HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[Madam Speaker in the Chair]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the hon. Penelope Beckles Robinson, MP, Member for Arima, Mr. Dinesh Rambally, MP, Member for Chaguanas West and Ms. Khadijah Ameen, MP, Member for St. Augustine, who have requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

CONDOLENCES

(ARTHUR SANDERSON)

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, Mr. Arthur Sanderson, a former Member of Parliament, passed away on Sunday, November 26, 2023. Mr. Sanderson served as the Member of Parliament for Fyzabad during the Third Republican Parliament from February 1987 to November 1991. I now invite hon. Members to pay their respective tributes to Mr. Sanderson. I now call upon the Member for Diego Martin Central.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Symon de Nobriga): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I stand here today on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to pay tribute to one of our own whose earthly pilgrimage has now ended. Today the political bibliography of this country is missing one page, as one of our hon. Member has transitioned to the

Madam Speaker, Arthur Sanderson epitomized the phrase “country before party” as his political lineage spanned not one, not two, but three political parties, always desiring nothing more than to serve the people. His political career was a natural next step some would say to his very active involvement in the trade union movement, rising, as he did to, become the Vice-President of the OWTU Fyzabad/Palo Seco Branch. But even before that, he served this country briefly as a member of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

A former county councillor for the Apex Fyzabad district, Mr. Sanderson was part of the four-prong amalgamation called the National Alliance for Reconstruction, which swept into power in 1986. Though a candidate originally for the Democratic Action Congress, he found himself on the NAR ticket due, we are told, to the formula followed for the allocation of seats, and entered this Parliament as the representative for the Fyzabad constituency. During that term he served as the Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Settlements and Public Utilities.

The demise of the NAR in 1991 did not deter Mr. Sanderson from seeking to continue his representation for the people of Fyzabad. But rather than return to the DAC, or join any of the other parties that comprised the NAR, Arthur Sanderson entered the 1991 general election campaign as an Independent candidate. Even as he bowed out of active politics after though, Arthur never stopped campaigning for the improvement in the quality of life for the people of Fyzabad. He became a pivotal figure in civil society, presiding over the Siparia Network of Civil Society from 2006 to 2008, and leading another group called Communities United to Fight Underdevelopment.
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Hon. S. de. Nobriga (cont’d)

Such was his embark, upon his death persons from across the political divide were unanimous both in their praise for a life well lived, and for the magnanimity that Mr. Sanderson always demonstrated. His love was for people first, regardless of their political affiliation. It was that love for people and his community that saw him devote his time, energy, and resources to the establishment of the Sanderson Heritage Park, a well-known landmark in the Fyzabad community that is managed today by his children. Arthur pioneered a cottage industry for women, providing opportunities for skill development in art and craft. His commitment extended to the major improvements in the Deltones Panyard, fostering community engagement, cultural expression, and providing opportunities to engage youth in the neighbouring communities.

While Mr. Sanderson’s sojourn in the politics of this country, saw him traverse many political parties, he eventually came home to the PNM and was the education officer for Party Group 1 in the Fyzabad constituency and a representative for the constituency group being elected to both positions during the 2022 internal elections. He served as a member of past executives in PNM Fyzabad constituency, and was even a general election candidate in 2002 for the PNM, amassing 8,017 votes, but unfortunately, losing to Chandresh Sharma.

Madam Speaker, Arthur Sanderson’s journey from community activism, to trade unionism, to representational politics encapsulates a life dedicated to the service of others. His legacy remains not only in political milestones, but also in tangible developments, enriched lives and strengthen community bonds. Arthur’s story is a testament to the transformative power of dedication, vision and a deep understanding of the importance of both community and family.

On behalf of all of us on this side, I offer my sincerest condolences to his family and the people of Fyzabad whose cause he championed until his last. I pray
that his soul and the soul of all the faithful departed Members of this House may rest in eternal peace.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Fyzabad.

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

**Dr. Lackram Bodee (Fyzabad):** Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to bring condolences and pay tribute on behalf of the Opposition to former Member of Parliament Arthur Sanderson. When Arthur Maxwell Sanderson departed this life on the 26th November, 2023, he had exceeded his biblical allotment of three scores and 10 by some four years, yet the cry in Fyzabad was that he was gone too soon. He was hailed as a local hero who contributed much to and advocated for a lot more for his beloved community of Fyzabad. The many tributes at his funeral last Monday were testimony to a man who had left an indelible mark on the lives of many and on the soul of his beloved community. Mr. Sanderson had been known as an advocate for his community and was committed deeply so to social justice.

After a brief spell in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, which he left in 1970, Arthur Sanderson went on to become a county councillor for the then electoral district of Apex, Fyzabad during the period 1983 to 1986, in what was then called the St. Patrick County Council, now known as the Siparia Borough Corporation. In fact, he started his political career one may say and his life in the arena of activism when he joined the OWTU, the Oil Field Workers Trade Union, and became the Vice-President of the Fyzabad/Palo Seco Branch. It was there he advocated for the rights and welfare of workers.

In 1986, following the victory of the National Alliance for Reconstruction in that general elections, Mr. Sanderson was elected as a Member of Parliament for
Fyzabad in the Third Republican Parliament, serving from 1986 to 1991. Mr. Sanderson was part of the team that achieved a historic victory to remove the long standing Government at that time, and he was so to speak, part of the winds of change which brought new hope and a fresh perspective to the governance of Trinidad and Tobago.

During his five-year term as a Member of Parliament for Fyzabad, he also served as parliamentary secretary in the Ministry of Settlements and Public Utilities, from 1988 to 1991, demonstrating once again his passion for public service and the upliftment of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. In 1991, after demitting office, Arthur Sanderson remained a powerful voice in Fyzabad as he remained committed in the struggle for improvement and equity to Fyzabad particularly, in the areas of sport, culture and many other community activities. His creation and supervision of the Sanderson Heritage Park in Fyzabad, was his vision of an oasis for relaxation and the niche for eco-tourism.

Born and raised in Fyzabad, Mr. Sanderson attended the Fyzabad Intermediate EC School, and later pursued tertiary studies in Jamaica. He was very passionate about this community, and even stood as an Independent candidate for that constituency in the 1991 general elections.

Beyond politics, he was a pivotal figure in civil society, presiding over several NGOs, including the Siparia Network of Civil Society, leading another NGO by the name of Communities United to Fight Underdevelopment, and also served as President of the Fyzabad Improvement Committee. He was a passionate advocate for the availability and accessibility of water, that basic need for his constituency by overseeing the laying of pipelines and he even marched to Port of Spain to advocate for water for all. His work transcended borders, earning him the title of Goodwill Ambassador of the State of Houston, Texas. His strategic
planning and input also foresaw the expansion of the Butler Anderson Avenue, which has transformed Fyzabad into a hub of business and trade.

When I became a Member of Parliament in 2015, I remember very clearly, within my first month of Office, Mr. Arthur Sanderson, a very humble figure, coming into my office with an envelope in his hand and we sat down and he took out a plan which he had for the further development of Fyzabad. He was very kind and, you know, generous enough to share that plan with the incumbent or the current Member of Parliament. I must say that he maintained that close connection to my office and, you know, he continued to engage me as the current Member of Parliament in terms of the further development of Fyzabad and I have to record that here today as we pay tribute to him.

So Arthur Maxwell Sanderson leaves to mourn his wife, Frances Bridgid, his mother, Sylvia, his children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and many other family members and friends. I am certain that his record of public service to his beloved community of Fyzabad and the country will be the lessons that his family will take pride and comfort in, and be the motivation for them and others to continue his work to enhance and protect his legacy.

On behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, my colleagues on this side, and my own office as the Member of Parliament for Fyzabad, I extend deepest condolences to his family, friends and his community, and pray that his soul now rests in eternal peace as he hears the welcoming words of his Creator, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and share in your Master’s happiness.”

Thank you Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I too wish to pay tribute to the late Mr. Arthur Sanderson, who was known for his commitment to the community of Fyzabad and for being a tireless advocate in the pursuit of social justice. Mr. Sanderson was born and raised in Fyzabad. Throughout his working years, he engaged in varied professional pursuits, serving as a member of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service until 1970, thereafter, being called to the vocation of teaching and then acquiring the qualifications of a physical planner, providing consultancy services.

Mr. Sanderson also became a member of the OWTU and over time he rose to the office of Vice-President of the Fyzabad/Palo Seco Branch. Mr. Sanderson’s entry into politics began at the local level as the county councillor for Apex Fyzabad and in the year 1987 he was elected the MP for Fyzabad. From February 8th 1988 to November 19th 1991, Mr. Sanderson served as a parliamentary secretary in the Ministry of Settlements and Public Utilities in the Government of the National Alliance for Reconstruction.

1.45 p.m.

In the 1991 election, Mr. Sanderson stood as an independent candidate for the constituency of Fyzabad, and although not successful, he continued in service to his birth place. Mr. Sanderson has established himself as a prominent activist who took great pride in selflessly giving yeoman service to his community, before, during, and after his time as a parliamentarian. The establishment of the Sanderson Heritage Park in Fyzabad is a testament to his lifelong dedication to community development as a proud son of Fyzabad in particular, and overall as a civic-minded citizen of Trinidad and Tobago.

I take this opportunity to express my deepest condolences to the Sanderson family during this period of mourning. I pray that the Almighty grants them peace during their time of bereavement. May they find strength and solace in the
memories they shared together. I now ask that we stand and observe a minute’s silence as a mark of respect.

_The House of Representatives stood._

**Madam Speaker:** May his soul rest in peace. Hon. Members, an appropriate letter will be sent to convey our condolences to the family of the late Mr. Arthur Sanderson.

**CONDOLENCES (MS. MARLENE MC DONALD)**

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, Ms. Marlene Mc Donald, a former Member of Parliament, passed away on Friday December 8th, 2023. Ms. Marlene Mc Donald served as the Member of Parliament for Port of Spain South in the Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh Republican Parliament, spanning a period of 13 years, from 2007 to 2020. I now invite hon. Members to pay their respective tributes to Ms. Marlene Mc Donald. Member for Port-of-Spain South.

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

**Mr. Keith Scotland (Port of Spain South):** Madam Speaker, on Friday last, we in Port of Spain South say that we lost a champion and a half. Marlene Mc Donald successfully screened as a PNM candidate for Port of Spain South in 2007; secured a seat in the House of Representatives having been successful in the November election in 2007. She again won the Port of Spain South seat in 2010 and 2015 at the general elections that followed. From 2010 to 2015, she was appointed as the PNM’s Chief Whip and served with distinction. In 2015, she was appointed a Minister of Housing and Urban Development and, in 2017, appointed as a Public Utilities Minister. In 2018, she was appointed junior Minister in the Ministry of Public Administration, and in 2018, appointed the full Minister in that Ministry.

But, Madam Speaker, that does not tell the true story of Marlene Mc Donald.
Marlene Mc Donald, at all material times, epitomized the spirit of Port of Spain South. She faced adversity with resolve, grace, resilience and dignity. That is not surprising because her navel string, Madam Speaker, is literally buried in Port of Spain South. She was born at No. 3, Moseley Place, East Dry River. She attended the Nelson Street Girls RC School in the heart of Port of Spain. When a teaching job became available, she taught at the Mucurapo Senior Comprehensive, again in the heart of Port of Spain South. And, Madam Speaker, to hear Ms. Mc Donald speak of the places in Port of Spain South is to see her come alive.

1.50p.m.

Her very pronunciation of these places pits joy, when she says L’eau Place, Beverly Hills, Katanga, Woodbine, Jeffers Lane. It is like taking them out of a storybook because the places and the people come to life and she says it with pride, Madam Speaker. Sometimes the words, I wonder if they were English words when she speaks about the various places in Port of Spain South. Marlene McDonald has not been in this House for a couple of years but, Madam Speaker, I dare submit that she has never left Port of Spain South and Port of Spain South has never left her. I was there to witness one of her crowning achievements when on the 14th of August, 2023, as coordinator of the PNM-led campaign in the local government election, she brought home successfully all 12 seats in that local government election as coordinator.

Madam Speaker, Port of Spain South was her family. Marlene McDonald was never one who was just passing through this life. She always left her mark on all who she encountered and she left her mark on this earth. So we on this side pay tribute to Marlene McDonald, and particularly remember her family, Michael and her other close relatives, and we say to her, may the Lord bless and keep you. May the lord make his face shine on you and be gracious onto you. May the Lord turn
his face towards you and give you peace. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Oropouche East.

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

**Dr. Roodal Moonilal (Oropouche East):** Thank you. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me. Madam Speaker, it is a very difficult moment, as well, for several of us on this side to stand and pay tribute to a former Member of Parliament and former Minister who last Friday left us all, I believe, in shock. Notwithstanding the ailing state of her affairs, and so on, it was still extremely shocking when at a relatively young age we lost a dear friend, colleague, and to some persons in this House, almost a sister. Madam Speaker, I have had the distinction of working with the former Member of Parliament, Marlene McDonald, extremely closely for several years when we both served in the Tenth Parliament and Marlene McDonald was Opposition Chief Whip, and I had the honour to serve as Leader of Government Business.

I can testify, as the Member of Port of Spain South alluded to earlier, that Marlene McDonald was indeed a champion as an advocate and representative of the people of Port of Spain South, and elsewhere as well, and represented with distinction, and with great passion and courage, her constituents. There are too many enduring memories, and so on, to recite all at this time, but many of us will recall Marlene’s love of life and the strength of character she displayed during very difficult times in her public life. Madam Speaker, it is only myself, I believe, and the Member for Siparia were here in 2007 on the arrival of Marlene McDonald. Several colleagues opposite were also here. During the period 2007 to 2010, under the former Patrick Manning administration, Madam Speaker, when I believe you were also nearby, Ms. McDonald served as Minister of Community Development,
Culture and Gender Affairs, and at that time several of us got to know her well, and her generosity of spirit, her kindness, her consideration was always at the forefront of her public duties.

No one in the then Opposition can complain that Minister Marlene McDonald treated us any differently, treated us with any measure of discrimination, or anything like that, in the discharge of her public duties. And I wanted to say that, in that period, 2007—2010, Ms. Marlene McDonald really distinguished herself as a Minister of the people, so to speak. We have memories of Ms. Marlene McDonald, Madam Speaker, that are very close and dear to us. In fact, myself and the former Minister quite often exchanged a lot of “piong” and banter, both inside this House and outside, and I actually looked forward to hearing some of her speeches on the political platform.

I think she was only one of two PNM speakers I listened to at that time. Her passion came across, and although we were at times extremely vocal, and what may have appeared to be hostile in the House and outside, Marlene McDonald epitomized that truism that everything is politics but politics is not everything, and I think that is a worthy statement to make here. We cooperated with each other when we were in charge, so to speak, of the Tenth Parliament. The Opposition Chief Whip worked closely with us, I must say. In those days, Madam Speaker, I wanted to just put on the public record, that when we were debating the budget every year, generally the Member for Port of Spain South would be the last speaker of the Opposition, generally. And that will happen at the closing moments of a budget debate, because we were very clear that it was 29/12, I believe, and that the Opposition must continue down to the end, and generally the Opposition Leader will speak early, which is part of our system here. But, the Opposition Chief Whip always spoke last on the last evening, and that was an arrangement we had, time
and time again, every year that worked for us then.

Ms. Marlene McDonald has had a very exciting political and professional life and a very interesting political life as well. Ms. McDonald found the challenges that several Members of Parliament, Ministers, elected officials, and so on, often will find in public life. Notwithstanding the test of her character within recent years, she distinguished herself as a person who was frank, as a person who was genuine, and the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, has also given some glowing terms to describe her, which I will just put on the public record. Indeed, the Member for Siparia had worked closely with Ms. Marlene McDonald for 20-odd years. They were politicians together but worked across the aisle to ensure that constituents and members of the national community benefited from her work.

She indicated that Marlene had the people’s touch. Her unwavering humility defined her, her heart of gold, her intelligence, her wit, her humour, her competence. In fact, we often exchanged banter about, you know, attire, and so on, at that time and she was always extremely boisterous and loaded with irony and humour, and that is something we want to record as well. The Member for Siparia indicates as well that her competence, diligence and love for the people of her constituency defined her public spirit and her public contribution, and indeed her public service.

She has left an enduring legacy, Madam Speaker, and that legacy will continue. I will not go into the details but she had served her political party with distinction in very high office as well. She has served the people who remain close to her heart, always close to her heart. When we did disagree, Madam Speaker, we disagree on policy, we disagree on programme, but we never ever disagree on personality, and that was a defining characteristic as well. And in a way, as the
Member for Siparia noted, Marlene represented that great old school politician, the ones who understand and live and always remain close to people and let people define them.

She had several enduring images in this Parliament, and I would just leave you with one, Madam Speaker. In a famous clip that has now become legendary on social media, when the former Prime Minister, Member for San Fernando East, was making a defining statement about a parliamentary colleague of his at the time, Ms. McDonald was in the back listening attentively and banging the table in the Parliament. I think the carpenter had to be called in after. But that is an enduring image of her in support of the then Prime Minister that lives on forever; I believe it will.

So those of us on this side join the Member for Port of Spain South, as he spoke on behalf of his colleagues, to extend the deepest sympathy to her friends, her loved ones, her family, and so on. We have great memories of her. It is so sad. I believe it is truly sad that someone with this service, 13 years unbroken service to this Parliament on leaving this place would not stay around a long time to enjoy and to live the life, but this is also the will of God, which we all have to accept.

So on behalf of Members of the Opposition, on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, Madam Speaker, I extend the deepest condolences to Marlene McDonald’s family and loved ones. May the good Lord comfort them in this time of grief. May Marlene’s great legacy and inspiring life continue to motivate us all to serve others in the truest spirit and in this place, the heart of our democracy, and may her great soul rest in eternal peace. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I too would like to pay tribute to Ms. Marlene McDonald. Hon. Members, Ms. McDonald was a recognized advocate for her
Condolences (Ms. M. Mc Donald)  2023.12.13
Dr. Moonilal (cont’d)

constituency and for the people of Port of Spain South. She was described by many who interacted with her as a true servant of the people and a champion of social causes, including, but not limited to, the advancement of women in society. The records have not shown otherwise so that one may not find it surprising that Ms. McDonald served as the first female Opposition Whip in the history of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

As I shared recently during my reflections on Ms. McDonald, in December 2008, our respective Ministries collaborated to host a workshop on domestic violence to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The intended outcome of the workshop was the establishment of a central domestic violence registry to give teeth to the then existing legislation. Several years later, the Central Registry for Domestic Violence was officially launched, having been built upon the significant foundation laid in large part by Marlene McDonald.

As a parliamentarian, Ms. McDonald was first elected to the House of Representatives as the Member for Port of Spain South on November 05, 2007, and subsequently was appointed Minister of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs. From 2010 to 2015, she served as an Opposition Member and as Chief Whip. During the period 2015 to 2019, Ms. McDonald held several ministerial portfolios, among them, Minister of Housing and Urban Development and Minister of Public Administration and Communications. Ms. McDonald was also instrumental in the work of several joint select committees during her career as a legislator. These included the committees of Foreign Affairs, Finance and Legal Affairs, Public Administration and Appropriations Committee, Public Accounts Committee and Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.

Ms. McDonald’s contributions are also recognized through her membership
on several ad hoc parliamentary committees appointed to consider legislation, such as the Children Bill, 2010; the Anti-Gang Bill, 2010; and the Bail (Amdt.) Bill, 2010; the Securities Bill, 2012; the Insurance Bill, 2015; and the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2019. Using her training as an attorney-at-law, she was unafraid to use her academic knowledge and sharp wit to deliver impactful contributions which will remain etched in the memories of her fellow parliamentarians and of all those with whom she worked.

2.05 p.m.

Many have acclaimed Ms. McDonald’s generosity and desire to build the capacity of others. She never stopped fighting for her constituents and had a relentless determination to improve their lives in any way she could. Ms. McDonald’s diligence and dedication have been highlighted by both her colleagues and adversaries as a model for other aspiring change-makers to follow.

Having served in the Ninth Republican Parliament which provided for close interaction between us, I can personally attest to Ms. McDonald’s zeal and enthusiasm and to the fact that she was always proud to refer to the potential of the marginalized, citing her own humble beginnings.

Undoubtedly, Marlene McDonald was really committed in her pursuit of improving the lives of others. Having earlier pursued the vocation of teaching at the secondary level and being deeply involved in the credit union movement, serving as the General Manager of the Diego Martin Credit Union Corporative Society Limited.

I take this opportunity to express my deepest condolences and those of my family to her sister Marva and to her brother and to her wider family and to her loved ones during this period of mourning. I pray that the Almighty grants them peace during this time of bereavement. May they find strength and solace in the
memories they shared together and in the work that Marlene did in the improvement of the lives of those with whom she interacted. I now ask that we stand and observe a minute of silence as a mark of respect.

*The House of Representatives stood.*

Madam Speaker: May her soul rest in peace. Hon. Members, an appropriate letter will be sent to convey our condolences to the family of the late Marlene McDonald.

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE**
**(APPOINTMENT OF)**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, correspondence has been received from the President of the Senate dated December 11, 2023 which states as follows:

“Dear Madam Speaker,

Re: Establishment and Appointment of Members to Joint Select Committees

Reference is made to your letter dated November 01, 2023 the subject at caption. At a sitting held on Tuesday November 07, 2023, the Senate agreed to the following resolution:

‘BE IT RESOLVED that the Senate concur with the House of Representatives in the establishment of a Joint Select Committee to consider and report on ‘The Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, 2020’, and that the following six (6) Senators be appointed to serve on this Committee:

1. Dr. Amery Browne;
2. Ms. Paula Gopee-Scoon;
3. Mr. Randall Mitchell;
4. Mr. Wade Mark;
5. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy; and
6. Mr. Deoroop Teemal.’

Accordingly, I respectfully request that the House of Representatives be informed of this decision at the earliest convenience please.

Thank you,

Respectfully,

Nigel de Freitas

President of the Senate”

MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS (TRUSTEES, EXCHEQUER AND AUDIT ACT, THE MINISTER OF FINANCE (INC’N) ACT, PROCEEDS OF CRIME, INCOME TAX, COMPANIES, PARTNERSHIPS, SECURITIES, TAX INFORMATION EXCHANGE AGREEMENTS, THE NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS AND MUTUAL ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANCE IN TAX MATTERS) BILL, 2023

Bill to amend the Trustees Ordinance, Chap. 4 of 1939, Exchequer and Audit Act, Chap. 69:01; the Minister of Finance (Inc’n) Act, Chap. 69:03; Proceeds of Crime, Chap. 11:27, Income Tax Act, Chap. 75:01, the Companies Act, Chap. 81:01, the Partnerships Act, Chap. 81:02, the Securities Act, Chap. 83:02, the Tax Information Exchange Agreements Act, No. 5 of 2020, the Non-Profit Organisations Act No. 7 of 2019 and the Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters Act, No. 7 of 2020, brought from the Senate [The Minister of Finance]; read the first time.

MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS (REGISTRAR GENERAL, COMPANIES, REGISTRATION OF BUSINESS NAMES AND NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS) BILL, 2023

Bill to amend the Registrar General’s Act, Chap. 19:03, the Companies Act, Chap. 81:01, the Registration of Business Names Act, Chap. 82:85, and the Non-
Profit Organisations Act, No. 7 of 2019, brought from the Senate [The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs]; read the third time.

**PAPERS LAID**

1. Notification of Her Excellency, the President, in respect of the nomination of Mr. Wendell Lucas, for appointment to the Office of Deputy Commissioner of Police. [The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Esmond Forde)]

2. Notification of Her Excellency, the President, in respect of the nomination of Mr. Junior Benjamin, for appointment to the Office of Deputy Commissioner of Police. [Mr. E. Forde]

3. Notification of Her Excellency, the President, in respect of the nomination of Ms. Natasha George, for appointment to the Office of Deputy Commissioner of Police. [Mr. E. Forde]


5. Beekeeping and Bee Products (Amdt.) Regulations, 2023. [The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)]

6. Trinidad and Tobago Special Economic Zones Regulations, 2023. [Hon. C. Robinson-Regis]


9. The Administrative Report of the Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the fiscal year 2017. [Hon. C. Robinson-Regis]

10. Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority (Extension of Period) (No. 2)
Order, 2023. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]

11. Sector Wide Approach Programme Loan Agreement between the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Corporación Andina De Fomento in the amount of US$175 million for a Modernized Transportation Infrastructure. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

12. Sector Wide Approach Programme Loan Agreement between the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Corporación Andina De Fomento in the amount of US$120 million to Support the Implementation of the Digital Transformation and Digital Inclusion Strategy in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

13. Trinidad Drainage and Flood Mitigation Programme Investment Loan Agreement between the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Corporación Andina De Fomento in the amount of US$40 million. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

14. Sector Wide Approach Programme Loan Agreement between the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Corporación Andina De Fomento in the amount of US$75 million for Support and Sectoral Strengthening of Health Systems in the Framework of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

15. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the San Fernando City Corporation Mayor’s Project Fund for the year ended September 30, 2018. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]


17. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Office of Procurement Regulation for the
year ended September 30, 2021. [Hon. C. Imbert]


19. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2020. [Hon. C. Imbert]


22. Report on the Operations of the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago and the Audited Financial Statements for the financial year ended June 30, 2023. [Hon. C. Imbert]

Papers 15 to 22 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.

23. Administrative Report of the Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago as at December 31, 2019. [Hon. C. Imbert]


26. Response of the Auditor General to the Fourteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an examination of the


28. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development to the Thirteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an examination of the Management and Operations of the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) including the restructuring of the HDC into three distinct State Enterprises. [Hon. C. Robinson-Regis]

29. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Public Administration to the Ninth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on the implementation of the 2021 budget with emphasis on the “Green Economy”. [Hon. C. Robinson-Regis]

30. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Education to the Sixth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an examination of the state of technical and vocational programmes and their contribution to achieving the development goals of Trinidad and Tobago. [Hon. C. Robinson-Regis]

2.15 p.m.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE REPORTS
(Presentation)

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (Oropouche West): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following reports:

**Administering of Government Grants**
Tenth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an examination of the concerns raised in the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year 2021 with specific reference to the administering of government grants, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament.

**Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago**
Eleventh Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT) for the Financial Years 2014 to 2018, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament.

**Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries**
Twelfth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an examination of the implementation of the recommendations made in the Thirtieth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the concerns raised in the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and

Public Transport Service Corporation


PUBLIC ACCOUNTS (ENTERPRISES) COMMITTEE REPORTS

(Presentation)

Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following reports:

National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited (MTS)


Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (SporTT)

Eleventh Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on an examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (SporTT) for the Financial Years 2019 and
2020 and follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations in the Committee’s Second Report from the 11th Parliament, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament.

**National Infrastructure Development Company Limited (NIDCO)**


**Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP)**


**Estate Management and Business Development Company Limited (EMBD)**

Fourteenth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on an examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheet and other Financial Statements of the Estate Management and Business Development Company
Limited (EMBD) for financial year 2015 and follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations of the Committee’s Seventh Report from the 11th Parliament, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament.

Tourism Trinidad Limited

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE REPORTS

(Presentation)

Dr. Lackram Bodoe (Fyzabad): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following reports:

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

Food Security in Trinidad and Tobago
Secondary Road Rehabilitation and Improvement Company Limited (SRRIC)


Ministry of Social Development and Family Services

Provision of Flood Relief Grants


Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA)

Pesticides and Toxic Chemicals Inspectorate

The Minister in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Lisa Morris-Julian): Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following report:


Ministry of National Security

Criminal Justice System in Trinidad and Tobago

Mr. Keith Scotland (Port of Spain South): Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present:

First Report of the Joint Select Committee on National Security on an inquiry into the Criminal Justice System in Trinidad and Tobago to determine
strategies to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness, Fourth Session (2023/2024), Twelfth Parliament.

URGENT QUESTIONS

Palmiste Government Primary School
(Steps Taken to Relocate)

Mr. Arnold Ram (Caroni Central): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Education: Having regard to the recent fire that destroyed the Palmiste Government Primary School and displaced hundreds of students, will the Minister state what urgent steps will be taken to relocate the school?

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Education.

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, a large section of the Palmiste Government Primary School was gutted by fire on Thursday, 07 December, 2023. The Ministry of Education is working with the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation to have the affected portion demolished and the rubble removed to allow for possible occupation of the usable portion of the school.

In addition, the Ministry is discussing the accommodation of the Standard 5 students at a nearby private school. There are three further options for relocation, which have been recommended and are being explored at this time. Site visits are ongoing and a decision on the way forward will be made this week. Thereafter, preparations will be made to accommodate the students.

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central.

Mr. Ram: Hon. Minister, you indicated the school will be demolished and the rubble will be removed in collaboration with the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. Can you indicate when that demolition and removal will take place?
Madam Speaker: Minister of Education.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Madam Speaker. That discussion we are having now and we are working out the arrangements for when they will come to do it.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Public Servants/Members of the Protective Services (Update on Backpay)

Mr. Saddam Hosein (Barataria/San Juan): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Finance: Given the announcement by the Government that public servants and members of the protective services will receive back pay before Christmas, will the Minister inform the House of the date on which these payments will be made?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the bargaining agents, trade unions that accepted the Government’s offer of a 4 per cent wage increase prior to the presentation of the national budget in October are as follows: Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association; the Fire Service of Trinidad and Tobago, Second Division; the Amalgamated Workers Union; the Trinidad and Tobago Police Social and Welfare Association; the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service, First Division Association; the Prison Officers’ Association of Trinidad and Tobago, Second Division; the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force Pay Review Committee; the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service, First Division Officers Association. And I might add that the first division is merged—first division of the police service is merged with Police Social and Welfare Association for bargaining purposes.

This has been quite a difficult exercise. An announcement was made and I am fairly confident that the following associations will be paid in accordance with
the announcement: The Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association, comprising in excess of 17,000 teachers; the Fire Service of Trinidad and Tobago, all divisions, comprising in excess of 4,000; Amalgamated Workers Union has already been paid this year. I want to repeat that. The Amalgamated Workers Union, the workers that work at Port of Spain City Corporation, they have already received their backpay this year. The Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service, First Division—as I said, all divisions of the fire service, all divisions of the Prison Officers’ Association, the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, all arms of the defence force, the coast guard, the army and the air guard were paid already prior to the presentation of the national budget. The Commissioner of Police has reported to me that there are difficulties with the accuracy and—

Madam Speaker: Minister, your time is now spent.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay.

2.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Can the Minister indicate to this honourable House, Madam Speaker, how many of the bargaining units—the employees under those bargaining units will not be paid before Christmas?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, an announcement was made in the budget. I have just called out all the bargaining agents who have been working assiduously with their respective line Ministries and the Ministry of Finance. We have had a whole-of-government approach to this. We have applied all of the resources of the Government to deal with these issues. I am satisfied there are about 34,000 persons. I am satisfied that in the order of 30,000 would be paid in accordance with the announcement and we are giving support to the police service—again,
whole-of-government support—for their backpay to be paid soonest.

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

**Hon. F. Hinds:** The Government is committed.

**Madam Speaker:** Leader of the House.

**ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there are five questions for oral response, we will be answering four of those five questions. We are asking for a two-week deferral for Question No. 18. There are seven questions for written response, we will be answering six and we are asking for a two-week deferral for Question No. 15. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**WRITTEN ANSWER TO QUESTION**

The following question stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. Rodney Charles (Naparima):

78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly
(Details of Delegation)

15. With respect to the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York during the period September 19 to 26, 2023, will the Minister provide:

a) the total cost incurred by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago inclusive of the value of per diems paid to each member of the delegation who attended the Session;

b) the names of all officials who comprised the delegation, both Government and non-Government, who attended the Session; and

c) an itemised list of individual official expenses incurred by all officials listed in (b)?

