

**SENATE***Monday, October 21, 2024*

The Senate met at 1.30 p.m.

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

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne, who is out of the country.

**VACANT SEAT**

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, I have received the following correspondence from Her Excellency the President, Christine Carla Kangaloo, ORTT:

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND  
TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: SENATOR LAUREL LEZAMA-LEE SING

WHEREAS by the provisions of section 43(2)(e) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the President, in exercise of the power vested in her, and acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister is empowered to declare the seat of a Senator to be vacant: NOW,

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THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, in exercise of the power vested in me by the said section 43(2)(e) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby declare the seat of you LAUREL LEZAMA-LEE SING, to be vacant, with effect from 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2024.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the  
President of the Republic of Trinidad  
and Tobago at the Office of the  
President, St. Ann's, this 25<sup>th</sup> day of  
September, 2024.”

### **SENATORS' APPOINTMENT**

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND  
TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. ANCIL K. DENNIS

In exercise of the power vested in me by section 40(2)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, acting in accordance with the

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advice of the Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you, ANCIL K. DENNIS, Senator.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 25th day of October, 2024.”

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. VYASH NANDLAL

WHEREAS Senator the Hon. Dr. Amery Browne is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you, VYASH NANDLAL to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from the 21<sup>st</sup> October, 2024 and continuing during

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the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of Senator the Hon. Dr. Amery Browne.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the  
President of the Republic of Trinidad  
and Tobago at the Office of the  
President, St. Ann's, this 18<sup>th</sup> day of  
October, 2024.”

### **OATH OF ALLEGIANCE**

*Senators Ancil K. Dennis and Vyash Nandlal took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.*

### **CONDOLENCES**

#### **(MR. HAMLET JOSEPH)**

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, former Senator, Mr. Hamlet Joseph, passed away on Thursday, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024. I will now invite Members to offer tributes. Minister of Digital Transformation.

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

**1.40 p.m.**

**The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus):** Thank you.

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** On behalf of the Government side, and all Members present, I wish to convey our deepest sympathies and condolences to the family, friends, and loved ones of former Senator Hamlet “Yaxsie” Joseph who passed away in September of 2024. Those of us who had the privilege of being part of the parliamentary system of our beloved country of Trinidad and Tobago are quite a diverse group as you can tell when anyone

is looking at us. And from the distinguished Members of this Chamber; the Opposition, the Independent, and the Government, to the hon. Members of the other place who represent the interest of their local constituencies and communities, and of course, the hard-working and dedicated professionals, public officers, et cetera, we are all members of what is in effect, an extremely large and extended family comprising representatives from all walks of life and from all parts of the country.

That is why I feel a sense of sadness and loss with the passing of Mr. Joseph last month at the ripe old age of 88. Hamlet “Yaxsie” Joseph was appointed as an Opposition Senator on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1974, just over 50 years ago, and he served until March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1976 when the Senate seat as it was then, was declared vacant ahead of the 1976 general election. Joseph was one of the Members of the Tapia House Movement of which we are well aware who were appointed as Opposition Senators at the time including others, and those others are members of the great fame of our political past, Lloyd Best and Ivan Laughlin.

During his term in the Senate, Mr. Joseph served as a member of the Regulations Committee and the Standing Orders Committee for the 1975 to 1976 session. Mr. Joseph’s parliamentary biography states that he, along with Lloyd Best and Mr. Ivan Laughlin as the new appointees to the Senate in 1974, made representations to the President of the Senate requesting variations of conventional attire, something which we are still proud of today and we continue to be able to utilize.

As reported by Wesley Gibbings in the Trinidad and Tobago *Guardian* last month, Laughlin related that despite strong reservations by

then Senate President, Wahid Ali, it was decided to allow the group's traditional shirt Jack—which I am sure Member Mark is well aware—in the Chamber. However, he stopped short on the question of sandals without socks. Mr. Joseph was a mentor, teacher, and community leader who was especially passionate about improvements to communities, particularly in the John John Laventille and East Port of Spain area.

