

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Tuesday, October 08, 2024*

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**Upholding Dignity of the House**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, it is important that I speak to a matter that occurred during the contribution of the Member for Moruga/Tableland at yesterday's sitting of this House. The particular comment made by the Member was very inappropriate and distasteful and information in the public space has reinforced this as it has also provided context for that statement.

The original statement was made by a woman against another woman who is in fact a sitting Member of this House. It is unbecoming to say the least that a female Member of this House would repeat such a misogynistic comment against another sitting female Member of this House. While Members enjoy the right of freedom of speech, this right comes with a level of responsibility and as parliamentarians, we must hold ourselves to an even higher standard.

It is critical that we are fully aware that while Members can make statements or reference statements made by other persons, when doing so, as a Member, you take full ownership of that statement. That statement becomes your statement and it will be held to the same standards of parliamentary practice, procedures and rules as if it were your original statement. The usage of the expression that was made by the Member for Moruga/Tableland does not reflect the civility of this House. Consequently, such a statement has no place in this society and certainly not in this House.

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I therefore wish to caution all Members that the dignity of this House must be upheld at all times and we must conduct ourselves in a manner befitting the responsibility entrusted to us by the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

As Speaker, I will do all in my power to ensure that the integrity of this House is upheld by all Members and at all times. I thank you.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2024

[Fourth Day]

Order for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 04, 2024]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, the Members who have already contributed to this debate are as follows: Hon. Colm Imbert, MP, Minister of Finance, Member for Diego Martin North/East; Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, MP, Leader of the Opposition, Member for Siparia; hon. Stuart Young, SC, MP, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West; Mr. David Lee, MP, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre; hon. Keith Scotland SC, MP, Minister in the Ministry of National Security, Member for Port of Spain South; Mr. Dinesh Rambally, MP, Member for Chaguanas West; Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox, Minister of Social Development and Family Services; Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP, Member for Chaguanas East; hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy, MP, Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, Member for Tobago East.

Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister of Trade and Industry; Mr. Rushton Paray, MP, Member for Mayaro; hon. Brian Manning, MP,

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Minister in the Ministry of Finance, Member for San Fernando East; Mr. Davendranath Tancoo, MP, Member for Oropouche West; hon. Marvin Gonzales, MP, Minister of Public Utilities, Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West; Mr. Barry Padarath, MP, Member for Princes Town; hon. Shamfa Cudjoe-Lewis, MP, Minister of Sport and Community Development, Member for Tobago West; Mr. Arnold Ram, MP, Member for Caroni Central; hon. Lisa Morris-Julian, MP, Minister in the Ministry of Education, Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara; Dr. Rishad Seecheran, MP, Member for Caroni East; Mr. Kennedy Richards, MP, Member for Point Fortin; Ms. Michelle Benjamin, MP, Member for Moruga/Tableland. Member for San Fernando West.

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi SC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise to join in contributing to the national budget. This, Madam Speaker, represents by 15th budget contribution having stood in this House now for, with the collection of time in the Senate, collectively 15 years and counting.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: Madam Speaker, I have said that really so that I can reflect upon what I believe a budget ought to involve. Secondly, to engage in a discussion through you, Madam Speaker, with the citizens of this country as to what we have done with public money. Thirdly, what one can expect in this financial year with public money and Madam Speaker, to also speak to the constituents of San Fernando West whom I am very grateful to, for having put me into the seat to represent their interests.

I start off by reflecting upon the presentation of the Minister of

Finance and as I am opening the batting as one would say this morning, permit me to put into context what we are doing this morning. This Appropriation Bill is, pursuant to the Constitution, an estimate of what money the public sector in Ministries, statutory authorities, the THA, et cetera, may expect during the financial year. It is premised upon an estimate of revenue. Revenue is earned largely on the basis of taxation. Of course, the Consolidated Fund also receives fines and fees but the revenue that we earn is essentially upon taxation and we, Madam Speaker, are doing that with the most significant contributor to our revenue being our oil and gas production.

When we look to the budget before us and we look to the Appropriation Bill, the Appropriation Bill is asking us to issue \$49 billion across several entities.

10.10 a.m.

The entity thligoricalat I represent and must give account for is the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, that is Head 42. We are earmarked under the Appropriation Bill to receive an allocation of \$2,626,297,700. When you compare that to last year's allocation, taking both the Appropriation Bill, Act No. 14 of 2023, and the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) Act No. 8 of 2024, when you add up last year's figures, we received \$2.573534 billion in the first allocation and some \$95 million extra in the second allocation.

What that means, Madam Speaker, is that we are nearly on par in our expenditure because the difference that we are looking at is the difference between \$2.626 billion versus \$2.650 billion. So we are slightly down in

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our allocation. We expect this year, by the utilization of oil and gas figures, to run our accounts on the basis of oil and gas revenue coming in at US \$77.80 per barrel of oil, and we are looking at gas at \$3.59, as opposed to the last year's estimate of \$5.

Madam Speaker, I am saying this because apart from oil and gas, one of the first comments offered by the Leader of the Opposition was that we are engaged in fancy footwork and that we overestimate the price of gas and oil. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries has put up—but let me say that the revenue we expect is based upon a basket price. It is averaged off. And, Madam Speaker, when the Leader of the Opposition says, in comparative analysis, between this Government's tenure and the five years and three months that she has managed, that we have not put money into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, et cetera, I want to remind you that the law says that if you earn above your gas prices, you would put 60 per cent of that money into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, but if you are below that price, you do not put it into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

And it is a matter of record that in the nine years that we have managed this economy, we have had severe oil and gas shocks, firstly, in 2016/2017, when we saw a near 95 per cent drop in oil and gas revenue—let me repeat that, a 95 per cent drop in oil and gas revenue. Where you would normally expect some \$22 billion in revenue, we got \$800 million in revenue. Then during COVID, we saw the price of oil go, if look at West Texas Intermediate, to minus \$2. What does that mean? You have to pay people US \$2 per barrel to take your oil for free because if you block up the production and you do not get rid of it, you logjam, and you have to shut

down production. All of that is yesterday, one could say. And therefore, this budget must focus upon today and tomorrow.

And let me say, Madam Speaker, that in the money that we are spending as a country, I would like to put on record that of the \$60 billion, which is the real sum coming out of the allocations, \$9.3 billion or 14.6 per cent is for Personnel Expenditure. That is salaries alone. When you look at transfers and subsidies, how we pay for electricity, how we pay for gas supply, how we pay for water, we are looking at \$28 billion or 44.1 per cent of our revenue, going to transfers and subsidies.

If you look to debt servicing, how much we paid back in debt, you are looking at \$11 billion, that is 17.2 per cent. Those three numbers alone are equivalent to 75 per cent of the budget moneys. When you look to what we intend to do—I want to point you to the figures of expenses and interest. We are looking at \$6.7 billion in interest. And we have to pay into the sinking fund for the payment of debt, \$4.2 billion.

Our *Public Sector Investment Programme* is only 4 per cent of the budget. Let me repeat that, \$2.6 billion of the \$60 billion package, only \$2.6 billion goes to the *Public Sector Investment Programme*. And, Madam Speaker, when you look to the IDF, you are looking at \$3 billion if you add the totals together. So, I would like the population to know that when we are looking at budget figures, the vast majority of money is spent upon keeping, “the system as it is”, ensuring that people are employed, ensuring that salaries are paid, et cetera, and that the *Development Programme* is where we are looking to stimulate an economy.

I have seen floating around, issues appearing to be analysis of budget contributions, and I note the Leader of the Opposition's contribution that the UNC intends to abolish property tax, that they intend to ensure that there are no electricity rate increases—because they have alleged that there is one, which is untrue—that there is no further taxation in this economy, that they intend to give more than a 5 per cent offer for public sector wages, et cetera. But, Madam Speaker, we have not heard a single issue of revenue, that is, how you are going to pay for it, coming from the Opposition. And adding that idea to the numbers that I just gave you, I would like to remind you, again, that interest on loans alone is \$6.7 billion; repayment of old debt, that is, sinking fund, is \$4 billion, that is \$10 billion.

So, what I would like the population to know is that if one were to accept the arguments and proposals coming from the Leader of the Opposition, the only way that the plan that the Opposition has, or the so-called plan can happen, is to borrow money. And if you are going to borrow more money and you have not a single item of revenue coming back at you, it means you are going to have very little money to do the *Public Sector Investment Programme* or the IDF's. In other words, then, Madam Speaker, it is a plan that just cannot work.

A second broad aspect that I would like to get to before I get to the Ministry, by way of contribution analysis, is to point out, in simple terms, that this budget actually brings to life some very critical revenue-generating aspects. We have, for years, complained that Trinidad and Tobago is an energy/plantation economy model, that is, we rely only on oil and gas. We have asked, what about diversification? But yet, in this budget, the

Opposition pretends that the Minister of Finance did not address critical matters that he did.

And let me put it on record in summary form. Number one, the Minister of Finance has proposed that transfer pricing legislation becomes a reality. The Minister of Finance has reported that with the successful passage of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act and with its upholding of constitutionality by the Privy Council, a law which I am pleased to say I drafted, Madam Speaker, with that in success, the Revenue Authority will go into operation fully. The Minister of Finance has said that property taxes will be collected and given to the corporations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: The Ministry of Finance, through its Minister, has said that the international airport in Tobago will be completed, five-star hotels are to be brought to life, a marina is to be brought into Tobago.

And, Madam Speaker, when you look at what the Minister of Finance has done on the agricultural sector to perfect it as a 100 per cent tax-free, let me now explain those five items. That is where foreign exchange comes from. Everywhere else in the Caribbean, the island chain, the large-scale revenue contributor is tourism.

Madam Speaker, even though there was a drive out of Sandals and it opened in Grenada and then St. Vincent, the Government is keenly aware that the airlift that it brings into Tobago, and the hotel stock that it brings into Tobago. And the fact that the hurricane season causes havoc in the rest of the Caribbean, and the creation of a safe harbour in Tobago, that means

foreign exchange, and revenue earning, and job creation for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, reducing our reliance on oil and gas.

10.20 a.m.

But, Madam Speaker, when you look to the transfer pricing, you look to the Government's legislative agenda, the Base Erosion Profit Sharing laws, the Global Forum laws, the Financial Action Task Force laws, and you look to our Revenue Authority, we are saying to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that fair application of taxation law to ensure that all people pay their taxes can allow us—eventually when a taxation system works well—to reduce the taxation because the net is broader. But, Madam Speaker, the conservative estimate is to the tune of about \$10 billion extra, in fair share revenue. That is people coming onto the system who ought to be paying taxes. Now, Madam Speaker, when you add the transfer pricing money, another \$10 billion if you are conservative, that is close to \$20 billion, which is nearly equal to our oil and gas revenue if you look at it in the way it is constructed now.

So, the Government has with the Revenue Authority, with transfer pricing legislation, those two mechanisms alone do not trouble the tax-paying citizens of this country, particularly those in working poverty. Because anybody who earns under \$7,500 is tax-free in this country, and because it allows us to support transfers and subsidies to the tune that I have just given you. So, Madam Speaker, in our budget we have identified foreign exchange earnings, revenue source, and how we intend to put this together. So, Madam Speaker, I just wanted to deal with those broad concept issues because not a single Member opposite has been able to tell us

how they will support or afford any of the plans that they wish to put into action.

Now, Madam Speaker, let me turn to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government immediately. So, Madam Speaker, we are expected to receive—according to this appropriation Bill—\$2.6 billion under Head 42, \$2,626,297,700. And, Madam Speaker, I would like to put on the Table right now that the yellow books of our appropriation package will demonstrate what expenditure looks like. And I want to put a big X on the spot right now. And I would like to say that the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government is rather unique. Because it is—apart from the Tobago House of Assembly, it involves a management of resources that is politically managed by persons who are not necessarily in government.

In other words, the 14 municipal corporations are spread between seven for the Opposition currently, and seven for the Government currently. And in those 14 corporations, we have all, together with the head office, had the first year of the Public Procurement Act. Let me repeat that, we have just completed the first full year of the Public Procurement Act, Madam Speaker. And I would like to remind you that expenditure in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government is dependent, one, upon programmes to be published six weeks after the national budget, and then procurement happens. And, Madam Speaker, I would like to remind you that in reflecting on this year's performance, that we had an election just after the budget. And in November that election came, we had seven new councils in the UNC-held corporation, and seven new councils in the PNM-

held corporations, and all of them engaged in project re-prioritization which meant they had to reformulate and resubmit their items.

In this financial, we also had the under \$1 million regulations to be ironed out. We also had the population of the public procurement depository. Because you cannot participate in public procurement unless you are under the regulations on a one-time basis for the under \$1 million, without being in the depository, and this year you will see that the performance has been materially impacted:

1. By the change in projects when new councils came in. In other words, then they had to resubmit new projects, go into the system, be approved, so older councils—the expired or moving out councils—had a change of projects.
2. In the public procurement law that has been passed and which we were warned there would be consequences and things to fix, in that you will notice that you must have confirmation of funds, you must have a person coming from the procurement depository. And therefore, Madam Speaker, what you will see this year is that the performance across corporations has dropped from the year before.

Exactly as expected. It has dropped because of changes of projects, because of an election that happened, and those changes of projects, because of the public procurement regulations being ironed out. And I want to remind you, Madam Speaker, that in getting those laws settled so we could spend, we had no assistance from the Opposition, none at all. We had threats, we had bramble, and we had complaints. In the meanwhile, all of the corporations involved have managed to line up and engage in their performance and I

would like to tell you a little bit about what that performance involved.

Madam Speaker, in total, the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, we ended with a revised allocation of \$258 million. I can tell you, Madam Speaker, this year we are looking at \$249 million. So in other words then, roughly \$8 million difference between last year and this year. But, Madam Speaker, the allocation that we got last year allowed us to have in the works, 1,255 projects of which 445 were completed, that leaves 810 that are ongoing.

So, Madam Speaker, you are going to see in this financial year, a rush of 810 projects carried over from last year which are all in works or shovel-ready, and therefore you are going to see a very fast expenditure. Because we are now over the hurdles of the public procurement difficulties, which in my view have materially hampered—but understandably so—the performance indices of this rather unique Ministry, Rural Development and Local Government. Remember the THA is not an equal comparator because the THA runs itself. We have in Rural Development and Local Government seven one way and seven another way. Those that complain publicly about something but come privately to tell you, “Well, you know, we really support property tax but we cyah tell we leader dat.”

So, Madam Speaker, in the 810 projects to come over into this financial year, you can expect to see an extremely quick performance factor. That 445-project completion resulted in—as I promised last year and this year to give an account—the direct employment of 4,924 people. And it impacted, in terms of the works performed for the benefit of people, it impacted 207,347 persons. And, Madam Speaker, that means that the

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employment figure of nearly 5,000, generated from the expenditure that the corporations and head office engaged in, is to be added to the direct employment that this Ministry engages in.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and the corporations, with its charges in the entities of the Rural Development Company and the CEPEP company, we employ close to 30,000 people. And that 30,000 is, of course, some 10,000-odd CEPEP workers, approximately 10,000 workers being supplemented by 2,200 in the Forestry Division. You are looking, Madam Speaker, at the daily-rated workers which range between 9,000 to 13,000 depending upon what the cadres look like.

10.30 a.m.

But, Madam Speaker, when you see what that involves, you will notice that the vast amount of our expenditure is really in wages and salaries. Now, Madam Speaker, what does that mean? Because I am marking the spot for the record for posterity for all time in the *Hansard* here. But let us now, through you, Madam Speaker, speak to people.

In the performance of work, it is very important for us to note, Madam Speaker, that you can expect to see reform. We have spoken about the reform legislation; the law was passed. We made a trip to the Privy Council, the Privy Council decision effectively said that you cannot implement the law, the municipal corporations amendment law, and have it applied to existing councillors or persons. It only applies to prospective. So let us start with what the Privy Council said. The Privy Council said that the local government reform package can only be applied to prospective councils.

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We have had a council implemented into a quadrennial term, via the elections that happened in November last year and, Madam Speaker, unless the law is amended, which is being looked at right now, the implementation of certain provisions in that law cannot happen without an amendment to the law.

Secondly, Madam Speaker, in looking at the implementation of the reform legislation, I would like you to bear in mind that the legislation proposes the creation of 14 semi-autonomous entities and therefore we will have to replicate what head office looks like, times 14. In other words then, there is to be an expansion of jobs, an expansion of positions because the head office will no longer be performing exclusively certain aspects of management. That organizational structure has been built out, it has been costed and that has to be submitted to Cabinet for its estimations as to how it can roll out for the full proclamation, because once you put full-time councillors in you are going to have to staff them with terms and conditions and bodies, et cetera, in the various committees that they manage to make the prospect work.

Madam Speaker, in the meanwhile the Ministry has been engaged in significant works by way of reform, because the process reform is what makes this come to reality, and I will come to process reform in just a second. But permit me, in giving further account of what we did with last year's money, to put on record the following.

In our parks and grounds maintenance, we maintained over 3.9 million square metres of parks and maintenance. Roads and verge repair, we did approximately 120.7 million metres. Drains and bridges repair, we did

915,182 metres of drains and bridges. The cleaning of drains, cutting of verges and bagging of garbage, we did over 66.3 million metres. Scavenging, we did over 2.83 million open trays. That cost us nearly \$371 million in scavenging. Open tray compacting, commercial, we did 145,421 open trays. That cost us nearly \$60 million. So you are looking at over \$410 million in scavenging alone; that is picking up your garbage.

Road and control, we baited nearly 600,000 points. Water distribution, we engaged in 9.3 million gallons of water distribution. In our national reforestation programme, we were able to directly benefit 2,480 households, moving up from 59 sites to 80 sites. That, Madam Speaker, gives you a bit of an understanding of where the money from last year went to, the work that was performed.

You know work is going on when you hear less complaints. Because the truth is that most people do not realize that the services of the State go to work. When Carnival happened and CEPEP cleaned Port of Spain and Ash Wednesday there was not a bottle on the road, it was noticeable.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: But the point is that the hard-working people, the over 13,000 daily-rated persons in aggregate, the 10,000 CEPEP workers, they deserve the gratitude of the citizens of this country for working in the fashion that they have.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: So, Madam Speaker, let us look inside of the further expenditure, as I come to how we are going to get the reform operationalized in further process. I would like to underline, under local government reform,

because we did certain virements from corporations across back to head office. We have employed and deployed 138 young professionals. So to get the work of local government done, we had to deploy 10 persons per corporation, so nearly 140, that is 10 per corporation, so that they could receive instructions on reform from head office and implement it.

In last year's budget, we provided a fairly fat figure for local government reform across the 14 corporations, knowing that we would have to apply some of the resources from the corporation's end and not just head office's end. What we were able to do is to rationalize some of that work, bring it more to the head office and so we vired moneys during the course of the year to bring it to that.

I would like to remind that in the course of the Standing Finance Committee last year, and in my budget contribution last year, I plainly said that the Ministry would be run, not only by appropriations from the allocations but, Madam Speaker, by the fact that we would vire and transfer and supplement if necessary. That is exactly what we did during the course of last year.

But, Madam Speaker, in dealing with the implementation of reform, in creating 140 new jobs, in creating an entire digitization department at the Ministry—because, Madam Speaker, the only way that we will get work done quickly is to make sure that we reduce the number of steps to get it done. But, Madam Speaker, we cannot rely upon pigeon carrier and smoke signal to carry communications. We have deployed, with the blessing of the Ministry of Digital Transformation, an entire digitization product.

That means, Madam Speaker, that this year as you see the SharePoint

platform come alive, where everybody is looking at the same document regardless of where you are, where the submission, once it is made, is instantly spotted, where you know whose desk it is sitting on, and therefore whether it is red light, yellow light, or green light, it is only in those circumstances that people will be able to say that their work is going on, they have made a request and know where it is.

You see, Madam Speaker, I can tell you in the course of digitization we have discovered a significant amount of fraud, and in discovering a significant amount of fraud in one corporation in particular, which is not controlled by a Government entity, I can tell you, Madam Speaker, once you are able to track personnel with expenditure and approval, bearing in mind everything is now done under the public procurement law, then you are able to tighten up waste, mismanagement and leakage through corruption or inefficiencies. That, Madam Speaker, the aspects of corruption, et cetera, I cannot say too much more, there are laws against tipping off, but what I can tell you is that police intervention will be and is already involved in some of these matters. Because, Madam Speaker, we just have to manage it right.

Now, I am very careful, Madam Speaker, to also say that every allegation is not necessarily true and you have to have a very fair and even hand to understand what someone says may be an aha revelation versus something that is not. That is why, Madam Speaker, we brought forward whistle protection laws.

We are, and I note the very impassioned contribution from the Member for Princes Town yesterday, which joined my colleague from D'Abadie/O'Meara in particular and my colleague from Tobago East.

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Madam Speaker, yesterday we had a national discussion on bullying. Why? Because yet again we have seen the most tragic outcome of an event. Nobody, no parent, no society, no school, should have to deal with something like that but it is a reality.

10.40a.m.

Madam Speaker, what can we as parliamentarians do, we can only pass law. I drafted, together with Minister Young back in 2015, whistleblowing protection laws. We tried for years to pass the law, we could not get it passed. Eventually, through the courage of one Member of the Opposition, the Member for Cumuto Manzanilla, we were able to pass the whistleblower protection law.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: Is it the most robust of those laws? No, because when you elect to go by simple majority, you have to leave out the special majority considerations which could give you a deeper cut. Madam Speaker, I recall drafting revenge pornography laws laid in this Parliament, the Sexual Offences (Amdt.) (No. 3) Bill, of 2021, in 2022, it went to a special select committee. Who to protect? To protect people who have their photographs leaked or young children that make a mistake online, et cetera, to protect children. So, Madam Speaker, when the Member for Princes Town brings a genuine issue to this Parliament, I want to remind you what we can do. It is why Minister Fitzgerald Hinds, Member for Laventille West, brought and piloted and worked while he was at the Office of the Attorney General on the polygraph legislation to make sure that those in law enforcement were being checked as well. But we could not get that

supported either.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: Madam Speaker, in terms of crime and prevention as well, I want to remind you that we drafted something called anonymous witness evidence to allow people to give evidence without being known, because you cannot tackle crime without a witness in a court. And, Madam Speaker, when I drafted the amendments to the evidence act and brought in the witness anonymity provisions, it is the Opposition that said, no to that.

So, Madam Speaker, I want to put into context, this is not a “tit for tat”, we are in the Parliament, section 53 says, in the Constitution we make laws for the peace, order and good governance, we draft law, we bring law, we cannot pass law, and I need the population to understand to prevent tragedies, if you see something, you have to say something. And, Madam Speaker, to parents who are outside there, I want to remind that part of what the Ministry of Digital Transformation is doing, and you will see in this budget, is ensuring that there are protections and safeguards, Madam Speaker, because the online effect of bullying is a deep tragedy.

Madam Speaker, I heard the Member for Princes Town say that, he could speak to bullying, and that, allegedly he was bullied in this Parliament. Madam Speaker, I am a Member who is accustomed to featuring in memes, bacchanal, “ol’ talk” and strife from the UNC since 2010. It has been 15 years of that, and whilst I would say to my colleague that it takes a certain thickness of skin to manage these issues, the point is, the Member for Princes Town would do well to simply support the law.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: If he supports the law, Madam Speaker, we can have a better conversation. So, in our Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, we have put forward a robust digitization effort, we have launched our local App, in launching our local app, we are able to receive a geo-pin, a picture and identification and by one example, Madam Speaker, we saw over 500 reports from persons who are in impoverished positions asking for latrine eradication. Let me drive it down to the Ministry's work. By an online platform we were able to see that there is still a prevalence of latrine eradication needs and, Madam Speaker, it means that we were able to double-up the money for latrine eradication and apply it into this year's—so, that we can bring people into decency, Madam Speaker. So, that is an example of how digital transformation works, but Madam Speaker, in our budget you would notice that there are four new items into our budget position.

Madam Speaker, I want to just note them, because you will see them in the appropriation. We have the Municipal Security Surveillance (Eyes Everywhere Pilot), that is under *Developmental Programme*. We have the Municipal Flood Mitigation Plan, we have the Digital Transformation of 14 Municipal Corporations. We have the Youth Community Model Farm Programme, we have the refurbishment works of the current annex building. And, Madam Speaker, when you look to those five programmes, I would like you to bear this in mind. The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, in my tenure as Minister, I can tell you that, nearly 500 persons have joined the municipal police. We have 164 in training right now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: The number is roughly at 1000 in total. We have 250 persons just behind that. The municipal police academy also trained the praedial larceny officers, and trained the litter prevention wardens. So, in the municipal police organization under this Ministry, under the expenditure that we have engaged in, we have done is amassive throughput of training. But, Madam Speaker, in our Municipal Surveillance (Eyes Everywhere Pilot) programme, this year we will be rolling out mobile police stand-up units with drop-down barriers. Where will we be doing that? Every community that we can including over 124 HDC communities?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: Why? Madam Speaker, if you have a basin like Olera Heights, which is in my constituency, some 3000 people living there, do they not deserve a gated community? The Harpe in Port of Spain, where we saw gang violence run through, do they not deserve a gated community? Well, these mobile units come for anywhere between \$33,000 to a \$100,000 with CCTV evidence, with cameras, with digital poles, with the security booth, Madam Speaker. And that is why there is a new Item in this budget.

Madam Speaker, when we looked to the Youth Community Model Farm and we see what that is involving, Madam Speaker, let me tell you what that is about. We are able to implement into our performance the way to make money. I have often said to people, and they chuckle at times, that money does grow on trees. It is called agriculture. And we have designed in Local Government and it is—the line Items are in here, the manner in which we can grow vertical hydroponics, Madam Speaker; the manner in which we can roll out as well, in conjunction with the Ministry of Youth Development

and National Service, and let me stop and compliment the Minister of Youth and Development and National Service, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC:—for training thousands of young people. But, Madam Speaker, not just book training, business training, actual job matters, and Madam Speaker, as you look to the budget that has a 100 per cent tax free status for agriculture, we in combination with our colleagues at the Ministry of Youth Development, under a very vibrant Minister, would be engaged in our shade house programme.

Madam Speaker, when you add our vertical hydroponics model, our vertical hydroponics model allows us, for six towers, six units at an installation cost of \$22,200 using only 72 square feet, Madam Speaker. Let me repeat, 72 square feet, growing chive, celery, whatever you want to do. Madam Speaker, we can generate close to \$6,000 in revenue per month. Who does that matter too? Every single mother, every working person who wants additional income, Madam Speaker, but when you take it to the larger models, and we look to the 150,000 unit layout which is 43 units, the yield is approximately \$30,000 per month.

Now, where do I get this figure from? Where do I get these numbers from? We ran a test pilot. We ran it at the Ministry, we are engaged in beach camp right now generating revenue so that the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government expanding into depressed communities or communities in need of stimulation, we are able in our communities to roll out our vertical hydroponic programme, our shade house programme and generate money for people.

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Madam Speaker, effectively, because we are integrating the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the University of the West Indies, and manufacturers, we are able to say that the produce will not cause a glut. You can take all the produce into a manufacturer. But, Madam Speaker, we did not stop there. We went into the further development of something referred to as our mulch production system. Madam Speaker, bearing in mind that CEPEP cuts trees, daily rated workers cut trees, fire services cut trees and grass, rural development is assisted as well by forestry, we have tons of grass produced, and tons of cut branches. And we have therefore opened our own mulch producing aspects.

10.50 a.m.

And you will see that in our DP programme, Madam Speaker, where we take the refuse and we convert it into mulch product. It can sell at \$40 a bag if you refine it. It can sell at \$80 for further refining and therefore, the Ministry becomes a revenue earner. But, Madam Speaker, what does it mean? It means that the spin-off is that transportation services are now created because you have to move the tree to the loading site and to then have—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two more minutes of ordinary time and you are also entitled to 10 additional minutes—

Hon. F. Al Rawi SC: Should it please you.

Madam Speaker:—to wind up. Please proceed.

Hon. F. Al Rawi SC: Thank you. Do not have nearly—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi SC:—enough time, Madam Speaker. So, Madam Speaker,

we have also designed a system for topsoil production, where we can take every bag of grass cut and convert it into topsoil.

Madam Speaker, we have done something that is actually quite necessary—back to crime and its management. We have designed in our digital product, and it has gone out for tender, the mechanism to track every single police car and every officer. We now have into production, as the tenders will close and somebody will be procured, whomever that is, the ability to tell you, a police car for the municipal police is two minutes away, seven minutes away, six minutes away.

So, Madam Speaker, let us connect it now. At the mobile police unit, at the virtually gated community, you now have cameras and eyes everywhere. You have the ability to call in to the central system, know that there is a police vehicle seven minutes away, six minutes away, or somebody who is off-duty because you actually, Madam Speaker, do your return of personnel on your phone, on an app. You turn up to work, you scan in, you are at work. You leave work, you are out, you go offline.

Madam Speaker, when you look at that, you will see something called unified data insights, the executive reporting framework and the operational reporting framework. How else could I have come this morning to tell you, in plain honesty, that the number of persons who were hired is 5,000 and to say to you that that number is less than the year before, because the year before was under the old law prior to public procurement, and what this is—because we track the data. And, Madam Speaker, in looking at that, you are now seeing where the process reform begins to make a difference.

I recall vividly—when I had the opportunity to push the process

reform in the Judiciary and in the legal system, I remember the Members opposite saying, “Nobody would go to court virtually. Nobody would file documents online. It cannot be done.” Today, Madam Speaker, everybody goes to court on their phone, on a computer laptop. Persons are able to see where their ticket offence lies by a device in hand. Madam Speaker, that came through the reforms in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, which I led. And those programmes are being transplanted into the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. So the reform package is now appearing and showing, Madam Speaker, to generate income, to generate structure.

Now, Madam Speaker, let me touch quickly on the issue of property tax. We have heard the manifesto pledge, which is 100 per cent reversal of ideology, words and actuality from the Opposition. The Opposition says—I saw in one of my constituency boxes this morning, a UNC yellow envelope saying, “We will axe the tax.” This is after the Member for Siparia presided over budget contributions led by the Minister of Finance then, Larry Howai, saying, “We will implement the property tax.” For five years and three months, they did not repeal the property tax, they came to the Parliament and said, they are going to implement it, and they proclaimed it.

And, Madam Speaker, I would like you to know as at August 21st, we had 163,079 persons on the system to pay property tax. The annual rental value was over \$9.7 billion but the revenue to be earned by property tax at that point was \$175 million. Madam Speaker, total payment count for corporations was approximately 20,000 persons per corporation. Madam Speaker, that means that every corporation, as at August, could theoretically

receive close to \$20 million in revenue. Madam Speaker, \$20 million in revenue is equal to the PSIP's, the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, allocation for the entire corporation for the year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi SC: So the property tax per corporation is equal to the PSIP. So the Members opposite promised to axe the tax, get rid of it, but replace it with what? Where is the revenue coming from? How is it going to be done? Madam Speaker, what is the full time exactly?

Madam Speaker: Your full time, hon. Member, is 11.02.39.

Hon. F. Al Rawi SC: Thank you. So, Madam Speaker, this concept of axe the tax, I would like to tell the members of the population, through you, most respectfully, just ignore them. Desperate people—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi SC:—will hold on to anything as a flotation device, even if they have to drown you while they are doing it, Madam Speaker. There is nothing wrong with paying a fair share of taxation. We support property tax because in this budget, you have had the Minister of Finance saying that the money is going to be given to the corporations. Madam Speaker, that goes into the *Development Programme* of the corporations. And for everybody that wants something fixed in the corporation, a road fixed, a pothole fixed, a curb, a lot of land managed, Madam Speaker, it is useful. But, Madam Speaker, you know what it does? It helps us on flood alleviation because while you are checking every lot of land in this corporation, you will know who owns it, who “thief” it, who is squatting on it or if it is state land. And therefore, you get to apply something which is critically important for all of

us. You get to enforce how those areas are maintained.

And we all know, as citizens, a private individual owning land, the grass is 14 feet tall, they are begging the corporation to cut the land, the corporation cannot enter on private land unless you could treat with it under the property taxes or the valuation of land regime as applied in municipal corporations, meaning, you enforce the maintenance provisions and you can go in and do it under law. Madam Speaker, is flooding not an issue for this corporation, each corporation and for the country? How are we going to treat with it if we just leave everything unmanaged? That is what the UNC says we should do, leave everything unmanaged, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, permit me to jump to San Fernando West. Madam Speaker, I have been the Member of Parliament for San Fernando West for nine, going on 10 years. The last back-to-back MP was Errol Mahabir. I will be offering myself to the people of San Fernando West again—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi SC:—should the party choose me. We have a process to go through. I intend to fight my seat. And what will I be fighting it on, Madam Speaker? I noticed that many of my colleagues are now in the VSEP category on the Opposition Bench because the Leader of the Opposition stood up in her speech and said, “I represent 99 per cent of the people that oppose the budget,” but 26 per cent of her Bench was empty.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi SC: So I cannot take anything they say seriously. But let us talk to San Fernando West.

Madam Speaker, we have spent and committed and have in works,

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\$1.6 billion in developmental programmes in San Fernando. And, Madam Speaker, I am very pleased, as the agitator of these projects, to have the support of the hon. Prime Minister. And in the hon. Prime Minister agreeing—sometimes calling me in reflection to another PNM Member that made a lot of noise to get a lot of projects done, he would call me by that person's name. But, Madam Speaker, I fight for the people of San Fernando West and I would like to tell you what we have done.

Madam Speaker, we have finally done what everybody else said they would do, which is to handle the reclamation of the waterfront.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi SC: Madam Speaker, 3.8 hectares of land now exist. You could see it, conducted in two months, Madam Speaker. It took us six years to get the EMA to say, yes. We had to do it because if you are going to invite an international hotel to build there, you had to vouch for the soil stability. So we had to do it right. But in creating 3.8 hectares, through Dravo S.A., at a cost of \$78 million, Madam Speaker, the waterfront takes shape.

11.00 a.m.

We have done the replacement of a fishing facility. If you see the sign. The sign says that the fishing facility in San Fernando is 1903/1904; 100 years old. There is a brand new structure, Madam Speaker, that has been built there at the cost of over \$38 million. Our coastal protection which is ongoing—because we had to build the foreshore widening and create the avenues to do it. Our coastal protection is literally ongoing with the reclamation at the cost of \$67 million.

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Lady Hailes Avenue is 85 per cent widened and if you drive there and you look at the billboards and signage, you will see a very different atmosphere. You can see the 3.8 hectares. You can see the road widening. As that road widening comes into effect, Madam Speaker, that is where our full completion comes in. We are at 85 per cent complete. The project is over \$136 million.

Madam Speaker, it made no sense to move squatters before the work started, and therefore, the removal of the squatting population is now in effect and they have been going voluntarily. In some instances, we have had to take court action but what I can tell you, as we remove and relocate persons, that is what is going on. Skinner Park: we heard the Member for Caroni Central say that nobody can play in Skinner Park. Madam Speaker, Skinner Park is FIFA under-19 certified.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Members: So if FIFA Under-19 could play in Skinner Park, if everybody could want to use Skinner Park, the only person that seems to not know that is Caroni Central.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: But Madam Speaker, speaking in blind ignorance is not something that is uncommon to the Hon. Member. Blind ignorance, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: And you know what is unfortunate? Why would you want to send that message to schoolchildren? Why? Why would you want to deprecate something as beautiful as Skinner Park? Do you know how

hard we had to fight to redevelop Skinner Park and take \$140 million of taxpaying dollars to do that for hundreds of thousands of people in San Fernando? Caroni Central, stay in Caroni Central.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: Take VSEP from the UNC, but stay out of San Fernando's business.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: You have no place being there, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, Plaza San Carlos is ongoing. The Trinidad Railway Station is being redeveloped right now as we speak, Madam Speaker. Our Bayshore housing, this budget proposes 800 HVIP units. Madam Speaker, come down to Marabella. Come and see—in the one minute I have left. You said 04, it is 02.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi SC: Were you wrong? Madam Speaker, I have a lot more to say. I thank you. That time has unfortunately run out. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Augustine.

Hon Member: Ohhhh!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: Signal moment.

Ms. Khadijah. Ameen (*St. Augustine*): A wonderful and pleasant good morning to you, Madam Speaker, and of course, to all of Trinidad and Tobago who are listening. Madam Speaker, decades ago, people who used

to make hats—hats were very fashionable—worked with a lot of what we now know as dangerous chemicals such as mercury, lead and so on.

Dr. Moonilal: Correct.

Ms. K. Ameen: And these chemicals would seep into their body and cause damage to their system. And they would often display symptoms such as tremors, memory loss, and a certain kind of incoherence. And so the term “mad as a hatter” came about.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And I was just so reminded when the Member for San Fernando West was on his feet—

Dr. Moonilal: Mad.

Ms. K. Ameen:—he seemed to be displaying the behaviour that led to the term “mad as a hatter”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The Member said that the UNC said to leave everything unmanaged. What madness? He also spoke about the San Fernando Waterfront Redevelopment Project and he gave some descriptions and he said about something being done in two months. It has been nine years and the project is still not off the ground.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: In 2015, in the PNM manifesto, that is what they called it—they had a whole set of game changers. Up to now “de game eh change”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And that was the first game changer and it has not been implemented.

Mr. Indarsingh: “De game start”.

Ms. K. Ameen: And I feel sorry for San Fernando West because he should be ashamed as the elected MP for that constituency, where the PNM Government that he is a part of has failed the people of San Fernando West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: He should be ashamed and he probably is. He probably is but he would not say so.

Dr. Moonilal: “Yuh” correct.

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, the Member for San Fernando West also spoke about the Property Tax being proclaimed in 2010. Madam Speaker, the Property Tax Act was passed by the Government led by Patrick Manning.

And in fact, it was one of the reasons the PNM was voted out and Kamla Persad-Bissessar became Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: In the Act—in fact, in section (2) of the Act, the proclamation date was January 1st, 2010. And it was subsequent to that, all that time who was in Government? It was the PNM that was in Government and they proclaimed the Property Tax Act and when they were voted out and a Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government came, we repealed the Property Act.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia, right? Please.

Ms. K. Ameen: Sorry. When the Member for Siparia became Prime

Minister that the UNC Government got rid of that onerous PNM Property Tax Act and we will do it again after the next general election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, the Member for San Fernando West, I know he served as Attorney General before and he would have jumped to the issue of the Sex Offenders Registry, and I just want to correct the record because, in the hatter's rant, he spoke about the UNC objecting to the Sex Offenders Registry. I want to put it on record; that it was the UNC who raised the issue of a Sex Offenders Registry

Hon. Member: Yeah, yeah.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And we called for the PNM to bring the law to Parliament. In fact, we spoke about it for seven years and the PNM did nothing. The Member for San Fernando West was also the Attorney General at that time. And then they finally brought it and we asked them to make the registry public and they refused. And you know what? A whole one year later, they had to make the Sex Offenders Registry public. Had they listened to the UNC, they would not have had all that drama. So I just want to set the record straight.

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, there is no secret about my passion for local government. Having served as a councillor for 10 years and being appointed to chair the Tunapuna/Piarco Corporation at that time, and I probably still hold the record as the youngest person ever to be elected as a

chairman of a corporation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: I served at a time when the party that I was a part of was in government and it was performance, performance, performance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: I know of the potential of local government and when I hear excuses being made, I feel really sad because I feel for our local government representatives, who are the first arm of Government out there to people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The Member for San Fernando West has really proven to be a very absentee, very uninvolved, very disconnected person who has been given the responsibilities for local government and regional corporations.

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. K. Ameen: He has the gift of gab, I will give him that, but not much else.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: He has a gift.

Ms. K. Ameen: People need performance, not “ol’ talk”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And when the Member was appointed, some said demoted from Attorney General—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—but when he was appointed as the Minister with responsibilities for local government, I cautioned the Member very early that

pocket squares “doh fix potholes and PR doh pave roads”. So the Member has been long on promises but very short on delivery.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: There is a string of broken promises from this Minister and it is made worse, Madam Speaker, with that bravado that he comes with in Parliament and outside, when he speaks as though everything is wonderful. I know blue skies are ahead and we know the reality on the ground. So a little caution, the fact is that the Government is having trouble with revenue, they are having issues with performance, they are underperforming, and a little humility when you go to the regional corporations might earn you a little goodwill out there. But do not come to tell people that the skies are blue and they are seeing dark clouds ahead.

11.10 a.m.

Madam Speaker, part of the problem for this Government—the Member for San Fernando West spoke about the issue of revenue generation and transfer pricing. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance promised legislation for transfer pricing in every one of his last nine budgets—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—everyone, including this one. While this country is having serious issues with money because of transfer pricing issues, we are now facing issues with the energy companies because of this Government’s failure to bring transfer pricing legislation. this is an area of significant loss of income for this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, if the Minister of Finance had done what he was supposed to do, this Government would not have to be relying on property tax to force citizens to pay through their noses for what should be afforded to them by the State.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, one of the great promises as well from this Government from 2015, has been local government reform. I do not know how much to talk about it again, because “I and all getting fed up of de promises, de mamaguy, de ole talk”.

The Minister of Local Government spoke about a process going to be involved in putting in full-time municipal executives. He talked about the mayors and the body corporations getting executive councils that will look like Cabinet and they will be similar to THA Secretaries, they will be called secretaries, and you will give them the full-time opportunity. Today he comes to say, well, “yuh cyah really follow de THA model”. So nine years later, “yuh pulling back”, and I am saying, have you thought this thing out?

You spoke about giving the CEOs that power, like a permanent secretary, to give them the ability to hire for themselves. You know what is happening now? I will speak later on how the Ministry is forcing regional corporations to hire persons that they sent. They hire people, send them to the corporation and the corporations have to pay them. You spoke about allowing corporations—

Madam Speaker: Member, Member this is not a personal conversation between you and the Member for San Fernando West. This is really a

conversation this way. Okay. So, if you are referencing the Minister, please do in accordance with the Standing Orders, please.

Ms. K. Ameen: Thank you. Madam Speaker, it was the Government who proposed that the regional corporations will have this authority and they have failed. They spoke about executive councils. You know what they also spoke about? Well, Madam Speaker, they spoke about extending the term of office from three years to four years. We know that it was the only section of the Act that they proclaimed and the purpose behind it, of course, was to postpone the local government election. But thanks to a very vigilant Opposition—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—we were able to go to court and have elections on time. They promised increase for councillors' salaries. Well, of course, all councillors both PNM and UNC were very happy but to date, Madam Speaker, nothing has happened. There was a *Newsday* article. Speaking during the debate in Parliament to adopt the report on the JSC on that Bill, the Minister of Finance proposed for local government representatives to be paid more fairly under the new law. I want to quote the Minister, he said: And for the first time, they will get what they receive.

Madam Speaker, two years later, nothing has changed. I want to remind the population that the Act passed by the Government on local government reform gives the power to the Minister of Finance to determine how much councillors will be paid and what their other allowances will be. I want to tell the population that councillors currently have a stipend of \$4,360 per month—per month. This heartless Government has made

promises, and this is a section of the Act that they could proclaim, they could pass, and the power is really in their hands now not to rely and throw the blame on the Salaries Review Commission, but for the Minister of Finance to use his power in the Act. He said he would have done it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: He said and he has failed. Madam Speaker local government councillors currently get a travelling allowance of \$1,860 for the entire month. This Government has sent up the price of fuel once, twice, three times and we “eh” riot yet, but the traveling allowance, just given the cost of fuel now, should also be increased for local government representatives.

Madam Speaker, most travelling officers in the public service, as well as elected MPs, are given tax exemptions for vehicles. A vehicle is perhaps one of the greatest tools of a local government councillor, because you have to be visiting problems, issues, complaints, people. You must be active and available and accessible and your vehicle is the thing to take you there. I feel that councillors should have that tax exemption and access to vehicle loans for all councillors across the board and all of these things, Madam Speaker, fall within the remit of the Minister of Finance because the Government gave him that power, and it is for them to deliver. So I am calling on the Government to proclaim the section of the Act that has already been passed by Parliament and do fair and good by our local government councillors who are out there giving service.

Madam Speaker, I want to move now to another aspect of councillors' performance in terms of their secretarial staff. For the first time in the

history of Trinidad and Tobago, councillors were given secretarial staff, an office and a \$1,000 incidental towards their office under the Government led by the Member for Siparia, Kamla Persad-Bissessar. Madam Speaker, it was created based on a Cabinet Note during that 2010 to 2015 term in office, and we came to Parliament earlier this year when the Government increased the minimum wage to bring to the attention of Government that the secretaries for councillors currently work for a stipend of \$2,800 a month. Well, it is \$3,000 and by the time they take out NIS and health surcharge, and so on, they go home with \$2,800. We indicated that if you work eight hours a day, you work 40 hours a week, or 160 hours a month on average, that comes up to \$3,600 which is the minimum wage currently.

The Member for San Fernando West stood here in response to a Motion from the Opposition and promised that he would do what is necessary, the legal necessity, to ensure that the councillors' secretaries are not being getting less than minimum wage. You know, to date that has not changed.

Hon. Members: What?

Ms. K. Ameen: To date, councillors' secretaries are being paid below minimum wage, and what it requires is a Cabinet Note or legal mechanism—

Mr. Indarsingh: Breaking the law.

Hon. Member: Breaking the law again.