*Question, by leave, deferred.*
ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following question stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. Rodney Charles (Naparima):

Commission of Enquiry into Paria Diving Tragedy
(Status Update on Report)

18. Will the Prime Minister provide an update on the status of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the February 25, 2022 Paria diving tragedy?

Question, by leave, deferred.

Point Lisas Industrial Estate
(Details of Petrochemical Plants)

8. Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre) asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

As it pertains to the downstream industries at the Point Lisas Industrial Estate for the period September 30, 2018 to October 31, 2023, will the Minister advise:

a) the number of petrochemical plants that have been shut down;

b) the names of the petrochemical plants listed in part a);

c) the number of petrochemical plants that are currently idled; and

d) the names of the petrochemical plants listed in part c).

Madam Speaker: Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

Hon. Members: [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, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the number of petrochemical plants that have been shut down is one. The plant that were shut down was actually closed on the 31st of December, 2019. It is the Yara plant. And anyone who knows the Point Lisas Estate, will know this is one of first plants that was built on the Point Lisas Estate,
and it is decades old, and it was actually shut down because it has become very inefficient and also it is carbon intensive. So therefore, it was shut down.

The number of petrochemical plants that are currently ideal are two. Methanex has idled its Titan methanol plant since March 2020, and Nutrien idled its ammonia number three plant since August 2022. And I think the country can standby very shortly for news with respect to the Titan plant, as I believe it will soon restart. Thank you.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

**Dragon Gas Field**
*(Commodity Payment to Venezuelan Government)*

9. **Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre)** asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

Further to the response provided to the House of Representatives to Question No. 130 on April 26, 2023, will the Minister state the commodity that has been offered or will be used as payment to the Venezuelan Government for gas from the Dragon Gas field?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

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

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young):** Madam Speaker, I must say I was a little surprised from my friend’s question. Nevertheless, Standing Order 30(1)(k) makes it clear that:

“A question”—quote—“shall not—
seek information set forth in accessible official publications or ordinary works of reference…”

**UNREVISED**
In this context, Madam Speaker, it is a matter of public knowledge, both in Trinidad and internationally, that almost two months ago, the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries published an official statement on its website in October 2023, which confirmed, and I quote:

“…that on October 17, 2023 the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the Department of Treasury of the United States Government issued a license amendment to the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (GORTT) based upon requests made by GORTT dated March 8, 2023 and September 15, 2023 with respect to, inter alia, the development of the Dragon gas field.”

The Ministry also confirmed on its website, in October 2023, that under the heading, “OFAC License Amendment Information” that:

“The said amendment further authorizes GORTT, NGC and Shell plc to make payments to the Government of Venezuela in fiat currency, including US dollars or bolivars.”

2.35 p.m.
Madam Speaker, in addition to that on the same said day, the 17th of October, 2023, I held a press conference that was carried live on national TV and reported widely, not only locally but internationally, to announce that the licence amendment from OFAC, all of this information was provided. This was done and all of this information was provided. Included in my coverage of that October 17th press conference we provided the details of the OFAC licence amendment, which I just said is accessible on the Ministry’s website and was also widely reported in both the local and the international press in October 2023, including by Bloomberg and Reuters, among other major international media outlets. Madam Speaker, yet we stand here today and hear from the Member of Pointe-a-Pierre such a question
that has been widely reported, not only in local media but also in international media, the same Members who are very quick to cite media reports. So I would invite my friend to take a look at the Ministry’s website, but also to brush himself up on current affairs in the energy sector.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Pointe-a-Pierre.

**Mr. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Speaker, supplemental to the Minister based on your response. Given that there is change in the licence agreement with this country and Venezuela on that dragon gas, could you state what payments and the amount of payments that would be paid to Venezuela in respect to this Dragon gas?

**Hon. Members:** Ohhh.

**Hon. S. Young:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. First of all, Madam Speaker, I never said there is a change. I said the Government of Trinidad and Tobago received an amendment to our original licence from OFAC that was based on submissions made by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in both March and September 2023. One of the amendments to the licence is how we may pay for gas in Venezuela. Again, maybe it is not surprising that the Member opposite has not been following the news and has not been following what is going on, but we are in the process of finalizing the negotiations for the dragon licence, and it is only upon finalization and the production of gas does the measurement and the amount of money to be paid arise. And may I add, of course, that it is not going to be one of those contracts that was negotiated that cost the country billions of dollars in losses, as was done between ’10 and ’15.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

**Mr. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Speaker, as a follow up. Minister could you state, based on your response just now that amended licence, when would the agreement
or when would you conclude the agreement that you just spoke about between Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago?

**Dr. Rowley:** [Inaudible]

**Hon. S. Young:** I am being reminded that every time I travel to Venezuela to conclude these discussions it becomes a very superficial and shallow conversation by those on the other side about per diem.

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

**Hon. S. Young:** Hopefully, Madam Speaker, because we in the Government are doing this for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and for the future of Trinidad and Tobago. So we on this side hope that that licence agreement will be completed very shortly.

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

**Mr. Charles:** Since the Minister raised the question of per diem, would you confirm or deny that you received a $1,000,000 in per diems to date?

**Hon. Member:** What!

**Dr. Rowley:** He should have received five!

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Naparima that question is out of order based on the standings. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

**Future Monetisation of the Manatee Gas Field**
**(Details of)**

10. **Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre):** Asked the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

Will the Minister indicate:

a) whether future monetisation of the Manatee Gas Field will be done separately from the Loran Gas Field and independently of Venezuela as agreed in 2019; or
b) whether there will be a joint development of Manatee Gas Field and Loran Gas Field by both Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela?

Madam Speaker: 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, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, again this question is a bit surprising by the Member who claims to be the shadow Minister for Energy. So, when it comes to the Manatee Loran gas field, again, Standing Order 30, subsection (1) subsection (k) makes it clear that the question shall not:

“…seek information set forth in accessible official publications or ordinary works of reference...”

And, Madam Speaker, in this context it is a matter of public knowledge that in October 2019, four years ago, this Government, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela executed an agreement to allow each country to independently develop its share of the hydrocarbon resources from the Loran Manatee gas field which straddles the maritime borders between Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, indeed, on November 17, 2021, two years ago, at an official function to announce the agreement between the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Shell Trinidad and Tobago Limited, on the production sharing contract for Sub-Block 6D which is the Manatee field, the hon. Prime Minister at that level stated, and I quote:

“The Manatee field, forms a part of the Loran-Manatee cross-border field, with Loran being located in the marine area of Venezuela. The Loran-Manatee reservoir has an estimated resource of 10.04 tcf, of which 2.712 tcf is within the Manatee field. On August 16, 2010 the Government of the
Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the Government of the Republic of Venezuela executed a Unitisation Agreement for the Exploitation and Development of the Loran-Manatee field. An absence of urgency and no definitive commitment to making necessary investment among the various interested parties saw this proven reserve remaining dormant as though stranded.

Therefore, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the...Government of Venezuela agreed to the independent development by each Government of the field within the Loran-Manatee cross-border, that falls within its marine area. By Government to Government Agreement dated 15, October, 2019, the Loran Manatee Unitisation Agreement was terminated, delinking the development of the Manatee field from the Loran field.”

Madam Speaker, that statement was published on the official website of the Office of the Prime Minister at that time, and is still accessible up to today. It was also widely reported in the media. Further, Shell PLC is pressing ahead with the project as reported again by Reuters and other international media outlets three months ago, in September, 2023, when it was announced that Shell PLC had given financial approval for the development of the manatee gas field. Madam Speaker, up to two weeks ago it was international energy news that Shell has awarded the contract to Mc Dermott to develop the Manatee field. The manatee field, to help the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, is on the Trinidad side, and is in the Trinidadian resources of the Loran-Manatee field. So nothing has changed. Trinidad and Tobago continues to pursue the development, and the first gas will come hopefully in the not too distant future from the Manatee field. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.
Mr. Lee: Thank you, Madam Speaker, follow up. Minister, could you just state, based on what your response was, that what is the projected cost to the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. S. Young: Madam Speaker, the questions just keep confirming the lack of knowledge with respect to these things. The field, as I just took great lengths to explain, is being developed by Shell PLC. It is being developed by Shell PLC using McDermott. So therefore one wonders, what cost is the Member referring to? There is no cost to be incurred by the people of Trinidad and Tobago. What it is going to bring for the people of Trinidad and Tobago is greater revenue, and I can add at this stage, this is one of the contracts that we renegotiated better revenue terms for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Young: Again, the only contract that was negotiated in the energy sector between 2010 to 2015 by the Opposition on the other side, the only contract, continues to cost the people of Trinidad and Tobago in losses billions of dollars every year when you look at NGC’s books, it is a loss-making contract. This, that we have negotiated in Manatee, is no such contract.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, supplemental. Thank you, Madam Speaker. Follow up again, Minister. Could you state how soon is soon for first gas from the Manatee other than how soon is soon? What projected year and month?

Hon. S. Young: Madam Speaker, right now we are working with Shell and we hope for that first gas to reach in 2026.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Future Monetisation of the Manatee Gas Field
(Details of)

17. Mr. Rodney Charles (Naparima) asked the hon. Attorney General and
Minister of Legal Affairs:

Further to the response provided to the House of Representatives to Question No. 86 on February 10, 2023, will the Attorney General state what are the specific steps to be taken by Trinidad and Tobago to be fully removed from the European Union’s list of “non-cooperative jurisdictions for tax purposes?”

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it must be understood that the European Union and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development are imposing EU and OECD standards for international tax cooperation on other countries. Recently there was a push back against this system at the United Nations. On November the 23rd, 2023, just three weeks ago, the OECD's dominance in global tax coordination was challenged at the United Nations by a large majority of 125 mainly developing countries who backed a draft UN resolution proposed by Nigeria calling for a framework convention on international tax cooperation. Trinidad and Tobago voted for this resolution, while some 48 mainly developed countries, including Britain, Germany, Japan and the US were against it. Nine countries abstained, including OECD members Iceland, Mexico, Norway and Turkey.

To be removed from the EU’s non-cooperative list, the Government has established a high level committee led by the Ministry of Finance, with support from the tax treaty unit, Board of Inland Revenue, and Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. This committee is working with the Global Forum secretariat to prepare the necessary legislative, administrative and operational improvements for Phase 2 of the Exchange of Information on request peer review, Trinidad and Tobago’s on-site peer review visit is expected to commence in the second quarter of calendar 2024. As part of this ongoing
technical assistance programme, on November the 24th, 2023, the Senate passed the Miscellaneous Provisions (Trustees, Exchequer and Audit Act, the Minister of Finance (Incorporation) Act, Proceeds of Crime, Income Tax, Companies, Partnerships, Securities, Tax Information Exchange Agreements, the Non-Profit Organisations and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters) Bill, 2023, which is designed to address outstanding technical deficiencies identified by the Global Forum with respect to the Exchange of Information on Request standards. The Bill provides, among other things, for the availability of adequate, accurate and timely information on the identity of any natural person exercising ultimate effective control over express trusts, and imposes penalties for non-disclosure of beneficial ownership information.

The second round of peer review by the Global Forum is crucial to assessing how Trinidad and Tobago processes and responds to Exchange of Information Requests. It covers all Exchange of Information Requests received and sent during the review period, and considers responses received during and after it. During this period, the Global Forum secretariat will also critically examine all legislation and information to assess whether Trinidad and Tobago can be removed from the EU list. The related Miscellaneous Provisions (Registrar General, Companies, Registration of Business Names and Non-Profit Organisations) Bill, 2023, passed in the Senate yesterday will also assist in ensuring compliance. The Base Erosion and Profit-Shifting Inclusive Framework (Country-by-Country) Reporting Bill, 2023, already introduced in the Senate is another requirement. Further, as part of the programme to achieve compliance, the Special Economic Zones Regulations were published in Legal Notice No. 370 on November 23rd, 2023.

Further, to achieve the clarity that can only be achieved through face-to-face meetings, a team from the Ministry of Finance, led by the Minister of Rural
Development and Local Government, recently participated in the 16th Plenary Meeting of the Global Forum from November 27th to December 21st, 2023 in Lisbon, Portugal. At that forum, the Ministry of Finance’s team established a relationship with the European Union Code of Conduct group chair, who agreed to support our efforts for removal from the EU list. Mechanisms to ensure confidentiality and data protection must also be in place, therefore the Inland Revenue Division is finalizing confidentiality and data protection documents and an information security plan. The IRD is also working on a robust exchange of information system to meet EU standards. Our tax treaties must also be updated to ensure removal from the EU list. As such, our permanent double taxation committee is working on including the UN version of Article 28, Exchange of Information—

**Madam Speaker:** Minister.

**Hon. C. Imbert:**—in our double tax treaties.

2.50 p.m.

**Mr. Charles:** Minister were you mistaken when on August 29th, 2018, at the Third Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Income Tax Bill you said that if we pass four pieces of legislation, which we did, we would become compliant. Did you misadvise us at that meeting?

**Madam Speaker:** So, which is the question, mistaken or misadvised?

**Mr. Charles:** Were you mistaken?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Madam Speaker, I have made it clear inside and outside of this place that the OECD and the EU keep moving the goal posts. I have just spoken about the country by country reporting requirements, the beneficial ownership requirements, the trustee requirements, the exchange of information, the goal posts keep moving and this is why 125 countries initiated by an African-led alliance
voted by majority to end the OECD’s dominance of global tax co-operation. And we voted for that.

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

**Dr. Rowley:** And they are busy undermining the country as usual.

**Mr. Young:** That is all they do.

**Mr. Charles:** Can you advise why some CARICOM countries have been able to come off the list and we remain on it because of your incompetence.

**Madam Speaker:** Member I would not allow that question based on the questions initially asked and the answers given. Do you have another question? Yes.

**Mr. Charles:** Could the Minister indicate, therefore, why certain countries in CARICOM have been able to get off the EU blacklist?

**Madam Speaker:** Again Member, that is the same question you asked. That is the same question you asked.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** You have no more?

**Hon. Members:** [Crosstalk]

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, so Members let us get on seriously with the business of the House. Okay, so, hon. Members, Questions 18 and 15 are deferred for two weeks.

*The following questions stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. Rodney Charles:*

**Paria diving tragedy**

**(Status of Report)**

18. **Mr. Rodney Charles (Naparima)** asked the hon. Prime Minister:

Will the Prime Minister provide an update on the status of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the February 25, 2022 Paria diving tragedy?

*Question, by leave, deferred.*

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Princes Town.

**UNREVISED**
Privilege Matter  
(Hon. Marvin Gonzales)

Mr. Barry Padarath (Princes Town): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I hereby seek your leave in accordance with Standing Order 32(2) to raise a matter directly concerning the privileges of the House of Representatives. On Wednesday 01 November, 2023, during a sitting of the House of Representatives the Minister of Public Utilities was questioned by the Member of Parliament for Couva North, Mr. Ravi Ratiram, about the recent cyberattack of a state enterprise, namely TSTT and also measures put in place to prevent further attacks. On a supplemental question by the Member of Parliament for Couva South, the Minister of Public Utilities was asked and I quote:

“Could you inform this House based on this recent cyber-attack, if any of TSTT’s data and so on, was compromised?”

The Minister responded and I quote:

“…I can advise the hon. Member that based on the safety protocols that were triggered when the incursion was detected, that TSTT’s data and the data of its customers were not in any way compromised.”

However, less than a week later Minister Gonzales is quoted in a November 06, 2023, Express newspaper article by Rickie Ramdass, stating:

“…that there was in fact some compromise on customer data.”

The utterances by the Minister of Public Utilities clearly show that he misled the House. The Member knew or ought to have known that the statements he made were deliberately untrue, false, inaccurate and misleading to the House. According to David McGee’s Parliamentary Practice in New Zealand, third edition:

It requires three elements to establish that a Member is in contempt by reason of a statement that he or she has made in the House. One, “the
statement must, in fact, have been misleading.” Two, it must be established that the Member making the statement knew or ought to have known, at the time that the statement that was made was inaccurate. And three, in making the statement, the Member must have intended deliberately to mislead the House.

Based on the foregoing the Member has deliberately made misleading statements, he has committed contempt of the Parliament and abused his privilege as a Member of this esteemed House. As such I submit that the hon. Member has committed a breach of privilege of the House. In this regard, hon. Speaker, I refer this matter for your urgent attention and determination.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. Moonilal: Well said.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members I reserve my ruling for the next sitting of the House.

STATEMENT BY MINISTER
Report on the Operations of NIBTT

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, I have been authorized by Cabinet to make this statement on the report on the operations of the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago and audited financial statements for the financial year ended June 30th, 2023. Section 13(2) of the National Insurance Act, Chap. 32:01 states:

“Subject to subsection (3), the Board shall within three months of the end of each financial year make a report of its proceedings and of the operation of this Act in respect of that financial year to the Minister who shall, within two
Statement by Minister  
Hon. C. Imbert (cont’d)  

45

months of the receipt of such report, lay it before Parliament.”

Today I would to outline some of the main highlights of this report. Madam Speaker, key operational statistics as prescribed by section 13(2A) of the Act during the financial year ended June 30\textsuperscript{th} for the National Insurance Board are as follows: The number of contributors in the national insurance system during 2023 was recorded at 491,726, increasing by 8 per cent from 455,448 in 2022. While the number of beneficiaries increased by 4.1 per cent from 214,490 to 223,281. That is an increase of over 36,000 contributors. Contribution income collected for the 2023 financial year amounted to $4.807 billion increasing by 6.1 per cent from 4.530 billion earned in 2022. Benefit expenditure for the 2023 financial year amounted to $6.164 billion, increasing by 7.6 per cent from the $5.729 billion in 2022. Administrative cost for the 2022 period was recorded at $280.9 million, increasing by 24.4 per cent from $225.9 million in 2022, also increasing as a percentage of contribution income, from 5 per cent in 2022 to 5.8 per cent in 2023. The net yield of the investment portfolio for the 2023 period was 4.1 per cent compared to 4.6 per cent in 2022. Total funds decreased by 3.2 per cent from $29.94 billion in 2022 to $28.99 billion in 2023. Similarly, total assets decreased by 2.7 per cent from $30.24 billion in 2022 to $29.44 billion in 2023.

Madam Speaker, the report noted that the financial year, July 01, 2022 through June 30\textsuperscript{th}, 2023, was a period of restoration for the National Insurance Board as the last of the mandatory COVID-19 restrictions were, with minor exceptions, removed. There was a strengthening of business activity in the non-energy sector with increased economic activity in transportation and storage, wholesale and retail. This translated into a rebound in the number of contributors both employees and employers during the financial year.

The National Insurance Board continued implementing its strategic plan
with particular focus on leveraging technology and compliance and collections. The discovery phase of national insurances information and communication technology project called “Empower” was completed, a debt collection unit was established and a significant number of authorized officers were on boarded and trained in the conduct of employer compliance audits.

The National Insurance Board continued to advocate for reform of the national insurance system as guided by the 10th Actuarial Review. During the financial year, the National Insurance Board supported a series of stakeholder meeting hosted by the Ministry of Finance on the recommendation related to the retirement age.

During the year ended June 30th, 2023 the number of new employers registering with the National Insurance Board increased by 2.5 per cent to 1,638. The active employer population increased by 2.7 per cent to 19,140. With respect to employee registration 24,666 applications for processing in the financial year were determined. Of these, 79 per cent were new insured persons added to the database in 2023, a 36 per cent increase compared to 2022.

In the area of benefit administration as at June 30th, 2023, 223,281 beneficiaries received a total of 6.16 billion in benefit payments which represented an increase in expenditure of 7.6 per cent over the previous period. The number of long-term beneficiaries increased by 5.1 per cent to 195,859 persons in 2023, from 186,332 persons in 2022. Payment to this group totaled $5.80 billion or 95.4 per cent of the total benefit expenditure in 2023, these are NIS pensioners, an increase from 94.9 per cent or 5.435 billion of the total benefit expenditure in 2022. The payments to short-term beneficiaries total $211.9 million or 3.4 per cent of total benefit expenditure. This represents a decrease from $225 million in 2022. The payment of funeral grants significantly decreased to $72 million in financial year
2023 down from $94.8 million in 2022 and accounted for 41.3 per cent of short-term beneficiaries, compared to 52 per cent in financial year 2022.

With regard to employment injuries, benefits totaled $71.9 million or 1.2 per cent of total benefit expenditure. This represents an increase of 4.3 per cent over total employment injury benefit expenditure for 2022 of $69 million. There was a 4.7 per cent increase in the number of beneficiaries from 3,945 to 4,130. Contribution income collected for the year ended June 30th, 2022 was $4.807 billion, $407 million above the budgeted estimate of $4.4 billion. Penalties and interest received amounted to $11.7 million, a decrease of $22.4 million from the $34 million collected in 2022.

In the area of investment as at June 30th, 2023, the market value of the investment portfolio of the National Insurance Board was $28 billion, reflecting a $1.1 billion or 3.7 per cent decrease over the fund size in 2022. The decline in the portfolio’s market value was mainly attributable to approximately $290 million in unrealized losses as well as the withdrawal of $1.5 billion to finance the national insurance system deficit during the financial year.

During the period, the global economy continues to cope with the lingering effects of COVID-19 and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. These factors contributed to a high inflation environment globally within advanced and emerging markets and forced central banks globally to adopt an aggressive stance to tighten monetary policies by increasing rates to curb inflation. The national insurance equity portfolio accounted for the largest asset class, 61 per cent of the total fund, which stood at $17 billion at the end of financial year 2023, with 75 per cent of the portfolio invested in Trinidad and Tobago and the remaining 25 per cent internationally. The two primary sector exposures were financial 37 per cent and sovereign 19 per cent. This market value represented a decline of $1.75
million or 0.01 per cent when compared to the prior year.

With regard to the fixed income portfolio, this portfolio increased by 9.3 per cent or $745 million to $8.8 billion with a weighted average yield to maturity of 4.6 per cent. The national insurance investment holdings recorded a net unrealized investment loss over the period of $290 million resulting from unrealized losses in equity investments, mutual funds and fixed income.

3.05 p.m.

Conversely, total realized investment income amounted to $933 million, with key drivers being interest income from local bonds, $386 million, dividend income from local equities, $370 million, and foreign equity holdings, $93 million.

It is also noted that implementation monitoring and evaluation of the relevant strategic initiatives and goals of the Strategic Plan, which was revised in 2021, have continued through the financial year 2023. In the new financial year, planning will commence in anticipation of the new cycle for the years 2025—2029.

Regarding the waiver on penalties and interest, the National Insurance Board (Amdt.) Act was assented to by the President in July 2022, for a waiver of all penalties and interest due and applicable in respect of any contribution outstanding as at June 30th, 2022. For the financial year ended June 30th, 2023, the total contribution in arrears received in response to the waiver amounted to $123.8 million.

In the area of digital transformation, during the financial year the National Insurance Board continued the thrust for digitization of contribution records, and an additional 3,000 square feet of warehouse space was acquired to facilitate data clean-up and digitization.

Finally, in the area of manpower, staff training and welfare, during the
financial year, 180 positions were filled compared to 44 in 2022. As at June 30\textsuperscript{th}, 2023, the approved staff complement stood at 755 with a permanent staff headcount of 656.

**Madam Speaker:** Minister?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Additionally—thank you.

**FINANCE BILL, 2023**

A Bill to make provisions of a financial nature and other related matters [The Minister of Finance]; read the first time.

*Motion made:* That the next stage be taken later stage in the proceedings.

*Hon. C. Imbert*

*Question put and agreed to.*

**FINANCE BILL, 2023**

*Order for second reading read.*

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

That a Bill entitled an Act to make provision of a financial nature and other related matters be now read a second time.

Before us today is the Finance Bill, 2023, aimed at putting in place the fiscal measures that were announced in this House on October the 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2023, and other significant measures concerning national insurance, property tax and public procurement. The Bill contains eight clauses that concerns six Acts of Parliament, namely the National Insurance Act, the Income Tax Act, the Corporation Tax Act, the Petroleum Taxes Act, the Property Tax Act, and the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act. I will now look at it on a clause by clause basis.

Clause 1 of the Bill is self-explanatory—

**Hon. Member:** [Inaudible]
Hon. C. Imbert: I am glad we want to go home early—and needs no further explanation except to say it contains the short title of the Bill which is cited as the Finance Act, 2023.

Clause 2: National Insurance Amnesty. Clause 2 of the Bill seeks to implement the third amnesty on interest and penalties under the National Insurance Act, the previous two being 2012 and 2022/2023. In 2012, approximately $36 million was recovered during that amnesty period. In 2022, approximately $90 million was recovered up to December 31st, 2022, and as you have just heard, Madam Speaker, the total actually collected in the amnesty for 2022/2023 was over $100 million. Given the positive performance of the recent amnesty in 2022/2023, which is approximately two and half times, almost three times, the 2012 figure, we expect that this third amnesty will again motivate employers and employees and bring in millions of dollars’ worth in outstanding contributions. But this is not the only goal.

In the last amnesty, we gave a waiver of interest and penalties to employees and employers, or employers in particular, sorry, who were in arrears of payments of their contributions. They were given a period within which to make their contributions and if they did so, they would not be subject to penalties and interest. However, there was a particular category, a small number of persons and companies who did not benefit from the last amnesty. They, I will have to say, fell through the cracks because they had already paid the outstanding contributions before the amnesty began on July 1st, 2022. And since the amnesty applied to persons who paid outstanding contributions from July 1st, 2022, to the end of the period, they having paid it just before were not eligible for the amnesty on penalties and interest and we thought this was manifestly unfair that persons who had not paid their contributions benefited from the amnesty but persons who had
paid, could be up to the day before, did not benefit from the amnesty. So we are correcting that with this particular clause.

We also felt that we should give a short amnesty—the period is quite short on this occasion—to allow those who were unable to get all their paperwork in order because this is always a difficult problem for employers to have all their documents in order to meet the deadline. So we are giving a short amnesty for the third time to allow those who just missed the deadline on the last occasion. So that is the purpose and intent of the clauses that deal with the third amnesty for national insurance.

And there is another twist that affects the payment of national insurance contributions. With the coming into force of the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act, and the statutory requirement of producing both income tax and national insurance clearances as part of the prequalification process, there is a need to ensure that individuals and businesses operating as employers can obtain these tax and national insurance clearances in the post-pandemic world. To be more specific, section 29(1)(d) of the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act states:

“A procuring entity shall ensure that suppliers and contractors—
have fulfilled their obligations to pay all required taxes and contributions in Trinidad and Tobago;”

While it is also the case that Regulation 4(3)(a) and (b) of the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property, pre-qualification and pre-selection, permit two instances in which prequalification may be continued, namely:

“(a) where the supplier was not informed of the exact amount of taxes on national insurance contributions owed in such time to allow it the opportunity of fulfilling its obligations before the deadline of
submitting its pre-qualification documents. In such situations, the pre-qualification process continues but approval is only granted after evidence of payment is provided;

(b) the supplier has entered into a binding agreement with the regulatory body to pay outstanding taxes or national insurance and such an agreement is submitted to the entity at the time of seeking pre-qualification.”

Notwithstanding that, none of these two scenarios relieves the individual or business from paying its income tax, corporation tax or national insurance contributions.

Given that the amnesty, the previous one, commenced before the full proclamation of the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act—in other words, the last amnesty commenced in July of 2022, and the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act was proclaimed in April of 2023. We expect now that individuals, businesses, and any other type of employer who wishes to participate in procurement procedures will seize the opportunity of regularizing all their outstanding contributions without the burden of interest and penalties. This is why we are giving this third amnesty in addition to dealing with the category who, as I say, fell through the cracks and might have been treated unfairly.

In a similar vein, with effect from December 1st, 2023, certificates of compliance issued by the National Insurance Board will now be valid for a period of three months. It used to be one. So that in the past when a person wished to participate in public procurement, a company or a natural person, we submitted a national insurance clearance certificate, by the time the procurement process was completed it would have expired because under the rules the normal procurement
process takes about two months. So if you have a national insurance certificate valid for one month, it will expire in the middle of the process. So we asked—the Ministry of Finance asked the National Insurance Board to change the period of compliance from one month to three months and they did so, and that is in effect now since the 1st of December.

This measure, again, is aimed at encouraging greater participation in procurement proceedings under the Public Procurement Act and did not require any legislative amendments by the National Insurance Board. In fact, when I asked them, why is it that national insurance clearance certificates are only valid for one month I, it turned out to be a practice. Nothing in the law. So that for years, however long—I think national insurance has been in force since 1972. So for 50 years the National Insurance Board had been issuing clearance certificates valid for one month based on a practice. It was not law and, therefore, we did not require to change the legislation when we asked them to shift it from one month to three months. They were able to do it without—it is three months now from December 1st, 2023.

The third benefit is aimed at addressing the usual concerns raised in this House that we are giving a “bligh” to somebody, and that there is no benefit to be derived from those employers who have walked the tight road of compliance. In this particular case, only outstanding contributions due and owing one day prior to the amnesty period and paid during the amnesty period will derive a benefit of—sorry. In the previous case, as I said, only outstanding contributions due and owing one day prior to the amnesty period and paid during the period derived the benefit of a waiver. We have looked at this, as I said, and I want to repeat that this third amnesty will be applicable to both contributions paid prior to the amnesty period and during the amnesty period. In other words, there will be a total waiver of

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interest and penalties on all outstanding contributions that were paid either prior to December 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2023 or during the amnesty period of December 20\textsuperscript{th}, the 2023 to January 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2024.

Moving on now, we note that clause 2 of the Bill repeals section 39(c) of the National Insurance Act and replaces it with a new section 39(c). This implements the waiver on penalties and interest due under section 39(b) of the Act where the contributions is paid by the employer as I have just explained, prior to December 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2023, or between December 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2023 and January 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2024. This will apply to employers registered prior to December 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2023. This differs in some way from the previous amnesty where employers were permitted to register during the amnesty period. Simply put, employers previously had a period of approximately six months to register with the NIB in 2022 utilizing a process that pursuant to section 30 of the National Insurance Act, takes one working day nowadays to complete. I want to repeat that. It takes one day now to register with the National Insurance Board. As an employer, one day—okay?—with the current improvements.

Section 39C(3) clearly establishes that the waiver on penalties and interest does not affect the payment or the rate of contributions set out under the Act. Section 39C(4) operates to revive the interest and penalties when the amnesty period ends on January 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2024. Section 39C(5) permits the Minister of Finance to extend the period by order which has always proved to be very useful.

3.20 p.m.

Moving on to clause 3, this is to fulfill a promise made with respect to the waiver of income tax on the $4,000 lump sum payment for retirees. It is a
relatively straightforward clause and it is intended to exempt income tax attendant on the one-time lump sum payment of $4,000 to persons who retire compulsorily, voluntarily, with permission, or on the grounds of ill health from 2014 to 2016. And this goes back to a matter that was raised today.

The genesis of the $4,000 lump sum payment is as a result of negotiations and recent agreements reached between the Chief Personnel Officer and the following: TUTTA; the Fire Services, First and Second Division; Prison Service, First and Second Division; Police Service, First and Second division; Amalgamated workers at the Port of Spain Corporation and the Defence Force Pay Review Committee. This special payment of $4,000 will benefit approximately 1,600 monthly paid officers and 100 hourly, daily and weekly rated workers who retired between January 01, 2014 and September 30, 2016. And to further explain this, in the Government’s offer of 4 per cent over the period, it was 002, 002, and there would be some persons who would retire within that period who would not benefit from the full 4 per cent. What the Government decided to do, and the bargaining agents accepted, that those persons who retire within that period, who did not receive the full benefit, the 4 per cent, will get a lump sum payment of $4,000 and we went further and we are going further to exempt that $4,000 lump sum payment to retirees from income tax.