He had been credited with successfully leading the efforts to acquire the property on which the Highlanders Steel Orchestra—the location that they have and currently sit. Mr. Joseph's commitment to education, collaboration, and to ensuring all members of our national communities have a voice in determining the affairs of our nation remains as important and as relevant today in 2024 as they were when he was sworn in as a Senator in 1974, 50 years ago. I again, wish to extend condolences to his family on behalf of the Government Bench on the passing of a great man. I thank you, Mr. President.

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

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

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

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Yes. Thank you, Mr. President. Hamlet Joseph was a grassroots politician and parliamentarian hailing from Success Village in Laventille. Whilst his stay in this Senate was relatively short, his contribution on the Floor was quite rich and profound. Brother Hamlet Joseph who passed a few weeks ago in September made some significant contributions to the Senate. He spoke on issues such as constitutional

reform and local Government reform in the manifestation of the local authorities Bill.

He also contributed to housing as it relates to a very important debate. He made his mark in his contribution to other pieces of legislation, always focusing and advocating on behalf of the small people, on behalf of the common man, and on behalf of his community here in Laventille, East Dry River. Mr. President, I would describe Hamlet Joseph—even though I never had the opportunity of meeting with him directly—as a disruptor to the status quo and we need more in this country. He, Mr. President, challenged, as my colleague said, the dress code that I am proud today to be wearing what I am wearing—

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

**Sen. Mark:**—because of people like Hamlet Joseph. He led the struggle for us to address and redress that dress code, Mr. President. Hamlet Joseph was a community man; a community activist. He lived all his life in Success Village in Laventille and Mr. President, he was a very important individual in the development of the Steelband Movement in that part of the country associated with Highlanders, doing everything he could have done to promote that band, ensuring that band got land title to build its pan yard and its steelband. He, Mr. President, was a very simple individual and a very easygoing gentleman. He has now passed. He now belongs to the ages. A family man, a teacher, a writer, and a contributor to his party's newspaper, the Trinidad and Tobago Review, the Tapia House Movement newspaper, distributing them throughout his community in Port of Spain like Lloyd Best who has now passed as well, and others.

**1.50 p.m.**

Mr. President, on behalf of the alternative government, we would like to extend deepest condolences to the bereaved family, friends and associates of the late great Hamlet Joseph. May his great soul rest in eternal peace and may it rise in perpetual glory. Rest, brother Hamlet Joseph, rest in peace. I thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Maharaj.

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

**Sen. Sunity Maharaj:** Thank you, Mr. President. Hamlet Joseph was a community leader long before community leaders were identified as being men with guns and arms, who enforced the authority by weaponry. His weapons were dialogue, rational thought, persuasion and a belief that the people of Laventille were special.

When the DEWD programme was summarily eliminated, I think some time in 1987, he was a lone voice mourning its loss, whereas most of the—the rest of the country was saying, “Good riddance,” to what they considered a waste, pointing out, as he did, that the people who had been so hard at work, so diligent in delivering towards the steelpan, had come to be viewed by the society, especially the business class, as being wasteful, dependent in their reliance on state funds.

He never wavered from that view. No matter how Laventille changed, how it moved from being a place where the public servant class lived, where the people who were moving out from the countryside, coming in from the other islands, moving from being hagglers and higglers and



found permanent employment with the State or in some business, but who were, very abruptly in the period after 1970, quietened by a largesse of state funds took for pacification purposes, he never joined that. He never believed in that. He believed that there was potential to be unlocked in the people in their own power. Throughout his life, his position was, the people of Laventille know what they want, but they need to be consulted. But if you do not consult them, they will enter into a transactional relationship and they will take what they get, and they will ask for more. But the greater power and the greater good that they will be to themselves in the society were if they were full participants in our democracy.

The last time I saw “Yaxsie”, as we called him, it was at the relaunch, or the rebirth of the Highlanders—that was not the launch of the pan theatre, which was last year, but the rebirth of that steelband, which went back to Bertie Marshall days and had seemed to have disappeared, and the community thought it was important, especially with Bertie having passed, to rekindle that spirit that resided in the Highlanders. What was so interesting about that, that day, was how in the midst of all the revelry, “Yaxsie” tried to promote an agenda of, “Let us talk, let us talk about the steelpan and what we can do, and how we can translate this into a transformational instrument,” all the things we are still talking about, but his lone voice was swept away because it was a day fete and festivity and music and food, and that was his hurt because he thought this was the chance to get a serious conversation going within Laventille for an agenda like that.