Ms. K. Ameen:—to discard the current Cabinet Note that gives life to these positions and they could be put under the regional corporations and paid similar to what a clerk in a regional corporation is paid. So it is something

very simple, and I am so disappointed in the Member for San Fernando West that we have come here months later and councillors' secretaries being employed are getting less than minimum wage in this country. In the meanwhile, they have come—so right now, CEPEP workers are getting more money than—and URP workers more money than councillors' secretaries. So it is a simple thing that should be fixed—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—Mr. Minister, and I look forward to that. We also have the situation with the councillors' offices. Madam Speaker, the Cabinet Note I mentioned before gave birth to state-paid offices for local government, councillors. Madam Speaker, that happened in 2010. Since then you have had a tremendous increase in the price, cost of living and so on. You have had property tax being introduced. The allocation to these offices is, I think, \$2,500 per month, but it really could barely pay to get an office space. “Yuh cud get ah lil room in ah lil kanook, as dey say.” And depending on the type of area, if it is a more built up area, it is much more difficult to get a space for that price.

Councillors have been evicted under this PNM Government because they have not been even given the releases to pay for the rent.

11.20 a.m.

And they are also not getting the incidentals. You know what they get, Madam Speaker? \$1,000. And, when their rent allowance is \$2,500 and they get a space for \$3,000, they take \$500 from the incidentals and put towards the rent. You know what the incidentals have to cover? A phone for the office, ink for the printer, stationary. They have to pay their light

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bill, if it is not included in the rent. They have to pay for little things, like cleaning supplies, water, coffee, tea, and so on, for their office, with \$1,000 a month.

So, I am saying, Minister, these are simple things that could be fixed, and I am pleading with you, if you really care for local government practitioners, the Minister would increase the remuneration for councillors, the travel allowance for councillors, the secretaries salaries would not be below minimum wage, and you will fix the allowance given the incidentals for each of them.

Madam Speaker, our local government councillors are first line of duty outside there. And under this Government, their duties have become more onerous. Because of the neglect of this Government, when you have bad roads, they call on their councillor. When you have flooding, because of government's neglect, they call on their councillor. When you have no water, they call on their councillor. Well, if I have enough time, I will deal with the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, who spoke before. But when councillors have burgesses, who are not getting water in the pipe, they make requests for truck borne water. Truck borne water to regional corporations, is really meant for areas that do not have pipe borne supply, that do not have pipe borne infrastructure. And where there is a pipe borne supply, and customers are supposed to get truck borne supply from WASA, when WASA constantly fails them, they call on the corporations. And the measly water trucking allowance that they have, the Minister could tell you, it is used up very early, and then they have to go begging cap in hand again.

You also have, Madam Speaker, the responsibilities for maintenance of schools. Under the previous Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, there was a memo, a directive given that all regional corporations will assist in schools, when it comes to doing minor repairs, maintaining the compound and so on. Mind you, they did not get any additional money for that. So they are now using out of their allocation for other things, to see about schools. When every day you have a sewer system erupting in a school, it is the regional corporations, one cesspool truck that has to deal with it, and sometimes the truck is not even working. And that means that burgesses are now deprived of the service, because the Ministry of Education is failing in terms of the upkeep and maintenance of schools.

When you have crime and security issues—facilities that fall under the remit of the regional corporations are vulnerable to vandalism. We have had a child being shot and killed on a recreation ground in central. My colleague for Chaguanas East, one of her constituents, and when we see those types of things happening where it supposed to be a safe space, we have to ensure that our municipal police are properly equipped to go out there.

The Member for San Fernando West and his government have been promising 100 new municipal police officers for every regional corporation, totaling 1,400 officers. Since 2015, this was promised to materialize at the end of 2016. Today, he has come here to tell us, that he has 500 new officers. You have not reached your promise. Something you promised to complete by 2016. Another blatant, blatant failure.

Hon. Member: Breakdown of the corporation.

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Ms. K. Ameen: And, Madam Speaker, I want to—during the Standing Finance Committee—I could probably better request, but I want to ask the Minister if he could provide for us a breakdown of the number of municipal officers hired, and which regional corporations they have been assigned to. I understand municipal police officers are being assigned to a place in Cedros that falls under the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. Municipal police officers, you have not recruited the amount you promised. The regional corporations are short staffed where the municipal police are concerned. And they are sending them elsewhere. I think you need to account better for that, where that is concerned.

Madam Speaker, we have several roads falling under the Ministry of Works and Transport. In this country, the highways are not the only roads that fall under the Highways Division. Many of my colleagues on this side represent areas that are considered rural. When you have the Naparima/Mayaro road, you have the Manzanilla road—you have several major roads that fall under the Ministry of Works and Transport, that are in such condition. When you go there Madam Speaker, you are driving, you could swear you are in the movie, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When you see things falling—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—and landslips and so on. It is just in an—out of this world.

Hon. Member: The chronicles of the PNM.

Ms. K. Ameen: And that is the chronicles of the PNM, where road maintenance is concerned. When, Madam Speaker, the Minister fails in his

duty, the regional corporations now have to take their meager resource and go to fix these roads—and you know what they have to do, neglect the local roads that they are actually responsible for. And then they are—they get the blame, you know. The corporations get the blame. And the Minister as well has been partially responsible for blaming corporations.

Madam Speaker, when it comes to local tourism—Members opposite talk about tourism. Local tourism sites fall under the regional corporations. They are barely getting money to patch potholes on the main roads, much less to maintain the roads leading to these tourist sites. Some of the tourist sites, Madam Speaker, that have been—I mean, you have areas in Mayaro, you have—I remember the road to the Devil's Wood Yard mud volcano, which falls in the Princes Town region, that was impassable for years.

And what happens is that people who want to go Mayaro, in Kernaham Village and buy a watermelon on the side of the road, support our local farmers. If you want to go for roast fish in Mayaro; if you want to go to the Marac tar lake in Moruga; if you want to go to these places—you want to go to Lopinot, you have to traverse the roads that are terrible, one. But what happens is that when we, as citizens visit these local tourist sites, we give support to local vendors, craftsmen, people who sell snow-cone, aloo pies, I mentioned roast fish. But even craft and art and so on—and hats. [*Member laugh*]. You give support to micro-entrepreneurs, and Members talk about small and micro-entrepreneurs. But if you are not providing the road network for people to go there, then your vendors and your small and micro-entrepreneurs will not be getting any sales.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Ms. K. Ameen: So you have been damaging local economic development. You have been damaging the same SMEs that the Minister of Trade came here and spoke about. They speak about these things and boast, Madam Speaker, on paper. It is on paper, it is in shiny magazines, but when you go into the communities, in Cedros, in Point Fortin. The Member for Point Fortin, stepped out? You go even in Toco, Matelot, when you go to those areas, the fishing village of Toco—I mean, the Member for Toco/Sangre Grade, I hope he says something good for those people on the east coast, because those are areas that are being tremendously impacted negatively by the Government. And you know what saddens me? Members opposite, who represent those areas, they do not even speak for their neglected constituents.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: They do not. Because if they are to give true representation of the people in their area, it would be an indictment on this Government. But, Madam Speaker, there are people all over who vote for the UNC, so we will speak on their behalf.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.30 a.m.

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, the Member last year spoke about a Local app—the Member for San Fernando West. He said that the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government—and they launched this app on June 12, 2024, and the purpose of the app was to report issues. Right? So you are reporting complaints. Madam Speaker, our local government councillors have cell phones, they have offices. There is the regional corporations. There is the Ministry of Rural Development and Local

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Government. You see, complaints, there is no shortage of complaints. You see ways of getting complaints to the ears of those who could act, there is no shortage of that. What there is a shortage of is solutions.

So while I hear the boast of the app, and the app, and the app—last year I called him the “app man”, you know—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—but I would not do that this year.

Mr. Indarsingh: Not the “Aquaman”?

Ms. K. Ameen: The app was just another tool to highlight and to bring complaints. It is the same complaints you are getting, but it does not address the shortfalls in local government. It does not.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: So I want to hear about an app that will deliver—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—and I feel that app is named, UNC.

Madam Speaker, another failure in this pattern of mismanagement has been the Secondary Roads Rehabilitation and Improvement Company. Madam Speaker, \$100 million was first allocated to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government for a company that was not yet formed. The next year in the budget, that company got an additional \$100 million and the company, subsequently, was shifted to the Ministry of Works and Transport. So, again, the Motion for “meh padna”—well, the Motion for the Member for San Fernando West. But you have \$200 million being given to deal with secondary roads, you have thousands of secondary roads all over this country in terrible condition and you cannot deliver?

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So it was removed from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and given to the Ministry of Works and Transport. You know what we have over there now? We have audits and we have claims of price fixing, corruption after corruption, and roads not being paved. So, Madam Speaker, this is another area of poor delivery and wastage of government money. That \$200 million that went to that Secondary Roads Rehabilitation and Improvement Company could have gone to the regional corporations for them to fix their business and fix their roads.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: You talk about empowering regional corporations, you are giving them less money. Regional corporations never get \$200 million for secondary roads. Why did you not assign that money to the regional corporations for them to perform and deliver? That is what should have been done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, I am calling for a full investigation into that Secondary Roads Rehabilitation and Improvement Company—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—and the \$200 million that seemed to have gone into thin air.

Madam Speaker, in the last budget, the Minister of the Rural Development and Local Government—in fact, he made front page in the *Guardian*. The headline was: 200 per cent increase in funding for local government. Well, everybody got excited, but you see these yellow books here, Madam Speaker? You see these—well, I cannot display them, but

these yellow books, these have the facts. These books tell us where the Government is trying to pull wool over our eyes.

Let me tell you how they came up with 200 per cent increase. They have a line Item—it was recently introduced in these books—called Property Tax, under Rates and Taxes, and in that, in every regional corporation, they put a certain amount of money because they saw—they said, this was going to be revenue they will collect for the regional corporations. Arima Borough, \$8 million; Chaguanas Borough, \$14 million; Couva/Tabaquite, \$14 million; Diego Martin, \$14 million; Mayaro, \$8 million; Penal/Debe, \$12 million; Point Fortin, \$8 million; Port of Spain, \$8 million; Princes Town, \$8 million; San Fernando City, \$12 million; San Juan/Laventille, \$12 million; San Fernando, \$8 million; Siparia Borough, \$8 million; Tunapuna/Piarco, \$14 million, a total of \$150 million allocated in 2024 to regional corporations, a promise.

In is this year's budget, Madam Speaker, we saw the Revised Estimates—well, you know, they did not collect no property tax, so they went and revised the Estimates and they seem to have cut everything across the board and give them 10 per cent of what the original Estimate was. They put that as the Revised Estimate. So it boiled down to \$15.2 million. Has the Government collected \$15.2 million in property tax? I do not think they have. So why are you doing the regional corporations that? Why are you mamaguying them?

This year though, the mamaguy continues, you know, but it gets worse, because last year, you boiled down and this year now they have continued. Arima Borough, \$7 million; Chaguanas Borough, \$11 million;

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Couva/Tabaquite, \$12 million; Diego Martin, \$11 million; Mayaro, \$7 million; Penal/Debe, \$7 million; Point Fortin Corporation, \$7 million; Princes Town, \$7 million; San Fernando, \$9 million; San Juan/Laventille, \$9 million; Sangre Grande, \$7 million; Siparia Borough, \$7 million; Tunapuna/Piarco, \$11 million, totalling \$125 million under property tax. Again, a promise that is just—poof!—up in the air. So they have allocated on paper a total of \$275 million to regional corporations that turn out to just be pie in the sky. So that is how they are inflating.

But you know what they also do, Madam Speaker? They give the regional corporations money under other Heads now, where they actually are supposed to get releases. So regional corporations are statutory bodies. The Ministry of Finance will release the money to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, who in turn will release the money to the statutory bodies that fall under them, including regional corporations, CEPEP, RDC and some other special purpose companies.

When time comes, the regional corporation will do estimates for their projects and send a request for funds. They will ask you to confirm that “ah getting dis money”. The regional corporations will receive a confirmation of funds from the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and on that authority, the CEO, which is the chief accounting officer of the regional corporation, can now engage in a contract with suppliers, with people who are paving roads and so on. This Government has had requests from funds coming from the regional corporations for their development projects. They gave them confirmation of funds. They went ahead and signed contracts with contractors and work

started, and then you know what they came and said? “Procurement. Oops! You know what? We are not going to give you this money again. We want you to tell us when your project is complete and we will pay the contractor.”

I want to warn that two things are happening here. The Ministry is now insisting that they are not releasing money that they previously confirmed to the corporation would be released. The regional corporation, as a legal entity, signed a contract with a company to do work, whether it is paving or any other work in their community, and they have a legal obligation to pay that contractor once the work is finished. The Ministry should release that money to the regional corporation. If the contractor is not completed and he is not ready to be paid, they will have the money committed on the book. So that whenever the contractor is paid, they could pay—when the contract is complete—sorry—they will pay the contractor.

As it is now, the regional corporations have engaged contractors to do millions of dollars in work and the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has refused to release the money to the regional corporations. I am calling on the Minister today to release the moneys for development projects to the regional corporations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And I do not think you should tell us about last year and next year, because what they are telling them now is that these projects that you have not paid for, “Doh worry, you will pay for them next year,” out of next year’s allocation which we are debating now. What that means is that they will not be able to do any new projects in the new financial year.

Hon. Member: What?

Ms. K. Ameen: They are depriving the regional corporations. They are taking away their autonomy. You promised autonomy for them and here you are now refusing to give them the money that we passed—we debated and passed this in Parliament, Madam Speaker. This House approved that these corporations get this money. And to use the procurement legislation as an excuse to not give them this money, I find it very unfair; very unfair.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.40 a.m.

Ms. K. Ameen: Very unfair. But you know what that does? It allows the Ministry to expend less money, so they just do not give them their money and they come and report it as savings.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. K. Ameen: “So dey saving money and in de meanwhile, flood to we waistin Bamboo.”

Dr. Moonilal: Oh Lord.

Ms. K. Ameen: Literally.

Mr. Tancoo: “To we waist”.

Ms. K. Ameen: All over this country, you have instances of places that the regional corporations could provide relief, in terms of drainage projects, bridges, in terms of repairs of roads, recreation grounds, and so on.

You know what else they do Madam Speaker? Very recently, this is a memo from the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance to the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, dated September 2, 2024, and the subject is:

“Transfer of funds - Recurrent and Development Programme 2024

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Head 42: Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government”

And this is where, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government requested and approval was given by the Minister of Finance for the transfer of funds in the sum of \$43,622,300 within the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government from various regional corporation. And it goes: \$36.6 million to CEPEP and; \$7 million to RDC, the national reforestation programme. And you know where the money coming from, Madam Speaker? Every corporation. It have:

- Port of Spain.
- Arima
- Chaguanas
- San Juan/Laventille
- Sangre Grande.
- Couva/Tabaquite
- Mayaro
- Siparia
- Penal/Debe

If I did not call one, it is because it is not here. Hear where they are taking money from: money to develop recreation facilities; money for computerization programmes; money for local government reform—

Mr. Tancoo: What?

Ms. K. Ameen:—Money for municipal police station and municipal police vehicles.

They are taking money for drainage and irrigation.

Dr. Moonilal: Drainage?

Ms. K. Ameen: They are taking money for disaster management. They are taking money to fix markets and abattoirs.

Mr. Tancoo: That is abuse. That is abuse.

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, several corporations. They are taking money to use for local government reform and municipal police vehicles, and then want to know why the regional corporations cannot deliver, because the same money you have given with your right hand, you are taking away with your left hand.

Dr. Moonilal: Good point, good point, good point.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Forty-three million dollars taken away from the regional corporations, by a memo dated the 2nd of September, just before the end of the financial year. My question now, “ah done talk” about the abuse to the corporations, where “yuh taking back dey money”, what are you doing with \$36.6 million to CEPEP—

Dr. Moonilal: “Ah hah”

Ms. K. Ameen:—in the second week, of the last month of the financial year? What are they going to spend that money on before the 30th of September 2024? What have they spent this money on? I would like the Government to answer that. I would like them to tell us about the reforestation and watershed programme, \$7 million, how “dey going” to spend that in two weeks, because it would take some time for them to release, and so on, when the regional corporations have not been able to get their money for an entire year? And you have, Madam Speaker, amidst all

this allocation, new money, millions going to CEPEP, you have allegations of corruption at the CEPEP company, you have several newspaper articles, time may not allow me to go into all of them. But questions are being raised about decisions regarding these allocations, about political work being done, about the use of CEPEP in marginal constituencies—CEPEP and the reforestation programme—and the use of it for campaign financing.

So, Madam Speaker, the PNM always talking about campaign finance, you know; up to now they “cah” bring campaign finance laws, but if they do that they will have to account for self-help grants that they give in marginal constituencies, particularly when there is a by-election like in Lengua/Indian Walk. They will have to account for millions in food cards that go to these marginal areas. They will have to account for additional CEPEP contractors, that they give out CPEP contracts to PNM friends and family. They will have to account, Madam Speaker, for the use of taxpayers’ dollars for campaign use—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—and they do not want to do that.

Mr. Indarsingh: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Moonilal: Good point, good point, good point.

Mr. Indarsingh: Good point. Excellent.

Dr. Moonilal: That is the issue.

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, this Minister has also contributed to a dengue crisis we saw in this country earlier.

Mr. Tancoo: Yes.

Dr. Moonilal: “He and de mosquito”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, regional corporations play a serious role in terms of keeping our environment clean. This Government fired litter wardens in 2015.

Hon. Member: Oh God.

Hon. Member: What?

Ms. K. Ameen: They cut the allocations for scavenging so that you have less days of garbage collection, and you have illegal dumping sites being created; you have derelict vehicles; you have vacant lots breeding mosquitoes. When you have poor solid waste management, you have more mosquitoes breeding. When you have the regional corporations as well, who have been assisting over the years with spraying, with what they call the ULV spraying, and so on, they have also been underfunded. And then, the Minister says, “well look clean up your place” and they ask citizens to take responsibility; clean it up and put the rubbish where? You put it out on the road; it has been weeks. My office is on Pasea Main Road in St. Augustine, that entire area there, weeks pass and the open-tray truck does not pass and collect garbage, and that is a built-up area. Throughout the country, you have this situation, and then you know what they do? They threaten to fine citizens \$3500 if they do not clean up their premises.

Mr. Indarsingh: Yes.

Ms. K. Ameen: I want them to go and visit all the premises that have old PTSC buses, the insect vector unit that has derelict vehicles—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two more minutes of original speaking time available to you and you are entitled to 10 more minutes to

wind up your contribution, if you wish.

Ms. K. Ameen: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Ms. K. Ameen: So, I will be taking my 10 minutes.

Hon. Member: Oh no.

Ms. K. Ameen: I will be taking all my time, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dr. Moonilal: You would not take no more than you are allotted.

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, another issue that I mentioned, in terms of funding. Very quickly, the Member for Point Fortin yesterday spoke about a constituent of his from Cedros, which falls in the Siparia region that was begging him to get a road fixed—I think it was—from the Point Fortin Borough. Something they wanted—

Mr. Richards: Drainage.

Ms. K. Ameen: Drainage; a drainage issue attended, right. I want to point out to the Member that Point Borough has a land area of 25 square kilometres.

Mr. Richards: Siparia north.

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes. Point Fortin's land mass is 25 square kilometres and Siparia's is 495 square kilometres. In terms of their population size, the population size in Point Fortin is 20,000 persons and in Siparia it is 87,000 persons.

Mr. Tancoo: Three times more.

Ms. K. Ameen: So, you have about roughly three times more, in terms of

population. But in terms of funding, you know what happens? Both regions get roughly about the same amount of money, right, roughly. It varies from year to year. So you have a certain allocation and when you really check it and you have to check how much money goes per burgess per day. The per capita per day; Siparia Regional Corporation is \$2 per day and Point Fortin Borough Corporation is \$9.94 per day. I am just using that to show you the disparity in funding and I hope that by sharing this information with you, you could advocate for your Government to be more fair in the allocation of the resources to regional corporations.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: Good point, good point.

Ms. K. Ameen: I want to very briefly move now to a matter that is of concern to everybody, crime and security.

Dr. Moonilal: Oh yes.

Ms. K. Ameen: This Government has been very firm that crime and security is also the business of local government. We have spoken about stand your ground legislation. We have spoken about firearm user's licence for law-abiding citizens who qualify and who apply. We have spoken about municipal police patrols, comfort patrols for areas such as schools and so on and recreation grounds. But, another issue that falls under regional corporations is gated communities. Where you have public roads and you want to make them private or you want to restrict access to the public, you must have the regional corporation intervene.

Madam Speaker, I think it is prudent for each regional corporation to have a policy on gated communities. It should not be arbitrary and it should

be guided by their line Ministry, which is the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. The very astute former Attorney General should be guiding that legal process. You cannot have a situation in Bamboo Settlement, which is in the St. Augustine constituency but falls in the Tunapuna/Piarco region, where persons will erect a security booth and it is demolished because it is an illegal structure. And then you go in San Fernando and you have a structure that has not received the approval of the San Fernando City Corporation and the Minister is there cutting the ribbon then that is blatantly unfair.

11.50 a.m.

Madam Speaker, I call on the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to bring a uniform policy for gating communities since there is an increase in the requests from various communities to make their communities safer.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: I want to point him—Penal/Debe Corporation has successfully done this by following the law and maybe he could follow an example from a UNC-led corporation to make communities safer.

Madam Speaker, I mentioned earlier the situation where regional corporations are called on in schools because in my constituency I have a school called Curepe Presbyterian. Madam Speaker, that school was almost complete when the People's Partnership was in Government, it has come out of the programme. It was growing up in bushes and so on, they cleaned it up and I saw \$5 million allocated in the previous budget, not the last one, the previous one, \$5 million. "Ah geh happy." You know what they did with

this \$5 million? They went and fixed the auditorium and the school children are still in the old building, the sewer is erupting every day, the regional corporation has to go and suck out the sewer water. They have no access to the classrooms there and I find that is, Madam Speaker, a sad reflection of what is happening elsewhere. And I want to highlight, because I mentioned that there are Members on the other side who cannot speak out truthfully for their constituents and I want to refer to an article, October 5th in the *Guardian*:

“Parents of La Fillette pupils issue ultimatum to ministry”

In a correspondence from the Member of Parliament for Arima, MP Beckles, wrote:

“...Despite the sod-turning ceremony...”

Madam Speaker: Remember, and that is what we started with. When you are quoting something, it is your words so you are subjected to these rules so you will have to amend it for it. Do not let me have to say that to any Member again.

Ms. K. Ameen: In the correspondence and I quote:

“Despite the sod-turning ceremony in July 2015, which promised swift action, progress has been negligible. The lack of advancement has significantly heightened frustrations within the school community. On Friday, January 26, 2024, the PTA submitted a detailed list of concerns, which I have enclosed with this correspondence. The documents highlight the critical need for a fit-to-purpose school building. The prolonged delay impedes our students’ educational development...The delay has led to...”

And hear this, Madam Speaker:

“The delay has led to repeated complaints and visits to my office, increasingly becoming a source of embarrassment and posing a risk to the reputation of both the Ministry of Education and the Government. It is perceived as a failure to deliver on our promises to timely and effective educational infrastructure.”

That, Madam Speaker, sums up what is happening in all the schools throughout this country where the Government has failed. And, Madam Speaker, accompanying that article is a photograph of the school where you have water gathering, bush growing, and mosquitoes breeding.

Madam Speaker, under the UNC Government we had delivery in education and what we are having now is just neglect throughout, not only in the secondary and primary schools. I particularly want to point to safety where schools are concerned. The Government has a responsibility to ensure that our students are safe and we have to get back where we had previously—under the Member for Siparia’s Government you had comfort patrol around the schools—

[Device goes off]

Ms. K. Ameen:—you must have that returning to have gangs—

Madam Speaker: Member. So somebody has an offending device. Can they go out, get it under control and they are entitled to return.

Ms. K. Ameen: So, I am calling on the Government to provide security measures to secure schools and school children and the areas surrounding schools. It is not only from the outside but even from within that you have young children who have been unfortunately falling prey to gangs. You

have schools where teachers know of drugs being passed over the fence from the street and if you have patrols there that will not happen. You have cases where students have to lock themselves in a classroom because a shootout is taking place. On two occasions, children shivering under a desk and I am saying, secure the areas around the schools on a full-time basis.

Madam Speaker, in terms of secondary education, there are a lot of issues with secondary education. The enrolment in secondary institutions has dropped and this is in the SSIP, the *Social Sector Investment Programme* report of this year but they have almost identified the issues and it has to do with the cut in funding from GATE. You have figures that, while you have a reduced enrolment, what you also have are dropouts along the way because people cannot maintain to stay in these programmes. Even when you had scholarships being given by the People's Partnership Government they gave 500 national scholarships; about 150 open scholarships and 350 additional scholarships. The PNM has now brought that down to 50 scholarships.

They also spoke about bursaries that they give. I know, Madam Speaker, of a particular—I will use one child as an example, she is a constituent. Where her parents—she got a scholarship we were all so happy for this child, she is very talented and so on. Got a scholarship, went to Jamaica, and you know what happened? She has to come back to Trinidad because at the beginning of every semester they are not getting the money on time. Her parents have to pay for her rent for her over there and pay for her and she cannot go to class until they make the releases. And they decided it was not making sense. So you know what she does? She came back home, she had to give up the scholarship. So I want to know how many of these

students end up not getting the full benefit of the scholarships although it is on paper. They are saying—and they are down to 50 scholarships, so I wonder, it has to be less. Madam Speaker, the future of our children is not safe with this People's Partnership Government and the solutions we have given them. Nine years, we are going into the tenth year and the solution lies with the people of Trinidad and Tobago and I call on the people who live in St. Augustine constituency as well as the entire Trinidad and Tobago, the solution is in your hands. Your vote in 2025 must be for the United National Congress, thank you.

Hon. Member: “Oh, yes.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: MP for Arima.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Penelope Beckles):

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Let me, of course, start by acknowledging the work of my Ministry, let me just acknowledge and thank my Permanent Secretary, and my Deputy Permanent Secretaries. Let me acknowledge and thank the staff of the PPRD. My own personal staff both at the Minister's Secretariat as well as the constituency office. Let me thank the Ministry of Finance, in particular, the Budget Division for their cooperation. I want to specially acknowledge the work of the Minister of Finance who has been the Minister of Finance for the People's National Movement over the last ten years and has continued to deliver for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I am proud to have this opportunity to speak as the Minister of

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Planning and Development, and let me just say at the outset I wish to thank the hon. Prime Minister for having given me the opportunity to serve both in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and the Ministry of Planning and Development. I do not intend to spend too much time responding to the Member for St. Augustine, but there are just a couple of things that I want to speak about. And let me start by making reference to her statement that Members of Parliament on this side cannot speak out truthfully about their areas.

12.00 noon

I think the hon. Member for St. Augustine needs to make up her mind, and those on that side need to be clear on what it is they really want to say, because they want to give the impression that many of us have some issues in our constituencies, but we are afraid to speak about it. The Member for St. Augustine used the letter referred to a short while ago written by me to my colleague the hon. Minister of Education about a situation in the La Fillette school. Now, is that not ironic—

Hon. Members: Yeah.

Hon. P. Beckles:—that I wrote to my colleague complaining about a school in my area, but still she says, I am afraid to talk about it. Make up your mind.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: Make up your mind. As a Member of Parliament and a proud Member of Parliament for the constituency of Arima who I have had the honour to serve, I do not mix matters where it concerns my constituency.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: If I have to write to one of my colleagues, one of the things I do is to be truthful.

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: That is right.

Hon. P. Beckles: You read a truthful letter.

Hon. Member: That is right.

Hon. P. Beckles: So what “yuh” coming to say today about, we do not speak truthfully. The irony of it, one minute “yuh” saying that, my colleagues on the other side, that the Government, the PNM Government is giving everything to the Members on this side.

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Hon. P. Beckles: That is what they want the population to believe. Right?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: That they “doh” get “nuttin” and “we does get everything”.

Mr. Gonzales: That is right.

Hon. P. Beckles: That is what you all tend to believe. So when my honourable colleague from Point Fortin spoke about his performance with passion—

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Yes.

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles:—the Member for Moruga/Tableland—

Mr. Deyalsingh: That is right.

Hon. P. Beckles:—getting up to say, “it look like he get everything”.

Hon. Member: Everything.

Hon. P. Beckles: But he works, he represents.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: Then further to that now, the hon. Member for Moruga/Tableland now says, well, “they paving road up and down in Moruga/Tableland and feel they go win”. Yes. We are going to win the next time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: And where is Moruga/Tableland, the roads that the hon. Member is referring to that the Government is paving are in Moruga/Tableland. Make up “allyuh” mind. You are the Member of Parliament—

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: “They burning tyre.”

Hon. P. Beckles: And when it is “yuh upset, yuh burning tyre”.

Mr. Deyalsingh: That is right.

Hon. P. Beckles: I heard the Member of Parliament for Princes Town talking about how much places in the constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West “doh” have water.

Mr. Gonzales: That is not true.

Hon. P. Beckles: I mean, he knows that is not true. We are not saying every single area in Lopinot/Bon Air West has water, so make up your mind. Let me just make it abundantly clear, not one single Member of Parliament here is afraid to make the appropriate—

Mr. Gonzales: Absolutely.

Hon. P. Beckles:—representation for improvement of the lives of their various constituents.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: So you make up your mind what you want to tell the public. You want to tell the public that we do not speak the truth about what is really going on. I do not think there is any constituent in Arima who is not aware that there are roads in my constituency that need to be repaired, because they love to talk about rural constituencies. You all are the only ones who have rural constituencies, nobody else has rural constituencies.

Hon. Member: That is right.

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Ask Mayaro.

Hon. P. Beckles: Not every single road in Arima is paved. Not every single road in Lopinot/Bon Air West, St. Ann's East, La Brea, Point Fortin—

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: All the way up.

Hon. P. Beckles:—St. Joseph, not every road is paved even those in the city, not every—in Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, not every road is paved. The fact of the matter, if you have been to Blanchisseuse, if you have been to Paria, if you have been to La Fillette, if you have been to Aripo, I mean, yes, they have been complaining because they also want an equal share of the pie, but we also understand as a responsible Government that you make every effort to ensure, to ensure that not just in government constituencies, but also in Opposition constituencies that things are done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: And when you come to the Finance Committee and your questions are asked, when is this going to be done, when is that going to be done, very few of them get up and give credit to any Minister for works that

have been done in their respective constituencies.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: Because all they are thinking about is, yes, “yuh” want to win and therefore, if you want to win, bad talk the Government. The Prime Minister “eh” do nothing, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries “eh” do nothing, the Minister of Health. Every hospital is a white elephant, but I mean, it is not the same hospital they are going in. Did Jack Warner not say, a former Minister of their government that he got state-of-the-art—

Mr. Young SC: Gopeesingh said that.

Hon. P. Beckles:—Gopeesingh, the same white elephant “allyuh” talking about.

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Mad Hatter.

Hon. P. Beckles: Nobody is saying it is perfect. There is a lot to be done.

Hon. Member: Ungrateful.

Hon. P. Beckles: Then property tax.

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: “Mm-hmm.”

Hon. P. Beckles: I really want the hon. Member, because I am prepared to sit down, I want you to tell me when the UNC repealed the property tax. When? “Ah” sitting down.

[*Member sits*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: One of “allyuh” get up and say it. “Allyuh aint” repeal no property tax.

Hon. Member: But they want the money.

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Talk about—

Hon. P. Beckles: Yes. I gave way. “Nobody eh get up because allyuh aint repeal no property tax.”

Hon. Member: They want the money.

Hon. P. Beckles: Let me just make it abundantly clear because that is what you want to sell and market to win the 2025 election.

Mr. Gonzales: Snake oil.

Hon. P. Beckles: That if you vote for us, “yuh aint have to pay no property tax”.

Mr. Gonzales: Snake oil.

Hon. P. Beckles: How many persons here have friends or family or themselves have properties in Miami, in Canada—

Hon. Member: Oh yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles:—in New York paying property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: At the end of the day—

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Some in Canada—

Hon. P. Beckles:—it is fair to say, I am of the firm belief that it is not that Trinidadians and Tobagonians do not want to pay property tax. They want to pay a reasonable property tax, and they want to ensure that when the taxes are paid that you see infrastructure, you see water, you see electricity, you see all the things, you want a better standard of living, but you want people to believe that we are forcing. Could you believe that? We are forcing people to—the legislation is there, and we know very well whether it is Trinidad or whether it is Tobago that we want a better Trinidad and Tobago.

We want better roads, we want better drainage, we want bridges, we want water, we want electricity, we want education, we want schools. How is it going to happen? I mean.

My colleague wants to call the Member of Parliament for San Fernando West and to say that, he is a Mad Hatter. I mean, you know, sometimes, you know sometimes in an attempt to prove a point and to be so desperate people will make all kinds of—

Hon. Member: Go to the lowest.

Hon. P. Beckles:—go to the lowest and to say the future of our children is not safe with the People's Partnership Government. I hope the hon. Member remembers what it is she said, but let me just quickly say that my same colleague the hon. Minister of Education, I did not only write her about La Fillette, I also wrote her about Arima Central Secondary School and I wrote her about Holy Cross College, and both of those schools were built and completed, and in some instances, improved by the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: Therefore, if I can write her and get success there, wherever it is that there are challenges, I am going to continue to write and make sure that I get the assistance and represent the people of Arima.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: The hon. Leader of the Opposition:

I saw—“...two Ministers...trying to connect to Wi-Fi...standing by the Arima Dial trying to connect to Wi-Fi because to the PNM that is what a smart city is.”

Now, if I have to take this literally, “I saw two Ministers”, I do not know whether on the newspapers or the hon. Member came there and was peeping, but let me just say this: I am proud of the Arima connect project.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: I want to acknowledge the work of the hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Development, the hon. Minister of Public Utilities, the hon. Minister of Digital Transformation. I want to thank my colleague the Minister of Health, the IDB, the Mayor and the councillors of the Arima Borough Corporation for ensuring that that Arima connect project and the Arima smart city is the first of its kind in Trinidad and Tobago and the region.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.10 p.m.

Hon. P. Beckles: Madam Speaker, the Connected Arima project is not a fly-by-night one. In fact, we implemented phase one of the project in 2023 and 2024. B In the initial phase of the Connected Arima, the focus was on the Queen Mary Avenue and the Arima General Hospital, as well as the four wings of the Arima Health Facility and County Medical Office. The solution includes three back-up generators as part of the disaster preparedness resilience and redundancy; considerations that support the network design: The section of the network will be kept separated from the rest of the Connected Arima project for privacy and security reasons. The vision is to create a model of health care described as one patient, one record, that will intergrade radiology, laboratory records, pharmacy and wards into a unified singularity for Arima health care.

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Madam Speaker, let me just say that as it relates to the issue of the Arima Town Hall, there has been some outstanding payments. The work is almost 98 per cent completed. Cabinet has approved the outstanding payments and therefore, we look forward to the official opening of the Arima Town Hall very soon

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: I want to thank my colleague, the hon. Minister of Health. The Blanchisseuse Health Centre is 95 per cent completed. It will include an incident response centre, a conference centre, non-communicable disease prevention services, and again, that is due to be opened shortly.

I want to thank my colleague, the Minister of Works and Transport, for the multiplicity of road works that has been done in Arima, but as I said, there is still quite a lot to be done. I know that my constituents in Aripo and in Paria are getting a bit impatient. I must say that the landslips that have been done in those areas have been very costly, but I am looking forward to my colleague continuing his promise to do the works in those areas. If you go to Blanchisseuse now, it is much easier. There was a meeting held with the Ministry of Works and Transport, and they fulfilled their promise to improve the road works.

I also want to thank my colleague, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, and to say that several constituents have been going all the way to Tunapuna in order to access public assistance and other related matters of social development. That office is due to be opened soon and I want to also acknowledge the work of the Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

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I also want to say that Cabinet has approved the construction of the Arima administrative centre.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: And there are some outstanding issues as it relates to land and that matter is being addressed. Let me especially thank my colleague, the Minister of Public Utilities, and just to say that the Minister of Public Utilities and WASA has delivered the Lalaja intake; the First Peoples' booster; Charles Street; Darwill Gardens; Myra Lane; the Arima Well 15, producing 340,000 gallons per day, enhancing supplies to Maturita, Calvary, Tannis, Mount Pleasant, central Arima; the new booster station at Aripo; pipeline at Brasso Seco; Calvary booster; upgrade of Tannis Lane pipeline.

We are due to commence the Sanchez Street project, the Farfan Street; the upgrade of the Subero Street booster; to commence works at the Guanapo booster station, which would have started in August, that is funded under the IDB and approximately 30,000 persons will benefit; and increase water levels to 24/7. Other areas are Green, Lockhart, De Verteuil and Sanchez Street, where persons have been complaining, those areas will also be impacted positively. And as it relates to Santa Rosa First Peoples, again, I want to acknowledge the work of the hon. Minister of Public Utilities, where there is now, for the first time, electricity, pipe borne water and we recently installed solar lights.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: I also want to knowledge the work of my colleague, the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, and the Land Settlement Agency for the Home and Village Improvement Project, and the work that

has been done in Demerara road.

As it relates to community development, I would want to acknowledge the work of my colleague, the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development; the opening of the Arima Community Centre; and also, to knowledge the installation of lights by the Minister of Public Utilities in Santa Rosa Heights, Maturita, as well as the Blanchisseuse sports grounds.

A very vexing project is the issue of the Guanapo landfill. I want to indicate that there is a GEF project that is being executed by BCRC Caribbean, in collaboration with United Nations Industrial Development Organization, to develop a sustainable management mechanism for persistent organic pollutants in the Caribbean, with a specific focus on the Guanapo Landfill in Trinidad and Tobago. Preliminary studies conducted by the University of the West Indies revealed that there are some environmental risks and the cost of that project is US \$420,000.

I now want to go onto deal with some issues specifically relating to the Ministry of Planning and Development. Madam Speaker, I would like to first of all say that our *National Development Strategy, Vision 2030*, is the bedrock of our development agenda. It is a blueprint designed to transform Trinidad and Tobago into a nation that is resilient, inclusive and prosperous. The *Vision 2030* plan is not merely theoretical exercise, it is a practical, actionable and measurable framework that drives our national policies, informs our decisions and ensures that our country remains on the part of sustainable development.

Vision 2030 was designed to aligned the United Nations' Sustainable

Development Goals, thereby ensuring that our growth and progress meet the highest global standards, and it is built around five key themes:

People-centred development;

Promoting—“...Good governance and Service Excellence”;

“Improving Productivity...”—and innovation;

“Placing the environment at the Centre of Social and Economic Development”; and

“Building Globally and Competitive Businesses”.

Madam Speaker, if I can just share some information as it relates to the environment. The Ministry of Planning and Development is steadfast in ensuring the sustainable management and protection of Trinidad and Tobago’s environment. As it relates to the issue raised by at least two Members, which is the issue relating to renewable energy, this Government is committed to reducing our carbon footprint by implementing the nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement.

In fiscal 2024, we updated our National Climate Change Policy with the support of the Green Climate Fund, and completed the NDC implementation and financial investment plans, focusing on reducing greenhouse gases in power, industrial and transport sectors.

Madam Speaker, as the world faces the dual challenge of climate change and rising energy demands, transitioning to renewable energy is, of course, more important than ever. The International Agency Energy projects that global energy demand could increase by 30 per cent by 2030, driven, of course, by urbanization, industrialization, especially in developing countries. Renewable energy will be key in meeting this demand.

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12.20 p.m.

The Ministry of Planning and Development, as the lead for climate change policy and planning, has led, and is leading various initiatives in this regard. These include the European Union's Global Climate Change Alliance Plus Piarco Airport Solar Park as well as installation of 12 solar photovoltaic systems at various institutions throughout Trinidad and Tobago, including some that previously had no power thereby demonstrating the value of renewable energy. So whilst I know more than one speaker from the Opposition indicated that the Government has not been doing anything as it relates to renewable energy let me share some areas where we have implemented solar systems:

- The Aquaculture Demonstration Centre in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries;
- Nature Seekers Turtle Nesting Site in Matura;
- Speyside High School in Tobago;
- the Main Ridge in Tobago, and that was a facility where there was no electricity;
- the Reptile Conversation Centre of Trinidad and Tobago;
- the Caribbean Institute of Astronomy;
- the Brasso Seco/Paria Tourism Action Committee;
- the Brasso Seco Village Council;
- the primary school;
- the Trinidad and Tobago Red Cross Society;
- Strong Ones Youth Academy, Guayaguayare; and

- the Mc Donald Old Age Home in San Fernando.

This will complement the ongoing development of a utility scale solar power plant which is being led by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries.

The Ministry of Planning and Development recognizes that addressing climate change requires the buy-in and involvement of all Ministries and agencies, the private sector, the academia and civil society. It has accordingly embarked on various projects to harmonize the policy and projects toward the common objective, which is updating the national policy, implementing the indices, developing the carbon training policy and participating in the Blue Co. Caribbean Umbrella Coordination Programme. Renewable energy is not only essential for mitigating climate change but also for securing a sustainable energy future, and it is taking centre stage globally for several key reasons. Madam Speaker, I want to share a special project, which is the Nelson Island project. That project is a project where you have both desalination as well as solar system, and that island there is one island, therefore, that we can comfortably say that the Government has taken a decision to ensure the implementation of renewable energy.

Madam Speaker, the Government has set a target to achieve by 2030, 30 per cent of our energy needs via renewable energy power generation. The Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries is installing solar photovoltaic systems in 25 schools and community centres designated as emergency shelters. The installations are expected to be completed by December 2024. Another key renewable initiative being undertaken in fiscal 2024 is the establishment of an inter-agency committee to design, issue and evaluate a

request for proposal documents for utility scales solar project on non-utilized state lands. Additionally, in 2025, a renewable energy system will be installed at the Port of Brighton promoting LABIDCO as a green port and supporting its eco-port certification efforts. This system is expected to provide 36 per cent of the port's conventional load.

Madam Speaker, I now want to address some other areas that fall under the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Central Statistical Office. The importance of accurate data cannot be overstated and the Ministry of Planning and Development has been working diligently to support the CSO in building a reliable national statistical system. A revised organizational structure for the census planning and management division has been submitted for approval, and interim staff has been hired to support essential census planning activities. This census will incorporate digital technology with partnerships like ones with TTPOST granting access to geo-located addresses for efficient data collection. The Inter-American Bank has also supported digitization efforts and facilitated knowledge sharing with Uruguay's statistical office.

Madam Speaker, the CSO continues its role in its national survey such as the multiple indicator cluster survey, which was conducted in 2022, which provided valuable data on socioeconomic conditions on women and children. Additionally, the joint household budget survey and survey on living conditions collected key income and expenditure data informing inflation rates, poverty and inequality matrices. Fieldwork for this survey was completed in 2024 and data process is on the way with final results expected to be by December 2025.

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As it relates to the Town and Country Planning Division, the Ministry continues to modernize and streamline spatial planning to the Town and Country Planning Division, ensuring transparency in the development while protecting conservation on agriculture lands. In fiscal 2023/2024, the TCPD worked closely with the national planning authority to prepare for full implementation of the Planning and Facilitation of Development Act. I am pleased to report that in August of 2024 Cabinet approved a seven-member Trinidad and Tobago council for regional and urban planners, a vital step in licensing planners under the PAFD Act. This is, of course, expected to be proclaimed in fiscal 2020 and 2025.

The Ministry also manages the automated construction permitting system, DevelopTT which standardizes the processing of development applications for transparency and efficiency. Continuous training has been provided and digitization of records has been undertaken in two phases. Phase I saw 20 years of paper records digitized at the north and south regional offices, Phase II focusing on the east and Tobago office, and that is expected to be completed in 2025. Madam Speaker, as it relates to the Town and Country Planning Division there is also the implementation of the ArcGIS Enterprise System, which will enhance spatial data analysis by equipping staff for the TCPD and other users with the necessary tools to efficiently research and analyse spatial data digitally. This will improve the efficiency of the planning process helping reduce project delays and project legacy data.

Madam Speaker, I am aware that when I assumed office in the Ministry of Planning and Development one of the complaints was the length

of time for applications to Town and Country, so that you can now apply online, you can chat online as to the status of the application. I want to record my thanks and appreciation to the staff and Director of Town and Country Planning Division for the work that they have done and the feedback that I have received from the public is this system has improved considerably.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: The University of the West Indies and the TCPD has aimed at mitigating impacts of future earthquakes and utilizing data generated to inform land use and other policies and plans, and to enhance institutional response capabilities, and to promote hazard mitigation and resilience with seismic measurements completed in five urban areas, and vulnerability maps produced. This programme supports a risk-informed approach. Madam Speaker, that programme is the Seismic Microzonation Studies in Trinidad and Tobago.

I would now like to share some information as it relates to the Caribbean Industrial Research Institute, CARIRI. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Planning and Development is committed to fostering innovation and supporting development and providing access to financing, technical support and other relevant services to support business and other individuals. Madam Speaker, I recall the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas West who expressed concern about Trinidad and Tobago and where we are in the innovation index. My view is that quite a lot is taking place—or was it Mayaro? Might have been.