Clause 4(a), exemption from business levy. This exempts manufacturing companies whose gross receipts fall within the 30 per cent tax bracket, in other words, ordinary companies, because banks and so on are charged at a higher rate of 35 per cent, oil companies at 55 per cent. So it is ordinary companies as you would call them who fall within the 30 per cent tax bracket. It exempts them from business levy charges in respect of export sales only. So we are exempting local manufacturers who export or exempting the income earned from export sales from
business levy, and that is to encourage manufacturers to export. This is also expected to facilitate trade and stimulate domestic economic activity, create employment, enhance production, improve revenue.

The exemption from business levy is not applicable to receipts derived from the manufacture of petrochemicals because they are outside of the 30 per cent tax rate, they pay 35 per cent. Wholesale marketing and distribution of petroleum products or banking, or the business of banking under the Financial Act to name a few, they are all outside of the ordinary 30 per cent corporation tax rate.

Clause 4(b) seeks to amend the Corporation Tax Act by inserting new sections 10X and 10Y and this is a corporate sponsorship allowance, public and private schools and the cyber security investment tax allowance. Section 10X will implement an allowance equal to 150 per cent of the actual expenditure incurred up to a maximum of $500,000 on the enhancement and promotion of education, through corporate sponsorship to a public or private school registered with the Ministry of Education. To simplify matters, expenditure will be required to be certified by the principal or the most senior administrator of the public or private school thereby ensuring that expenditure is consistent with the specific goals of the public and private school and within the overall remit of enhancement and promotion of education.

3.25 p.m.

It allows for flexibility and it is intended to meet the individual needs of a public or private school. Expenditure will be certified by the recipient public or private school as a measure to ensure that schools have actually benefited. And the rationale behind this provision is to recognize that, as we all believe, education is extremely important and there are many corporate sponsors who want to help to assist in the maintenance and development of school infrastructure, and this is to
encourage them because they will get a 50 per cent uplift on their expense for tax purposes.

Section 10X is intended to commence on January 01, 2024, and there is no expiry date. So this is a permanent allowance, 150 per cent uplift for tax purposes of expenditure by private citizens and private companies from income tax on expenditure on a public or private school. The school just has to be authorized by the Ministry of Education. It has to be an approved school, whether public or private. Obviously all public are approved but this will also apply to all approved private schools, and it has no expiry date.

Section 10Y is intended to promote investments in cybersecurity by granting an allowance of up $500,000 in relation to expenditure made in cyber security software and network security, monitoring equipment by companies. This has to be certified by iGovTT. So in the case of the previous measure, it is to be certified by the principal or the most senior administrator in the school. And in this case, it has to be certified by iGovTT, which is the Government’s ICT company.

As you may know, ransomware, cyberattacks, I do not want to use loose language, but I would say it is the flavour of the month internationally; ransomware and cyberattacks. There is a proliferation of cybersecurity intrusions aimed at businesses within Trinidad and Tobago in particular and in fact, it is simply shocking. The other day I heard about the Massy Group, I think it was attacked and their computer systems went down, and it was an external attack by an international cybersecurity criminal.

The Trinidad and Tobago Cyber Security Incident Response Team, TT-CSIRT, a unit within the Ministry of National Security, has established, with the assistance of the Organization of American States and the International Telecommunication Union, that cybersecurity measures are extremely important to
counter cybersecurity threats to Trinidad and Tobago.

TT-CSIRT’s Mission statement is:

“…to respond to cyber incidents, through effective response techniques, education, training, awareness, research, collaboration and…management…”

By way of example, the input and recommendation of this specialized unit of the Ministry of National Security has become a prerequisite for any electronic funds transfer method being approved by the Treasury and ensures that all relevant cyber security risks have been identified and addressed. And let me just explain what that means. You may have seen new digital solutions to payments. The Judiciary, for example, has a CourtPay system, a voucher system, where persons now no longer have to pay in cash, pay their fees, their fines, maintenance, et cetera, in cash. They now do it by way of a voucher, by way of a mobile wallet and it is a cashless transaction. But before that could be approved, the TT-CSIRT had to examine the integrity of that transaction methodology, look and see whether there were any cracks within the system where someone could penetrate and undermine that digital payment system. So that is the function of this specialized unit of the Ministry of National Security.

Moving along, all of the digital payment transactions that we are now implementing throughout the government service in the Housing Development Corporation, the Ministry of Works and Transport and so on, all of the digital payment solutions have to be examined and certified by TT-CSIRT.

Following that paradigm, we now believe that this should translate itself into the private sector, and this is why we are giving this allowance in section 10, I think it is 10Y, to promote investments in cybersecurity. And I do not think I need to be labour this point. I think everybody in Trinidad and Tobago is now acutely
aware of the need for enhanced cybersecurity protection, whether you are in the public sector or in the private sector. So we are giving an allowance up to $500,000 for investments in cybersecurity.

Clause 5 refers to small shallow water marine area producers and it seeks to establish a new rate of supplementary petroleum tax that is applicable to a small shallow marine producer and to increase the discount of the sustainability incentive from 20 per cent to 25 cent under the Petroleum Taxes Act. It is important to highlight that this refers to a person who carries out petroleum operations in shallow marine areas under a licence, sub-licence or contract, and produces less than 4,000 barrels of crude oil per day. Shallow marine areas are currently classified under the Petroleum Act, by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, and these areas will also be applicable in the case of small shallow marine producers.

The other important matter to highlight is that clauses 5(a) and (c) of the Bill, which establishes this new tier, is modelled exactly on the applicable rate of supplemental petroleum tax that obtains in respect of small onshore producers. The genesis of all of this is that some years ago, we agreed that for onshore—small onshore producers of oil, we would change the supplemental petroleum rate, the rate at which supplemental petroleum tax gets in, from 50 to 75, and this was to incentivize small land producers of oil to engage in drilling, exploration and production. Because if you do not drill, because of the nature of our basin, the nature of our hydrocarbon geology, we have declining production—like any other hydrocarbon basin in the world, we have declining production and if you do not drill, you are not going to be able to replenish and replace declining production.

So we incentivized land producers by increasing the level at which SPT will kick in from $50 to $75. We now believe this is appropriate for shallow water
marine. We need to incentivize the shallow water marine operators to do as much drilling as possible to produce as much oil as possible in the shallow water area. So that the new rates are going to be up to $75, price of oil, the rate of SPT will now be zero—up to $75; between $75.01 and $90 per barrel, the rate will be 18 per cent; from $90.01 and $200, the SPT will be the base rate plus 0.2 per cent of P minus $90, where P is the price; and $200 and over, it will be 40 per cent. This is meant to further incentivize investments in the shallow water marine areas that otherwise would not be as attractive. The basic maxim is oil in the ground is of no use to anyone.

Clause 5(b) of the Bill increases the sustainable incentive from the 20 per cent to 25 per cent and amends the Third Schedule of the Petroleum Taxes Act. The sustainable incentive reduces the applicable rate of supplemental petroleum tax in relation to mature marine oil fields and small marine oil fields and the measure is therefore intended to also incentivize investments in these fields, because you have different types of fields. You could have a brand new field where oil is being produced for the first time or you could have a field that is 50 years old where it is extremely difficult to continue to produce oil. So this sustainable incentive further reduces the rate of SPT in relation to mature fields, where it is proving to be very difficult to continue to produce oil.

For the benefit of Members, I will explain what all of this means by definition:

“‘mature marine oil field’…means a marine oil field that is twenty-five years or older from the date of its first commercial production…
‘small marine oil field’ means a field that has production levels of 1500 barrels or less of oil equivalent per day.”

Mr. Charles: We know that already.
Hon. C. Imbert: “You eh know nothing”. Both fields must be certified by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, and a person carrying out production business can only qualify for one discount in respect of a particular field.

We intend—later on, there will be discussions between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to continue to provide further incentives for the energy sector to continue to motivate producers to continue to generate and produce more oil and gas. That will take place early in 2024, after discussions are completed between the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. But this is what we are doing now, we are now bringing shallow water marine producers into the same regime as small land producers of oil.

I move now to property tax. Clause 6 of the Bill seeks to make some adjustments to the property tax regime. Clause 6(c) of the Bill waives property tax for the period January 01, 2010, to December 31, 2023. This means that property tax will only be a liability to the public, commencing from the year 2024—1st of January, 2024, which is just a couple of weeks away. And the Government will therefore forgo any revenue from property tax for the period up to December 31, 2023. This is necessary to provide certainty because although persons have not yet received their tax notices, their property tax notices for residential properties from the Board of Inland Revenue, but will receive them soon, we need to have certainty so that these notices will be applicable and will impose the tax from the 1st of January, 2024. I am sure that this will ease the anxiety of many.

Mr. Indarsingh: Ease the anxiety?

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, the fact that the tax is going to be applicable from January 01, 2024, because I know Members opposite will be telling them that they have to pay for 2023, 2022, 2021, 2020, 2019. Madam Speaker, I know who I am dealing
with. They like to spread “mauvais langue” and rumours and confuse people.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** So certainty is being provided here and I want people to understand that property tax will be applicable from January 01, 2024.

The Valuation Division has already commenced printing and dispatching valuation notices in November of 2023. As at the middle of November 2023, the Valuation Division had issued 33,787 valuation notices through TTPost. We expect that all valuation notices for residential properties, which is in excess of 200,000 residential properties that have been valued, will be delivered early in 2024.

On this basis that property tax will now be implemented from January 01, 2024, clause 6(b) of the Bill reduces the timelines for payment of property tax and the imposition of penalty and interest from 15th March in the following year to the 30th September in every year. And that is necessary, to have consistency, because the date on which property tax is to be paid, the last possible date is the 30th of September in any particular year, so we are now correcting an anomaly. The effect of clause 6(b) of the Bill is therefore to streamline the date on which the obligation to pay property tax arises with the date on which interest and penalties for non-payment will arise. There was a lacuna in the law.

Clause 6(b) of the Bill also provides a mechanism through which municipal corporations will notify the Board of Inland Revenue of instances of non-payment of property tax, thereby permitting the board to pursue appropriate measures to recover the tax. In this regard, clause 6(a) of the Bill is intended to make provision for municipal corporations to collect the tax pending the proclamation of the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Act, 2022. This is a fallback measure. Once the local government reform package is fully proclaimed,

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there is no need for the Minister of Finance to authorize local government bodies to collect tax because that will be the law.

3:40 p.m.

But in the event that for some reason the full package is not proclaimed, this Bill gives the Minister of Finance now the authority to authorize local government bodies to collect residential property tax. So it is a fallback position because we do intend to collect property tax in 2024.

Moving on to the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act. Again, there is a dispute with respect to a recent amendment where, despite advice, the Office of Procurement Regulation is of the view that the phrase “goods and services” does not apply to construction works. Now, the international definition of “goods and services” does apply to construction, but the OPR is of the view that in our case, it does not. To prevent any argument, to avoid any confusion and to avoid disputes, we are now amending the definition of “goods and services” to include “works”.

We have been working steadfastly with the Office of Procurement Regulation on the applicable regulations that form the basis of the simplified procurement procedures under section 58A of the Act, and I am happy to report these are at a very advanced stage. In fact, I saw what was purported to be the final, final version of these regulations, and these are the regulations for procurement for goods and services under $1 million.

We are adding to that the—to the definition of “goods and services”, we are adding the word “works”. So that the regulations by clause 7 of the Bill, the regulations for procurement to under $1 million, or a simplified procurement as it is also called, will now cover, goods, services and works under $1 million dollars. So we are moving any argument or any dispute as to what “goods and services”
covers. Because it was always the intention that the million-dollar limit for simplified procurement would cover any procurement that any public body would be involved in, so we did not want to have this thing confused by any argument, by some clever lawyer, that “works” is not included in the definition of “goods and services”.

Clause 8 is the usual clause, a commencement date. It establishes December 20, 2023, as the date upon which the national insurance amnesty will come into force. And clause 8(2) of Bill sets January 01, 2024, as the date on which clauses 4, 5, and 6 of the Bill will come into effect and the remaining clauses will take effect on the date of assent. So, Madam Speaker, although I hesitate to say this, the Bill before us is not complex. It just has 8 clauses. It seeks to provide an amnesty under the National Insurance Act—

**Hon. Member:** [Inaudible]

**Hon C. Imbert:** You could have 100. It seeks to provide tax allowances for persons who assist in the development and maintenance of public and private schools. It seeks to provide a tax allowance for businesses that invest in cybersecurity. It seeks to motivate and incentivize producers of oil in shallow marine areas. And it seeks to correct an anomaly in the definition of “goods and services” for simplified procurement under $1 million.

I beg to move, Madam Speaker.

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

*Question proposed.*

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Oropouche West.

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

**Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (Oropouche West):** Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this Finance Bill, 2023, the short title of which is:

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“An Act to make provisions for a financial nature and other related matters”, Madam Speaker. If the Minister is to be believed this is not a complex piece of legislation, however, having just spent an extended amount of time providing an explanation for what he says is “not a complex piece of legislation”, I think the Minister in his presentation lacked—a—

Mr. Indarsingh: He was very unconvincing.

Mr. D. Tancoo: He was completely unconvincing, but I think he lacked the concern. He lacked the concern to provide some pieces of information, Madam Speaker, with regard to this Bill and with regard to the clauses of the Bill, which I would like to put in the public domain.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: This is not a simple Bill, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Member: It is not complex, it is just complicated.

Mr. D. Tancoo: This is a very complicated Bill. The legislation, the wording might be very simple, but the effect of these pieces of legislation, these amendments, Madam Speaker, will be far-reaching—a—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—and substantially devastating to the population of Trinidad and Tobago. These eight clauses, over 8 pages, including the Explanatory Note, Madam Speaker, demonstrate the material and substantial disconnect—a—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—and misalignment between the policies of the Government and the needs and welfare and priorities that this country and the people of this country require from it.

Madam Speaker, the Bill seeks to make several corrections to mistakes and errors that the Government itself had put in legislation prior to that. But above
that, Madam Speaker, the Bill intends to continue a level of complacency when it deals specifically with the implementation of law in this country. Madam Speaker, I begin with clause 2, and I will go through clause by clause for the Minister’s benefit and for the country’s understanding as to what exactly this legislation does and how it affects them.

Madam Speaker, clause 2 writes off all penalties and interest on outstanding contributions owed by employers once this payment is made before December 20, 2023. So all penalties being owed to the NIB is being wiped off once payment is made before December 20, 2023. But, Madam Speaker, same clause 2, if payment was not made by 20th of December, the Minister has now come and given them an extra time frame within which they can in fact make their payments.

Madam Speaker, the Minister in his presentation indicated that one of the reasons why he was bringing this amendment is because the public procurement legislation was passed after the last amnesty and he was giving the offending employers, who had broken the law and not made their payments as due, he was giving them the opportunity to update.

Madam Speaker, the fact is—well, he was giving them the opportunity to update because they would have wanted to engage in the public procurement process. And as a result of that, since the laws now requires—public procurement legislation now requires them to have clear—provide clearance certificates for all taxes in Trinidad and Tobago, they would have had to provide a clearance certificate to show that they would have been compliant with their NIS requirements. Madam Speaker, on the basis of that, to facilitate those who were negligent in complying with the law, the Minister says he is now extending this amnesty.

Madam Speaker, if businesses were interested in pursuing contracts under
the procurement legislation as it is now, should it not be logical that they would have expedited their own work, they would have rushed forward to ensure their own compliance without having to wait on the Minister’s say so to give them a “bligh”, to beg them to come and get involved, Madam Speaker? The fact is that compliance is a requirement of law.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: And what the Minister has done last year and is doing this year, he has been facilitating the breach of that law. He has been facilitating defaulters, Madam Speaker. Ironically, the Minister in his statement earlier indicated that—if I may refer to it, Madam Speaker. The Minister responded in his statement earlier, he said that:

“…debt collection unit was established and significant number of authorized officers were on boarded and trained in the conduct of employer compliance audits.”

Excellent, excellent. I am very glad to hear that, Madam Speaker.

3.50 p.m.

So, we have created a situation where we have a unit that will go after the defaulters, and instead of employing that unit, instead of giving that unit the authorization and the teeth to do so, Madam Speaker, he comes with an amnesty.

Again, what the Minister is doing by his actions is facilitating persons to breach the law, which is not an acceptable situation. It is unfair to the citizens of this country, especially those businesses who have been following the law. Madam Speaker, the Minister also said in his presentation that for financial year ended June 30, 2023, the total contribution in arrears received in response to the waiver, that is, to his tax amnesty, his amnesty from last year, the total contribution in arrears received in response to the waiver amounted to $123.8 billion, and he
celebrated that. The problem Madam Speaker, is that the total arrears outstanding for that financial year was actually $598 million. The Minister gives an amnesty and only $123.8 million was forthcoming on payment of arrears.

If it did not work the first time, what makes the Minister believe it will work the second time, because persons who did not pay this $470-odd million outstanding that was not paid during the last amnesty. Madam Speaker, persons who did not reach that amnesty, who did not take advantage of that amnesty, continue to default, continue to earn penalties and taxes as a result of their non-compliance. Regardless of the amnesty, they made a deliberate choice, and it is my view that when the Minister facilitates this kind of defaulting, he weakens the implementation of the law, he weakens the very NIB that he is seeking today to boast about, to tout about. He is literally—

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** —weakening the financial support, the financial structure, the financial strength of the National Insurance Board, and that is unforgivable.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance is aware of the level of default and has been aware of that for the longest while. It is my view that this amendment being proposed today will do little because the level of default has continued to be extremely high, and on every occasion, the Minister has been bending over backward depriving taxpayers of due taxation, depriving the revenue fund of revenue that they critically need. He has been doing that willingly and what has happened now. Madam Speaker is that businesses will continue to default.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** They will continue to default. What is required is a level of action, a level of aggression, by this Government, and this Minister, that they simply see no urgency in doing so, even though the National Insurance Board has
been in crisis. Even though the National Insurance Board has been using up its investments. Madam Speaker, I believe the Minister has himself cited a $1.8 or a $1.2 billion deficit between the revenue and expenditure in the National Insurance Board which means that they were eating into their investments to make their payments. Madam Speaker, even in that situation, the Minister is depriving the National Insurance Fund and the National Insurance Board of revenue.

Madam Speaker, I want to refer to a *Guardian* article dated 31 October, 2020, because this I think includes some policy suggestions that the Minister should take careful consideration of. And this matter, Madam Speaker, the *Guardian* article is headed:

“Delinquent employers owe NIB millions in workers' contributions”.

So, in 2020, the National Workers Union raised this issue publically they raised the issue, by writing to the NIB, by writing to the DPP, by writing to the Police Commissioner, trade unions, and parliamentarians on this issue, the outstanding money owed by employers to the NIB.

3.55 p.m.

They viewed this situation as utterly scandalous because, Madam Speaker, they are aware that when employers do not make their payments it is the employees that suffer. It is employees who are put at risk, and that is unfair. But according to this article, according to this article, Ma’am, the National Workers Union viewed that transaction where employers were negligent in complying with the law as a matter of fraud, which is why they wrote to the DPP, which is why they wrote to the Police Commissioner, Madam Speaker.

And I want to cite for the Minister’s recommendation, something that was recommended in 2020 that I think the Minister must consider today. Before we go to amnesty, Madam Speaker, I think we need to do a little bit more to get
compliance in place. If I may quote, the same newspaper article of the 31/10/2020:

“Michael Anisette, general secretary of NATUC said…”—stronger—

“…legislation was needed to deal with delinquent employers as the fine is too small.”

That is something we should see here today, not an amnesty.

“He suggested that a database be set up by the NIB so that employees…”

Madam Speaker, those who are affected—

“…employees…would be able to monitor payments made to the NIB after deductions are made. In this way, any attempts to manipulate the system will be prevented.”

I continue with the quotation, Madam Speaker:

“He said the NIB should also publish in the newspaper the names of all employers who have not fulfilled their duties to the NIB. He said this was a way of embarrassing errant employees.” —into compliance.

The same article also refers to the ECA, the Employers Consultative Association and they, these are the Employers Consultative Association, they were saying and I quote, Madam Speaker:

“We would also advise employers of the possibility of litigation as well as the denial of a benefit to employees. National insurance deductions and contributions are a statutory requirement and depending on the circumstances, non-payment to the NIB could be deemed an act of fraud.”

Madam Speaker. And here we are today with a Minister coming forward and saying, “Let’s give them a bligh again”. “Let’s bypass the need for funding. Let’s bypass the need for prosecution of employers who have not fulfilled their legal requirements”, Madam Speaker. It is facilitating the breaking of the law.

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Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: It is unacceptable and that is the Government’s policy. This is the second amnesty in two years. Madam Speaker, I want to refer as well to a newspaper article dated the 11th of April, 2023. In that newspaper article, Madam Speaker, the Ombudsman, the Office of the Ombudsman was raising an issue that dates back to the 2017 report where the Ombudsman stated, and I quote—this report was actually laid in Parliament, Madam Speaker:

“Non-payment of employees’ NI contributions by employers is a recurring issue and this office has received several complaints.”

As you know, Madam Speaker, the Office of the Ombudsman deals with complaints by the members of the public when the state agencies are not doing the job that they are supposed to be doing.

“The report said 41st Annual Report…”

That would go back to 2017—

“…cited a parliament committee’s call for the NIB to improve its ‘oversight of the collection of contributions from employers’ and its, ‘registration of all employers who are not currently registered or paying…NIS…”

The article continues:

“It is therefore quite clear that the NIB’s Compliance Department which is tasked to handle delinquent employers is not effective.”

Pair that, Madam Speaker, pair that, Madam Speaker, with the Minister’s boast today about increasing the staffing, et cetera, creation of the unit in the Ministry, in the National Insurance Board for the prosecution and persecution of agencies that have—employers in particular, that have broken the law.

Madam Speaker, the long and short of all of this. The long and short, and
there is much more that could be said with regard to this, but the long and short of all of this, Madam Speaker, is that the Government is going the wrong way when it deals specifically with employers not paying, not meeting their statutory, their legal requirement to the NIS. What they are doing is depriving the NIB of funding but they are facilitating employers in disenfranchising employees of their due rights.

Last year—in fact, earlier this year, Madam Speaker, there was a *Guardian* article that cited that one of the major offenders of entities that are not meeting its payments was the very same Government. The very same Government. That *Guardian* article highlighted several agencies, several boards, several government institutions, which were in fact indebted to the NIB to the tune of millions and hundreds of millions, Madam Speaker, hundreds of millions.

The MTS. MTS at that time, $75 million outstanding; Ministry of Education, $35.9 million; WASA, $16 million; Ministry of Science Technology and Tertiary Education, $23 million; UTT, $21 million; Employment Training Programme, $16 million; Ministry of National Security, $12 million.

Madam Speaker, I have a question for the Minister and I hope whenever he comes back, because he seems to be very—well, he has presented his Bill, has asked for the Opposition to comment and he has disappeared. Walked out of the Chamber, this is very disrespectful but I will move on, Madam Speaker. I want to ask the Minister—

**Hon. Member:** [Interruption]

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** You will have your chance, Sir. You will have your chance you will speak then, please.

**Hon Member:** Yes, yes.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** You will speak then. Madam Speaker, I want to ask the Minister,
is it that all of these entities, all of the government agencies, all of them will now be forgiven their penalties and taxes owed as a result of not being compliant? Is it that these agencies are going to be forgiven as well? Is that why we are bringing this amendment today?

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** So that the Government gets a free pass for breaking the law itself? Completely unacceptable, Madam Speaker, but I want to go forward.

Last year when the Minister brought this same amnesty, when he brought a request for amnesty for 2022 and prior to that. Last year, the Minister indicated and he repeated it today, that was because of last year we had COVID issues, et cetera, et cetera. And this was to create the space so that employers who could not put their documents together, would have been given the breathing space to so do from COVID. COVID does not—it is no longer an issue.

**Hon Member:** [Inaudible]

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Yes, there will always be an issue for the Minister but that is not acceptable for Trinidad and Tobago. On the basis of that, like I indicated, Madam Speaker, $400-odd million was still not met. But I want to refer you, Madam Speaker, to how serious this issue is, because last year, last year, when they came here the Minister indicated in piloting this Bill, that serious aggression was going to be placed in persecuting and prosecuting offenders. Substantial investigations were going to take place, Madam Speaker.

In fact, in the other place another Minister, the Member for San Fernando East in the other place, Madam Speaker, warned, and there is a *Guardian* newspaper headline, because I try not to listen to him too often. But there is a *Guardian* newspaper headline.

**Hon. Member:** [ Interruption]
Mr. D. Tancoo: Well, you could say if it is true or not true. You could say if it is true or not true.

Hon. Member: [Inaudible]

Mr. D. Tancoo: You could say it now. Madam Speaker, in presenting the Bill the Minister says words to the effect, I am quoting the newspaper article:

“He said NIS non-payment deprives people - especially in low-income groups - of access to much-needed benefits, while enriching the coffers of employers who’ve avoided making payments.”

He said:

“This Government is working to address this issue through introduction of this bill and when the waiver period is over, penalties will be so adjusted to deter the willingness to breach.

‘I say to those who have been willfully…’—neglecting—“…their NIS contributions, that they should get their house in order and pay now because winter is coming,’…”

Big bad Minister:

“…winter is coming...

…we’ve improved detection and are much better at this point at seeing which employers aren’t in compliance with the law.

And absolutely - after the amnesty period - we’re going to go after these delinquent employers.”

He repeated:

“…winter is coming.’”

Madam Speaker, you know what their version of winter is? Give the defaulters a “bligh”. Give the defaulters a “bligh”.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mr. D. Tancoo: Employers who are in default must be laughing at this gentleman right now. They must be laughing at the fact that he is big and bad and bluff and fluff, completely unacceptable. And Madam Speaker, I am predicting that what will happen today is the very same Minister will probably get up and say the very same thing: fix or put your house in order. And if you do not put your house in order, we are coming. And next year we may end up with another “bligh” again. So Minister, you have the chance now, rewrite your speech from now. Edit the speech that was written to you so that you could really make a contribution in this.

Madam Speaker, I am moving on. I am moving on.

Hon Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. D. Tancoo: No, no, no. We do not necessarily need him across here. We do not want him across here at all, at all, at all. Madam Speaker, 39C(4), just to repeat 39C(4), Madam Speaker. If they breached the law before, they broke the law before, what in the world makes this Government believe that they will not breach it again? It is a definition well repeated in this House on a multiplicity of occasions, it is a definition of absolute madness and chaos, Madam Speaker. The same situation will occur and reoccur, and reoccur, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I move on to clause 3 of the Bill. Clause 3 of the Bill makes amendments to the Income Tax Act and seeks to provide a “four thousand” dollar payment:

“...to persons who retired compulsorily, voluntarily with permission or on the grounds of ill-health, for the period 2014 to 2016.”

The Minister indicated that this was on the basis of several conversations and discussions with various unions.

Madam Speaker, I want to throw us back because in his presentation, and I had hope that the Minister would provide a little bit more clarity to his comments
given that this amendment emanated from the budget. I was hoping that he would provide some clarification. So for the benefit of the listening audience, Madam Speaker, and just as a reminder to you, Madam Speaker, I want to repeat what the Minister said, so I could treat with a bit more of a concise manner.

The Minister said in his presentation, in the budget presentation, Madam Speaker, I quote:

“We are also pleased with the decisions of these unions to accept a one-time lump sum payment of $4,000 to persons who retired compulsorily…”

Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera—

“This special payment of $4,000 will benefit approximately 1,600 monthly-paid officers and 100 hourly, daily and weekly-rated workers who retired between January 1, 2014 and September 30, 2016.”

The Minister repeated that today. The Minister then in the budget said:

“As a gesture of goodwill, I have decided to make tax exempt this one-time $4000 lump sum payment to retirees.”

He continued:

“This will cost up to $19.7 million in revenue foregone.”

That was the budget, Madam Speaker. The Minister comes here today to put in place a legislation after the budget has already been passed, to put in place the legislation to give effect to this promise.

Madam Speaker, we did not have much of a time then but I had the time to do the maths on behalf of the Minister and I must admit, Madam Speaker, we have now gotten to a point where I think as a Christmas gesture, I would be providing the hon. Minister of Finance with a calculator because clearly his “maths does not maths”, Madam Speaker.

He stated that this benefit would be passed on to 1,700 persons, 1,600 plus
100 “…who retired between January 1, 2014 and September 30, 2016.” That cost will be $19.7 million. Madam Speaker, when I went to school my maths teacher, Mr. Basdeo, Mr. Basdeo insisted that we not use calculators because we would lose the ability to do maths. Clearly, the Minister has lost the ability to do maths, but it seems worse, it seems that he has also lost the ability to use a calculator.

**4.10 p.m.**

As I said Madam Speaker, they could trivialize as much as they want the loss of millions and millions and millions of dollars you know, Madam Speaker. They could trivialize the failure to account as much as they want, you know, Madam Speaker. The problem remains that the maths not “mathsing.”

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Madam Speaker, $4,000 by 1,700 works out to $6.8 million. You know how much the Government approved for this action? Madam Speaker, $19 million. So where did the money gone?—$19.7 million approved in the budget for the payment of $4,000 to 1,700 workers. Madam Speaker, we missing “rell” money, we are missing substantial money. I queried Madam Speaker, and I hope the Minister in his wind up could explain where the money went to. Because what $4,000 works out actually is $1.10 a day for the period over which they provided the grant. But, Madam Speaker, I have another question which I hope the Minister will answer in his wind up. For the specified persons, because several persons would have passed away during the period under review. For the specified persons who are now deceased and whose next of kin receive a pension, would this one-time lump sum be paid to those persons, Madam Speaker? The next of kin of the persons who would have passed away, who would have qualified for this payment—one-time payment, Madam Speaker? I hope the Minister in his wind up will touch that Madam Speaker.
Madam Speaker, briefly I want to reach out to the Corporation Tax Act amendment, Madam Speaker, clause 4. Clause 4, the first part of clause 4, the part that deals with the business levy, Madam Speaker. There is an attempt by the Minister to indicate that this amendment will provide some incentive for businesses to export more. Madam Speaker, that is an absolute mamaguy, and I know one of my colleagues will treat in more detail with that. That is an absolute mamaguy, Madam Speaker, because what businesses are facing in this country right now is a series of issues facilitated by this Government—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Oropouche West, you have two more minutes of ordinary speaking time. You are entitled to 15 more minutes additional time, if you so need, to complete.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you for the time. I would be much obliged, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Yes, Ma’am. As I was mentioning, the amendment seeks to provide a facility by—seeks to create the impression that this would promote increased export sales; the Minister himself said that. It will boost exports, it will create an increased revenue stream, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, Madam Speaker. However, businesses in this country have been complaining bitterly about other factors which the Minister has not touched and which this Government has treated shabbily.

Madam Speaker, we have situations with the ease of doing business. Businesses have been complaining about problems accessing foreign exchange. Crime is now a factor production in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. Those factors greatly overshadow and—well greatly overshadows any sort of this benefit, because until businesses feel a little bit more comfortable investing in an
environment where they can generate revenue and receive revenue, where they can have access to foreign exchange to buy goods and services, Madam Speaker, until that could happen, we are spinning top in mud Madam Speaker.

Unfortunately, this Government—the Minister boasted about an all-of-government approach has been taken to treat businesses, Madam Speaker, that is not happening. That is why businesses today, up to very recently, over the last two weeks, business chambers were complaining about the level of problems they were getting to access foreign exchange, and the deficiency and the crises that they were facing as a result of crime, Madam Speaker. So that simply taking export sales and giving a “bligh” with business levy is not sufficient. What is required is substantially more, a true situation where the Government looks at the big problem and treats with it each item by item by item. Unfortunately, that is not something that could simply be resolved by a signature on a pen. That is not going to assist substantially, and I predict therefore, that that is not going to assist in improving export sales.