So he never wavered. He never joined it. He never sold out. As he got older, he got quieter. He was always a quiet presence. No matter what

room he entered, he would walk with a distinction because he had a very good air, and he would smile when he approved of something. And when he eventually spoke—and he did not always see the need to speak—it was always profound and calming and authentic. It was my joy to have known him, and I would like his family to know that he is honoured here today and he is remembered. I thank you. May he rest in peace.

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

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, I too would like to join in paying tribute as we honour the memory of a man whose service to this Senate and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago has had a profound impact, former Sen. Hamlet Joseph. As President of the Senate, I feel a deep responsibility to echo the sentiments already expressed and to further acknowledge the legacy of a man whose work was truly dedicated to the citizens of this country.

Hamlet Joseph became a Senator in 1974, at a pivotal time in our nation's history, during a period of political transformation and growing demands for more representative and inclusive governance. As one of the Tapia House trio, his entry into the Senate was not just an individual achievement, it symbolized a courageous move by a group of young activists seeking to influence a national decision-making via a new and unique political ideology.

Sen. Joseph was a man of ideas, a man driven by the desire to improve the lives of ordinary citizens, particularly those in the communities of Laventille and east Port of Spain. His speeches in this Chamber, now part of our parliamentary record, demonstrate his deep concern for issues, such as housing, infrastructure and local government reform. His contributions in

the Senate are proof that he was a tireless advocate for the empowerment of local communities and believed that strong, functional local governance was key to unlocking the potential of our nation.

As hon. Senators have noted, Sen. Joseph's dedication to improving the conditions of Laventille and surrounding areas was unwavering. His calls for better drainage, housing and public facilities were not mere political points, but were born out of a deep commitment to the people he represented. He knew, as we all should, that governance is ultimately about improving the lives of the people we serve.

Hon. Senators, as we reflect on the legacy of former Sen. Hamlet Joseph, let us also reflect on the values he embodied. His life and his work remind us of the importance of inclusion, of ensuring that no community is left behind and of the transformative power of public service. His contributions to the Senate were marked by thoughtfulness, integrity and a deep sense of duty, qualities that should inspire each of us who serve in this esteemed Chamber today.

Though he is no longer with us, the values and principles he championed can certainly serve as a guide for us in our roles as Senators. His commitment to justice, to fairness and to the empowerment of communities should remain at the forefront of our work as we strive to build a better nation.

On behalf of the Senate of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, I wish to extend deepest condolences to the family of former Sen. Hamlet Joseph during this time of mourning. May his soul rest in peace and may his legacy continue to inspire us all.

Condolences – Mr. Hamlet Joseph  
Mr. President (cont'd)

2024.10.21

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

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, I now ask that we stand and observe a minute of silence as a mark of respect.

*The Senate stood.*

**2.00 p.m.**

**Mr. President:** May his soul rest in peace. Thank you hon. Senators, the Clerk will convey to the family of Mr. Hamlet Joseph, the sentiments expressed today.

## CONDOLENCES

(CYNTHIA ALFRED)

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, former Sen. Mrs. Cynthia Alfred, passed away on Tuesday, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024. I now invite Members to offer tributes. Sen. Dennis.

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

**Sen. Ancil Dennis:** Thank you very much, Mr. President, for the opportunity to join my colleagues to extend condolences to yet another fallen former Member of this Parliament. Of course, Mrs. Cynthia Alfred, was a Tobagonian, a daughter of the soil that blazed the trail in several areas of community and public life. She started off as a teacher, known to be involved in a significant way in the culture of Tobago; known as a director of several plays; heavily involved in the church and heavily involved in community groups and organizations. She was also a significant part of the well-established Tobago Heritage Festival, where between the period of 2005 and 2007, she took responsibility for the product that was displayed to the world, at that time.

