of the negotiating team, he is not on a frolic of his own. He is, in fact, the tip of the negotiation spear, and behind him would be a cadre of technical advisers and experts.

Turning now to the Motion under consideration. Now, I agree with Sen. Mark. We share a common concern regarding falling production in the energy sector and how this will impact our economic future. Given the importance of the Dragon gas field licence, which as we have heard is a major pillar of Government's current energy policy, I think his Motion is both timely and relevant. Now, by way of putting things in context, it may be also useful to pick up the baton that Sen. Mark may have passed or dropped. He did promise to differentiate between policy and negotiations but then he failed to do so.

I do not know if it is he did not have time or he might have forgotten in the heat of the debate, but I think it is useful to differentiate between the two because it has bearing on this Motion. Negotiations, it is generally problematic and inappropriate to reveal sensitive information whilst negotiations are ongoing, whether you are negotiating in the private sector space or you are negotiating on behalf of governments, and that is because sensitive information can potentially give the

other party an advantage in the negotiation or can allow them to use that information against you.

4.45 p.m.

So it is important to maintain confidentiality and to only disclose sensitive information when it is absolutely necessary and in the appropriate context. Having said that, we also need to look at policy.

Policy refers to a set of principles or guidelines that are established to guide decision-making and policy will outline the objectives that need to be followed to achieve specific goals. So negotiations refer to the discussions and the communications between the parties, in this case, we have Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela, we also have stakeholders like Shell Global, NGC and the United States of America. All of these parties have their various interests. All of them, one would expect are attempting to reach some mutually acceptable agreement, some sort of settlement on the issue. And in the negotiations between Trinidad and Venezuela, there will be bargaining, there will be compromises and there will be attempts to find common ground to achieve desired outcomes in the midst of a very interesting situation going on with the sanctions. Policy provides the framework for the decision-making and the actions. So, I think that in terms of considering the Motion, there are aspects relating to policy that can and should be disclosed. While I think that we are sensitive to the fact that some aspects which will impact the negotiations cannot be disclosed now but may be disclosed at a later stage.

What is the Motion really looking to do? The Motion focuses on this licence which allows Trinidad and Tobago to develop the Dragon gas field in Venezuelan waters that licence we know is an exception to the sanctions that are currently

being visited on Venezuela. We hear that the licence will expire in October '25 and the purpose of the licence is to build a pipeline to transport gas between Venezuela waters into Trinidad waters at a very expensive US \$100 million.

Why is that licence important? Well, besides the very high cost and besides the fact that it is being given exceptional circumstances, it will supplement our needs for natural gas given the decline in production and as we have heard, natural gas is the feedstock for our sector. So, what Sen. Mark is trying to ascertain, I think, when one reads through his Motion is, he would like to know what happens if that licence is revoked or withdrawn and that is a very reasonable position. What happens if—because Maduro fails to hold general elections as was agreed or Venezuela invades the Essequibo region, the licence is impacted? Minister Young says he has no crystal ball and that is true but in terms of policy, not negotiation tactics, policy, what is our fall-back position? What are our options? What are the associated risks?

So, I think this Motion is an opportunity for the Government to outline policy for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Tell Trinidadians and Tobagonians how this country will benefit from the deal. Explain the policy, and give citizens the assurance that this Dragon deal is very likely going to succeed. What it is going to do for us. When can we expect the gas to start flowing from this pipeline that is going to be built? What are the pricing mechanisms involved? Who is going to pay the royalties? Who is going to collect the royalties? How are the royalties going to be calculated? This is not information that is sensitive for the negotiations, but we are talking now from just a policy framework, right. So I think in terms of the Motion the Government certainly can speak on this aspect of it. I think citizens do have a right to know and on that happy note, I will end my

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contribution. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: No. No. No. We have two more speakers.

Sen. Mitchell: They are not here.

Sen. Mark: We have two more speakers. Mr. Vice President—

Mr. Vice President: One moment, please. If it is an Opposition Motion—

Sen. Mark: Yes. They went in the toilet, Sir.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Vice President: Sen. Mark, the business of the Senate—

Sen. Mark: Yes, I know.

Mr. Vice President: The business of the Senate cannot adjourn—

Sen. Mark: I sat with my friend and we agreed, and on the agreement that we had I indicated to my two colleagues who were supposed to speak this evening that they could go and eat something I understand. Then my friend, who is the Acting Leader reneged on the agreement. Now that is a bad thing, he cannot do that.

Mr. Vice President: Sen. Roberts, are you—?

Sen. Anil Roberts: Or you would like me to speak? Thank you, Mr. Vice President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Well, it is amazing. Every day I come to this Senate and I see the PNM, it gets better and better. The hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries spoke for 42 minutes and did not address one issue in the Motion. He

said I, I, I, I, I. I thought he turn Rastafari because he is a Minister of Government.

A Minister of Government is not a lead negotiator. A Minister of Government is not to travel all over the place to meet with providers of goods and services. Yet this PNM, these Ministers break down every principle of corporate governance and talk about it with arrogance as if that is appropriate. The whole concept of anti-corruption or corporate governance, the principle is to keep decision makers, the Executive, the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, and the Ministers, those who are going to decide, far away from the service providers. The PNM has changed that and warped it into bringing them as close as possible.

So the Prime Minister and the Hon. Minister “going” to meet with everybody. Going to meet with energy CEOs, going to meet and purchase boat, going to purchase themselves Galleons Passage and we have changed the paradigm, we have gone against all the principles and today the Motion is about what are you doing on behalf of the people. Where are the technocrats? What is the benefit? Why are you, as policymakers, so close to very critical trillion-dollar, billion-dollar negotiations and the Minister comes to regale us with a history of the energy sector as if we did not read that before? Someone wrote it for him and he came to tell us about 1908 and 1979 when they started to flare gas and so on. We “doh want to know “bout dat”. That was very nice. We want to know about the tenure of this PNM when the energy sector has been decimated since—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—since September 2015 to now.

4.55 p.m.

We want to know about the negotiations that the very said Minister of Energy

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and Energy Industries, and the hon Prime Minister, and Member for Diego Martin West, boasted about in 2017, that they went and there was this roadblock and the technocrats were dealing with it and “dey couldn’t get it done”. And they went to Houston, and it was led by the hon Minister of Energy and Energy Industries now, but he was then the Minister of National Security, and they left the then Minister of Energy home, while negotiations were taking place. They feel we do not remember, they feel we sit down and fall asleep, when the cookie started to crumble, because two people and the hon Member Sen Wade Mark asked, “what is your qualifications?”

There is a reason we go to school, there is a reason we study hard, there is a reason we specialize in a field, it is to be an expert. That Member, the last time I saw, he is a “lawyer”, but now he is a major “negotiator”, “he doh know about chemical engineering”, “he doh know about gas.” He come to tell us about molecules and what happen and all of that—“he now learn that”. But there are people who are specialists in the field, who go through HR processes, to be hired at NGC, to be hired in Ministry of Energy and all of “ah sudden de PNM, tell all dem bright people stay in the back, we coming with ah geologist, and ah lawyer who claim to fame is ah email-gate defence” to negotiate on behalf of the country.

And when we saw the effects of that negotiation, for the first time in history, “he did not give we that history though”. For the first time in history, NGC makes a loss under his negotiation and he comes to talk here today and forget all of that. NGC, under Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the UNC, back in 2013/14, was reporting US 2.1b-b-billion in profit.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: They come to negotiate and is loss after loss after loss. Point Lisas, in 2016/17, was up at about 74 per cent capacity, after the great negotiation of this Minister of Energy and Energy Industry, who came in the Senate, here today and his hon Prime Minister. By 2020, 11 companies shut down in Point Lisas. I “ain't” talk the refinery yet you know. He started to talk about “Heritage netting off U.S.”, well Petrotrin with the refinery was netting off that same U.S. up to US\$2 billion per year. They came and say is “all kind of people with big contract, men who was cutting lawn was getting \$30,000”.

All kind of dramatic nonsensical stories, when the fact of matter is the yoke around Petrotrin’s neck was the Malcolm Jones, PNM negotiation from World GTL, and other projects, which put them in a debt portfolio of \$13billion, having to pay a bullet payment of US\$850 million. They “ain't” pay that yet you know, “dey kick de can down in 2028”, we will have to pay that when the UNC becomes the Government—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—and they are pretending that Heritage playing games with accounting like “dey feel we doh read, like we doh prepare. Look dey thought dey could come and stop ah debate”. The UNC could stand and talk whole day, you could extend my time and all. So, when we come here, and the Motion is a very critical one, to talk about what is going on, you are not reporting, the hon Minister, said “check de record we have reported, we have reported every step of the way”. Well I check the reports.