[*Mr. Paray nods head*]

Hon. P. Beckles: My apologies, yes, Mayaro—and what is important is for the appropriate mechanisms to be put in place so that the research and the various projects that have been taking place that that could assist us in terms of what is going on in the country as it relates to innovation.

12.30 p.m.

Now, one such innovation, for example, is the Shaping of the Future of Innovation Project, which is a collaborative effort involving the European Union, the IDB, and CARIRI as the executing agency. This project has a total budget of US \$9.7 million funded by US \$8.53 million from the 11th European Development Fund, US \$580,000 from the IDB and \$638,000 from CARIRI. They have been able to impact, that is that programme, 50 small businesses to advance to development of innovation in Trinidad and Tobago and we are not stopping there. In 2024 to 2025 we will distribute over 25 more grants and we would make a further call for small businesses to apply.

Other notable projects include CARIRI's efforts to manufacture rubber crumb from waste tyres, which will improve road durability through rubber asphalt and the Innovation Nation Training Programme, which offers students—and that would be between the ages of 10 to 18, and their training would be encoding entrepreneurship and climate change, helping them to expand their knowledge and make informed career choices.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: In the agro-processing sector, CARIRI provided technical support to numerous micro, small and medium enterprises in fiscal 2023—2024, including the implementation of the global food safety systems designed to assist local enterprises in accessing export markets. Seventeen

local enterprises received audits and recommendations while eight benefited from the direct interventions in areas, such as, process optimization, system integration and marketing strategies. These efforts aimed to enhance local businesses' capabilities, particularly in accessing export markets.

Madam Speaker, another area that I wish to address is the area of chemical waste. Managing chemicals and hazardous waste is a priority for this Government, recognizing that we have experienced significant economic growth and development with the expansion of our industrial manufacturing and agriculture sectors along with the increased generation of chemicals and other hazardous waste. We are working on several initiatives, inclusive of the collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards to join the steering committee for the revision of the national standard for pesticides labelling.

Other initiatives include work in the areas of environmentally sound management and disposal of used mobile phones, ozone depletion management, low carbon technologies for energy efficiency, the establishment ambient air and water quality standards and the establishment of a regional blue hub and the US National Oceanography Data Centre. These efforts are critical to addressing climate change by diversity conservation and waste management, all aimed at promoting a sustainable and resilient environment for the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

As it relates to development finance, the Caribbean Development Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank have been pivotal in supporting Trinidad and Tobago's development agenda. Their assistance covers critical areas, such as financial sector regulation, climate change,

public sector management, education, energy, social protection, water and sanitation, citizen security and housing and urban development. In fiscal 2024 we signed a \$90million agreement with the Inter-American Development Bank for the establishment of a conditional credit line for the investment projects for the National Digital Transformation Programme with US \$42 million allocated for the first phase. This programme aims to increase productivity through safe and inclusive digital technology adoption, boost workforce digital skills and strengthen Government's cyber security capabilities.

I also recall that the hon. Member for Mayaro expressed his concern on the area of the Government's ability to deal with the issue of cyber security. So as I indicated that is part of the US \$42 million project to deal with the issue of cyber security. The Ministry of Planning and Development is the national focal point for the technical corporation inter-facing with Government's and regional international agencies in the international development centre exchanges and for assessing and facilitating technical exchanges and advancing the national development agenda. In fiscal 2025 we will continue to leverage these partnerships for the benefit of Trinidad and Tobago. So just to remind again that the hon. Member for Mayaro raised several concerns as it digitalization and digital transformation and I hope that the information that I have given as it relates to that loan will, of course, explain exactly where we are.

Madam Speaker, I just want to say that work has recently—one important project that I forgot to speak about, as it relates to water would have been the upgrading of the Guanapo Water Treatment Plant which on

completion will result in a 2.5 million-gallons of water per day to increase the current production of three million a day, thus improving the supply. This will bring significant improvements to persons in Eleanor Gardens, Mt. Pleasant bypass and including the constituency of D'Abadie/O'Meara.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: Madam Speaker, I just want to use this opportunity again to say, as it relates in the area of electricity that—and I want to go back to what the hon. Member for St. Augustine said a while ago. There is not, in any constituency, I do not know that there is any Member of Parliament that can stand here and say that there is electricity or water supply in every single area. Once you go through your constituency, sometimes areas that you believe have an adequate water supply do not have an adequate water supply. Sometimes you believe that persons have water and they do not have water at all. And I recall that there was an objection when the Minister of Public Utilities spoke about rainwater harvesting. Now rainwater is one of the projects that is funded under the Green Fund. And I want to acknowledge the work of Jennifer Massiah of the UN Habitat for the partnership with the First Peoples of Arima to establish rainwater harvesting.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: Right. Now, you know it is kind of strange that some people believe that the only time you have a country developed is when you do not see barrels, and you do not see tanks and you do not see any of those things, until sometimes we have a situation where you have an earthquake or you have a hurricane and some people realize that it is not that you do not want to put in place a proper water supply, proper infrastructure for all areas.

But, when you think of rural communities again, and when we say rural communities, of course, as I mentioned a lot of my colleagues on the other side believe that there are no rural communities on this side. But if I could use Blanchisseuse as an example, or Lalaja as another example, because when the hon. Minister went to Lalaja and installed pipelines to facilitate water for the first time, a number of the residents did not want to use the pipe borne water, simply because the people using water from the river, which for them it is not only that it is clean, but they also understand the impact of rainwater on agricultural products.

12.40 p.m.

So that the rainwater harvesting really means that when you go to communities where you have river water and you have that supply of river water, that you can utilize that, and the community gets involved so they understand how they can use the natural access to water that is in their community.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two more minutes of original speaking time. You are entitled to 10 additional minutes to wind up your contribution.

Hon. P. Beckles: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I would like to have—I would not be much longer, but thank you for the additional minutes which I would use. Yes. So that there are many communities as I indicated where you have rivers and it is not just in Trinidad and Tobago—sometimes in Tobago you have, let us say Argyle Waterfall and you have a river there, sometimes it is a challenge depending on where you are to be able to run lines to some communities and, therefore, that project of rainwater

harvesting and the utilization of rivers in such communities, all it means is that you are using a different mechanism. You may not be using a dam, but you are using a river. I just want to encourage my colleague to continue, especially for those rural communities where the cost and the time that it takes to actually do the project—I mean, it is not that that is not going to be part of it, because the vision is that because of climate change you do not know how long you would have access to river water. So at least in the meantime you are ensuring that you are implementing both processes.

So, Madam Speaker, I just want to share as well in a similar vein the new intake in the Aripo village, that that is expected to be completed by year end and that is through the Community Water Improvement Programme. Again, I know that this has been quite a concern for the people of that area and I want again to record my thanks and appreciation to WASA and the Minister of Public Utilities. As I close, I want to say to the people of Arima that you can place your trust in a Government that prioritizes their needs and concerns, and I am honoured to be their representative and remain dedicated to addressing their issues effectively.

I heard the hon. Member for St. Augustine, of course, boast that there are people all over in constituencies that vote for the United National Congress and that is their right, but it is always interesting that the hon. Member for St. Augustine seems to have this special love affair with the constituency of Arima. I remember when there was the Andrea Bharatt death, the hon. Member for St. Augustine found herself at the corner of the Eastern Main Road and the entry to the Heights of Aripo. Interesting thing about it is, the hon. Member for St. Augustine never went into the village.

She stayed right on the outside and spoke so much about her love for the people of Aripo.

But let me just say very clearly to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, this budget as read by the hon. Minister of Finance is a budget for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: And this budget impacts not only on urban areas whether it is in Port of Spain or whether it is in San Fernando, but it impacts on people whether it be from Toco, whether it be to Guayaguayare going all the way to Cedros, back up to Port of Spain, Diego Martin, Chaguaramas. It is a budget for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the outstanding individuals within the Ministry of Planning and Development. Their unwavering commitment and remarkable contributions especially during the budgetary period, and the development of the budget and the PSIP, deserves recognition. To the entire staff at the Ministry of Planning and Development, and as I indicated before my personal staff in the Minister's secretariat as well as my personal staff that works with me, my manager and my team at the constituency office in Arima, I extend my heartfelt thanks and appreciation for their exceptional work.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate what an incredible privilege it has been for me to serve the constituency of Arima. I am truly fortunate to have been granted this opportunity, and I remain steadfast in my commitment to putting the people at the centre of all that I do. Together, we can achieve greatness for our beloved community Arima and, by extension, Trinidad and

Tobago. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for acknowledging the fact that I am here to contribute to this budget speech. Madam Speaker, this is my last situation in which I will be present in the budget, and as such I will not engage in the tit for tat. I will seek God's guidance. I will look beyond Arima to the hills from which cometh my health. My health cometh from the Lord who created—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles:—heaven and earth and I suspect the PNM and the UNC.

Madam Speaker, today I wear a title I have been clothed by my colleagues for the past few months, “dissident”. According to a cursory Google search, a dissident is a person who opposes official policy, especially that of an authoritarian State. If that is the case, I have nothing against being called a name which denotes fighting against tyranny, oppression—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. R. Charles:—autocracy and dictatorship.

Madam Speaker, I speak in this honourable House having been placed in the naughty corner by those empowered so to do. I am in what we used to call back in the good old days in Naparima College, I am in detention doing penance and my penance is to write 10,000 times every day. So if you see me writing it is because I am doing penance, Madam Speaker. My penance is to write 10,000 times the following: The golden rules of Trinidad and

Tobago politics are: Rule No 1, the boss is always right. Rule No. 2, if the boss is wrong then refer to rule 1. I am now, Madam Speaker, seated in Zion, in the kingdom of Zion—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles:—sitting beside a doctor, a qualified doctor on my left; on my right sits a de facto senior counsel having earned his stripes among other things as a judge in the Industrial Court; on his right sits an accomplished businessman, deserving some say, of the Order of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago; and to his right sits the only island scholarship winner seated in this honourable House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: I am indeed seated among honourable men and women. So when we speak it is not for party, not for principalities, not for powers nor frail human beings omnipotent though they think they are, but for God, family and country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: That is the position which we propose to take on matters coming about before us in this honourable House.

May I remind—and now to the matter at hand, may I remind the Finance Minister who is here today, may I remind him to just cool it. Follow his friend, the MP for San Fernando West who reminds us nauseatingly of Surratt, the need for proportionality and necessity.

12.50 p.m.

Now, US President Biden, who runs a US \$25 trillion economy, 1,000 times the size of ours, took 30 minutes to address the people of the United

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States, a joint session of the US Congress and Senate, and the members of the Supreme Court in his last State of the Union address; 30 minutes. My Finance Minister, by contrast, took five hours and 15 minutes to harangue us about the state of our economy, which is one-thousandth the size of Biden's

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: Madam Speaker, imagine if our Finance Minister were the President of the United States, managing a US \$25 trillion economy, he would have tortured them in their Parliament non-stop for seven straight days.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. R. Charles: Some frightening concerns about this budget; frightening concerns: The burdensome debt for future generations. We are told in *Review of the Economy* that the total adjusted government debt for the current fiscal year is TT \$140.6 billion or 75 per cent of our GDP. Madam Speaker, the Government's total debt of \$140.6 billion exceeds both our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund savings of \$41.5 billion, and our reserves of \$37.4 billion. It exceeds those two by \$61 billion. Government total debt also exceeds a combination of all government revenues for fiscal '24 of \$60.36 billion, by over \$90 billion.

So if we take of all last year's revenues and our foreign reserves, and if we add onto that all our savings in the HSF, our Government would still be over \$11 billion in the red. Madam Speaker, we are broke. We living on fumes. Madam Speaker, in the dialect, we will say "we buss". We are living beyond our means. We are living pay cheque to pay cheque. Minister Imbert should follow the advice of that calypsonian, I think it was Lord

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Christo, who sang more than half a century ago, I quote:

Saint Peter preach, never rest yuh hat where yuh hand cyah reach.

We are leaving future generations in a situation that is impossible to repay. We are leaving them a poisoned chalice and this is where we have reached under nine years of the Minister of Finance's budget, nine budgets.

Madam Speaker, more frighteningly, Mr. Imbert boasts that we are borrowing to refinance debt. We are informed that of the 11 bonds on the domestic capital market, totalling \$8 billion, comprising \$2.2 billion was for refinancing central government domestic debt. The remaining nine was for budgetary support. So we are borrowing domestically, primarily not for investment purposes but to finance recurrent expenditure. In other words, you are digging a hole to cover a next hole. Now, make that make sense for me, please. We simply cannot repay our debts when due. Borrowing to repay past debt is not a sustainable or sensible economic policy.

Madam Speaker, despite our Minister of Finance's garrulity and the fact we will be here for any number of days talking in vain, we will be talking in vain like the prophet Noah about an impending flood, not one word, not one sentence, not one paragraph will change based on what we say here today.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker, I have spent nine fruitless years in the Opposition wilderness. We, on this side, have provided thousands of excellent ideas. We have gone through the budget line by line nine times and nothing has changed. So Parliament, we has inherited a system from the colonial masters that is in dire need of change. We have, as a collective body, to sit

and reason together and come up with something that makes sense. We are arguing on this side, you are ignoring us on that side and eventually, the country suffers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, despite the Government's precarious financial position, precious little has been said about measures to increase revenues. I heard a moment ago from my friend and excellent colleague, and others, about the revenue changes that are being made and how we will get revenue from legislation, like the BEPS legislation, to get finances that we have missed in transfer pricing structures. But the revenue-generating strategies and policies are few. Why do we not enlist UWI and other reputable bodies in the search for new revenue options?

I read somewhere—it was economist, Dr. Vaalmikki Arjoon, he published in the *Express* one such idea. It calls for the establishment of a real estate investment trust, where the State transfers under-utilized state assets, like land and buildings, to this trust, which in turn sells shares to the public. Shareholders, including the State, get dividends based on incomes derived from leasing the assets and this initiative, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would also foster investment opportunities for citizens and promote capital market activity. We need more market ideas like that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We also propose in this budget to spend in fiscal 2025, \$54 billion, of which over 70 per cent represents recurrent salaries—recurrent expenditure, salaries, interest payments, goods and services, and transfers and subsidies. So if we spend on recurrent expenditure, 70 per cent of our budget, it means these are non-investment expenditures. We have, essentially, a welfare state budget, with all the negatives associated with non-investment-type

expenditures.

Another idea about this budget is it has a déjà vu feel to it. We have heard it before, only with different numbers, different figures. It is not transformational, it is pedantic, lacking vision, direction, common sense and purpose. Some say it is merely bogus, arithmetic, elementary bookkeeping, backed up by overbearing verbosity.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I come to the heading of our banks and customer friendliness, how our departments—the ease of doing business locally. While Minister Imbert boasted about the steps being taken to improve the ease of doing business and fostering:

“...a more dynamic and user-friendly regulatory environment.”

He talks about that. But hear how our loquacious Finance Minister stated this, and I quote:

“Madam Speaker TTBizLink has been a transformative force in Trinidad and Tobago’s trade and business and environment. This innovative platform has significantly streamlined and simplified the process of conducting business, making it easier for companies and individuals to navigate the regulatory requirements.”

What is the reality for citizens? Well, it took me upwards of three and a half hours to pay my property tax in Princes Town, in a line with 90 persons; told to leave the line to go to the bank a quarter mile away to get exact cash, then rejoined the line and waited.

1.00 p.m.

No ease of doing business with our local banks, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let us not talk about accessing foreign exchange, even from your own US

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account. I know of someone who has US \$100,000 in a local bank, he asked for only US \$1,000 in cash. He was told to come back in four days and was only paid part of it. This was his own money “yuh know”. How come I never see a member of the 1 per cent in lines accessing foreign exchange? How come? Do they have a special arrangement that we are not aware of as citizens? All citizens know, all citizens know unlike our relatives in Canada and the United States, how we have to catch our aunt, uncle and “nennen” merely to open a simple bank. Talk about ease of doing business but try to open as a citizen a simple bank account, right, while in these same banks in their home countries ask for only one form of ID, right.

Hear what they want from us in Trinidad, same bank. Hear what they want: Two forms of ID, two utility bills, two references, email, contact number, relative contact number, next of kin, recent job letter, recent pay slip, land deed, permission from “yuh wife”, permission from “yuh outside ’oman”, five subjects and born-again or confirmation status.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. R. Charles: While these banks demand flesh, sweat and blood from us, they demand only one form of ID in their home countries and I am talking here not against you or you against me, I am talking here as a citizen, right.

Hon. Member: “Trinbagonian”.

Mr. R. Charles: Trinidad and Tobago. So much for the ease of doing business for the average citizen in Trinidad and Tobago.

President Biden, in his 2023 State of the Union Address, indicated that his administration proposes reducing late payment fees on credit cards from US \$32 to \$8 to help save American families \$20 billion a year.

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President Biden. Reports show that the Canadian Federal Government has done the same. We also know that Barbados is—Barbados again. Barbados' Central Bank Governor was instructed by Prime Minister Mia Mottley to address the issue of bank charges in 2022.

In 2023, Governor Greenidge indicated that he was reviewing the fee structure that fell within the ambit of the Central Bank. He further added that he had obtained commitments from several banks in Barbados to reduce fees in certain areas. Yet, in my Trinidad and Tobago, our Government has given our banks free rein on exorbitant charges. We are all victims of our banks' predatory pricing strategies. It appears that our Government is more concerned about collecting corporation taxes from all banks and dividends from some even if it means that it ultimately comes from the picked pockets of citizens. The time has come for urgent review of the various charges by banks to an increasingly overburdened citizenry. Some may even class banks as white-collar bandits always searching for not-so clever but very creative ways of extracting money from unsuspecting customers.

Now, in a budget, we talked about reimagining the Ministry of Sport and culture for value for money budgetary results. My view is that all Ministers of Government work in systems and structures inherited from our colonial masters. These systems and structures were not developed to deliver goods and services but to secure the interest of the metropole. It is important for all of us as we move to the next level of development that we revise, review, restructure, re-engineer those systems and procedures.

For example, we have allocated \$431 million to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, and despite what Minister Imbert said last

Monday with no indication of what we can expect from this massive injection of funds. Last year, we gave that Ministry \$734 million and the year before that \$541 million, but yet, at the recent Paris Olympics, we came back with our two hands swinging. Not the fault of the Minister I say, the systems that she has to work in. And the systems that if we do not change it, we will come here year after year, my successors will come here year after year to discuss the failings of which ever Government is in power.

Little Grenada, population of 126,000, little Grenada, allocated only EC \$20 million in their last budget and with that miniscule investment, their athletes returned with two bronzes. St. Lucia allocated less than EC \$15 million. We are in the \$400 million, they are EC \$15 million, less than one-tenth our allocation and that little country, unlike TT, was blessed with gold and silver. Dominica got a gold medal with a population of 72,000 persons, probably less than the population of Naparima and they got a gold medal. It is not our athletes to blame, Lord knows that they tried their best but it is a system that specializes in mamaguy, “ole talk”, incompetence and verbosity Mr. Deputy Speaker, we need to re-engineer the Ministry of Sport and Community Development and instead task a small team to allocate funds to sporting organizations to run our sporting assets, identify and nurture potential athletes and sportsmen and enlist our top performers to unearth, mentor and develop world-class sportsmen. Let the Ministry of Education identify and mentor sportspersons such as they did in our colonial times and is now done with the secondary school sports.

Reengineering the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs. As you know, I shadow the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs.

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Hon. Member: For now.

Mr. R. Charles: For now, for now. We have allocated this year \$263 million to the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs and the question is: Are we getting value for money? And when I make these criticism is not to criticize anybody, not criticize the Ministry but to give, as I leave, to give some ideas. You do not have to take all, take one, adopt it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: If it makes sense, use it and if it does not, ignore it, that is cool with me.

When I went to Japan weeks ago, I had to visit their Embassy twice, get invitation letters, answer a host of questions and pay \$290 for 30-day visas for my wife and myself. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with due respect to my beloved Prime Minister who invited me to go to Barbados, maybe I should take his advice, my mother Ursil Sampson-Charles migrated at four years of age to Trinidad and Tobago from Barbados in 1927. Any Barbadian or Bahamian for that matter can just “jump on ah plane just so” and visit Tokyo for 90 days visa-free. “I hadda line up, beg, geh on meh knees for 30 days and pay money.”

Minister Imbert spoke about taking advantage of the China’s Belt and Road Initiative, nice talk. “Hear, ah quoting him eh.” You know the Minister cannot say something with one line. To say that:

“...as the first English-speaking Caribbean country to sign the China’s Belt and Road Initiative since 2018, we will be exploring membership in the network of Silk Road Arts Festival to foster global cultural collaboration and expand opportunities for local arts and cultural

organizations.”

End of quote.

1.10 p.m.

Madam Speaker, the only problem is that Barbadians also have visa-free access to China, and we do not. Why are Bajans always ahead of us? If I were to take Prime Minister Rowley, my Prime Minister Rowley’s advice and inadvertent wisdom, I, as a naturalized Barbadian, would have visa-free access to 11 more countries than I have at present with my TT passport. What it is? What it is that Mia Mottley knows that we in Trinidad and Tobago do not? Mr. Deputy Speaker, we give this Government the gift of the President of the General Assembly for the 78th session of the United Nations, which just ended as a gift. It was a gift.

One would have thought, one would have thought that the person selected to be PGA would have been young enough in his late 50s or early 60s to mentor young upcoming foreign service officers in the Ministry. That person could have been a catalyst for birthing a truly professional foreign service. Instead, it was given to someone like myself in the winter of his years. Could they not have sent a much younger Minister, Amery Browne? If he had gone, if he had gone, he would have been able to have the respect, having interacted with Crown Princesses and Presidents and Prime Ministers and Heads of Government, and he would have now been able to come back to the Ministry and impart that knowledge to the rest of Foreign Service Officers.

For example, Abdulla Shahid, of the Maldives, was Finance Minister when he served as President of the General Assembly of the 76th UN General

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Assembly. He was 59 at the time. Think about the prestige Minister Browne would have had in his Ministry today with that kind of—Years ago, a citizen of Trinidad, Desmond Parker, who was Chief Protocol Officer to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, one would have thought that upon his retirement, his world-class “protocoligorical” competence, would have enhanced the diplomatic skills among our young upcoming FSOs. We should have the best foreign service today, in terms of protocol matters.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: Instead, he was recruited, I am told, by an oil-rich Middle Eastern country to train their staff. We have the skills. God gave it to us, but we ignore it, and we allow other countries to tap into it. When we get the non-permanent seat on the Security Council in 2027, my hope is that, whichever Government is in power, I might be in the grave by that time, will be wise enough to select someone with years of service remaining to seed a new class of cross-cultural, multilingual, output-orientated FSOs, Foreign Service Officers, and not wedded to outdated club diplomacy to sit down, drink tea, and have a thing, give the pan to the pope when the new Singaporeans and the Bajans are networking, getting visas, and all of that and we club diplomacy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could go on and on. Do we have a rotational system for Foreign Service Officers to broaden their cross-cultural experiences and language capabilities? India’s Foreign Service. India’s Foreign Service Officers are some of the best in the world. Serve two tours of duty outside on rotation, followed by one in home; capital. This ensures

they do not lose touch with realities on the home ground while being exposed to diverse cultures.

When you meet a foreign Minister from one of those advanced countries, they have served. They have served in Brazil, they have served in Berlin, they have served in Japan, and they have served in India, so they have a breadth of experience that is structured and developed over time.

Hon. Member: And could speak 10 languages.

Mr. R. Charles: And could speak 10 languages, my friend reminds me. When I met Ban Ki Moon, he could have spoken Korean, he could have spoken English, he could have spoken German, he could have spoken Hindi, and he could have spoken Portuguese.

Canada, New Zealand, and the UK and Australia have a system among themselves. You see how the First World works, a system among themselves where they have exchange programmes in which Foreign Service Officers from one country serve stints in the others. They gain broader diplomatic skills through the structured cross-posting.

So we could put all the money we want, but if you have a third-world foreign service, it is not the problem of the Minister, not a problem of the officers themselves, it is a problem of how we operate or how we choose to operate. Can we not do the same cross-postings with CARICOM sister States? Would our Foreign Service Officers not gain from being cross-posted in the Barbadian Foreign Service? Perhaps our Trinbagonian FSOs could learn the art of accessing visa-free access to more countries.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I look at the budget allocation, I see nothing for Haiti. We talk a nice talk about Haiti but do nothing. Our

calypsonian, Rudder, sang, “Haiti I am sorry”, but we do nothing. Far away Kenya has troops in Haiti helping the breakdown of law and order. Jamaica is sending troops, Belize, and also other CARICOM States much poorer than us are considering assisting. Not a word from Trinidad and Tobago. Not a single word of the millions that the Finance Minister spoke in his budget was about Haiti, not a penny. Now wonder why we have lost eminence in CARICOM.

Thousands of soldiers we have and millions allocated to salaries because for pensions or pensions for recurrent expenditures. Millions allocated for salaries to the defense force. Hundreds of air guards, I am told, we have 400 and change officers, and we have three or four “lil” planes. The ratio is 100 officers per plane. We have coast guards, hundreds of coast guard officers with very few vessels operational, and we cannot send 100 officers to poor Haiti in distress.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we also need a world-class property management capability in the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs to properly manage the millions of properties we own abroad. When I was at the mission at the UN, a PRUN , years ago, we were paying over US \$50,000 a month for a rundown property in a recession when properties were going for half the price, a comparable property, half the price. And you know what? People down here signed an agreement to increase the rent by 10 per cent annually. Madness.

Again, not the fault of any Minister. Not the fault of anybody, but the system in which we are operating. You cannot take somebody with five O’Levels, an AO I, AO II, and they are making decisions on million-dollar

properties. When we bought the property for \$12.8 million, and that was another thing, I had to take them. They sent up a team. I had to take the team to the Barbados mission. And I had to tell the Barbados Ambassador to show off on us. When he showed off on his mission what he had, and I had a rundown—the office I have in Princes Town right now is better than what I had on the mission. And my friend from Arima would tell you that she has inherited one of the best offices among CARICOM. What we used to do—Jamaica had a better chancery than us. When they had a function, we gave the money because ours was not good. We paid the money, and Jamaica got the credit.

Eventually, we bought the property, which has escalated fivefold I understand. An earned rental income close to one US \$1 million. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am convinced that we can earn enough, if we plan our business well, to cover a significant part of the cost of running our New York consulate and our UN mission. That should not cost us a cent.

1.20 p.m.

If we use our brains and if we use our proper management capability into the decision-making that takes place there. But coming here and just approving money and approving money, no system, no control.

Ministry of Education: Are we getting—I will leave—let me just say, the third Ministry we showed based on this budget, reimagines and re-engineers the Ministry of Education. And I am saying this as a 76-year-old who has nothing to gain, I am just throwing out this idea, ignore it if you wish. I will leave details on this Ministry to my esteemed colleague, an island scholar in the naughty corner. In this naughty corner [*Laughter*],

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down at the penance end.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. R. Charles: But our schools are now battlegrounds and warring and bullying. and here let me extend condolences to the family of Jayden Lalchan and his untimely passing. Failure rates beyond acceptable, school feeding exists more to give work to—sorry, my friends—“PNM-ites” than to meet the nutritional needs of students. Many fail to get passing grades in math and other STEM subjects, even our best and brightest. You know what? Our best and brightest know only to cram and pass exams, I call them model answer grads. They say “we good, we bright”, the teacher hands them five sheets of things, learn that, cram that, who could cram it the best, you know, pass. And they go to Fatima [*Laughter*]—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. R. Charles: And then they end up UWI and they end up here.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Scotland SC: “Ayee”, Fatima— [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, please, please, Members—Member for Naparima is doing fine, please, proceed.

Mr. R. Charles: No critical thinking. I have sons, they know how to pass exams, ask them these questions, they will answer it. No vision of their place in the world, no collective understanding of the wisdom of Orisha, Hinduism, Christianity, or Islam. No musical competency by the mass of our graduates. Yeah, they have some who beat pan, yes they have a Naparima team with 15 Creoles in Naparima, 12 on the football team. The students are not part of it, we have to face—we are mamaguying ourselves.

Mr. Charles (cont'd)

No fluency in another language even Spanish, most cannot swim to reduce drownings at our many beaches. We are an island nation, 90 per cent of our graduates from our excellent system cannot swim. Most cannot administer CPR to save or rescue—CPR?

Mr. Rambally: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. R. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I looked at a school in Japan. I looked at a school in Japan—they told me not to show it but it is here, it is here. Unlike our Government, I designate some of my attention and budget for international trips on fact-finding missions. I do not get any per diems because I cannot afford. I looked at this school in Japan, listen to the curriculum of one of Japan's leading primary schools, and tell me honestly if our best and brightest could match.

English, math, science enquiry, computing—five-year-olds—history enquiry, geography enquiry, art/design technology—I do not know what that is. Maybe the Member for Mayaro could tell us about design technology, my grandson is doing it in this school [*Laughter*]. Religious education enquiry, I learned about Hinduism in Canada, even though I went to Naparima College where 90 per cent of the students were Hindus. All I know is light over darkness and Divali [*Laughter*] —something, something. But if you ask me about the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita* and whatnot, I cannot tell “yuh” even today. Music and drama, phys-ed. Now, hear, hear, hear: modern language, modern foreign language, six-year-olds, Japanese from nursery—this is in Japan—English throughout and French from year four.

We have music and drama—sports: include football, basketball,

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volleyball, tai chi, badminton, swimming. If you see my grandson swimming, swimming, all over the place, learned life-saving, age six in a different system. And we in an island with the sea all around us. Gymnastics, cricket, table tennis, yoga, athletics and cross-fit rugby, and much more. So can the \$7.5 billion allocated to education and training transform our current cram and exam system so that our best and brightest can match the critical thinking and investigation-based systems in places like Japanese, Indians or South Koreans.

One of the great things I had in life was working my first job in the public service, it was with Dr. Cuthbert Joseph. And the first thing Dr. Joseph gave me to read was a book, *Education in the British West Indies* by Eric Williams, 1953. Even then Eric Williams had a view for education in Trinidad. What is our philosophy? Are we educating our citizens to be multi-lingual? We are residents in a sea of Portuguese-speaking, 200 million-plus Portuguese-speaking people. Spanish and Latin America, how many graduates of our schools, let us be honest, could fluently speak Spanish? You go in Finland and every 10-year-old could speak English. I am asking the question.

Mr. de Nobriga: You could speak Spanish?

Mr. R. Charles: *Hablo Español. Un poquito, por favor.* Yeah, the Ministry of National Security, crime prevention: From the onset, I welcomed Minister Scotland to the Ministry of National Security. Sir, take a bow. I note his enthusiasm and energy, I am hopeful that he makes a difference. I am a citizen, I do not want you all to fail, I want the country to succeed. Crime is not a partisan issue, but the systems, procedures,

Mr. Charles (cont'd)

management, tactical and strategic policies must change as well as the need for the establishment of smart goals. Until these changes are implemented, is this Finance Minister aware that increased economic hardships lead to escalating crime? Mr. Deputy Speaker, could you tell me how much time I have, please?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yeah your initial speaking ends in the next four minutes right, but you will have an additional 10 that you can avail yourself. You so accept now?

Mr. R. Charles: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, so proceed.

Mr. R. Charles: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Sure.

Mr. R. Charles: And when you fail to reduce crime, you fail every sector of the economy, every person in our country, even succeeding generations. In fact, let me say, subsequent generations because of this crime situation, it is making it difficult for them to succeed. When crime is out of control our citizens live in fear, our foreign investment declines, our education system collapses, our social systems become overburdened, our agriculture sector suffers at the hands of thieves and praedial larcenists, our best and brightest panic and migrate.

One of my colleagues read the latest US travel advisory 2024, downgraded Trinidad to level 3, reconsider travel, et cetera. Mr. Deputy Speaker, crime is spiralling out of control, and the finance man came here to tell us there will be an increase in the fleet of police vehicles by 2,000 over the next three years even though maintenance of vehicles routinely stalls,

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with even PED police vehicles in the scrap yard. In two years' time, these 2,000 vehicles will be in the scrap yard, so it is like throwing money, throwing money, "spinning top in mud". Give them more vehicles, give them time. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in September 2023, the Minister of National Security said he had recently bought 192 body cams on top of 1,167 previously bought, as well as 2,500 new cameras, that is *Newsday*, September 18, 2023. With all of these, there appears no policy in place for mandatory use by the TTPS officers. So we are buying body cams and there is no mandatory system in place.

Minister Imbert also called for building capacity of our police force, but may I remind you Sir—that is on page 103—may I remind you that the word is not police force but police service. He talked about plans to focus on specialized training for TTPS officers with ongoing development efforts at the police academy. We have heard these statements, a million times before to no avail, it is tedious repetition, tedious repetition, year after year. Acquiring additional speed guns as well as technology to support fingerprinting. Was this not a repeat of what was said in 2021, 2022, 2023 budgets? The Minister in his 2023 budget, for example, stated:

“The automated fingerprint system, and its expansion to a biometric system by the TTPS will be an immediate milestone.”

We heard that last year, we hear it again.

1.30 p.m.

“• Enhanced Border Control and Protection;”

Well, the TTGS, one wonders—let us leave them alone.

“• Immigration;”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we do not even have a well-thought-out refugee and migrant policies that are humane, consistent with UN conventions and best practices, and which recognizes the limits of our absorptive capacity.

“• Social Programmes aimed at reducing...”—crime—“...violence;”

Well, I give up on that.

“• Expansion of Rehabilitation programmes within the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service aimed at reducing recidivism;”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, but yet, we have hundreds of inmates in Remand Yard with no time frame for their time to appear in court. Where are the plans for ensuring criminal records are removed for selected petty crimes after serving time in prison, so that they could get a job when they leave, if they are rehabilitated? You cannot have programmes to rehabilitate them and when they go for a job, it has, “You have a criminal record X, you cannot get the job.” Our prisons are universities, providing diplomas and PhDs in crimes to inmates.

“• Establishment of a National Forensic DNA Databank;”

—would not go into that. You have families waiting weeks for autopsies. We are giving hundreds of scholarships every year and we cannot give 10 or 20 in forensic science and pathology and whatnot; just 20? You always tie your scholarships to your manpower needs, but you are doing history. You are giving them to study marketing and they are studying all kinds of foolishness, and the things we need are ignored.

“• Purchase of four Patrol...and eight high-speed Interceptors to aid border security...”

How long will they last before “dey mash up?”

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“• Purchase of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles...to assist with surveillance and Search and Rescue...”

We have heard this before. I could go on and on.

We need a wholesale review of the Ministry of National Security. I am not criticizing you. I think they have inherited a system that is in need of urgent repair, and if you need our support to effect this repair, and it makes sense, and it is in the national interest—can I speak for five?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: We need a wholesale review of the Ministry of National Security, the TTPS and all arms of the national security apparatus. We need to set measurable targets for each national security function, create lean systems, structures and procedures to achieve that.

For example, the Minister of Finance said he is going to recruit new police officers, and I hear today we are boasting about officers in the municipal police. We do not need police. Our sanctioned strength of 7,000 police officers and 3,000 SRPs are twice the 5,000 officers in Toronto, who serve a population of three million. They serve a bigger set—a larger population. They are less than us, and you know what? Their murder rate is a fraction of ours and their detection rate is much, much higher. It is not—when I see we are putting in more police, I know “we lose it”. “We ain’t have ah clue”. It is not data-driven. We have more police than Chicago, which has, on a per capita basis, one of the highest murder rates in the United States. “And we beating dem back”. So we “go have” more police than anybody else. Boots, boots and more boots on the feet of recruits. Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, hon. Member for giving way. I

heard the Member for Mayaro offering support to the Government on crime reduction initiatives. I am listening to your contribution and I am also very much interested to know if you are willing to cooperate with the Government and look at initiatives that we can work together towards reducing incidence of crime and criminality in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: The answer is, yes.

Generational transfer: We are being—and here I speak for the next generation, nobody here. I am on my own here, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We are being governed by out-of-touch, antideluvian, 1960s-era, educated and pseudocolonial misfits, and that includes all of us. “I in dat too”. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in order to make Trinidad and Tobago great again, we must craft a system that allows for renewal of those tasked with leadership.

Ms. Beckles: That is Trump.

Mr. R. Charles: Which is what?

Ms. Beckles: That is Trump.

Mr. R. Charles: I withdraw it. I withdraw it. It is Trump. I withdraw it—to make Trinidad achieve its destiny, which God destined for us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: This budget will have no effect unless we have a seamless generational transfer based on well-conceived succession planning. Those who will feel the impact of the decisions we make in our various budgets must have a seat at the table. Right now, “dey barely have a foot in de door of de room”. Yeah. And we have ignored their issues, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have ignored their issues. We have ignored their issues. Look at some

of their issues that we are ignoring: Unsustainable debt we are bequeathing to them. We have not dealt frontally with the scourge of NCDs, having regard to younger citizens now being victims of diabetes and obesity. We are in climate change. I heard a lot about climate change, but nothing measurable. How much in this budget—how much money you put, tells me how important it is. How much money has been allocated for climate change, climate adaptation and mitigation?

Are the curricula and other approaches in our education sector designed to prepare future generations to compete in an unforgiving, competitive, global environment market? Are we saddling future generations with future import bills, with no plans to change the dietary habits of our citizens? Fast food, “greasy dis, chicken dat, process de other”. What is the plan? And where is the money behind the plan?

Will we truly integrate our Spanish-speaking Venezuelan guests so that they help Trinidad and Tobago become a global bilingual country and not one with a highly disadvantaged Spanish-speaking citizenry, adding to future problems? Will we educate our youth to deal with gender-based issues? Part of the problem in the schools in Trinidad and Tobago is when that guy complained, Lalchan—and I extend condolences to the family—when he complained, he is complaining in a school where 80 per cent of the teachers are female. Where are the strong men? The Mr. Chandler, the Mr. Tony Joseph’s father, the others, Mr. Tikasingh, big men? You could have bullied a child and the report went to Mr. Tikasingh? “Yuh dead!”

Will future generations be equipped to handle increasing number of aged citizens? “I geh frighten” in Trinidad when I look—there is no

high-quality old-age homes for the average citizen in Trinidad and Tobago. None! In Tokyo, you can go anywhere on a wheelchair. In Trinidad and Tobago, you cannot, not even in government buildings, hotels, and even Parliament. If the elevator is not working, future, aged parliamentarians may not be able to come in this Chamber.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes.

Mr. R. Charles: Oh, Lord. Yeah. Something has to give. I call on our leaders to follow in the footsteps of President Biden, as I quote his statement from the UN General Assembly—I quote:

“But as much as I love the job, I love my country more. I decided, after 50 years of public service, it’s time for a new generation of leadership to take my nation forward. My fellow leaders, let us never forget, some things are more important than staying in power. It is your people that matter the most.

Never forget, we are here to serve the people, not the other way around.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, my wish, as I leave Parliament, is for a seamless generational transfer of leadership to the next generation. I do not have time to talk about my constituency. All I can say is, we are tired of begging for roads, better roads, regular water supplies, reduced crime, so that the iconic St. Madeleine Pond will not continue to be a dumping ground for murdered bodies.

Like the THA, give us our 6 per cent share of the budget and leave us alone to improve our lives. Naparima will then become a paradise among constituencies. I will be able to show off on Arima and Lopinot/Bon Air West because we have \$2 billion; \$2 billion. You “cyah” hand Princes

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Town Regional Corporation \$200 million for three constituencies, Moruga/Tableland, Naparima and Princes Town and say, we are happy. And yet, I get accused, “You are doing nothing for the constituency.” But where am I going to get money? Beg? Thief? I cannot. Give us the resources, leave us alone, and we will improve the lives of our citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I appreciate you giving me the time. As I said, this is my last and I am speaking, not out of bitterness or hatred or anything. It is for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Amen.

1.40 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And you were given your fair share of time, Member for Naparima. I recognize the Member for Laventille East/Morvant.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Adrian Leonce): I thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute here in this debate. As Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, and also as Member of Parliament for Laventille East/Morvant, I would like to first congratulate our Minister of Finance for his budget statement with the theme: “Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity”, 10th budget submission. And I would like to say that, the People’s National Movement has guided this country into economic growth in the most difficult times.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: And, we must pay gratitude to where it is due. And we as a nation, we also must be very proud of the growth that we have been

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making.

Serving in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, under the hon. Member for Arouca/Maloney we have focused on making real opportunities for persons, for something that we consider to be one of the main basic need, which is shelter. Now, in this Government team, we have a lot of strong players, and we take our work very seriously. I take my work very seriously, and I understand that the things that we do, and the things that we say, the people of Trinidad and Tobago listen. So, today I want to make this contribution, and I want to speak to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Housing, Mr. Deputy Speaker. A lot of people feel that the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development is just the HDC, and I would like to make my contribution today to guide persons on the good work that the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development continues to do, and not even mention HDC until the end. Now, our focus is mainly for the vulnerable, the most vulnerable in society who depend on us for housing. And we have several agencies that we depend on for this.

Now, when you think about your shelter, you think about the community, you think about your home, you think about a place of peace, a place of security, a place of serenity, and these are the foundations and the pillars that we use when we think about providing shelter for persons. We think about developing persons in their space, we think about developing the space, we think about bringing economic activity. We think about training, we think about letting persons understand how to access housing, because accessing housing sometimes somebody would say, you know, they want a

HDC home, but really and truly, they want support, they want to renovate their space, they want to make their space liveable.

Sometimes their situation might change, they are growing older, so they would need different forms of access, more accessibility, you know, they might have additions to the family, so, they might need another space in the home. These are the things that we try to bring to the population of Trinidad and Tobago to let them know that through this Ministry we can assist you. To not just develop your space for housing, but also provide the need that is required for the main housing.

Now, I made a pledge and most of us made that pledge too. We made a pledge to dedicate our lives to the service of our God and our country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: And, I take that pledge very seriously. So, when I go out to work, I go out to work with the intention that I am serving my God, and my county. When I speak to people, I speak to persons because sometimes they themselves are praying. They are praying to God for some assistance and I am grateful when God uses me as a vessel to give them that assistance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: Now, we have some “hero-agencies”, what I call hero-agencies in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. Some of which persons do not actually know, but I would like to go into some details about these hero-agencies. And, I would mention three of these hero-agencies. We have the Port of Spain Shopping Complex, we have the East Port of Spain Development Company, and we have the Land Settlement Agency. These entities work collectively to drive the Ministry’s projects

forward, guided by the National Development Strategy, Vision 2030, the Road Map to Recovery, and our greatest asset, people. Putting people first.

Now, let us start with the Port of Spain Shopping Complex. The Port of Spain Shopping Complex comprises 41 Independence Square, which is formally known the New City Mall, or as I know it, Tent City. The Charlotte Street, the East Side Plaza, and 43 Independence Square, which is the Drag Brothers. Now, Port of Spain Shopping Complex is doing something very tremendous with these assets that they have. If you pass on Independence Square, you will see the upgrade of the New City Mall where they change signage, and they did a lot of work in terms of upgrading the spaces and making persons feel a certain sense for pride in terms of selling and showing their skills, and doing their trade within the Port of Spain.

But, what is something that we need to note is that, these spaces that are provided for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are provided for the most vulnerable entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs are entrepreneurs that would not be able to afford the rent that you would typically pay to a space in Port of Spain, in the city. So, what does the Government of Trinidad and Tobago do? What does the Port of Spain Shopping Complex do? We subsidize this rent, we seek persons that are interested and have a viable interest to provide them with space and give them that opportunity to develop their craft, to develop their business, to grow and even transition out of using this subsidized space. And to do this we are very structured in the way we do this.

1.50 p.m.

On September 4th, we would have done business development training

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programme with NEDCO bringing persons who would have the spaces and giving them that training to understand business, and how to develop themselves and expand their business, and really assist them in transitioning into self-sustainability in terms of business. We also have where we would have teamed up with the East Port of Spain in terms of providing them with financial support. So you have your business and what we are saying is, you know what, we are going to give you a free space. We are going to give a chance. We are going to give you a free space. We are going to help and fund you and give you some rent for some time for free so you can “ketch” yourself, build on it, whatever this business plan that you have, build on it. Become self-sustainable and then move forward.

So what the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is doing is basically allowing persons who would typically not have the chance to have a space to be able to spend the money to rent in expensive malls and stores, but to have that same pride of being in a mall, being in this store, and doing this work to provide for their families, and to build and to grow, to provide employment, to hire store clerks, et cetera. This is what the Port of Spain Shopping Complex is doing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: And what I would like to say is that within doing this, we are allowing person to recognize, listen, these spaces are available this is what happening. We are getting more and more persons. There is an option. There is the hope. There is the hope for a better living. There is the hope for a better life. And when persons could say, “Listen, I have an option to do something better, and I have the support of the Government.” Hope is

something I take very seriously because sometimes when you listen to persons that turn to crime and criminal activity, most of the time it is because they are not informed and they lose hope. They lose the hope of being able to be employed. They lose the hope of being able to get their meal, which is why we provide more options. More options for persons, more hope. Real opportunity, real development, real progress, through the Port of Spain Shopping Complex.

There are endless possibilities when you develop yourself as an entrepreneur because you learn about business, you learn about the value of money, you learn about employing, you learn about management. You learn about how to care for each other, you learn about marketing, you learn about customer service. All of these programmes we embed into training tenants within the Port of Spain Shopping Complex so that they can be better citizens and contribute to society.