Madam Speaker, clause 4 (b) of the Bill proposes that the Government will now give a tax concession of 150 per cent allowance of the actual expenditure incurred up to a maximum of $500,000 for businesses that invest in the enhancement and promotion of education through corporate sponsorship. Madam Speaker, what the Government is starting to do, in fact, what they are continuing to do, is pass the buck. That is what this is about. This is about passing the buck.

**Hon. Members:**  *Desk thumping*

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** My colleague, the Member for Tabaquite, raised issues before in this very House, Madam Speaker, where we have schools in this country where the roof is falling down and the Minister was not even aware. We have situations in this country where crises are taking place in schools. Right now, the infrastructure
is collapsing, the Government has failed the teaching service, they have failed the educational system in this country, Madam Speaker, and what they are hoping to do now is beg the private sector to get involved.

**Hon. Member:** A PNM business plan.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** And worse than that, Madam Speaker, they are now putting the weight of overseeing that and accounting for that—not in the Ministry of Education you know, Madam Speaker, to the principals who have no capability, competence and training to so do. You are asking a principal to oversee and account for investments being made, offers being made, sponsorships being made, by corporate citizens, Madam Speaker. They are treating with principals who are already overburdened with their responsibilities by expecting that principals will do the work that the Ministry of Education has failed to do, Madam Speaker, failed.

    What is worse, Madam Speaker, is that—and we saw this during the COVID period when corporate sponsorship came in and were providing laptops because the Government itself failed to provide laptops during the COVID, for the same citizens and the same children that they were talking about Madam Speaker. We saw various entities, various schools, benefit substantially. But in my constituency Madam Speaker, in Oropouche West, we have multiple schools which did not benefit from the good graces of many corporate citizens. In fact, much of our citizens, much of our students, had to do without unless the UNC, the Opposition, was able to raise funds to assist them and we did so, Madam Speaker—

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** —we did so. But that was because of the failure of the Ministry. We are back at the same situation, and because there is no check and balance, because nothing has been put in place except the talk about this piece of legislation
here, we run the risk of various schools, various institutions, benefiting substantially from corporate sponsorship and the vast majority of others are not.

There is very likely to be a continuation of the disparity in the allocation of resources by the corporate citizens that we are seeing—that same disparity being done by the Ministry of Education. What is required here, is a much more structured approach, Madam Speaker, but the Government is not inclined to do that, because they want to come and wave around the tax concession in the hope that private citizens, corporations, will in fact step in and do the job that the Ministry and the Government has failed to do.

Madam Speaker, I move on to clause 4, the amendment 10Y, the cybersecurity investment tax.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Minister Bacchus *[Inaudible]*

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Yeah, I note—I thank you for reminding me of who the gentleman is because now I know that that is the Minister with responsibility for digitization Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in this particular instance, we are being offered a tax concession, the State is offering a tax concession up to a maximum of $500,000 to persons who involve themselves in expenditure from investments made in cybersecurity software and network security. It is in the document here, Madam Speaker.

So they are going to give a tax concession of half a million dollars—up to half a million dollars spent on software and the technology for entities that are involved in protecting their assets, et cetera. Madam Speaker, that is wonderful news. That is wonderful news. However, how practical is it? TSTT was hacked. The Office of the Prime Minister was hacked. Massy was hacked, the AG’s office was hacked, and all of them would have spent their best amount—maximum amount of money possible. They would have invested heavily, heavily, in cyber

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security software and network security monitoring equipment, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The problem, Madam Speaker, is that this Government simply is not aware of where the crises is with cyber security.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Software, Madam Speaker, that is what they are proposing. Spend money on software and you good. TSTT spent money on software, they were not good. And we know that the Minister of Public Utilities to date has not provided any report on that matter, but that is a different matter that is before you, Madam Speaker. We will treat with that at another point in time and other places, Madam Speaker. But I want to refer this honourable House to a joint select committee that took place on Monday. And at that joint select committee some very startling revelations took place. Very, very startling revelations. We had members of the protective services who are advising this country, Madam Speaker, I cannot find a newspaper article now, but I could remember it well—I remember it well.

That very joint select committee, senior officials were telling the national community, because it was televised, were telling the national security apparatus, were telling the country, were telling the Ministry of National Security, that they were under-resourced. Senior officials involved in national security, involved in the cyber crime unit, involved in treating with cybercrime and accessing and—people who were responsible for tracking down cyber criminals were telling this country that they are under resourced Madam Speaker. That is where the Government should be spending the money, because you could put all your money into getting software. If you are putting no money or inadequate resources in the investigation, then we will continue to have the same level of criminal conduct that
the Minister himself was responding to earlier, where we have a rapid increase in the reports of cybercrime and cyber attacks Madam Speaker.

It is unacceptable because the Government simply does not know what it is doing.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:**—it believes that it will mamagu y the population by giving tax concessions, but it will not spend the money where it is supposed to be spent, which is in developing and harnessing and equipping the relevant authorities to track down and prosecute and persecute cyber criminals in Trinidad and Tobago. They have not put in place the relevant connections so that they could prosecute and persecute via various agencies abroad as well, where the attacks and so on are taking place from abroad. The Minister himself, the Minister of Public Utilities himself, has been treating with TSTT was complaining we do not have anybody locally, who could very possibly investigate that hack. Imagine that. Madam Speaker, so you could put all the money you want on cyber software, et cetera. Until they get ready, until they get realistic, until they get real, until they get factual and truthful, Madam Speaker, this Government will continue to spin top in mud and suffer citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** I, Madam Speaker, believe that that is unacceptable.

Madam Speaker, I move on—

**Hon. Member:** *[Inaudible]*

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** How much?

**Hon. Member:** *[Inaudible]*

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** Madam Speaker, I move on.

**Mr. Charles:** Talk for the rest of the day man.
Mr. D. Tancoo: Ah, I could do that, my friend. I could do that but they do not want to hear that on the other side. Madam Speaker, clause 6. Clause 6, I would leave clause 5 for my other colleagues, but I want to touch clause 6, Madam Speaker, because for me, this is serious, serious, serious—let me choose my words carefully, Madam Speaker—mess up. Ah, we would stick with mess, that the Government itself has put itself in.

You see, Madam Speaker, what clause 6 does, clause 6, the amendment part two, it amends section 33, the amendment part two. What it seeks to do is to tell this country, it is to put in place the law that says now, regional corporations are now going to be able to collect tax. So they bring this property tax, Madam Speaker, they bring property tax, they walk up and down this country left, right and centre, telling people—here what, you know, property tax coming. But you will get this money, regional corporations will collect the tax and you would get this money to spend on the population, you would get this money to spend on—and the corporations will get that money to spend. Two things are wrong here, Madam Speaker. The first thing is that they are only now coming to give the regional corporation the authority to collect the tax.

Ms. Mohit: And we told them that before you know.

4.25 p.m.

They are only now coming. Yes, they were told that when they came—they were sitting in this very House, Madam Speaker—that you need to authorize the corporations. They did not do that, because this is sloppy, sloppy, sloppy. All they are concerned about doing, Madam Speaker, is taking from the pockets of the taxpayers. They are not concerned about the procedure, they are not concerned about right and wrong, or the effect it is having on the citizens of the country. Do you know that it is only now they could collect the tax, after this is passed? That is
why we have to defer the collection of tax. We had to defer the collection of property tax, not because the Minister feel sorry for nobody, not because it is a bligh he is giving them, but because the law does not exist for the regional corporations to collect it.

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

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** And worse than that, now he is coming to put the responsibility on the regional corporations to collect and to report back. Again, the regional corporations do not have that money to do that. They are already underfunding the regional corporations. Now they are to take whatever resources they have to hire personnel to go and implement the property tax, because the Minister run from it. He passes it on, just like they did, they are doing with education and the security, they are now doing it with the local government.

Madam Speaker, it is an oversight and they are now trying to fix it. But, I want to make—Before I wrap, I want to make one more point. When during the local government election the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Local Government, other Ministers were walking again, length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago, telling the population, “Do not worry. Do not worry. Property tax coming, but it not so bad you know, because when you get this property tax, it would go to the regional corporations and the regional corporations will then spend it.” Creating the illusion, Madam Speaker, creating the illusion, that it is more money going to regional corporations. They were deliberately creating this story.

**Ms. Mohit:** False narrative.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** It is a false narrative that more money was coming to the regional corporations. The fact is, Madam Speaker, that the law as it exists today, the law as it exists today under the Miscellaneous Provisions Act, the law as it exist today:

> “Where estimates have been approved for use of a Corporation for a
particular year and the Corporation is in receipt of the sums collected from Property Taxes for use by the Corporation, the sums shall be off-set from releases due to the Corporation for that year.”

So, they are back to net zero. They were walking up and down misleading the population, Madam Speaker, into thinking that more money was coming and that could be further from the truth.

**Hon. Members:**  *Desk thumping*

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** So, today they are coming now to tell people property tax—

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** Member can you give the source of that information?

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** I cited it earlier and you are trying to take up my time, Sir. You get your time. You do not know, if you do not know, then clearly something is wrong with your responsibility. Find a lawyer and ask them. Madam Speaker, I want to continue, I am wrapping up at this point.

**Madam Speaker:** One minute.

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** I have one minute. What I said before as I began, I would like to end, Madam Speaker. The fact is that this Government brought this Finance Bill with the intention of misleading and correcting errors that they have made in their own legislation.

**Hon. Members:** *Desk thumping*

**Mr. D. Tancoo:** This is not a simple piece of legislation, Madam Speaker. In fact, virtually every act that they are taking here has questions to answer. The one act, which is the $4000 that they are providing to give to people which they are actually going to give somebody something, that has a set of money missing in it. So even that action being brought by this piece of legislation, the Finance Bill, 2023, even that act is foiled by the incompetence of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, headed by the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, the Member of

**UNREVISED**
Parliament for Diego Martin West.

Madam Speaker, I request that the Minister do the honourable thing, scrap this Bill and come with something that could help Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you very much.

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

4.30p.m.

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Digital Transformation.

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

**The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus):** Thank you, Madam Speaker, again for allowing me the privilege to join this debate. Every time I come to this House, I must say thank you for the opportunity to provide some clarity on the things that would not normally hear my voice. I could understand the difficulty of Members opposite to address the things in this Bill. I think it would be—it takes significant creativity to be able to criticize something that only spells good for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It is amazing the lengths to which we will go. The previous speaker highlighted a number of things but my colleagues will deal with that, I really want to deal here with specific items in the Finance Bill, 2023, and specifically under clause 4, the amendments to the Corporation Tax Act, dealing with cybersecurity and the allowance that will be given and the adjustment into and why.

I know the previous speaker did not get a chance to read it so I will, through you, Madam Speaker, identify what it is, and it says:

“Where for each year of income commencing on 1st January 2024 until 31st December, 2025, a company incurs expenditure from investments made in cybersecurity software and network security monitoring equipment, there shall be allowed as a deduction, in ascertaining the chargeable profits of the
company for those two years of income, an allowance up to a maximum of
five hundred thousand dollars.”

There is also a second part to that, the subsection saying:

“Notwithstanding subsection (1), any expenditure incurred by a company in
procuring for its own use cybersecurity software and network security
monitoring equipment shall be certified by iGovTT.”

Now, there is a simplicity in that, that I guess escapes most people. This is about
pushing a type of behavioural change, and the reason why that has to happen is that
we are dealing with, in the cybersecurity space, a very, very threatening landscape.

Madam Speaker, what I am going to do, I am going to identify what that
landscape really is, because the idea as put forward by the previous speaker, that
software and hardware will do nothing and monitoring equipment will do nothing
in the fight against the cyber criminals is simply misguided. It also identifies, as I
will try to do here, how organizations who wish to take advantage of this, and I
hope all of them do, can do so and the reasons why they could do it. So
cybersecurity is extremely important. The recent spate of cyberattacks on critical
infrastructure on a number of organizations, in both the private and public sectors,
really emphasizes that.

I do not think I need to say that to anybody for them to understand it, but the
thing about it is that the realization of that threat, if left as it is, will not allow
Trinidad and Tobago to develop to its full digital potential, and we have to address
that. The confidence of customers, the confidence of providers, all of these things
are shaken when we have the realization of a cybersecurity risk happening. So this
investment tax allowance is really meant to spur the private sector into reacting in
a way in which many of the organizations in the private sector simply have not.
The types of cybersecurity threats that we are dealing with now pervade Trinidad and Tobago. Very few of them originate in Trinidad and Tobago. As a matter of fact, if we look at the Express today, page 34—Express of today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 13th December, 2023, an article by the Associated Press, you will see that the country of Ukraine, the entire country faced a:

“…heavy attack from…”—both—“…air and…cyber-space…”—actors and unknown—“…hackers knocked out…”—the—“…phone and Internet services of the…biggest telecom provider…”—in Ukraine, affecting 24 million people.

And as we speak, as of now, service has not been restored.

Now why is that different from what was pervaded to by the previous speaker? What we are trying to create here is not an ultimate defence against cyberattack, what we are trying to create is cyber resilience. Of all of the attacks that were mentioned by the previous speaker, there is one thing that is true about all of them, in every case all of the services were restored. So the types of technology that we are looking to deploy, including the software, hardware and monitoring equipment, is not only to make it difficult for people to attack you, but it is also to provide you with the mechanisms by which you can restore your services, so that the customers and the providers can enjoy the benefits of the things that we have.

So what is the threat landscape? The threat landscape deals with things that are quite sophisticated, Advanced Persistent Threats, APTs as we call them. These involve people prolonging and continuously bombarding you to find ways to access your sensitive data. Nation to nation cyber-espionage attacks, as has happened here, in the case of Ukraine, ransomware attacks, we have a lot of
targeting and data encryption for ransom, all of these things are happening inside of Trinidad and Tobago and indeed the rest of the world. Internal threats, insider breaches, supply chain attacks, all of these things leveraging the way in which people operate. All of this is meant to be addressed by the provisions of this particular piece of legislation, and let me tell you what it is you are dealing with.

There are nine key areas of protection that if organizations would adopt them, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they would be in probably the best shape that they can to address the operational risks associated with cybersecurity attacks. I will name them and I will identify how the provisions will allow people to address them. Firstly, network security, sounds simple but it is important; endpoint protection; data security; identity and access management; incident response and management; training and awareness; backup and disaster recovery; security information and event management, and security orchestration and automation response. These nine things, if addressed, can put your organization on a footing that provides it with the necessary resilience to be able to address what can happen during a cyberattack. The previous speaker said that, “Well, software and hardware cannot help that”, that is not so.

In the first instance of network security, the components that are involved: firewall solutions, network traffic analyzers, intrusion and detection and prevention systems, security networks, all of those things are involved. Software and hardware, all of them. Almost every company in Trinidad and Tobago as it stands now probably has a firewall. Endpoint protection; second one, this includes now antivirus software, something that people should be fairly familiar with, mobile device management, device control safeguards, all of those things involve software and hardware, and monitoring equipment. Mr. Deputy Speaker, how could it be, that those things do not count and that providing a way to provide an incentive
through an allowance for companies to be able to access and do this, is something that is bad?

Backup and disaster recovery involves massive amounts of storage, off-site providers for it, transport to move it inside of there, protection of those things, again, software and hardware, but as would be stated, those things really do not count. They must count. Security and information event management, this is utilizing solutions to deal with the detection of logs going through all of your information to ensure that the things that are there and the things that should be there, and you can spot and find these bad actors when they are in your networks. Again, it involves, in some cases, specific appliances of hardware and lots of very sophisticated software. Security orchestration and automation response systems, again, this involves the automation of those processes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, tools that will do threat hunting inside of your networks to find and expunge these threat actors when they do it.

There is significant highlight on the number of successful intrusions that have happened in Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the world, but it pales in comparison to the number of attacks that are attempted, and when I say “pales in comparison”, really, really pales in comparison. The thing that prevents the majority of these things from being successful is the same software and hardware, which is being ridiculed in this House. That is unacceptable because it serves as a deterrent for people who should be getting the benefit of something that is essential even to their own businesses.

The joint select committee, which was referred to on Monday, maybe a report is all the previous speaker got, but I was there. I appeared as the Minister and I brought with me five of my most senior technical people and spent two hours before that committee, two hours. And in that time we sought to explain to the
committee, not just what is happening in Trinidad and Tobago, not just what is happening in the world, but what can be done and how it needs to be done because there are softer skills involved. I understand that hardware and software is not the be-all and end-all of it. Training and awareness is also critically important, sensitizing of people of how to operate within secure and safe environments is also important.

The incident response management, which deals with the planning and preparedness and communication protocols, et cetera, et cetera, and incident response procedures, all of those things are there, and those are not hardware and software things but those are critically important things if your business is going to survive. I thought someone would have mentioned the $500,000 as not being enough when you consider the enormity and the complexity of what we are dealing with. But it is, because what you can do and what Trinidad and Tobago is blessed with is the fact that people create and evolve the industries as the need requires. If this was 10 years ago, there would not be a single security company, cybersecurity company in existence in Trinidad and Tobago that could address the cybersecurity concerns of the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the operations and organizations that we have, and that seems to be the current thinking of the Member for Oropouche West. That also is not true.

In the attack that happened, the successful attack that was launched on the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, we brought to bear on that situation, through the Ministry of Digital Transformation, an international organization, namely the IDB, who brought in people from Israel—it is one of the most renowned countries in the world dealing with cyber threats—to help us address the situation. And in the IDB’s resource pool to address the situation, they included a cybersecurity company based here in Trinidad and Tobago to do the
majority of the heavy lifting. That company, when I read the report from the IDB, was given an A star rating because of its competence, its ability to manage, its ability to scale, and its utilization of up to date and prime technology in the threat hunting, in the forensics, in the hardening, in the securing of the network when it was finished. This is a local company.

4.45 p.m.

How could a Member of this Parliament stand and say that Trinidad and Tobago and the companies in Trinidad and Tobago do not have the capability, the capacity and the ability to manage cyber security things? I find that to be particularly offensive because it is simply not true.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the conditions laid out under that section is that if you are a company engaging in this for your own purposes and for utilization for yourself, that you have to have basically clearance from iGovTT and some people may not know what iGovTT is. iGovTT is the National Information and Communication Technology Company Limited. It has been in existence for some time. It is as the hon. Minister of Finance said in his piloting of the Bill, basically it is the Government’s ICT company, that does all of its implementation and significant amounts of it. And they would have been since given the notice of this during the budget preparing for the day when this becomes a reality once this Bill, of course, is passed. And the allowance becomes a reality to be able to accept, evaluate, and certify the requests that will come for those things relative to people taking advantage of this allowance. Now, that is being proactive. So again, I was surprised not to hear if seeking for doom and gloom, that the institution that you are asking to certify this would not be prepared, I am pre-empting that by simply saying, they are.
And Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you will permit me that same iGovTT, National Information and Communication Technology, only last night at an IDB award ceremony for Pr.A.I.S.E, Pr.A.I.S.E being the President’s Awards for Innovation and Service Excellence—only last night, was the recipient of the People’s Choice Award for Service Excellence as provided by the IDB.

This constant requirement, or this idea that we denigrate, that we discount, that we reduce, that we degrade the capabilities of the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the organizations here within, must stop.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: It has to stop. How do we progress as a people in a digital society to get to the place that we need to get to if we do not believe in ourselves, or even our own? At the highest levels of our existence being the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. And as I am on the topic of awards relative to this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me also congratulate my own Ministry and the people that work there in also receiving an award for innovation—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:—for the D’Hub as from the IDB. We did not give it to ourselves, the IDB judged it and that is what it was for a project that involves an application that was built by the people of Trinidad and Tobago for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and is now being exported to the rest of the world. That is the power of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: Let me return, after dishing out such compliments, to the specific part of the Bill of which I wanted to speak.

Addressing cyber security is not only about preventing attacks. If that is the mechanism by which you are going to do this, it is not going to work. So a lot of
what we have been encouraging and what this piece of the amendment will do, is allow companies to explore the pieces of the things that they need to do to get them on secure footing. I have asked and have received allocations in the budget which again, I thought somebody would have identified what is the Government spend on ICT and security measures. My Ministry alone is a significant amount. And the reason for that is that because we are looking across all of the Government Ministries, divisions and agencies and addressing, and identifying what is their cyber security posture and making wholesale changes to the way in which these organizations operate. Meaning that we are putting in fundamental technology and services that must be there. Organizations have to do the same thing.

When we mention certain types of jargon, things that are commonplace in the industry, IDIAG, and XDIAG, when we mention those kinds of things people start looking around at us as if to say what are you talking about, and why are you talking about those things here? Endpoint detection and response is a standard grab-bag thing you should have if you are running any organization that is distributing. The extended detection and response deals with the automation and things, and all of these things run on hardware and software which is provided for to be able to qualify for this allowance. Cyber security is not an IT thing, you know. It is not. I have said this in almost every forum I have, I said it at the same Joint Select Committee. Cyber security is an enterprise risk issue. So when you look at the front-end of it, the tip of the sphere is normally the IT folks but it is in the boardrooms and in the areas or places and in the places of Parliament like where we are now, that those decisions are made. And rather than identifying the foresightedness of the Minister of Finance and the Government in identifying this as something that is critical, it is not only topical, what we find is a level of disregard and discount. That is not the way to go.
Organizations need to, if this is a word of advice, they need to look, if they can, at those nine areas in which I just spoke, I will repeat them just so that they can have them again. Network—through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Network security, endpoint protection, data security, identity and access management, incident response management, training and awareness, backup and disaster recovery, security information and event management, and security orchestration and automation and response. You will find that at least six or seven of those will allow you if you utilize the tax allowance that you have, to make forays with this into your business and so to protect it.

The other advantage of having capable local companies to do this is that you pay these fees in Trinidad and Tobago dollars. Heavy weather is being made of perceived shortages of foreign exchange all over the place which is hampering the operations of business, but here you have the perfect example where you can use local industry to get what you want and pay them in Trinidad and Tobago dollars. My advice is to look around and find those people. Find ways to get yourself involved in this, find a company here locally in Trinidad and Tobago that can help you set up your security strategy, set up your security tactics, set up your security posture, and put yourself in the best position so that if you are attacked you can repel it, and if the attack is successful you can address it and continue to provide the service for which your company is slated and allowed to do.

I think the population of Trinidad and Tobago is fully and educated enough to understand that cyber-attacks will happen. I think the important thing that they also need to be aware of is that we are being prepared to address them and when they do happen, that the thing that is affecting you as a consumer that wants to do something, will be alleviated in the shortest possible time. This part of the legislation is a significant input in getting you to that place.
Mr. Deputy Speaker, there were some other things mentioned earlier which I thought maybe I should leave alone but I will touch a few of them, and it really has to do with the contribution of the previous Member. I am yet to understand the logic because if the hon. Minister of Finance was listened to at all when he piloted the Bill, you would understand the reason associated with the extra time. I think he was very clear, very lucid, very focused, very poignant in how he put this thing across but to put it in English, the simplest way I can put this, I cannot see how you can say providing extra time for people to become compliant for something to happen, as being a bad thing.

4.55 p.m.

That is what he did. I do not get it. It was as simple as it was. I mean—

**Mr. Imbert:** They do not want them to take advantage of it.

**Hon. H. Bacchus:**—because if you do not have—then you will not—it is almost—it is mindboggling to me that they are asking people to be compliant. We are putting a measure in place to allow you the time to get that—you need—the thing to get the thing done that you need to be compliant but it is being criticized that, well, do not do it. Well, then how will the people become compliant? And then the next phase would be to penalize them.

I mean, clause 3, the thing for the retirees. Now, how could you criticize that? The criticism is that the “maths not mathsing”. That is the criticism. But I do not know if they do not understand the difference between foregone revenue and cost. The statement was made, you know. If you read what—if you listen to what was said, there is a significant difference. I will leave that alone. I am sure the Minister of Finance will deal that in the way he wants to deal with it.

And then, of course, the attack went into the cybersecurity space, and I am absolutely sure that I have dealt with that to how—the way in which it needs to be
dealt with. I do not think I need to say anything more on that.

And then the last thing really pertains to what was happening with the municipalities and their ability to collect things, and I am absolutely sure the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government will deal with that. I am absolutely sure so I will not even touch it.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, suffice it to say, really, the misinformation, disbelief and the things espoused by the previous speaker as it relates to the cybersecurity environment, I hope, through you, I would have dispelled a significant amount of that and that the listening public will understand that simply what this piece of the amendment in this Bill is meant to do is to provide the enabling environment that will spur the private sector, and organizations within the private sector, to get themselves in order on a proper cybersecurity posture. And again, this is not about being able to say you have built this wall and nobody else can operate it. This is about preventing attacks as best as possible and recovering and restoring your services whenever you are successfully breached.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, with those few words, I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Mayaro.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you very much for allowing me to enter this debate as we look at the implications of the Finance Bill, 2023, as laid by the Minister of Finance today.

First, let me congratulate my colleague, the Member for Oropouche West, for a very clear and precise delivery, in terms of looking at all—sorry, most of, if not all of the issues as presented in the Bill by the Minister. The Minister—the
MP, my colleague from Oropouche West, identified that although the Minister of Finance claimed that the Bill was simple, it was indeed complex in terms of the impact and the rationale behind why the Minister had to come, albeit year after year, to make these amendments to really make up for failed economic policies that have plagued this Government for the last eight years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what we continue to see in these Finance Bills are but patchwork measures that merely provide, what I will call, nominal assistance to really ease the pain and suffering from the poor and the working poor in this country because of failed economic policies year after year.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to address one or two items in the time allocated to me, and I will first respond to the Minister of Digital Transformation who would have spoken specifically on clause 4(iii). Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to remind Trinidad and Tobago of an old saying that “an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the proposal with the tax incentive—and I have no issue with the tax incentive. The Minister spent the majority of his delivery talking or speaking to a cure rather than what I believe should be the focus of prevention. And I will get into that in a bit, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this proposal for the $500,000 tax exemption, it really sticks out like a sore thumb. Because the introduction of this tax allowance, in respect to a company’s investment in software and hardware network security, I see no fundamental problem with that, because it is giving all companies the ability to make an investment in an area where they may not have the necessary funding to be able to invest in a high-quality product to secure their networks. But I would have thought, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the focus of this Government, more so after the last month of the impact cyberattacks to TSTT, the South-West Regional
Health Authority and some other agencies, that they would have focused, not only on the network and hardware and software side of it but the prevention which, to me, is the public awareness in terms of the cybercrime environment which can culture digital behaviours.

So if we can reduce the incidence of cybercrimes, it really reduces the financial, the technical, the manpower resources that you want at the highest level, if we can focus a bit on the prevention of cybercrimes. So I would have thought that the Government would have come today and perhaps look at an additional amendment to put some funding or some effort in the area of public awareness.

And the other part that I thought the hon. Minister could have spent some time in his response was to give a clear picture of where this Parliament and this country has to go with our cybercrime legislation that has been dormant for many, many years. And on top of that, perhaps, what is the status with our ratification of the Budapest Convention, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which is critical in terms of the investigation, the transnational nature of cybercrimes. Signing on to the Budapest Convention would give Trinidad and Tobago and our agencies the ability to really deal with it from an investigative, law-making, cooperative-type of relationship with our international partners. But neither of those two areas were explored today, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So I just want to refer to the Joint Select Committee which was highlighted by the Minister. He identified there are over 200 reported cyber attacks in 2019. Now, 200 cyberattacks is an alarming amount in a small population like ours, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Most persons in the country would have been aware of the TSTT breach, the South-West Regional Health Authority breach. I think I saw in the newspaper where Blue Waters had an issue a couple weeks ago as well. But why after that, when you had TSTT—the CEO of TSTT lost her job, tens of thousands
of citizens’ private data were exposed on the Internet, but yet not a peep from the Government in terms of bringing or expediting or having some emergency that we can deal with the legislation—the legislative component of dealing with the issues of cybercrime, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this matter—while the Minister sees the tax incentive as a simple measure, what the Minister does not see is the issue of cybercrime as a serious and potential risk to both our public safety, our private sector business and our international face where our investors must feel safe and secure to bring their business to Trinidad and Tobago, to bring their proprietary data to Trinidad and Tobago, to bring their trade secrets to Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if they are not comfortable that their trade secrets can be protected here, well then, we are already in a bad state where international investors are running, and then the few who want to come, may not be so inclined to do so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you allow me a couple of minutes to just speak on the issue of the cybercrime legislation—which I know sat before a joint select committee in the last Parliament and I am not sure what is the situation with it. But just a couple months ago, in Port of Spain, we had a meeting, a seminar where the issue of weapons of mass destruction and cybercrime and cybersecurity was discussed among many colleagues, a few Members of the Government, some of the state agencies were there, and it was critical, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why Trinidad and Tobago has to pursue its signing up of that Budapest Convention.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what it will provide for us, outside of just the software and the hardware incentive, for businesses to benefit in terms of lifting their level of preparedness, our legislative arm, through our cybercrime legislation, we must be able to enhance the legal framework, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, signing the convention would assist Trinidad and Tobago in really
pushing hard and fast to have an effective legal system to combat cybercrime.

What it also opens us up to, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the international cooperation. International cooperation is important for investigative component. And I know the Minister spoke about some matter of we not having the expertise here in Trinidad and Tobago. I think we do have the expertise. I have worked with many local companies here in my own field and I know there are people who are quite competent, quiet capable of doing the work. But what they need is the ability to extend their arms across the oceans to get assistance from multiple agencies—INTERPOL, Europe, Europol—whatever agencies all over the world that could help us here in terms of the investigation, plugging the holes and so on. So that is another why it is important that the Minister ought to be pushing to bring this to our Parliament, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Another thing too is that our own local enforcement agencies, Mr. Deputy Speaker, can have the benefit of modern training in investigative techniques, in terms of hunting down those who will take our information and terrorize us with it. Having access to that treaty will give us some additional benefit, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So I though the Minister could have spent some time in looking at that aspect in terms of the benefits from that.

The other issue on that is, obviously, the capacity building because of the interaction and the economic and business confidence, which is a trade matter. It is a trade and business matter that we must establish to the world that we have the ability, the capacity to protect you when you are here to do business.

5.10 p.m.

So that is all I want to say about the importance of getting our legislation done, getting our legislation before the Parliament, and working towards getting us on board with the Budapest Convention.
Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to spend just a couple minutes on the area for public awareness because I mentioned that “an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure”. So, why is public education important? Mr. Deputy Speaker, we do not have a very digital-savvy population. Although we have over 8,000 Facebook accounts, probably 2.5 million cell phones with data services, I do not think we are on the cutting edge of our population being able to understand the intricacies of your digital environment and the behaviour that is required for it, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just quickly, the Government, ought to have, not only in terms of bringing the fiscal incentives, the tax exemptions, for businesses to improve their framework, their digital framework, but there should have been an effort to go out to the general public and let us start making our citizens aware of their digital environment, the digital behaviour that is required in a modern society, which we want to adopt here in Trinidad and Tobago. So the first thing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, awareness and prevention. If we sensitize our public, educate the public about the nature and the tactics of these cybercrime felons, we will create a system where our population can recognize and identify threats. If we can get our population to recognize and identify, there will be a reduction in those who are getting caught, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, part of the prevention as well ought to be the promoting of safe online practices and behaviours. So public education, Minister, simple things like, you know, having strong passwords, do not put your birthday. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at emails and when you have to change your password and you are setting the security questions, they will ask you, “What is your first car, what is the colour of your first car, what is your niece or your nephew’s name? But you know what we do? We go on Facebook and we put a
picture of “we” first car and say, “This is my bestie.” You put all of your secret information that you are putting in those challenges and you put it on Facebook, and that the social engineering, that the cybercrime felons, they look at and they get access to your email. And when you are in your email, you get access to your credit card, your banking information, because people check any and everything on their email. So that is the training we need to give people, do not put Visa card information and so on in your email. So the public awareness practices.