He came here today and you see when you do not tell the truth sometimes your memory has to be very good. You see when you tell the truth, “yuh could just talk, yuh doh even need paper”. When you not telling the truth your memory has to be

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very good, because there was a “COVID time” and the Trinidad and Tobago, “number one in the world” because they blocked their own citizens from coming home, “you cah come home”. Whether it is 14 days, whether it is PAHO regulations, “you cah come” they lock down, nobody could come home, and some Oxford student, two “ah dem” was drinking beers somewhere and they say “aye that sound good”.

Sen. Mitchell: Mr. Vice-President, please 46(1).

Sen. A. Roberts: It have no 46, I am talking Sir, on something that was said.

Sen. Mitchell: 46(1).

Mr. Vice President: Senator—

Sen. A. Roberts: Always—

Mr. Vice President: Senator. Senator, your argument seems to be outside the course of your debate. Can you bring it in please?

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, I am guided. Let me pull it in back in quickly because the hon Member knows exactly where “ah” going, he get “jumpy”. See that is why he will get back San Fernando East just now, but he is very quick.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

5.00 p.m.

The hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, back then, was the hon. Minister of National Security, see how quick it tie in. The same Minister who is here today was then the hon. Minister of National Security during COVID. The only human being on planet earth who could sign a piece of paper to allow you to come home was the Minister of National Security. The only person who could sign for you to land in Piarco was the Minister of National Security. That Minister

of National Security when a plane landed that was sanctioned by the very USA that he said he was going up and down to talk with, and the plane carried Delcy Rodríguez, the *Vice-presidente de Venezuela* and PDVSA officials included Asdrúbal Chávez, the cousin of former president Hugo Chávez and other PDVSA officials at that time, as printed in the *Express* of May 12, 2020.

The hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries who was then the hon. Minister of National Security said that he had no idea who was coming, what they were coming to talk about, that Delcy Rodríguez was in charge of COVID-19 response, that she came to get hampers for Venezuelans, all of that. But today on *Hansard* the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries boasted that back then the negotiations for Dragon field were going on and during COVID that he invited Delcy, he and the Prime Minister invited Delcy Rodríguez. They came here to discuss Dragon gas, they came here to discuss energy, he said so today. But back in 2020, he was telling a different story. “He say he did not know how they reach. He say he did not know the plnce was sanctioned. He doh do dat, is public servants”. That was his statement, but today we get the truth, you understand.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: You see his problem is memory not good. Okay. My problem is, mother and father “gimmeh” good memories.

Sen. Lyder: He has a small memory.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: So now we know that when those negotiations were going on related to this Dragon gas that Trafigura—he called out the name big and bold today. Back then they were pretending they did not know who Trafigura was. Now if you understand and you remember why it is very important to know about

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these negotiations and know what is going on, because the very said Minister of Energy and Energy Industries now who was the Minister of National Security, who told a lot of fairy tales back then, and now admits that they were discussing Dragon gas, remember there were sanctions at that time.

And remember there was a company called Paria Fuel, and remember a shipment of fuel left Italy under Shell who is now being negotiated for, as the Motion says, on behalf of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. He is negotiating for everybody. He is the super negotiator. The gas fuel left Italy under Shell, and as it came across the Atlantic, it miraculously transformed into Trafigura PTE. It pulled up into Point Lisas. It pulled up there with 226,000 barrels of fuel. It stayed in Point Lisas for an inordinate amount of time. The hon. Member, Sen. Wade Mark, put a Motion in the Senate, I was not here, and he asked about that shipment, and on Sunday the 14th, documents were created, 54 days after the ship had left. Where the ship went, nobody knew.

But the ship came in as Trafigura PTE, which is Wilmer Ruperti—Wilmer Ruperti is the oil czar of Hugo Chávez and Maduro. The man who became in charge of PDVSA. The man who was all over the world trying to get away and sneak around sanctions. The Trafigura PTE is a Wilmer Ruperti company, ES Euro Shipping is a Wilmer Ruperti company, so the fuel came into Pointe-a-Pierre—“I’s” connecting it very carefully, because remember, we are talking about transparency, accountability, truth. We have just caught the hon. Minister telling untruths back from three years ago with the same oil and gas, the same players, Delcy Rodríguez and Maduro, during sanctions which could have risked this country's status, but they come to talk about patriotism. When you heard that story, we only found out that the ship had actually come into Pointe-a-Pierre and

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left, because the US at that same time had coast guard vessels in the Caribbean Sea. At that same time, they found two shipments packed with cocaine, 900 million. Remember? The link—[*Mr. Vice-President stands*] You are not letting me link it, it is very important. The fuel ended up in Venezuela, Sir. The fuel—I am not finished yet.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Roberts. Sen. Roberts.

Sen. A. Roberts: Excuse me?

Mr. Vice-President: You are faring further and further away from the point.

Sen. A. Roberts: Okay. Let me—

Mr. Vice-President: Try not to extrapolate that much and keep it tighter.

Sen. A. Roberts: Alright, but I have to give you the context.

Mr. Vice-President: We are getting the context but just bring it in. Yes.

Sen. A. Roberts: I just want the people to know that I am telling the truth. So I give you too much context and I could narrow it. The fuel left Trinidad and Tobago and ended up in Palito Venezuela during sanction time. This is very dangerous. The paperwork came in here. We had no documents done for a ship, bill of lading, customer—and so on. Mr. Vice-President, 54 days later some customs officer did a bill and presented it when there was a Motion in this Senate, and that needs to be investigated, because there is no way a ship could leave Trinidad and Tobago without paperwork. We are a serious democracy and we are a country of laws. Now why are we linking all of this to Dragon? The Dragon gas, we have learnt today, was being negotiated at that time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: When you quote—I now quote the hon. Prime Minister, at that time when Kamla Persad-Bissessar brought out some flight information

showing that a plane with the Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez, who at the time was under sanction and was under indictment by the USA, along with 15 other members of the Maduro cabinet, landed here and went face to face with our Prime Minister. Now you all might feel it is PNM Prime Minister, but when you are Prime Minister you are Prime Minister of the entire country, and they got face to face with our Prime Minister in a meeting at the palace, and the response was, the Prime Minister said, “I did not know who these people were”.

He said, “I see now”, in response to Kamla Persad-Bissessar, that one was Asdrúbal Chávez, and he is the PDVSA, and they had other PDVSA officials. Do you all recall? But the hon. Minister came today and said they landed to discuss Dragon gas which meant PDVSA was invited to talk oil and gas. They came here and now the truth comes out three years later, so this is the Motion. The Motion requires, as Sen. Vieira said, as Sen. Dr. Remy said, these are not your assets. The way they talk about I, I, I, I I thought is soca and they are going to sing and who going to Panama, but these are not negotiations about your assets, they belong to the people. And now today we see that the two main negotiators have been less than truthful.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: So this Motion is a very serious one. So when we ask the hon. Member, what is the issue? Where are we going? What is going to happen? The sanctions that the hon. Minister said that were raised, they are in jeopardy once again. We are pretend that we are burying our head in the sand, but it is a geopolitical situation. The only reason the dragon “ain’t” dance yet is because the USA stopped the music. “The USA tell the DJ play tune but it looks like the DJ going to get throw out or electricity will go on a blackout because it have no TGU.

We doh know but the music may stop, and if the music stops the PNM in trouble.” You want to know why? The hon. Minister today also admitted something that all PNM should be afraid of and ashamed. He admitted that he “cah” walk and chew gum. He admitted here on *Hansard* that when they saw the amount “ah gas in Dragon” that was secure—”Yuh know you have possible, probable and proven reserves. He said it here, de Dragon gas is proven, which mean yuh eh have to find it again, all yuh have to do is try and get it.”

So when in 2016 they saw that that was proven and so many trillion of TCF and so, they get excited and they put all their focus on Dragon gas. And then you heard my colleague talk about bid rounds that failed. Imagine you put out 17 bid rounds and only three were taken up by up-streamers, only three were bid on. “Dai like you gone in ah party and yuh ask 17 girl for their number and yuh only get three”. That is not a very good track record. That is what they are boasting about, because they said Dragon gas is it all, and they put all their effort, and right now all their efforts, the basket empty because they miss “all de egg” outside the basket.

So when we talk about this Motion it is a very serious Motion. The hon. Minister told the hon. Sen. Vieira, and I must commend Sen. Vieira. When I do not agree with him I criticize him, so I must be man enough when he speaks well and ask critical questions I must make that point. Hon. Sen. Vieira was so despondent, was so disturbed by the waffling of the hon. Minister, by the filibustering for the first 11 minutes, he did not read the Motion, he did not come to respond to the Motion, he was giving us a historical lesson about Ken Julien and whoever gave ideas to come through from '79 back to 1908, the hon. Sen. Vieira asked the Member, “Sir, transparency, accountability, corporate governance, what

is your role? How can you be policy maker? How can you be negotiator? How can you be finalizer and contract man”?