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Having embarked on that aspect of her life for a number of years, she entered into the political arena in the year 1997, when she became a Member of this Parliament. And of course, with her proud track record of community service, it was very easy for her to find herself in this arena, in service not only to the people of Tobago, but to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

During her time in the Senate, she sat in the Opposition Benches of the PNM at that time. She debated some 27 critical Bills on behalf of the people of this country, and following that, she contested her first Tobago House of Assembly elections in 2001, where she won by a very small margin. I think, after the count it was one vote, and then after the recount, the final margin was about five votes, and immediately she served as the Secretary of Health, in the Tobago House of Assembly. Following that in her second term, she served as Secretary of Community Development and Culture. But during that period from 2001—2009, she served as Tobago's first female Deputy Chief Secretary, in the Tobago House of Assembly. Her life and her legacy, of course, is one for all of us to emulate. She lived a life of giving, a life of service. She operated both in public and private life, on the tenets of integrity, of character, of decency and morality.

During her last days, she continued to be active in her church, in her community and in the People's National Movement. I can recall a few days before her passing, she actually attended one of our Tobago council meetings. And in her usual style, very charismatic—and as tiny as she was, she was known as a short, small in stature, but she was a towering figure throughout her political life, and even in her stage of life where she should

have been retired, she continued to contribute and she continued to let her voice be heard.

And, therefore today on behalf of the Government Bench, and I dare say, on behalf of the people of Tobago, by extension, I want to extend sincere condolences to her family, her friends—and I am sure the entire island, who is grieving at this time, at a significant loss. And though, she was at the age of 84, I do not think that anybody expected that such a vibrant charismatic individual would have left us, at this point in time.

So, on behalf of all of us, may her soul rest in peace and may her legacy act as a beacon of hope and a beacon of direction, and as an example, not only for the Members of this House, but I dare say for the entire country. Thank you.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. John.

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

**Sen. Jearlean John:** Thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Sen. John:** Today, I stand to honour the life of Sen. Mrs. Cynthia Alfred, a remarkable and consequential Tobagonian. Petite in stature, but a giant based on her strong legacy of achievements. I say this because to achieve what she did in her political career—and at the time she did, Mrs. Alfred was true trailblazer. Mrs. Cynthia Alfred was Tobago's first female Deputy Chief Secretary, and she also served as a Senator in the Fifth Republican Parliament. I had reason to interact with Mrs. Alfred in my capacity, as I was then, Minister of Transport, Tourism, and Tobago Affairs. And Mrs.

Alfred, you know, arose as Deputy Chief Secretary, and Secretary of Health and Community Development, and we were both Senators, during the Fifth Republican Parliament.

Back then in politics was a different time. We were on different sides of the aisle, but we were never enemies. Mrs. Alfred was very approachable, but carried an air of defiance, always ready to fight for all, and on behalf of Tobago. Mrs. Alfred's presence illuminated the lives of all, who had the privilege to know her. She was not only a devoted advocate to all, but also a beacon of strength and inspiration within her community. Her unwavering dedication to service, compassion for others and vibrant spirit touched the lives of many, creating ripples of positive change that will resonate for years to come. Her contributions to the community were manifold, whether to her advocacy work, her volunteer efforts, or her role as mentor to young people.

Mrs. Cynthia Alfred, dedicated herself and her life to uplifting others. She believed in the power of education, empowerment, culture and tirelessly working to inspire the next generation to reach their full potential. Her passion for social justice and equality was evident in everything she did, and she fought valiantly for the rights of those who often went unheard. Mrs. Alfred, was a fierce advocate for those in need; always ready to lend a helping hand, or a listening ear. She had a unique ability to make everybody feel valued and appreciated, reminding us all of the importance of community and connection.

As we reflect on her life, let us celebrate her extraordinary contributions and the countless ways she enriched the lives of others.

Though she may no longer be with us, her essence will endure in the stories we share and the lessons we have learnt. Let us honour former Sen. Cynthia Alfred, by committing ourselves to the values she exemplified, which included passion, compassion and her unwavering belief in the potential of every individual. Never mind, she always had this air of defiance. Rest in God's heavenly peace, former hon. Sen. Cynthia Alfred. Your light will continue to shine brightly in the hearts and lives of those you have touched. Thank you.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Dillon-Remy.