Regular software updates in your own home, those are some things that people must do. Sharing the comfort of sharing personal information: People are too comfortable, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in sharing personal information on Facebook, on Instagram, and these are the things that social engineering—these felons in the cyber world, they take that and beat you with your own whip. So, the public awareness, Minister, it will augment that money that the Government is investing. Quite frankly, I am in support of that, but if we do not have the public part of it, we may be throwing good money behind bad money.

If we get to that point where we are sufficiently appraised as a public in terms of your digital behaviour and conduct, we will see an increase in the reporting, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And if we have an increase in reporting, the response time from our agencies can improve. And if we have an improved response time from your cybercrime unit, from TTPS, from CARICOM IMPACS, those agencies, you will see an overall pressing down or reduction because people become aware, they know the police and these agencies are responding effectively, “lewwe eh try dat”.

And obviously, the last item, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is we will build a culture of safety; a culture of digital safety because the Minister has talked about going into a cashless society. That is the way of world. If we do not prepare our citizens
for a particular behaviour in a digital society well then, we are creating problems.

5.15 p.m.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just to close that particular area in response to the Minister, while I have no objections in the tax incentive, I thought the Government could have done a little more in terms of dealing with the issue of cybercrime and cyber-threats going forward. And based on that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, only yesterday—For this year I think I had three persons come to my office with incidents of phishing and they lost their money, and two out of the three persons are well-educated people. They are not to say uneducated that you know they did not understand what was happening, but these are people who I would have thought would have read through that nonsense, but you lost $20,000, $30,000 because you say they want a fee to send you a cheque. And that is the issue. If we do not educate them, we will have that problem.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know what I did? I reached out to Caribbean IMPACS yesterday, and in absence of the Government looking at the public education in this I have asked Caribbean IMPACS to look at joining with me in the constituency of Mayaro to do a one-week cybercrime workshop that would actively involve my schools, my small businesses, the general public, and with a bit of corporate sponsors, experts from Caribbean IMPACS, we can start the public awareness education in rural Trinidad and Tobago. And why that is important, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Because of the nature of the economic challenges that people are facing today, more so in rural communities like the ones that I represent, it is allowing the snake charmers and the men with snake oil to fool people who are desperate, desperate for a chance to survive, and they are willing to take the last little bit “ah” money in their pocket, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and try something, and when they try something they are in problems. So all I am saying, perhaps as we
come back to this Parliament in the new year, perhaps looking at some public education in that area will be important. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will leave that issue on the cybercrime and the cyber-incentive there for the moment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as we are on clause 4, I also want to bring into the conversation the tax allowance for corporate sponsorship to public and private schools in Trinidad and Tobago. I want to agree with my colleague for Oropouche West, that we should never have to be in a position where we have to beg the private sector.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** Beg the private sector to help our schools. We should never end up in that position. I am not going to go down the road as to how we got there, I think everybody in this country knows how we got there. There is a culture that we have had to deal with for years, and when you put that with eight successive years of poor management by this administration the Government has no choice but to go beg cap in hand for corporate sponsorship to help our schools.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, schools are important. It is important, the welfare of our children, their education, and their education is not only numerics, Arithmetic and language, sporting and sporting disciplines as well are very important for the full development of the child. And be that as it may, but we have ended up in a place where the State has to go begging corporate sponsors. But you know what is missing in the legislation or missing in the language of the State, Mr. Deputy Speaker? There is no effort by the State to promote it. The State has to promote this to the private sector. The State has to help or to encourage the private sector. Just put it as an incentive and you put it on the headline for one day that is not going to get the results that I think that the State is looking for.

And I want to give you an example, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Many school in
the constituency that I represent, I have 19 primary schools and five secondary
schools, all of them, most of them are in fairly reasonable condition, but there are
quite a bit of them that have issues with their fields, their outfields, their electrical,
some drainage. You have some of them with the libraries that are not working
properly, they are not designed properly, there are issues with ACs and so on. And
I know the PTAs they struggle. They struggle to raise funds to at least get their
children in some sort of comfort for the learning experience. So, be that how it
may, how we got here, I want to ask corporate Trinidad and Tobago to utilize,
utilize the incentive and help our rural schools. Help the schools in my
constituency. Use that incentive to help us get our libraries going, to help us
refurbish our washroom facilities and so on. Help us to get our playground.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you allow me to just give you an example: This
year, 2023, Rio Claro West and Rio Claro East, both teams, one is a girls team, the
Rio Claro West is a girls team and East is a boys team, both of them were
successful. They won their league tournament. But you know how they won those
tournaments, Mr. Deputy Speaker?—and when I heard the stories. They had to
borrow pads and bats and gloves and gears from older students, other students,
other schools, just to be able to get the gears to be fit for training and to get them
into the league, and both of them won. You know what I did, Mr. Deputy
Speaker? I went and “ah beg”, and “ah sorry” this was not this year because I am
sure I would have gotten more money for them. I was able to get some
sponsorship to buy some new gear for both schools.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray: And both of them are not outfitted to prepare for the tournaments
next year. But you know what, sadly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wrote the Ministry of
Education and SporTT. I wrote both agencies and I asked, in lieu of the

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performance of these children from rural Trinidad and Tobago, they have done so well, they have jumped the hurdles to success, let us give them a “lil bligh”, can you help them repair their fields, their cricket fields so we can help them prepare for next year?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had the courtesy of a response only from SporTT, and they advised that “dais not dem wuk. Dais not their job”, and I must go to the Ministry of Education. I think I did write the Permanent Secretary, I believe, and I am yet to get a response from that. But I made a case. I made a case, I know funding is a challenge. But I was saying, you know, if we have these children that have performed well, let us give them an opportunity to do better. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in terms of this particular incentive I do believe that if the State can promote it more, can have a public education drive on it, I think every single MP who is responsible for every constituency in this country will be in a better position to be able to go and ask for corporate support to get their schools going, because the education of our children is important. It is way beyond the politics of the day and I will stand by that any day, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to speak on clause 4, Item one, very very briefly, because I know my colleague from Oropouche West spoke about it, and this particular incentive of waiving the Business Levy charges for certain manufacturers who are exporting. I do not know if that is enough. I do not know if that waiver of that 0.6 per cent is sufficient to allow our manufacturers to ramp up to what they are asked to double their exports by 2025. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I believe that the Government must be a little more forward, get to our manufacturing association, and really have some purposeful dialogue and look at our environment and see where there are opportunities for multi-sectoral growth in our export market. I do not know if this 0.6 per cent is enough to really drive the
type of change that we are looking for.

Just recently, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is my understanding that we do have very intense, very good, very broad trade arrangements with Canada in terms of free access for our goods and services into the Canadian market as well. I am yet to see what efforts that the State, that the Government is making in terms of looking at these recent trade agreements, like with Canada, Saudi Arabia—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker**: Hon. Member your initial speaking time of 30 minutes has elapsed, you have an additional 15 minutes, you care to avail yourself?

**Mr. R. Paray**: Yes, Sir.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker**: Kindly proceed.

**Mr. R. Paray**: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Yes, so as I was mentioning, I find it strange that I have not seen a very focused approach in terms of these two bilateral trade agreements that we have with Canada, and what we have done with Saudi Arabia most recently, and then we have a bunch of other partial scope agreements, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am not seeing the effort that I think is really needed to get our goods and services into those markets to really allow our manufacturers to ramp up their exporting capabilities.

So sometimes, you know, you look and believe that these hodge-podge measures that are coming up year after year in budgets, it leaves you to wonder if we are really serious in putting Trinidad and Tobago in a place that we want to be as a preferred exporter here in the Caribbean. But to close off that particular point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, not wanting to sound like a broken record, because I have been looking at trade and finance for the last seven years in this Parliament, and if we really want to deal with matters of manufacturers, export, import trade we have to fix the operational issues. We are not addressing the operational issues. We could put 10,000 pieces of legislation, 25 agreement with every country in the
world, and if we cannot fix the ease of doing business we are nowhere. We are nowhere. If we cannot deal with the manpower shortages at Customs and Excise, we are nowhere.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a system called CESS—C-E-S-S—where containers can be red flagged to go to this area and a specific thorough check is done based on the items in the container and so on to make sure that there is adequate provision for the charging of the right duties. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, every Monday morning is another complaint, is either the trucks to pull the containers not working, the scanner is down, people not turning up for work. Every time a business owner has to put off a CESS inspection the demurrage fees go up, the holding fees at the port goes up, and you are talking about businesses that are in heavy competition, and their mark-up and their margins are so low. And when the container finally arrives in Rio Claro he now has to pay $45,000 or $50,000 more than what the container would have originally cost him to get into Rio Claro.

So I want to connect it back to this 0.6 per cent Business Levy waiver in that we could put how much fiscal measures to enhance our ability for export, but if we do not deal with operational issues like what I now mentioned that is not going to help our businesses. And if we help our businesses we put people to work, and when we put people to work we put food on their table, and we will get a society where you have, you know, people who are motivated, they wake up in the morning and they want to contribute to our society. So when we do not address these operational issues, we are creating a spiral effect going down, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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Mr. Deputy Speaker, those are the things that I feel that when the
Government comes with these amendments to the legislation, to make the promise in the budget, to bring it to life, I wonder if there is an opportunity to do some additional work. So they would of have had enough time from the presentation of the budget in October to get all the feedback, to get all the feedback from the business association, from the general public, get the feedback and come with something extra, come with something extra that it sells you and your government going into the new year. But you failed that miserably. That is something that is not done, it has never been done. We come every year like an anniversary, a ritual, where we come with these Finance Bills one or two and we just make amendments to make sure that what was promised in the budget gets legal effect and life in the next year ahead. So that is what we are doing here today, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to close and remind the Government that at the end of the day nobody in this Chamber, not me, at least, and I am sure none of my colleagues sitting here want to see anybody fail in this country, we do not. But we have a duty here to point out to those on the other side where they may be going wrong and we take the time, we take the time and the effort, sometimes as short as it may be, to find the opportunity in a reasonable and a respectful manner, to allow the Government to either make some opportunities to make a change. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to say that we will continue as the Opposition in this country to poke holes in any legislation—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray:—that comes before this House. We will poke holes, we will identify the weaknesses and if the Government agrees with it they change it and if they do not agree, well, they leave it as it is and we deal with it as a nation and as a people going forward. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to share my two cents on these matters today and I thank you. Take care.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for St. Ann’s East.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you very kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am appreciative of being able to join this debate and specifically to deal with one of the clauses that will greatly and positively affect the education sector in Trinidad and Tobago. So I want to give my congratulations to the Ministry of Finance on the introduction of the tax allowance for the expenditure incurred for the enhancement and promotion of education. And that allows 150 per cent of the actual expenditure to be claimed, up to maximum of $500,000.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the value of this is that it encourages a culture of education philanthropy in Trinidad and Tobago. And I listened to the contribution of Oropouche West and Mayaro and I was disappointed in their view of education philanthropy and how that can benefit the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And why I was disappointed is because the impression they gave is as though it is a bad thing for corporate Trinidad and Tobago to contribute to the education of our citizens. Whereas in the developed world we see so many examples of philanthropy and the benefit it has on the children, on the schools, on the nation. If we consider, I mean there are well-known names Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg foundation, Walter Foundation, those are in the US. But even here in the Caribbean, in Barbados there is Maria Holder Memorial Trust; in Jamaica, Helping Hands and these foundations are significantly contributing, partnering with the Government to assist them in the education sector.

So, it is so narrow-minded and myopic to have this impression that they are going cap in hand to the corporate sector. That is not the view. Philanthropy
allows for an interplay and intercourse between the corporation or the corporate sector and the education sector, that is important, that is critical. In the US alone in 2022, donations to education from philanthropists were over US $60 billion, that is one year and that alone shows how valuable it is and how important it is and therefore it is unfortunate that my colleagues on the other side take this view about going cap in hand. That is not the view we are taking, it is a partnership between the Government and corporate Trinidad and Tobago to build the country. It is the national development and that is what we must look at it as.

That is why this allowance is so important because it incentivizes that education philanthropy and that culture that we need to build more strongly in Trinidad and Tobago, because education is everyone’s business. Not just the business of the Government, not just the business of the Ministry of Education, it is everyone’s business. And without success in the education sector there will be no national development. Matters not what developmental agenda we implement or we write on paper, without the citizens to carry out that agenda we will not be able to do that. So national development depends on the success of the education sector and therefore everyone must be involved.

We have an education sector that is robust and has its share of successes. We have to acknowledge that and that is not government or party related. This is Trinidad and Tobago we are speaking about. When we compare ourselves to the rest of the world and when we compare ourselves in the region we stand well. However, we have our challenges like every other education sector around the world. We are not without challenges.

There is inequity in educational opportunity. That is not a Trinidad and Tobago problem, that is a global problem. There is a decline in the standard of parenting, and again that is a global issue. The lingering effects of COVID-19, that
is with us still and will be with us for some time, everyone is grappling with this. School violence, certainly, we are not the only country. We have to just look north to see what school violence, how much worse it can be. It is something we are all grappling with. Societal violence, in Trinidad and Tobago specifically we have an ageing school stock and that is posing its own difficulty in terms of school operation. Student attrition, that is another issue that we are dealing with, the Caribbean is dealing with, the world is dealing with. Student and school underperformance, every education sector, one of the goals is always to increase performance of our students and our schools.

Lack of student engagement is one of the factors that leads to low performance and we are dealing with that too. Grappling with all of these challenges and surmounting these challenges is a critical thing for our nation, for if we do not find the solutions to these problems our education sector, the success of our students, the preparation of our citizens will be at risk and therefore that has serious implications for national development.

In response to these problems, the education sector has been implementing certain initiatives. So, for example, student performance, we have implemented the Remedial Education Policy and programme to assist with this. We started in 2022, and we are continuing until 2026, with this particular programme with certain initiatives. We have identified 106 schools, these schools need the most support. We called them “our school of focus”. They need the most support. We have hired learning support assistants in these schools to assist with school operation in any way that the principal needs it. We have hired more school social workers and guidance counsellors because the students in these schools face severe psychosocial, as well as socio-economic issues and therefore the case load is so large that they need dedicated persons assigned to the schools to help our students
and help parents.

We have dealt with school infrastructure and we continue to deal with this. And at 27 of these particular schools, we have undertaken critical repair to the tune of $175 million and that started with the last academic year, because we understand that if we want the school to improve we must show the interest as well and we must ensure that the teachers and students have a proper learning environment. We have instituted an after school education programme in these schools, in the 80 primary schools because we understand that from Standard 3 to 5 we needed to put more emphasis on the time required for our students to learn and to inculcate the literacy and numeracy fundamentals that are required for their productive citizenship.

We have instituted the Vacation Revision Programme, yet another way of putting more time and effort into helping our students who needed the most. We have instituted teacher training so in the last academic year our teachers were trained with remedial Math, English and writing. The teachers of Standard 3 to Form I because this would be the area of the most focus and these are the teachers that needed it the most to deal with our students and to have more effective teaching. We provided laptops to them to assist the teachers to carry out their digital education programme.

So we have, as a government, taken steps to deal with student performance, one of the challenges that face us. What have we as a government done to deal with aging school infrastructure? The Government has and continues to invest heavily in school infrastructure. From 2020 to present, we have invested more than $800 million in completing unfinished schools that we met unfinished. We have invested more than $400 million in critical repair of the 27 schools I mentioned earlier, as well as another 15 that we have put on that list. So we are looking at
how we are dealing with those particular schools and trying to do Math repair because the patching, patching, patching just was not working so more than $400 million there from since 2020. And we have spent more than $1 billion in emergency repair.

So it is incorrect to say that the Government is not doing anything to address school infrastructure, we are doing and we continue to do. What has the Government done in response to school violence? Another one of the challenges that we are facing. We have revised the school discipline matrix and this was in consultation with all our stakeholders, the PTA, the police, Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services the Children’s Authority, ministry of gender. We called everyone together and we came up with a revision to the discipline matrix which we are implementing.

We have formulized the arrangement with MiLAT to assist our students who need a different structure to be able to transform into productive citizens. We have introduced restorative practices into our schools. We have 11 schools where we have hired facilitators that are working with the principals to change the way the school operates, so that we can teach our children to deal with conflict more effectively, so that they do not fall by the way side. And we have increased the number of school social workers and guidance counsellors as I mentioned before, to add that personal touch to help our students again who may be suffering from circumstances that we could not even imagine.

So we have put things in place to deal with school violence. What have we done to deal with the lack of student engagement, how we are approaching that? We have restarted the primary school music programme and this programme has had different iterations but one thing that has been a principle of this, is that it has
increased student engagement, students love to be involved in the activities that go along with a music programme and there are benefits to their learning as well. So we have restarted that programme and that programme boasted 50 tutors for our primary schools previously. We have increased that to 100 tutors and so that is now in the implementation stage, we have hired some and we continue to hire so that we can have more tutors, double the number of tutors in our schools assisting our students, preparing their minds to be a futile soil so that when they come into the classroom for the academics it is easier for them to learn.

We have also introduced the Cultural Transformation Policy and that one is a very important one because it is a wide-ranging policy that we are implementing in this academic year and it will stretch to the next academic year. And the goal of this is to deepen and to enrich the education experience of our students. This is how we increase student engagement, this is how we focus on values, attitudes and behaviours and the skills that our students need. This is where we focus on the type of citizen we are creating, this is where we look at what are the values of ideal Trinidad and Tobago citizens, who do we want to create. And therefore how do we focus on this, how do we allow time in our syllabus so that our teachers can devote to developing these values, attitudes and behaviours and we are speaking about what is the Ministry is actually doing to meet our challenges.

We are creating opportunity for skill development and we are mandating student experiences. So, for example, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are saying to all our schools that you need to have a school garden. It may look different in different schools, in some schools maybe a plot of land, in some schools it may be a few troughs, but whatever the form of it, the principle of what we are teaching our students is important. We cannot speak that we want food security and we want our citizens to eat differently. If we say that then we have to select for that
even in our education system.

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So from as low as the ECCE, our students have to understand that they can plant, they can reap and they can eat, and when they understand that it becomes more natural to them to do it. So when we speak about the changes we want to see in our citizens, we have to do it in our school system so that our citizens inculcate these values, attitudes and behaviours, and that is what we are doing. So that is why just, for example, we say our schools must have a school garden. When we say that our schools must at least enter two national performing arts competitions, we are saying this because we want our students to develop their skills in that way. Most of our artistes in this country develop themselves and were exposed in their school experience, and that in some instances has fallen away. So when we put our music tutors into the primary schools, and we have our music and VAPA teachers in the secondary schools, we want the outcome to be that our students get that opportunity to present themselves on a stage because that is where some of them may discover their creative and performing talent.

When we say that our schools must have a sports day, it is because we want our young athletes to have that level of exposure and to be exposed to the opportunity to develop those skills. When we say our schools must have a career day, it is because we want our students to focus on the value of what their education is going to give them in the future. This is the career I am looking at, and we want them to have that experience. When we say to our schools that you must have a student-led entrepreneurship project, it is because we are saying to our adults we want more micro-entrepreneurs and we want our persons to be involved in business, but how are we going to get there if we do not expose our students to these experiences. They you must have an opportunity—

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Mr. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have to rise on Standing Order 48(1). I do not know which clause of the Bill the hon. Minister is addressing please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed. Overruled.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you. And for the benefit of the Member, I am speaking about what the Government is doing for our challenges right now, and I am speaking to what was said that the Government should do more.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again—

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: I am speaking to what we are doing so that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, please address the Chair. Address the Chair.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Yes, yes. So I am speaking to that to show how corporate Trinidad and Tobago will be involved in this.

So our schools have to have an entrepreneurship project as we build micro-entrepreneurs. Our schools have to have a community outreach project because our students need to understand their responsibility to community and to country, and they need to understand the patriotism. Our school must have field trips because there children growing up in communities and they do not know anything but the four walls of their communities. We need to take them even into the cities to be able to understand the entirety of Trinidad and Tobago. So this is what the Government is doing to deal with the challenges that we have in our education sector, and about 10 per cent of our annual budget is devoted to the Education Ministry to be able to do these things. But the Government cannot do it alone.

Though we are doing a lot, we cannot do it alone. And schools need financial and other support coming from our corporate sector. And in Trinidad and Tobago, we already have this culture because there are many corporate entities who are involved in schools. There are many corporate entities who are doing yeoman service in our schools for years assisting schools to be able to carry out
some of these activities, and by assisting our schools what they are actually doing is providing the opportunity for our students to develop a holistic education and that is critical and very important. And therefore, what the corporate entities that are already involved in schools are doing is that they are partnering with the Government to develop the ideal Trinidad and Tobago citizen. So what is happening by this allowance being included here now is making that even more attractive so that more persons can get involved, and that is what the benefit of this tax allowance is and that is why as the Ministry of Education we are so happy for it.

As a matter of fact, many of our local school boards and our PTAs, they would have come to the Ministry saying, “Why don’t we institute this to allow more persons to benefit by donating to our schools and it is a win-win situation.” Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, where is the corporate sector getting its highly skilled workforce from? Where are they going to get the professionals that are going to help them build their businesses? They are getting it from the education sector. And therefore, the partnership between corporate Trinidad and Tobago and the education sector is natural, it is needed, and it is important. So this incentive that will allow more persons to be attracted to donating to schools can only redound to the benefit of our students.

Philanthropy supports equity and this is where the Ministry of Education comes in. My colleague from Mayaro, the Member for Mayaro, mentioned that the Ministry should be promoting this more. It is important to note the success of the Adopt-A-School Programme that the Ministry instituted in 2020 and it was successful because of a couple factors. One, it was promoted; two, we organized the donation in such a way, the framework in such a way, that it was easy and efficient for companies to come to the Ministry, know exactly what they could
donate to, know exactly which school, and to get that donation there. So the fact that we were able to get 40,000 devices donated to our schools and our children shows that the Ministry of Education understands how to arrange this, and understands very clearly how corporate Trinidad and Tobago would like things to be so that they can contribute freely to our schools.

So we have already done this successfully. We have already instituted a programme that allow for corporate Trinidad and Tobago to donate to our schools and, therefore, this education philanthropy that this tax allowance is going to promote, we are ready and able to institute it. Equity is important. It is a pillar of our Education Policy 2023—2027. And a part of the Ministry’s organization is to ensure that the schools that do not have strong support networks, alumni associations, PTA associations, these are the schools that we would want to promote to the corporate entities to help. Because there are some schools that receive a lot of help, there are other schools that do not receive as much and that is where the Ministry can come in, and that is where the framework comes in to allow the corporate sector to see schools that they normally would not see and to understand the needs of schools that they normally would not interact with. And that is what we are promoting.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in January, based on feedback from corporate Trinidad and Tobago and the chambers that we have already interfaced with through the Adopt-A-School Programme, the Ministry of Education will be hosting a business forum and we will be inviting the chambers who we have had interaction with already. We will be inviting business persons to come and interact with us because we need that rapport. One, we need feedback from them with regard to our preparation of the workforce, and we need to understand if there are things that they would like to see us doing to assist them better when we develop
the workforce that they need. And also, we need them to contribute to our schools, and we need to explain to them the ways that they can do that so that we have made it not for them to help and to encourage this culture of philanthropy.

So we have done it before and we are going to do that again to continue encouraging the education philanthropy to build. And when we speak about cultural transformation through education, we speak about that in our schools, but we are also speaking about it at the Ministry of Education, the way the education system is organized, and we are speaking about it in the national conversation. And that cultural transformation is what will assist our corporate bodies and everyone to understand that education is everyone’s business and, therefore, approaching corporate for partnership is not coming is cap in hand begging. It is providing an opportunity for all of us to contribute to the development of our young citizens. And the philanthropy is not just resources, it is not just money. It may be technical support. It may be different things that our schools need. It may be advice. It may be a programme that you can assist internship.

So I have shown in my discourse what the Government is doing. It is not that the Government has just say, oh, we cannot do anything. Hands in the air. We are doing things. We are investing significant sums of money to assist our schools and to assist our education sector, but as we have seen even in the developed world, with economies much bigger than ours, philanthropy is a huge part of the education sector and, therefore, this tax allowance is a step in the right direction. Not in the wrong direction. And no company should be shamed, and no Government should be shamed for trying to partner to ensure that the benefit of our students is prioritized. This is something that we must do and this is something that we are doing. So I want to again thank the Minister of Finance for recognizing the importance of this initiative.
I want to encourage all of our corporate sector to adopt a school. I want to let you know that in January we will be coming to you with our business forum to hear from you what are your thoughts on the education sector and how we can serve you better, and to also partner with you and for you to hear from us how you can contribute to the development of our sector and of our schools because education, as we say, takes a village. Education is everyone’s business. Let us partner for the benefit of our schools and our students. Congratulations to the Ministry of Finance and we are will continue to work with all stakeholders including corporate Trinidad and Tobago to the benefit of our children. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the Member for Tabaquite.

**Mrs. Anita Haynes-Alleyne (Tabaquite):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate today as we look at the Finance Bill, 2023. Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me to just note very quickly the defensive tone taken on by the Minister of Education coming in to discuss a programme that was put forward in the budget. Because I listened—I looked at the Finance Bill and we are discussing an amendment to the Corporation Tax Act. We are discussing an amendment that would allow for corporate entities to contribute to the education sector and they will then get some tax incentives. There is an incentivized approach for a contribution to the education sector.

So when I saw that the Minister of Education stood up to contribute to this debate, I was expecting a full breakdown of the administration of this programme because the Minister of Finance told us in his opening here today that the approval systems will come through the Ministry of Education. And so, I said all right, well finally, we are getting an announcement made by the Ministry of Finance and then the details made by the Ministry of Education. We did not get that. What we got
here from Minister of Education was a defensive approach. This is what we have
done, and it was, I believe, a direct response to my colleague from Oropouche
West who spoke about passing the buck, who spoke about the Ministry of
Education having seen the problems not providing a solution and now trying to
find some new way.

And so, in the Minister’s response I am now forced to put new things unto
the record in this discussion on what I thought was just a simple amendment to the
Corporation Tax Act that will allow for an announcement made by the Member for
Diego Martin North/East to come into play in January 2024. So we listened to the
Minister of Education acknowledge the lack of student performance or the
reduction in excellence and academics over the past—now the Minister listed it
from 2020, the data shows us it is from 2017. There has been consistent declining
pass rates amongst our CSEC and SEA students since 2020. That was
acknowledged by the Minister of Finance in the budget debate, it was
acknowledged again by the Minister of Education here today. And then we were
told that put things in place. We put things place to correct this.

And so, you know, the difficulty the population is facing, the difficulty all of
us will be facing is that you keep telling us about things that you are putting in
place, but you are not telling us how you are measuring it, how you are monitoring
it, what are the targeted objectives, what are you doing if the thing you put in place
is shown not to be working. So are we, as a population, supposed to be comforted
by the idea that you put things in place or you spend some money, or you did this?
No. What we want are actual solutions. We want the evidence that the thing that
you have put into place is indeed working.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: And so, in a discussion here today, and again just for the benefit of those looking on, this is a discussion on an amendment to the Corporation Tax Act that would allow for corporate entities who contribute to the education sector to get some benefit, to get some incentive.

In this discussion, we are told here today by the Minister of Education that they have implemented the Remedial Education and the Vacation Revision Programme. In this very same House after the implementation of those two programmes—just to contextualize it, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because it was brought into this debate by the Minister of Education, that the Remedial Education and the Vacation Revision Programme was put into place to treat with a reduction in student performance.

6.00 p.m.
This came about after the results of the 2022 SEA results where we saw a remarkable number of students scoring below 30 per cent, not 50 per cent, 30 per cent in the SEA. We were told it was as a result of learning loss during the pandemic, et cetera, and that we have now included this Vacation Revision Programme.

I stood in this House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, after the programme because I, despite the narrative always put forward by the Members opposite, we on this side, we look at the programmes, we wait and then we assess. But we require answers because it is the job of the Opposition to hold the Government accountable. So we asked the question: given the amount of money that you put into the Vacation Revision Programme last year, given the number of students who attended verses how much you catered for, because it was some 9,000 students that were catered for and some 3,200 thereabouts, who actually attended, and that “attended” as opposed to a sustained consistent attendance.
And I asked in this House, well, what are the measures? How are we judging that the programme was a success or a failure? Before you then come to the population and say, “You know what we will do, we will expand the programme”. You have to tell the population that the programme is indeed working. How are you going to expand something and you have no evidence that it is working?

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: And so that here we are—in the Minister’s discourse here today, in her attempt to show us, to show the population that the Ministry is working, using her words as opposed to any data, any data available to the Ministry. We are expected to be told today that they have spent $400 million on school repairs and X number of billions of dollars on emergency repairs, and we exist in constituencies. We live in Trinidad and Tobago. We see the schools.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: When I came here and I spoke about the Gasparillo Secondary School, I came here from the compound of the Gasparillo Secondary School to say what was the exact state of affairs, to be told the problem was fixed only for it to be corrected. And so that is the difficulty we are facing. And so while in this discussion as to whether or not we need corporate assistance in the education sector, or whether or not we as the Opposition welcome corporate assistance in the education sector, absolutely. Anybody who is willing to help, we are willing for them to get on board.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: But what we want from you, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is to do your job. You have a job.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: And consequently, the job here today was to tell the population exactly how you intended on administering this programme, and you did not do that.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: So how are we going to be confident that—so come January 2024, we wake up, happy New Year, everybody saying good, new things, 2024, you have this business forum where you invite business persons to speak with the Ministry of Education, to outline what you require what you need, et cetera. But then you tell us, which was a point that I wrote down, that we will ensure—that the Ministry will ensure that there is equity, because some schools—and that is a fact across Trinidad and Tobago. Some schools are beneficiaries of more assistance or they have more alumni who are in the business sector, et cetera, and so they have more contributors to the school system.

But we are told by the Minister of Education here today, that the Ministry will be the check for equity. So that they will introduce them—introduce corporate Trinidad and Tobago to schools that they may not have known before. But then how are you ensuring, how are you determining? What is the check, what is the actual check? Is there some new incentive, some hidden incentive that nobody spoke about here today because they did not come up with it yet, that will allow for business X to say that I will contribute to the Brasso RC School for example, because even though I myself may have gone to a school in San Fernando, this is the incentive that will allow me to contribute to a school in Brasso that is in need, et cetera, et cetera. What is the intro—are you just going to suggest it and fingers crossed? It is a hopeful thing, is it that we are depending on—or is it built into the programme? Is that that check for equity built into the administration of the programme? The Minister spoke today and did not answer that question that you
know would certainly be on the minds of those of us who represent rural constituencies.

**6.05 p.m.**

I am sure the Member for Toco/Sangre Grande would have been very interested to hear what would be coming for the schools on his end, as I am, as the Member for Tabaquite, Member for Moruga/Tableland, where we have smaller schools. Sometimes our SEA classes may be 10; 10 persons, 15 persons. What is the incentive—the further incentive then for corporate Trinidad and Tobago to adopt that school?

When we heard about the Adopt-A-School Programme today, we heard none of the numbers, none of the details as to how indeed that was a success. Is it that you just tell us it was successful? That you just tell us that they adopted a school and children got laptops and all was well? Because again, as Members of Parliament, we exist in constituencies where we know students who still were waiting and waiting, having completed the means test, et cetera, and still have no access. So it is not sufficient to tell us something was a success, without telling us what is measurable, what is targeted, how your intervention worked, what made it effective and what spurred this decision to expand the programme in such a way.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, unlike the Minister of Education, my intention here is not to come in and make this a debate on the education sector. I think it is no longer a debate. We live in Trinidad and Tobago, we see the school violence, we understand the student reporting, et cetera. What we want are measurable, targeted interventions. We want, when any Minister of Education stands up in this House, outside this House and you announce a programme, you announce a policy, you say, “Listen, we are giving this this academic year and at the end of the academic year, we will tell you how many students benefitted or what was the
exam rate like at the beginning, what it is like at the end and then we will tell you what changes we are making based on an evaluation of the programme and how that will benefit the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.” And unless you are coming to say that, quite respectfully, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you are not telling us anything new or anything at all, and I thank you.