He told him, he tried to rush the Senator and say, “No, no, I will deal with that”. “Well, we still waiting for him to deal with dat. “If it was ah All Fours game we hah no cards because he eh deal with it yet”. So I am saying here that we are still none the wiser. What we have been told here in 43 minutes is, “mind your business, I in charge, we win de election, we go tell all yuh wha we could tell yuh, when we could tell yuh, and what we decide to tell yuh”. That is not democracy. “Dey not mad. Dis is not a parlour. This is our resources.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The US “have” landed in Guyana. You see, the hon. Minister said they went up and down to the US 10 times. He went for the year. “Well, me eh even know but thanks for dat. Dais de only information that at least he have vi-zay. Right? But he went up and down 10 times to deal with Dragon gas. He even said the White House communicate with he. Well the White House cah even communicate with President Biden so me eh know how dey know the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries of Trinidad and Tobago, but we have to take his word for it, he is a truthful, oh sorry, let me be truthful. Yes. “

And they said that they went up and down to negotiate to be able to get the Dragon gas out to start to invest, and they made many trips, the hon. Prime Minister and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, and they got, successfully, the US to lift the sanctions. At first, it really was not “nutten” but they celebrated. They nearly had a party in the Balisier House that “eh” finish. Right? But I see it slow down right now, so maybe they are looking for more

donations. But, when you are talking about the US lifting sanctions, the US allowing negotiations, first with no cash, now with cash in different “kinda” currencies, as the Minister said, then it is very pertinent that the US army has just landed in the Essequibo, because the very people that the Government and all of our futures are in this one Dragon gas basket, the Americans are now on the side of the country that is opposed to the one we want to hug up with the Dragon, and this is very critical.

Because the US—the Minister said the US allowed, they worked with the US, the US lift the sanction, they got a two-year licence, it is not that, they got an extension now. All “ah dat” was US, US, US. Well the US has landed on the side of Guyana. December 3rd is fast approaching, and I want to ask the hon. Government, not only the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, because a lot of them do not really listen to him anyway. Yes. But I want to ask the Senator, they have good people “dey, when they go home dey will understand, dey would not answer the question now cause camera on, but when dey” home quietly. I just want to ask the Government something since this is our future, and we “ain’t do we work and geh no bid on no gas” that we have. We eh try to use technology to find more in our land or in our water blocks, out Tobago, we eh do dat. We say Dragon, Dragon, Dragon, okay. And Sen. Sagrainsingh-Sooklal, hon. attorney-at-law, I want to ask her—

Mr. Vice-President: Minister in the Ministry.

Sen. A. Roberts: Hon. Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. Nice, “dai’s plenty title” but deservedly so. I want to ask something, if someone you are negotiating with has no respect for the international court, international law, rule of law, natural justice, codified laws and

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boundaries from 1897 to 1899, does not care, calls a referendum of its people to say, “I want to ignore the international court and I want to take what I want to take because I am a strong man, I have army, I have missile and I have jets”, do you feel comfortable signing a piece of paper with that person?

5.15 p.m.

Because “yuh talking” about contract, “yuh talking” about signing a piece of paper and we have not heard the information, hon. President, because we want to know, what is the negotiation? What we are hearing and what was neither confirmed nor denied today is that we have to put between US \$65 million and US \$100 million up front. Because, “it make sense”, Venezuela “eh ha” no cash, they were under sanction for a very long time “to build pipeline and so on”, and build infrastructure. That means the people had to take their money away from medicine, hospital, road, school, GATE, food card, “all of dem tings”, to try and invest in this great future with a man who ignoring and disrespecting the International Court.

Do you have confidence that when you “done spend” that money and the gas start to flow, and “de man start to see money, that he eh tell you, I watch “all yuh down in Tetron and all yuh only eating three meal, a pelau per day and all yuh cyah fight me”, and therefore the gas is mine. Do you feel confident that a man who will disrespect the International Court will respect a piece of paper with you? I am very worried about that, because not only I am worried as a citizen, the hon. Minister told me my children’s future, my nine-year-old daughter’s future, is in that Dragon gas.

So, if her future is in Maduro’s hands I do not feel confident because the future of Guyana from 126 years ago is in jeopardy now because Maduro does not respect

the law, does not respect propriety and contract.

Sen. Mitchell: 46(1), please, Mr. President.

Sen. Mark: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark. Again Minister and Sen. Mark, please allow me to rule. Senator, so you have spoken to Venezuela, issues with that, you have connected it to this and you have made that point again and again and again. So if you have any other points I ask you to bring them forward now.

Sen. A. Roberts: Not filibustering at all, but it is not only on the side of Venezuela, on the side of this Government too. So it is like two negotiators who, when they say something you cannot really believe them, because this Government signed an indemnity with a man and is now in the court saying they did not really sign it because they should not have signed it, it was illegal so to do. So therefore you have two groups making a contract that is good—

Sen. Mitchell: That is a matter that is sub judice and 46(1).

Sen. A. Roberts: I did not go into details.

Mr. President: Okay, so that particular point that you just made is irrelevant to this. Again, move on.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thanks. I would not say it is irrelevant, it was harsh for them but it was just en passant. “Because you see, it is contract we are dealing with, is future, is negotiation, is gas price and we have already seen and we see a Minister come here knowing the track record of himself, in Houston, knowing that they collapsed the entire energy sector and comes here to tell the people that he is the greatest, that we, that the UNC is the worst, and the energy sector is booming.

The hon. Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh already told you the sort of losses—

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Mr. President: Minister of Trade and Industries.

Sen. A. Roberts: No, no, no, “dis Gopeesingh”, not Sen. Gopee-Scoon, no, no, no.

Sen. Mark: No, no, no, the President is anticipating.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Mr. President, yes, yes, yes. **Sen. Mark:** [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Mr. President, I bow to your wisdom, yes. Minister Gopeesingh, yes, that is coming shortly, thank you, Sir. Thank you Sen. Wade Mark. I do not normally like assistance but I enjoyed that one.

So, also honourable, we saw the hon. Minister talk about foreign direct investment, and it is a good thing I did not have water because I would have choked, because under this Government foreign direct investment is not only non-existent it has turned and transformed into capital flight. What does that mean? It means you have negative foreign direct investment in the energy sector that people and companies—he was boasting that because of the trust that people have in him—I do not know who “know” him because nobody in the PNM knew him before 2014 when he went to defend his hon. Prime Minister who was the leader of the Opposition in “emailgate”. None of the PNM ever saw him before but he is saying that all these companies had this trust in him, you know, they put trust in him and he is there to spearhead the negotiation.

One time they tell them that he concluded the price and this time they tell him that, no, they have technocrats. When in meeting we “doh see” no technocrat in no picture, no video, no nothing at all. But we saw that foreign direct investment has

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dried up, meaning companies are going. This Government says that the Dragon gas is going to provide feed for Atlantic, but they fail to tell you what this Motion asked.

To keep Train 1 up, the PNM said in 2020, 2021, 2022 they spent \$233 million on maintenance, okay, because they wanted to keep it alive even though the upstreamers, the owners, the shareholders, said that dead, we have no gas for that. The PNM said Dragon coming because we are negotiating Dragon since COVID when we “tell all yuh” it was hampered. So they spent \$233million and that same Minister came in the Senate and said, “no big thing, we go make back that”. But let us ask, because he did not tell us today, how much maintenance they spend for 2022, 2023 and we are going into 2024, because the plant is still down and the cost, one could extrapolate that if you spend \$233 million in a 15- and 16-month period, that the same cost should apply for the next 16 months. But we do not know because the Minister did not answer, because the Minister did not want to hear Sen. Vieira, he did not want to tell us the information that we asked. He said everything is a secret and that non-disclosure is very important. It might be important to them because they should not be negotiating in the first place, so they have to keep it a secret.

The hon. Minister also went on to say that methanol and ammonia, you know, these things that they are boasting about, that we are number one and two in the world, this has nothing to do with the PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: We are number one and two in world from since 1995 coming up the road. If it was PNM, well it had PNM back then, but it had NAR, it had UNC, it had Tobago, it had all kinds of things, it had Partnership.

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The Minister is discussing things historically. But, what he failed to show is that AUM I and II closed down, that Yara closed down, that 11 plants in Point Lisas have shut down and closed down, losing over 23,000 jobs in the energy sector, but they want to keep it a secret. But if the Dragon does not dance the PNM has no music because nothing else—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The Minister talked about negotiating deals, deals, deals. I saw some of the Independent Senators' faces. Those who studied hard to understand red flags, to understand corporate governance, to understand how you keep decision makers away from goods and service providers and they could not understand what was being said. What is a Minister discussing, negotiating deals? That is not a Minister's job. You have people—you want to do a contract, we know tender, we argued the procurement legislation. A Minister getting actively involved in pricing, purchasing, movement of money in the billions of dollars is not on. It is a red flag. But the Minister stands up here boasting and then goes on to say that he went on *CNN* to tell us our life is good. And we could not understand what he was talking about but we understand now while we could walk out here and dead, we will “buss” we tyre outside when we are driving, the country is in a mess, you cannot buy nothing in the grocery, \$100 worth \$60 as compared to 2015, but he is saying, “we life good”.