**Sen. Dr. Maria Dillion-Remy:** Mr. President, I am honoured to be asked to give tribute on behalf of the Members of the Independent Bench, on the death of a former Senator, Ms. Cynthia Alfred, who died on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024 at the wonderful age of 84 years old. She was from the village of Mount St. George, and was privileged to attend the Bishop's High School. I spoke to a close friend and classmate of hers from Bishop's, and this is what she said:

As a friend, she was always reliable. No halfway measures with her. Things had to be done properly, or not at all. She always looked for the best outcome. She was a strong disciplinarian, never used dialect—and that was a feat in Tobago in the era that she grew up.

**2.10 p.m.**

She insisted on using the Queen's English, even with the accent. She loved England and anything English. At school, our English teacher used to make us walk with a big book on our heads to ensure that we



kept good posture, and Cynthia loved it.

One of our textbooks that we studied was, *The Groundwork of British History, 1688-1939*, and Cynthia spoke about William Pitt as though she knew him personally.

She went on to say:

Her dress code and the way she carried herself was very important to her, yet she was down to earth and friendly and would always go the extra mile to assist someone in need. She was always very sociable, a great conversationalist, always well read, and kept in touch with global affairs.

In her professional career she was a teacher, rising to the rank of Teacher II before becoming a Cultural Officer with the Tobago House of Assembly. She was instrumental in the creation of Best Village scripts for many villages. She was a well-known play writer and director for many staged plays, producing her work mainly in the church and for the Tobago Heritage Festival. She was responsible for writing a trilogy for the Heritage opening nights, 'Then, Now and Beyond', performed between 2005 and 2007.

She served as an Opposition Senator, representing the PNM during the Fifth Republican Parliament, from 1997 to 2000. During her tenure in Parliament, she debated on several Bills and took special interest in areas involving women, the vulnerable, and especially people of Tobago.

I quote a press release from the Women Parliamentarians of Trinidad and Tobago, WPTT:

During her tenure in the Upper House, she tirelessly advocated on

behalf of the people of Tobago. Though small in stature, her presence was powerful, passionate and compassionate. She regularly contributed to parliamentary debates, presenting a true Tobagonian perspective while championing the needs of the vulnerable, the dispossessed, and especially the needs of women in Tobago.

I also quote from Member of Parliament, Bridgid Annisette-George, Speaker of the House, who is the President of the WPTT, and she said:

“...Cynthia Alfred was a wonderful example of advocacy meeting opportunity. She used her platform to advance the needs of those whom she served, especially the women. I clearly recall her passion and enthusiasm when we were just thinking about creating this women’s parliamentary group in 2022.

She attended our planning sessions in person, lending her expertise and wisdom which helped shape what our group is evolving into. On one occasion in June 2023, when she travelled to Trinidad for a WPTT meeting which eventually was unavoidably postponed, she used the opportunity to observe the sitting of the Senate and was warmly received and recognised by members of the Upper House. Ms. Alfred served with great distinction, and she will be missed.”

During the period, 2001 to 2009, Ms. Alfred served as a Member of the Tobago House of Assembly, representing the Bacolet/Mt. St. George district. She was the Secretary of Health during her first term, and Secretary of Community Development and Culture in the second term under the People’s National Movement administration led by the Chief Secretary, Mr. Orville London. She was the first woman to serve as Deputy Chief

Secretary, as was said already.

Ms. Alfred contributed to many debates and advocated on behalf of the people, again, especially the vulnerable. In 2015, Ms. Alfred coordinated a thanksgiving service at the Shaw Park Cultural Complex, entitled, *United in Praise*, featuring the Spiritual Baptist Combined Choir. The Chief Secretary at that time, Mr. Orville London, praised Ms. Alfred whom he dubbed, “the grand dame of culture in Tobago”, and he said the complex was her brainchild.

I also had the opportunity to speak to Mr. Horace Wilson, screenwriter and producer, and former Senator, who wish to pay tribute to her. For those who do not know him, he was responsible for the popular television series, *Turn of the Tide*, which used to be aired on TTT years ago. Mr. Wilson said that as Secretary of Community Development and Culture, she would have supported their film and television productions. This included the support for the film called, *HappySAD*, which was entered in the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles in 2009. That film placed second in the competition, with more than 2,500 entries from across the diaspora. Ms. Alfred was present in LA for the screening of the film. He said, without her help, and that of the Tobago House of Assembly, their success would not have been possible.