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

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the MP for Port of Spain South/St. Ann’s—

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young):** Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West, Sir.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West.

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

**Hon. S. Young:** I will resist the opportunity to respond to the utterances of those on that side. If I may be permitted to come a little bit off script, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I was listening to the Member for Tabaquite and towards the end of her contribution, an important question being asked that I believe I can address because I was there, and I am paraphrasing a bit here: What spurred this decision to expand this incentive? And the particular incentive that the Member for Tabaquite is referring to is found in clause 4 of the Bill before us and it is the incentive to corporate Trinidad and Tobago and corporate businesses in Trinidad and Tobago by providing them with an additional tax incentive, that if you contribute and you sponsor financially towards any school institution, a public or a private school, once it is registered with the Ministry of Education, that you would receive 150 per cent of the actual expenditure as what we call in layman’s terms a “tax write-off”.

**UNREVISED**
And I can say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that this was an incentive, that when we were looking at it as a Cabinet, and as a responsible Cabinet, I was one of the main advocates and supporters of this particular incentive and I can tell you that one of the main reasons for it is as a result of being a Member of Parliament and having just recently gone through at the opening of the school term and there was a lot of heat in the country, physical heat, and you had schools that were not appropriately outfitted and there was a need for fans and a need for some way of cooling the classrooms, et cetera, and as a Member of Parliament, going around and trying to seek corporate sponsorship. So we were looking for a way to encourage persons, and it is the smaller schools that were in my constituency and some of these things.

So the purpose, the policy behind it is really as a form of encouragement for corporate Trinidad and Tobago because we believe in the Government, the Government is not going to ever be in a position that it can have all of the answers and all of the financial answers. And we are all Members of Parliament here, we all are representatives, some better representatives than others—they have some there, the one who was uttering a short while ago, I believe from Chaguanas West, that I will recall on the morning of—

Hon. Member: Not Chaguanas, Caroni Central.

Hon. S. Young: It is what? Caroni Central. And I remember, just recently, the last election, seeing that he stirred me, and seeing him on television just as I came back from voting, him being chastised by persons he should have been representing and them asking him, “Well, what are you doing here? Why are you coming here?”—et cetera.

Mr. Ram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1), please.

Hon. S. Young: So it is really for the representatives.

Mr. Ram: 48(1), please.
Mr. Manning: “How you so sensitive”?  
Mr. Deputy Speaker: On?  
Mr. Ram: 48(1).  
Mr. Deputy Speaker: On what matter?  
Mr. Ram: Relevance.  
Mr. Deputy Speaker: Well, Member, continue your discourse and I will determine—  
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]  
Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much. So I am explaining and I am responding to the hon. Member for Tabaquite. So for those of us who are representatives and can go into our constituencies and address the persons on the ground in the constituencies without fear of being told by someone, and then when accosting them and saying, “But you are here from the Government,” and she said, “No, I was a UNC supporter, I was your supporter”—so it is to help those types of persons to attract corporate sponsorship to help schools.  

There is no panacea, Member for Tabaquite, there is no one solution, there is no silver bullet but it is another incentive that can be provided for those who corporate people will listen to and legitimate businesses would listen to and those who can operate, for example, with TSTT, without being dismissed from TSTT. They could go to TSTT and they can say, “Listen, we are asking you to help with some laptops, et cetera,” and it will work as a tax write-off. So hopefully that has provided a bit more—shed a bit more light on it, but the policy behind it is really to provide an outlet, an attraction for more corporate sponsorship towards schools because we recognize, in particular as Members of Parliament, that we may need to attract investment in the school system.  

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now to turn to what is going to be the majority of
my contribution to this Bill today and it is, of course, clause 5.

Hon. Member: [Interruption]

Mr. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are getting some interference here.

Hon. S. Young: I would never, Mr. Deputy Speaker, ask for any protection from that who cannot even protect himself. So clause 5—and we are dealing with the petroleum taxes and in particular, the amendments that we are seeking to make. So maybe, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it would make sense to start by just outlining where we are in Trinidad and Tobago, in particular in the energy sector, and to remind and to put into context that we have been exploiting oil, in particular, in the energy sector for over 100 years.

Hon. Member: [Interruption]

Hon. S. Young: You want to say something of relevance? Go ahead.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hold on. Members, no. Members, please, please.

Mr. Manning: Very sensitive.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I am on my legs. The only person I recognize is the present Member who I have identified. Other than that, who would like to enter the debate, they would have the opportunity when the time presents itself. Proceed.

Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Trinidad and Tobago has been exploiting oil for over 100 years. The first well was drilled in Trinidad in 1857. Commercial oil production began in 1908. We had our first export of crude oil in 1910. I give that context for us to understand that oil is a depleting resource. We are also a very small province. We are not the size of a Saudi Arabia. We are not the size of our neighbours, Guyana and Venezuela, in terms of physical land mass as well as what we have in the marine area that we can
call our own. So we are a small province with fairly small acreage and we are dealing with a depleting resource.

So after exploiting oil for over 100 years, we are at a stage now where the fact is we have been facing a decline in oil production for an extended period of time, and just to give the statistics to support that: In 2008, we were producing 114,000 barrels of oil a day; in 2010, that dropped to 98,000 barrels of oil a day; in 2011, it went down to 91,000 barrels of oil a day; in 2012, it dropped to 81,000 barrels of oil a day. So during the period of 2010 to 2012, you had a daily depletion taking place already in production of oil of 17,000 barrels of oil a day.

And I think the significance of that, and people should understand the significance of that, is in the period of 2010 to 2012, you had a drop of 17,000 barrels of oil a day. By 2015, it had reached 78,000 barrels of oil a day. So if in that five-year period, you have lost 20,000 barrels of oil a day and that has depleted, then why continue to ask the question, well, what is happening with production now where we have maintained a current production rate of about 58—we are hoping to get up to 60,000 barrels of oil a day? The fact is you are dealing with a mature province. The fact is you are dealing with a natural rate of decline of 15 to 20 per cent, which means that if you are producing 100 barrels of oil a day and you do nothing, you can expect by the end of the year to be down to 80,000 barrels of oil.

So what you need to be constantly be doing is looking for ways to incentivize persons to produce and to increase production, but it is a balance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Because, you see, if you over incentivize, what you are actually going to do is ensure you derive no revenue for the country’s resources and again, that is something that we saw happened with some of the changes made in the energy sector in the 2014 and 2015 period, where they put capital cost recovery at
100 per cent in the first year, meaning that if you spend $1 million in exploration, you can write off the full million dollars immediately, which means as an expense—which means that you reduced the potential profit upon which to tax and we have had to make the changes to adjustment that.

And you have heard the stories that we tell time and time again, the factual stories. The Prime Minister repeated it again last week that we were told by our largest gas producer—when we came into office in 2015, the Prime Minister was told, “You have no revenue to derive until 2024.” So being told that in 2015, that you have no revenue to derive until 2024 from your largest gas producer, that would have been disastrous for Trinidad and Tobago. So today, this particular measure is another measure that we are putting in place to encourage, in the shallow water areas, additional exploration and production, and I will explain how it is intended that this should work.

In 2023, we completed our 2022 onshore, nearshore bid rounds, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and it is an appropriate time to put on the record that there were 16 bids for the eight blocks. So again, it is another box that we tick. For all of the onshore blocs, we put out eight blocks, we had 16 bids, all were awarded, meaning for the eight blocks. And what we looked at in the last budget, and you saw spurring this type of interest, is we made some adjustments in what we call the SPT, the supplemental petroleum tax, that I will get into and what today’s measure, half of it, is about and another is with respect to what we call “sustainability incentives”.

This year, only recently on the 3rd of October, we went out with our shallow water competitive bid round. It will run for six months. It ends at 12.00 noon on the 2nd of April, 2024. I could tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago that before we went out with the shallow water bid rounds, we had what you call a “nomination period”, where basically you opened it up and persons who operate,
the stakeholders in the industry, you tell them, we are considering a shallow water bid round, are there blocks that you would be interested in, nominate the blocs that you would be interested in. So what you do is you get a pre-idea of what are the blocks that will generate an interest and bids on, and that was quite a useful programme and we got a lot of interest. So I am hoping, and I think that I can predict, that when we close this bid rounds in April, there is going to be a lot of interest and we would get quite a number of bids. Hopefully, again, a situation where we have more bids than we have blocks put it.

So in looking at that, one of the things we did—and I can say now the Cabinet approved and confirmed a couple of weeks ago a new production sharing contract where we have looked at it, we have looked at how things have been going in the industry over time and there is now a model production sharing contract put out in the shallow water bid round that again provides a number of, not incentives in terms of loss of revenue but incentives in encouragement to those in the industry as to why they should pay particular attention and be interested in the shallow water bid rounds.

6:20 p.m.

It is quite an interesting experiment. I think when they look at the model PSCs they will see that we have listened to some of the concerns raised, but we have also sought in those PSCs to protect the population. The Minister has a lot more involvement in the monitoring of the process, in the auditing of the process, in the sharing of expenses, in how things can be done, we have shortened time frames for exploration to be done, and these types of things.

So what we have here today is the implementation of a measure that the—two measures actually, that the Minister of Finance, the hon. Minister of Finance, spoke about when he presented our annual budget a few weeks ago in October.
The first focus is exactly on the area I have just taken some time to outline, our small shallow water marine area.

Just to, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let the population know, in Trinidad and Tobago, there are really three areas that we categorize. You have the onshore area. I have just said that we have completed the bid rounds and the award of contract for that, and that is a lot of onshore exploration and activity taking part in Trinidad and Tobago right now. And I am quite pleased about that, we are seeing some of the results of it. In there, you have farmouts, you have lease-outs, you have workovers, you have Heritage as the main acreage owner and Heritage trying to increase its oil production under a new CEO. And then it is the shallow water, and then you have the deepwater.

Today, it is all about the shallow water area and it is defined right here in clause 5, which is really an amendment to the Petroleum Taxes Act. And we say for the purposes of this measure we are seeking to implement today in law, a:

“‘small shallow marine area producer’ means a person who carries out petroleum operations in shallow marine areas under a licence, sub-licence or contract and produces less than four thousand barrels of crude oil per day.”

So you can immediately see that this particular measure is to encourage the small producers, the Trinity’s, the Touchstone’s, Perenco is over 4,000 barrels of oil a day in the shallow water. But some of our smaller operators, who are looking to increase their production, we are particularly doing this today in dealing with the SPT.

Now, we would have heard, if you follow the debates and you follow the conversations in the energy sector over time, a number of taxes, you have SPT, you have PPT, you have royalties. Today, we are dealing with the SPT, which really, Mr. Deputy Speaker, started in 1980 as a windfall tax. The policy behind the SPT
is if you have a spike in the price of oil, over what is considered a very good rate—so in the 1980s, I believe at that time they had set it, they were just coming out of the—no, they were going into—they had just come out of a difficult time in oil and when you had a rise of price, the government at the time decided to introduce this windfall tax. So once you were producing oil, it was being sold over a certain value, they would implement a special tax on it.

That has evolved over time. In 1980, it was 60 per cent of tax on the marine, 35 per cent on land. In 1983, another amendment made and they dropped the land SPT to 15 per cent tax. In ’84, they dropped the marine to 55 per cent, and it continued like that. And just to bring us to recent times, Mr. Deputy Speaker, between 2011 and 2012, there was an amendment again to the SPT and they said, we will increase the level of price per barrel of oil, when SPT kicks in, to $50. So if price of oil was being sold at less than $50, one did not pay SPT. So in other words, the rating of where a windfall tax would kick in, in 2011/’12, was consider to be $50. Then between $50 and $90, a barrel of oil for the marine licences, it would be 42 per cent and 33 per cent; for land licences and deepwater, it would have been 18 per cent would have been the rate of tax. For price of oil between $90 and $200, again, there was a different SPT formula.

In 2013—again, this is during the Opposition’s tenure when they were the government, just to set out for the population, that they too made amendments to SPT, recognizing and trying to increase production, because as I showed at the outset of my contribution on energy, oil was declining during the Opposition’s time between 2010 and 2015. And it was actually a much more drastic decline in oil production that we have experienced between 2015 and 2023, and certainly between 2020 and 2023 where it has remained fairly stable.

So this narrative that they try to carry out—certain persons try to carry out
about, “Oh, production has crashed, production has died,” it actually was the worst
decline in production between 2010 and 2015, where we lost 20,000 barrels of oil a
day and we have never recovered from that. But what they were obviously doing
in looking at and adjusting the SPT is trying to encourage some of the producers to
spend their money and invest it back into oil production, exploration and
production. So you fast forward to our budgets of 2021 and 2022, which is when
we, as a Government, decided to address the SPT rate, after having spoken to many
of the producers. And we decided let us start, first of all, with our small onshore
producers and we started it, of course, for the production of barrels of oil, under
2,000 barrels of oil a day that we would not charge SPT once oil was below $75 a
barrel.

And I can tell the population, just to give another indication of what this
means in reality, the volatility of oil prices, if we were having this conversation
two weeks ago, three weeks ago, we are looking at oil prices above $80 a barrel of
oil. If we were havinga conversation a month or two months ago, we were actually
over $85 a barrel of oil. As at 3:20 this afternoon, WTI was at $69.59, so it has
dropped below $70 a barrel of oil, and Brent, which is a better marker for us, was
at $74.36. So even this amendment that we are seeking today, which really kicks
in at $75 a barrel of oil, as at today, the price of oil has dropped below $75 a barrel
of oil.

And I think it is important for us as citizens to understand what this means
for Trinidad and Tobago. We do not set the price of oil. There is no country in the
world that sets the price and the indices and the markers of oil. OPEC tried to
influence it, and they do to a great extent, and in particular some of the larger
producers in the OPEC community. But what we are trying to do is encourage
persons because we had the smaller producers come to us and say, “Listen, if we
are getting $75, above $75 a barrel of oil and we are subjected to, as small producers, this SPT tax, plus royalty, what it does is it really makes it uneconomic for us.”

And, of course, we, in Trinidad and Tobago, are encouraging as much of the exploration and production of our oil as is possible. So we listened, we made the first adjustments for onshore in 2021/2022, first of all, for production at under 2,000 barrels of oil a day. And then this year, in the annual budget, you heard the Minister of Finance say that we would address the small shallow marine area producers, and that is the particular provision we are dealing with today. We have defined a small shallow marine area producer at a production below 4,000 barrels of oil a day—between 15,000 and 4,000 barrels of oil today and we are saying as well, on the next measure that I will get into, which is the sustainability measure—which I will not touch on now, I will focus on just finishing off the SPT.

So, today, what we are saying is that for this marine area, the small shallow marine area, once the weighted average price of crude oil is $75 a barrel or less, we are not going to charge SPT. Where it is between $75.01 and US $90 a barrel of oil, tax will be chargeable at certain rates of SPT. And once it goes between $90 and $200 a barrel of oil, there is another rate now, with a sliding scale as well that those in the oil industry would understand. So the policy reasoning behind this is that the Cabinet believes and, of course, with my advocacy, and I support the collective position of Cabinet, that when we introduce this measure from the 1st of January, 2024, the smaller producers in the shallow water are going to benefit from it and we are going to get more investment going after the pools of oil that exist in our shallow water. It is fortunately tied in—[Device goes off]—with what we are facing right now, which is the—

6.30 p.m.
Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second. This is the second time a mobile device went off. Again, on the third occasion, it will not be tolerated, please. So, ensure the devices are on silent or switched off. Thank you.

Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much. Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is tied into the introduction of a shallow water bid round, as yet another encouragement for persons to participate in this bid round, because we as the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are quite interested, and we are looking on with a lot of bated breath to see what will the success of this shallow water bid round.

You see, especially on the Government side we are interested in the progress of Trinidad and Tobago, and it is very unfortunate that there are some in our society, who are constantly trying to undermine what is happening, undermine all of the good things that are happening. But I can tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and they have seen, and they can judge for themselves.

The results would have come in so far in 2023, and we are coming towards the end of the year, and we are hoping to be able to deliver a few more in the energy sector, there have been tremendous good results, and with the full support of the Cabinet. And I would like to thank the Prime Minister and my Cabinet colleagues for the support.

What you would have seen, and it is a good place to put a plug, signed in London last week, is historic on the LNG side, it has never happened in anywhere in the world before, with the restructuring of the LNG facilities. We know what we are doing in the energy sector. Today's provision on the SPT and the shallow water, I am sure I will be able to come after we have completed the evaluation on the bids in April of next year. The Minister of Energy will be able to come and tell the Parliament that these various encouragements have met with success and there is going to be additional expiration and production in the shallow water, going
The second part of the incentives that we are here to deal with today, is actually found at clause 5(b), which is where we are now amending. Clause 9 of the Petroleum Taxes Act, and there is something called sustainability incentives which are really for mature fields which are coming to end of life. And today what we are saying when you read clause 9 as it currently is, it says, clause 9(1),

With effect from January 2011, the weight of supplemental petroleum tax for any mature marine oilfield or small marine oilfield shall be discounted by 20 percent.

So, again that was a measure put in place by the UNC in 2011. We are saying, okay let us start it again from 2024, for the same mature oilfields or small marine oilfields recognizing that those are areas where as they are depleting persons may no longer want to spend their financial resources to keep exploiting the oil and we are saying no, continue to do it and we are now going to give you a discount of 25 percent on the SPT, and the whole purpose behind that is to encourage continued production towards the end of life of these mature marine oilfields and the small marine oilfields.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, those provisions, I was going to say as simple as they sound, but the calculation is not that simple. But those two provisions in the energy sector we believe will spur and encourage continued and increased oil exploration and production, in particular in the shallow marine area, and as you have heard me say in the mature areas of the marine, and the small marine fields. And time will tell if these incentives and encouragements work, we believe that it will and we hope that we will continue to see a stable oil production because that is where our revenue comes from.

I think, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is the full explanation of the incentives that
we are seeking. I was also happy to hear once again the Minister of Finance, the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East say again today as he did in the Budget, and it is really a signaling to the energy sector stakeholders, that the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries will continue to be in close collaboration because we are not going to stop with our fiscal measures and our changes to fiscal measures just with this provision. I am hoping that within this fiscal year, we will come back with some more. I can indicate at this stage because I know that those in the energy sector is looking on and listening very closely.

6.35 p.m.

Another area that I intend to take to the Ministry of Finance for us to address will be the capital cost recovery. I have listened very carefully; we have heard what they have said. We are not going to go the kamikaze way that took place in 2014 that almost crashed the revenue stream for Trinidad and Tobago and allow a full 100 per cent write-off in one year. But we are looking, I would be speaking to the Minister of Finance and attempting to persuade him and the Cabinet for us to change from the current 2020/2020 write-off period, 20 per cent over a five-year period to get 100 per cent to front-load the write-off period. We have not come up with the figures and the formula as yet, but I prefer a front loading at this stage with a provision that says you have to reinvest the money saved right back into exploration and production.

Having met with the stakeholders, including up to yesterday meeting with EOG, Woodside, and other stakeholders in the past few weeks, I believe that that is another measure that hopefully we will be able to introduce in this fiscal. The Minister of Finance is in conversation with me, and he has promised for us to look at some of these things. We are also looking at other areas in the energy sector that
we may be able to introduce different—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, your initial speaking time, you have just about two more minutes. You have an additional 15 minutes; you care to avail yourself?

**Hon. S. Young:** Thank you very much. Yes, yes.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Proceed.

**Hon. S. Young:** I was just confirming with the Minister of Finance a previous conversation we had, and it would also be an appropriate stage to indicate that we are also looking at a carbon tax going forward. We recognize that that can keep us globally competitive, which is something we have been working very hard on. In fact, the restructuring of Atlantic LNG has put us right back up in that global competitiveness, so we will also be discussing amongst the capital cost recovery, the introduction of a carbon tax that will be beneficial to those who are operating in Trinidad and Tobago and who have their global operations.

With respect to the rest of this Bill that is before us today, I of course commend the measures. They are very important measures. I touched very briefly to answer the Member for Tabaquite on the provision with respect to the corporate tax, incentives for schools, and my colleagues would be able to speak to the rest of it. But I just want to put on the record, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that as the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West, this is something that I fully endorse and support, and I am glad that the Minister of Finance has once again been able to deliver via legislation the promises that he made in his annual budget presentation. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I now recognize the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre): Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for recognizing me as I join this debate this afternoon. Mr. Deputy Speaker, before I get into my contribution I must—

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Pointe-a-Pierre only.

Mr. D. Lee: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Before I get into my contribution, which will be mostly on clause 5 like the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, I just want to put on the record a couple of things. Firstly, I would like to congratulate all my colleagues who would have spoken here this afternoon.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Lee: I think the Member for—even my colleague from Mayaro, he did a fantastic job in the cyber aspect.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping and crosstalk]

Mr. D. Lee: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to go to clause—the Bill that we are debating here this afternoon is eight clauses. I just want to expand or just—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members. Members, please, please, let us hear the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Mr. D. Lee: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, clause 4(2) where it talks about the:

   “$500,000 corporate sponsorship to public and private schools…”

I do not think anyone of us on this side is against that initiative or that amendment, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It augurs well for our country. I think if I can stick a pin, maybe the Minister of Finance could increase it in time. But I, on a personal note, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to ask the Minister of Finance whether or not the Minister of Finance might consider opening up this sponsorship to parents that participate, you have kids or children in schools or even past pupils of certain
schools. It might be a good initiative.

I remember I heard the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West mention that, you know, when he was visiting one of his schools in his constituency and the place was overheated, the climate, and maybe I want to stick—maybe the Minister of Finance can consider having a sort of a sponsorship or an allowance, tax allowance by parents who would like to sponsor certain capital expenditure in the schools that their children attend. I just put that down, maybe air conditioning, et cetera, fans, and they could either write it off from their personal taxes. So I just ask the Minister of Finance to maybe consider that. Maybe not today but maybe in the future, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at these eight clauses and I will get into my substantive area which is clause 5, the SPT. Clause 7. Clause 7, talks about:

“...the Bill seeks to amend the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act by amending section 58A to include ‘goods, services and works up to one million dollars’ as opposed to ‘goods and services up to one million dollars.’”

So, what the Minister of Finance is proposing here this afternoon is, again, changing how the Procurement Act is supposed to operate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister of Finance gave an explanation in his opening presentation this afternoon that, for all intents and purposes, “works” tends to go with “goods and services.” But when you look at the definition of “works” in the parent Act, “works” talks about engineering and construction works, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So there you see, again, a gutting of the procurement Act where now the Minister of Finance and this Government is changing the paradigm in this whole procurement aspect, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And in including “works,” which includes engineering and construction of contracts up to one million dollars that you do not
need to fall under the Procurement Act, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not think that is a good thing for the country. We have some issues on that and will say more at another time, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at clause 5 which relates to the SPT aspect, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to say firstly that we in the Opposition are not opposed to the amendments to the SPT and even what the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talked about, the sustainable incentives, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are not opposed to that. What we are opposed to and we will like to expand the discussion is that over the past two to three years, actually in these Finance Bills is the whole aspect of energy is being treated in a piecemeal affair, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, last year in the Finance Bill the Minister of Finance brought a change in the SPT for onshore small producers in relationship to changing the SPTs for that aspect in new wells, just for new wells. In our debate discussions we told the Minister of Finance that would not be feasible to alone address new wells on shore because there was a host of issues with that. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am yet to understand or appreciate, or the country, or us in the Opposition, what were the results or the effects of that amendment that was done last year by the Minister of Finance through for the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries? I would have thought that even in his budget presentation or even today, the Minister of Finance would have told us here this afternoon the results of the initiatives that were done last year, 12 months ago.

So Mr. Deputy Speaker, we need to find out about that. Today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in this amendment we are talking about small producers which the definition is 4,000 barrels and under in shallow marine waters, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Again, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries last year, last year, you
know, the Minister spoke about those SPT changes would have been one of the first step in the adjustment to SPT, and there were step two and step three, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I will discuss that later on.

I just want to put again on the record, again on the record for the umpteenth time, for the umpteenth time, Minister Young, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Mr. Deputy Speaker, every time the Minister gets up to speak about oil production and capital incentives under the PP Government, the Minister talks about we gave away revenue, we over incentivized the large players in the energy sector, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is the same rhetoric that the Minister talks about every time he gets up to speak. I just want to, for the umpteenth time, put it on the record again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I want to quote the former BP President Norman Christie, about this incentive that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries constantly talks about. And I quote the Minister, and this is a Trinidad Guardian 14 April, 2016 article, Deputy Speaker, I know you like to know where we get the source from. And I quote, this is the former BP President, Norman Christie in 2016:

“The sensational stories about decreased taxes due to changed fiscal incentives and 100 per cent one-year write-offs for projects such as Juniper have no basis in reality.

‘Even if the tax codes had not been changed two years ago we would still have the same reduction in taxes because of deeply-depressed prices and reduced production.

‘And, consistent with the tax code, we are writing off development spend over three years, not one year as has been commonly reported.’”

So Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the umpteenth time, we are putting on the record again that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries keeps misleading this country
that the write-offs, that because of the incentives that the PP Government gave, had some loss of revenue, and that is not so.

**Mr. Young:** [Inaudible]

**Mr. D. Lee:** The BP—but Norman Christie said so, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again, Member, I will give you a little leeway, just be careful in terms of your references accordingly as you go along. Right?

**Mr. D. Lee:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move on.

Again, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries constantly comes here again in the Parliament and talks about oil production. I just want to put it on the record again, underneath their stewardship, under this Government, since 2015 to present, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the oil production and gas production in our country has been at its lowest in decades under their stewardship, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They have done nothing to increase our oil and gas production. That is a fact. But the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries constantly comes here in the Parliament Chamber and gives the impression that this oil production and gas production, the decrease that we are seeing is because of the PP Government, and that is again not so, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is not so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this SPT that we are debating here this afternoon, nothing is wrong with the SPT. Nothing is wrong with the sustainable incentives, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but there is much more that this Government can do to increase or to help assist our small producers in finding oil and gas in our country.

Last year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the 2023 budget, I mentioned they did it for the new wells in the small onshore producers. This year they are coming back now and doing it for the small marine producers. They are doing it again in a piecemeal fashion and we are saying in the Opposition, if you are trying to increase
Mr. D. Lee (cont’d)

oil production in our country, deal with it in a holistic way. Not only the small producers, Mr. Deputy Speaker, deal with the large producers to incentivize the companies in our country to try and find the oil and gas that is so detrimental in keeping our revenues and our standard of living for our citizens, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

6.50 p.m.

You cannot keep putting all your eggs in this basket in Venezuela, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you cannot keep doing that. Right. We have said that time and time again Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it appears that this Government and the Minister of Energy is placing everything under the Venezuelan deals.

[Madam Speaker in the Chair]

Mr. D. Lee: Whether it is the Dragon gas, whether it is the Loran-Manatee fields, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I recognize the Madam Speaker, here on the Chair. So, again Madam Speaker, we have seen that so much more can be done to increase our oil and gas production, but it cannot be done at what is being proposed here again, year-on-year, with just simple band-aids on our SBTs and trying to increase production.

Madam Speaker, there is an issue that the Minister of Energy touched on; it is about capital expenditure. The Minister of Energy and the Minister of Finance last year in their budget of 2023 talked about capital expenditure for the energy companies. Again, it has not been addressed in our budget for 2024 going forward, this afternoon, I know the Minister of Energy briefly touched on it that they are considering it but again, Madam Speaker, it is about—is trying to ramp up our gas production, our oil production in our country so that we can benefit and not depend on external countries to assist us, Madam Speaker. So, we are asking through you, Madam, to the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Energy and Energy

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Industries: when the energy companies will be able to get an incentive for capital expenditure to be able to write off certain things in capitalist expenditure in their companies, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker, back in August 21, 2023, the Energy Chamber, and I just want to quote a couple of lines—back in August 2023, the Energy Chamber released a powerful statement, in our view, and it is entitled “The Need for Speed”. And that article from the Energy Chamber is about the need for speed, about ramping up incentivizing our energy companies, Madam Speaker, because we are behind time. The Energy Chamber feels that a lot more could be done to assist our energy companies and that is why that article was entitled “The Need for Speed”. And it cannot be business as usual, it cannot be business as usual, Madam Speaker, in our energy sector. It cannot be business as usual.

So, Madam Speaker, when the Minister of Energy this afternoon talked about deep water bid rounds, and the shallow bid rounds, trying to assist in our finding gas and oil, Madam Speaker. The Minister failed to mention here this afternoon that underneath their stewardship once again, you know, none of their bid rounds have been successful. It has been a constant failure. Whatever they—how they frame those bid rounds, it has been a constant failure whether it is deep water or shallow bid rounds, Madam Speaker. So they need to maybe relook at how they do their business, because underneath the PP Government between 2010 and 2015, we had very successful bid rounds and that is why we have been able to keep the country afloat in our oil and gas sector.

Madam Speaker, so I will not be long, because a lot has been said in the other clauses of this Bill this afternoon. I just wanted to address a few of the concerns that the Minister of Energy raised and I had to rebut some of the concerns. So in closing, Madam Speaker, I would just like the Minister of Energy
to may be take into account looking at that school corporate sponsorship, and maybe addressing and looking at it from the aspects of parents being able to sponsor certain things for the schools that they might have attended, or their children attended.

And in closing, Madam Speaker, I just want to say this Finance Bill is a reflection of the budget, as it fully shows that this budget lacked any potent fiscal measures to propel our country forward. Last year, we had over 18 measures in two Finance Bills that were brought last year in the 2023 Budget, Madam Speaker. Today we are approving a meagre six measures. If you wanted to understand how the budget impacts your life, Madam Speaker, as a citizen the Finance Bill here shows fully well that. The Finance Bill is passing a clause to tax on your property, it allows the Government to procure goods and services without proper procurement. The energy measures that I mentioned are meagre leaving our energy sector in a state of crisis, and the other measures that do not improve our day to day lives, Madam Speaker. So with those few words Madam Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for San Fernando West.

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it is the month of December, probably likely to be seeing the Christmas season come sooner rather than later and one ought to be charitable. But, Madam Speaker, I have to say that I am genuinely in shock at the performance put on by the hon. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. Madam Speaker, let me say why I say that in the context of this Bill. Madam Speaker, the hon. Member stood up to supposedly rebut the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the points made by him, and ended his contribution by saying that this is effectively a repetition of the budget, which has
failed to stimulate our economy and do anything for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. But the hon. Member says that merely days after the hon. Prime Minister of this country addressed the nation on active negotiations spearheaded by the Member for Diego Martin West, our hon. Prime Minister Dr. Rowley, and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries in particular, in the period beginning then with Minister of Energy Franklin Khan, God rest his soul, 2016, but from 2018 to 2023. And the hon. Prime Minister in the context of this Bill, and the contribution made by the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, has reported to the nation, to the world, Madam Speaker, that the corporate reorganization of contracts has resulted in billions of dollars of revenue increase for the country that is Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Hinds: That is right.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Days ago, the hon. Prime Minister says to the nation, with particular reference to contracts, to negotiations, to investment broadening in Atlantic LNG portfolio, in moving from an aggregate of 5 per cent across train and train four to a 10 per cent shareholding across, to the tune of billions of dollars of revenue for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Member for Point-a-Pierre has the temerity to say that the Government has done nothing for oil and gas. Madam Speaker, the best that a government can do is to recognize what it can do.

A government earns revenue in the form of taxation. In the arena of oil and gas, it could be SPT tax, it could be PPT tax, it could be corporation tax. Madam Speaker, taxation is how you earn revenue for a government. The Prime Minister has reported the result of renegotiation to improve our taxation take. To see the shareholders of Trinidad and Tobago as the Prime Minister put it, the people of Trinidad and Tobago gain more than they had before. And my learned friend, the
Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, quotes from the Trinidad *Guardian* 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 2016, a quotation from Norman Christie, then President of BP TT, saying that:

There is a CapEx write off for three years and that the year-to-year write off makes no difference.