We also have in line in the Port of Spain Shopping Complex a five-storey building that right now is it is in design phase. Where the old drag brothers were. That five-storey building right on Independent Square will be something in terms of our urban development, will be a new building, will be a brand new building that will also provide more spaces for more entrepreneurs, for more persons willing to do what they want. Whether you like art, whether you like sewing, whether you like craft, these are the things that we are bringing forward to persons in and around the East Port of Spain area.

So we want persons to improve their business. We want persons to expand their business, and we want persons to do well. The Port of Spain

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

Shopping Complex, I am very proud to say that they are doing just that. They are making the spaces. They plan to make the spaces a Wi-Fi free zone—these malls. This type of ingenuity that we are bringing to the malls will allow persons to be more attracted to the spaces.

So it is a holistic approach—from persons, the most vulnerable persons. Remember, the people that we are putting in these spaces are persons that typically would not be able to develop themselves or expand as an entrepreneur. So this is hope, and this is real, and this is what the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is doing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: I would like to say another agency, as I said before, that I am very proud of, is the East Port of Spain Development Company. Now, this agency that was formed under the People's National Movement is an agency directly responsible for the development, the progress, the upliftment of persons within the East Port of Spain area. It comprises of 19 communities and as you know, in Trinidad, we can all agree that there are some socioeconomic challenges within the East Port of Spain area. So this entity is specifically mandated to look at this space, this space within Trinidad, and come up with strategies, come up with development plans to ensure that there is a change within the culture within the space, and they have been doing such a great job.

I will give you some information in terms of some of the things that they have been doing. Let me just go straight to some of the projects, a lot of infrastructure projects. Now, earlier this year—or was it last year? The OPR, the OPR became a challenge for us in terms of procurement, but it is

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law. And if we are thinking about developing the economic strata within the East Port of Spain area, members who want to develop their business and their companies, they too will have to understand and fall in line with the law with the OPR.

The East Port of Spain Development Company created a secretariat where persons can go to the East Port of Spain Development Company and get the assistance they need to become OPR registered in whatever line Item business that they are interested in or whatever they practice to allow these persons to not just do their work within the East Port of Spain area but also throughout the rest of Trinidad and Tobago. And I would like to commend the East Port of Spain for that initiative because a number of persons, they feel intimidated by the OPR and the processes of the OPR, and the East Port of Spain has changed that. Now, you have an opportunity—because some persons have issues in terms of reading, some persons have a fear from the time you speak about forms. They have a fear of filling forms. So a number of people lose the opportunity of a lot of opportunities because they do not want to fall into that space. And the East Port of Spain Development welcomes everyone and said, “no, we will hold your hand, we will guide you and we would allow you to be able to partake in the national scope of work.” And for that I will like to congratulate them.

Their infrastructure works, their development works, in terms of personal development, their business initiatives, their sporting initiative. I would like to just name a few.

2.00 p.m.

Earlier today we heard the contribution of the Minister of Rural

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Development and Local Government, and he spoke about the real challenge of latrines within the country. The East Port of Spain took—there is an initiative where we go through these 19 communities and we build a standard bathroom and toilet to allow persons to have proper sanitation in their spaces. All of these things contribute to urban development, to better living and to more comfortable housing and housing spaces.

I remember one time a guy came to me and he said to me, “MP, I have an outside bathroom and I cringe every time because when my daughter goes outside she is uncomfortable and she is getting older and persons always look”. And I am telling you that the initiatives there to provide proper toilets and bathrooms changes the lives of the people and their family and that is such a great thing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: We are doing significant infrastructure works such as box drains and roads throughout the constituency. We have here, handrails and footpaths. We have developments in terms of some of the community centres. We even partnered with the Ministry of Education with some of the schools in terms of developing some of the schools and some of the infrastructure issues that they are having. As you know, the Ministry of Education is tasked with not just new schools that they are building, and thank you, the lower Morvant school is being built right now and is long-awaited, and the people of Laventille East Morvant are very happy about that.

So the East Port of Spain, also recognizing the importance of the assistance to schooling, has also partnered with the Ministry to assist in

developing some of the schools. We have here, a lot of community maintenance micro projects where we employ persons within the community to assist in maintaining and developing some of the work.

We have here, the Royal Stars pan theatre building where, in terms of culture, there are spaces that need developing. So we have a lot of persons who have been skilled in the pan and playing of the pan or interested in learning the pan, but we do not have the facilities. So the East Port of Spain took it upon themselves to ensure that these facilities are provided for the people of East Port of Spain.

We also have a significant amount of sport initiatives. There was the Junior Golf Programme where youngsters within the East Port of Spain community would have learned golf and they would have gone down to Petrotrin Golf Club and played golf. I have some of the youngsters saying that they want to ensure that when they get better, they want to play with the Prime Minister, and I am holding the Prime Minister to that, to play with them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: And the thing about it is—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. A. Leonce:—sports to me—and we can also play with the Member for Oropouche East. I know he is an avid golf player.

Mr. D. Lee: “You know dat?”

Hon. A. Leonce: We also—Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the East Port of Spain Development Company, support and help grow, with some of the other sporting initiatives that we are grateful to now be partaking of, for example,

swimming. Thanks to the People's National Movement, we have a beautiful swimming pool in two constituencies in the East Port of Spain area. One in Soogrim Trace and one in Morvant, in Coconut Drive.

And I will say something, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When I pass by the pool and I see the amount of elderly persons there taking part in aerobics and taking part in all the activities that the members of the Coast Guard provide and support, I feel very proud. There was one lady who said to me that she does not use her cane as often because of the therapy that the water gives and that is something very powerful.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: Do you know what is even more powerful? There are some youngsters that never went into a pool before and they would have been training and they would have been taught by the coast guards—and by the way, we have a Morvant Swim Academy and that could have only been possible because we have the facility of a pool. But these youngsters, they train, and I saw them enter a competition in Flying Fish and it was so emotional for me to see these same youngsters who did not grow up in pools, for a few months of training, were able to compete and come first and second. That is something very powerful.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: Because what it says is that, again, hope and opportunity are real because of the work provided by this People's National Movement Government. And we have several other things; we have a programme where—as you know, we have pan manufacturers within the East Port of Spain area and we have a programme where we are trying to get all the

schools within the East Port of Spain area to have pan.

Pan is our pride of this Nation and we are trying to make sure that it becomes part of the curriculum and we want to ensure that the instruments are there. That has been supported by the East Port of Spain Development Company. And I would also like to say that we also have manufacturing capabilities in the Russell Latapy Secondary School. Very powerful, and these initiatives—I have to thank our support from the private sector because they see the importance of injecting their funds into the East Port of Spain area, into Laventille, to Morvant and to the different parts of the community where we know we have challenges.

We have our ALTA Programme, we have Cooking with Confidence, we have Conversational Spanish—I heard a speaker before speaking about what are we doing in terms of making sure that we become bilingual. We have Conversational Spanish. East Port of Spain is looking at every aspect of life. We even have parenting. There is a programme, Confident Parenting, and re-branded as Building Resilient Families. So we recognize some of the challenges and we are investing in the persons within the East Port of Spain area through the East Port of Spain Development Company.

There are so many other things but I want to move forward to—oh, there is a business hatchery. Now this business hatchery programme, just as the Port of Spain Shopping Complex, it provides mentorship and support for start-up companies, individual entrepreneurs and established businesses that are looking to develop entrepreneurs and grow.

What happens when the employee becomes an employer? What happens is that that person now buffers the unemployment space because he

is now able to provide something that is very powerful: one, he is providing economic strength within the community and two, he is providing support to the other persons and their families. So these are the things that we want to continue empowering and growing persons with. So we spoke about Port of Spain Shopping Complex and the good work that they are doing providing that opportunity of option for growth and for development. We spoke about the East Port of Spain Development Company and the work that they are doing within the space in the 19 communities, giving holistic development.

2.10 p.m.

Now, if you think about it, all of these things are what is necessary for proper community, proper home, proper safety. These are the things that we need to continue doing because we need to develop persons, not just in terms of skill, but also in terms of mind. We need to develop persons so that they become citizens of great character. They start seeing the value of the pledge that we made, persons that honour themselves through God and for country, and we need the skill sets for us to all grow together.

You know, someone once said to me, “The rising tide raises all boats,” and we need to be able to raise each other so that Trinidad and Tobago could be a much better place.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: I would like to talk a little bit about the Land Settlement Agency. Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre would have asked about what is the criteria to get persons within his constituency. Let me just say this, and I checked, all 41 constituencies have benefited from the HVIP programme.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: All 41 constituencies. And what I would say, I want to read the eligibility criteria, and I want to encourage all persons to ensure that when you see persons that are eligible, contact the LSA or you could even contact me. Right?

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. A. Leonce: Because I take my work very seriously, I want to ensure that all persons, all persons of this nation benefit from what this Government is providing. The criteria for the HVIP is:

- To be a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago;
- Have attained an age of 21;
- To have the income of less than \$7,000 a month; and
- To be the legal occupant of the land by means of security of tenure or have tenure documents.

That is all.

What we do, we look at the structures, we send persons out, we ask them to assess the structure and we take the most vulnerable structures—persons that are most at risk when we have adverse weather—because we want persons to have resilient homes. So all persons that I have seen, that have benefited from this programme, have been very grateful and to me, it is a powerful programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: I would like to congratulate our Prime Minister for this programme, because I need to tell this nation how this programme started. The Prime Minister would have walked in Moruga/Tableland and he would

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

not have been satisfied with some of the living conditions of persons there. He instructed the then Minister of Housing and Urban Development to create a programme to address this. And what the Cabinet approved was to develop a programme where we can go to persons that filled out that criteria, and rebuild a resilient structure for free. Persons would benefit from a new two-bedroom structure, all courtesy of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and that programme was birthed under this People's National Movement Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: Now, this programme is developed and is managed under the Ministry by the LSA, and it is really geared to reduce poverty, and it is geared to reduce the persons that need protection from the natural elements and need access to water, to electricity, to sanitary facilities, contributing to a better physical and mental health. We want to provide these units to ensure that persons can focus more on education, on health care, on development. When you study—when your children come home and they want to study, if you do not have proper access to electricity, you do not have proper lighting, you do not have proper space—if rain is falling, you cannot focus. When we provide these units, what we are essentially doing is providing what is our essential purpose of the greatest need, which is shelter. We are providing a space for possibilities, for better families, for persons that are now able to really develop and become the best of who they can be.

By improving this living condition, it not just provides hope to that person, but it also provides hope to the other citizens of Trinidad that can say, “Listen, I also fall within that category. I also need help, and you know

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what? This Government gives me the hope that I can get help. I do have the ability to seek assistance.” And this assistance is for the most vulnerable. As I said at the start, this Ministry is focused on giving shelter, and avenues of shelter, and improving shelter to the most vulnerable.

To date, the LSA has overseen a construction of over 800 residential structures for low-income families throughout Trinidad. Think about that. Think about 800 families within this nation that now have a chance, a better space for living, now have a better space to provide for their children, now is not concerned of the adverse weather patterns because they live in a resilient structure. I have seen structures that were built, where we have a starter house, and persons would have gone afterwards and you would be surprised of these same structures and how they look now, put up moldings, put up additional rooms, et cetera. I am very happy to know that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago intervenes in these people’s lives, and they are very, very, very grateful.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: We have some special projects through this programme. We have gone down into the Beetham Gardens. This programme would have been initiated because of a fire and as such, we would have gone down to build structures under the HVIP area, so that persons can now have better structures. You know, where before they would have been clipping wires to get electricity, we would have brought T&TEC. We have proper water, proper sanitation for these persons. So in the Beetham we are doing this. We also have a programme in Morvant. We plan to go into Sea Lots.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. A. Leonce: We are doing it in Jacob Hill and so many other places that have these challenges. It is almost as though it is a transition of community, from a space of risk to a space of pride and opportunity.

2.20 p.m.

So we plan to continue this in this fiscal. We plan to do 500 houses of low income throughout Trinidad and Tobago. We also plan to undertake several infrastructure projects in several areas, and I will call out a few: in Windy Hill, Pascall Recreational Ground; Arima: Hamilton Siding, Nicaragua Road, Tractor Pool Road; Belle Smythe Street in Curepe; Maharaj Street, Grant's Trace, Rancho Quemado. We have Las Mercedes Trace; we have La Lune in Moruga, La Ruffin, Mandingo Road; we have Carapo, in Jokhan Trace—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: We have Church Street; we have Branch Trace in Enterprise; we have Psalm Drive in Enterprise; we have Johnson Street in Enterprise; we have Well Street in Point Fortin; we have Williams Avenue in Morvant; we have Butler Street. We have—so many projects that we are going through, where we consider it to be areas that need significant intervention. So, the LSA is going into spaces where, you know, several squatting areas, where typically the squatters are unplanned development, so there is not proper drainage. The structures would have been whatever materials they had available.

And what the LSA is doing, is going into these spaces, restructuring it, building resilient homes, developing the infrastructure, the drainage, the roads, et cetera for the persons, so that persons in Trinidad and Tobago—the

most vulnerable could benefit on what this nation is providing. And for me, that is something that I am proud to be part of. It is something that—I think that, it is heartwarming, to know that persons that may have been born in a community, and developed that squatting community there. In fact, we have 25 registered squatting communities in Trinidad. And not just because you are born and came up in a squatting community does not mean that you should not benefit from what this nation provides.

So the laws were changed, so that we can go in and provide better spaces for them; better opportunities for them, better living conditions for them. And the impacts of this is phenomenal. Because what it does, it allows persons to feel that sense of pride. We have developed recreational spaces, and all we are doing under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, is strategizing on how to urbanize these spaces, how to develop these spaces, so that everyone can feel that pride of community—everyone can have access to different things.

The LSA has also been going into communities and finding spaces, and building homework centres, going in and doing training, developing persons in different ways. Just as in the East Port of Spain, in terms of that holistic development of persons, going into communities and recognizing where the gaps are—where the gaps are with persons from within the communities, and seeing how best we could fill this gap. So that each one can basically benefit and say “listen this government really gives me the opportunity, so that I can do the things that I want to do. I have the opportunity to have a proper shelter. I have the opportunity to have good training close by. I have the opportunity, if I am interested in certain skills, I

can access it". And this Government has been working very hard to ensure that persons can become who they want to become.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: We also have a programme called the GASHH Programme, which is the Government Aided Self-Help Housing Programme. Now this programme is also a programme that persons who may not typically be able to afford the HDC units, but they may be able to get this subsidized land, and then they can develop this land with a modest home. And by the way, the LSA has different designs that they give for free. So you do not have to go and hire architects and engineers, these designs were already done and—so we give you subsidized land, we provide you with the designs and the structures. And now you can look at your pocket and see how you can manage. You might start off with a starter home, or even a one bedroom unit. And then as you go, you can go on and build. These are the opportunities that we provide for the citizens of our country. And so far we have not mentioned HDC. And all of these are opportunities, and avenues for shelter, that we provide for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Some of these areas where the GASHH Programme is being done, where lots are being developed, Cashew Gardens; Carlsen Field; Chin Chin Road, Cunupia; Factory Road, Chaguanas; Orange Field Road, Carapichaima; Milton Village, Couva; Roopsingh Road, Carapichaima; Waterloo, just to name a few. So far we have 409 beneficiaries, and they been sent to the Commissioner of State Lands, and we are going to organize to ensure that they get their deeds et cetera.

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There are a number of persons that have to be part of this programme, but we are confident that the persons that need it the most, are the people that are benefitting from this particular programme. I just want to run quickly, the LSA is also responsible for developing the residential lots for the former employees of Petrotrin—and just two weeks ago—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your speaking time is now expired. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to wind up, if you wish, you may proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: Yes, Madam Speaker. So, just about two weeks ago, we would have given out letters to 150 persons. Basically they are able to identify their lots and have that sense of security as to where they will be going, et cetera. The deeds are in process. This would have been our third submission and distribution of these letters.

So the Government is committed to doing a significant amount of work and the LSA is ensuring that housing and shelter are available to persons within this country, and not just persons in the country, but also to the most vulnerable. We have providing avenues so that the most vulnerable can get this. Now, there is another challenge that the LSA is also doing, where we try to regularize squatters. So there are persons who would have been squatting on land for quite some time and developed themselves, put up a really nice structure, but they cannot carry this to the bank. They do not have a deed. So, what has been happening, a lot of persons when they die, sometimes somebody else takes their property, and we have been hearing those stories.

So what we are trying to do, we try to give persons security. So in these squatting communities, we have established the tenure regularization, where persons are able to apply. Right. There are certificates of comfort and we would give you that certificate of comfort, or if you would have missed that period, we would give you that—we would start the process on the tenure. We would do the surveys, et cetera and persons are now able to put to the Government, and say “listen after this survey is done the Government will then offer you that same land that you are squatting on for one-third of the value”—just the land, regardless of what structure you put.

2.30 p.m.

So, essentially, we offer persons the opportunity for where they are squatting to actually own it, which means they now have the confidence to provide for their children and their children’s children. It is actually generational wealth. It is a structure for the most vulnerable persons to actual have that share within this nation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: This is what the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is doing. We are trying to ensure that no person is left behind, because we see the people as our greatest asset.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: Persons who would have experienced these types of programmes would know the power of it, and I would just like—the reason why I wanted to express these things is because I wanted persons to understand that sometimes you may be in a situation or in a space and you may think that the only solution or the only option is to go and get an HDC

house, when, really and truly, there are so many other options for the space that you may currently occupy, and that is something very, very powerful.

So, I would just like to skip over to some of the things that we are also doing in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. We also have a number of subsidies and grants and, in my view, persons, some persons, they—as I said earlier, some persons just need a little assistance. You know, they have a leaking roof. You know, they want to add another room, et cetera, and they just need that assistance, you know, but they are in a vulnerable state and they do not have the money to do it. These grants and subsidies we provide to persons of this nation, and, again, it is available to persons that earn—the subsidies, I believe, is under \$7,000 and the grants are under \$5,000.

These grants obviously are grants, so the Government gives you the money. The subsidies are really designed where you have some money but you need some help to put towards it, and I have seen so many persons do so much with the subsidies. In fact, a couple of months ago we were in Tobago and we walked with the Members of Parliament for Tobago, and I was absolutely amazed with what persons were able to do with the subsidy in Tobago. So I know this programme is working. I know that people are getting hope. I know what we are doing makes a serious impact, and the budget that was read for us, it continues this work. It continues that economic growth within the spaces, and, as such, I am happy and I have to congratulate the Minister of Finance for—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce:—managing our economy so that we could continue doing

the things that we are doing.

I would like to just run quickly to—Member for Arima would have spoken about Connected Arima and I just wanted to add that it is a very important project, you know, and we have to start somewhere. So when the Port of Spain Shopping Complex decides to make all their spaces Wi-Fi free, that to me is a big step, because what it does, it now allows persons to see business in a different way. So in Arima, you can imagine you are in Arima, you are all over, and businessmen in Arima have an app where you could order stuff just before you get there while you are in the street. You know, the first thing persons do when they reach a space is to see what Wi-Fi is available. I mean, it is a very powerful move.

I have listened and I heard a speaker speaking before about, they “doh” know what the Minister of Digital Transformation—or they “doh” know who it is, and I saw—I think it was the same day, that in the region he was honoured with being the head in his field, you know, and I am so proud that he is my Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: I was listening to one of his employees, his officers, and they spoke about so much that is happening. You know, there was one thing where he spoke about, like, for example, the EMA. They are doing different apps where you could actually, where if there is noise, without doing the complaints, there is an app where they will tell you what the noise level is and you could do the reports.

You know, I listened to the CEO in North Central and he spoke about the cause of this technology, how they are going to be sharing information

differently and improving the performance of the health care system. I have looked at all the different uses of technology within the different agencies. So I see the Connected Arima in terms of transitioning and building and bringing that space to a smart-city space, doing all the smart lights and bringing security, bringing transport, bringing all these things to fruition. I see that as a powerful move, because I see that, even though it is a pilot, I can actually picture it in my community.

I picture walking the Lady Young Road or in the Savannah having access to Wi-Fi; persons have an app, a Morvant app, basically saying, “Listen, we have football. We have games. We have so many things”, bringing communities closer together.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: So I know, Madam Speaker, that we have challenges, as in everything. You know, we still have to ensure that we have the bureaucratic process that we still have to follow. We need approvals, et cetera, and things might slow down, but I want to say that we are grateful for this opportunity and we continue to do the work of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you very much.

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 the opportunity to enter the debate and address the House and the national community on a few of the pertinent issues arising in the budget statement and some related issues in the public space at

this time. Madam Speaker, I want to begin by congratulating the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—on a most comprehensive, detailed, policy-oriented response to Budget 2024.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Member of Parliament for Siparia is at this very moment attending the send-off in a very troubled area in Princes Town. Once again, on behalf of Members on this side, I want to extend condolences and our very deepest sympathy to the family, friends, relatives of Jayden Lalchan in circumstances that are so horrible.

The Opposition Leader is where she would be, extending sympathy, compassion, hope, solidarity with troubled families in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: I congratulate all my colleagues on this side of the House for their sterling contribution in the debate thus far, and we look forward to some powerhouse contributions to come on this side, I am sure.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance, as we all know, delivered his tenth budget presentation last Monday. He kept the worst for last.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Minister uttered 34,975 words. Madam Speaker, that is a fact that we checked using Wi-Fi that the Member for Laventille East/Morvant reminded us about. Madam Speaker, I just want to put in context that Shrimati Nirmala Sitharaman, the distinguished Minister of Finance of the Republic of India, in July 2024, she was budgeting for a

quarter of the world's population, she spoke for 1 hour and 25 minutes.

Hon. Member: What?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

2.40 p.m.

Dr. Moonilal: She only had to budget for a quarter of the planet.

Mr. Imbert: Oh, God, UNC.

Hon. Member: [*Laughter*]

Dr. Moonilal: Now, had this Minister of Finance had to budget for India, he would still be speaking.

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

Dr. R. Moonilal: Now, for 5 hours and 12 minutes, after a while, Madam Speaker, the national concern was, when will it end?

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: How many pages left? And so, Madam Speaker, he added—

Mr. Indarsingh: What about the content?

Dr. R. Moonilal: [*Laughter*]—injury to insult by continuing. Madam Speaker, if this ever happens again, and it cannot, this Member should supply this House and its Members with painkillers, eye drops and other related pharmaceuticals to assist during that exercise. Madam Speaker, I would not want to bring anybody into this debate, but, I took a look around the House that day, and I think many of us were moved—

Mr. Hosein: Exhaustion.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—to some level of exhaustion.

Mr. Indarsingh: Exasperated.

Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, so with this wordy budget, the Minister took us around the world. He told us about the drought in Panama and instead of blaming, and I say, the Member for Siparia, Kamla—instead of blaming the Member for Siparia, he blamed—

Madam Speaker: You know the right thing.

Dr. R. Moonilal: I know.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: So let us do the right thing because it is the right thing.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Sure.

Madam Speaker: So take out that word—

Dr. R. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker:—and you continue with all the respect to the rules.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yes. Let us proceed. The Member for Siparia. Instead of blaming the Member for Siparia—

Mr. Hosein: Withdraw.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Oh, withdraw?

Madam Speaker: You did not take out the word.

Hon. Member: Withdraw the word.

Madam Speaker: Yes, yes.

Dr. R. Moonilal: I thought I did.

Madam Speaker: No, I did not understand that.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Oh, fine. I withdraw that word.

Madam Speaker: Sure.

Dr. R. Moonilal: And instead of blaming the Member for Siparia on this occasion, he blamed Panama; a drought. Then he took us to Argentina

where we did not know it was that bad. Then took us to Copenhagen; then took us to Germany; then came back to London—

Mr. Indarsingh: The Red Sea.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—ended up in the Red Sea.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And I think if he continued, they would reach the Barents Sea by then. But he took us all around the world but without any focus, without any purpose and just continued forever. And I think that, Madam Speaker, was a disservice to this country; the presentation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And in the future, a future Government ought to look at that.

Madam Speaker, at the heart of this matter, the Minister came with rehashed plans and programmes that we have heard so many times. Whether it is the dry dock in La Brea, it is the Toco highway, it is—what again? The “umm”—

Mr. Hosein: Moruga.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—Moruga highway, whatever it is, every year; the same plan, the same programme and they have a crisis of implementation. It is a crisis of implementation—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—that we face, Madam Speaker. And then they beat their chests on their performance. We did not know what was happening because the Member for Diego Martin West was offering “caraille” and the Member for Diego Martin North/East was offering sweet bread; one was sour and one

was sweet, so you do not know what is the true picture. And I ask, would the real Member for Diego Martin North/East come forward? Because on one occasion he told a court in an affidavit, in the TTRA matter, that it was gloomy, the next two/three years; bad.

Things were collapsing, no revenue, and then he came last week Monday and said “Things are looking up; good”. And the Prime Minister is on record, “dark days ahead until 2027”, I believe it is. So the Prime Minister, one, would like the population to purchase a Lotto ticket and indicate that that Lotto will draw in 2027. Hold on, you could succeed but in 2027. That is where we are with this contradiction that comes from the highest level of the Government. They were caught out by the Leader of the Opposition who raised the issue of the \$50 million entertainment budget for the Office of the Prime Minister, another \$400 million that they cannot explain.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: For fetes and gallivanting.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Prime Minister, for “fete”—

Mr. Indarsingh: Gallivanting.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—\$50 million, gallivanting.

Mr. Indarsingh: “Fete and more fete.”

Dr. R. Moonilal: Four hundred million dollars, the Prime Minister was on a platform last week Friday, I believe. It was a wake somewhere in—Belmont, was it?

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: A wake somewhere—

Mr. Indarsingh: Moved from the corner to the community centre.

Dr. R. Moonilal: And he said—well, he had to go to the community centre, nobody will come out at the corner.

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And, Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister was there. I did not listen, I must confess, you know. I was not doing anything but I did not listen.

Hon. Member: Too painful.

Dr. R. Moonilal: And I had to ask someone who was paid, to listen for me and give some notes. So I have a sense of what was said. Nobody will listen to him for free.

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

Dr. R. Moonilal: So, Madam Speaker, we did get a report on that. It is fascinating, the issues that the Prime Minister raised related to the budget, trying to explain the \$400 million as payments to UDeCOTT, and I will come to that in a few minutes, when the Opposition Leader exposed him, as late as yesterday, that those figures are already in the budget. The Ministry of Health is paying UDeCOTT for the hospitals, so it cannot be in the Office of the Prime Minister. We await the next excerpt on that matter. I want to remind the Government, before I really get into the meat of my contribution here, that this is a minority Government. This is an Opposition in waiting.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: They were booted out in Tobago and they got less votes than the UNC in the local government election. They are the minority and the Opposition in waiting. Madam Speaker, they came, they saw and they

destroyed. We got cries, untruths and mamaguy. Those last 10 years, Madam Speaker, the last nine years or so, constitute and will constitute lost years of development.

Today, Madam Speaker, I can tell you that in this country we have too much grief and death in Trinidad and Tobago. There is an overbearing hopelessness in this society. Children are being slaughtered. The social fabric of this nation is decaying. We have bullies in the schools. The Member for Princes Town alluded to bullies in the Parliament, Madam Speaker. We have criminals roaming the streets, mass murderers on the prowl because the detection rate in the police is so low. I believe it is now about a 15 per cent detection rate for murder, it could be less for other serious crimes, Madam Speaker. The detection rate is abominable. Madam Speaker, the family structure has broken down due in part to poverty, joblessness, hopelessness, economic contraction. Madam Speaker, a good slogan for the Member for Diego Martin North/East is “Honey, I shrunk the economy”.

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

Dr. R. Moonilal: I shrunk the economy. This economy is 20 per cent smaller than it was when we left office in 2015; honey, I shrunk the economy. That is their motto. And I will come to the energy sector for a few comments in a few minutes. Madam Speaker, everything is co-related and the wider failure stems from an evil that lurks in the highest quarters of this land. Madam Speaker, day by day this society is norming to tragic news as we had within the last hour or so, of a double killing, I believe in—

Mr. Indarsingh: Barrackpore.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—in south Trinidad, Barrackpore. Madam Speaker, this is the context that we come to the population with today.

Madam Speaker, in the budget debate I took note of something which I will also raise now. The Point Fortin Hospital, a project of the People's Partnership Administration—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—and we are proud. When they came in 2015, Madam Speaker, they had an approach, and we know their approach; they stopped all major large-scale projects of the People's Partnership and they said they have to review. They are reviewing. Do you know what they did as well? They went to large-scale contractors and said, "Reduce the cost". "Anything the Partnership was paying, come in with less, and if you come in with less, we can go publicly and say look, they were building a house for, I doh know, \$600,000; we are building it for \$400,000. They were building a highway for X billion, now we are building it for X billion, minus something.

They were building—something else—a community centre. They were building this so we want to come in with less." So they carried a narrative that the People's Partnership was doing everything. So we had budgeted, I believe it was \$187 million to complete the Brian Lara, they said "No, no, no, we did that with \$90 million". You know, they had to refurbish and do over Brian Lara about three times. That will come in for more than \$180 million. Because now I believe, as the Member for Caroni Central, a brilliant contribution here—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

Dr. R. Moonilal:—reminded us, I think they are “fogging up” the media centre, to use the term—I got it right. Madam Speaker, so all the projects. I was appalled when I heard the Minister announce that the Point Fortin Hospital came in at \$1.3 billion. Madam Speaker, I took note and I went back to my documents—some of the documents—public documents which I kept from the ministerial office, public documents.

2.50 p.m.

And, Madam Speaker, do you know the initial budget of that hospital under the Partnership was \$810 million?

Hon. Member: Wow.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, \$810 million. They came in at \$1.3 billion. That is the \$500 million more than budgeted.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And, that is one project. And, Madam Speaker, I have in my hand a document, which I will come to in a little while—

Mr. Indarsingh: In a red folder.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—in a red folder, believe it or not, on another large-scale project. But before I get there—I do not want to get there too early, Madam Speaker—I want to speak about these projects. They went to the Curepe Interchange and one of their Members was boasting that they did it for less money. They removed roads that today, you still have bottleneck traffic. Madam Speaker, not even Waze can help you to navigate that interchange.

Mr. Hosein: “Waze does get confused”.

Dr. R. Moonilal: They confuse Waze.

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

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Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

Dr. R. Moonilal: They confuse Google. You have to go two miles to come back up the road, Madam Speaker. But they had a narrative that you have to come in less than the Partnership, so they can go to the population and say, “Look at that, they were building for \$10 and we now building for \$6, so where the \$4 was going?” So they carried about that and so on, and they got away with it for a while.

We bought vessels, coast guard vessels, Madam Speaker, I think six—

Hon. Members: Damen.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—Damen vessels. Madam Speaker, those vessels went to Suriname to dry dock, they came back to Port of Spain, Chaguaramas, and you know they are still not functioning? This country has two Ministers of National Security and one vessel operational. One vessel is, today, operational and two Ministers of National Security.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah. Madam Speaker, the coast guard is no longer a coast guard, it is just a guard, because they do not guard the coast, so it is just a guard. It happened under them. They have a lot of firsts that they could take a curious credit for, you know, it is a curious credit. Never in the country’s history has this country been without, at least, one operational vessel and it was like this a few months ago.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance—correct me, if I am wrong, but he cannot—dipped his hands in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, not once, not twice, but 10 times. How much money?—\$16 billion, I think?

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: He is saying it is more than 10. Madam Speaker, I am

happy that he is responding and awake.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, in the Heritage and Stabilisation jar, we should put a rat trap inside there with some kind of cutter. If we put that there, his both hands will be bandaged now.

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

Dr. R. Moonilal: Both his hands would be in bandages now if we put a cutter in that Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. And if we test after a few years, his hands they will be scarred. Ten times, no Minister of Finance in this country's history "do dat". No government would do that. And he says, he is the first, but you are the first and you are the last.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: All the talk about revenue and the economy turning around and so on, 10 times you put your hands in that jar called the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

While that was happening, Madam Speaker, crime escalated. They cannot protect you from a mosquito, they cannot protect you from a snail and they cannot protect you from the criminal elements. And I tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago, it will get worse. This is not the worst. It will get worse before they demit office, Madam Speaker, which will be soon.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, I come to a matter that has been in the public domain, this refinery sale. I want to congratulate the Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre, the very distinguished Member for Pointe-a-

Pierre—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—on that dragon-like contribution last week that exposed and ripped apart the contribution of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. And, you know, I had cause to reflect as well on the contribution of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries on Friday last—I think he also was at the wake. And, Madam Speaker, it was interesting they did not call the Minister of Finance to speak on the budget in a political meeting at the height of the budget. They called the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. And the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries had this to say, he was praising the Prime Minister—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: He was praising the Prime Minister. He said, they are well known throughout the world by all the executives in the oil and gas sector. In fact, they are known on a first-name basis. I want to tell the Member for Port North/ St. Ann's West, this is not our first rodeo. "We come here before, long time". The people who head all those oil and gas companies, they are business persons, they are interested in money, they have no friends and they have no enemies. Today, it might be Stuart and Keith, tomorrow it is "Kams" and "Moonie".

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

Dr. R. Moonilal: No, it was an analogy.

Madam Speaker: You self-corrected before.

Dr. R. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Yes, please.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Today, it is the Member for Diego Martin West and the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, tomorrow it is the Member for Claxton Bay and the Member for Siparia, you know. So, Madam Speaker, this is how business works. They are not your friends in that way, they are into business, so do not feel that, you know, it is a friendship working here. And they went and they negotiated, and while they negotiated, they collapsed the energy sector. They collapsed the energy sector.

And, Madam Speaker, I want come to one issue of that sector because I think the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre dealt with it so comprehensively. Only one matter I would raise. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries came to the House and made what he thought was some bombshell announcement that a fake document was tendered during the process and it was a wire transfer of some kind and so on, and it was fake. I took note of a matter today, dated 8th October—I think that is today. Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited issued a media release to say they are in receipt of a document submitted by Patriotic Energies in furtherance of its non-binding offer for the Guaracara refinery. A document, US \$1.5 billion. “Information to hand suggests that there was no such transfer. Accordingly, the... document has been referred to...legal advisors...for”—relevant—“advice...”—and so on.

I want to ask, how Trinidad Petroleum got hold of wire transfer documents, meant to be under the purview of an independent evaluation committee chaired by one Vishnu Dhanpaul.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Dr. R. Moonilal: The other members of that committee—it is very instructive, Madam Speaker. The other members of that committee, for the record—and we want to thank the members of that committee as well for their service, Madam Speaker, their service to the country in this manner. Vishnu Dhanpaul, Sandra Fraser, Dexter Jaggernauth, Jimmy Wong, Selwyn Lashley, Clyne La Borde, Christopher Narine Thomas, Anil Singh and others, we thank them for their service. But I am not seeing anywhere there, Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited. In fact, I am not even seeing the Minister's name here as part of the evaluation committee. How did the Minister get wind of a wire transfer involving an impartial and independent evaluation committee? The Minister has to tell us, how did this happen? Did you enter the room of evaluation committee? By accident, you were in White Hall and you entered the wrong room and they were looking at documents that Patriotic submitted? How did this happen? And how did Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited get a copy of these documents—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—confidential documents meant for Scotia international and meant for the evaluation committee?

How it works, Madam Speaker, is when you send your documents to the evaluation committee, if they believe that something is amiss and so on, they have a duty to take it up with the authorities, and politicians do not get involved in that. But, Madam Speaker, that is a question they will answer. But you see, it is related to another matter I will raise now, because I am on this matter. They have developed this tragedy of influencing, undermining, participating in matters of evaluation, in matters dealing with all types of,

you know, reviews and so on.

Madam Speaker, I have in my hand a document by NIDCO. Let me take a little sip for that. Madam Speaker, it is a freedom of information request made, it is dated the 14 April, 2021. And do you know, Madam Speaker, we got hold of this as part of the freedom of information business? Questions were asked, Madam Speaker, to NIDCO as to the process for submitting bids and tenders and proposals and interest by Austal or Incat to provide passenger fast ferries to service the sea bridge between Trinidad and Tobago for the period 2018/2019.

3.00 p.m.

Very instructive. This has revealed that Cabinet, of course, agreed to an official visit by a delegation from Trinidad and Tobago to China and Australia, May 2018. So let us see how it goes. An official delegation went to China and Australia, they saw a boat, “dey like boat, dey buy boat”.

Hon. Member: Picture of de boat.

Dr. R. Moonilal: They saw a picture of the boat because the boat was not constructed yet and “dey buy boat”. When we asked about the names and qualifications of persons on the committee established to evaluate the submitted bids or tenders and/or proposals, Cabinet, June 21, 2018—and I do receive some Cabinet Notes and Minutes time and time again, Madam Speaker. I think they probably still have my name and address on the list there.

Madam Speaker, Cabinet appointed a committee to review proposals for the purchase of fast ferries. Madam Speaker, the tune of money we are talking about here, 70 plus 70, 140—but US \$140 million multiplied by

seven, almost a TT \$1 billion passing here to purchase boats, fast ferries. You know it is the evaluation committee—well, let us get the term right. Yes. Yes. To evaluate the submitted bids, Madam Speaker. The hon. Stuart Young, Minister of Communications, Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. Chairman of an evaluation committee for a TT \$1 billion to receive bids, tenders, interests. The hon. Maj. Gen., Minister of National Security, Ret. Edmond Dillon; Sen. The Hon. Dennis Moses, he was then Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs. This one is an interesting one. Mr. Marvin Gonzales, Director Legal Services, Ministry of Works and Transport, as he then was. So he was involved a little way before on the compound. Mr. Stephen Gardner, Project Manager; Mr. Demi John, businessman.

Madam Speaker, this reveals that politicians with Cabinet rank who are involved in policy making. Now to be a Member of Parliament I think you need to be 18 years old and not bankrupt, unless I am mistaken.

Mr. Hosein: Correct.

Dr. R. Moonilal: It correct? Yeah. So satisfying the age requirement and the bankruptcy requirement, you get to the Parliament and you can get to the Cabinet, not that we have nothing more to offer like to—sanity, I guess.

Madam Speaker, politicians found their way on a committee to evaluate a \$1 billion in bid for fast ferries. When we asked who else was on this committee? NIDCO said, no. It had nobody else. We asked NIDCO, could we get the report of the committee established to evaluate the submitted bids and tenders? They said, NIDCO is not in possession of any such report. NIDCO that is purchasing—

Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

Mr. Hosein: Project managing.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—project managing, going to visit to see if the boats are, you know, compatible and so on, they say, we are not in possession of any such report on the evaluation. We are not in possession of that.

Mr. Indarsingh: A \$1 billion?

Dr. R. Moonilal: We asked for the report of the committee established to negotiate with companies for the provision of passenger fast ferries. NIDCO replied, NIDCO is not in possession of any such report also.

Ms. Ameen: “Huh”

Dr. R. Moonilal: A \$1 billion spending and the state enterprise that is dealing with this matter, does not even have the report because we dread to think they have and they will not disclose, so, they do not have the report. Madam Speaker, this process of evaluation and so on, using politicians is something they are familiar with, Madam Speaker, and that is why when they purchase whether is boat or plane or anything, you will have all of this scandal and bacchanal—

Mr. Indarsingh: “Umm humm.”

Dr. R. Moonilal:—apart from the real issue of non-performance and having vessels and equipment that are operational. Madam Speaker, let me get to my red file here immediately. I mean, I am itching to get to this business here, Madam Speaker.

So, Madam Speaker, we know Ministers find themselves in the Cabinet, they recuse themselves 98 times, 100 times. In fact, they have an interesting strategy. They recuse and then they accuse. So they recuse themselves and accuse us. It is a nice strategy. Madam Speaker, I heard the

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Prime Minister last week as well. He was responding on the platform to serious concerns raised in the Parliament and in the speech of the Leader of the Opposition.

The Prime Minister raised a most horrendous matter that touch and concern all citizens, that such an installation as the Diplomatic Centre that houses a Cabinet room, government offices and residence of the head of government. He said that under the centre the sewerage lines and so on were blocked and he called in WASA and then they discovered something there. They discovered that it was a mass of female underwear. It was in the newspaper reported so, Ma'am. That was a very serious matter, that WASA would be called in. Madam Speaker, I called WASA, I said, "Is there a report on this very—

Hon. Member: Troubling.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—"troubling matter?" The person on the line with WASA laughed in my face. He said, "Doh ask we nothing about politics." That is where we are. That is where we are. So the Prime Minister has gone on to make these serious allegations, and I challenge the Prime Minister now, go further and produce the WASA report that speaks to that matter.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And as they say in the O.J. Simpson matter, "if it does not fit, you must acquit".

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: "If it does not fit, you must acquit" because they are making serious allegations, and the Prime Minister has this pathological obsession, Madam Speaker, with undergarments and sleep clothes of the

Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

female. A pathological, you know, obsession which, I think, Freud explained somehow, but now is not the time—

Mr. Indarsingh: For that.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—for that, Madam Speaker. I think Sigmund Freud explained that well, Madam Speaker, that obsession. But if it does not fit, acquit. So I expect that the Member Diego Martin West to have in his hand the offending materials and to walk up and down the Brian Lara looking to see who it fits.

Madam Speaker: Member—

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yes. Let us move on.

Madam Speaker: Yes, please.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, on that note all I will and close is that, over my life, you know, I have been shopping, I travel a bit as well in Malls and I heard of Victoria Secrets, but I have never heard of Rowley secrets.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: So that may be a new addition. I have not seen the shop yet. Maybe that shop exists. Madam Speaker, I want to come to the highway, Point Fortin to San Fernando another project undertaken by the People's Partnership that we are proud of. We are proud.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, when they came into office they raised all kinds of concerns about the OAS and so on, about all other companies too. To this day I want to remind Members opposite, after 10 years no police officer has gone to the door of the Member for Siparia asking her any questions about her tenure as Prime Minister of this country.

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Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: She is the only Prime Minister, the Member, is the only Prime Minister, I say this with great respect to former Prime Ministers. Every time you demit that office, there is some little “troubleness” and so on, troublesome business. Some have had it more than others. In fact, when you demit office as a Minister too, you find yourself, you know, engaged in some business of investigation and so on. No Integrity Commission, no police has gone by the house of the Member for Siparia on any matter.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: When they campaign, Madam Speaker, that is their thematic about corruption and corruption, and I want to tell you, no police ever come by the house of the Member for Oropouche East either.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: When they come by me, it is because they want water, they want printer, they want—

Ms. Ameen: Stationery.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—paper and ink.

Ms. Ameen: Yes. Yes.

Dr. R. Moonilal: When they come by me they want to find out your address. That is why they come by me, to find out where you are living.

Madam Speaker, I have in my hand an important report. You see, I made a statement two years ago and showed pictures and so on, elsewhere, that they had mismanaged this project called the highway to Point Fortin. Do you know when they came into office they stopped that project, accused us of every wrong under the sun, but what they did again, they told

contractors, reduce the price so that we can show that the People's Partnership was doing it for an excessive cost, and look we are here now and we have reduced the price. You know what happened, Madam Speaker? The "Mosquito crack" happened. Yeah. On that road by the Godineau River—

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—there is something called the "Mosquito crack". I dubbed it the "Mosquito crack", but I did not know that I was technically correct.

Mr. Hosein: It is close to the creek.

Dr. R. Moonilal: I thought I was politically correct, but not technically. I have in my hand, Madam Speaker, which I will not display. I cannot trample on your goodwill, Madam Speaker. I have in my hand here the completion of the Sir Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension to Point Fortin project. The January 2022 road failure at the Mosquito Creek. A report on the nature cause, remediation and contractual implications of the failure.

Mr. Hosein: Oh my.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, asked the Minister of Works and Transport for two years, could you please give us the report. Tell us what the report said. I got fed up of asking this Minister of Works and Transport. After a while I think he was ducking me. Anytime he see me, he would turn around and walk away because he expected that I would ask for this report, but I got the report, it is in my hands. It is in my hands. Look it here, Madam Speaker. A report dated November 29, 2023 in my hand. Madam Speaker, it is a very technical report. I do not want to bore this House and

the national community with typical cross-section drawing and—what is that?—geotechnical language and differential equations and so on, geotechnical investigations.

Madam Speaker, I want to get to the real point here. The point is, Madam Speaker, with all this drawing and data and so on, they have concluded that the failure took place, it was the construction of the road where it was almost finished, a crack almost parallel to the road alignment developed, more or less, along the median of the road, the boundaries and so on.

3.10 p.m.

They called it a “crack” in their technical report, so I was right. They measured it at 1.2 metres along the road, the main crack. So there is a main crack and a secondary crack. At the end of the failure event some holes were observed and they expressed their methodology and so on.

Madam Speaker, what was shocking to us was that this matter arose because they were in business of cutting cost to show that the former Administration would have handle this matter in a way that was somehow wrong, with cost escalation and so on. In the summary part of the report it says the embankment suffered complete failure. The crack had developed a drop of 120 millimetres along the western edge. The damage was caused by a failure, a significant failure.

Madam Speaker, and they point out here that when we demitted office in 2016/2018, there was a change in the design. They changed the design, and in changing the design they removed the part to put drains, “wick drains” is called I think the technical term for it. They removed that and that

Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

caused a crack, a failure, a fissure as they say. Considerable lateral movement, it caused severe collapse of that road. The change of design and the new design that AECOM, their project manager I believe, implemented, Madam Speaker. So that they change the design to save money, removed drainage and it mash up the whole road.