My first interaction with her was when she served as the Secretary of Health in 2001. At that time, I was Medical Director. We had several meaningful interactions as she sought to use her term in office to make progress for the development of health needs of the people in Tobago. She would have been responsible for the initiation of sending persons to Trinidad

to receive dialysis, because that was not available in Tobago. She was the Secretary who initiated the Litter Eradication Programme in Tobago. It was also her brainchild to introduce the Community Enhancement Programme, which went on to become the national programme called CEPEP.

I also received information that Ms. Alfred was the founding member of the Happy Haven council, which was responsible for the establishment of the Happy Haven School for special needs, founded in November 1974, and as already mentioned, she was very active with the Methodist Church. Her life impacted the people of Tobago in several ways, but especially in the area of culture. She will be missed. Condolences to the members of her friends and family and community. May her soul rest in peace. Thank you.

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

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, I too wish to pay tribute to the remarkable life and legacy of a community leader, a teacher, a cultural icon, and a woman whose service to Tobago and the wider nation has left an indelible mark, former Sen. Cynthia Alfred. Ms. Alfred was a trailblazer, a woman of vision and strength, who dedicated herself wholeheartedly to the advancement of her community and to the people of Tobago. She was the first woman to serve as Deputy Chief Secretary in the Tobago House of Assembly, a remarkable achievement that speaks to her courage, capability and unwavering belief in the potential of women to lead and inspire. Throughout her distinguished career, she was a fierce advocate for those who often had no voice, particularly the vulnerable and the marginalized.

Her service as an Opposition Senator in the Fifth Republican Parliament, from 1997 to 2000, was characterized by her tireless advocacy

for the people of Tobago. As a legislator, she contributed to critical debates on issues that shaped our nation's future, from domestic violence and cohabitational relationships to the protection of the environment and the care of the elderly. In every debate, her passion for justice and her deep concern for the welfare of the people were evident. Her contributions were never mere rhetoric, but a clarion call to action, a call to recognize the needs of those often overlooked by society.

Ms. Alfred's leadership extended well beyond the Senate. She was an Assemblyman for the Bacolet/Mt. St. George district from 2001 to 2009, where she held the portfolios of Secretary of Health and later, Secretary of Community Development and Culture. In these roles, she worked tirelessly to improve the lives of her constituents, particularly in the areas of health care and cultural development. Her impact as a cultural leader was profound. She was instrumental in shaping the Best Village scripts, which was a celebrated playwright, and a key figure in the Tobago Heritage Festival.

Her trilogy written for the Heritage opening nights, 'Then, Now and Beyond', performed between 2005 and 2007, remains a testament to her commitment to preserving and promoting Tobago's rich cultural heritage. Former US President, John Quincy Adams, is quoted as saying:

"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."

In other words, a mark of distinguished leadership is making others better because of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence. Indeed, Cynthia Alfred exemplified this statement. She used her platforms,

both in politics and in the arts, to uplift her community and to ensure that the legacy of Tobago's cultural identity would endure for future generations.

**2.20 p.m.**

The title bestowed upon her by former Chief Secretary, Mr. Orville London, as a “grande dame of culture” in Tobago was truly well deserved. Her vision continues to resonate in the programmes and initiatives she pioneered. Hon. Senators, Cynthia Alfred is more than a parliamentarian; she was a mentor, a guide and a source of inspiration for many. She was a tireless supporter of women's advancement in politics. Her impact is clearly reflected in the many heartfelt condolence messages that have poured in since the announcement of her passing. As we reflect on her legacy, let us commit ourselves to continuing the work she so passionately believed in by uplifting the vulnerable, advocating for justice and preserving the culture and heritage that defines who we are as a people. Cynthia Alfred's life was a testament to the power of dedication, resilience and love for community. On behalf of my family and the Office of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago, I wish to extend sincerest condolences to the family of former Senator and Deputy Chief Secretary, Cynthia Alfred during this time of mourning and reflection. May her soul rest in peace.

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

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, I now ask that we stand and observe a minute of silence as a mark of respect.