What the hon. Member did not tell us is how those companies got to write-off multiyear CapEx, Madam Speaker. Because the hon. Member did not tell us the other part of what Norman Christie told the country, and that is that the master gas contract arrangements had not been negotiated for five years and three months under their tenure, leaving Trinidad and Tobago exposed, Madam Speaker, on what the price of gas would be, which ultimately then determines what your take on LNG is going to be, what your PPT tax is going to be, your SPT taxes, et cetera. And Madam Speaker, BPTT told Trinidad and Tobago, told Dr. Rowley, then Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Diego Martin West, I was present at the meeting, that Trinidad and Tobago would not see one cent of revenue from oil and gas until 2025 because of what the UNC did.

**Mr. Hinds:** That is right.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Let me repeat that. Trinidad and Tobago would not see one cent of revenue because of the capital right of expenditure, Madam Speaker. So the hon. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre comes here today, and I am in shock, because Madam Speaker, what was left for the people of this country is nothing short of a nightmare. Let me put it into further context. Madam Speaker, in 2016, Trinidad and Tobago experienced a shock in oil and gas prices. We move from collecting $21 billion in oil and gas revenue to $400 million. We had a 96 per cent decline in our revenue Madam Speaker. The Minister of Finance had to give instruction that everybody is to cut back by 7 per cent.
Madam Speaker, if the hon. Prime Minister and the hon. Minister of Energy, and his predecessor, the hon. Franklin Khan, did not have the guts and the strength to call a spotlight on energy to confront the oil and gas companies in the face of the chambers of commerce and say to them, the people of Trinidad and Tobago are getting 53 cents out of every US$100 that we earn in oil and gas. Let me repeat that; 53 cents out of every US$100 that we earn. Thanks to the UNC, Madam Speaker, where would we be? Madam Speaker, let me repeat this. Trinidad and Tobago’s take from every $100 of oil and gas was 53 cents. You hear that? Today, days after the Prime Minister spoken the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre says, this Government has done nothing.

Madam Speaker, I want to publicly salute the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Because, Madam Speaker, watching what my colleague, the Minister of Finance, has had to do as the longest-serving Minister of Finance, if my memory serves me, in balancing, Madam Speaker, the books of Trinidad and Tobago with plummeting oil and gas prices, with COVID shocks, with $17 billion in deficit Madam Speaker, Dr. The Hon. Keith Rowley, the Member for Diego Martin West, the Prime Minister, has saved our country.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Verily so, Madam Speaker, from ultimate disaster.

**Mr. Hinds:** From the UNC.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Now, Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre made another point. We have not done enough for incentives and the Minister of Energy should come here and report on what the results of the incentives offered a year ago. Madam Speaker, last time I checked, you do not drill oil in the ground
and bring it on to shore and refine it, or gas and bring it and move it inside of one year. Where is the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre living?

Madam Speaker, to bring oil and gas out of the ground, please come back to reality. It is a multi-year process, Madam Speaker, to bring Loran-Manatee in its divided form of Loran and Manatee on Trinidad and Tobago side, requires a unitization agreement, requires a producer, requires a gas pricing contract, in a unitized balloon it requires a factor for what they call first gas. If you imagine a balloon, which is Loran-Manatee, and you are popping one hole in it, is going to be more pressure in the first gas coming out. So, whoever gets first gas gets a faster take, Madam Speaker. This is not simple popcorn logic Madam Speaker. You have to have a producer, you have to have a market, you have to have a scale. That does not happen in 12 months Madam Speaker. For the Member to say that the Minister of Energy has been derelict in his duty to come and report to the country on this is to show that the hon. Member has absolutely no clue whatsoever on how oil and gas industry works, Madam Speaker, particularly when the oil and gas market in the last two years suffered from the problems that COVID brought on.

Mr. Hinds: And the UNC.
7.05 p.m.
Shipping was down, containers could not move, consumption was down. Madam Speaker, where has Pointe-a-Pierre been living?

Mr. Hinds: In the refinery.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Hon. F. Al-Rawi: I could tell you it is not in the seat of Pointe-a-Pierre, because I know Waze does not go in some of the places in his constituency to take him there. But, I am telling you that I am deeply concerned that the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre could be the shadow Minister of Energy and Energy Industries,
making the submissions that the hon. Minister is doing today, because God help Trinidad and Tobago if the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre were to ever sit in the seat of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. God help us, Madam Speaker. We might return to when there was a previous Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs, who just basically gave away the entire shop. His name was Kevin Ramnarine.

Mr. Hinds: Yes

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: That gentleman, when the gas was curtailed in this country, because there was no gas available, said the plants were down for maintenance, and that was the response of the UNC, Madam Speaker. Fortunately, there is a sober government in the context of Trinidad’s management.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Fortunately, the Prime Minister, no less a character in law than the Prime Minister, headed our energy renegotiations and, Madam Speaker, fortunately, billions of dollars have come our way, and that is no different from the fact that our Prime Minister has ensured that the easiest way to ensure that your facilities are operating and that your plants are not mothballed and moved out of country, is to take proven gas and bring it onshore. Therefore the hon. Prime Minister has done very well again, in ensuring that Trinidad and Tobago is the beneficiary of the first OFAC exemption for licence to produce for Venezuela, and again, that our Prime Minister is part of the entourage of CARICOM, going to St. Vincent tomorrow under the auspices of CARICOM to ensure peace and stability in our region.

No rattling of swords, and no complaints, and certainly no popcorn logic, to say: Well last year you gave an incentive, where is the money from oil and gas? Nowhere in the world, other than the magic of Hollywood, does somebody
produce oil and gas in twelve months. It just “doh” happen so, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. Madam Speaker.

**Mr. Hinds:** I feel that he has 10 percent in Atlantic

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** The Hon. Member for Oropouche West, in his contribution was talking about, cyber hacks and where is this Government, and TSTT “get” sabotage, and AG Office gets sabotage, and this Government is doing nothing, this Bill will do nothing on the incentives for 150 percent benefit write-off for companies engaged in cyber security. I heard them in the Senate on television, I was looking at the debate on another Bill recently, complaining, what has this Government done? Data needs to be protected.

Madam Speaker, I went back on a tool called an iPad, which happens to have the debates of Trinidad and Tobago *Hansard*, in my case, for 14 years, and on the Parliament website, there is something called debates, Bills debated, and under my name the cybercrime Bill comes up over, and over, and over again. JSC for cybercrime, cybercrime number one, cybercrime number two, cybercrime number three, and you know what the outcome of the attempt to pass law to stop cybercrime is? The UNC said no.

**Mr. Hinds:** Hmmmmm.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** They refused to support the cybercrime laws that we brought. So, Madam Speaker, today Oropouche West stands up, pomp and ceremony and righteous indignations, the Government doing nothing about cybercrime. Well if you are so concerned, why you could not support the law to criminalise cybercrime?

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

**Mr. Hinds:** That is right

**Mr. F. Al-Rawi:** You think the *Hansard* does not reflect the Noes that you put?
Madam Speaker, the JSC with Sen. Mark, jumping up and down and saying no.

7.10 p.m.

Madam Speaker, it is just shameful to stand up in the Parliament and pretend that people cannot research or remember your words immortalized in the *Hansard* records of Trinidad and Tobago. The cyber environment, Madam Speaker, is met by the fact that this Government has moved the digital environment of Trinidad and Tobago into places that no other government has gone. Madam Speaker, in certain Ministries, in the Attorney General’s office for example, it is the only Ministry in the Caribbean to be doing what it did. Certainly, I recall when I was there, scanning and digitizing millions of records, Madam Speaker, to the point where you can now get birth certificates online and companies’ documents done that way.

So, Madam Speaker, I support the Bill and the write-off for investment in cybersecurity, Madam Speaker. It is timely. It is fortuitous, Madam Speaker, and if the UNC is serious about protecting people against cyber criminality, just support the law, Madam Speaker, it is the easy thing to do.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Madam Speaker, I heard the hon. Member for—again—Oropouche West, joined by other Members, speak in reflective terms on the property tax provisions of the Bill that we have in front of us, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, when we look to what the property tax is intended to do here—Madam Speaker, I have had a chat with the hon. Minister of Finance and I am aware that a few amendments will come to the table, in particular, to treat with the property tax provision, but, Madam Speaker, suffice it to say, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has the responsibility to operationalize the Municipal Corporations (Miscellaneous Provisions), 2022 Act.

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That law, Madam Speaker, is the compendium of laws that we brought into effect and which we say will help us to have a new form of law, one for the betterment of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Act No. 11 of 2022. Specifically, that Act in clause 10, now section 10 of that Municipal Corporations (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, amended the Property Tax Act in the following form which this Bill impacts upon. At section 10, we said:

“Notwithstanding subsection (1)…”

—we are going to amend section 10 of the Property Tax Act to say:

“Notwithstanding subsection (1), tax on residential land shall be paid to the Municipal Corporation in which the residential land is located.”

The Member for Oropouche West put on a song, sang a song and had a dance, saying, “Madam Speaker, it is only now they come to give property tax to the municipal corporations”.

Madam Speaker, how could the hon. Member not know that? How could the hon. Member forget that we were compelled to go to a joint select committee, receive their minority report that they will not support the collection of property taxes, receive their minority report refusing to support what became Act No. 11 of 2022, which law for the first time in section 10 of that miscellaneous provisions law said, municipal corporations will receive property tax? Was the hon. Member absent? Did the hon. Member not read the law? It is true because it is in black and while that the first time that corporations are going to receive directly into their statutory fund, the property tax, is when the law will be proclaimed, but that it is not yet proclaimed. And the Minister of Finance has come today to say, “You know what, in the context of other amendments we want to accelerate the receipt of property taxes, give it to the corporations and allow the corporations to spend that money for the benefit of the citizens of this country”. 

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So let me put the data into context, and I will use—because the valuation notices are going out from the Ministry of Finance—let me use data from WASA, Madam Speaker. The Arima Borough Corporation has listed under WASA, households, 28,635 households. If you look to the Arima Borough Corporation, it gets $89 million in government subvention every year. It earns revenue which tops it up to $99 million. The Development Programme for the Arima Borough Corporation is $9.7 million. If you look, Madam Speaker, the revenue generation is $9.7 million. So they get $89 million, they generate $9.7 million, the Development Programme is $20.4 million, Madam Speaker, using the WASA data for the number of households, the property tax revenue on a rough calculation will be $51.9 million. Madam Speaker, that equals, in the case of Arima Borough Corporation, to 352 per cent increase, depending upon the numbers that you look at.

Port of Spain City Corporation will get 169 per cent increase; San Fernando City Corporation, 181 per cent increase; Arima Borough Corporation, 534 is the percentage increase; Point Fortin Borough Corporation, 352 per cent; Chaguanas Borough Corporation, 562 per cent. Madam Speaker, when I asked Oropouche West and he could not give it to me, he just start to “bramble”. Where was the law that he was referring to that says, “If you get corporation tax they are going to deduct it from you”? Madam Speaker, I asked that question so that I could read section 10 of the Municipal Corporations amendment package to prove that what the hon. Member said is wrong.

Madam Speaker, I do not know who in their right mind who is screaming for local government services, better roads, better markets, better sanitation, better security, more municipal police will turn down 534 per cent increase in revenue? Who except the UNC will do that, and why? Now, Madam Speaker, let me
address in the property tax provisions that I commend the hon. Minister of Finance for bringing, what we are attempting to do is to get money faster into the corporation, because, Madam Speaker, we do not want people to be suffering the indignity of getting an assessment. If you get an assessment that says your property rental value, if you work it back down, is $4,000 a month, Madam Speaker, that is the fictitious annual revenue split into 12 at $4,000 a month. Madam Speaker, when you take that revenue at $4,000 a month and you do the simple maths on the property tax calculator which this Bill seeks to amend the parent law to, it is $4,000 multiplied by 12, it is $48,000; minus $4,800 for non-occupancy, that is $43,200; multiplied by 0.03 to get the percentage, it is $1,296 per annum; divide that by 12, it is $108 per month; divide that by 30, not 31, $3.06 a day.

So let me connect that: Arima Borough Corporation with 28,635 households will generate 534 per cent more revenue because the property tax revenue will be close to $51 million, at $3 a day in some instances. And there is a campaign going on opposite to say that we are—the UNC is telling people, “Take the annual rateable rental value and assume that is the property tax”, so when people see $12,000 a month, the news that is being spread, “That is your property tax”. No, Madam Speaker, it shows at $4,000 a month, that you are going to pay $3 a day. At local government, Madam Speaker, I can tell you, the corporations, all 14 of them, seven of them say, “Please, hurry up and give us the money”; the other seven say, “Please hurry up and give us the money but doh tell Aunty Kamla”—whoever that might be—“because she go geh vex”. Madam Speaker, if that is in reference to the hon.Member for Siparia, then, Madam Speaker, I say, shame on you, because I would not assume for one moment to call the name of somebody personally, but I will call the name of the seat of Siparia if that is the case.
So, Madam Speaker, I reject the arguments on property tax. I support the amendments that will come from the hon. Minister of Finance so that we can keep the property taxes that are collected, put them into the statutory fund, and from the statutory fund engage in expenditure, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, if I go to the public procurement law, I heard the Member for Oropouche West say that this is a charade on the people of Trinidad and Tobago effectively, that the property tax is not to be supported, Madam Speaker, to every right-thinking individual in this country who wants to earn a living legitimately, goods and services, together with works means, Madam Speaker, that we can finally ensure that people who do not yet have their OPR registration in the depository have a chance to earn a dollar in contracts and labour. And on behalf of the people of San Fernando West, who I speak for in this Chamber, I can tell you, Madam Speaker, I support the amendment for the inclusion of works, because if you look at the work that Minister Leonce is doing, the hon. Member for Laventille East/Morvant, at the HVIP housing project, an HVIP house is anywhere from $150,000 to $175,000; that is under $1 million.

Why should the contractors of an HVIP home, providing good sustainable shelter and employment at the same time, why should they be denied the opportunity because they are too small a contractor to participate in contract work on behalf of the Government under supervision of regulations from the OPR? Why? Because Oropouche West says so? On behalf of every small contractor in this country, Madam Speaker, particularly those in San Fernando West, I want to thank the hon. Minister of Finance for including the terminology “works”. And in answer to the scurrilous allegation made by Oropouche West, the law as it was amended, provided that the $1 million exception that the regulations to govern that would be drafted by the OPR, and the OPR said you have to include works.

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So what is the Minister of Finance to do, listen to Oropouche West or listen to the OPR? Give small contractors a chance or listen to Oropouche West? Give people who want to earn an honest living a chance or listen to Oropouche West? Madam Speaker, I prefer to ignore the exhortations of Oropouche West because they are not designed to support the common average hard-working individuals of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I think in essence I have given the rebuttal that I stood to give in respect of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries’ attack that the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre misguidedly attempted to launch. Madam Speaker, I will say that I totally support the public procurement amendments to include the definition of works. I completely support the intention to allow municipal corporations to collection taxes whilst we operationalize, which will happen if full form shortly, Madam Speaker, and I thank you for this opportunity to contribute.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

7.25 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (Couva South): Thank you very, much, Madam Speaker, as I make a short intervention in this debate this afternoon which focuses or attempts to focus on this Bill, this finance Bill that seeks to provide for the variation of duties and taxes and to introduce provisions of a fiscal nature, and the Bill provides for the amendment of six pieces of legislation.

But more importantly, Madam Speaker, I listened to the propaganda of the Member for San Fernando West in attempting to create—

Dr. Moonilal: Correct. Correct.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—a feeling that the best thing that will happen to the citizens
of Trinidad and Tobago is the imposition of the property tax. If you listen to the Member for San Fernando West you would feel that he has announced that local government reform is really in the air and this property tax in relation to being a revenue-generating measure will result in a magic wand being waved and as a result of that, all the ills of local government will be dealt with, Madam Speaker.

And, Madam Speaker, sometimes it is important to go back in history in the context of the rebuttals and to put it in proper perspective because the Prime Minister and all of his Ministers in the recently concluded local government campaign, were leading the charge as it relates to local government reform, the platform being the imposition of the property tax. But I want to remind Trinidad and Tobago that the current Prime Minister of this country was opposed to the implementation of a property tax.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And for me, that speaks volumes about the hypocrisy in terms of the approach—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—of the Government. Because in 2009 and I am quoting from a newspaper article written by one Sean Douglas and the Member for Diego Martin East—West, sorry, stated and I quote:

“...‘In my constituency there is anger, anxiety and resentment, at both ends of the spectrum.’

Saying the property tax is obviously a revenue...”—generating— “...measure…”

And he said that the:

“...people are saying if the Government had…handled its largesse, there would have been no need for this”—property—“tax.”

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Well, I want to tell the Prime Minister and the entire Cabinet, the population is saying that they have mismanaged the economy of this country, there has been no foreign direct investment.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: There has been no job creation and diversification of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago and the population is saying to the PNM Government led by the Prime Minister, that there is no need for the implementation of this property tax, taking into consideration the difficult economic times that we are living in.

In fact, Madam Speaker, I do not know if you listen to Chutney music and so on in Trinidad and Tobago, but the people are telling me that the only—as they celebrate Christmas and so on, they cannot celebrate because of the tremendous economic hardship and the only sounds of “jing-a-ling, jing-a-ling, jing-a-ling—"

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping and laughter]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—is coming from the pockets of Ministers of this Government and they are celebrating Christmas while the rank and file, the masses, Arouca/Maloney, cannot celebrate—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—cannot celebrate Christmas because they feel that the Government is continuing to pick their pockets.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And the imposition of this property tax—

Madam Speaker: Member, that terminology you just used there, I consider it unparliamentary. I will ask you to retract it and find another way to say that. Okay? This is not Oliver Twist. All right, please.
Mr. Indarsingh: Madam—

Mr. Hinds: [Inaudible]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, I am guided and in the goodwill of the season I will say that the population of this country can no longer take any further pressure and hardship—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: in terms of how their pockets are being impacted by the measures that are being implemented by this Government. Because the property tax will come, and as I said also on the horizon is the implementation of the rise in electricity rates and also—

Madam Speaker: Okay. Member, this is not a whole debate about fiscal measures and so on. We are just dealing with what is in here. We are not talking about the whole economy and so on, you know, just be guided by where you are going with this present venture, okay?

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: In the season of goodwill.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: I am sure in this venture that I am going—the season of goodwill will continue to prevail.

And very quickly, Madam Speaker, as I said, the question of economic hardships and how it will impact upon the pockets of the citizens of this country is the key thing and the population is really saying this is not the time for the imposition or the implementation of this property tax. And I listened very attentively to the Member for San Fernando West, and if you listened to his delivery and his discourse you would have felt that this Government has salvaged, they have saved the energy sector of this country but I want to remind Trinidad and Tobago that in 2016 plants were closed throughout. And we have to put it in a
historical context again, because the state of the energy sector is one that is in crisis and we must never forget that in 2017 the MHTL plant and the Point Lisas Industrial Estate were closed. In 2018, Petrotrin, the refinery was shut down and in fact, I really do not want to say much more on that because it has been reduced, the refinery has been reduced to “scrap iron, old battery buying”.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And we cannot find a buyer for the Petrotrin refinery. 2019 Yara was closed. 2020 Methanex, Titan, and Atlantic LNG, and so on.

And, Madam Speaker, just to ask, and I am sure probably in winding up the Minister of Finance may want to throw some light, because if they want to speak about Atlantic LNG and apparently this new shareholder’s agreement with Trinidad and Tobago with NGC is now a 10 per cent shareholder and Shell 45 per cent and BP 45 per cent. I want to tell the Prime Minister and this Government, while they celebrate this new Atlantic LNG agreement, it was the UNC Government that completed the negotiation and oversaw the construction of the Atlantic LNG plant. That is the history, Madam Speaker. And whilst the Prime Minister, the current Prime Minister could not give a single figure of the benefits or the cost to the people of this nation, a UNC Prime Minister by the Member for Siparia had come to Parliament on the 11th of February, 2000—a UNC Prime Minister, sorry, on the 11th of February, 2000, came to the Parliament and provided a parliamentary statement which included the cost of it to the nation and it included the tax, the cash benefits to this nation and the expenditure, Madam Speaker. And the important thing is that while we boast to the country of the configuration of this new shareholder’s agreement and so on, at the end of the day, I think that we need to see that in black and white and in addition to that, we also need to tell Trinidad and Tobago when it will start, Madam Speaker.

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7.35 p.m.

So, Madam Speaker, my colleague, the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, he is very au courant with the energy sector. He has a thorough understanding of the energy sector and what is taking place.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And that is why, based on his contribution, the Government had to resort to the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to rebut to the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, Madam Speaker.

And, Madam Speaker, I now want to get into clause 2 of the Bill. And clause 2 of the Bill repeals clause 39 of the National Insurance Act and substitutes a new clause 39C. And based on the Bill Essentials that I have in my position, it states that:

“The effect of this amendment is to provide for the waiver of penalties and interest payable under section 39B for any contribution paid by an employer before December 20, 2023 and any contribution outstanding as at December 19, 2023 that is paid during the period December 20, 2023 to January 31, 2024. Contributions not paid within the waiver period shall be reintroduced as…a waiver…not…”—guaranteed.

And it further states that:

“The waiver applies to an employer who was registered with the National Insurance Board prior to the December 20, 2023, and does not affect the obligation of an employer to pay contributions for employees between the ages of 60 and 65 years.”

Madam Speaker, if we go back up a bit, the National Insurance (Ammdt.) Act No. 15 of 2022 was assented on the 5th of July, 2022 and amended National Insurance Act. And this amendment was again amended to focus on a waiver of
Finance Bill, 2023

Mr. Indarsingh (cont’d)

all penalties and interest on the late payment of outstanding national insurance contributions as at the 30th of June, 2022, where the contribution is remitted between the 1st of July, 2022 and December 31st, 2022. And also, it increased the penalty for the provision of false information to the NIBTT to a fine of $50,000 and imprisonment of three years. And also, it increased the statutory limitation for the commencement of proceedings for offences committed under the National Insurance Act and three years of the date of commission and taking into consideration the personal knowledge of the executive director of National Insurance Board and so on.

And, Madam Speaker, this measure seeks to introduce the provisions of a fiscal nature as it relates to budget 2024. And in budget 2024, on page 19 the Minister of Finance, and I quote—Madam Speaker, the gap between focusing on the National Insurance Fund and the status of the fund. And I quote, Madam Speaker:

“The gap between benefits spending and contribution revenue has widened with an ageing population and generous benefits. We have been reviewing mechanisms to close the gap based on many technical assessments. Through actuarial assessments, we have determined that an increase…”

I want the country to listen:

“…we have determined that an increase in the retirement age by five years from 60 to 65 will support pension adequacy and the system’s sustainability.”

And:

“We are now…."

He goes on to say, the Minister of Finance, that:

“We are now in the process of completing consultations with the major
stakeholders on the increase in the retirement age.”

And:

“I am encouraged by the process being made in the consultative sessions relating to the increase in the retirement age from 60 to 65…”

So, Madam Speaker, what we are seeing really, for me and the Opposition, is what I would call a plaster being placed on the sore and we are not really hearing from the Government what plan is there for the National Insurance Board going forward. And I when I say “plan”, I should rephrase that to say, not for the National Insurance Board but for the stability and financial sustainably of the National Insurance Fund, Madam Speaker. Because when we debated the amendment in 2022, in terms of the National Insurance (Amdt.) Act 15 of No. 2022, a number of conclusions were made or positions postulated or adopted by the Member for San Fernando East when he spoke in the other place, Madam Speaker. And in fact, my colleague, the Member for Oropouche East, during his contribution alluded to some of the positions that the Member for San Fernando East put forward or attempted to put forward on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, probably from a policy point of view. And my colleague reminded him because on the 30th of June, 2022, in an Express article, written one Anna Ramdass, the headline being:

“Manning: Winter coming for non-compliant Senate debates National Insurance (Amendment) Bill, 2022”.

And the Member went on to breathe, as we would say, brimstone and fire, threatening every errant employer in this country, get your act in order or get into your lane and everything will be resolved as it relates to the sustainability of the National Insurance Fund.

Madam Speaker, I want to ask the Government, because it is important as
they come with pieces of legislation seeking a waiver on penalties and interests and providing, as we say, a “bligh” to errant employers, what have they done? Because the Member for San Fernando East, during the debate in the other place, stated that they have introduced a method to detect companies that have not been making their contributions. And I hope in winding up, the Minister of Finance may be in a position to tell us of the success of this new methodology or method of detecting companies that have not been making their contributions and how they intend to deal with errant employers. Because we will continue to grant how many amendments—or waivers, sorry, will we continue to grant via the legislative process? Is it a question of enforcement or are we falling down as it relates to enforcement in relation to this piece of legislation, Madam Speaker? Because when it was amended and assented to on the 5th of July, 2022, part of the amendment focused on, as I said, increasing the fine to $50,000 and an imprisonment of 3,000, and also to increase the statutory limitation for the commencement of proceedings for offences committed under the National Insurance Act.

So, Madam Speaker, I ask, in the context of the continuing or the continuation of the waivers via the legislative process, what are we putting forward as it relates to the question of enforcement of the legislation rather than going the route from a legislative point of view of amnesties being granted by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago?

Madam Speaker, the Minister also—Madam Speaker, today too we got from the Minister of Finance a statement as it relates the status of National Insurance Fund and where we are. And, Madam Speaker, in terms of dealing with delinquent or errant employers, if my memory recollects, and in the whole question of waivers on penalties and interests and so on, I could recollect that before a joint select
committee and on the 9th of September, 2022, I am quoting from *Trinidad Guardian* article written by Gail Alexander:

“Govt among those owning the National Insurance Board”.

And I am hoping that the Minister of Finance, being the line Minister with responsibility from the National Insurance Board, will be in a position to advise whether the Government has been able to reduce its level of indebtedness to the NIB. Because we were told in October of 2023 that the Government was the largest debtor to the NIB, where MTS was owing or owed approximately $76 million; the Ministry of Education, $36 million; the Water and Sewerage Authority, $17 million, and I am reliably informed that WASA had informed NIB that the debt was statute bad.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay. So, Member, I have given you a lot leeway but this really—unless you tie up quickly what you are saying into the provisions of this Bill, I will ask you to move on because really, this is not about NIB and the indebtedness and so on. If you are talking about the waivers and you are talking about something about the Government, tie it into what are the provisions are before us, please.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Simply to say that if indeed the introduction or the effect of clause 2 of the Bill is designed to improve the financial position of the National Insurance Board based on the concerns of all stakeholders, including the Opposition of Trinidad and Tobago, based on the fact that the National Insurance Board was established, and the fund, in 1972, it is a key pillar of social security or the social safety net in this country, and we are saying that from a revenue-generating position, whilst the Minister is here seeking legislative support, at the end of the day, the contributors to the National Insurance Fund, they need some kind of transparency and accountability going forward. And
at the end of the day—Madam Speaker, that brings me to the end of my contribution.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Thank you. Minister of Finance.

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

7.50 p.m.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it is almost impossible to respond to the contributions made by hon. Members opposite. We were treated with a barrage of irrelevance from the hon. Member for Oropouche West who cried shame on every measure. The first thing that perplexed me, Madam Speaker, was what was the target audience of the Member for Oropouche West? Because who in Trinidad and Tobago, which employer, which contractor, consultant or supplier who is trying to qualify to provide goods and services in the public sector, which employer, including all UNC supporters, would not be happy for an NIS amnesty? All of them will take advantage of the amnesty, Madam Speaker, and every single one of their supporters will be glad that the Government is doing the amnesty.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Who? Who in Trinidad and Tobago would be annoyed, and vex and upset and enraged because the Government is giving them an opportunity to qualify to provide goods and services in the public sector? Who? No one! Every single one of them will take advantage of the amnesty, Madam Speaker, and every single one of their supporters will be glad that the Government is doing the amnesty.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** But the hon. Member for Oropouche West virtually described this assistance that the Government is giving as “wicked and evil”. I do not understand the hon. Members opposite. I just do not understand them. And when
one looks at everything that they said, the hon. Members said, they opposed everything. The front group opposed everything. They do not support the tax allowance for assistance to schools. They do not support the waiver of businesses levy for exporters; supported nothing.

The first wave opposed everything and then the second wave supported everything. [Laughter] So when you listen to the hon. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre and so on, they are in agreement with everything, yes, we agree with this allowance, we are not opposed to this, we are not opposed to that. But everyone in the first wave said, it is nonsense, they do not agree, no amnesty, no tax incentives for people to help schools, no tax incentives for oil producers. How can one respond to this, Madam Speaker? It is impossible. Impossible! And then what happens as well, they dwell and, I do not know, they embroil themselves in irrelevance. This is a Bill that has eight clauses. It deals—

**Hon. Members:** [Interuption]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Would you please be quiet?

It deals with tax amnesties—sorry, national insurance amnesties. It deals with allowance for corporations to sponsor restoration and renovation and facilities in schools. I mean, Madam Speaker, I am just scandalized. All of them travel to the United States, all of them have family in the United States; every single one of them. All of them wished they were living in the United States; every single one of them. All of them have houses in the United States and are paying property tax in the United States too; every single one of them.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** But what beats me, because of their close affinity with the United States, they know that all tertiary institutions and secondary schools in the United States survive on endowments from the private sector and from various groups.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: There are billions of dollars in private endowments to schools and universities in the United States. That is how they survive. But the hon. Members opposite are against that. They are against us creating a regime, a tax regime, where companies, who have corporate social responsibility, who want to give back to the community, who want to help, could be given tax relief if they assist public and private schools with their expenses. They are against that, but every other country in the world promotes that. This is what I do not understand about hon. Members opposite. I do not understand it.

With one side of their mouths, we must give no incentives. With one side of their mouths, we must not tax anybody. With the other side of their mouths, we must penalize everybody. “Punish people who doh pay their national insurance contributions, enforce de law, lock up everybody who does not pay their national insurance contributions,” that is what I heard from over there. That is what they said. They started off by saying, “Lock up everybody who does not pay their national insurance contributions,” and then quarreling because we are bringing in a regime for the taxation of property to provide, for the first time, a dedicated revenue stream for local government authorities, half of which reside in UNC constituencies.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

7.55 p.m.

There is nothing to respond to. They want to turn this debate into a budget debate. They persist in reviving matters that have already been debated, considered and voted upon in this House.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: I heard the Member for Couva South talking about some debate
in the other place. What debate in the other place? This is the first time this Bill has been introduced in the Parliament. It has not gone to the other place yet. What on earth are they talking about? This contribution from the other side was just absolute nonsense. I cannot support it.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I “cyah” respond to anything they say, and I want to repeat what we are doing: We are giving employers a little time to qualify to provide goods and services to public bodies. That is the purpose of the amnesty.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** It flows from the proclamation of the Public Procurement Act, which they passed, and they put in that Public Procurement Act that in order to qualify for provision of goods and services to the public sector you must get a clearance from the national insurance body. They put that in there, but they did nothing to ensure that that was something that could easily be achieved by employers. Nothing! They put that in, that onerous position in there, and did nothing about it. We are doing something about it. We are trying to help businesses, we are trying to stimulate economic activity. We are trying to promote fairness and equity by giving people a little more time to qualify with respect to the provisions of the Public Procurement Act. That is what clause 2 is doing.

Clause 3 is giving a benefit to retirees who do not have the ability to take advantage of the full offer of 4 per cent to the public sector. We are giving them tax relief. So clause 2 is a benefit. Clause 3 is a benefit. Clause 4 has two benefits in it, where if you provide funding for promotion of education through sponsorship to public or private schools you get a 150 per cent uplift on your expense for tax deduction purposes.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Hon. C. Imbert: If you engage in the installation of cybersecurity software and hardware—Madam Speaker, I really worry about the Members opposite, you know.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Why?