Hon. Member: Wow.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mash up the whole road.

Mr. Hosein: Design is the problem, not construction.

Dr. R. Moonilal: I want to make the point, I am not here to attack a contractor or any group of contractors or anything. They build according to what they are given, a design. This is a design flaw that they promoted, instigated, initiated. Why did you change the design when we left? The designs were clear. Madam Speaker, it is in the report. So, this failure was caused by that.

Madam Speaker, hear what they say in this report. After OAS was terminated, NIDCO executed the design consultancy contract in the interest of completing the project, and the design was changed. It was changed to complete the project. AECOM issued a stamp called “for construction drawings to the contractor” that were different from the drawings based on the original designs, where both carriageways were treated identically. The drawings contained the revisions and the removal of wick drains. That is what they did after, because they wanted to show that the cost was too much under the Partnership, they wanted to show.

You know what is the net result of this? I have now in my hand—not to display—I have in my hand a Note for Cabinet that is currently before the

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Finance and General Purposes Committee of this Cabinet. Who is the Chairman?

Mr. Young SC: Me.

Mr. Indarsingh: Oh.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Chairman is from—no it has to be the Minister of Finance. He is generally the Chairman of the Finance and General Purposes Committee, unless—“Dey change that too?”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Oh, my! Madam Speaker, shockingly I am told that this is the first Cabinet where the Minister of Finance is not the Chairman of the Finance Committee. Well, anyway, I do not want to get into that. They can put any Member, they can put the Member for Toco/Sangre Grande, as Chairman for F&GP. I think he will do a better job.

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

Dr. R. Moonilal: The matter for consideration of Cabinet is the approval of the revised construction budget for package A. They go to Cabinet, it is before the Cabinet now, well a sub-committee of Cabinet, it is before them now. So maybe I can help them, as I read, because they are considering the matter. This project, from NIDCO of course, they would like an increase from \$333 million to \$398 million, an increase of \$64.29 million to fix the “Mosquito crack”.

Mr. Hosein: \$64 million to fix a crack?

Dr. R. Moonilal: To fix the crack; \$64 million, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Hosein: Wow.

Dr. R. Moonilal: No, no this deserves another sip.

Mr. Hosein: Rehydrate.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, I have to rehydrate with this one. So they come for \$65 million more or less for the removal of drains because of a design flaw when they came into office; they “change” it. Madam Speaker, hear the nice part. All the money on this project so far \$333.35 million spend out. There is not one cent of the budget for that package left. All gone. We must now add \$65 million for drain embankment, seawall, pile installation, that is what we are going to add it for. And hear this one, Madam Speaker, in closing this sodden affair for me here. The revised cost does not include the cost of installation of final service. So, the cost of paving is yet to come. That is a further \$10 million or so. Right. So that is a further amount of money that will come to \$65 million. They stand accused of the highest level of mismanagement and incompetence we have seen.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, I say with pride, we built roads, no road collapse. They build a bridge the other day, where is it?

Mr. Hosein: Perseverance.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Perseverance in Central Trinidad. After one week the bridge collapse. I think today some trucks must do limbo to pass through there.

Mr. Indarsingh: The vehicle.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The vehicles. Madam Speaker, at Claxton Bay right now, there is something called an “iron wall”. It is just iron in middle of the road. We thought it was an advertising board. They try to fix a little landslip that

was for \$1 million. Do you know it is now being tendered? The work is now being tendered out for \$27 million? From \$1 million.

Mr. Indarsingh: The Bridal Bridge Road.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Bridal Bridge Road, somewhere there, collapsed. Madam Speaker, here this one. It touches all of us, anybody because you move in this country all over. There is an extension to the highway between Chase Village and Chaguanas. It causes hours of traffic day and night, inconvenience. It is a hazard because you have sticks and things poking out the ground with the little lighting, so it is a hazard. Do you know, Madam Speaker, that project crisis now is that they allowed works to take place and they used inferior materials? They used materials that were not suitable for the foundation work on the extension. Now, they must go back and dig up the material, get a new contractor to fix the road with a further delay of what could be two to three months. You look at that project, you look at the Claxton—

Mr. Hosein: Break.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—the “Claxton break”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: You know you look there, the Mosquito crack. Which highway we built that collapsed under the Partnership? None.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Which house? Madam Speaker, I have in my possession as well, well this is the Cabinet business here. Madam Speaker, we spoke about Trestrail. They are now tendering for demolition of 100 housing units at Trestrail. Last year budget I brought the report as well, to tell you that

Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

project—you remember that speech? “Pumping in the sand”? They said no do not worry we did not spend a cent there, then later they said we will offset with moneys we owed to the contractor. Madam Speaker, do you HDC applicants have paid money on those units? One hundred units to be demolished.

Mr. Hosein: No performance bond.

Dr. R. Moonilal: No performance bond by the contractors. I want to know how you getting the contractor to do anything there, because it was a project of HDC, Madam Speaker, where for the first time in history, another curious first, no performance bond was offered by a contractor for \$100 million project. So, you have nothing to go and take and snatch. But they made a big deal out of the OAS, you know, that we change the law and we allowed OAS to get away with the performance bond. They had none at Trestrail. To this day they cannot report that as any matter of any offence under the law of any wrongdoing, not even of breach of your public duty, because if it was a breach, I imagine somebody is a responsible as misbehaviour in public office so to speak. Nothing. Trestrail stands there ready to be demolished. All the homes we built, Madam Speaker, not one fall down.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Not one land move, Madam Speaker, under thePartnership.

3.20 p.m.

Dr. R. Moonilal: So, Madam Speaker, their record on construction is notorious, and just to repeat some of the budget matters, they speak about the construction of the La Brea Dry Dock—you know how much is budgeted

in the Estimates of the *Development Programme* at page 219? Madam Speaker, \$1 million. What are you developing a dry dock for \$1 million? That is to dry clothes. Madam Speaker, they speak about the South Manzanilla Shoreline Stabilisation Park, \$15 million. That is a fraction of the cost.

Madam Speaker, oh, this one is nice, development of a marina facility in Tobago. Proud, beat the chest about that, a marina. Tobago is the only place in the Caribbean, I think, where if you come in with a yacht you have to get somebody to swim out with a keg of fuel and meet you in the sea. I think people “does do” that there. That is the only place. Hear how much they budget for this one, \$1 million to build a marina facility in Tobago.

Hon. Member: For the keg.

Dr. R. Moonilal: What is that for, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two more minutes left of your original time. Of course you know you are entitled to 10 more minutes to wrap up. Please proceed.

Dr. R. Moonilal: I will. Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, dredging Sea Lots though, where a favoured contractor is involved, \$14.4 million for that, but nothing for the marina. In construction again, I want to ask the Ministry and the Government, what about the Secondary Roads Rehabilitation Company started with fanfare, just like the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery and Patriotic Energies, they banged the table. The Member for Diego Martin North/East banged the table when he spoke about the Secondary Roads Rehabilitation Company.

Mr. Indarsingh: SRRC.

Dr. R. Moonilal: SRRC. And when—that was in one of his four-hour budgets, and, Madam Speaker, he announced with fanfare. Today they went secretly, we had to expose them, they went secretly and shut down the company when they heard of the “bobol”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: They went secretly, Madam Speaker, they shut down the company.

Mr. Hosein: And paid \$200 million.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, \$200 million gone. “We doh know where it gone.”

Hon. Member: Two hundred, two hundred.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, NIPDEC—who is the chairman of NIPDEC, anybody knows? There is a chairman there, we will get to the person in a while.

Mr. Indarsingh: I believe it is—[*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, the Valsayn Avenue Bridge Reconstruction and Associated Works, do you know the Office of Procurement Regulation had to seize that project in light of an application before that body, what is it called? Challenge proceedings.

Mr. Hosein: Under the Regulations.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Under the Regulations that project came to a halt, a bridge, and the allegations there are issues involving, well, “bobol” to use local language. But it is alleged, Madam Speaker, incompetence, unlawful assessment, a lack of fairness, procedural fairness and so on, in the award of a contract for a bridge. The Valsayn Avenue Bridge.

So, Madam Speaker, this Government this is their track record on construction. No wonder we have so many problems in this country as it relates to fixing things. You know the other day I went to that area where we were some years ago, the Waterfront Complex there, doing some business, and at Tower D—I am told by employees there, an elevator is not working for three years. And they cannot fix an elevator at Tower D for three years, and we are expect highways and bridges and roadways. We expect that, Madam Speaker, the Minister—I just want to touch on one or two matters quickly. The Minister spoke of, of course he is beating his chest, having read from 400 pages, he is moving to a paperless system.

Mr. Imbert: Me, the Minister, I was doing that?

Dr. R. Moonilal: You were jumping there like a puppet of some kind.

Hon. Member: *[Interruption]*

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, the Member is deliberating troubling me.

Hon. Members: *[Laughter]*

Madam Speaker: It is always very comforting to see, you know, a “lil” camaraderie going on, but I think the conversation going between the Minister of Finance and the Member for Oropouche East, I think we could address that now and continue with the conversation in the right direction.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Thank you. Madam Speaker, for the record, he is not my comrade so there is no camaraderie.

Hon. Members: “Ohhh.” *[Laughter]*

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, I spoke about this matter, a cashless economy. The Minister was also, you know, highlighting—I will not say

Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

anything more dramatic than highlighting—the importance of a cashless economy. I just want to tell the population that the promotion of a cashless economy leads to a lot of people making cash. All those organizations, institutions, international financial entities, local and foreign as well, that promote this cashless economy, they make a lot of cash. You look at the record of revenue and profits of Visa, of MasterCard, of the banks, they will wish you buy a doubles using a plastic card, because they get the money out of that.

Mr. Hosein: Services charges.

Dr. R. Moonilal: They get service charges, fees, moneys from that, and therefore we support the Leader of the Opposition's proposition, recommendation of a hybrid between a cashless economy and money transactions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: We submit that. Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister also made a point elsewhere when he spoke about the Government, he said the Opposition has not made any Motion of no confidence in the Government but we are talking all over the place, and attacking the Government and so on. We have brought Motions against the Attorney General, against the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, against the Minister of everything. We have brought that, you know, those Motions. When the Member for Diego Martin West brought a Motion of no confidence in a former Government, he came with email-gate. That was his idea of a Motion of no confidence, email-gate.

Mr. Hosein: And it was fake.

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Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah, it was fake. That was what you call “real fake”, not the wire transfer that they ought not to even have their hands on. So, Madam Speaker, I have heard other commentaries from Members opposite and some were, you know, polite and other were not, and I do not really care to introduce myself to those Members, but to indicate that in the housing sector we have questions to ask.

You see, Madam Speaker, I have raised the matter of Trestrail, I do not want to continue with that. I have raised the matter of the eviction of citizens. Imagine citizens who obtained their homes years ago when they had a job, when they had an income, today the HDC is kicking them out and the Member for Laventille East/Morvant, wherever he is on the compound, he is not here, I want him to take note because he came across like someone with enormous compassion and care. He was talking about free Wi-Fi in Port of Spain shopping centre and so on, and the Member for Laventille East/Morvant ought to know that when persons are without jobs, they have lost their job, they have lost their income, you cannot evict them from an HDC house like that. I stand for the protection of HDC tenants and occupiers that they ought not to be evicted.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: You must work out some type of payment plan so they can keep their units until the economy gets better under an incoming Government of the United National Congress.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: You see, Madam Speaker, their approach to economic development is tax and sell out what we could sell out. That is the approach,

you know. You look in the cabinet and if you see gold, silver, diamonds, anything, you sell everything because you want money. You have to raise tax to get money and you have to sell the jewellery. That is their approach, so you sell Magdalena, sell this hotel, sell CLICO, sell this to raise money. That is the approach of the Government.

You know what they are doing now, shockingly? Housing units of an upscale variety were built years ago, I believe under the Chambers regime, George Michael Chambers, at Federation Park, Port of Spain, an upscale neighbourhood. We are told that the HDC are now involved in some type of surreptitious, underhand method of selling out at a reduced price Federation Park units for much less than its market value in a process that nobody knows. They are not going for a public auction or a public bid, they are not going for a lottery draw, because we are dealing with some big figures here. You can invite members of the public who are interested to put in a bid and decide on a market value and you go for a public draw and say, look, whoever, we draw, we draw.

But they are favouring persons, including managers at the HDC, including a former Government Minister. I think the Minister is about 90 years old by now, going now to take a mortgage to get Federation Park unit. We ask the HDC and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development to come clear on the process being used to sell out Federation Park housing units at this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Ameen: Friends and family.

Dr. R. Moonilal: And the recipients of those units, prime property, because

I know what will happen. They will buy it for \$3 million and in quick time resell that at \$7 million. That is the approach, and they will favour who they want to favour. Madam Speaker, that is their approach to governing the country. And I want to indicate on the next occasion when I speak, I will have in my hands a full list of those persons who they are selling the Fed Park units to. I will have that in my hand.

Mr. Hosein: I think you could give it to the OPR too.

Dr. R. Moonilal: And I will be sharing that with the OPR and other interested parties. Madam Speaker, I come now in the closing few minutes to address a matter of national security, although, let me say that the Member for Barataria/San Juan will be dealing with some matters of national security, and I think there is great anticipation for his contribution, and probably greater anticipation for the Member for Couva North who will also speak on works and transport in the coming hours of this debate. So I do not want to delve too much into that because they are very capable of bringing the details of some of those projects, and the hypocrisy of this Government.

3.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, in my closing couple of minutes, as is the norm, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the great people of the fortress of Oropouche East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: The UNC fortress. Madam Speaker, it is a place in Trinidad, we say, where eagles dare. It is the only constituency where the PNM could not field a candidate in the history of electoral politics. They

could not field a candidate there. And it explains itself, the local government election 2014/2013, thereabouts. I would not suggest my role but it was difficult and the PNM did not have a candidate, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Because it is where eagles dare. You do not dare in a place like that. I want to congratulate and thank the people of Oropouche East for their commitment, their love, their dedication to my office and to myself. I want to thank our staff, activists, supporters, Charmaine Lewis and others—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—for their yeoman service to the constituents; our Chairman, Mr. Raymond Surujbally, and others, Madam Speaker, for their contributions over the years; and thank the people of Oropouche East that has given me so much strength and tenacity and courage that I can stand to continue this work that I have started.

Madam Speaker, unlike other Members of this side when they speak, I believe my journey has not yet ended. And, Madam Speaker, this is not my swan song, it was only to say that I may continue my journey towards representation and service to the people of Oropouche East and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I thank you so much

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Laventille West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I too must begin by complimenting the

Minister of Finance for a very solid budgetary presentation; solid in terms of content. And I would like as well to congratulate the Prime Minister who has steered this ship for the past nine, approaching 10 years, and did so quite solidly. I must as well compliment the Minister of Planning and Development who would have played—that Ministry having played its part in putting this budget together, one that reflects three years of consistent economic growth, after all of the challenges of COVID-19 and the falling oil and gas prices around the world. All of this we have been through, we have kept Trinidad and Tobago's economy whole and we are well on the way, notwithstanding those who comment otherwise.

The Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, I can proudly and confidently say, I regard as, and most of us in this country will accept that he is a man of some nobility, a responsible man—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—focused on national affairs, honest, and highly and acutely principled. I would want to contrast that to the Leader of the Opposition, who spoke earlier, as being a person who is disconnected from the reality, reckless, populist—meaning, will say and do anything just to get the next vote—irresponsible in the extreme and unprincipled.

Imagine, the Opposition Leader queried a \$400 million allocation to the Office of the Prime Minister, not reading the documents, not understanding that UDeCOTT is now under the purview of the hon. Prime Minister, the Office of the Prime Minister, and that allocation explains some of the plans and projects for that particular, very, very hard-working and achieving state agency. But I am not surprised. I am not surprised because

that Member for Siparia, as a former Prime Minister, after she demitted that office, did not demonstrate knowledge that Trinidad and Tobago owned a 10 per cent share in Atlantic LNG. So there is a lot she is—

Mr. Young SC: Train 1.

Hon. F. Hinds:—Train 1—a lot that the Member is disconnected about.

Madam Speaker, the Member spoke about the Prime Minister being out of country for 391 days over a year. Well, I did a quick calculation. Based on what a former Minister of National Security—two former Ministers of National Security in her Government said that the Member for Siparia, as Prime Minister, enjoyed four-day weekends—

Mr. Young SC: Five-day.

Hon. F. Hinds:—five-day weekends. Well, I calculated it at four and worked out that there were 1,048 days in recuperation and resuscitation over those weekends. And, of course, her government ran up \$250 million in foreign travel in five years and three months, not to mention a roti binge of \$250,000 on one happy UNC occasion.

The Opposition Leader did three amazing things in her contribution. She identified my hard-working and distinguished colleague, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, as the Prime Minister's chosen one. But look at her chosen ones: Sen. Anil Roberts of LifeSport, rather "death sport", fame; Sen. David Nakhid, who is on record as telling this country that a former President, in plain words, is an unmitigated something.

Dr. Moonilal: Standing Order 48(6), please. He is imputing improper motives of Member of another House.

Madam Speaker: I overrule. I overrule.

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Hon. F. Hinds: MP Barry Padarath; MP Moonilal, who just jumped to his legs.

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, he is using names repeatedly.

Hon. F. Hinds: I said, “Member of Parliament”.

Madam Speaker: But—

Hon. F. Hinds: Okay. The Member of Parliament for Oropouche East.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Hon. F. Hinds: The Member of Parliament for Couva North speaks only in Spanish outside this House—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—at all hours of the day and night.

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I stand on Standing Order 48(6), he is misleading the House as well.

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

Mr. Ratiram: He should stop misleading. I should send him to privilege, this is a privilege. He should apologize for misleading the House.

Madam Speaker: Overruled.

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you very much. The Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, David Lee—

Madam Speaker: No.

Hon. F. Hinds: Sorry, sorry, the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre and, of course, the Member for St. Augustine.

Look at her—look at the Member for Siparia’s lifelong associates: The likes of SIS’s Krishna Lalla; a former Minister of National Security in her country, while he was wanted internationally, a man called Jack Warner.

A gallery, an album, Madam Speaker. They do not want the likes of the Member for Tabaquite. They do not want the likes of the Member for Chaguanas West, the Member for Mayaro, the Member for Naparima and, of course, my friend from Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: The UNC is split, not for the first time, along the lines of morale and spiritual righteousness and value—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—not for the first time.

The Member for Oropouche East, Madam Speaker, told us, in his usual spirit of conviviality that if they had a rat trap inside of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, the Minister of Finance's hand would have been in bandaged. Well, I could tell you if they had rat traps in the Treasury, "some ah dem nose and mouth and face" would have been brutalized by the rat traps.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: And went on to tell us, shamelessly, that for all these years, "no police ain't come by him". He do not know if it is as yet. We do not know what will happen tomorrow. But in any event, the Member for Oropouche East is a defendant in a conspiracy matter before the courts and when they tried to strike it out, the judge found that there was a case to answer, file your defence, and he has issues to answer there. That is a fact—for conspiracy to defraud the taxpayers of this country millions of dollars, when as a Minister, in the last three months, in 2015, is recorded as distributing and paying those contractors some for \$450 million in three

months. That is what is in front of the court now, Madam Speaker.

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. F. Hinds: “De police ain’t come yet”. You hear he is tormenting me?

Dr. Moonilal: Next 20 years.

Hon. F. Hinds: “And if I was ah police, I woulda be there long time.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: In the Barracks.

3.40 p.m.

Hon F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, the Member for Oropouche East commented and wondering how Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited would have had knowledge of the evaluation. It is their asset. When we restructured Petrotrin, that holding company holds the assets and liabilities as new companies were set up to carry on profitably. They are entitled to those documents and they have it. So he could waste his time if it pleases him.

Madam Speaker, the Member spoke about billions of dollars and so on, I just want to remind this House, back in 2014 when the UNC was in office, the Prime Minister at the time, the Member for Siparia, went on a jaunt to China, saw a vessel and just say like if it was a nip, “gimme one ah dat”. Madam Speaker, the upshot of that was, came back to Trinidad and is on record as saying it was a grant from the Chinese Government. It is only belatedly we discovered it cost the people of this country US \$32 million, TT \$224 million.

Out of that—well at that time the Minister of National Security for 14 months, a certain fella called Gary Griffith, he was out there saying—

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because they had cancelled our OPVs to protect our borders and the money was returned to the UNC Government. They then went and pick up this river boat—it was a river boat. Not even a military vessel—in China, and the Minister of National Security was telling the country it was fit for purpose.

The upshot was, Madam Speaker, we got eight months service out of that vessel. We had to spend an additional US \$1.5 million to outfit it. The generators are not in place. No shore power provided for it. All the signs on the vessels were in Chinese, either Cantonese or Mandarin. We used 50 hertz here, the vessel demanded 60. We had to put in a transformer to get the thing going. All we got—and the hull integrity, as I speak to you, is in doubt. The vessel is at risk of sinking and right now, we are grappling with that—\$224 million.

So when you hear the Member for Oropouche East, Madam Speaker, you know that they are not serious. The Leader of the Opposition told us that we spent over \$60 billion in national security in the last nine years, and my friend from Chaguanas West said, in the last five years we spent \$25 billion and wondering what we did with it. I am sure I heard one of my colleagues this morning, but if I am mistaken let me record. The figures and statistics in our budgetary arrangements demonstrate that as much as 64 per cent and 65 per cent of the allocations we read about would normally go for salaries, emoluments and other recurrent expenditure like rents and all of the things, stationery and all of the things that the Government purchases to service these Ministries.

So I just want the people of Trinidad and Tobago to know when the

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Leader of the Opposition says \$60 billion, of that \$60 billion near to \$40 billion of it is spent. And if you want to see where that \$40 billion goes, you have to look in people's credit union, and bank account, and their cars, and what they do with their personal money, salaries and emoluments, and as I say to keep the Ministries and so on, and their recurrent expenditure going.

I would have expected to hear some contribution about productivity because I think that is one of the issues we need to reset in this country. Because as we do these annual exercises, productivity is an important ingredient for the multiplier effect, for the implementation, forgetting the full bang for the bucks. So my friend from Chaguanas West, he spoke and he told us that he met with different associations in the Ministry of National Security, and not surprisingly we would have heard a lot about complaints, and noise, and all of these things but that is par for the course around here. We have a job to do and we continue to do that job.

Not a word about integrity. Not a word about productivity, as I said, and professionalism, because it is these human elements that are like the oil that makes the wheel of the economy turn. And these are matters we have to focus on hence the reason why I was grateful to my friend, the Member for San Fernando West, who reminded us among the things we did is to put some integrity testing in place for a wide cross-section of the people in national security—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—to keep them whole. Because if you have these allocations and you have these loopholes of small productivity, and corruption, and bacchanal, bacchanal, bacchanal, no serious application of

the human resource that we spend billions on, on an annual basis, then we are not going very far.

Madam Speaker, even in this debate on my final point to demonstrate the “incredulability”—if I may construct that—on the part of the Member for Siparia. Even in this debate, the Member for Siparia came here speaking about missing money in the Auditor General issue with the Minister of Finance over the past few months. After Marla Dukharan who first issued those comments was sitting in an audience where a former governor of the Central Bank, Dr. Trevor Farrell, addressed it, pointed out that she was not making any logic, she was not making sense, and pointed out that not one cent was misappropriated, or missing, or stolen or nothing.

After all of that, the Member for Siparia accuses the Central Bank of cooking the books, and came in this debate to talk about missing money, misleading the people who listen to the Member. That is sick and unbecoming of a leader, a national leader. At least we owe it to the people to speak truth to them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, so we had some talk about crime. The Member for Chaguanas West pointed out that we need to create pathways for youth from crime. Well, we have a very proud record in that regard. The entire effort and the budget for the Ministry of Education is for the youth of this country in the formal education sector—largely about youth.

The Ministry of Sport and Community Development, an allocation of \$400 million largely for the young people in Trinidad and Tobago. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, \$5.6 billion,

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benefitting homes and families largely for young people, start-up business expenses and all those, seed money and that sort of thing. And not to mention the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, everything that it does is directed to the youth in this country. And therefore, I can say here confidently there is no shortage of correct and proper pathways for the young people in Trinidad and Tobago in terms of, or vis-à-vis, getting involved in a line of crime. It goes deeper than that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: There is some other thing. It cannot be for a lack of opportunity. There are other influences, some of which I will try to address. And in passing, I went to a MiLAT graduation, I was invited by Minister of Youth Development and National Service. A Military-Led Academic Training Programme for youngsters between the ages of, I think, 17 and 25 or something like that, and I saw many of these youngsters who might have been either mis-schooled or missed school, did not do well for one reason or the other. We saw 85 of them graduating with five and six and seven CXC passes—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—in a short two years coming out of that institution on their graduation with discipline, pride, patriotism, self-respect, respect for authority, and after all of that a full certificate here and there.

In fact, it was reported that they did better than the national performance on average, and I want to compliment the Minister of Youth Development and National Service—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—I want to compliment these young people. I met one of them, a particular youngster from, I think, Carapichaima, one called Christian Chancery. He went there. He volunteered to go there not because of any bad behaviour. He went there and he was an outstanding success.

3.50 p.m.

There is no shortage of these opportunities for them. Madam Speaker, prevention has been recognized—and I did Criminology at the postgraduate level—as the most effective method in conquering crime. We aspire to build a sustainable, statutory and institutional framework as our approach in dealing with these matters.

We, relatively recently, pronounced violence as a public health concern along with the other countries in CARICOM. This would involve individuals, communities in a public health type response, Government state institutions, non-government faith-based. Many crimes are transnational in origin and nature, so there is no need for a regional and international corporation and response.

The business of the Ministry of National Security is far more than our response to crime. As such, this intervention I am making now will deal with crime but it would deal with other matters in the Ministry of National Security where we propose a whole-of-Government, a whole-of-society, whole-of-world approach where individuals have to play a part just like COVID-19. “You wash your hands. You decide you not hugging up, you not shaking hands, you buy sanitizer, you buy masks.” Individuals have a responsibility in dealing with this crime issue, and the community as well, and families and the state agencies. We all have a role to play. So it is

intellectually moribund to suggest that he is responsible for murders.

I dislike hearing altogether—this how much murders under that Government and under that— “It ain’t have nothing to do with dat.” That is why when I was in Opposition no one could find any record of Fitzgerald Hinds saying—or the Member for Laventille West—saying that the UNC is to be blamed for crime. What I did say is, under the UNC because of the tone they set in the country, crime proliferates. Yes, and our philosophy is not to go to bed with no criminals.

The Member for Oropouche East, one Friday, left the Parliament Chamber, went downstairs—the records are there to show—to pay a bill at the Hyatt for a group of criminals who went there and had a cheery good time. “Had dinner, had lunch, had all kinda thing.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: That Member for Oropouche East and beyond that—

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I stand on Standing Order 46, please.

Madam Speaker: Overruled.

Hon. F. Hinds: There were no Venezuelans there.

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

Hon. F. Hinds: And as well as that Member for Oropouche East, the former Commissioner Gary Griffith came to a Joint Select Committee, which I chaired as Chairman of the National Security Joint Select Committee. and told us that the police had information that he was going to meet with a group of criminals and put undercover teams to follow them. The Police Commissioner at the time, Gary Griffith told us that when he realized that they got a tip off and the meeting was aborted and that was not

the last of it.

The Member for Oropouche East telephoned him and he responded and they rendezvoused at a restaurant in Port of Spain on the same day. When he was asked, “But how could you go?” Police following a man, you are going and have a rendezvous with a suspect? He gave an explanation, which I would not venture now. That will be for another time. So we require all hands on deck in dealing with these criminal matters and what irks me is that plenty people who complain about crime in this country, they are perpetrating a lot of it in one way or another.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: But I know as we learn from the Vietnam War, no guerrilla force could operate in any territory without the complicity, the acquiescence, the support of the community in which it is involved. If Trinidad and Tobago decided that it would stand resolutely against antisocial behaviour and wrongdoing and crime—all of us—then they will not be able—those who perpetrate crime will not find any comfort among us.

I did a quick survey only yesterday just because I do not want to be guided by my own thoughts and intellect alone. I made contact with eight persons. I would not identify the individuals, but one high in the business community, a business leader, an ex-Police Commissioner, a recently retired judge, a calypsonian, Archbishop Jason Gordon—I will call his name. That is all right. An economist, a professor in criminology and of course, one young person, and I did a quick anecdotal survey as to the cause of crime in preparation for this debate today.

In the main the ideas were similar. You heard issues not in any

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particular order of gravity, drug trade, the gun trade, the weakness of the family, the weak criminal justice system and legal system more generally, the impunity of criminals largely as a result of that, the absence of moral values, poor parenting, and of course, one was emphatic on the question of weak law enforcement.

There is some justification in every aspect of that. I would read on the newspaper, Madam Speaker, I think it was Sunday *Guardian*. The headline said:

“A pensioner placed on bond for robbing Debe family 25 years ago”.

I told you this is a whole-of-Government thing, Madam Speaker, because when the police lock up and charge and all of that, it ends up in the court. It is 25 years, Madam Speaker, the man is now 71 years of age. He was charged in 1999 with wounding with intent, possession of a firearm, possession of ammunition, robbery with aggravation and shooting with intent—and by the way 1999, the UNC was in Government. So you see it really has nothing to do with that. It is a crime and he was indicted for this 22 years later. “Indictment”, for those who did not know, meaning the matter moved from the Magistrate’s Court in what was then the preliminary enquiry and the indictment is when it was filed in the High Court before it goes before the judge and jury. Twenty-one years later and of course, another two years were to pass until last week when there was a plea deal and, of course, he was put on a \$20,000 bond on each charge to keep the peace and good behaviour and he was made to pay \$15,000 to the people. So he virtually walked away because of the effluxion of time. That is not a rarity. This a regular state of affairs to the point now where we come to

understand with all of the backlog in the courts and with all that we are doing to deal with those issues, you still cannot trial your way out of the backlog.

So I agree with the Member for Chaguanas West there has to be an element of dispute resolution, arbitration and various ways of dealing with these things and of course, plea bargaining is a part of it. We have removed the preliminary enquiry. We have created more courts. We appointed more Court of Appeal judges, more puisne judges, a whole keep of things. We took matters off the traffic list. We decriminalized certain levels of marijuana and all of that intended to improve the criminal justice system. So shouting and criticizing and saying under the PNM and under the UNC. “Dat doh help us.” We have work to do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: All of us. This is why I want to congratulate and celebrate the Member for Mayaro, leading the UNC down on that end—well the former UNC.

Mr. Gonzales: And Naparima.

Hon. F. Hinds: When he stood up here in this Parliament, in his contribution, and said you bring law and once it is good and it seeks to and protects the people we will not object to it like the Member for Siparia and her UNC team.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: I welcome that because that is what the doctor ordered—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—as we proceed, intolerant of crime. I received a call from

a 10-year-old day before yesterday whispering on my phone. I asked him his name he would not tell me. “He think he anonymous because he probably did not know, no number doh be hidden on my phone.” Something they did to it. The youngster called me to tell me he is fearful that gang violence will erupt in his area. That thing touched me so deeply. It showed children are seriously traumatised and affected. And I ask him, when did he expect that to happen. “He tell me about within a month.” A 10-year-old, day before yesterday. Bless his heart, but what it did is motivate me into doing more to protect him and all others like him. In fact all of us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

4.00 p.m.

Hon. F. Hinds: In a world where young people around the place are telling you, all over this country, Madam Speaker, pills, synthetic pills, MDMA, ecstasy, all kinds of things easily available all around the place. As I said to this country before, reports in communities where children as early or late, depending on how you look at it, at 2.00 a.m. in the morning on streets unsupervised, unguided.

We have a situation, it appears, where our Constitution and the law and our respect for and adherence to concepts of human rights, appear now altogether to be working to favour the criminals, and that is why the question of impunity which came in my anecdotal survey resonated so powerfully because the criminals are not afraid of the justice system. They do not expect to get caught and if they get caught, they believe they could intimidate people and time will protect them and so we are floundering along. We have got to do something about it and I have just outlined some

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of the things this Government has done about it, including arranging for special courts so that the court could fast-track certain matters and deal with it. That exists.

Twenty-five years ago when I started out in this business, a crime scene would have been characterized by a knife or a cutlass and if there was a firearm, a nine-millimetre firearm. Today, 25 years later, you hardly find nine-millimetre ammunition on a crime scene. It is 5.56, 7.62 military grade and no wonder why today the murder figures are where they are because when he came with his nine millimetre and he discharges two rounds, those who were in the vicinity had time to run. But now, he comes with a military grade weapon and he sprays it across an arc and when he does that, four or five people so you are having triple and quintuple murders in any one scene. That is where we are.

We cannot do like El Salvador and just send people out there and say “pick up every gang member once they have ah tattoo” or once “some policeman or soldier say he is ah gangster, is inside for life”. We cannot do that, we cannot do that. Our Constitution would not allow that. Already we had a visit from a Venezuelan Vice-President here and they were calling for sanctions against the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, sanctions against the Prime Minister in their personal capacity. If I were to suggest anything close to what is going on in El Salvador, they would lock up me, they would scream.

Mr. Young SC: When they tried to do that, they used a state of emergency and did that to black people.

Hon. F. Hinds: Yes, when they had a problem in 2011, you know how they

responded to it? Well, two ways. They went to bed and mollycoddled with the criminals. I told you “they meeting to have dinner and lunch at the Hyatt” and meeting quietly all over the place. I was a victim of a criminal attack in 2018 on the Beetham with some assault with some water and they were celebrating that.

Mr. Young SC: Correct. That is how they are.

Hon. F. Hinds: And I would later learn that UNC officials paid individuals down there, to do that to me and my councillor and I told them that time, you know. “Ah say, yuh celebrating this, but the same mentality for ah fee that you got to work against Hinds in the Beetham, will leave”—against the Member for Laventille West, “will leave the Beetham and find you anywhere in this country” and today, we are having a problem of that nature. All over this country, home invasions.

There was a particular case. Three of them went into a man’s bedroom in Couva, 3.00 a.m. in the morning, the man mercifully had a firearm and he was able to put up some resistance and one of them was left dead in his bedroom. He survived, he and his family, praise God for that. Turned out to be a youngster from a long way away from Couva. This is “all ah we business”. Serious business and that is why we work to trying to resolve it.

Madam Speaker, this is a serious thing. I could tell you some of them who speak the loudest, complicitous. A report was made to me and then I called the police and the police investigated and are continuing to investigate as we speak now. A criminal in this country swore to the police that a UNC high official paid him \$60,000 to commit a murder outside. That matter is

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under investigation, “who want to go and find out, could go”. That is what we are talking about, the treachery and the deceit. That is why I do not listen to them. All I do is keep focus under the guidance of the National Security Council led by the distinguished and honest and principled Prime Minister and do this work as a Minister of National Security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: The Ministry of National Security’s crime strategy is a comprehensive plan involving law enforcement operations, technology utilization, intervention strategies, prevention programmes, policy development, training and development, resource allocation and interagency and multiagency collaboration. Different types of crime require different types of policing.

In terms of our border management, we consider that effective border control is therefore one of the key elements in dealing with transnational organized crime, stopping illicit movements of people, human trafficking, goods meaning drugs and cigarettes and alcohol, all uncustomed in many cases, and firearms. So the Coastal and Riverine Patrol Unit which was established in June of 2021 is an important element of this, they deal with our borders from the shoreline to two miles out. Of course, we have other vessels.

You heard the Member for Oropouche East mentioned the Damen fleet which was purchased or ordered in 2014 when they were in Government. They did not budget or pay for it. When we came in 2015, we met it and we paid for that fleet of the Damen vessels. Four patrol vessels, two supply ships and six ship’s boats as they call it. It costs now because

like every other piece of equipment, the time for servicing and overhauling and so on is necessary so we have just contracted to spend \$336 million to recertify these vessels and \$122 million in a three-year maintenance project for that Damen fleet which we absolutely need but they were down.

In the meantime, to deal with that, we went and purchased two Cape-class vessels costing \$605 million. We put a two-year maintenance contract in place for \$54.4 million. That patrols out to 3,000 nautical miles, goes at 12 knots and a crew of 27.

But you know, Madam Speaker, even in the Damen deal that I just told you about, we paid \$1.3 billion for that. We, the PNM Government, paid that because they ordered it, we paid for it. Then we were told by the police in Holland that there was an on-going investigation. They found \$200 million in what they call a finder's fee; \$100 million was already fritted away and they seized \$100 million which they still have to this day, proving that the UNC will put in place contracts and give you the impression that they are trying to do good for the country but the contract is just another opportunity to put "their face in the rat trap". So, Madam Speaker, we got a donation of four riverine vessels from the United States for which we are very grateful.

In terms of our border security, we are continuing the upgrade of the automatic fingerprinted identification or AFIS system of the Immigration Division, improving the hardware on all of the systems to make the system more efficient.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Chaguanas West, the Member for Siparia implying "they cyah see" what we do with the money, well, let me

tell them a little bit about what we do with some of the money. The UNC built a fire station in Penal and that cost the taxpayers of this country \$109.8 million in 2012, before COVID, eh.

4.10p.m.

We built a fire station in Point Fortin in 2021, and that cost the taxpayers \$39.1 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk Thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: The UNC built a fire station in Mayaro in 2014, and that cost the taxpayers of this country \$112.4 million. We built one in Roxborough, in Tobago, for \$37 million. Cabinet business is secret, eh, but sometimes I pray in my heart that the Trinidad and Tobago people could get a peep inside of the Cabinet room when that Prime Minister is cheering us on, on a weekly basis and sometimes more, and look into the F&GP room when the Chairman, the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's, is conducting meetings and see how he goes through, painstakingly, line for line to protect the public interest and the public money—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—“worse dan meh grandmother”. Ministers are quarrelling, “dey cyah geh dey ting through because, boy, between this and the Minister of Finance and Prime Minister, we does have ah wok to account for public money”, not the UNC. “Dem all inside, over, around and below de cookie jar, and dey with dey—wah is de name ah de ting dey does butter with”?

Hon. Members: Ladle

Hon. F. Hinds: Ladle, yeah. “All ah dem mouth dripping with ting.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Sorry.

Madam Speaker: I think the analogy is a bit unwarranted. So retract that and find another way. You know, we have heard a lot of things on either side but, you know, let us not carry it further.

Hon. F. Hinds: I thank you. I will desist from that metaphor.

Madam Speaker, we built a Maracas/St. Joseph Police Station, \$21.3 million, and listened to what the Prime Minister and then Minister of National Security decided. We had to build the Besson Street Police Station. You know what they decided? That they would use the same drawings and the same plans and replicate it, because if it worked, we could do it again. And they went to Besson Street and was able—without the architecture because they had it from the Maracas—and they were able to get a Besson Street Police Station at \$13.8 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: That is what we do. That is how we do it, Madam Speaker. We built a Shirvan Road Police Station. We built the Roxborough Police Station as well. And as you would have heard earlier today, the biggest example of UNC behaviour is the Curepe Interchange. They were running. “They break up de government over it, Ministers fight, Ministers resign”, Stacy Roopnarine; former Minister Rambachan, bacchanal in the UNC Cabinet, \$500 million, and we went in and we were able to do it for about \$225 million. That is the way of the PNM. And the country, therefore, must know, as we approach an election next year, your economy, your resources, your sweat and your work are in safe hands with the People’s National Movement—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—not those who scream and want to get their hands—I was about to say slimy hands, but let me just say hands upon it.

Madam Speaker: You said it. So, withdraw it, okay?

Hon. F. Hinds: All right, Madam Speaker. It was just a metaphor but I will desist from it again. I will desist from it.

Madam Speaker, I heard my friend—and I must say, eh, I regard him as, essentially, an innocent man. I do not think he has any ill will about him, so I am not going to be castigating him. But I heard him say, courageously, in this Parliament and though, untruthfully, that all the statistics that are available to him, all the serious crime figures are going up; increasing. Well, that was shocking to me, anathema even, because I am in touch with the police leadership on a daily basis and all the statistics I read said exactly the opposite. So I asked for some figures and let me help the Member.

I want to let the Member understand that—let me just give the Member it in synopsis. I do not want to spend too much time on it. But the figures show that all serious crimes, with the exception of murder, are in decline. For 2023, there were 4,445 violent crimes, as compared to 3,402 for the same period in 2024; a 16 per cent decrease. Yeah? So murders, as at this time, as of October 7th, would have been in 2023, 455; in 2024, 484, a difference of 29 as at that date, and all other serious crimes are on the decline. And the reason perhaps why we are having an increase in murders is because the people are just violent, you know—some of them, too many of us. It is a violent society. But with the weapons available now and the

ammunition that supports those weapons, death is more likely and murder is more likely in their outbursts.

Madam Speaker: Member for Laventille West—

Hon. F. Hinds: My lady.

Madam Speaker:—you have two more minutes of original time left. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to wind up your contribution.

Hon. F. Hinds: I would like about half an hour, you know, but I will take 10, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, I just want to say, in terms of our rehabilitation portfolio in the prison, we have academic/vocational training in there, CSEC, CAPE, adult literacy, primary school leaving and technical vocation.

In terms of moral and cognitive behavior: Inmate development programmes; mindfulness and mediation initiatives; remand intervention for treatment of them; academic education programmes; cognitive development programmes; adult literacy programmes. Well, when it comes to culture, they have calypso inside of there, and they celebrate, and they get involved, Easter gospel concert, Indian Arrival Day.

In other words—in the reformatory activities: Women's conference; all the religious faiths would come in; Fathers in Action; Father's Day programme; art shows; one they call, Sycamore Tree; interfaith services in there under religious Spiritual/Shouter Baptist, Prison Fellowship, Roman Catholic, all of these religions are allowed to bring people in there to administer onto their members who find themselves inside of there.

So, Madam Speaker, to answer my friend from Chaguanas West, there is a very active rehabilitation process. I heard him say that the recidivism rate is now about 49 or something per cent.

Mr. Rambally: *[Inaudible]*

Hon. F. Hinds: How much?

Mr. Rambally: *[Inaudible]*

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, 50-something per cent. Well, a few years ago, it was 60 per cent, so I think we are heading in the right direction and we must persist in that work.

Madam Speaker, in terms of the fire—in terms of immigration, we are now upgrading, as I indicated earlier, from the machine-readable passport to e-passports, and we are spending \$99.3 million on that.

We just spent \$2.1 million on some vehicles for the Transit Police Unit because they police the Priority Bus Route and our main transit centres in Port of Spain, Arima, and other places, in the Croisee and so on, and Curepe. That is their route, and we got them some motorcycles and some vehicles so that they could carry out their work. We paid 50 per cent to the suppliers, and that work continues.

In terms of the fire service, we ordered, and they are now on order for delivery in 2025, a chemical industrial tender for the Point Fortin Fire Station and an emergency tender for the Penal Fire Station. The first of them, as I just called, for Point Fortin, was \$39.5 million; the Penal Fire Station, the emergency tender and a water tender for Penal, \$109 million together; the Mayaro Fire Station, a water tender, a breathing apparatus trailer and a hose layer, altogether, the total contact price, \$48.9 million.

And this is what we are doing with money. The Woodbrook Fire Station, we ordered a water tender for that, and that is costing \$4.9 million.

Similarly, the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service: A water truck for them; a garbage compactor; a 15-seated minibus and those sorts of things; refurbishing the extended remand facility; the building of the Youth Training Centre, the community residence and rehabilitation centre for female offenders, and an elders complex. When prisoners get to a certain age, we put them in a lower security environment, something I introduced back in 2007, when I had responsibility for prison as Minister in this Ministry. And all of that, a total expenditure package of—well, yes, so all of them are there and we are dealing with all.

There are 25 fire stations. I spoke to the Chief Fire Officer for confirmation this morning—the Acting Chief—and there are 21 of those stations which are set with vehicles, four are without. And he expects—because two of them are with the engineers at the moment. He expects that by later this week, those two will be on schedule so we will be in a much better position.

4.20 p.m.

In terms of breathing apparatus, we have an order, the contract was signed and we are expecting delivery by March of next year, 225—the Cabinet approved—breathing apparatus sets. Something you hear a lot about in the national community. And in the intervening period, we received—thanks to a firm in this country that operates in that kind of industry—a donation of 77 breathing apparatus sets. And as I speak to you, Madam Speaker, they are being deployed inside of the fire service for use so

officers will not be without breathing apparatus sets as they are expected to go out there and carry on fighting fires on our behalf.

Madam Speaker, air cop, and sea cop in terms of border security, these are best practice internationally acclaimed models where we train specially vetted units to deal with transnational crime on our seaports and in the airport, and that is up and running. The Member for Moruga/Tableland will tell you, in 2022 we established a police post in Moruga to deal with some trafficking issues there. I know it does not please the Member for Couva North but it is happening, it is in place, and there we go. We opened a new Fraud Squad office in Sangre Grande in October of 2022 to allow persons who have fraudulent reports to make, matters of fraud, they do not have to come all the way to Port of Spain, so we have a unit out in the east there now dealing with those problems.