So he “come” to say he went on Quest and tell them that. What we asked here in this Motion is, how much you paid Quest for that interview? How much the taxpayers paid for that interview?—because Quest did not know about the hon. Minister. [*Laughter*] Quest did not know about him. Quest did not call him. We

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are not a major player right now, because since 2015 our productivity has diminished on every level.

Sen. Lyder: Stick a small pin there.

Sen. A. Roberts: Yes, yes, let me do that, yes. Now when they cannot—look I have a note here, Sen. Vieira was brilliant. Sen. Vieira we have to record that one, “eh”. That was excellent. But the hon. Minister did not answer, right.

Sen. Lyder: He bobbed and weaved.

Sen. A. Roberts: What! “Ah feel ah finish”, you know, Sir, Mr. President, but you know I “doh” like to just leave time like that.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Yes, man, because you will say—“ah feel ah will go ahead”.

Hon. Senator: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Long time, what?

Sen. Mitchell: Long time I “eh” go to the circus.

Sen. A. Roberts: Long time “wha”? “Oh God” you “eh” go to the circus long time, “a-a”.

Hon. Senator: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. A. Roberts: “But you in Cabinet”—but he is a Cabinet Minister.

Mr. President: All right, all right. Have a seat, have a seat.

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

Mr. President: So, we have about three debates going on—

Sen. Mark: Yes.

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Mr. President:—and the only person who has the attention on the floor right now is Sen. Roberts. So Sen. Roberts, continue.

Hon. Senator: Oh yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: So, Mr. Vice-President—

Sen. Lyder: Mr. President.

Sen. A. Roberts: Mr. President. I should as a Senator know that you are the President because I appreciate that greatly. I would not go through all of this but I will just not show you, but I will just say that all of these are articles regarding the tensions that are existing in our neighbourhood, in the Essequibo. These things are related to the Dragon gas because of the players who are playing. On one side you have the USA and Guyana. We want the USA to uphold the licence to extend the licence to allow Venezuela to conduct business for us to be able to pay and negotiate. If that—

Mr. President: Senator you have five more minutes.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Mr. President. If that goes away so does Dragon gas. It is a very important critical aspect. I saw the *Guardian* newspaper wrote that, and I thought I would have liked to hear some of that today from the hon. Minister. The *Guardian* editorial said that the Keith Rowley, Prime Minister, Member for Diego Martin West's administration was in a very titular key position to be able to handle or lead diploma talks and cessation of intensity and fight between Guyana and Venezuela because of the negotiations with the Dragon gas and the great relationship that the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries spoke about today.

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Now, the *Guardian*, they probably ran out of space. They forgot to tell us how or what the Government was doing in that vein, because thus far, the PNM has been absolutely silent as a Trinidad and Tobago Government on the issue or Essequibo. The only statement coming out of the Government was that CARICOM position is our position. Well CARICOM is not negotiating our children's future with Dragon gas. As the Minister said, everything is Dragon gas. All trips, 20 trips, everything for the last five years.

In the COVID, Delcy Rodriguez visited, Asdrúbal Chávez came in, everything, USA going up to Congress has been Dragon gas. Dragon gas is their football, Dragon gas is their LeBron James, but now it is in jeopardy and the PNM and the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries came here today and did not say anything. Because had the Minister read the Motion and come to this Senate and say, listen, we understand the situation, we are not only going to negotiate gas price and so on, to get and monetize that Dragon Field, but we are going to ensure that the cessation of hostilities is forthwith. So that we put a strong team to go there, to sit down as the arbiter between Guyana and Venezuela because we have a great relationship with Maduro. The hon. Prime Minister danced the conga line with Maduro. The other Minister has been sitting cross-legged with Delcy Rodriguez on 10 different times without any technocrats. We did not hear that so therefore we are worried because everything is a secret and Trinidad and Tobago's future has been put on hold by the PNM because all the eggs in that basket, but the basket "looking weak", the basket looking like it get stalked, the basket looks like everything is going to fall out.

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

5.30 p.m.

Sen. A. Roberts: So let me just say on this Motion that I support my honourable colleague. I support the request from the Independent Bench. You do not hear that much from me, but I support the request for information. We are seeing a trend in this Government, a sort of hubris and arrogance in their statements about T&TEC bills that we must show the people what the electricity really cost. But the electricity really cost—the reason it is cheaper is the gas and the oil belongs to the people. So I do not understand what you are trying to tell the people. Is the oil and gas the Cabinet own? Is the oil and gas the circus own? No, it belongs to the people. So take the Motion seriously. Bring the information.

We want to know what is the position between Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and the USA, Trinidad and Tobago and Russia, Iran, and getting involved and mortgaging our children's future. We have heard nothing from the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries today that could make the population feel that we are in good hands. We have a track record of eight years of the demise of the energy sector. We refine nothing. We make nothing. We have no bitumen. The Point Fortin Highway “ha” more pothole than Diego Martin, and Trinidad and Tobago is in a total state of chaos.

The Minister came here today, had an opportunity to be humble, to show, to share information, to bring forth, to answer, to appease, to let us know that the future is bright, that we will have money for children for GATE, we will have money to fix roads, we will have money for sports so footballers would not have to

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play on ESPN with a name blank out and wrong name coming through and so on. We hope to hear that. We have no confidence in this Government. We have seen the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries tell untruths and he admitted today, and now we say in this Motion that we are calling upon the Government to give all the information and be forthcoming about Dragon gas and every negotiation about the people's assets. Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Lewis.

Sen. Francis Lewis: Thank you, Mr. President. When I looked at the Motion there seems to be a proximate issue and an overarching issue. Let me speak first to the proximate issue. The question raised in the Motion is about spending US \$100 million to build a pipeline to connect the Dragon field. NGC's profits in the last year, if I saw it right, is about \$1.6 billion. One hundred million is about \$650 million. The question that policymakers face in something like this is: Is the risk worth it? And on the face of it, it would seem that the risk is worth it. In the context of this industry, the expenditure which is a great amount of money but not atypical of this industry of \$100 million would seem to be reasonable provided the various risk management approaches were used.

The reality of it is we cannot read the future. We cannot see on the horizon, and I hear a lot of anxiety around what will our neighbour do, what will the leaders do? We cannot know that, but we can take action that depending on if they zig, we zag. If they bob, we weave. And, therefore, keeping the flexibility to move I think is important that in the context of should the country spend this amount of money, on this, for me the gas is there. That is proven, as has been acknowledged by all

speakers, that it needs to be monetized. That is a desire and the aspirations, and motives of the various players, I will leave it to much brighter heads than mine to work out what that is, but I think it would seem reasonable.

So on the face of the question raised in the Motion that would be my initial thinking. But the Motion raises a larger overarching issue and it is an issue around transparency and about information sharing. It is about information being available for decision-making, and I want to approach—and I would certainly take your guidance on this, Mr. President. I hope I do not stray too far from the point. I will try my best, but if I do just pull me back in. It is begging the question of: How much is too much transparency? If I approach it at that direction I commend the Motion. It is a valuable thing and I would want to start with where I will end, which is on the whole transparency is a good thing. In some cases, it can expose wrongdoing, but more critically it improves decision-making and our ability to learn and to improve performance over the long run. But at core, there is—at what point does transparency stop being helpful and start being harmful?

Transparency is not about sharing all information all the time. Some information sharing offers very little value, and sharing every detail can ultimately backfire. The Senator who brought the Motion comes out of the labour movement and understands well negotiations and how delicately they need to be managed because you speak as a negotiator in the interest of your members. At the same time, you have got to preserve enough space for the conversation and the negotiations to happen. Transparency is about empowering with information needed to be successful, and compared to information hoarding or secretive behaviour it is easy to argue for greater transparency. But in doing so, I think we need to recognize, be careful what you ask for you might get it, because there is a

dark side to transparency. Sharing excessive information at the wrong time can create problems of information overload, it can legitimize endless debates and second-guessing of decisions.

A high level of visibility can reduce creativity as people fear the oversight, and I could not help but thinking as people were talking, as the various contributors were talking, behind the Minister and whoever the Minister happens to be in the future, there are teams of very competent, very creative people. It is right and legitimate to ask for information and to hold people up to ask, how did you come to that decision? But this is not simply the doing of a single Minister as it is in any of the Ministries. The question that we have is: How do we help and empower those people when we call for transparency? The argument for transparency lies in a wisdom of crowds. It starts with an assumption, not illegitimate, that broadening the number of people involved in decision-making will overall lead to smarter decisions and most especially will increase bribe. So the question becomes for us, as policymakers, how do you strive for a balance between transparency, not as an absolute in its own right, but transparency balanced with responsibility?