*The Senate stood.*

**Mr. President:** May her soul rest in peace. Thank you, hon. Senators, the Clerk will convey to the family of Ms. Cynthia Alfred the sentiments

expressed here today.

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEES  
(APPOINTMENT OF)**

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, I have received the following correspondence from the Speaker of the House of Representatives: the hon. Bridgid Annisette-George, MP, Speaker of the House:

Establishment and Appointment of Members to Joint Select  
Committees.

At a Sitting held on Friday September 20, 2024, the House of Representatives agreed to the following resolutions:

*Be it resolved* that the House of Representatives agree to the following appointment:

Mr. Marvin Gonzales, MP in lieu of Mr. Keith Scotland SC, MP on the Joint Select Committee on National Security:

*Resolved* that the Representation of the People (Amdt.) (No. 2) Bill, 2020, be referred to a joint select committee hereby established;

That this Committee be mandated to adopt the work of the Joint Select Committee appointed in the fourth session and report by March 28, 2025, and;

That, subject to the concurrence of the Senate on the establishment of the Joint Select Committee on the Representation of the People (Amdt.) (No. 2) Bill, 2020, this House appoint the following six Members to sit with an equal number from the Senate on this Committee:

Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis, MP.

Mr. Colm Imbert, MP.

Mr. Fitzgerald Hinds, MP.

Mrs. Shamfa Cudjoe-Lewis, MP.

Mr. Saddam Hosein, MP.

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo, MP.

Accordingly, I respectfully request that the Senate be informed at the earliest convenience please.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

Bridgid Mary Annisette-George

Speaker of the House

**THE CIVIL DIVISION BILL, 2024.**

Bill to make jurisdiction for matters of a civil nature exercisable in a division of the Judiciary to be known as the “Civil Division” and to make jurisdiction for specified civil matters exercisable in a sub-division of the “Civil Division” known as the “Civil Court”, to make jurisdiction for small-valued claims exercisable in a sub-division of the “Civil Division” to be known as the “Small Claims Courts”, to make jurisdiction for estates administration business exercisable in a sub-division of the Civil Division known as the “Estates Administration Office” and for related matters, brought from the House of Representatives [*The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs*]; read the first time.

**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2024.**

Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2025, brought from the House of Representatives [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

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

**UNREVISED**



[*Hon. C. Imbert*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **PAPERS LAID**

Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for the fiscal year 2022. [*The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox)*]

1. Annual Report of the Police Service Commission for the year 2023. [*The Vice-President (Sen. Dr. Muhammad Yunus-Ibrahim)*]
2. Annual Report of the Teaching Service Commission for the year 2023. [*Sen. Dr. M. Yunus-Ibrahim*]
3. Delegation Report on the Multi-Stakeholder Exchange on the Role of Parliaments in Transforming Digital Economies in the Caribbean hosted in Miami, Florida from September 07 to 08, 2024. [*Sen. Dr. Sharda Patasar*]
4. Delegation Report on the Official Visit of a Parliamentary Delegation to the National Assembly of the People's Power of Cuba from September 01 to 07, 2024. [*Sen. Helon Francis*]
5. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2023. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon)*]
6. Special Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2023. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]

**UNREVISED**

7. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2014. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
8. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2015. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
9. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
10. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee for the financial year ended September 30, 2005. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
11. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended December 31, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
12. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the National Lotteries Control Board for the financial year ended September 30, 2013. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
13. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Point Fortin Civic Centre for the

- financial year ended September 30, 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
14. Annual Administrative Report of Caroni (1975) Limited for the fiscal year 2021. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
  15. Annual Administrative Report of the National Institute of Higher Education (Research, Science and Technology) (NIHERST) for the fiscal year 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
  16. Annual Administrative Report of the National Energy Skills Centre for the fiscal year 2018/2019. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
  17. Annual Administrative Report of exporTT Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
  18. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the Sixth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on a follow-up inquiry into the implementation of the new Public Procurement System. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
  19. Draft Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
  20. Draft Estimates – Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the financial year 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
  21. Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the financial year 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
  22. Draft Estimates of the Development Programme for the financial year 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
  23. Draft Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]

24. Social Sector Investment Programme 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
25. Public Sector Investment Programme – Trinidad 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
26. Public Sector Investment Programme – Tobago 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
27. State Enterprises Investment Programme 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]
28. Review of the Economy 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon*]

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Mr. President, I wish to advise that the laying of paper number 18 on the Order Paper will be deferred to a subsequent Sitting of the Senate.