We established the St. Clair Police Station, that was largely channelled by my friend, the Member for Port of Spain North\St. Ann's West, but it was opened when I was inside of there in 2022. And, of course, there houses' the gender-based violence unit and all of the training they get observing the children's law that we passed here, led by our former Attorney General, Member for San Fernando West, in the whole juvenile justice system. And that we would have spent \$66 million on, and that unit is up and running. We are aiming and hoping—not yet the case—that every single report of domestic violence is responded to, attended to, by elements of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Up to last weekend there was a report of a case that was not

attended too, and that is a matter that we are looking into but we need to do that because domestic violence is a subset of violence, and all matters of violence are important to us in the Ministry of National Security. The Trinidad and Tobago Police Services Ballistic Recovery Department, we established that. We took 21 police officers, put them in the Forensic Science Centre, trained them—

Mr. Young SC: Certified them.

Hon. F. Hinds:—they were understudying the four officers that we had in there. Madam Speaker, well that was a very successful decision, very successful. They have reported in August alone, 157 cases; in September, 172. They have been gazetted so they could give evidence in court as tool mark examiners in which they were trained—

Mr. Young SC: Correct. Certified, they are certified.

Hon. F. Hinds:—certified. They are now doing their own peer reviews which is an important element of this. And they are now providing assistance to investigators real-time, in other words, if they hold a man—and I have a list here but time does not permit—of successful cases where they might have held someone with a firearm, while the police have him in custody, they could measure test that firearm to see if it was involved in another murder somewhere, and in many cases including that family that the Member for Siparia spoke about, the Peterkin family, it is that work that solved it, and police were able to arrest the perpetrators of that horrendous quadruple murder in quick time, quick time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: We have spent \$2.4 million providing the Forensic Science

Centre with a list of its needed, equipment and so on to make it better. Recently there was a report in the papers about bodies piling up in Tobago, I can tell you truthfully, Madam Speaker, we have two—at the moment we had three, one retired recently, and we are now going out in the market for another one, we have three forensic—

Mr. Young SC: And we took a decision for them to be trained.

Hon. F. Hinds:—pathologist, and we took a decision. Somebody over there talked that, the Member for Chaguanas West, that we should put a system of scholarships in place to encourage people. I want to say to the Member, he was negotiating for that which he already had.

Mr. Young SC: Correct.

Hon. F. Hinds: We did that, and it is in place. So, Madam Speaker, so there is no issue around the Forensic Science Centre. As for the defence force, as you would have heard Minister Scotland say, they are very much involved in patrols across the country, altogether the defence force was involved in 7,940 patrols for this year; 366 foot patrols—7,940 mobile patrols, 366 foot patrols, 787 static or standing patrols and 802 confidence patrols. All that happening to raise visibility and give the citizens of this country some comfort. We told you last year that we were recruiting 1,000 police officers. I am happy to report we were able to induct 1,007 of them in the period.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Some have passed out, others are in different stages of their training and we expect by March of next year all of them will become full-fledged police officers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: We had to make that happen with regional corporations, we got the MOCCA, the serious crime unit in Jamaica. They sent eight of their polygraphers to assist us, in two rotations they did that and I want to congratulate the Commissioner and the police service for executing this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: And the Jamaicans who came in two rotations to assist their Trinidad counterparts in doing the necessary polygraphing to make this thing a reality. We continue with our specialized teams, Madam Speaker, and so the story goes.

So we are doing what we have to do in the Ministry of National Security to ensure that we provide the people of Trinidad and Tobago with the seriousness they deserve. Some people behave as though I have to formulate and go out there and patrol and all that, it does not work that way. The Prime Minister only went and gave information to the Police Service Commission when they were recruiting a Commissioner of Police, and they want to lock him up, they want to take him to enquiry, all kinds of things. And all he was doing is—we are expected to stay far removed from police operations. So I as Minister, we as Ministers, we know what our role is, and trust me, Madam Speaker, we carry it out implicitly and effectively without murmur. We doing what we have to do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: So, Madam Speaker, there is so much more to be said, and let me just conclude by treating with my own constituency Laventille West. I too am thankful to the people for the support they have rendered—

Madam Speaker: Member, your time is now spent.

Hon. F. Hinds: Ohhh! Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Bartaria/San Juan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Saddam Hosein (Bartaria/San Juan): Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me to join this very important debate, this anticipated debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024. And, Madam Speaker, I just want to commend all of my colleagues on this side of the aisle, and in particular, the Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: For what we describe as a comprehensive plan for Trinidad and Tobago going into the next general election, to bring back hope, to bring back prosperity, and to bring back good governance to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I had the unfortunate privilege to respond to the Minister of National Security and the Member for Laventille West. And he engaged in all types of bacchanal, and la carre in his contribution, but did not give any real solutions to the most important issue facing our citizens which is the crime situation in Trinidad and Tobago. He spent his time, Madam Speaker, talking about who recuperating after long weekends. Madam Speaker, this Minister is perpetual recuperation. He always sleeping.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: He is always sleeping, Madam Speaker, he is always sleeping at the job. And then he comes to tell us, Madam Speaker, about corruption and bacchanal in the United National Congress. Today he cannot give a proper explanation why under his Ministry they procured wooden ladders for \$1 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: He could not respond, Madam Speaker, to the allegations made from a NIDCO report by the Member for Oropouche East with respect to an additional \$65 million to treat with the “Mosquito crack”. He could not answer that, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, he speaks as though he comes from a pulpit of integrity, Madam Speaker, integrity. And he said these words, “Some who speak the loudest are complicitous.” Madam Speaker, I have in my possession a judgment registered in the Registrar General’s Office, the *Integrity Commission vs Fitzgerald Hinds*, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—where the Integrity Commission has a judgment registered against the Member for Laventille West, and he came here today to tell us about integrity.

Madam Speaker, that is the height of hypocrisy in this country.

4.30 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: That is the height of hypocrisy, but we are not engaged and

Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

interested in that bacchanal that the Member tried to introduce in this debate, Madam Speaker. We are here to tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago our plans, our policies when we are elected as the next Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: The Member could not give a justification, Madam Speaker, for the statements being made by the Chief of Defence Staff, with respect to the coast guard vessels. There are eight long vessels, Madam Speaker, and none are working. Not a single vessel is working. I am told, Madam Speaker, there is one interceptor that is in the north region and nothing in the south region. Cedros, Moruga, they are areas of concern and they remain unmanned. And, the Minister of National Security cannot tell us, Madam Speaker, why that is so and when we will get back patrols there, Madam Speaker. When?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And then he comes to talk today about bacchanal? Madam Speaker, we are interested in solutions for the people of Trinidad and Tobago to make them feel safe, to make them feel safe.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They are spending billions of dollars on these coast guard vessels, and the last vessel that sailed, which they acquired from Austal, sailed in February of this year. “Dey mash up de vessels” because they are not properly maintaining these vessels. They have no proper maintenance schedules for these vessels. “Dey take one ah de vessel from Damen, take it to Suriname, bring it to Trinidad and the vessel still not working.” This is

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the level of incompetence we have to deal with. Madam Speaker, I am guaranteeing you, the people will reject the Member for Laventille West at the polls.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They will reject him. They will reject him. That is why we have narcotics flowing into our borders. That is why we have illegal immigrants flowing into our borders, because of what is taking place with respect to our nation's coast guard, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We have an issue with respect to cocaine in this country, narcotics, Madam Speaker. I do not know if the Member for Laventille West might be familiar with that, "but cocaine does fry brains", Madam Speaker. And, I can say, Madam Speaker, none of us are accused of knocking down Marley the dog, none of us.

But then the Member engages in some issues with respect to the Opposition Leader's response to what is taking place, the impasse between the Auditor General and the Governor of the Central Bank, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, do you know the Governor of the Central Bank is the neighbour of the Prime Minister in Tobago in Inez Gate? That is the neighbour of the Prime Minister, Madam Speaker. They live in the same compound in Inez Gate.

This is the first time, Madam Speaker—I know the Member for Port of Spain South and the Member for Laventille West are both attorneys-at-law and they both belong to the same Ministry. But when you go to court, Madam Speaker, the senior leads the junior. Madam Speaker,

this is the first time the junior leading the senior. This is the first time that is happening.

Then the Minister says: “Look, I never blame the UNC for crime.” He said that you know. He said he never blamed the UNC for crime. These were his statements. Madam Speaker, do you know his Prime Minister said if the Government cannot deal with crime, then the Government itself is part of the problem. Is he disagreeing with that statement? Is he departing from that statement of the hon. Prime Minister? I ask him.

And then there was a strange statement he made when he was an Opposition Member. He accused the UNC Government, when UNC—in fact, Madam Speaker, the statistics will show that every time the UNC is in power crime is lower.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: You know, the Member for Laventille West say crime is lower when the UNC is in power because people do not report crime. Madam Speaker, that is not true. It is because we had policies. We had boots on the ground. We had vehicles on the road, we had patrols. We had Community Comfort Patrols. We had CCTV cameras. We had the intelligence agencies working. We had the coast guard working, Madam Speaker; a holistic approach to fighting crime, be it the soft method, the hard methods. Madam Speaker, we had the approach for dealing with crime.

They have shut down youth programmes. They have shut down many of the training programmes. They have shut down, and, in fact they have decimated the intelligence agency and environment of Trinidad and Tobago. I will get to that with respect to the expenditure under the SSA, Madam

Speaker, because those are very important matters, we must let the population know with respect to where their money is going.

And then he tells us about military-grade weapons are being used in crime scenes. Well, how did it get here? We do not manufacture firearms in Trinidad and Tobago. They had to be imported in Trinidad and Tobago. But when you have the borders, Madam Speaker, without any security, when you have over 132 entry points in Trinidad and Tobago, and you have no coast guard vessels out there, you expect the firearms to get in here. And, the Minister cannot tell us what is the solution to that. These are matters not confirmed by the United National Congress. These were put on the public record by the Chief of Defence Staff. He said it, we did not say it, Madam Speaker, we did not say it.

Crime, Madam Speaker, is a holistic approach and we all agree to that. The United National Congress understands that. I think the Opposition Leader outlined clearly, Madam Speaker, the plans with respect to crime-fighting, together with the criminal justice system; it was clear. It was absolutely clear, Madam Speaker. When we get into power, we will deal with the criminals. We will deal with the criminal justice system, Madam Speaker. We will deal with it.

Because under this Minister, Madam Speaker, there was a total of 2,100 murders. Do you think any other Minister of National Security could survive in any Cabinet in any part of the world, having a record of 2,100 murders under his watch?—the highest being 604 murders in the year of 2022. We are now in the month of October and we have crossed over 500 murders in Trinidad and Tobago, 500 murders, 500 murders.

The Peterkins, Madam Speaker, those children that were murdered, Madam Speaker. The Minister could not offer some level of comfort to those families, comfort to the families who are still grieving, comfort to the families who are afraid, Madam Speaker. And, when the crime situation is bad, do you expect investors to come in Trinidad and Tobago and have any sense of comfort to invest their money here? We have to get a hold of the criminal justice system, a hold of the crime situation, Madam Speaker, to encourage investors to once again come to our shores. That is what we have to do, Madam Speaker. But what we have been experiencing with this particular Government is an entire list of broken promises.

Last year, “dey beat their chest, dey beat de desk”; we are going to increase the number of recruits by 1,000 officers in the TTPS. Madam Speaker, do you know that they did not recruit the 1,000 persons in this fiscal year that that went by? They had the ordinary pass out of about 300 officers, Madam Speaker. We on this side advocated that there are several hundreds of SRP officers who are competent, who are experienced; absorb them within the regular police service, Madam Speaker. They are in receipt of a remuneration package that is much less than the regular officers. It will be easier for us to absorb the SRPs into the system, rather than go and recruit 1,000 officers, which you cannot do and which they did not do and which they will not do. It will take a UNC Government to increase the officers in the TTPS. Madam Speaker, it will take a UNC Government.

Then we were told last year, listen, new modern scanners are being procured for the port, bonded warehouse and transit sheds. They awarded a contract at a cost of \$90 million supply, delivery, installation and

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commissioning of four large scale, non-intrusive inspection scanners for shipping containers, which they will deploy at Port of Spain and Point Lisas. You know, the Minister of Finance came to the Upper House this year around July 2024 or so, Madam Speaker and indicated, “well, de scanners eh reach yet. We will still have to wait for them.” They will still have to wait for the scanners at the port.

Then they tell us: Look, there is an established Riverine Police Unit at Carenage and they allocated the sum of \$15 million. Do you know much they spent on that unit, Madam Speaker? Zero dollars, zero dollars. They allocated \$15 million for the Riverine Unit last year and they spent not a single cent on it, but they allocated \$50 million for feting and gallivanting, Madam Speaker, \$50 million for that.

They allocated \$80 million, hear this one, for new vehicles and equipment for the police service; new equipment and new vehicles for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Madam Speaker.

4.40 p.m.

And they allocated \$80 million. Hear this one. For new vehicles and equipment for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. New equipment, and new vehicles, for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Madam Speaker.

Well, Madam Speaker, I had a look at the PSIP and I want to be very accurate when I quote here. At page 87 of the PSIP. Hear what it says:

“Purchase of Vehicles for the Police Service - in preventing and detecting crime, the acquisition of vehicles is critical to increasing mobility and visibility of officers. The TTPS continued to execute its planned expansion of the fleet of vehicles of approximately 2,000

over a period of time. However, no vehicles were procured in this fiscal year.”

This is the PSIP confirming no vehicles for the police service were acquired in that fiscal year, Madam Speaker. That is shameful. That causes the police service to now be under resourced. We have heard the amount of derelict vehicles within the TTPS, we have heard that, when you call a police station, the first thing they tell you, “hey, we eh have no vehicles, yuh know”, and then you have moneys allocated and you are not spending the money. Not a vehicle according to the PSIP book, was procured for the fiscal year, 2024.

Hon. Member: Shame.

Mr. S. Hosein: Shame. And persons in this country have their homes invaded. They are being robbed, murdered, Madam Speaker. Police do not have any vehicles, and you could come to tell us to report, that you could not buy vehicles for the TTPS. Confirmed black and white in their own PSIP documents that they have provided to this Parliament, Madam Speaker. Not a single vehicle.

Then, Madam Speaker, they were talking about the purchase of two search and rescue surveillance fixed-wing aircrafts that they will now procure for this financial year, 2025. You know, when you look in the yellow books there were no allocations placed in the Air Guard for the purchase of these items, or these assets? None, Madam Speaker. In fact, I do not know if they acquire these new assets, whether they will have pilots to fly them, because there is an article from the *Guardian* dated the 5th of February, 2023, Madam Speaker, and this says:

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“3 senior specialist pilots resign from Air Guard.”

And what the Air Guard is saying, Madam Speaker, and those persons that are quoted in the article, this is a Trinidad and Tobago *Guardian* article, they said:

“To compound the situation, two pilots who withheld their names said while there are junior helicopter pilots in the Air Guard, they do not have the necessary skills.

National Security sources said it would be a...safety risk for the junior pilots to fly by themselves.

The young pilots, sources said, need to be trained and that would take some time...”

So, you are going to buy planes and you have no pilots to fly them, Madam Speaker. So, you have a TTPS without vehicles, a coast guard without boats, and an air guard without planes and pilots. So, the Air Guard cannot fly, the Coast Guard cannot sail, and the TTPS cannot drive. And that is the result of over, billions and billions of dollars being pumped into National Security—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein:—every single year. Every single year, Madam Speaker.

Then we have the SSA, because the SSA plays a critical role in crime-fighting. This is the central body that deals with intelligence-gathering capabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I have the budget here for the SSA, and that is very shocking. When you look at the numbers with respect to what the SSA has been allocated, and what they will spend in the next financial year, Madam Speaker. The SSA, for the period 2015-

2024, spent TT \$2 billion, \$2 billion, Madam Speaker. They are allocated a further \$270million, and that entire SSA collapsed recently. You remember when they had the resignation and the firing of several high officials of the SSA? They had to be replaced.

So, if the intelligence community is not in fact operating at capacity, how do you expect the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to fight crime also? Because they are the ones who will pass on the intelligence to the operational units, such as the Defence Force, and the TTPS in order to fight, detect, apprehend criminals, Madam Speaker. That is what—you have a holistic approach and fight against crime. Then, Madam Speaker, when you look at other issues within the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, you have to look at the manpower available at the TTPS. Currently right now, the sanctioned strength of the TTPS is 7,844 officers, 7,844. The actual, Madam Speaker, is now 6,447. So, we have a deficit of around, over 1,000 police officers within the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. And, you now have officers in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service who are overworked. There are several divisions of the TTPS, and they are assigned to various divisions of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. And, Madam Speaker, what happens in this instance is that, when you have a lack of manpower within the TTPS, now these officers will have to claim something called overtime. Yeah?

Madam Speaker, according to the yellow books, in Trinidad and Tobago when you look at the *Recurrent Expenditure* for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, would you believe that the overtime bill for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is \$418 million, \$418 million in

overtime. They have now allocated an additional \$400 million in overtime payments to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. Madam Speaker, it is very simple, you do not need rocket science to figure this out. If officers are claiming overtime it means you have a lack of manpower, and therefore you need to recruit more and more police officers. But, what they have done, is promise that they would do work on the Trinidad and Tobago Police Academy. The work has not been completed. You do not have the proper facilities for training, for studying, for certifying these police officers, and therefore, that is why we are in this position. You have enough money, but you do not have enough management in the TTPS, Madam Speaker, you do not have that.

Look, I have some of the bills here. This is from the overtime section ASP finance branch, Madam Speaker. DCP operations for the period 1st of January, 2023 to 31st of December, 2023, and the bill, for one particular area which is operations, was \$160 million in overtime. The Port of Spain Division, \$11 million; Northern Division, \$23 million; Central Division, \$9 million; Tobago Division, \$8 million. Hear this one, Guard and Emergency Branch, \$25.8 million; Western Division, \$8 million; North Eastern Division, \$9 million; Southern Division, \$18 million; Eastern Division, \$8 million; South Western Division, \$9.8 million; IATF, \$22.6 million. DCP administration and support which comprises, community oriented policing, mounted and canine branch, traffic and highway patrol branch, transport branch, finance branch, \$16.8 million in overtime. DCP intelligence and investigations, court and process, PSB, and CID stolen vehicles, \$2.85 million in overtime.

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Madam Speaker, we have a problem in this country with respect to the management of the human resource of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. We have a management problem. And then, Madam Speaker, within the budget speech, you hear the Minister saying, “Well look, we need to establish some new task forces, we need to establish some new specialized units within the TTPS”. You already have a deficit in your sanctioned strength—in your actual strength compared to what you sanctioned, and now you are creating more and more divisions. You will have to now take out officers from other units, put them into these new units, some of which are duplicating resources, and therefore you will end up again with respect to no productive use of money, and human resource.

Look, they want to set up something called the establishment of the illegal firearms ammunition retrieval task force. You would think that this is a multimillion dollar agency. They allocated \$250,000.

Hon. Members: “Hmm.”

Mr. S. Hosein: The establishment of a special anticrime operations unit, \$425. One of the biggest issues facing Trinidad and Tobago, the establishment of special operations counter home and business invasion task force. Madam Speaker, I thought they would have allocated \$50 million for this. They allocated \$225,000 to fight home invasions, and business invasions in Trinidad and Tobago. Improvement works to Police Station, Tobago, \$1.5 million, Madam Speaker and strangely they are establishing something called a seismic fusion centre for \$3 million.

4.50 p.m.

What? The TTPS is going to measure earthquakes now? A seismic

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fusion centre, I do not understand that allocation. We might get some more answers when we come to the Standing Finance Committee, Madam Speaker. And these are some of the issues with respect to the human resource management within the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

And, Madam Speaker, you have to also look at what is taking place at the top of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service because that is where officers get their encouragement, they get their morale from. Look, I have a freedom of information request sent to the Police Service Commission, and what prompted this FOIA request, Madam Speaker, is this. When the Acting Prime Minister, the Member for Diego Martin North/East—I think it was the last time he acted, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Member: Before he was dethroned.

Mr. S. Hosein:—before he was dethroned, they would have extended the contract for the current Commissioner of Police, Mrs. Erla Harewood-Christopher. Within that, Madam Speaker, the Minister came on the eve of when the contract was going to expire to announce to the country, “Well, look”—I think the Member for Couva North asked the question—“we are going to extend the contract by a period of one year.”

Madam Speaker, I asked the Police Service Commission for a copy of the report that the Cabinet would have used in order, or the Acting Prime Minister, in order to extend or justify the extension of the Commissioner of Police. Madam Speaker, I was shocked when I read it. I was assuming that I would gotten a very big envelope with bound documents to show me the performance of the Commissioner of Police. Madam Speaker, do you know I got a three-page document? And the first page just had to do with a review

of the constitutional powers of the Commission.

So really, Madam Speaker, we have a one-and-a-half page, really, of what they reviewed the Commissioner on, and these are the criteria. The Commission monitored and appraised the Commissioner for the period March 01, 2023 to the 29th of February, 2024, against four broad areas as follows: One, financial; two, internal; three, customer; four, learning and growth; and five, competencies. Madam Speaker, do you know it had nothing there to do with crime fighting? None of those five criteria had to do with crime fighting, or intelligence gathering, or measuring against the crime statistics.

Madam Speaker, this is what the Commission found when they evaluated these five criteria of the Commissioner of Police. The Commission has rated the performance of the Commissioner for the period March 01, 2023 to the 29th of February, 2024, as “good”; as good, you know, Madam Speaker. After 600 murders, after 500 murders this year, after many home invasions, they have now certified that the Commissioner’s performance is “good”, Madam Speaker.

And then they said—listen, they also considered that there were areas for improvement in the Commissioner’s performance, such as crime reduction and detection. Madam Speaker, I would have thought that would have been the first criteria they used, whether or not to extend the term of the Commissioner of Police.

Completion of updating internal policies and orders, and customer service in the police service.

Madam Speaker, this is what they said some of the improvements and

some of the achievements of the Commissioner of Police were:

Setting up the police hospital in Siparia; the creation of an aide-mémoire for officers; improvement works in divisional command centres; and hosting a successful association of Caribbean Commissioners of Police Conference.

Nothing about crime fighting. Nothing about crime fighting or crime reduction, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And that was not included here, Madam Speaker, with respect to the promotion mishap. But these are some of the pertinent matters and gives an outlook of why Trinidad and Tobago is in the position we currently are in when it comes to crime fighting and crime reduction. We have to get serious in this country, Madam Speaker.

When a Police Service Commission recommends that the performance of the Commissioner is “good”, after we have seen the abysmal failure with respect to crime reduction and crime detection in Trinidad and Tobago. And that is something we in the Opposition continue, Madam Speaker, to look at and examine when it comes to the safety and security of our citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

And then I want to get into some other items with respect to the Auditor General Report of 2023, the same report that was hidden from the people of Trinidad and Tobago, but we had to get a copy of that particular report, Madam Speaker. And within that report, it outlined many, many issues with respect to financial scrutiny when it comes to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. At page 34 of that report, Madam Speaker, there is

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an item called:

“Vouchers to support five payments for the rental of vehicles totaling...”—\$1.2 million.

You know what, Madam Speaker? Those payments were not provided for audit scrutiny. There was one instance where payment for the rental of vehicles was made in advance for the month of October 2023, in the amount of \$1.3 million for the financial year 2024, and supporting documents were not present for approval. So basically, what the Auditor General is saying, Madam Speaker, they were prepaying for rentals in this country for the next financial year, after the books were already closed for the financial year 2023.

Listen to this one:

“Minor Equipment Purchases”

There was:

“Expenditure...for the purchase of 50 Dell monitors, 40 Samsung...TVs and other items, in the sum of...”—\$255,000,
Madam Speaker.

A cheque was issued—a voucher was issued on the 19th of September 2023. The cheque was handed over on the 20th of September 2023. In November 2023, when the Auditor General went in, Madam Speaker, you know they could not find the Dell laptop, they could not find the TV, and nothing else that they paid for? There were no items that they could have found that were paid for, for this \$255,000 that was spent by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Madam Speaker, there is another one. We are hearing about this

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property tax thing. The Valuation Division is in charge of valuating properties in Trinidad and Tobago to determine what your annual rental value will be for your property. And therefore, they will have various public officers, contract officers, conducting surveys going around your homes, looking at your homes, doing the assessments.

Earlier this year, in the Parliament, Madam Speaker, I was able to outline documents and show evidence that they were doing something called, “curbside valuations”. And that is why there were many issues and people continuously complained of the quality of the valuations that they were given with respect to the payment of property tax.

Madam Speaker, do you know the Valuation Division now bought two drones? They are buying drones, Madam Speaker, to fly over your home in order to detect your properties. I heard, Madam Speaker, and I am reliably informed that they are measuring the size of your roof and then they are telling you what your property will be valued. Madam Speaker, they bought two drones and they paid \$206,000 for these drones, Madam Speaker. You know, when the Auditor General went into the Valuation Division, they could only find one of the drones and the next one is missing? I do not know if it flew away on top of somebody’s roof. Madam Speaker, these are some of the issues—and it sounds comical, but this is actually what is taking place with the taxpayers’ money in Trinidad and Tobago.

Look, I also shadow the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. Madam Speaker, according to the Auditor General’s Report, we have a very important issue that we continuously raise

for many years. The housing of the Director of Public Prosecution's Office in north. That office is, right now, on Richmond Street, Madam Speaker. There are officers within there, the state counsels, who have complained about the space requirements, complained about the security, Madam Speaker, complained about the condition and quality of that building. A new building was sought, Madam Speaker. The rent, according to the office of the Auditor General, Madam Speaker, is this. The Government has spent \$29.2 million on renting a building for the Office of the DPP that was not occupied a single day; \$29.2 million, and the expenditure does not stop there. They outfitted the building with \$23.2 million worth of taxpayers' money, amounting, Madam Speaker, to about—close to \$53 million when it comes to expenditure, and that building currently remains unoccupied.

We are calling, Madam Speaker, for the treatment of the staff and the state prosecutors to be treated better, Madam Speaker. When I was at that office, there was something that they were lobbying for, and it was something called a “risk allowance”, because their job, according to the job description, is the same thing as any other legal counsel or legal officer, state counsel, in the public service, within the JLSC. But their job is specific, Madam Speaker, because they are the ones who are prosecuting the criminals, prosecuting the gang members, prosecuting the gang leaders, and you cannot be paying them the same remuneration as the rest of persons because they conduct a specialized job. And we are calling for better remuneration for the state counsels, and that is why you have in that office persons leaving over and over, and always causing a vacuum with respect to human resource within the Office of the DPP.

5.00 p.m.

And then we hear that the Government is coming here to tell us that the Office of the Attorney General has had so many achievements, that they did so well. Madam Speaker, you would remember it is a hot issue in this Parliament every time budget comes around and that is the expenditure of money when it comes to legal fees. Under this Attorney General, Senator—the hon. Attorney General, Madam Speaker, not the Member for San Fernando West. That Attorney General has the highest spend for legal fees. In the last fiscal year, that Attorney General, Madam Speaker, spent \$158 million—

Hon. Members: “Whoooo”.

Mr. S. Hosein:—hand-selected State briefs to PNM officials, Members, and financiers. Madam Speaker, \$158 million. The Member for San Fernando West did not get such a great expenditure but the new Attorney General, Madam Speaker, Sen. Armour SC, has received \$158 million in the financial year 2024.

In the year 2023, the Attorney General in legal fees, allocated and spent \$188.5 million in legal fees. In this fiscal year, Madam Speaker, he is now allocated an additional \$80 million in legal fees. And then there is a Stanley John report that was paid under that line Item, Madam Speaker, and we have not seen the Stanley John report. Yet they brought a bill to this Parliament to tell us, look, let us restructure the Office of the AG based on Stanley John’s recommendation, but we have not seen the report.

Mr. Bodoë: “You cyah read de report”.

Mr. S. Hosein: They want to hire a hand-picked Chamber manager so that

they can continue to distribute briefs to their PNM friends and family, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Bodoë: Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Without bringing anybody into the debate, Madam Speaker, before I rose in this debate, I saw the First Gentleman representing the Office of the Prime Minister in a particular matter.

Hon. Member: Yes, I saw him.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, and when we in this Parliament complained what they are doing, this is the highest spend when it comes to legal fees in the history of Trinidad and Tobago under this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And what did we get for it? Did we get value for money? Madam Speaker, they are losing matters left, right, and centre.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Imagine we had to take them to court all the way to the Privy Council for some Lord in the Privy Council to tell us, “Aye, alyuh go and call de local government election”.

Hon. Member: Election.

Hon. Member: Acting illegally—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, that is the extent of it. That is the extent of it that we have to face in this country with respect to what this Government has placed the population under. And then we have something called a crisis of credibility in this country. When I say that, I want to examine a particular statement that the Minister of Finance made, and this

can be found at page 174 of the budget speech. He said:

“This turnaround did not happen by chance or by magic. Our economic success is a result of two factors... However, if one listens to the uninformed nay-sayers, you will have no idea that our economy has grown for three consecutive years, and our revenue base is now higher than it was five years ago.”

He said that. Madam Speaker, I have in my hand, a copy of an affidavit filed in the matter of *Terrisa Dhoray the Attorney General and Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority*. That matter is completed and there is no appeal. The matter has been exhausted at the Privy Council. Madam Speaker, the affidavit reads this—the affidavit is deposed by the Minister of Finance. And in the affidavit, he swears and says that:

“...The facts and matters deposed to in this affidavit are within my personal knowledge true and correct or taken from the files, records and documents of the Ministry of Finance to which I have access, in which case, I verily believe same to be true and correct.”

Madam Speaker, when you read paragraph 22 of the affidavit, it says this—this is paragraph 24, sorry.

“Accordingly, the next three years will be very challenging for the country from a revenue perspective. In fact, unless additional tax revenue can be collected through the improvements in tax administration that will come with a fully operational Revenue Authority, the Government will soon be faced with very difficult choices in terms of maintaining the current levels of subsidies, grants, free services and social programmes. Notably, as the Government grapples with significantly reduced revenues, there are

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demands for more and more government expenditure on infrastructure and social programmes.”

Madam Speaker, do you know that he went to court, “tell de courthouse”, all of this, that the economy is doing bad so he needs to collect more money, and then comes in the Parliament under parliamentary privilege and says something else? Madam Speaker, that is hypocrisy to the highest level.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Do you know what he estimated as the country’s deficit for financial year 2024? The Minister of Finance did not put what the deficit will be in 2024, in terms of dollars and cents. Do you know what he told the courthouse, Madam Speaker, what the deficit will be? It will be as high as \$9 billion for the last financial year. If we did not have this affidavit, Madam Speaker, we would not know what the estimated deficit will be. The Minister of Finance congratulated the Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs, I think, about three or four times within his speech—I believe he is fighting for his job in the next general election.

He says that the energy sector was booming when he was speaking in the budget. Hear what he told the courthouse. He said:

“...In fact, oil production in this country is half of what it was 15 years ago, and gas production is 35 per cent less than what it was 10 years ago. Such production is not expected to improve until 2027, when it is expected that gas from Venezuela should become available to the country.”

Hon. Member: How can we believe that?

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Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, it will take a UNC Government to restore the economy, not this PNM Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: We cannot trust PNM.

Mr. S. Hosein: We have lost faith in this Government. The people have lost confidence in this Government. There is a crisis of credibility with respect to this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: He then tells us in the budget statement, Madam Speaker, that there was a surplus budget in the year 2022, and not because of their policy, you know, because it had a war in Ukraine. And in that, Madam Speaker, the last time I checked, a surplus means that you have more. It will mean that you have more revenue and you will have less expenditure, so you would get more money in your pocket.

The Auditor General, after auditing the books in 2022, found this; she said that the expenditure for the financial year 2022, was \$58.9 billion, and the revenue was \$58.7 billion. So if you subtract 58.9 from 58.7, Madam Speaker, it leaves you with a deficit of about \$262 million. So again, Madam Speaker, the Minister came with untruths to this Parliament. There is a crisis of credibility.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We cannot believe anything he has to say. We cannot believe anything that this Minister has to say. And then the Member for Arima will come to tell us about the CSO data. We have heard time and time again when economists complain in this country that the Government is

Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

establishing policies without proper and credible data, and we are seeing it right before our eyes. We simply cannot believe a thing that this Government has to tell us. He is telling us one thing in the courthouse, and then he is telling us a different thing in the Parliament. Telling the courthouse, “Look, de economy is about to fall down” and coming to the Parliament to beat his chest to say, “Look, we have done so well, and you should vote us again”. Madam Speaker, the people will reject them at the polls, 2024 or after.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And then he tells the public servants, “Watch, you cannot get your 10 per cent. You can get 5 per cent, and we gave you 4 per cent for the last bargaining period.” Madam Speaker, I was very surprised by that statement, because you know, before the budget debate, you often consult with your constituents. And we in the United National Congress conducted several pre-budget consultations in almost every corner of Trinidad, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Thirty-nine constituencies.

Mr. S. Hosein: And we have had an enormous response from the population telling us what their problems are and what their recommendations are. When we spoke in this budget debate, we stood on the shoulders of most of those people who gave us ideas, policies, and problems that they are facing. So we do not speak here for ourselves, Madam Speaker, we speak here for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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5.10 p.m.

Now, the Minister is saying, look, 10 per cent is too much. The Opposition Leader gave a position that they should offer 10 per cent to public servants. The Minister said: “No, we will crash the economy if we do that”.

Madam Speaker, I have a letter dated 8th December, 2023 from the office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance. In this letter, Madam Speaker, it was to the workers who they want to bring under the TTRA and under the TTRA law, there are various options which a public servant can exercise in order to come under the TTRA law—

Madam Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes of original speaking time. You are also entitled to 10 additional minutes to wind up.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, I will use the allocated time. There are several options. So one of the first options is that you can voluntarily retire from the public service. But then there is another option, where, if you are in the public service, you could transfer to the TTRA on terms and conditions which, taken as a whole, are no less favourable that was enjoyed by the public servant and the public service.

I want to quote from the letter here, Madam Speaker, so they telling the public servant, if they exercise this option, this is what they are entitled to:

An attractive compensation package has been designed for the staff of the TTRA. You have been acting in the position of—

For anonymity, I will leave out the person’s name:

—and will be offered an equivalent position in the TTRA. The salary band is identified below. Please note that your final monthly base salary will either be a minimum of 10 per cent more than your existing base salary, or the minimum of the band, whichever is higher. So what they are saying here, in essence Madam Speaker, is this, that if someone transfers to the TTRA, they are giving them the 10 per cent but if you remain in the rest of the public service, you are getting 5 per cent. Madam Speaker, there is a crisis of credibility when it comes to this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Hear what it says, To encourage people to come over to the TTR is this:

The TTRA will also offer several benefits, some of which may include a health plan; life insurance plan; pension plan; vacation leave; sick leave; personal leave; transport facility; car allowance; mobile; mobile data and Internet, professional membership and subscription and overtime.

You are giving the rest of the public service, Madam Speaker, pennies, but you are encouraging persons to come over the TTRA, resign, transfer, Madam Speaker, and giving them the 10 per cent. We call on this side, Madam Speaker, for every public servant to be given that 10 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We adopt the statement of the Leader of the Opposition. You cannot continue to discriminate against workers in Trinidad and Tobago. You cannot discriminate against them, Madam Speaker.

Then, I hear the Government talking about an e-Passport. We have heard about this e-Passport moneys were allocated in the last budget. You know, they spent no money on the e-Passport, Madam Speaker. They have something called the fingerprint system; when you travel to other jurisdictions, you are fingerprinted when you pass through Customs. Madam Speaker, again, money was allocated for that; they spent none, and that is why we are in this position.

Look, they want to implement e-Passport with chips, and you still have to follow the customs form when you are in Caribbean Airlines flying back to Trinidad, you know. You know how much people complain about that customs form, Madam Speaker. In fact, the Minister of Finance, about three or four budgets ago, said that they will abolish that form. Madam Speaker, if you go away now and come back, you have to fill out that form.

Hon. Member: It is a book now or what?

Mr. S. Hosein: It is a book. Look they want to say, Madam Speaker, that they want to go cashless; cashless, use your card. Do you know that they have cut the allocation or the amount of money that you allowed for forex or US on your credit card? So when you go cashless, Madam Speaker, you will have limited spending ability when it comes to foreign exchange through US currency.

There are some other issues that I wish to raise, Madam Speaker, with respect to my portfolio. Earlier again, in this Parliament, I raised issues with respect to the difficulty with respect to registering deeds in the registry. Madam Speaker, we are asking for that process to be streamlined. With respect to subdivision approvals for RPO lands, many persons are finding it

difficult to get local health approval. We are asking the Government to look at that because persons cannot conduct conveyances or transfers, it is very difficult and expensive. If you buy a piece of RPO land, one acre, two acres, it is difficult to get the subdivision and if I have to declare interest, Madam Speaker, I am an attorney-at-law and these are some of the issues that I have identified in practice and were raised with me by other practitioners.

With respect to stamp duty, Madam Speaker, there are many persons in this country who have worked very hard, built large homes that are now very valuable and they find it difficult to give those homes to their children because of the high stamp duty that has to be paid. Before they die, they want to give their children, family member, whoever it is, their property, Madam Speaker, but the stamp duty prohibits them from doing that. We are asking that the Government look at a revision of stamp duty on inter vivos gifts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, with respect to the tint laws, a constituent emailed me on the 1st August, 2024 and he is of the view, Madam Speaker, and I promised him I will raise it in the Parliament that he believes that the tint laws are a revenue-generating measure. I also, Madam Speaker, want to believe what my constituent is telling me. I do not believe tint can stop criminals in this country. It will take a United National Congress Government—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—to stop the criminals in this country. You are now telling people, “doh” tint your car too dark. You really think the bandit who rob somebody will tint down their car dark, so that when the police stop them on a roadblock they will search the vehicle? Madam Speaker, that in itself makes it suspicious and we are asking for the Government to rethink that policy when it comes to tint.

Lastly, Madam Speaker, I want to thank the people of Barataria/San Juan for electing me as the youngest—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—Member of Parliament in this Twelfth Parliament, Madam Speaker, and hopefully in the next Parliament, the Thirteenth Parliament, I might still be the youngest Member of Parliament.

Madam Speaker, we have identified several issues in the constituency; unemployment, infrastructure. We have asked for various roads to be paved, including, the El Socorro Main Road, parts of the Eastern Main Road, there are issues with respect to flooding, Madam Speaker. We have written the Minister of Works and Transport on many occasions but I do not believe, Madam Speaker, the Minister has the ability to read because he does not respond to our letters—the Minister of Works. We have written him on several occasions.

We have issues, Madam Speaker, with respect to WASA, and I must say that we have various officers who we liaise with on a continuous basis to bring relief to our citizens when it comes to water supply in Barataria/San Juan. We had asked for long service mains to be installed in various parts of the constituency. We have asked for the flooding pumps to be properly

installed and I must say, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West has engaged with some consultation with me with respect to the long main installation in various parts of the constituency, because we want to bring relief to those citizens who have been suffering for many years.

Madam Speaker, we also have the issue of the St. George's College that occupied the news cycle for quite some time. We are asking, Madam Speaker, for the Member for St. Ann's East, who might pass that school on her way to Parliament, at most times, Madam Speaker, to get serious about St. George's College. You cannot have students in that condition after spending \$10 million on the roof of that school, Madam Speaker. That roof, Madam Speaker, if it is \$10 million, you might go to look for diamond and gold on it because you cannot see where the money went.

When I went there—Madam Speaker, we have to be careful when we cut ribbons with the Government, you know. They are telling us to join hands with them and cut ribbon and when you go, the project unfinished. It have no desk, no chair, no blackboard, no whiteboard for the children, Madam Speaker, and that happened in St. George's College. Madam Speaker, is it full time? What time do I end?

Madam Speaker: You end at 5.22.30.

Hon. Member: Four minutes.

Mr. S. Hosein: Four minutes. Madam Speaker, these are some of the issues that I wish to raise with respect to my constituents.

Crime is another issue. We have seen many criminal activities taking place because where my constituency is situated is on the East-West Corridor. It is in an area where we are bounded, or the Eastern Main Road

passes through parts of the constituency. We have the highway also passing through parts of the constituency, so it is a very easy area for persons to escape after criminal activities. We are asking for more presence of police officers for resourcing of the Barataria Police Station, and we are asking for the installation of more CCTV cameras. My constituents deserve to be safe, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: With the policies with respect to what the Opposition Leader has outlined, many of my constituents have supported the call, because I have a large business community within Barataria/San Juan. They have supported the call for gun ownership and easier access for legal firearms.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.20 p.m.

Many constituents—and I border the constituency of St. Joseph and Aranguéz, and also parts of Boundary Road, there were instances of many home invasions. The Member for St. Joseph was absent but, Madam Speaker, we on that part of the corridor are supporting the call for stand-your-ground legislation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And, Madam Speaker, I cannot take my seat without thanking my staff at the Barataria Constituency Office. I want to thank the executive, led by Ms. Aruna Mohammed, who has helped me tremendously with respect to activities within the constituency. We have hosted many Christmas, Diwali, Eid—we are currently hosting many cricket tournaments,

football tournaments, Madam Speaker. I believe we played Sen. Roberts, in the first cricket match, and Barataria/San Juan was victorious in that match—

Hon. Members: Like the CPL, man.

Mr. S. Hosein:—and the lights did not come off for the cricket match. And I want to ask the Member for Lopinot/ Bon Air West to keep those lights on for us.

Hon. Members: [*Laughing*]

Mr. S. Hosein: But, Madam Speaker, I must say that I wish that when Diego Martin North/East was presenting the budget, that the lights came off.

Hon. Members: [*Laughing*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And, Madam Speaker, we on this side of the Parliament, we have outlined the plans, we have outlined the policies. All we are waiting on now, is the election date, and I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me, and I want to begin by quite clearly placing on the record my sincere congratulations to the Minister of Finance of Trinidad and Tobago, for a very inspiring and effective budget presentation.

Madam Speaker, Minister of Finance is now the longest serving Minister of Finance, on the records of Trinidad and Tobago, and I must say that he has proven the naysayers wrong and has established himself as an

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

effective advocate in the best interest of all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I want to also quite clearly congratulate colleagues on the Government Benches, who have brought to this budget debate a degree of intellectual prowess, a degree of accuracy, a degree of integrity, and a clear representation of what is best for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I wish I could say the same about colleagues on the other side of the isle but quite frankly, I cannot. I have paid close attention to the progress of this debate, listened to the Member for Siparia, who I see is slowly making her way out of the Chamber at this time. And most recently, I had cause—

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Greetings. Most recently, Madam Speaker, I had cause to pay some attention to the contribution of the Member for Barataria/San Juan, who used every moment, every minute, every second of his time in a wide ranging discourse, including very strong opinions being shared about who will be rejected by the electorate.

Now, Madam Speaker, if it is any team in the history of this country that can give us an expert discourse on rejection by the electorate in this country, it is the Members sitting opposite to us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: They are world class in establishing rejection by the electorate of Trinidad and Tobago. And I have a message for the Member for Barataria/San Juan, Madam Speaker, and that message is this. Notwithstanding the hope that you may harbour, and a few of your colleagues may harbour, a house divided against itself shall not stand.

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

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And even in its physical disposition before I—Madam Speaker, I was shocked, walking into this Chamber today to realize that by some horrific decision, the United National Congress has patently placed before the public, a clear fracture and division. A house that is divided against itself—and they will reap the rewards for that bad decision in the next general election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: It will not stand, Madam Speaker. And the Member for Barataria/San Juan, went on to give us a textbook case of trying to use crime as a political football in Trinidad and Tobago. And, Madam Speaker, the situation with respect to violent crime, is not a point for pride of any Member elected, appointed in the Senate, any parliamentarians, any citizen of this country. It is a concern as has been acknowledged and responded to, by Members of this Government, including two Ministers in the Ministry of National Security, right up to the level of the Prime Minister.

But to come here to this Chamber as an elected representative and to seek to pour a vial—a vat of negativity on the population time and time again, it does poor service to the future of this country and all it tells the electorate, is that you care more about yourself and your political prospects than you do about the future of this country and the children of this country. That is all it does. And they are like a broken record, over and over again—

Mr. Padarath: Madam Speaker.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—trying to revel—

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

Mr. Padarath: Standing Order 48(1), the Member is lecturing elected Members, when he himself is not elected.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: So, Member, I overrule your point on 48(1). Please proceed.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Well, Madam Speaker, I will move on, after that very feeble and ill placed attempt to intervene in this debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: The Member for Princes Town had an opportunity earlier. I paid attention—I said I paid attention, and he did nothing to disturb the scorers. He is now trying to do so, while I am contributing. I hope you will retain your seat and listen.

Madam Speaker, the first step—and any child, a novice to crime reduction will tell you, the first step if you are serious about dealing with crime, as an organization, as an individual, or as a family, is you have to start at home within your own ranks. And to come here today, as the Member for Barataria/San Juan attempted to do, and to leverage crime as a political football, I would have to ask him to point to any Member of this Cabinet or this Government Bench that currently stands before the courts of Trinidad and Tobago on any matter of criminal conduct. I challenge him so to do. And I am willing to give way, if he is able to establish that. But, Madam Speaker, if you put the shoe on the other foot there are many questions to be answered within the United National Congress. So, if you cannot lead by example, what solace, what relief can you bring to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Because in effect you are either

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

contributing to the problem, Member for Princes Town, or you are concealing and harbouring the problem.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: And that is where we have to start. That is where we have to start. So I take umbrage to that line of pursuit by Members of the Opposition Bench in this Parliament. And I heard a phrase—and I guess the Member who spoke before me was trying to make it into a little bit of a catch-phrase in the debate, “a crisis of creditability”. This country has a crisis of credibility. Well, Madam Speaker, the first individual in this Chamber who has a crisis of credibility, is the Member for Siparia who is the Leader of the Opposition of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.30 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Those are not my words, Madam Speaker. That is not my own interpretation. With your leave, I will quote a truly historic letter to the editor, a public letter that I had cause to read on Tuesday, September 17, 2024, not that long ago, in the *Newsday* newspaper, page 14. I will quote, Madam Speaker, a short section of this letter. I was truly astounded at the wisdom contained in this letter from a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. I quote from the penultimate paragraph:

The Leader of the Opposition—“...is fond of referring to herself in maternal terms,”—true—“but she’s behaving more like a wicked stepmother now.”