When you are involved in transactions and transactional evaluation, it can create its own set of problems and it can backfire. Creative work such as negotiations often involves non-linear detours and dead ends, and it does not necessarily benefit from a close examination continually. I suppose it is like a surgeon who has operated and he tells the patient, "You can't keep lifting the bandage and lifting the scab. For goodness sake, give the thing the time to heal." Now, what is the right balance? That is about judgment, and that is what we are looking for from our leaders.

Transparency can also cause pain without not very much gain. It can lead—and some have accused us in this country and in this House—to a blaming culture. So simply knowing almost provides an opportunity as a platform to say, “You should have known better.” But the reality is, if I start with an assumption that good people are going to give it their best shot—and people have their own motives—but if I give the benefit of the doubt I want to provide the opportunity for them, and most especially for their teams in the various Ministries, for the multiple negotiators to be able to do the work. Too much transparency can create distrust. So the question before us is: How to wheel transparency effectively? And I think that is, at core, the third part of the Motion about requesting detailed information.

Yes, it is absolutely right to question and to require accountability, and to have information come to the surface. The question that we have is: How does this not as an absolute, but as a balance, how does that best serve the country? If we have a democratic system, the petrochemical assets, yes, are owned by “the people”. It is the national patrimony, however we elect a Government to govern and governments have to be allowed to govern even as we question the judgments and the decisions that they make. So how do we have transparency as a means to an end not as an end in and out of itself? How do we emphasize learning? Because whatever our Ministers do, at some point they are going to make mistakes, and this is not malfeasance, this is not negligence. It is part of taking the lead and being a leader. And in doing that, how do we help them learn so that we do not make the same mistakes over and over again? How do we—and this might be a strange place to raise it, how do we create an opportunity for forgiveness when mistakes will get made? Sometimes forgiveness is not deserved, but other times if it was well intentioned perhaps a second chance can be useful.

So let me end with the thought of transparency is a good thing. It can expose wrongdoing. It can help make better decisions. It can increase our ability to learn and improve performance over the long run, but it is not a quick fix. If managed poorly, the consequences can be costly and transparency can have a dark side. Wise managers remember that facts do not speak for themselves. They have to be interpreted, which is why this House and the judgment of its Members matter.

The value in the Motion is the challenge to us in defining and articulating the practices we are to follow. It is not, I think, necessarily about a detailed account of its approaches and providing a report every three months. There are times where that specificity is useful, but I struggle in listening to the contributions to understand what is the overarching principle that will govern transparency in the Dragon deal, in the wider petrochemical sector on which we so heavily depend. Let me end with I appreciate the assurances given by the Minister and I take them at face value. However, I think what we are looking for and which the Motion raises, is how to improve predictability based on quality information on a timely basis.

The last comment I would like to make, Mr. President, is about trust. Trust may or may not happen. Trust is simultaneously both expected and it needs to be earned. Whether we trust our neighbours or we do not, there is a quality that many in this country have learnt, particularly in the labour movement, that even if you do not think you could trust you never stop talking. And how you talk, what you say, when you say it really does not matter because tomorrow will come, and when it does the ability to work forward with them, perhaps in a very transactional way, is going to be necessary, and hard words at the wrong time can make it very difficult to move forward. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

5.45 p.m.

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Damian Lyder: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, I thank for this opportunity, though we are coming down and winding down this evening on this Private Members' Day with a mere 15 minutes in hand. I had no intentions—I had absolutely no intentions of speaking on this Motion. I think the hon. Sen. Wade Mark and Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh did ample justice to this Motion and, of course, I heard the Independent Senators behind me stand up here also expressing a level of concern about this whole Dragon gas—what I want to call a “Dragon gas mamaguy”.

You see, Mr. President, the icing on the cake was sitting down here listening to my honourable colleague, Sen. Anil Roberts, stand up here and give a full and detailed account from his head. Because, you see, Mr. President, we have grown so accustomed to listening to the Government come here year after year, budget debate after budget debate, with the same mamaguys, “mamagisms” and schisms, and that is what we have seen. And that is why we have seen Sen. Anil Roberts stand up here today and not only expose this Government when it comes to the mamaguy about this Dragon gas, but also show the absolute collapse of the energy sector under this PNM Government.

Sen. Roberts: Correct.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: Fail, fail. Collapsed like Rohan's highway.

Sen. D. Lyder: You see, Mr. President, I do not want to go into all the details that Sen. Roberts spoke about lest the Minister of standing—I mean, Tourism, Culture and the Arts gets up on Standing Orders and talks about the repetition. But I want to break down my debate into three areas, Mr. President. You see, when we look at this Motion, it starts off saying:

“Whereas the United States Government has granted a licence allowing Trinidad and Tobago to develop the Dragon Gas Field in Venezuela;”

Now, that is one full debate by itself when we think about the vulnerable nature of geopolitics today, when we think about what is going on currently—and I will get to that in a moment—what is going on currently or what went on in the past, and what is going on currently.

And when I deal with this part that deals with the licence to the United States of America, I want not only this Senate to hear, but the people of Trinidad and Tobago to know, it is not just about Dragon gas today, but it is about the history of oil and gas with the Government of Venezuela and what they have done over the years since the 1990s to now, since when Hugo Chávez, the then President came into power then, and how vulnerable that sector was not only for the Venezuelan Government and the people of Venezuela, but for international companies and countries who invested billions of dollars into Venezuela. That is an important thing to understand because on second part of this Motion, Mr. President, it speaks towards US \$100 million to be spent on 17 kilometres of pipeline. So we want to know who is footing the bill for this \$100 million.

When we take ourselves back to the \$233 million that this Government wasted—

Sen. Nakhid: Wasted.

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Sen. D. Lyder:—in Atlantic LNG in Train 1, I did not hear any of our partners in that Train 1—I believe it is BP, Shell, a Chinese company I believe—I did not hear about them spending this money. But we are hearing about US \$100 million to be spent. Is this the money of the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago like that \$233 million that was spent? And this is US \$100 million—

Sen. Roberts: Multiplied by nine.

Sen. D. Lyder: And this is why this Motion:

“...calls...”—for—“...the Government to provide a detailed account...”—on the—“...approach of this project involving entities such as Shell,”—we are seeing Shell’s name called again here—“the National Gas Company...”—called again.

All the usually suspects are back. It is the big return of the usual suspects of the Atlantic LNG Train 1

Sen. Roberts: Correct.

Sen. D. Lyder: That is what we are seeing here. Who is spending the \$100 million? Is Shell doing it? I do not know if they are great; if they are great.

Sen. Roberts: Well, the Minister could have told us.

Sen. D. Lyder: But you see, Mr. President, before I even get into the history of Venezuela—

Sen. Roberts: “I feel is Coosal’s”.

Sen. D. Lyder:—get into the geopolitics that has always maintained itself in a negative fashion in Venezuela, with countries such as Spain, with American oil companies that were exiled by the then Chávez regime—and let me remind you and everyone else, Mr. President, that Chávez regime is the same regime as Maduro.

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President Chávez passed away, Maduro took over, the regime did not change. But I will tell you what happened though. Opposition Members got locked up. There was gerrymandering, there was a destruction and a depletion of democracy in that country, Venezuela. And we have nothing against Venezuela, you know. The people of Venezuela are beautiful people, they are amazing people. It is not their fault that a level of dictatorship engulfed their country over the decades gone by.

Sen. Nakhid: Kind of like Trinidad.

Sen. Roberts: “Is Sookhai tell we that”.

Sen. D. Lyder: But, Mr. President, let me tell you before I get to the history. You see, I stand up here as a businessman in this country and I have sat with many different business people, whether it is in the various chambers of commerce, speaking to business people today.

Sen. Roberts: What did they say?

Sen. D. Lyder: Some of my colleagues on the other side know exactly those chambers I speak about. He will understand.

Sen. Roberts: Chaguanas?

Sen. D. Lyder: He will understand, right. And, Mr. President, when we sit here and listen to the hon. Minister of Finance come year after year after year with this Dragon gas, Dragon gas, Dragon gas promise to the businesses—

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Since 2016.

Sen. D. Lyder: Since 2016, we are listening to this. The business people are listening to this. The citizens of our country who are struggling and suffering, who are unemployed today, have been listening to this with great hope. Even single year, business people are sitting down in this country and asking themselves, “Do I

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continue investing in Trinidad and Tobago. How will I survive with this problem of foreign exchange?" Because this Dragon gas is supposed to be the big salvation for the foreign exchange crisis we have in Trinidad and Tobago.