Hon. C. Imbert: They have to engage in the programme that has been so well-managed by the Minister of Education. Remedial education.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: They need to go to vacation classes and improve their comprehension, because the Bill is clear that it is not just software for cybersecurity. It is also network hardware. But I had to hear the Member for Oropouche West say, “It is not for hardware. Why yuh not assisting people who engage in cybersecurity hardware?” The Bill says hardware. It is remedial education “allyuh” need.

Hon. Members: [Laughter]

Hon. C. Imbert: So, that is clause 4, two benefits inside of there.

Hon. Member: [Inaudible]

Hon. C. Imbert: No!

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: Clause 5—

Hon. Member: [Inaudible]

Hon. C. Imbert: Look, I would be happy to propose a 150 per cent uplift for companies that engage in remedial education for all Members of the Opposition.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: Clause 5 is giving a benefit to shallow water marine oil producers. It is a benefit. Clause 6 tidies up some conflicting provisions in the legislation relating to property tax. Clause 7 makes it clear that small contractors
who might get a contract of $100,000, $200,000, $300,000 to build a little retaining wall, to build a sidewalk, to build a drain, the famous box drains that they are so good at, a little contractor that might get a job to repair a school, to fix a community centre for $300,000; $400,000; $500,000; below a million. Clause 7 ensures that that little contractor is going to benefit from simplified procurement procedures and will not have to go through the onerous and exacting procedures that now exist for big contractors when they have to qualify under the Public Procurement Act. That is what clause 7 is designed to do, another benefit to help little people, little contractors, but they against that.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. C. Imbert: They are against that. They against everybody. They against all that is good. I cannot support anything they say. I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

*Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.*

*House in committee.*

Madam Chairman: Minister, are you ready?

Mr. Imbert: I am ready.

Madam Chairman: Okay, so can we do one to five and then six and then seven—

Mr. Imbert: Yes, ma’am. Yes, ma’am.

*Clauses 1 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

Clause 6.

*Question proposed: That clause 6 stand part of the Bill.*

Madam Chairman: Minister of Finance.
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<th>Clause</th>
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<td>Clause 6</td>
<td>A. Delete paragraph (a)(iii) and substitute the following:</td>
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"(2) The Minister may by Order, subject to negative resolution of Parliament, authorise a Municipal Corporation to collect tax and to refer the non-payment of any tax to the Board.

(3) The Board shall, where the Assessment Roll has been prepared for a year of tax relative to residential land, forward to each Municipal Corporation in relation to its Municipality, the names, addresses and unique identifiers of the owners of land and the amount of tax so assessed thereto.

(4) Notwithstanding any written law, a Municipal Corporation may retain for its own use all taxes collected which shall be paid into the Corporation Fund established under section 109 of the Municipal Corporations Act.

(5) A Municipal Corporation shall notify the Board of the names, addresses and unique identifiers of the owners of land and the amount of tax not paid at 30th September every year."

Mr. Imbert: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I wish to move the amendments as circulated to clause 6. I will explain what they are. What we want to do is to tighten up the provisions. These are really fall-back provisions, and I was assisted by the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government in drafting these provisions. What these are designed to do is in the event that the Local Government Reform package of legislation is not proclaimed quickly for one reason or another that we will have the power, the Minister will have the power to authorize municipal corporations to collect the tax. But there are some other things that need to be done. The Board of Inland Revenue will need to provide municipal corporations with the assessment role with respect to residential properties, and

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also we wish to make it crystal clear that in the event that the legislation, the local
government legislation is not quickly proclaimed, that not only would local
government bodies be able to collect tax, they will be able to retain it and use it,
and they can have the relevant communication to and from the Board of Inland
Revenue. So that is what these amendments seek to achieve.

**Madam Chairman:** Good?

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 7 and 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Question put and agreed to:* That the Bill be reported to the House.

*House resumed.*

*Bill reported, with amendments, read the third time and passed.*

**Madam Speaker:** The Minister of Trade and Industry.

**EXEMPTION FROM IMPORT DUTIES OF CUSTOMS**

**(2024—2026)**

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

Thank you, Madam Speaker. I beg to move the following Motion standing in my
name:

*Whereas* it is provided by section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01
that the House of Representatives may, from time to time, by Resolution, provide that any class of goods specified in the Resolution shall be exempt from import duties of Customs if the goods are imported or entered for use by any person for any purpose specified in the Resolution during any period to be fixed by the Minister, in each particular case, not being a period terminating later than the date prescribed in the Resolution as the last day on which such exemption shall be operative, and subject to such conditions as

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the Minister may impose:

*And whereas* by Legal Notice No. 389 of 2020, the last Resolution in respect of the goods identified therein came into effect on 1st January, 2021 would expire on 31st December, 2023:

*And whereas* it is expedient that the goods continue to be exempt from import duties of Customs as of 1st January, 2024:

*Be it resolved* that the House of Representatives, in accordance with and subject to the provisions of section 56 of the Customs Act, exempt from import duties of Customs, for the period beginning 1st January, 2024 and ending 31st December, 2026, the classes of goods imported and entered for use in Trinidad and Tobago for the following purposes set out in Part A of the list of Conditional Duty Exemptions in the Third Schedule to the Customs Act:

(a) I- For Approved Industry;
(b) II- For Approved Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry and Fisheries;
(c) III- For Approved Hotels;
(d) IV- For Approved Mining Purposes; and.
(e) V- For Other Approved Purposes.

This Resolution shall come into effect on 1st January, 2024.

I will now continue my presentation.

8.10 p.m.

So, Madam Speaker, the purpose of the Motion is to seek an extension and I have done this, probably this is the fourth time that I am doing it, to seek an extension of the benefits granted under section 56(1) (a) of the Customs Act in order to provide relief of customs duties to manufacturers, processors and other
beneficiary industries for a further three years. So this is quite normal. Let me just establish the regional linkage with our national Customs Act. And it is to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Common External Tariffs, the CET as we often say, originated in 1973 with the signing of the original Treaty of Chaguaramas which made provision for the establishment of a common tariff in respect of all commodities imported from extra-regional countries.

In 1991 Trinidad and Tobago would have adopted the CARICOM CET and the revised Treaty of Chaguaramas of 2001, again reiterated that a CET is to be maintained by all CARICOM member states participating in the CSME. And next to the CET is a list of conditional duty exemptions and this has been circulated to everyone in this House and this provides a detailed list of items and activities for which the member states of CARICOM may waive the application of the CET once the items are not available locally or regionally.

So this is a list, it is standard across CARICOM and can be utilized by all member States for the granting of customs duty exemptions. And adjustments to the items of activities eligible for exemption—just in case you are wondering whether we can do it, we cannot. The adjustment of the list must be done at the CARICOM level through the CARICOM Secretariat. And I give you the assurance that there is a current review of all of these lists at this time, a full review of the CET by CARICOM.

So in Trinidad and Tobago under section 56 (1) (a) of the Customs Act import duty concessions may be granted for a specified period to approved industries, enterprises undertaken approved projects. So, again, as I had said in my initial recital the specific classes of goods imported and the purposes for which concessions are granted are outlined in Part A of the list of conditional duty
exemptions in the Third Schedule of the Customs Act. And Part A is categorized into five sub-headings, each dedicated to approved industries and I call them out again for clarification, I would go through again:

I  For Approved Industry;
II  For Approved Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry and Fisheries;
III  For Approved Hotels;
IV  For Approved Mining Purposes; and
V  For Other Approved Purposes.

So what is it amounting to? It is an incentive which affords qualifying businesses the benefit of being exempt from the payment of customs duties and items imported for use into their manufacturing or processing needs and any other business as per the legislation. And as I had indicated previously the concession is granted once the items are not produced regionally or locally.

So, Madam Speaker, it is very clear that these provisions, what does it do, it gives fair access to these very essential foreign inputs, be they raw materials or equipment and it gives them a fair chance at benefiting at these global market prices. Import duty concessions are amongst measures aimed at incentivizing both the local and foreign investors to establish and operate and expand the activities in Trinidad and Tobago. And to access these benefits the businesses must be undertaking one of the approved activities from the Third Schedule of the Customs Act. And over the last past few years these concessions have really supported businesses to contribute, particularly manufacturers, to contribute to industrialization and among other areas of success that have since led a robust manufacturing sector in our country.

So, today we can confidently affirm that our manufacturing sector continues
to consistently demonstrate its healthy contribution to the development of our economy and this customs exemption makes it possible for them to be competitive. So let me get down a little bit to the nitty-gritty of the number of businesses that participated over the last three years. It would have been—

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House. Member. Leader of the House.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 15(5), I beg to move that the House do sit and continue to sit until the completion of the matters before it.

Question put and agreed to.

EXEMPTION FROM IMPORT DUTIES OF CUSTOMS (2024—2026)

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Trade and Industry.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you, Madam Speaker. So as I was saying, during the last three-year period 130 businesses would have benefited from all of the concessions in accordance with the existing resolution. And over this 33 month period the revenue foregone by the State from granting customs duty relief to these 130 companies amounted to roughly TT $1.1 billion. And this the figure as I have it directly from Customs and Excise authority. However, Madam Speaker, it is important to recognize that the benefits far outweigh the cost and I will demonstrate that as I speak a little more.

So, looking at sub-head I which would be for approved industries, 130 as I mentioned before were granted duty relief under sub-head I. And really they comprise a number of small and medium and large businesses operating primarily
within the manufacturing sector. Forty-seven of these businesses are from the food and beverage sector and the remaining 63 beneficiaries are engaged in the production of other non-energy goods, such as, chemicals and furniture; packaging materials; tobacco; beauty and personal care items; pharmaceuticals; building materials and garments and so on. And, of course, there are many large scale operators in the food and beverage subsector producing goods like non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages and cereals and snacks and frozen meat and sea food products, condiments and seasonings and packaging materials, all of these large enterprises, in particular, would have benefited from importing the various raw materials but also the machinery and equipment in order to facilitate production of these products which are consumed by the population but which are also exported. And there is no need for me to list the actual large companies but I think you would know as I said before they are the producers of your snacks and cereals, alcohol and spirits and bitters and sausage products and soft drinks and juices and wines and spirits and so on. Right?

Now, also under approved industries, that first heading, several other licences were granted and these are duty relief licences granted largely on a one-time basis not to the extent where you have manufacturers bringing in raw materials from time to time. So almost ad hoc. Where it is unlikely that the company will continue to import items due to the nature of the operations, and I will tell you that two licences were granted to small businesses involved in fin production and these companies are causing effect to organization in the Nomad Picture Company.

But coming back to the non-energy manufacturing beneficiaries, I really want to show you how it has worked in their favour, and not only in their favour
Exemption from Import Duties of Customs
Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont’d)

but in the country’s favour, in terms of our ability to export as well and make themselves competitive. So, the benefits granted under these concessions continues to support the growth of output and export in non-energy manufacturing. In 2022—and these are figures that you are very familiar with—non-energy manufacturing exports amounted to TT $17.2 billion, reflecting a 15 per cent rise from 2021, and a substantial increase of 58 per cent from 2020, and that was in account of COVID. But the point I am making is that we have gone way passed the pre-COVID figures.

So, I want to say that our manufacturing sector continues to perform admirably, they are now in markets on account of these concessions, they are now in markets of about 143 countries across various regions, including the extra-regional countries. Our export markets would include the USA, CARICOM, Central and South America, Europe, Asia and Africa to a lesser extent. So this robust global reach really illustrates the strength of the sector and the ability to compete based on these concessions and other concessions and incentives granted through the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

So, when we look at the growth of the non-energy manufacturing sector, I spoke just now about exports, but looking now at output, so excluding petroleum and chemical products based on current market prices, we see that it grew from $11.8 billion in 2020, to $15.7 billion in 2022, which is a 33 per cent growth and then I looked at the 2015 figures you see a 38per cent increase in non-energy manufacturing output. So the data is very encouraging and, of course, there is the potential for further growth and the Government’s aim is to aggressively continue to enhance the country’s international competitiveness through a number of incentives granted through the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Trade and
And I want to say that I said it in the budget, and I will take the opportunity to say it again, we are continuing to see the level of commitment by our manufacturers with the number of reinvestments which we had in 2023, and I spoke about that before, more than 40—in fiscal 2023, the Ministry would have recorded an estimated TT $1.4 billion injected by these manufacturers, these 40 companies, again showing the confidence and the competitiveness. Right? There were also—and as I say so to emphasize that there were some large investments, including a $200 million investment in plant and machinery for a major glass manufacturer right down to small businesses as well accessing the facility to get involved in producing new products like yogurts and ice cream and coffee products and so on.

So, the reinvestments were really channeled into physical factory expansion and upgrades to plant, machinery and equipment and so on. Very deliberate actions by our private sector stakeholders. Again symbolizing commitment and confidence.

Looking at sub-heading II: Approved Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry and Fisheries, equally vital to economic diversification and sustainability to the development of the agriculture and agro-processing sectors directly supported by the provisions outlined in this resolution. Eighteen agricultural businesses would have benefited from the items under sub-head II over the period January 2021 to September 2023. And beneficiaries included businesses engaged in poultry, fruit and vegetable farming and fish processing and importing items such as seedling trays, crates, broiler chicks and ducklings and so on. So both the major players, like the poultry players and so on, would have benefited, but also some of the
smaller players as well. And they would be, even the smaller ones would be engaged in the poultry business and in the eggs business as well, and I do think there is need for me to go in to call names, et cetera.

I would swiftly go then to the sub-heading III: Approved Hotels, tourism. And, Madam Speaker, allow me to comment on this. For the period under review, one hotel in Tobago, which is the Mount Irvine Bay Hotel, access customs duty exemptions to import materials to facilitate their renovation and to upgrade their work. I hasten to say that while this provision is important to the tourism sector there are other incentives which are done through the Ministry of Tourism and Culture and the Arts and we want to say that we see this as a sector that we can really drive growth and diversification and we have been seeing, noting the establishment of increased hotels over time but benefiting from all the other incentives that are on the table.

We would have seen the establishment of hotel chains. In 2022, we had the BRIX Autograph Collection by Marriott, the Comfort Inn & Suites Hotel in Tobago in August 2022. Then in 2023 you would have had the new HADCO Experiences at Asa Wright Nature Centre. They opened their doors as well and there are other hotels to come on stream including, the Sheraton at Piarco, the Radisson Blu Hotel, the Maracas Bay Hotel and of course the Marriott in Tobago as well.

8. 25 p.m.

So I would want to now go to sub-heading IV: Approved Mining Purposes. With respect to mining for the said period, there were no exemptions from customs duty for this particular purpose. Mining and quarrying, as you know, are activities that are closely linked to the construction sector and, of course, which is a pivotal
contributor to the economy. This sector significantly fuels employment generation, capacity expansion and social stability, and the Review of the Economy indicated that for 2022 mining and quarrying contributed to 14.9 per cent of the country’s total GDP. Notwithstanding, the particular incentive will stay on our books.

With regard to sub-heading V: Other Approved Purposes, one sports related company conducting recreational activities would have benefited under this particular sub-heading and that is Radical Sports in Tobago. The other purposes for which the continuation of customs duty exemptions is being sought would include navigation in equipment for boats, equipment to be used in sports and recreational activities, and public transport type vehicles. The Government acknowledges that sporting and recreational activities in particular can yield both economic and health benefits. So those remain available to businesses.

There is not much more that I should add. This is quite straightforward. So therefore, as I conclude, I want to say that the provision of this kind of relief from customs duty is a Government support initiative that will really drive and stimulate our economic activity, and foster growth and create employment. The benefit of the continuation of these exemptions cannot be overstated especially considering the vast opportunities for the industries reliant on them.

Accordingly, Madam Speaker, it is recommended that this Motion be passed in this honourable House to allow the Minister with responsibility for industry to grant import duty concessions to approved industry; approved agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries; also approved hotels; approved mining purchases; and other approved purposes. I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva North.

Mr. Ravi Ratiram (Couva North): Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker, for this opportunity to join this debate on Motion No. 1 on today’s Order Paper which states:

Be it Resolved that the House of Representatives, in accordance with and subject to the provisions of section 56 of the Customs Act, exempt from import duties of Customs, for the period beginning 1st January, 2024 and ending 31st December, 2026, the classes of goods imported and entered for use in Trinidad and Tobago for the following purposes set out in Part A of the list of Conditional Duty Exemptions in the Third Schedule to the Customs Act:

(a) I- For Approved Industry;
(b) II-For Approved Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry and Fisheries;
(c) III-For Approved Hotels;
(d) IV-For Approved Mining Purposes; and
(e) V-For Other Approved Purposes.

This Resolution shall come into effect on 1st January, 2024—as moved by the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry.

Madam Speaker, today I will use a portion of time to focus my contribution on the agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries sector as it relates to this Motion. In doing so, Madam Speaker, I will analyse the impact. The accompanying exemptions would have provided to these sectors over the previous years, discussed what is being proposed on the way forward and provided some recommendations that hopefully the hon. Minister and Government will take into
consideration to improve the agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries sector.

Madam Speaker, the content of this Motion is not new to this House as it has been brought here on several previous occasions, and has debated here on several occasions in the past. Several recommendations have also been made to this said hon. Minister of Trade and Industry, but it appears, Madam Speaker, that just like some of the Cabinet colleagues of this Minister, absolutely nothing has been done to improve the ease of doing business here in Trinidad and Tobago, and is a matter of fact this Government has made it 10 times for difficult for businesses to survive in this country.

About three years ago, Madam Speaker, when a similar Motion was being debated in this Parliament, I made mention of the statement made by the hon. Minister in an earlier debate informing the House, and I quote from Hansard, 9th of December, 2020:

“…this Motion allows for the extension of concessions to enable T&T incorporated companies in the private sector to acquire the necessary foreign inputs at world market prices without being subject to custom duties on entry.

The hon. Minister also stated that this provision would ensure that companies were not placed at a disadvantage in terms of their international competitiveness.”

Madam Speaker, it was only after the closure of Petrotrin and the virtual demolition of the oil and gas sector by this administration, that our country experienced the worse economic fallout recorded—

Madam Speaker:  All right. So—

Mr. R. Ratiram:—of all time, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker:  Member, I know you have just started, but I just want to
caution you on the direction that you are going. This is a very limited debate—kindly have a seat please.

Mr. Young: Sit, sit, sit.

Madam Speaker: No, no, no. Please, let us all recognize this is the season of goodwill. I am sure the Member meant no disrespect. So it is a limited debate. This is not a debate about the general economy, closure of other business, the ease of doing business and so on. The statement you made, having quoted the hon. Minister, certainly outlined the very narrow parameters of the debate. Okay? So to avoid us having to stand too often on Standing Order 48(1), and let us recognize the season of goodwill, let us keep it in the confines of the debate. Okay?

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker, and I will try my best to oblige with the guidance provided by your good self. Madam Speaker—

Mr. Hinds: [Inaudible]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Pleasant good night to you, my colleague, Member for Laventille West.

Madam Speaker: Member, please do not be distracted. Direct your contribution this way. Please do not be distracted.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, the result of what I have just made mentioned in the compromise of both the availability and the access of foreign exchange by the members of the business community and members of the various industries that this Motion attempts to address, makes it even a little more difficult for these entities to be able to effectively utilize the exemptions that are being provided.

Madam Speaker, this is the sad state of affairs that the average citizen has now found himself or herself for the past five years solely due to that—

Madam Speaker: Again Member, I think we are going back to where we started.

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I am prepared to give you some leeway, but I cannot overlook that you have gone back to where we started. Okay? So remember what we are dealing with is the exemptions, and as you had pointed out, you are dealing with II, agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries. They have set out, I think, 12 areas there, where certain customs exemptions—please deal with that.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, Madam Speaker. And moving on with respect to the ability of members of the agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries industry to be able to effectively utilize these exemptions that have been made available to them require a certain amount of capital investment, require a certain amount of availability of foreign exchange to be able to utilize these exemptions. So, today—

Madam Speaker: And we keep going back to that. Member, you know I am really trying to stretch my goodwill. Please, this is the third time I would have stood up on this and please do not let me have to stand up again on it. I will then have to exercise my powers.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, Madam Speaker. In just wrapping up this point, I would like to make the following recommendations in going forward to the hon. Minister of Finance, to supplement these exemptions as provided by the Minister of Trade and Industry to give some sort of consideration that through the Agricultural Development Bank that the loan facilities we have—

Madam Speaker: There is no wrapping of the point—Okay?—because I have ruled, if you want me do that, that by virtue of Standing Order 48(1) you cannot proceed along that line. So maybe you go on to your next point.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Guided accordingly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, moving on with my contribution, six years ago when the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry was presenting a similar Motion on the 15th of December, 2017, in this House, the hon. Minister identified agriculture as one of the sectors earmarked
with the Government’s diversification strategy. The hon. Minister stated that:

“The success of this sector contributes to increased food security, agricultural exports, employment and conservation of foreign exchange, while also providing an incentive for people to live more healthy and productive lifestyles.”

Moving from there to three years ago, on the 9th of December, 2020 in this said Parliament upon piloting a similar Motion, the hon. Minister stated and I quote:

“…Madam Speaker, we all bore witness to the impact of the pandemic on overall global food supply chains and therefore, it is a lesson to ensure resilience, we must become a more self-sustained economy. We must focus on expanding the domestic supply and also consumption of our agricultural products as well. Essentially, we should grow what we eat. And with government policy, and we would know of the...$500 million that the Minister of Finance and the Cabinet has approved for the agricultural industry for this year, this fiscal period, this is a signal…”—of—“…our commitment to growing this sector.”

However, Madam Speaker, as we fast-forward to this year’s Review of the Economy, 2023, by Minister of Finance, the publication explains the dire straits that this Government has created for our—

Madam Speaker: So Member, I think—you know I do not want to interrupt you too much. It appears that you have prepared this with a particular slant. So you have gone back. You have read certain things which Minister has not mentioned at all in this contribution today. Again, you have gone back looking at the economy in the wider sense. Definitely, I cannot allow that. So I am going to give you one attempt to sort of recalibrate. If not, I am going to have to ask you to take your seat.
8 40. p.m.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Guided accordingly, Madam Speaker. The Minister basically indicates that these exceptions that are being included into this Motion, it is really for the growth and the development of the various sectors, so that various companies will utilize these exemptions for the growth and the development of the various industries outlined. These exemptions are not new to this House and it is not new to the country, and what we are doing here is providing in going forward the exemptions from January 01, 2024 and moving forward.

However, by looking at what has been the results during this period that we are currently in, we take note of the guidance provided to us by the Minister of Finance when he reviewed our current positioning with respect to agriculture, livestock, forestry, fisheries and our food security here in Trinidad and Tobago as the Minister would have indicated that these exemptions were to, one, reduce our food import bill, allow for a greater contribution of agriculture to GDP by the utilization of these exemptions.

So taking from page 83 of the Review of the Economy from the Minister of Finance, if I may quote the Minister and I quote here:

“Domestically, farmers continued to be challenged by excessive rainfall, pests and diseases, praedial larceny and the high cost…availability”—

Madam Speaker: Member, Member, it is the same point. I have allowed you to read a little more to see if you will get there and, I am really at this stage going to have to ask you to take your seat.

Mr. Hinds: Sit down, have a seat.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Trade and Industry.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I want to thank the Member for Couva North for his contribution. I note his concerns. I think you know that the Government is committed to growing and diversifying the economy and that we are very focused on the manufacturing sector, the tourism sector, the agriculture and agro-processing sectors among other things. We know that this offering—

Mr. Ratiram: [Inaudible]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Pardon me, I am on my feet.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Ratiram: [Inaudible]

Hon Member: What!

Madam Speaker: One minute, one minute. Member for Couva North, if you are leaving you are entitled to do so, but please do not disturb the House and I really hope you are not saying anything unparliamentary. Okay, I do not expect that of you, alright.

Hon Member: Irrelevant.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you, so—

Madam Speaker: So wait a minute, Member are you leaving? Please do, please do and let us leave in the traditions that are associated with this House. Minister of Trade and Industry.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And I will just simply say, Madam Speaker, that the Government will continue to support all of these industries that I just spoke of through this particular concession and through the myriad of incentives and other initiatives which we have to grow all of these industries. I am therefore pleased that on the books we have recorded the benefits of this particular concession and all that is left for me now is to commend the Motion. Madam
Speaker, I beg to move.

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

*Question put and agreed to*

*Resolved:*

That the House of Representatives, in accordance with and subject to the provisions of section 56 of the Customs Act, exempt from import duties of Customs, for the period beginning 1st January, 2024 and ending 31st December, 2026, the classes of goods imported and entered for use in Trinidad and Tobago for the following purposes set out in Part A of the list of Conditional Duty Exemptions in the Third Schedule to the Customs Act:

(a) I- For Approved Industry;

(b) II-For Approved Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry and Fisheries;

(c) III-For Approved Hotels;

(d) IV-For Approved Mining Purposes; and

(e) V-For Other Approved Purposes.

This Resolution shall come into effect on 1st January, 2024.

8.45 p.m.

**Private Members’ Business**

*(Withdrawal of Motion No. 1)*

**Madam Speaker:** The Member for Barataria/San Juan.

**Mr. Saddam Hosein (Barataria/San Juan):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I seek your leave to withdraw Motion No. 1 listed as Private Members’ Business in my name.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, the Member for Barataria/San Juan being called upon and having not moved this Motion, in accordance with Standing Order

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Exemption from Import Duties
Mr. R. Ratiram (cont’d)

41(2), this Motion shall be and is removed from the Order Paper.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker:  Leader of the House.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, there is one matter that qualifies to be raised on the Motion for the adjournment of this House.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, by agreement—

Hon. Members: [Interruption]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: What? Madam Speaker, by agreement, the Motion on the Adjournment will not be raised today.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: So, Whip, I take that is so? Okay, so that—

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker—[Inaudible]

Madam Speaker: No, there is no question about doubt, so that all the voices will be heard.

**Christmas Greetings**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, as we all know, we are in the blessed and holy season of Christmas, a special time of the year that brings family and loved ones together in the joyous celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ who, for Christians, is the way of life. I therefore now, before I put the question on the adjournment of the House, invite Members to bring greetings on the special occasion of Christmas. Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara.

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Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

The Minister in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Lisa Morris-Julian): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Over 2,000 years ago, under the humblest of circumstances, a child was born. This child would then go on to change the world. The birth of Jesus Christ was prophesied in the Old Testament. It is the fulfilment of this prophecy that brings us together to celebrate Christmas.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son…”

It was God’s plan, as explained in John 3:16, the love that God has for this world, for each of us and for you is so great that he sacrificed his only Son for you, for me, for all the people in the world.

Religious writer Eliza Vlădescu said:

“No”—other—“leader has ever inspired mankind to a greater extent than the baby born in Bethlehem, the one who divided history. No other personality in the world has left such a mark on such a large number of fields as Jesus did. And the legacy He left in terms of human rights (especially women’s rights), education, attitudes towards children, humility, and forgiveness…”

Madam Speaker, no matter what creed or religious belief, one cannot deny that there is indeed something special about Christmas time. In our own twin-island state, it is a time when our people truly come together. From traditional foods to the sweet sounds of parang, these are unique Christmas symbols in our country. Our right-thinking citizens share one common goal: an inherent desire to love one another.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, let us remember his humble beginnings, born in a humble stable in Bethlehem. He is the embodiment of the ultimate gift of love and sacrifice. Let us reflect on the simplicity and kindness of his message. Let us strive to emulate his example in our lives. This Christmas, let
us embrace the spirit of humility and service that He exemplified and let us guide our actions and interactions with one another.

In a world where divisions often overshadow the common good, Christmas remains a symbol of hope, one that is supposed to transcend conflicts. As we navigate these challenging times, let us reflect on the message of Christmas and spare a thought for the birthplace of Jesus, Bethlehem, and let us pray that once again it will be a place of peace, joyous celebrations and unity.

On behalf of our hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley, the People’s National Movement and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as on my own behalf and from my family to yours, Merry Christmas and may the love Christ so freely gave the world be emulated in your hearts and homes. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre): Thank you, Madam Speaker. On behalf of the Leader of the Opposition and Members of the Opposition, I would like to offer a hearty sincere and warm Christmas greetings to all Members of this House, colleagues both sides and especially our hard-working parliamentary staff.

It is the custom of this House to offer joyous messages of hope and love each Christmas season and thus those sentiments remain our wish for each and every citizen of our nation this Christmas. But as parliamentarians elected by the citizens of this country, we are forced to ask ourselves a question this Christmas season: Do our sentiments represent the reality facing our country? Can we speak of merriment when we know that so many face turmoil, anguish, hardship and grief this Christmas? If as a Parliament, we are to truly reflect the love and goodness that defines Christmas, then we cannot separate ourselves from the reality facing our nation.
Christmas is about love, Christmas is about leaving our comfort zone to selflessly help those in need. The best way we can do as a country, as elected officials and as Parliament is by trying to change the reality that faces so many this year. If it is one message that we in the Opposition can pass on to all in our nation is, it cannot be business as usual this Christmas. This Christmas we must all have a heart. This is not a Christmas to simply repeat the story of the nativity. This is not a Christmas to simply repeat that “Trinis get joy from parang and sorrel”.

Christmas 2023 is the year we are forced to accept that just like baby Jesus who had no room in an inn for his birth, there are families out in the cold without a meal. Just as Mary and Joseph were forced to flee from Herod, there are families fearful of crime. This Christmas, let us go beyond speaking about joyous festivities with the hope that it drowns out the hardship in our country.

Christmas is about the birth of Jesus, the Saviour who came to redeem the world, and the foundation of his birth, his kindness towards all. Circumstances do not allow all of us to just stand here anymore and hope for goodwill in this season. It demands that we, as a nation, act for the goodness and goodwill of all. This Christmas, let our actions speak louder than our words, let goodwill be more effective than our good wishes. As a matter of fact, I ask my colleagues, let goodwill begin with those in authority. This is what our past Government did when we reduced certain things in our country. Maybe we can consider delivering on the promises of reducing fuel, even if temporarily, for this season. But as I said, this Christmas, it cannot be business as usual as too many are suffering. Let us have a heart. My Opposition Members and I will be on the ground helping families. Let us all do the same work.

I pray for God’s blessing on each Member of this House and their family. On behalf of the Opposition, we would like to thank our parliamentary staff for
their dedicated work in the last year. I thank each Member and let us have a brighter 2024. Let the one theme be used this Christmas: “Have a heart”; a heart with those suffering financially, socially or even facing mental trauma over the loss of a loved one. May God bless us and Merry Christmas.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, I wish to offer warm greetings to the entire nation on the occasion of Christmas. Christmas is a season that resonates with all Trinbagonians regardless of one’s religious affiliation. Christians, along with non-Christians, brothers and sisters among us, participate in the celebration of Christmas and its festivities.

Among the festivities of the Christmas season, may you find threads of happiness, love and laughter woven seamlessly together by cherished traditional traditions. May the enchanting songs of parang and Christmas carols fill your hearts and your homes, and as you delight in the delicious local cuisines, such as pastelles, ginger beer and black cake and joyously share gifts among yourselves, let us remember those among us who are less fortunate and are in less fortunate circumstances, leading us to sacrifice a bit to bring them some cheer. May also the lights of Christmas herald the hopes and plans which we have for our individual lives and the lives of our constituents for the upcoming year. At the heart of Christmas season are the tenets of love, kindness and generosity. I encourage each of us to uphold these ideals in our day-to-day lives.

On behalf of the Clerks of the House and the Senate, the staff of the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and on behalf of my family and myself, I take this opportunity to wish you and all of Trinidad and Tobago a very happy, holy and safe Christmas, and a bright and prosperous new year, 2024.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.58 p.m.