This is a letter to the editor from a citizen:

“She is doing the opposite of what”—Kamala—“Harris is doing:

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

stifling, paralysing and robbing the population of optimism and the possibility it desperately needs.

The question is: how many people who are in a position to eject her are going to act? How many will do nothing as one person”—referring to the Member for Siparia—“keeps us in terror and pain for another five years?”

And then the last line in this paragraph:

“Otherwise, the next five years will make the last five seem like a holiday.”

Hon. Member: Wow.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Madam Speaker, that concludes my quote from this letter to the editor from a citizen.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I was tempted to turn the page, but then I scrolled down to see who is this citizen, and I see the name, Dinesh Rambally, Member of Parliament for Chaguanas.

Hon. Members: “Oooh!”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Madam Speaker, I am not going to wave the—I want to—

Madam Speaker: So, Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, I know you are not a regular visitor to this House, but even though you are quoting the article and so on, in here, you either refer to a Member by their constituency or by their portfolio. I know it is different in the place from which you have come. I know what is there, but you will have to refer to the Member by constituency in this House.

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

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I withdraw the last comment, and I am referring the authorship of this letter to the Member for Chaguanas West, who is very much present in this Chamber today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: You are right, Madam Speaker, I am not a frequent visitor to this Chamber but I once was, and who knows what the future holds.

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

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: But then I went a little further, Madam Speaker, to look for evidence, because just because someone says something that sits well with me, it does not mean that they are right, and just because someone says something that may not sit well with me, it does not necessarily mean that they are wrong. So I went to look for some evidence of this, robbing the population of optimism, stifling, paralyzing and—my words—pouring out of negativity, toxicity on the population. And I looked no further, Madam Speaker, than the utterances of the Member for Siparia and the—

Mr. Gonzales: The A team.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: That is not—that is the Z team.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—the first half—

Mr. Gonzales: Yeah, the first half.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—of the UNC Bench, and I looked no further than pronouncements on public vaccination in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, if there is one issue that highlights, underscores and emboldens the political hypocrisy of the United National Congress, this is one of those issues. Quickly, I turn to an article on Loop TT, September 17—that was a great day it seems—2024. Headline:

“Sue them”—they used the name of the Leader of the Opposition—
 “...maintains COVID-19 vaccines were fake”

And, I mean, the article is astounding:

“Opposition Leader Kamla Persad-Bissessar is advising citizens who may have experienced negative side effects as a result of taking the COVID-19 vaccine to take legal action.”

The Member for Siparia—“...made the call during a UNC Cottage Meeting on Monday night, where she maintained...claims”—doubling down—“that the COVID-19 vaccines the country received were ‘fake.’”

Unbelievable and incredible. The last line says:

“...‘With over 50 per cent of our adult population not seeking to be fully vaccinated, there is little doubt that a high level of vaccine hesitancy exists among our population. Time has shown that our citizens were correct to reject these fake vaccines.’”

Astounding, incredible and obviously, patently irresponsible.

I go back in time, Madam Speaker, to August 2021—an *Express* article on August 20, 2021, and guess where I found this article, Madam Speaker? Not in the *Express* archives but on the social media pages of the Member of Siparia. It is still there. She, the Member, indicting herself on this issue. Let me give you a few lines from that article.

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“Opposition Leader...says the Covid-19 vaccine ‘geographic discrimination’ continues as the addition of two vaccination sites in South Trinidad is ‘woefully inadequate’ to reach thousands of”—our—“school children.”

So this is clearly talking on the other side of one’s mouth, one’s brain, one’s political identity.

The Member—“...told the *Express*...”—that—“...there are a lot of areas that are unserviced.

...why...”—are the—“...regional corporations not being utilised.

The discrimination continues...”

This is discrimination being alleged against the Government for not distributing enough vaccines to schoolchildren.

“Political pressure”

Opposition MP named—where is he?—Oropouche East:

“...said he was heartened that two new sites in Penal and Debe were established.

However...”—it took—“...‘political pressure’ for this to be done. ...more needs to be done...the Opposition is advocating for more sites around the country.”

He—“...said he was duty bound to advocate for equal access to vaccines for all.”

So you go from that, Madam Speaker, in 2021, to “Sue them”, the Government was distributing fake vaccines. Madam Speaker, that for me exemplifies this brilliant letter to the editor coming from within the—

Mr. Gonzales: Bowels.

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

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: The heart.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: A different organ.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: This is the heart. Coming from within the heart of the UNC and, who knows, maybe the future as well. Who knows?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: Shameful. Shame.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Incredible. And this is not taking place in secret, right in front of the population's eyes, on the platforms, on the public record published and on the Member's Facebook page, and we are expected to take them seriously? We cannot, impossible, at least not anyone with a modicum of sense and intelligence.

They may preach and pray on the least common denominator, someone who may be uninformed, unresearched, not paying attention or desperate for a favour, but the right-thinking citizens of this country shall and will continue to reject that level of political hypocrisy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: There is no doubt about it.

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: "Oh, boy". Madam Speaker, I want to move on quickly to some comments made by the Member for Oropouche East, who seems to have—the word "tabanca" is a bit overused, but he seems to have a bit of a cognitive echo with respect to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. I do not know why. I understand there

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

may be some unsettled matters.

Hon. Members: Yes.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: There may be matters unsettled, but he seems a bit unsettled when treating with the issue. I heard some comments. I heard comments about evictions, citizens being evicted from HDC properties and premises, attempting to castigate the Government and the decisions being made currently in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.

5.40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I have it on good authority, based on the records shared with me authoritatively, that the United National Congress did engage in evictions during their term in office on a consistent basis and therefore, there is no foundation for the line of approach being advanced by the Member for Oropouche East. In 2010, there were 20 evictions—HDC; in 2011, there were 28 evictions; in 2012, there were 33 evictions; in 2013, there were 45 evictions; in 2015, there were eight evictions. That is well over 100. My maths is working—about 140 during their tenure. So to come here and to make heavy weather of sound decisions based on the need within the population that requires adequate housing, and the fact that there are those among us who have not been meeting their responsibilities.

There is another decision that was made that was not referred to, of course, by the Opposition because it is not convenient to them when it comes to decisions around allocation of public housing in this country and HDC houses. Under a former administration, I think they called themselves the PP at one point. Do you know what it took, the threshold level, for a

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

household to qualify for an HDC house?

Hon. Member: Forty thousand.

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Forty-five.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Madam Speaker, \$45,000. So, of household earnings per month, a total of \$45,000 would have been in the pool and queuing up with the poorest citizens who could not afford houses in the private sector. That is the reality. Under the People's National Movement, that broken system which denied the deserving of housing, was reversed—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—and the qualifying income was slashed from \$45,000, which—there are some humble Members here who would struggle. I am not looking anywhere because some would not.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Yes, big fish. It was for big fish—down to now \$25,000 for the entire household. That is the ceiling limit for qualification. Removing the big fish from the net and allowing the most deserving to have a better chance. A better chance, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: So these are the things that the Member for Oropouche East—if he wanted to use his time constructively—could have put into the debate to provide some perspective with respect to the reality of public housing in this country. Instead, he went on a foray. There is so much inaccuracy in a 40—how long was it?

Hon. Member: Fifty-five.

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Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Oh gosh, 55-minute contributions of some of these Members opposite. It is incredible, Madam Speaker. I would spend all of my precious time in simply rebutting.

Let me give you one other example, one other example. The Member for Oropouche East went on a tirade about some Federation Villas and again preying on the lowest denominator, which is a signature of the top Bench on that side. A signature—preying on the lowest denominator. Comments were made about units being sold in secret with no public disclosure, below market price, of course, creating a concern, I myself sat up, what is this? Creating a concern, that something is untoward, with respect to the treatment of Federation Villas. Only to recognize, Madam Speaker, that these very same villas were publicly advertised by the Housing Development Corporation multiple times in both 2022 and 2023, in direct contradiction to the words on the record—

Mr. Gonzales: Shame.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—uttered by Oropouche East. Direct flagrant contradiction. Both in 2022 and 2023, notices were placed in the daily newspapers of this country for all citizens to see and parliamentarians who might not be busy otherwise, and also on social media inviting interested persons to submit applications to purchase units at Federation Villas. What more contradiction can you have between the UNC top Bench and the truth? What more contradiction can you have between the UNC top Bench and the reality in Trinidad and Tobago? There was a clear indication of the purchase price and valuations were done. Again, we cannot use unparliamentary language, but this appears to have been a patent and direct

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attempt to mislead the population and to mislead this Chamber, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I heard this was done in secret. I heard there was no advertising and transparency. I also heard something about below market value, et cetera. Valuations were done. Multiple valuations were conducted six months apart with the last valuation indicating \$2.8 million, so valuation prices and even the initial advertisement appeared to indicate slightly above. A direct contradiction to the submissions of Oropouche East. So Madam Speaker, how are we to take that motley crew seriously, if this is the calibre of contribution that they would make? And I invite any Member to stand here and contradict what I have offered on these particular matters, black and white. Black and white; plain as day.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to my compadre, the Member for Naparima. The Member for Naparima. I want to start charitably.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I want to start charitably. I have a lot to say but I want to start charitably by thanking, sincerely, the Member for Naparima for his service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. I want to start by—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Because I heard him say this is his last budget debate, so I want that on the record, but it is unfortunate that on so many occasions during that said service, the Member for Naparima has been completely wrong in what he has had to say; it is unfortunate. I do not

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

necessarily blame the Member personally, but I blame his poor choice of political associates over the years. First of all, in joining the United National Congress.

Hon. Member: Oh, yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: First of all; it was a very poor decision and maybe if he had a time machine, he might make a—

Hon. Member: Different [*Inaudible*].

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Well, he might rethink some of those decisions. I want to start charitably, but also correct the record because even though it might be someone's swansong, it might be mine, it might be any Member's, we could be dead tomorrow, who knows; life is short and fleeting. I do not want the charity that resides within me to allow me to leave some of the allegations and misinterpretations, and a few misleading comments on the record with respect to the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs.

So that being said, I want to begin by—I have his entire contribution already printed out. The staff of this Parliament works so well. It appeared—if I am to summate it—that there were attempts to cast the foreign service of Trinidad and Tobago in a less than positive light, I hope I am not misinterpreting, in a less than positive light. I want to stand here representing a PS and sector, and administrators, and a very hardworking team of diplomats to say that we have some of the finest officers representing our country that you can find anywhere in the world. I want to start by saying that.

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

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.50 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I want to go on to make a statement that between 2020 and today under the leadership of the Prime Minister of this Republic, Trinidad and Tobago has pursued a number of candidatures—that is a big part of the role of a foreign service—where you try to persuade, you leverage, you work, you negotiate, you do horse-trading, you persuade other member States and blocs of States to support Trinidad and Tobago for high representation, or position, or engagement in multilateral and other fora. Madam Speaker, I can say without fear of contradiction that the record under this Cabinet in this Administration with respect to candidatures mounted by Trinidad and Tobago has been remarkably 100 per cent success without exception.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: One hundred per cent without exception. It might be the face, you know; it is much more than the face. That represents hard work and application and patriotism and dedication by hundreds of our servants, the servants of this country, to make this record something that we should be proud of. So when we are talking about other countries, Barbados, Guyana, and Grenada, they love to play this card, love to play this card. I can say, I am proud of my own country and we stand on our record.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Madame Justice Althea Alexis-Windsor, Judge of the International Criminal Court for period 2021 to 2030, and we will get to the talk about gift for the future to 2030. Trinidad and Tobago's

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candidature was successful. Election to the council of the International Seabed Authority 2021 to 2024, Trinidad and Tobago was successful. Election to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs 2022 to 2025, Trinidad and Tobago was successful. Election of Prof. Rhoda Reddock to CEDAW, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2023 to 2026, Trinidad and Tobago was successful. Helena Inniss, Commission on the Limits on the Continental Shelf, 2023 to 2028, the future of this country. Trinidad and Tobago's candidature was successful. Mr. Kahlil Hassanali, Member of the Legal and Technical Commission International Seabed Authority, 2023 to 2027, Trinidad and Tobago's candidature was successful. Re-election to the Council on the International Seabed Authority 2025 to 2028 in Kingston, Jamaica. Trinidad and Tobago was successful by acclimation and worthy of some further comments; Ambassador His Excellency Dennis Francis.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: President of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Trinidad and Tobago's candidature was successful. Not a blot, not a blot, not slip, not a flaw, not a misstep. The product, the fruit of hard work and patriotism by the same foreign service officers.

Mr. Charles: Will the Member give way?

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: You will have a moment. I will give you a moment. The same foreign service officers—I know, time is fleeting. The same foreign service officers that were cast in a light, that well, better could be done. Well, better could always be done and we continue to pursue

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

perfection because that is really what our country deserves, but in so doing, we are doing our best.

Madam Speaker, there is ongoing training and interaction with other foreign services that are part of the recommendation which I always pay attention to and I take in good spirit. But I want to ensure that the record does not reflect that this is not happening, because it is happening it is part of our strategy. JUNTOS 2023, in Japan, took place this year with contribution from our officers being exposed to their training. Focus Germany in Berlin, Germany between December 2023 and January 2024. Our officers benefiting, exchanging, having osmosis experiences with the dedicated staff of other foreign services and training. Ongoing Spanish language training for our officers and diplomats including the Embassy of Colombia and a number of other embassies including the Cuban team.

Security awareness training taking place, psychosocial support and mental health training, crisis communication, and management, very important. We have a hurricane heading for Florida right now and the same officers that sometimes we look at in a slight manner are at work right now ensuring that our diaspora and our interests are well secured and facilitated. Training as well, subregional forum on the implementation of Chemical Weapons Convention Bridgetown, Barbados last year, we participated there as well. Capacity Building Workshops on Baseline in a Changing Ocean Delivering Certainty and Stability took place in the Bahamas. These are our colleagues, our friends May 2024, we were there.

Our officers took part. Regional Meeting of National Authorities of State Parties to Chemical Weapon Convention in Latin America and in the

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

Caribbean, took place in Guatemala, we were there, our officers benefitted. ITLOS Workshop for Legal Advisers sponsored by the Republic of Korea, September 2024 in Hamburg Germany, we were there, our officers, and our diplomats. So I heard a recommendation that we have engagements. The recommendation should really be that we have more engagements because we are doing it, and it is a strong platform on which we can build.

Madam Speaker, there were also some comments about the work to be conducted on our missions and the facilities. I know, it is one of the pet peeves and the points of focus of the Member for Naparima but I just want to say as I have said recently, we have adopted a new and more effective strategy in treating with these matters. So some of what you heard was a bit of a—what should I say?—a cerebral echo from times past. We are now in a better generation of treating these matters where we have dedicated officers that actually conduct visits, do reviews.

We just returned from a sweep in North America and also in Venezuela where we have facilities, we have assets, we have properties to ensure—and the Ministry of Works and Transport has been an excellent collaborator with the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs to ensure that these properties, these missions are not bleeding money, but are well maintained, well up kept and are an asset literally to the people of Trinidad and Tobago looking toward the future so that is a clear strategy that we are hard at work on.

With respect to postings, there were some comments on postings as well. Again, it is an area that is deeply troubled and it is a cause for review of many of the foreign services out there. We are not resting on our laurels,

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and there is a revised approach, to attempt to ensure that there is fairness, there is transparency and there is some predictability to the rhythm of postings that our officers experience. It is something that some officers look forward to. Also, it is not a bed of roses out there, the Member knows that as well. So it is also a sacrifice, it is two sides of the coin. But again, with the development of eligibility criteria, a ranking system and some attempts to make it less subjective, and more objective. That work is very much underway and staff have been feeling some of those particular benefits. And then there was talk, Madam Speaker, it was the Deputy Speaker in the Chair at the time and I quote:

“Mr. Deputy Speaker, we gave this Government the gift of the President of the General Assembly for the 78th Session of the United Nations which it ascended as a gift.”

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Now, maybe we should allow some poetic licence, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Maybe we should allow some, what should I say, some departure licence but I do not think I would want to allow the record to remain.

6.00 p.m.

I want to acknowledge that a placeholder was laid on this issue back in 2013. It would be disingenuous of me not to acknowledge that. A placeholder was laid which is important, in fact, essential to the overall success, but that was not a gift. That was not the be all and end all, and in so stating you are doing a disservice. We would be doing a disservice to the same offices that we are elected and so on, and appointed to resource and uphold. So, no, I cannot allow that to stand because it is not true, Mr.

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Deputy Speaker. It not true, because the true record would show that in 2023 the permanent mission of Argentina to the United Nations as chair of GRULAC officially endorsed the candidacy of Dennis Francis. Dennis Francis was not even a candidate in 2013. There was no name. There was no officer. That is number one. There was no endorsement by GRULAC. It did not does exist.

In 2020, September 18, 2020, COFCOR endorsed Trinidad and Tobago's candidacy. We took, the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs took a Note to Cabinet on October 28, 2021 outlining a clear strategy for the campaign, identifying His Excellency Dennis Francis and justifying his selection. It was not just a pick a hat or anything like that, this was a justified selection and I will give you the basis because I heard another disturbing reference in the contribution earlier. Then on top of all of that we had a number of fora that we hosted. I myself went up to New York as part of the campaign and activity, and the Member knows what it takes, but I guess it is politically convenient to pretend that the work was already done, there was no work. It does not work like that. It does not operate like that, and you will see for the in-coming president had to do a lot of work as well to ensure success at every single stage including events hosted right here in Port of Spain.

But then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was even more disturbed because I heard a reference, I could take it as flattering, where the Member appeared to say, well, the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs should have been Trinidad and Tobago's candidate, and instead it was given to someone "like myself"—like himself, for the winter of his years. They could have sent

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someone younger.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have to take umbrage at that submission because we have to be very careful and I have heard it before from the Member for Naparima in his own personal contemplation and I respect his decision, he is moving on, he is retiring from the active politics, he does not cast a bigger net and give credence to a phenomenon of ageism where because you have made a decision, you want the Prime Minister and other Members of Government or anyone who might be over 50 or something, to be considered in the winter of their years. There are vibrant and active persons in this and other societies, 50 years, 60 years, 70 years, 80 years. I have a long list here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I want to include in that category of vibrancy and having much to offer, His Excellency Dennis Francis who was—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Yes. Who was 66 years at the time of election, who was 65 or younger at the time of identification and submission and approval, and who today is still, I would say, in the spring of his life and contribution and has more to give to Trinidad and Tobago and the world. So let us be very, very careful in trying to offer a compliment maybe on one side, that we do not give credence to ageism because the proof is in the pudding. This was a very difficult year on the global stage, and I can say without fear of anyone contradicting me, that Trinidad and Tobago's President acquitted himself with great distinction and made this country proud.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I am not sure that his age really had anything to do with that. I am certain that his experience, his calibre and his attributes had everything to do with that success, and he had the full support of the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago, and there have been many presidents of the General Assembly who have been that age and even older. Need I remind the Member for Naparima that the first non-white head of state of South Africa was 75 years old when he became president? His name was Nelson Mandela. Let us not fertilize and nourish ageism right here in the people's Parliament. So, I just want to sound that particular caution as well, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has been robustly and positively engaged in our diplomatic responsibilities, both within CARICOM and further afield. We have been in the form of the Prime Minister of this Republic heavily and actively engaged in the leadership of CARICOM. I want to put that on record. Positively and actively engaged in the leadership of—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, your initial speaking time, you only just have about one more minute. You have an additional 10 minutes. Do you care to avail yourself?

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Yes. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I thank you for this indication, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Actively engaged in the leadership of the Caribbean Community, and as I shall establish in that leadership role, that clear voice of Trinidad and Tobago goes well beyond CARICOM as well. So there have been a

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

number of summits. I will give an example, the CARICOM-Canada Summit with personal engagement, involvement and leadership of the Prime Minister of this Republic in steering CARICOM's position in treating with Prime Minister Trudeau and the leadership of the Government of Canada.

We also had the first ever Saudi Arabia-CARICOM Summit taking place in Riyadh. Again, the Prime Minister leading his team and being a part of CARICOM's leadership in engagement with a fairly new, very strong and well-resourced global partner in the form the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These are new developments with great prospects for additional success for our region and also for Trinidad and Tobago. So when I hear those empty, thin critiques of the Prime Minister's travel, when I hear those, I can stand here without fear of contradiction as a witness being on some of those delegations, that the Prime Minister does not travel for recreational or holiday purposes when he is travelling on government business. When he goes out there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is to work day and to work night on behalf of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne:—and on behalf of CARICOM as well.

There were several emergency meetings of the Conference of the Heads of Government of CARICOM with Trinidad and Tobago being a robust participant and leader. We had meetings on hurricane Beryl. The record of the first Bench of the UNC on natural disaster response in this region is not one that they should be proud of. There were comments and interventions made that really hurt the standing of Trinidad and Tobago within the region. I would not regale this Chamber or the public with some

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of those reference because they are well-known. What we have done is not just repaired that damage, but have created a zone of solidarity, a zone of comfort, a zone of dependability where Trinidad and Tobago plays a reliable role with respect to assisting when there are natural disasters in this region. We did so to the credit of the private sector, to the credit of the Government, to the credit of the Minister of Trade and Industry and all others who worked hard to ensure that that assistance was heavily rendered. That applied to the volcano in St. Vincent and all other requirements of Trinidad and Tobago.

We were there at the Argyle intervention, Argyle International Airport coming on the heels of some terrible negativity from the UNC side, trying to draw a wedge between T&T and Guyana, as some of them seem to make a career out of doing. There are no closer two countries right now within the Caribbean Community than Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, notwithstanding electricity concerns from what may happen from time to time. We are close colleagues within the Caribbean Community, and for that achievement, again, I give credit to the wisdom and good sense of our Prime Minister and the President of Guyana in ensuring that that relationship is secure.

6.10 p.m.

And again, we were there in Argyle and were part of the solution: The cooling of temperatures, the healing of that very inflamed situation to the point where there is a less sense of tension in the so-called disputed area, the border controversy. There is less tension around that today and we will continue to play a responsible role in such regard.

We have reconstituted the National Committee on Reparations. It

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took a little bit of time. Now we have a retired history lecture from the University of the West Indies, Dr. Claudius Fergus, who is working very well, very dynamic, engaged both here and within CARICOM, and with the African Union, and all the other partners to advance the issues of reparations. Trinidad and Tobago has gone from an uncertain voice on this important topic to one of the leaders, and you will see that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the upcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa. Trinidad and Tobago is a leader on this very important issue, and I invite the good thinking Members of this Parliament to be a part of that as well.

Again, the Association of Caribbean States, the COFCOR, and all other bodies—I have an extremely extensive list—engagement now with Brazil as well, led by the Prime Minister, going beyond CARICOM; forays with respect to BRICS countries; additional inroads with respect to the Republic of India, high levels visits in both directions; and strengthening of key relationships and partnerships, the United States of America, China, the European Union, Very difficult global stage, very complexed, lots of tensions out there, but within our space, within the diplomatic core here in Trinidad and Tobago, within the precincts of the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, within the role of the Prime Minister's leadership, that tension is not imported into our space, and we manage our affairs responsibly and in a balanced fashion, all in best interest of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

So when the Prime Minister travels, or when he hosts a meeting here, or when he intervenes in a virtual fashion at events and meetings, as it

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

occurs today, tomorrow, consistently, it is with the best interest of our citizens at heart, quite unlike some of the activities that would have taken place in previous chapter in the Office of the Prime Minister.

Great advancements with the CARICOM Single Market and the Economy. And we have had a good interface with a number of parliamentarians on all sides of the House, with respect of facilitating and assisting citizens, getting them through the process quickly. We have been working on repatriation of remains and other issues because the Ministry is not here to serve a political party, it is here to serve the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. That is the focus.

I give one other example: Our resolution at the General Assembly for World Steelpan Day. Do you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker steelpan is sometimes misconstrued as, “For them and not for us.” Real foolishness. It was a young citizen, a young diplomat of Trinidad and Tobago, a Hindu born and raised from the beautiful deep south of Trinidad and Tobago, as the key drafter and architect of the concept note for World Steelpan Day at the General Assembly. Proud patriotic member of our foreign service, paying short—exposing the fallacy that this is something that was gifted to us by someone else or that this is something for one segment of population. It is our national musical instrument for all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs is proud to be associated with the advancement and the good work taking place in our Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, and all the other segments, Pan Trinbago with respect—sorry—to the steelpan.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fisheries issues: At one point—this is a

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

country of—what is it Barataria/San Juan? Crisis of credibility. Every little thing becomes the crisis of the day, political hay, heavy weather. There was a lot of talk about fisheries and bacchanal with Barbados. There is no bacchanal with Barbados. Again, good diplomacy. Behind the scenes, excellent work. Sometimes taking good advice as well, working with our Barbadian counterpart. When last have you heard of any incident? All of that is being well managed, not by the face, but by the team. And this is not a small team, it is a big team. It is team T&T and there are representatives of that team, sitting here on this side of the aisle, working hard for the people of this country every single day; team Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So I know that there is not much more time for this particular contribution. A lot of work with the European Union as well. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not want to draw you into the debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You have just about two more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I do not have time to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Yes. But we recently had the opportunity to sign the Samoa Agreement. And again, the story one day will be told, just like the story will be told about—FSO Nabarima, was it? That fuel vessel in the Gulf of Paria? I think that was the name—some years now. So much has happened, so many developments where wisdom coming out of the Office of the Prime Minister, and good sense coming out of our team at the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs has been able to calm the tension, solve problems, sometimes even before they become an issue in the public space,

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

and there are many, many examples of that occurring, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

A lot of work now—refreshed work with the Organization of American States, the Association of Caribbean States and all of these partnerships being leverage by the same team, that sometimes we want to castigate or say, “There are better foreign services out there”—well, maybe but we are a young country and we are learning, we want to do better and there is great commitment by this Ministry and in all the other Ministries, working together in this best interest of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

So I put that in the context of the national budget, maybe it is a fait accompli, the votes are there, et cetera, but this debate is an opportunity for us to ensure the record is clear. It is a positive one on behalf of this Government. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rai Ragbir (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure to be here this afternoon to join this very important debate before us today.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The front of the Bench, again, I have recognized the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, right? Proceed.

Dr. R. Ragbir: Thank you, again, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This might be my penultimate contribution, or it depends on the hon. Prime Minister, I may have another opportunity to have another budget speech.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Dr. R. Ragbir: So it is my fifth consecutive budget contribution, which I am grateful for, for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I want to say to the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, medical doctor to medical doctor, I will describe your contribution in two words, “divinely edifying”. It was fantastic.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: I will leave matters of state for my colleague from Naparima. The people of Trinidad and Tobago, who we all serve, are depending on us to ensure that their moneys are being spent wisely, and in their best interest, not just for themselves but for their children. This is why this debate on the statement by the Minister of Finance is so important.

Before, I begin, Mr. Deputy Speaker, first, let me pay tribute to the people of Cumuto/Manzanilla, who elected me to be their voice in this Chamber.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

6.20 p.m.

Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, over the past few months I have received hundreds of calls to my constituency office offering me support for the work I performed in this House and for this let me say I am truly humbled. I have also received tremendous support from persons outside my constituency, across the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago who are tired and frustrated of the current status of our political climate and who want meaningful change to our political discourse—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir:—so that we can build a better nation. Mr. Deputy Speaker,

I want to thank all those who took the time out to reach out to me for their support and generosity and I want to reassure my constituents and all those who want to see an end to the politics of division driven by racism and tribalism that I will continue to conduct my work with integrity and in the best interest of all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: I will start, if you will permit me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I will quote a *Guardian* article, one of my favourite papers, Wednesday, September 25, 2024, and the headline of the article said:

“Ragbir won’t seek re-election”—and the subheading was—“Cumuto residents happy to see him go”.

It seems that everybody wants to see me go. I will quote from the *Guardian*:

“Guardian Media visited the constituency last week and many complained about the lack of representation they received from Ragbir.

‘I never saw the guy, I never vote for him,...’ Yet the journalist interviewed the chap.

“According to Tewarie, the deplorable road conditions were the main issues faced by the 28,000 voters in the eastern constituency.

He revealed that while he anticipates the completion of the Cumuto to Sangre Grande Highway extension...”—in the eastern constituency we still will not vote for Ragbir.

“Further, along the Cumuto Main Road, mini-mart owner Ricky Mahabir said the bad roads often affect sales.

‘In this business, customers doesn’t even want to stop here sometimes

because of the road, sometimes it have traffic jam...sometimes I have to open my gate for four, five vehicles...”

I wonder, it is curious, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how many persons were interviewed for this full-page article. I would conclude the article by quoting:

“The businessman was also unhappy with Ragbir’s decision to go against the United National Congress (UNC) and support the Whistleblower legislation in the House of Representatives in June this year.

‘For the longest while I seeing many of them doing this when they find the PNM is rising they want to jump aboard and when they find something wrong with them now they going back to UNC...

I feel Dr. Rai Ragbir have to step down and give somebody else a chance, somebody younger who can build back this community...”

I end with that.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a medical practitioner I am also a man of science, however I am also a man of faith who is guided by the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: I know that these are difficult times for many people in our land. There are many people who are losing faith in the political establishment. There are many people who have said otherwise, and they have selfishly put their own interest and their own party over the interest of the people of this nation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the proudest moments in this honourable House for myself, was my decision to vote in favour of

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the whistleblower legislation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I did so because of my constituents have expressed concerns to me that they want to report instances of corruption but they were afraid to do so for fear of reprisal. And let me just start off a “lil” bit with that. While my earlier action in supporting the whistleblower legislation was concentrated on the damning allegations at the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, our fight is against malfeasance and corruption. And I will cite one particular case, and I want the entire country, Trinidad and Tobago to hear this:

The water trucking issue from the corporation, this falls under the remit of the public health department at the corporation. What I was made to understand by my constituents, an illegal Motion was passed in a council meeting which contravened the Municipal Corporation Act, I am made to understand, if you want water you have to go through the chairman and councillors of the corporation. No! Mr. Deputy Speaker, you cannot do that. You cannot politicize water.

Hon. Member: Racket.

Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are other issues and I am sure my colleague from Toco/Sangre Grande will tell you as well, it is the employment book. Who guards that employment book? Who gives out that 10 days and 20 days? And that is what is mindful, the whistleblower legislation is very dear, and we have to do things that are forthright and forthcoming.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know in my heart that voting in the interest of the people of Cumuto/Manzanilla and the people of Trinidad and Tobago, has lost me favour from some Members of this House. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I make no apologies for doing my duty—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir:—to my people and my country. Now I have been side-lined by my own party, forsaken and basically thrown away.

Hon. Member: Noooo.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: And now in the newspaper clipping which I read, even the people do not want me, but I love the people of Cumuto/Manzanilla, and I am a man of faith.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, if there are those who are prepared to stand idly by and ignore injustice, corruption, and abuses out of fear or out of their own selfish desires then that is their decision. As my political hero, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said:

“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are people who see no point in standing up for what is right because they feel that the wicked will always win.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to remind Trinidad and Tobago

from the good book, there are people here of all faiths, but from the Book of Galatians, Chap. 6:9 that says:

“Let us not grow weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I urge the citizens of our nation not to give up on our country. I was born here, I love my country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: And do not ever give up on the hope that Trinidad and Tobago could be a better place with all of us working collectively.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: I want to share another scripture from the book of Matthew Chap. 5:16 when Jesus said:

“...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Let me be a beacon of truth and righteousness for the rest of the world.

Mr. Scotland SC: Let it shine.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we live in a toxic environment, be it crime, disaster, unemployment, escalating food prices, economic collapse, a sense of mental hopelessness, and you see what is happening now in Florida, people are trying to escape Milton, and we all have family and friends in Florida. This is compounded with no unity, no rebuilding, not much thought of consequences of our actions, and for our future generation. That is why we are here. We need leaders that are forward-thinking in a changing world. We as elders need to listen to the young ones, their wants, their needs, and

their cries, that Gen Z generation my son falls within that bracket, he is 17. Between the ages of 12 to 27 they are different, they think differently, and I was sad about that Lalchan boy who committed suicide. Condolences to his entire family, his friends and their educators.

6.30p.m.

If we do not take care of our households this will resolve in total anarchy. Families are drowning in debts, not only in Trinidad and Tobago, all over the world, and some have even become homeless. Persons living in their cars, in tents, in the streets and it is going to get worse all over. The cost of living has escalated beyond their means, hence, beyond that difficulty in paying their rent, their mortgages, their bills, the utilities and even buying their foods and their medicines. People skipping three meals a day to one. You sometimes cannot afford to educate your children, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and even if you get a diploma or a degree or some form of certification no jobs waiting for them. This is not a Trinidad and Tobago issue, this is a worldwide phenomena. And I had looked through this budget and I think, personally for me, it looks fair because at the end of the day look at what is happening in the world.

Long ago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, our family and friends used to put “ah” US \$20, a \$20 Canadian in a little carbon paper and send it for us, in the '70s and '80s. Now, it looks like it has to change around. The young ones remain at home because of no jobs, idle minds, idle hands that may lead to criminal activity, that may lead to stress anxiety, depression and a sense of hopelessness. And let me continue.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to talk now about health, a sick healthcare

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service. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as someone who is all too familiar with the efficiencies of the health sector that is now a metaphorical ticking time bomb, let me explain. Throughout my career I have witnessed firsthand the challenges our health sector faces. Challenges that have admittedly persisted for decades, and we look at this 2025 National Budget Statement and I believe it is crucial to ask ourselves, will this budget do enough to address these issues? And sadly, your answer is, no.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, our nation is emerging from a pandemic. It pushed the limits of our already stretched thin health service to the breaking point. I agree that our healthcare workers must be commended for their professionalism they display in what was a very difficult time for our country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we must not forget that many of the issues, long waiting time, overcrowded hospitals, shortage of medication and overworked staff, predated the pandemic and it continues post pandemic. I could understand my colleague, the Member for St. Joseph; it is a very, very, difficult task being a medical practitioner. You could have someone who pays no taxes, does not work, gets in an accident and the bill is \$500,000 because you are in ICU for a month. That is an example of how health could actually reach to a bottomless pit. The Government should not use the COVID pandemic as a convenient excuse to mask or justify the many deficiencies that our healthcare workers and patients have to ensure pre-COVID.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, some of the areas of concern that I hope the

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Minister of Finance would have raised in his statement, as I said just now, are long waiting times and inadequate facilities. Now, all the accident and emergencies, all the district health facilities, all the health centres have been overwhelmed, oversubscribed with people because people find it difficult to put money into their pockets. So as a practitioner, I have seen, like the rest of the population, that many people have resorted to going to the public sector and the waiting time will continue to increase.

But do not think the waiting time is only for Trinidad and Tobago. When you go to First World countries for little things, sometimes you do not get an appointment at the same time, you wait for hours. So, I am now looking at my colleague here from Chaguanas West as you mentioned about a hospital. Maybe it is a good time that we need to look at a hospital for Chaguanas, because Chaguanas has the highest per capita rate of non-communicable diseases. The diabetes, the hypertension, the cardiac disease and according to Prof. Narinesingh the highest amount diabetic foot amputations in the country. So, we wait with abated breath that in a forthcoming budget we could see a new Chaguanas hospital, and I shall continue.

Medication shortages. Medication shortages right now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can tell you what is short right now. Gravol, everybody knows what Gravol is. Dimenhydrinate intravenous, you cannot get it IV; Alevian Duo, that is for IBS, Irritable Bowel Syndrome; Farxiga that is for chronic kidney disease; Endometrin, that is for menopausal women; Qlaira, that is an oral contraceptive pills; Ipravent nebulizer solution; Detrusitol, Detrusitol is used for overactive bladder syndrome; Seroquel, Seroquel is used for

hypermenia and schizophrenia.

Again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the entire world is going through a supply chain crisis. But I want to point out something that I have seen as a practitioner and many Members in this House may not realize it. It is a complete wastage of pharmaceuticals. Let us look at somebody who is older with chronic disease, non-communicable disease. They go to the private doctor, they have one set “ah” medication, they go to one or two clinics they have different sets of medication, they go to the specialist they have one set of medication. And when you look you are confused, the patients themselves confused. So the medication that they would have actually gotten on the CDAP is just wasted and the people who deserve it cannot get it when they get. And I am sure the Member for St. Joseph will discuss that.

One of our problems that we have in this country is expired drugs. So the ones that you have at home for your disease process might be expired because we do not put expiry dates. But here is a problem, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we do not have the science, the data behind the amount of expired drugs in this country because that has to be dumped, and that would include, injections and even vaccines. And this would account for tens of millions of dollars which could go back into the health sector if they were not expired.

There is something called suitcase traders. These are people who will bring counterfeit drugs. Yes, counterfeit drugs are a very real thing in this country. They will come, the cost of the item might be \$10 per unit—the Member for Mayaro might know about that, but they will sell you it for \$2 so you could make your profit. But it looks like, it smells like, it feels like, same colour, but it is not that. That is why people’s disease process changes,

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gets for the worse and they may actually end up in hospital and die. I shall continue. Mr. Deputy Speaker, all these are basic symptoms of a dysfunctional health care system. Mr. Deputy Speaker, a lot of what has been said in the budget statement concerning the health care sector appeared to be focused on treating the symptoms and not the root causes.

I want to talk about the Government's health sector allocation in the budget 2025. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2024 Trinidad and Tobago spent 3.3 per cent of the country's GDP on the health sector. Based on the Minister's statement for 2025 we are going to spend roughly the same 3 per cent of the GDP again. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know this is a very difficult economic time for Trinidad and Tobago, you notice I keep repeating that. I know the Government must find funds for other areas, however, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we must be honest with the population and let them know, Trinidad and Tobago is spending money on healthcare that is below the average global 5 to 10 per cent of the GDP.

So let us look at our neighbours, let us look at Barbados for instance, they spend between 6 per cent to 7 per cent of the GDP on health care. Barbados ranks higher than many of its regional counterparts focusing on universal health care access and robust public health infrastructure. The Bahamas. The Bahamas allocates approximately 6 per cent of its GDP to health care reflecting its commitment to improve health care services for its population.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will end this one by saying, St. Lucia. St. Lucia also spends about 6 per cent of GDP on health with efforts to strengthen its public health system in recent years, 3.3 per cent.

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6.40 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would have really loved if budget 2025 contained a roadmap for taking our health sector to a higher level even if we cannot commit the funds at this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: We need to chart out a course which we can seek to make our health sector an important priority which delivers world-class services. I must mention the Seemungal Report. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Seemungal Report which was led by Prof. Terence Seemungal—actually Professor and I were in the same class together in medical school in Jamaica—reviewed the parallel health care system response to COVID-19 in Trinidad and Tobago, was made public on March 02, 2022.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this report provided an in-depth analysis the health care system strengths and challenges during the pandemic, addressing critical areas such as mortality rates, resource allocation and operational efficiency. Some key observations very shortly:

1. Shortage of medical personnel: There was an insufficient number of health care workers particularly in critical care areas. This shortage significantly affected patient care;
2. Deficiency in essential drugs: The report noted that some essential drugs were unavailable during the peak of the pandemic making it difficult to manage severe cases of COVID-19 effectively, hence many people died;
3. Systemic gaps: Issues in communication, coordination and resource management were highlighted showing the need for improved health

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care system management;

4. Mortality and treatment outcomes: The report revealed concerns about the high mortality rate of critically ill COVID-19 patients in ICU prompting calls for a review of treatment protocols; and finally
5. Infrastructure issues: The health care system infrastructure was put under severe strain with certain facilities lacking the necessary equipment or space to handle the influx of COVID-19 cases.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, these findings urged the Government to implement the committee's recommendation to better prepare for future health emergencies. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I hope that the Minister of Health can inform the public about which areas of the report, if any, have been implemented. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I cannot stress enough how critical this is. It is only a question of when, and not if, whether or not another pandemic will hit us. We must learn from the COVID-19 pandemic in order to be better prepared next time.

National COVID-19 response review. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I disagree with all those who believe that the COVID-19 vaccines were fake.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: All evidence shows that the COVID-19 vaccines saved lives, and I urge everyone to consult their doctors when they have medical questions and make informed medical decisions. I urge the public to not make medical advice. They take medical advice based on Internet or random messages on Facebook.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you will permit me I have a full page here which I will just read some extracts. Monday, September 30, 2024, on

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Newsday, and the heading was Trinidadian disease expert criticizes Opposition Leader and the subheading was “COVID-19 vaccine ‘saved millions of lives’”, and if you will permit me I will read:

“Infectious disease specialist Dr Peter Chin Hong says other than not being vaccinated, the biggest threat to people in this phase of covid19 is misinformation, particularly when it comes from leaders of any sort in the community.

‘It is a global problem and the...(World Health Organization) listed it as one of the top ten threats to world health right now,’...

Chin Hong, a Trinidadian who is associate dean for regional campuses at the University of California, San Francisco made the statement after reading about Opposition Leader...”—statement about—“...hundreds of thousands of...”—Trinidad and Tobago—“... citizens were given fake vaccines, at a UNC cottage meeting in Chaguanas on September 9.”

The—“Health Minister...”—Member for St. Joseph—“...condemned the statement saying that it implied the hard-working doctors”—like myself—“and nurses were complicit in a hoax.

He said, ‘For the record, the covid19 vaccines distributed in...”—Trinidad and Tobago—“...Sinopharm, AstraZeneca, Pfizer, and Johnson and Johnson – were all approved by the World Health Organization prior to their use, and follow our stated policy to only use WHO-approved vaccines. Our healthcare professionals administered 1,554,804 doses, and it is critical to note that of the 4,444 covid19 deaths, 3,960 or 89.1 per cent were unvaccinated persons.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was a vaccinator. I vaccinated persons in my

community of Cumuto/Manzanilla willingly, and those at various centres throughout Trinidad.

“Chin Hong repeated that the vaccine protected from serious disease, hospitalisation and death. It did not protect against being infected. He also stressed that the mRNA technology used to make the vaccines had been in use since the early 1990s.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is almost 30 years. But at this point, more than 13 billion people around the world have received the vaccine. So it is no longer new or inexperienced, and there has been no increased signal or negative impacts on the vaccine, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In fact, as I conclude, there have been multiple studies that show the vaccine saved millions of lives. So unless it is “opposites day”, the statement is not true while my statement is back by studies and science.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do believe that we need a comprehensive review of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I do not mean we should go on a witch hunt and blame everyone for mistakes that were made, but we need a review because, as I said earlier, we need to be better prepared. The COVID-19 pandemic raised very serious issues. There were economic lockdowns, school closures, nationals were prevented from entering the country. It even affected persons who passed on, burials and cremations. There were those who were advocating for vaccine passports, Mr. Deputy Speaker. All these issues pose serious legal and ethical concerns, and we need to discuss how we are going to handle these issues if the need arises again. We need to sit down, have honest discussions with no

finger pointing, figure out what we got right and what we got wrong. That would benefit of the nation.

Now I want, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to turn to non-communicable disease. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance spoke about infrastructure projects he intends to get done on the health sector and so on. I have no issue with that. Any attempt to improve the infrastructure of hospitals I am sold, however, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I stress, treating the system and not treating the disease. How patients can access care when they need it is one function, but the health sector needs to be more prevalent and be more looked at so that they will be prevented from ending up in the hospital. So we focus on primary health care. And the biggest health crisis we have here in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the explosion of non-communicable disease.

6.50 p.m.

I want to compliment the Member of St. Joseph for launching the NCD hotline, that is the non-communicable disease hotline. It is 800-4NCD. That is 4623. Hon. Minister, let us work together to manage numbers and let us refer our diabetic, hypotensive to take primary health care to the rural communities, which I am part and parcel about; to embolden our primary care doctors because many of my patients will come to me and they will say for months and years, their families and themselves will sit next to the doctor, the doctor will not examine them. We need to train our doctors, examine your patients, see if the disease is progressing and see what complications are developing, because the State will have to spend

more on dialysis, cataract and heart surgeries. So we need to do it differently and we can only do that collectively.

I want to talk also about another suggestion for the Member for St. Joseph, and I think this will augur well, especially in rural communities. My humble suggestion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is to develop a new approach in rural communities. It is called a community health observer. Unlike a nurse, they will be living within their respective community where they will be working. Their role and function: Monitor child abuse and pick up potential for abuse.