What is the reality of the situation under this Government? The reality of the situation is that they continue—they came here today—the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries came here today with an opportunity to be transparent with the country, to tell us where we are with this Dragon gas deal, who signed the deal, who signed the MOU. Every single budget, we see them running and scampering to Venezuela signing a new MOU. Just now, we will have a collection of MOUs all over the wall of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries the amount of MOUs have been signed. And us business people are sitting here waiting with bated breath to hear what is the promise, when is it going to come, when are we going to see money from this, when are we going to get the US dollars from this. Right?

You know what the reality of the situation is, Mr. President? The business people of Trinidad and Tobago are starting to lose confidence in this Government and what they say about Dragon gas. What is the reality of the situation? The reality of the situation is one-third of the Point Lisas Industrial Estate has shut down, US dollars gone. Petrotrin has been shut down, US \$350 million gone per year; gone. ArcelorMittal gone under this Government. And how do we replace the US dollars lost? With promises; PNM promises that never materialize from this Dragon gas thing.

And I heard them speaking about Loran-Manatee, and what the Loran-Manatee will bring. That was discussed here today. Let me tell you, Mr. President, I sat down in a room, previous to the budget debate this year, with the American

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Chamber of Commerce, none other than them. I am not going to call names because I do not believe I need to brandish the names of such hard-working, diligent persons, especially from the energy sector, but we posed the question. We said, what is the latest on the Dragon gas. If I tell you who the company was “is laugh”. I will read out here and if you call the name from the Motion, I will whistle.

Mr. President, so no idea of what is happening with the Dragon gas. And when it comes to Loran-Manatee, you know what they told us? At soonest we could think about seeing income coming from that by 2028. That is how long we have to wait until we see any form of US dollars coming from the Loran-Manatee field. So we asked one more question after that. We said to them—because given the issue with the US dollars in this country and the fact that we hear nothing about Dragon gas, Loran-Manatee not coming on until 2028 at soonest—what are the chances of this country growing or at least remaining flat when it comes to gas production? And the response we got from a senior member of the energy industry was that the chances—he had to choose his words very carefully, but the chances of us remaining flat, meaning the same amount of gas, is very unlikely.

So we are going to continue to decline and decline with gas production in this country and yet the entire country is holding on to a promise about Dragon gas.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Since 2016.

Sen. D. Lyder: Since 2016, we are holding on to this promise and you are asking business people in this country to continue to invest millions of dollars in this country under these circumstances and with a promise of a deal called the Dragon gas coming from a country where their history has shown instability when it comes to democracy?

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The time will not permit me—I will come back because I know I have more time when I come back. I will give you the history of Venezuela.

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

Sen. D. Lyder: I will give you the history when it comes back. But, Mr. President, I will give you the history of Venezuela from the days of Chávez, when he booted the likes of Exxon and those out of the country to the days in 2000—what is it?—2020, when they were sanctioned by the then republican—government under the republicans—

Sen. Roberts: 2016.

Sen. D. Lyder:—2016—under the republicans and now.

Mr. President, look, this is hot off the press. The International Court will rule on December 01, 2023. Let me read it for you, Mr. President. Let me read for you.

Sen. Roberts: December 1st and the referendum is December 3rd. Yeah.

Sen. Mark: [*Interruption*]

Mr. President: Okay, so I am hearing three contributions and I need to hear one. Sen. Lyder—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder, Sen. Lyder, source, title, date.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. President, a letter from the International Court of Justice, Peace Palace, Copenhagen. Those are the Europeans, Mr. President.

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

Sen. D. Lyder:

“*Arbitral Award of 3 October 1899 (Guyana v. Venezuela)*

Request for the indication of provisional measures

The Court to deliver its Order on Friday 1 December 2023”.

That is how close we are.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. President, The Hague; The Hague where they tried criminals after World War II:

“THE HAGUE, 28 November 2023. On Friday 1 December 2023, the International Court of Justice will deliver its Order on the Request for the indication of provisional measures submitted by Guyana on 30 October 2023...in the case concerning the *Arbitral Award on 3 October 1899 (Guyana v. Venezuela)*. A public sitting will take place at 3 p.m. at the Peace Palace in The Hague...”

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

Sen. Mitchell: Mr. President, 46(1) please.

Sen. D. Lyder:

“...during which Judge Joan E. Donoghue, President of the Court, will read the Court’s Order.”

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder, Sen. Lyder, take a seat.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. President, what more must I say?

Mr. President: Take a seat, Sen. Lyder. First and foremost—

Sen. D. Lyder: Sorry, Mr. President.

Mr. President: As much—I know—

Sen. D. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Stop. You could be in flight all you want, when I stand, you come down.

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

Mr. President: Point of order, Minister.

Dragon Gas Field in Venezuela
(Development of)
Sen. Lyder (cont'd)

2023.11.28

Sen. Mitchell: 46(1) please; 46(1). It does not deal with the Essequibo or arbitral awards or anything like that. The Motion is very, very succinct.

Sen. D. Lyder: Mr. President, he is debating. Please rule.

Mr. President: So again—relax. Keep your arguments succinct and always connect it back to what is before us. Continue.

Sen. D. Lyder: Yes. Mr. President, it is relevant because of the referendum that is coming up because of the pending elections that is coming up.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Lyder: And because of the fact that this Dragon gas deal is depending on the support of the United States of America not giving them sanctions, Mr. President. That is why it is relevant. So we must all hold on to December 1st to find out if the Dragon gas will lose its wings. That is what is going to happen. The whole country is now going to be waiting on bated breath as well.

I am running out of time, I see mere seconds, Mr. President. So as I close off in the last few seconds, I will hold my fire to the next sitting where I will give you the historical breach of democracy by Venezuela all the way up until today and we put our hopes on this Dragon gas deal. Mr. President, I see have to sit.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell): Mr. President, I hate to disturb my friend in full flight.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: But I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, before I put the question on the adjournment,

leave has been granted for two matters to be raised on the Motion for the adjournment of the Senate. Sen. Mark.

**Persistent Decline in Labour Force Participation Rate
(Negative Effects of)**

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Mr. President, after that wonderful contribution from my colleague. Congratulations.

Mr. President, I have two matters, as you have rightly stated, and they are probing and we are seeking clarification. The first one deals with the persistent decline in the labour force participation rate and its negative effect on the national economic output or our national economic output—negative that is—in this country.

Now, Mr. President, we need to understand when we speak to the issue of the labour force participation rate, we are talking about:

“...a measure”—according to a definition of the labour force participation rate—“of the proportion of a country’s working age population that engages actively in the labour market, either by working or looking for work...”

And it provides an indication of:

“...the size of the supply of labour available to engage in production of goods and services, relative to the population at working age.”

That is the definition of the labour force participation rate.

Now, Mr. President, when we look at the *Review of the Economy 2023* and we go to page 206 and we look at Appendix 13, there is a bold heading:

“Population, Labour Force and Employment...”

And what does that tell us to understand this concept of the labour force participation rate? It tells us, one, there is something called the “non-institutional

population”. That is the population between the age range of 15 years and over. In Trinidad and Tobago, in 2017, that was just about 1,071,000; in 2018, it was 1,072,000; in 2019, it was 1,076,000; in 2020, Mr. President, what was it? It was just about 1,800,000. At the end of 2023, it stood at 1,800,000.

What was the labour force at that time, Mr. President? Between 633,000 in 2016, down to 602,000 at the end of 2023. And when we look at the persons who were employed, it varied in 2017, 603,000, and as we speak provisionally at the end of September of 2023, some 576,000 persons employed.

6:05 p.m.

Mr. President, the importance of this is what I am about to tell you. For you to get an understanding of the population that is available to work in Trinidad and Tobago, and to contribute to output, production, productivity, you have to take your non-institutional population of a million and minus the sum of the working population which varies between 600,000 and sometimes 590,000, 580,000, and you get the difference. So, what this tells you is that we have close to about 500,000 people to about 600,000 people in our country, who are willing to work, would like to work but they cannot work for all kinds of different reasons. And that is contributing to our low output levels in Trinidad and Tobago because you have a population of close to 600,000 people who cannot work, who are available to work but cannot find work. And that is what this question about labour force participation is all about.

Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. President, has the worst record in the world as it relates to labour force participation rate. We are down to almost 55 per cent. A country like the Bahamas is 70 per cent—little Bahamas—70 per cent. That is hampering national output and production, it is avoiding young people from

getting meaningful employment in T&T. And when they cannot find jobs, Mr. President, they fall through the cracks and I am coming to that in a short while. You have a lot of persons who would like to be employed and they cannot be employed, right. And what is happening, Mr. President, when people are looking for jobs and they cannot find jobs, the devil finds work for idle hands. And you have a lot of young people falling through the cracks and becoming part of the gang and criminal culture in Trinidad and Tobago, because of our failure as a nation to address this issue of upping—ramping up the labour force participation rate in our nation. We are—you know, when we were in office, the United National Congress, we were up to about 64 per cent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. W. Mark: Mr. President, 64 per cent. Since the PNM came to power, Mr. President, there has been regression, and at the end of 2023 it is predicted we will be 55.4 per cent labour force participation rate. Where we are supposed to be, Mr. President, is in the 70s, 70s, 70s—maybe 71, 72 going up to 75 per cent. And it shows that the Government has no vision, they have no plan, they have no policy. Yet still they will tell us, Mr. President, that we have an unemployment rate of 4.7 per cent. We have 4.7 per cent according to the CSO, but in Trinidad and Tobago, we have close to 600,000 people who are available to work but they cannot be gainfully employed because the Government has not put out economic policies to ensure that those citizens are able to become part of our labour force.

So, Mr. President, that is why I have raised this issue today to encourage the Government, and in this instance the Minister of Labour, to link with his colleagues in planning and finance to see what they can do combined—in a combined way to ramp up the labour force participation rate in our beautiful

country, Mr. President. Because we have what is called a large economically inactive labour population in our nation, and we have to do something about it. And that is why I have sought today to outline to this hon. Senate, the trajectory, the negative trajectory between 2017 under this PNM: 59.2 per cent labour force participation rate. In 2018 it dropped to 59.1 per cent; in 2019 it went to 57.3 per cent; in 2020 “it gone” to 55.9 per cent; in 2021 it is down to 54.8 per cent; in 2022, 55.0 per cent; and provisionally for 2023, 55.7 per cent. Mr. President, we leave—

Sen. Mitchell: Define it.

Sen. W. Mark: But I just told to you. Are you—

Sen. Mitchell: Define it.

Hon. Senator: Do it slowly.

Hon. Senator:—a bit slow.

Mr. President: Sen. Mark, you have mere seconds.

Sen. W. Mark: Okay, well, I cannot help you.

Mr. President: Okay, so you cannot—

Sen. W. Mark: I cannot help you.

Mr. President: Good.

Sen. W. Mark: So, Mr. President, all I am doing this evening is bringing a subject matter and a very important matter for the Minister’s attention so that he could provide some perspectives as to what the Government is doing to ramp up the labour force participation rate, which is good for national economic growth, national development, and national output along with productivity. I thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister of Labour.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Labour (The Hon. Stephen Mc Clashie): Thank you, Mr. President. I wish to thank you for this opportunity to respond to Sen. Mark's question. I would like to say that the Senator was quite on-spot with his definition of what is the labour force participation rate. He was also on point with the statistics that were read out and—except for one that there was a 65 per cent participation rate, we never quite got there. The best it got in 2014 was 61.9, but I do not make much of—or a whole lot of that. Mr. President, we would all agree that the participation rate, the labour force participation rate has a direct co-relation with GDP and it has a positive relationship; when one goes up, the other goes up, when one goes down, the other goes down. And therefore, it is a good indicator also of how we manage our economy.

It is, however, unreasonable to claim that there has been a persistent decline. From all the statistics that were read it is quite obvious that the rates were all over time in and about the same place. The Senator raised an issue of 600,000 people available to work in general, and he said between 500,000 and 600,000. That is also true, but what he did not consider is that of the other 400,000 workers that are available according to the definition, that many of them chose over time, to do other things. For instance, they go back to school for upskilling exercises, some take early retirement, and some just drop out of the labour force because they have no motivation or they feel that there are factors that do not support them in the work place. Other indicators such as employment rates, inflation rates, crude oil prices, government policy, also play a critical role in this.

6.15 p.m.

So we also have—and the data shows that people who entered school rose from 85,000 in 2016, to just about 95,000 in 2023. Now, that is a significant movement and when you take the difference into consideration, it reduces the labour force participation rate. What we sometimes do not tend to look at is what is happening also with women who are engaged in household duties. And an interesting statistic came up that in 2016, we had about 107 women who became homemakers, and adding to that, it is quite a valuable endeavour. But it went up to 120,000, which nets off at about—an increase of about 13,000 women who came out of the market, in terms of being able to provide or wanting to work.

We also have an ageing population, and people now opt to retire earlier. And when they exit the labour force at ages below the 60 or 65, depending on where you are, then you end up with that part of the population is still taken up in the statistics that would show that you have a labour force available to you that you do not really have.

Now, the question put is really about what is Government doing in relation to looking at the labour force participation and ensuring that it does not decline significantly and in fact that it increases. So within the Ministry of Labour, we recognize that we have a lot of data but we sometimes do not have any information. And as a result of that, we have mandated a division within the Ministry of Labour, the Labour Market Information Unit, to do a number of baseline studies, one of which we just finished and should be releasing within a month or so. We recognized that we cannot plan properly, we cannot determine educationally what fields we should be pushing people towards and so on, if we do not have labour market information, both from the supply and from the demand side.

Right now we are heavily pushing on the supply side by sending people to school and we are not sure when they come out whether they could job get jobs or not. And we sometimes do not have information on the demand side, where it gives the critical information as to what skills are actually required by employers, what kind of experience do employers need, and that whole kind of information that we have. So we are embarking on several of those studies that will help us in making some decisions that would aid in our planning, both nationally and in education and TVET, and so on.

We also have, interestingly, a number of programmes that tend to engage people. One of the flagship programmes is the OJT Programme. And the OJT is designed in a structured way to bring work-based training to a number of young people who would otherwise be idle. We are in the process—well, it is a continuing process where most—

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

Sen. The Hon. S. Mc Clashie: Yes—of those people are engaged in government agencies and statutory authorities. We are aiming to expand that programme into the private sector and to match skill sets with jobs so that, at the end of the exercise, people have real experience, not just paper-based experience that—back in my time, as young men, we used to tell the older men in the oil industry that—who said they had 35 years' experience, and we would say to them, “You had one experience 35 times, not 35 years' experience. We would show you what experience is.”

Likewise, I think that this programme, and programmes like even expanding the apprenticeship programmes through work being done by the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Education and so on, we aim to give and make

our young people better able to enter into the workforce at more meaningful and productive spaces.

We also have the expansion, and we got approval recently to expand our offices in Canada to enhance transfer of nationals into the Canadian work farm programme. We have been stymied a bit in some instances but the more bodies on the ground is the more people you get working. So it is not that we are sitting and looking at the data and saying that there is not a need. We agree there is a need, but how we fulfil that through the various programmes we have is what we are attempting to do.

So, Mr. President, I understand the concern, and I hope that I have given the Senator a little assurance that we are considering his concerns and working on it. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Mark.

Catastrophic Number of Primary and Secondary School Dropouts

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, the matter on the Motion for the adjournment, which we have just concluded, is inextricably linked to the one I am about to raise. Because we know the quality of the workforce is fundamentally, critically important if we are to talk or if we are to speak to the issue of increased output, growth, development, improving the quality of life and standard of living of the citizenry of our country, and ensuring that there is equality of opportunities for all.

But, Mr. President, to have these indices achieved, there is absolute need for us to ensure that the children who attend both primary and secondary schools, with

my emphasis being on the secondary level, they have to stay the course. They must complete their education and their training in whatever fields that they choose so that, at the end of the process, they can graduate as a technician or academically with their passes and go on to higher education and learning. All these things will contribute to a more prosperous, a more stabilized society. And in terms of cultural expression, in a positive way, it will lead to growth in that area.

But what have we witnessed over the last few years? What we have witnessed, Mr. President, is a catastrophic decline in the number or the catastrophic fall, not necessarily in the context of persons staying in school, but what we have seen is that because of cracks in the education structure and because of growing poverty, inequality, destitution, squalor in our nation, many young people, boys and girls, male and female, have had to drop out of the education system, particularly primary and secondary schools pupils and students. So we have gotten statistics from the Ministry of Education telling us that every year, Mr. President, between 2020 and 2022, we have had close to 2,800 pupils and students dropping out of the school system in Trinidad and Tobago.

We have also been advised—and I do not have the data on it to support it, so I can be guided on it—when it comes to the secondary school system, on a yearly basis, we are being told that between 1,500 to 2,000 students, they drop out of the secondary school system. And many, many, many occasions, Mr. President, they cannot be found, they cannot be located. So these children who can make a tremendous contribution to nation-building and to national development, they just disappear into thin air. We do not know where they are, what they are doing but what we do know is murders are increasing in the country, more home invasions are taking place, more gangs are being developed and the growth rate is

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Sen. Mark (cont'd)

expounding. So we have to conclude, without any scientific studies being done, that many of our young children, who should be in school and going on to higher education, they are now in gangs. They are now involved in activities that is not healthy to our economy and economic development. And there is where, Mr. President, we think it is very important that the Government has to invest resources into that area. We have to know where our children are. We have to know where they are. So when they drop out of the school, we must find them and we must find out what is the problem and assist them where we have to assist them. Maybe something is taking place and the Minister will tell us, but it is not enough. It is not enough.