I had recently—an aunt had to look after two little children. A 16-year-old girl, who is dyslexic, who dropped out of school and an 11-year-old girl, who now is entering into secondary school and you know, these children are developing fast. This child will take \$16 to travel one-way and \$16 to travel back home. And you know, as a child develops in a rural community, men will be looking at that little child. And this is where the Ministry that belongs to the Office of the Prime Minister (Child and Gender Affairs), we always have to watch out for those children, and persons like this, we could advocate for that; teenage pregnancy; school dropouts; children who have not been immunized, especially in those little side tracks and traces where people are now building up their little shacks and houses; observing children for malnutrition; single mothers who find it difficult to feed their infants and toddlers; domestic violence; drug and alcohol abuse and much more, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The data that is collected from these community health observers could now go to the nearest health centre, which they are affiliated with, and

this now is disseminated to the district health visitors, the district nurses. They will correlate this and let us go back out to the community, because we could do the science and we have to do things differently.

Just to conclude this part here—and I think it is very important. I know the Member for St Joseph would like this idea. The Private Hospitals Act in our law books, the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago from the Ministry of Attorney General and Legal Affairs, Chap. 29:03, section 17:

“The Minister may for the purposes of this Act and the Regulations appoint any medical practitioner not engaged in the management of, or financial interest in, a private hospital to be an Inspector and shall furnish every Inspector with a certificate of appointment.”

Have we engaged such a person so that we can determine the quality of care that is given out to our persons, and to determine whether that institution is recognized? I thought I would throw that in. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: No, I am not a lawyer.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, non-communicable disease is rampant throughout Trinidad and Tobago. People are not looking after themselves and you are supposed to look after—your health, it is your wealth. The health sector cannot do it for you. Trinidad and Tobago needs to look at—the number one cause of fatality in this country, like many other countries, is cardiac disease. We have friends and families and community persons, younger and younger persons are getting heart attacks, strokes and cancers, which are the leading cause of deaths, accounting for approximately 60 per cent of mortality in the nation.

Cardiovascular disease alone contributes to 25 per cent of all deaths, making it a major concern for our health care system. Diabetes is affecting nearly 15 per cent of our adult population and has severe implications for quality of life and economic productivity. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are in a religious time now, Navaratri and Divali, so, you know, even your diabetics, you tell them to have their sweets sparingly or none at all, but they would not listen. They say, “I would take an extra sugar tablet or extra insulin,” and that continues beyond this festive season.

Furthermore, Trinidad and Tobago ranks among the highest, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the Caribbean for hypertension. Do you know when you have hypertension, one in four persons with hypertension will get a stroke? The increasing prevalence of these conditions places immense pressure on our health care resources and underscores the urgent need for a robust, sustainable strategy focused on prevention, early detection and management. The financial and human toll of NDCs is a national crisis, and without targeted intervention, this burden will only grow.

So while Trinidad and Tobago has developed a national strategic plan to combat NDCs through a preventative, healthy initiative lifestyle, early detection, lifestyle promotion, the prevalence of risk factors, such as poor diet, lack of exercise and smoking remains high. Collaborative efforts between the Government, private sector and communities are essential to reduce these burdens.

I mentioned something, and we need to be cognizant of that. We give our children a lot of ultra-processed foods. Ultra-processed foods are industrial formulas based from oil, fat, sugar, starch and protein, and we give

our kids and we ourselves consume it. In fact, to say as much as 60 per cent of the food we consume are ultra-processed foods. That causes diabetes, cardiac disease and cancers.

Look at the energy drinks, sugar and caffeine, cereals, hotdogs, vegan meats, chicken nuggets, potato chips, macaroni and cheese, pancakes, pizzas, instant noodles, and I can go on and on. You know what? For are children, they are delicious. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are killing our future generation.

It will be remiss of me not to talk and say a little bit about the CDAP medication. I am not going to go through the whole thing but one of the things that I looked at is the donation of blood pressure apparatus. In the CDAP, because we have so much diabetics in the country, people are afforded the opportunity to get a diabetes machine and free strips, especially those on insulin. So it comes to a point in time, if we want to save cost at the hospital and cut down the cost from the health sector, so that the Minister of Finance could have some savings, it is to provide a blood pressure machine in the CDAP, just like a blood sugar machine.

One addition I will add, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is almost embarrassing to say, we have an explosion of sexually transmitted infections in the country. It may be a point in time that some antibiotics for these particular infections, and consultations with senior consultants, that we may have to put on to this right now because a lot of cases are prevalent, which we could see in private practice and even in the public sector.

I will go on now to another topic, Mr. Deputy Speaker, reduction of binge drinking. We live in a time where great strides are being made to

reduce smoking, as well as to educate the population on the dangers of smoking. All well and good. However, I feel not enough is being done to warn of the dangers of binge drinking and the dangers that alcohol abuse has on our population. Regardless of how much money you have, you realize bars and restaurants, every Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, they are filled. What is sad now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the younger ones now are there drinking, and they are under 18 and they are still being given liquor to drink. So you could imagine what will happen to their bodies in five to 10 years' time?

7.00 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, binge drinking plays a large role in exacerbating the dangers of non-communicable diseases and it needs to be addressed. Mrs. Lyra Thompson-Hollingsworth, who is the co-ordinator of the National Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Programme, reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Trinidad and Tobago saw an increase of heavy alcohol abuse. Mrs. Thompson-Hollingsworth also lamented that despite the prevalence of binge drinking in Trinidad and Tobago, there is no alcohol policy model. According to NADAPP—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member, yes, you have just about two minutes of your initial speaking time. You have an additional 10 minutes. You care to avail yourself?

Dr. R. Ragbir: I do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Thank you. According to NADAPP of Trinidad and

Tobago, about 10 per cent of men in Trinidad and Tobago suffer from alcohol abuse disorders. Unfortunately, many people believe that is a male problem but according to group alcohol Rehab Guide, alcoholism is an increasing problem for women as well. In general, women are more prone to develop alcoholism compared to men based on their body fat. They have more body fat and less water. The alcohol is the water in their body and this is bad. There is an enzyme called alcohol dehydrogenase which metabolizes the alcohol and there is a less amount in the liver for women.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one aspect of alcoholism that is rarely discussed is the serious issue of alcohol-related dementia. Alcohol-related dementia comes with a range of neurocognitive impairments particularly affecting your memory, reasoning and executive function. While this prevalence is difficult to pinpoint globally due to under diagnosis and the stigma associated with alcoholism, estimates suggest that up to 10 per cent of dementia, cases in the western population maybe linked to chronic alcohol abuse.

Hon. Member: *[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please, silence.

Dr. R. Ragbir: Now, my time is limited, I want to go to my constituency, the need to reach to rural communities.

Mr. Paray: “Call out all dat yuh doing, eh.”

Dr. R. Ragbir: As I said earlier, I represent the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla and it is a rural community but you know there are a lot of people who said that they do not see me, they do not see things done but I will use the phrase in my last few minutes: “I was there”. The

Cumuto/Manzanilla constituency has been actively engaged in various community support initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of life for its residents, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized population. Through these initiatives, we aim to address critical needs such as food, security, water supply and emotional support for children and families. It is a rural community.

Christmas hamper distributions—I would just list them out: December 20th, 100 food hampers and toys for the Fishing Pond area and now on-going food assistance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Cumuto/Manzanilla, December 2020, visit to the Casa de Corazon Children's Home, that is a Children's Authority home, where I provide, on a regular basis, grocery items. It is a State-run and sometimes they need assistance, we are always there. Imagine August 2022, I had to hire a truck-borne water supply all the way from O₂ Park in Chaguaramas just for them to get water, but I do not do anything.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Feeding the Communities initiative in the Cumuto/Tamana electoral district, August 2022. Support for the Manzanilla residents after the big flood, December 2022. I delivered food hampers to residents on a daily basis although the roads were impassable. Flood relief efforts, Riley Land Settlement, North Oropouche, timeframe, December 2022.

Hosting of medical clinics and diabetes fair—I will list them out. World Diabetes Day preparations, November 10, 2021; World Diabetes Day medical fair, November 14, 2022. There were 275 people that day, Mr.

Deputy Speaker, 275 people. I had cardiologists, kidney specialists, diabetic dietitians, ophthalmologist and we also had a dietitian and a cook showing you about flour:

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Cassava flour, breadfruit flour, green fig flour which is gluten free, good for diabetics and help you to lose weight and your abdominal girth. Teach you about that afterward.

World Health Day clinic, a free medical clinic, on-going health clinics in the Cumuto sub-office. We had one death sadly from dengue in Fishing Pond, thereby and then, I went and did a free dengue medical clinic. I took the bloods, I paid for the bloods.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: That is why my colleague here next door from Naparima say “doc, once you come in this profession, doh ever check yuh salary”. You told me that.

Mr. Charles: Yes, yes.

Dr. R. Ragbir: Right and I have never checked my salary.

Hon. Member: What is that?

Hon. Member: Me neither.

Dr. R. Ragbir: Mr. Deputy Speaker, here is one for you, partnership with migrant and refuge ministries on May 27, 2024.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: MP participated in Sangre Grande migrants refuge ministry programme providing free diagnostic testing, treatment and medication. This initiative was organized by the St Francis RC Church and I still

continue to support them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: I shall continue. Let me look at some infrastructure works. Mr. Deputy Speaker, how much time do I have again?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You may end at 7.13 so you just have about seven more minutes.

Mr. Charles: “Take yuh time.”

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

Dr. R. Ragbir: Thank you, thank you. Let us talk about some of the infrastructure projects. Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, infrastructure projects. The landslide repairs of Lamp Pole No. 196- 198, Cumuto Main Road were initiating response to a significant landslide that occurred near Coryal High School; project works of piling and shoring started November 27, 2023 and that together with a retaining wall constructed, started April 13, 2024 and those works are ongoing. “How ah get these things done in Opposition?” Because I talk nicely to my friends on the other side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know that I am at the end of my tenure in Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Mr. Gonzales: “Na, na, na, yuh mad.”

Mr. de Noriga: Not at all.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Hear this one, if you were to seek Caigual No. 1 bridge construction. I give credence and thanks to the Minister of Works and Transport.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: The Caigual No. 1 bridge construction project was initiated to address critical infrastructural issues affecting the North Oropouche Road and surrounding areas in Caigual and Fishing Pond. It is phenomenal. If you go there, you would want to picnic there. My gosh, it was fantastic, really really good.

The Plum Mitan Main Road, which is ongoing now, is basket retaining wall project where we have significant landslips. Plum Mitan, that is on your way to Biche. My friends, let us talk a little bit about the Cumuto gas station, piling and shoring. The Cumuto gas station piling and shoring road repairs project was initiated to address critical infrastructure issues along the Cumuto Main Road particularly in the vicinity of Lamp Pole No. 141, adjacent to the Cumuto gas station. In fact, the underground tanks were actually shifting. It was so bad, they put those piles down as much as 40 feet underground to stop that. It was like a major highway construction. How I got these things done? Because of how I liaise with people, how I talk to people.

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

Dr. R. Ragbir: And there are two things and I will mention it, as mentioned by the Minister of Finance. It is nearing completion, proposed date, March 2025, that is the Cumuto to Guaico Tamana highway, which actually is to be opened right behind my office. How is that being done? But I do not do anything.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Now, November 2022 is when they had the bad floods in

the Manzanilla stretch. My colleague from Mayaro, and we were there. That road was decimated, 5 kilometres. As another colleague would say nobody lives here, “yuh right”. But hear what, if you had an emergency in Mayaro/Guayaguayare, it will take you half an hour to go to your hospital which is the new Sangre Grande Hospital Campus. Thank you, Member for St. Joseph, thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: That is pristine and if I were to get sick, “carry meh there”.

7.10 p.m.

That is pristine, and if I were to get sick, carry “meh” there. So I must thank the Minister of Works and Transport. That is a pristine; Manzanilla road that just opened up. Anybody use that stretch now; it is excellent. And, I actually spoke to the forward-thinking Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, and I asked him, I said, “There is a wide expanse up Biche, why do we not use renewal energy, solar panels and wind power, and do a food hub there, so that people from all over, when they have their staycation, could come there and buy food with their family?”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: And like everything else, I am also involved in all the celebrations. You know, at the start of this year, I did not have an interfaith service, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You know what I had? I had the Hindus come on one day; we had a full Hindu Service. The Islamic committee, we had a full Islamic—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member you have two more minutes.

Dr. R. Ragbir: Thank you. And the Christians I had a revival, a Christian revival. So everybody had a full day of prayer and did not have a limit, and we give God thanks for what we get in this blessed country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: I will conclude by saying:

“Touch not my anointed; do my prophets no harm.”

Psalm 105:15.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: And my last concluding statement, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept up my faith, Almighty God is in charge of my destiny. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Digital Transformation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have 45 minutes initially and an additional 10.

The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I first want to really express my thanks to you for recognizing me one, and for allowing me to contribute in this House because I am not here very often, but it is always good to be here. I want to join in the chorus of praise, and I use the word “chorus”, as it has been emanating from this side of Bench from the beginning of the debate. But I want to join in the chorus of praise to the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East, specifically, the Minister of Finance, for his stellar, and I am sure he will not disparage me for using the word

“marathon” presentation of the Government’s Estimates and expenditures for fiscal 2025. The theme is quite apt, you know, “Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity”.

You know, the journey that he took—I mean, I did use the word “marathon”, it may have been long, it may have been epic, but it was necessary. I think, we have to understand the current circumstances on which we are—and the path, you know, that we must take if we want to continue on this quest for prosperity and sustainable development. So, I mean, if you just look back at the past nine years and what we have been facing, you know, a number of significant setbacks, a number of them not of our own making. These challenges—I mean think about it. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we had to endure profound social and economic disruption. We had the global pandemic, and as the Member just rightly spoke, I do not think that that would be the last one that we will have. We are working hard to mitigate the effects of climate change, which is evident everywhere, and you are seeing the direct impact of that all over the world. And, of course, we have had to adapt and manage the consequences of external security and other challenges. Just think about how this has affected other parts, even in our own CARICOM and Caribbean areas. You know, the fact that we have been able to successfully negotiate these and many of the other obstacles that we have is indeed a significant achievement. And I hope we are able to continue and endure.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the onset, I want to deal—and I am going to concentrate the majority of what I am going to talk about in the digital transformation space because, I recognize, one, there is still some

misinformation and misnomers to what is happening in that space, and two, even from some of the contributions from Members opposite, that they still do not get some of what it is we are trying to do. So I am going to try to demystify some of that, as well as provide some education, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the population.

Firstly—and one of the first comments we got represented the size of the allocation to the Ministry of Digital Transformation. There was an attempt to equate the size of the allocation with the priority that it has within the Government space. I do not think that, you know, I think if you were building buildings or roads, maybe that direct connection might have been established. But in this case, the two things are not necessarily aligned and congruent. More so, and I think more importantly, the allocation associated with the Ministry of Digital Transformation does not represent the Government spend or the Government allocation for digital transformation, or for working in the ICT space. You will have to go through almost all of the line Items for all of the Ministries independently if you want to create a single number for that

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

If you just take a look at some of the Ministries' allocations, you would see: Ministry of Health, \$25 million; the Ministry of Education, \$31 million; the Ministry of Finance, a certain amount, et cetera, et cetera. So you have to include and add all of that in if you are going to create a number that you could use as it relates to the allocation for digital transformation, and, like I said, it is spread out across all of the public service allocations.

Now the commitment to digital transformation is clear, and it is important why we have to have that commitment. This statement, I think, puts it, you know, quite succinctly. The commitment represents a consistent view, by all of us specifically on this side, that digital transformation and digital technology represent critical enablers for sustainable development across multiple sectors. We are not going to be able to do and get the efficiencies that we want out of the way in which we have to continue to provide services to our citizens without having significant interventions of transformation and technology.

Now I am going to borrow a statement from the Member for San Fernando West; he coined it, I have borrowed it, I have used it all the time and I continue to use it today, that transformation is built around four significant pillars, four. I am sure he could say them as I say them myself, people, process, technology, and the law. So any transformation that we are doing, regardless of whether it is digital or otherwise, those components always ring through if you are dealing with it from a Government perspective.

But, there are also some other aspects to this that involve things that must happen if we want it to take route the way we want. One of them is financial inclusion. Now, financial inclusion is something that, I guess, everyone has their own definition of it. But financial inclusion, social inclusion, and digital inclusion will be three of the things that we must have, in addition to those four pillars that I made, if you are going to be successful.

The National Financial Inclusion Survey undertaken by the TTIFC highlighted some things that, to my mind, were disturbing, but they

represent a reality. Just to highlight some of the things in it that would impact the way in which we go about our digital transformation, let us start with the fact that 25 per cent of the people that we have lack basic bank accounts. It is not a good place to start if you want to deal with having people included in a digital future. Seventy-seven per cent of MSMEs operate without business bank accounts, or without digital payment options. Again, not a good platform to start on. More importantly, 50 per cent of the population finds mobile banking and financial information challenging to navigate. So, you are already starting with significant disadvantages in some cases. For us to be able to navigate that, we have to improve those situations.

You add to that now social inclusion. Now, let me just put a definition around social inclusion. This is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups may take part in society, and it involves creating equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, identities, or circumstances. The last one is digital inclusion, which is the aspect of the inclusion rubric that is the most immediate and pressing interest of this particular Ministry; the Ministry that I lead. So we have to get this right, and we have to figure out how to do it.

7.20 p.m.

One of the most immediate tasks that we have before us while we are working on what we are doing is to make sure that we do not leave anyone behind. Well, what do I mean by that? When we do digital inclusion surveys and previously, digital divide surveys, we were thinking about what happens to people when they are marginalized because they are unable to get

or access the right technology to allow them to participate in the things of society. Well, if we proceed at too quickly a pace in this transformation that we are trying to do, we not only marginalize them but we will marginalize other people. We will create a larger divide than we already have.

And, Madam Speaker, once we recognized that, we had to be able to adjust the rate at which we roll out our services in the digital space, the rate at which we introduce technology, the rate at which we prioritize digital services over previously analogue services. So, in this regard, and understanding the fact that broadband access is the key to all of this, I want to take the opportunity, through you, Madam Speaker, to publicly acknowledge the work of the independent regulator, the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the excellent work that they have not only done this year but the works they have been doing over the years. But particularly, in addressing the things that came out from their own digital inclusion survey, that was completed by them.

Now, this survey identified a couple of things. This is the good news: that as of March of this year, 93 per cent of households, just over 392,000 households have Internet access. That is a great thing that is a significant thing for any country. And the national mobile coverage was around 94 per cent, again, quite high for what we have. But yet even with that, there are still communities that are underserved and very few of them that are unserved. And these tend to be smaller communities in remote areas with significant topographical issues.

We have been able to identify those within the survey and things are being done—I will speak a bit about that in a few seconds. But it also

identified that persons with disabilities, PWDs, that have special needs, can also find it difficult to access effective technology, so we have to find ways to assist them as well. One of the things why I was complimenting the Telecommunications Authority is that they financed the cost of internet and so on for underserved communities through the Universal Service Fund. One of the projects that I think epitomizes that, is a project that was launched when the universal service project in the Saint John's parish of Tobago. And for those not familiar with the parishes in Tobago we are talking about the Parlatuvier, L'Anse Fourmi, Bloody Bay area. And they have experienced significant challenges with internet, I mean going back, I cannot go as far back as when it started but it has been there for a significant period of time.

And what they were able to do, they used that initiative as a pilot and they have been able to provide to the citizens of that area, and that whole area, high-speed internet at extremely affordable costs by partnering with the service provider. And what that has meant is that the take-up of digital services in that area has been greatly increased. It is a model that we can take and replicate throughout all of the underserved and unserved areas in Trinidad and Tobago. And while fibre was the medium that was used in this case, any of the new technologies that we have will work to get us to where we are, and that includes the use of LEOs or low earth orbit satellite solutions.

Another thing that I want to compliment TATT on, of course, has to deal with the initiative that deals with the persons with disabilities, where it provides a subsidy—and in this case up to \$600 as it stands now—towards

the cost of a specific smartphone that is geared specifically for them. As of the beginning of September 2024, 1,441 persons have benefited from this facility, and that is since it was first introduced in 2021. And the plan is to expand this in 2025 to get to about 2,500 beneficiaries. I just returned from St. Kitts, Madam Speaker, and I happen to be on the plane with one of the significant advocates for—and in this case—the visually impaired and the use of technology and how they work. It was fascinating to sit next to him on a flight from St. Kitts to Trinidad and Tobago, and look at him operate everything that he needed to do using his phone with audible aids. It was tremendous to see and he was in St. Kitts actually, demonstrating and showing people how to do that. They do it here and the blind welfare is doing significant work on that so they also should be commended in doing this. This is an excellent initiative.

The national Wi-Fi initiative: This is something that we have going on in the Ministry and I think it is important that you understand that this deals with the creation of access to Wi-Fi in public spaces. So, it is funded in a couple of ways, some from the Universal Service Fund and others, of course, from the PSIP which the Ministry has. So, what we are really doing here is really creating spaces whereby you can take your devices if you happen to be there while you are waiting to get services, or you are trying to get services and have access to broadband.

Just a snapshot of where this is available already, there are already 187 TTWiFi sites located in various public facilities, public transport hubs, national libraries, public health institutions, public schools—in some of the schools that do not have connectivity but there are very few of those—high

traffic government offices, 187 exist, we are adding another 84 sites to that network by the end of the fiscal year for which we are dealing with the allocations now. So we will be well into the over 250 of those and that will allow for people to be able to use them where they are as required.

We have other digital initiatives that we are dealing with, specifically to deal with the quality and resilience of our infrastructure. A year ago I would have lamented the fact that if we put significant standalone infrastructure in Tobago, it represented a risk because it was connected to Trinidad by only one undersea fibre. I can stand here today and tell you that has been rectified, not necessarily by the Government, but the fact that it has been rectified does allow for a significant advancement in the resilience of services that are occurring on the sister island of Tobago.

So, in June of 2024, is when this happened. There was an additional subsea cable that was built by Deep Blue One cable, it is a Digicel company that built this. But this brings another level of international connectivity to Trinidad and Tobago and between Trinidad and Tobago. Just for some details on it, it means—the cable itself has a minimum life of 25 years with significant capacity in excess of 12 terabytes, they are using 100-gigabyte terminals now. So this means effectively that it is very difficult to isolate Trinidad from Tobago, from an undersea cable perspective. This is significant as it relates to the resilience of what we are doing.

You would have heard of a number of projects that are happening directly under the Ministry of Digital Transformation that are funded under the allocations that we currently have. One of them, significantly, is the establishment of a Tier 4 data centre. Why are we doing that? Well, to be

truthful there are five Tier 3 data centres—certified Tier 3 data centres on island. Why would we need a fourth and why does it need to be Tier 4? Well, there are significant reasons for that. One of them, of course, is the fact that there are certain specific types of data that you want directly in control where you are—sovereignly located in probably the best-protected facility you can have on the island. And as we improve and increase our digital footprint, having a facility like that works.

Two, it also would be one of only two in the region—the other one sits in Curaçao. And pairing them together as part of the data centre alliance will allow for regional growth in that space, and also for regional security to be increased. We are funding that through the service where we are, a number of the contracts associated with that have already been given out in the last fiscal. We are on the last leg of that now in the new fiscal so expect that to come into service very soon. Another key and very important aspect of what we are doing that is funded—and you would have heard me mention this. I mentioned this in a number of our contributions because one of the things that you will find that is happening in the Ministry of Digital Transformation is that we are not introducing a lot of new projects or programmes in this phase of where we are. We are really deep into the implementation of the things that we have already started a long time ago.

7.30 p.m.

So, in this phase of what we are doing, the primary thing is all on implementation and delivering to the people. The community ICT access, to me, has been one of our most successful projects, and what this really does is that it creates centres that, you know, is staffed by residents of local

communities. They are located in underserved areas and they are there to provide a service to the community. That is very difficult to replicate without having a facility like that.

How many of them have we opened now? We have 17 of them opened, as we speak. Three more will be opened in the next couple of weeks. They are already ready. And we will probably have another 10 opened before the end of the calendar year. Now, these access centres are really important for the communities in which they serve, and if you happen to have one in your community—and I mean, they are all over the place, Carenage, Caiman, Belle Vue. I know we opened one in Lisas Gardens recently. I mean, we have a number of them spread out all over the country, but I want you to be aware of what they do.

So, they provide Internet access, and access to mobile devices, mentorship, guidance, training in digital technology and other things. They use them as homework centres. I have seen them used for a number of things. They consist of really a massive hall that has machines inside of it, and when I say machines, everything: Computers, printers, scanners, TVs, hearing devices, et cetera, but—people. The most important part of that is the fact that it is staffed with people, and those people are there to help you. You can walk into that centre without a phone, without a tablet, without even knowledge of how to use ICT services, and you will be afforded the opportunity to do so. They provide access to government information and online services—it is a place to go to do things there—access to online training and education, cybersecurity awareness training.

We have partnered with the Adult Literacy Tutors Association to

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provide their training in those centres as well. We support other local civil society organizations. We have a number of online youth things going on there: girls in ICT, boys in ICT, youth ICT camps, camps for the elderly. A number of things happen in those cases, and I think this programme is one that—when we look back at it, it will be one of the ones that we will be most proud of because of its impact at a societal level. So we really have to continue to do that and look out for more of those coming in, in places that we have.

Building the capacity, the ICT capacity of our people, is a critical component of what we do. And again, this is all being funded under the same allocation that we have, but we do get generous donations from a number of societies that provide the content to us.

So in his presentation, the hon. Member for Diego Martin/North East spoke to several learning and capacity-building initiatives that either use digital technology or seek to build the capacity to effectively utilize the technology at a national level. So it is not really surprising that, you know, a number of the documents that we use to guide how we process what we are doing, the roadmap to recovery, the Community Recovery Programme, et cetera, et cetera, all of those documents provide a guidance as to how we do this because they represent government policy. Well, we are adding to that now. One of the things that I heard in the cut and thrust of the debate is that Trinidad and Tobago has no digital strategy, in terms of how it is going about what it is doing. Let me set the record straight for that, as it stands right now.

The national digital transformation strategy 2024 to 2027, for that

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four-year period, has already been approved by Cabinet and it is being distributed now, as we speak, to a number of stakeholders, but more than that, it will be available to the general population and community. But it represents the blueprint as to what we are doing, what we have been doing—because the last ICT plan ended in 2022. This is a digital transformation plan. It is the first of its kind. It is a very comprehensive document—if you want to understand the policy as to what we are doing in digital transformation, it is a document to get your hand on and be able to work in.

It was approved at the Cabinet a few weeks ago, but the thing about it is that it had significant consultation across Trinidad and Tobago with a number of people and agencies and functions and entities, and it truly is representative of what they would have liked to have seen in the strategy, combined with what the strategy really should accomplish at a national level. It is a document that is actually quite—if you look at it, it is extremely pleasing on the eye. It does not look like a strategy. It actually looks more like a magazine. And the key thing about that is it was done internally using our own resources, our own experts from here in Trinidad and Tobago, building on all of that investment that has happened in our youth and in our academic pursuits by our people.

This document—and I have had some reviews of it from some of my peers from the other islands, and it gets actually quite stark raving reviews. It is a document that I think everyone should get their hands on. So, let it not be said that there is no strategy relative to how the digital transformation of Trinidad and Tobago is going ahead.

There are some other initiatives that were outlined within the

presentation of the budget, dealing with numeracy and literacy and things that would impact or be impacted by our digital transformation trust, but I want to talk about the one that is happening internal within the Ministry of Digital Transformation, specifically WeLearnTT. And WeLearnTT is a partnership among government, academia, local and international partners, and they include YTEPP, Coursera, the Linux Foundation, Cisco, Simplilearn and, of course, the International Telecommunication Union, ITU.

Again, a lot of the content that we get there, apart from what we pay for, is donated to us. So, you might find that when you go on today, and I can tell you I have been on it, there is a tremendous amount of content that is available to the user at no cost to you. But if you go onto that platform, you can educate yourself in a number of ways, and it targets three specific groups of people.

Group one, all members of the national community. This is where people learn the basic foundational skills, how to use the Internet, how to use devices, basic productivity, software applications, et cetera, et cetera. It means that you can become a capable member of operating in a digital society.

Group two seeks to build on people who already have professional meanings and are able to operate, and those people get to upskill themselves to meet the demands of the local labour market.

Group three represents participants of the technical and business skills that need to create and manage ICT businesses in the local, regional and international space. So this is for another group of an even higher set of

people that can get themselves certified, they have access to mentorship and training, and so on. And again, all of this is being done at no cost to you.

So, Madam Speaker, the group two and group three components of this have been deliberately designed with the needs of the micro and small and medium enterprise businesses in mind. That sector is really where we targeted, to get that group of people really into the digital age and operating in the way they should.

I do not know if the numbers were presented in the budget, because I was not here for all of it, but there are over 4,000 people that have benefited from the training that we have in that, and over 130 members of communities of persons with disabilities that have had access to this. The intent is to push those numbers closer to 10,000. All right?

Let us talk a bit about financial inclusion, and I have recognized that this has caused significant levels of consternation with some people. And I believe a lot of times it is because people listen to words and associate those words with what they think it is. I tend not to use words like “smart” when we are talking about communities. Everybody has their own idea about what a smart city is. Everybody has their own idea what a smart community is, et cetera.

Hon. Member: Smart man.

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: That as well. Smart man has his own connotations as well. The idea behind it is, I tend to use things that are a bit more localized and you can focus on it and understand what it is.

So, I will talk a bit about what we are doing in Arima. Some of it has been spoken about. But it is not smart Arima, it is Connected Arima. And if

you say “Connected Arima”, people get the idea of what that is. You say “smart Arima” and all of a sudden people go on into all kinds of places.

I think the same thing has happened with cashless. People “gone” crazy with cashless. I just do not get it. There is normally another word associated with cashless. One of the ones that you hear the most is “cashless transaction”. A cashless transaction is not a cashless society. A cashless transaction is not a digital transformation change into moving the whole world into not using money anymore. A cashless transaction is simply a transaction that does not involve the way we traditionally use cash. I am not paying you \$5 for a pound of tomatoes. But transactions happen electronically all the time.

7.40 p.m.

If people want to adopt the jargon to use, and are willing to accept my suggestion, “use less cash nah”, when we are talking about society, et cetera, et cetera, “use less cash”. It means that we are trying to get people to move towards forms of electronic use for moving around the things that they need to pay for goods, and to get things without having to walk around with loads of cash. And the benefits of that are obvious. One, it is a lot faster—well I do not know who would walk around with a lot of money in their pocket. I certainly do not have a lot of money to walk around, maybe that is where the “smart man” thing came from. Yes, yes, that is quite possible.

But, Madam Speaker, the idea is, I do not think in my lifetime, any country has been able to outlaw cash, they still use it still, it has its purpose, and it is still there. But the idea is, as we increase, and if we can get those numbers as identified by the TTIFC to change, then the ability to participate

in electronic movement of funds, and the ability to pay for things, and so on, will make a significant difference in the way in which the efficiency of society runs, and of course, in the way in which we can implement end-to-end solutions for electronic services. It is very important that we do that. So, I just want to make it clear, cashless did not mean that we are going to move all the cash out of the society, and it certainly does not mean that an objective of digital transformation is to move all the cash out of society. Alright? So, we have that covered.

While saying that though, just under two weeks ago, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago signed a technical license agreement with the National Payments Corporation of India—it is really the NPCI—to develop a real-time payments platform using India’s Unified Payments Interface. I do not know how many of you have been to India, but if you go to India you would find that, that is the most pervasive mechanism used to pay for anything. I have been there, and I have been around people from our own embassies and our own consulates working with people down there, and they use it for everything. With just the agency, we have signed it. They do over 1.4 billion users in India, and the transaction rate I have, it is ridiculous in what they are doing.

And so, when I had made my initial trip to India to start setting this up, and that was back in 2023, I recognized recently that there was some level of criticism indicating that I had gone to India probably on some joyride, went again on a further joyride, came back and nothing came out of it. Well, let me identify again that the signing of this is a significant thing. It is probably the largest one of these types of engagements that will happen

within the Caribbean region, simply because of the size of us. But more so than that, there were other parts, and other MOUs that were signed that are now coming into implementation phase. And you will hear a lot more about those as we move along. The reason why India is unable to do this, is actually quite simple. India is a technology powerhouse, for many people who do not know that. India is a technology powerhouse as much as many of the other places that we know. Also, India built its technology in a particular way that it owns the intellectual property fund.

So, when India offers us something like Digilocker and they say, “Well sure, we have built it, we own the quote for it. It is ours, you can use it.” The Ministry has taken a lot of flak, because they say, “we do things a bit too slowly.” Now, let me deal with that, Madam Speaker, by saying we do think a bit too slowly. When I got this Ministry to operate it, one of the things that I decided to do is, that anything that we were going to do was going to be sustainable, and it was going to be sustainable at the best cost price point that we could. A number of the projects that we are building, and I would speak specifically to the one that we are doing with Estonia namely the interoperability network also known as X-Road, we could have done this in a number of ways. Other Caribbean countries have gone the way of and are going the way of going to Estonia, getting one of their companies who can do this, to pay them. They come build it, they would operate it, manage it, and take care of it for you, for as long as you have it. I decided not to do that. I decided to go to Estonia, get the help that we needed, for them to come here and teach our people how to build it.

So, the way it is built, our X-Road implementation is built and

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operated, it is built by our people under their guidance, operated by our people under their guidance when they were there, and of course, it is being developed and now rolled out by our people under our own guidance. You understand why the model is different? The resources operating it, doing it, developing it and keeping it up, and building other things on top of it? All local, they are local, all our own people doing it. The cost model is different. We are doing the same thing with our identity programmes. So, a number of the programmes that we have and by the way when we are done with this, strange enough, because we are using open source software, the IP at the end of the bill is ours. We can share it with other Caribbean countries. We can share it our own neighbours, we can do what we wish with it, because we have the ability to do that. These things are already in testing, and in pilot phase in a number of instances.

The next thing you would see coming in November, is when we start rolling them out into actual applications, and the benefits for these things represent a tremendous leap forward in the efficiency, and the way in which digital services are done. It is really, really important that we do that. One other thing that I want to mention, of course, is a social benefits wallet. Again, the Minister of Finance addressed it during his presentation, and what this really has to do, is a way to deal with the distribution of noncash items and benefits provided by Ministries and divisions. It will reduce waste in a lot of cases, but basically any item that you can get that is not cash, that you want to claim from somewhere, you can get the benefit of having that by having this social benefits wallet. We are almost at the end of it. Testing is going on, and by November of this year, we should be in a position to speak

more about that.

Madam Speaker, it would be almost impossible for me to go through a presentation of this type and not speak about cybersecurity. It would be impossible to do that and not speak about cybersecurity. I will take a few minutes to deal with that. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is, has been, and will forever be, once we have digital services in the business of addressing the cybersecurity posture of Trinidad and Tobago. All of our services, everything we have, and the thing is, the more successful we are at the digitalization, digitization and the utilization of ICT in the business that we are in, is the more exposed we are. We attack surface increases all the time. We have been, and continue to be involved in things that increases the cyber resilience of Trinidad and Tobago. Note the word I used. The cyber resilience. Because unfortunately, regardless of how well we do at this, the chance of a successful attack, there is always a chance that that can happen. Cyber resilience not only speaks to the fact that you are trying to remove and eliminate that as best as possible, but it also speaks to what happens when you are attacked.

How do you make sure that your services remain online? How do you make sure that you minimize its impact? How do you make sure that even if you are attacked, services continue to run? And we are doing a lot of things in the interest of that. I mean, you have to deal with that from a policy perspective, from a real and implemented perspective, you have to deal with it from a strategic perspective, and you have to deal with it from a health perspective. So, we are working on the cybersecurity policy that is there, we are upgrading the CSIRT, I know the CSIRT came in for a number

of things, but the CSIRT does not operate in isolation. And one of the things that you are going to realize is that the size of a CSIRT is not necessarily a true measure of its capabilities particularly in a collaborative and or partnership mode as it has been with a number of people.

We are improving the public sector cyber resilience and protecting critical, national infrastructure. What do I mean by critical infrastructure? Anything that can be interrupted, that would disrupt the normal operations of society, in any significant way. If you want to have understanding of what that would mean, think about what it would be like if the Treasury was attacked? No one would be paid, you could not do a number of things. Think about what it would be like if the customs was attacked? You would not be able to do very many things, and of course, we have seen what complexities can happen when one of our major service providers is attacked, as an example. And we have to be able to deal with that.

7.50 p.m.

Now, companies spend millions of dollars to protect themselves. Companies spend billions of dollars to protect themselves. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has to be measured in how it approaches this, but we have to ensure that what we do secures your data, secures all of your information, and allows for things to continue to operate, but puts you in the best protected posture that we have. So, with that in mind, the Ministry of Digital Transformation. Madam Speaker, primary cyber security objectives for 2025 include, and this is the fiscal we talk about, includes fortifying the nation's security and governance network, the cyber security network that is, bolstering response capabilities across Ministries and within Ministries as

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well, and all of the other associated departments and agencies, establishing resilient protection for critical infrastructure. As I mentioned, that has to be the priority because attacking smaller things really does not have the same impact. And of course, all of this is being done to reduce our susceptibility to being attacked.

The Caribbean region seems to be a favourite place now for cyber attacks. A number of these large companies, and when I say companies, I am talking about these dark actors who operate, they have aligned themselves like companies, and they operate and attack you with fearless, with a fearless resilience that is unparalleled in anything I have ever seen.

So, what have we done to build on what we are going to do for 2025? We have conducted comprehensive governance scorecard risk assessments on 21 Ministries and 11 Divisions under the Tobago House of Assembly. We did all that already in 2024. We have delivered mini cyber security workshop series with the Government ICT Leadership, and Advisory Council, the GILAC. We have partnered with CARICOM IMPACS to conduct cyber drill exercises and so on, and leaders within the public sector.

Cyber security awareness month is happening now, that has already been launched this month of October. We have engaged with workshops and continue with working groups dealing with a number of things as it relates to our international partners helping us, and those will include, of course, Estonia, the United States, et cetera, et cetera, and other CARICOM partners that we have. You would be aware. Some of you would be because it is public knowledge now. There was a fairly recent and successful attack in Barbados on their revenue authority, and they are working through how

they are going to get those things done. So hopefully, we will be able to manage through and prevent a number of that from happening.

Every time I do this contribution, I give a report as to where we are with the number of digital services that we have in Trinidad and Tobago. We started at 89; we got to just over 100. Today, I can happily report that we are 250, and they continue to increase—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:—all the time. These e-services do a number of things for where we are, right. And so, I just want to break them down in a little bit for you, because there was heavy weather made of TTBizLink, and every time somebody criticizes that particular entity, it worries me. TTBizLink has one of the best portals recognized by international institutions in the world, the whole world.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: When that portal was launched, I was at the launch, and when that portal was launched, within hours of it being turned on, in excess of 70 countries had already accessed it. If any one of us, and that includes any one of you, wishes to find out anything about trade in Trinidad and Tobago, you can go to that site. You can find out the cost, what we export, what we import, where we import it from, what is the price we pay for it, what would be a good business to do if you wanted to get into export. Everything that you want is in there, and it is updated in real time.

The reason why I say I cringe when people criticize it, you know what it has to do with? While I was there, that solution was built by a company out of Singapore called Crimson Logic. But while I was there, I was lucky

enough to meet four young engineers who had done a significant amount of that work. They were four recent graduates from UWI, they were working for Crimson Logic right here in Trinidad and Tobago, built that solution, and are building similar solutions for other countries from right here in Trinidad and Tobago. It should be one of our greatest achievements. It seems nobody wants to say anything about it that is good. But that is all right. We know where we are.

Speaking of the 250 e-services or so, 112 of them, or 44 per cent of them, are limited to information and downloadable forms, so it is easy. That part of it is easy. But 43 of them have heavy transactional capabilities and online submissions, bookings, et cetera, et cetera. And 22 per cent of them are fully online, which means you can start the transaction online and complete it online. This maturity index continues to trend in the right direction at all times, and that is because we are getting better at this, the technology is improving, and people's ability to understand and trust and use it is also improving.

I want to touch on one of the last of the initiatives that are under direct control of the Ministry, and that is the interoperability network. It is being built, as I said, with help from Estonia, and it really revolutionizes the way in which things work. It concerns me that cold water was poured on the fact that Ministries have to exchange information. I do not know how they expect this to work. Ministries must exchange information in the pursuit of services. The complaints that we get today about how things work is, "boy, yuh gone into the Ministry, they take the information, they have to go to a next Ministry to check it, then it come back, you have to come back to this."

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It is the standard thing that you hear. Yet, when we propose a secure, robust, resilient network that is internationally acclaimed to do exactly to eliminate that moving of things all over the place and to do it electronically for validations and verification, cold water is poured on that saying, “Aye, the Government wants to find out all your business”. We are not trying to find out anything. What we are trying to do is to create ways that allow for things to become more efficient.

Imagine you walk in to somewhere and you take with it your birth paper pin, and then somebody has to write that down onto a file and send it down to the registrar’s office for them to check to see if it really exists, and then to come back to tell you that it is there. And, networks that we have built do that in under one second for any validation and verification.

Madam Speaker: Minister, you have two minutes left of original speaking time. You are entitled to 10 additional minutes to wind up your contribution if you wish.

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: So you have that, and when you get that level of efficiency, they are not exchanging any information. All they are doing is validating that this is something that actually exists and sends a reply that says this is what it is. Why should that be something that people will not support? Why would it be something that should not have global and universal support, so that when you go to offices to get your services, they can be done quite easily?

Madam Speaker, I want to talk a bit about Developers’ Hub. And

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus (cont'd)

Developers' Hub fits into a space, I think it is one of our most successful programmes. It has won international awards, at least two it has won already.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: And it is interesting that it has done that because it only consists of us tapping into what is obviously the greatest resource we have in Trinidad and Tobago, people. We decided that the way in which we are going to improve the ICT contribution to GDP is by finding and utilizing the creativity of our own people in the digital space. So we sought out initially to find out, I wonder how large this developers' community is in Trinidad and Tobago. We expected 400. We are well in excess of 1,200 and growing strong today. That represents enough of a mass to be able to do what we ultimately want to have happen. And you know what that is? That this morphs into the Trinidad and Tobago software development export company, an independent company—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: It does what it does. There are people who participate currently in that programme who have developed their skills as developers without cost to them because of the amount of training that is available once you register as a developer in the hub. There are a number of people who are already building solutions for private companies because of the exposure of our Developers' Hub, a challenge series, which was aired on TTT and has been wildly popular. That series allowed for businesses and other people up and down the Caribbean and internationally to see the skill and the proficiency of the people that we have here, and recognize that they

are second to none anywhere in the world, and can build the type of applications that we need to keep going forward and forward. I will speak more about that when I speak in the other place.

Lastly, I want to talk about the way in which the Ministry has been impacting all of these other Ministries that have been speaking about their digital transformation activities. We built something called the DDU, the Digital Delivery Unit, and what that does is that it embeds in other Ministries, Divisions, and agencies, experts from my Ministry, mainly the Ministry of Digital Transformation, to help them to understand what they are doing, to help us understand what they are doing, and to make sure that they remain aligned in their own digital efforts with what the actual program is that is guided by the Ministry of Digital Transformation. It has been a wildly successful program.

It continues to help in a number of Ministries, Divisions, and agencies that gives them the ability to stay in alignment with what we are doing while at the same time pursuing the things that they need to do.

8.00 p.m.

The key to that is, the Ministry of Digital Transformation is not digitalizing the entirety of Trinidad and Tobago by itself. All of the Ministries, divisions, and agencies still retain levels of control and actually have significant amounts of work to do, but with the members of the DDU there to guide them and keep them on the straight and narrow, we are not having people running off in fifty different directions trying to get to the same place. It is absolutely important that we understand that.

So in closing, Madam Speaker, one thing I guess I want everybody to

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understand. The Ministry of Digital Transformation was formed three years ago. We continue to make significant strides and to add value to Trinidad and Tobago the way it is. We are in full implementation mode. We are not adding anything new to what we are doing now. It is all about rolling it out and embedding it in the society, so we will continue to do that from now, all the way through 2025 as we do this.

And of course, there are other things that I can speak about relative to what we are doing, but suffice it to say, Digital Transformation is well funded. Digital Transformation is well on its way to implementation and making things simpler. I know people talk about the fact that you are still making up paper forms coming into Trinidad and Tobago. You will be surprised to see how far we are. I know the Minister of Finance gave a date for that. I will not contradict any—he gave a time frame and I am not going to contradict that, but I guarantee we will finish it before when he says.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes.

Sen The Hon. H. Bacchus: I guarantee you that we will finish it before he says. You know what is interesting about that? The way in which we are doing this is that there is no cost to Trinidad and Tobago, and you may think it is because we are cheap. It is not that. It is because CARICOM IMPACS of which we are a member, has built the same system for almost all of the other Caribbean islands as we speak, and all we are doing is accessing that rather than paying millions of dollars to some company that we do not know about, to build the same thing for us. The same thing is in use in Barbados, in St. Lucia, et cetera.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. H. Bacchus: This speaks to the way in which this Government is trying to reduce its expenditure and still get the best technology available with the correct supervision and understanding of what we are doing. Madam Speaker, with those few words, I thank you for acknowledging me and having me in the House to give some level of minimal statement as to where we are with digital transformation, and I look forward to doing the same in the other place. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Wednesday, that is Wednesday, tomorrow, the 9th day of October, 2024 at 10.00 a.m., where the debate will resume.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.04 p.m.