Mr. President, I got some data based on a question my colleague, Sen. Dr. Paul Richards, raised some time ago in this Parliament, and the Ministry supplied it, and they also supplied it at a JSC level, which paints a very frightening picture. Between 2018 and 2023, the Ministry of Education provided us with a performance matrix in the Secondary Entrance Assessment area. And, Mr. President, I do not want to go through all the education divisions for you, but there are three that, to me, represents cause for concern, whether it is 2018, whether it is 2019, whether it is 2020, '21, '22, '23. But I will give you two quick examples so you will understand.

6.30 p.m.

Mr. President.

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

Sen. Mark: Mr. President, may I say in the two minutes I have, that in Caroni, in St. George East, and I think in Port of Spain, if I am not mistaken. What you

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Sen. Mark (cont'd)

have is a lot of children under-performing, getting less than 30 percent, less than 40 percent, less than 50 percent. Now, I know that there are remedial classes being held and that sort of thing. But what was alarming is that during the COVID period 2020—2021, 2022, in particular into 2022. Mr. President, would you believe that close to 46,700 children were never logged on to the online learning platform?

Hon. Senator: Wow!

Mr. Mark: Yes. I mean to say, we are talking about close to 50,000 children. So, we have to get from the Government some perspective as to the kind of interventionist policies and measures that are being taken to save our children. We have to save our children—

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Mark: —because they are the future. So we call on the hon. Minister, to share with this Parliament today what are the concrete measures being taken by the Ministry of Education in conjunction with other Ministries to get at these thousands of young people who have fallen through the cracks. Mr. President, we need to find them, we need to locate them, and we need to revitalize them so that they can make a positive contribution to our national development as a nation and as a people.

Mr. President, this is my intervention. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister of Education.

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, the Senator has raised a very important issue that has been brought to national attention frontally through the Ministry of Education, and our several pronouncements about the importance of the education system, and what is happening with our students, and our sharing with the national community about our education realities, and what needs to be done for our students in Trinidad and Tobago.

Just to explain how the Ministry counts a dropout. A dropout is defined as a student under the age of 16 who initially enrolled as a part of a cohort in a given school year but is no longer enrolled by November 30 of the following school year. And under 16 is important because that is the compulsory age of schooling in Trinidad and Tobago. So where you have a student that is over 16 that no longer chooses to attend school, the Ministry of Education is limited in its ability to make that school attendance compulsory.

So, on the basis of the data we have at the Ministry of Education, over the period of 2017 to present, at primary school, the average amount of dropouts per year would be 100 students, and in secondary school, which is 0.09 percent, and in secondary schools, it is estimated at 0.81 percent or 680 students.

Now, why students drop out of school there are a myriad of reasons, lack of parental supervision and support being the primary reason; poor socioeconomic circumstances also contribute; mental health, behavioural, or physical challenges; and lack of interest which is linked to parental supervision and support.

So, whatever the reason this is taking place, this is of interest to the Ministry of Education and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and every citizen of

Trinidad and Tobago should be concerned about this.

So, due to the fact that you have different reasons for student attrition, there are different ways that we use at the Ministry of Education to support, and not just the Ministry of Education, as I would speak to other Arms of the Government that are involved in dealing with the student attrition.

Student truancy is an offence. The Education Act requires students under the age of 16 to attend school, so when we have students who have repeated unexcused absences from school, it starts with the teacher or principal reaching out to the parents to find out what exactly is the situation at home, why this child is not attending school.

In some cases, that can solve the situation. In other cases, due to other reasons, you do not get that support. Sometimes it is as simple as the parent has an out-of-date phone number on file, so you are trying to reach the parent and you cannot get through to a parent to find out why a child is not attending school.

6.35 p.m.

In those cases, it is escalated now to the Student Support Services Division where the school social worker or the guidance counsellor, more likely the school social worker now attempts to do a home visit in some cases to try to find the student and the parent and to understand what is happening in the level of the home. These school social workers interact very closely with the social development officers out of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. So if there is a difficulty, sometimes an economic difficulty, they can assist in trying to provide support to the home so that the child can resume school attendance. Where this does not result in the child resuming regular attendance at school, now we turn to the community police and we ask them to intervene, not to

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and Secondary School Dropouts
Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly (cont'd)

lock up parents but to go to the home and see if they can now, through their mitigation, get the student to come back to school. That is always the primary focus to get our students to come back to school.

So that is the process we would take and once the child is under 16 we would continue doing this to try to get the child, and once we can find the child, we do so. We write to the community police identifying the child, the parent, the last known address, the last known phone number and we ask for their assistance to bring the children back to school because there is a point at which the school social workers can go no more, and that is when we need, at the Ministry of Education, other arms of the Government to come in and to assist us.

Now, where we have parents with socioeconomic challenges, we as the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and this is not this Government, this has happened for years in Trinidad and Tobago and when we attend different education conferences, many countries are amazed by the lengths to which Trinidad and Tobago goes to get our children to school by helping to reduce the economic cost. So, we have known for years that the PTSC works with the Ministry to provide transport for children to get to school as far as possible. For years, we have had the National School Feeding Programme, and they provide millions of breakfasts and lunches for children at school so that, that no longer becomes a barrier to our children attending school, because if children are challenged in this way, then the tendency for them to drop out is greater. So these are social programmes that take place through the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with other agencies, to be able to assist to reduce the economic cost for our children.

Students with physical issues can access free healthcare. Where we have mental health and behavioural issues, we have staff at the Student Support Services

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at the lowest level, starting at the granular level with the school social workers and the guidance counsellors to provide support. You have diagnostic specialists, you have psychologists who operate in that space as well to assist students who have mental health or behavioural issues to be able to overcome those challenges and stay in school.

We also have student aides, which are provided, over 400 of them throughout the country. We do need more so we have partnered with the OJT Programme to provide student aides in school. So where we have students with physical challenges, cognitive challenges, those student aides attend every single class every single day of school with the children so that those children are not kept back by their disability so that they cannot attend school. So all of this happens routinely to assist our students in getting into schools and having a productive school experience.

To address the issue of lack of interest and low performance, these are also very important things that affect school and student attrition. So the remediation programme which was launched in 80 primary schools and 26 secondary schools, these schools were specifically chosen because they have the characteristics which indicate that they need support. You have high student attrition, you have low student performance, you have students who commit a lot of infractions. And so these schools were chosen so that we can provide more resources to them to prevent student attrition at the source.

So we would have increased the number of school social workers and guidance counsellors in these schools. So they have a dedicated school social worker and a guidance counsellor who can deal with the caseload because the caseload is often a lot more in these schools. We increased the learning time for students. So the

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Vacation Revision Programme and the After School Education Programme where we provide free extra tuition for these students, again, in an effort to engage them. This programme is called Re-engaging for Success, and it is because we recognize that our students need to be engaged. If they are engaged, they are less likely to drop out and so that is what this programme addresses.

Upgrading the facilities for Student Support Services by putting dedicated officers, we recognize that in some of these schools, we needed dedicated space because social workers and guidance counsellors—

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

Hon. Dr. Gadsby-Dolly:—they need that space to be able to interact directly with students and parents. They run a parenting-in-education programme to, again, involve the parents in the education process.

We have started a restorative justice programme in 11 of these schools where we have hired personnel to engage the school operations in a different way to allow our students to deal with conflict and challenges differently so that again they are able to succeed in the space of their schools.

We have held meetings with the Girl Guides, the Boy Scouts, and the Cadets to encourage them to form chapters in these schools and we have linked them with the NPTA to provide the resources necessary to man these chapters in the schools. We have introduced a different way of teaching and learning in these schools where they start the TVET at a younger age again to engage our students, and we have introduced the secondary exam formally called the Primary School Leaving, it is called the Lower Secondary Proficiency Exam. So that if our students leave school before Form III, in Form II they have this exam. So at least if they fall away, some of them are older students in Form I even, 14 and 15 years old, so that

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if they fall away, they do this exam in Form II so they have something in their hand that gives them the basic qualifications for government employment. So we have done that as well.

You would have seen us reach out and partner with the Ministry of Youth Development for MiLAT to help students who are at the risk of being expelled from school to have some continuity of education and transformation. And let me just mention in probably the very few seconds I have left, that Trinidad and Tobago has a number of second chance options for our students through the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. If students drop out, they are classified as CHINS and they have the MiLAT, MYPART, CCC, and other training programmes.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has the adult education programme. The Ministry of Education pays for a free chance to redo your CXC and gives free tuition for that, so even if students are victims of the dropout syndrome there are opportunities in Trinidad and Tobago, and we have done well as a country to provide that so that that is not the be all and end all for the life of our citizens, there are opportunities. Ministry of Community Development, lots of training opportunities, so even if our students fall prey to this they can become productive citizens. Mr. President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.43 p.m.