**2.30 p.m.**

## **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE REPORT**

**(Presentation)**

### **Regulated Industries Commission**

**Sen. Jearlean John:** Mr. President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper in my name:

Seventeenth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the examination of the Reports of the Auditor General on the Financial Statements of the Regulated Industries Commission (RIC) for the Financial Years 2014 to 2018.

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

## **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS (ENTERPRISES) COMMITTEE REPORTS**

**(Presentation)**

**UNREVISED**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, I have the honour to present the following reports as listed on the Order Paper in my name:

**Trinidad and Tobago National Petroleum Marketing Company  
Limited**

Sixteenth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheet and Other Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago National Petroleum Marketing Company Limited (NP) and its Subsidiaries for the financial years 2018 and 2019 and follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Committee's Sixteenth Report, 11<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

**National Export Facilitation Organization of Trinidad and Tobago**

Seventeenth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial Statements of the National Export Facilitation Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago (exporTT) for the financial years 2017 and 2018 and follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Committee's Twenty-Eighth Report, 11<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

**Vehicle Management Company of Trinidad and Tobago**

Eighteenth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial Statements of the Vehicle Management Company of Trinidad Tobago (VMCOTT) for the financial years 2015 and 2016 and follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations

contained in the Committee's Second Report, 12<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

**Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited**  
Nineteenth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheet and other Financial Statements of the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (UDeCOTT) for the financial years 2016 to 2018 and follow up on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Committee's First Report, 12<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2024**

**Mr. President:** Minister of Finance.

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

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Mr. President. I beg to move:

That a Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2025, be now read a second time.

This, Mr President, would be what is commonly known as the Appropriation Bill, which has been circulated to all Senators. It has three clauses and a Schedule and follows the traditional format for an Appropriation Bill. The focus of my presentation today, Mr. President—because unlike the other place, I do not have unlimited time. The time limit in here is 45 minutes. So I will focus on the global and domestic economy, fiscal out-turn, some major projects and programmes which will be funded by the Appropriation Bill, the fiscal measures, and the budgetary allocations for some key Ministries.

The Bill before the House seeks to appropriate the sum of

\$49,097,035,525 for meeting expenditure for the service of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2025. Now, it is important to explain—because this is not well understood by many people—why the Appropriation Bill differs from the *Draft Estimates*. The reason for this is that direct charges to the Consolidated Fund are not included in the Appropriation Bill, so we do not appropriate direct charges. And the easiest example of direct charges that I can think of are the salaries of judicial officers, but there are my other direct charges.

Now, these are items of expenditure which are automatically charged to the Consolidated Fund but not required to be included in the Appropriation Bill. Therefore, the total Actual expenditure for fiscal 2025, or for the year 2025, will constitute both the appropriation amount plus direct charges, and this is in terms of cash flow. But there is a third paradigm and that is the fiscal out-turn, and for the purpose of determining the fiscal deficit, or surplus as the case may be, principal repayments and contributions to sinking funds are not included in the fiscal out-turn. So when I speak to revenue and expenditure and a deficit, as the case may be, this does not include on the expenditure item principle repayments, and there is a reason for this. Principal repayments are not considered to be expenses and therefore, not counted as expenditure in the fiscal accounts. Similarly—and this is just as an aside—withdrawals from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund are not counted as revenue, because that is revenue already earned in a previous period.

So the Actual cash flow expenditure for 2025, inclusive of principal

repayments, will be \$63.99 billion, but the Appropriation Bill simply seeks the permission of the Senate to appropriate \$49.1 billion. Now, the expenditure that is being appropriated also does not include expenditure from the unemployment fund or expenditure from the Green Fund. Those are also not appropriated, so you are not going to see them in the Appropriation Bill.

Some of the major items of expenditure in the Appropriation Bill are—and this list is far from being exhausted—expenditure on school feeding, \$260 million; direct university services, \$552 million; drugs and other related supplies, \$625 million; transfers to regional health authorities, \$4.4 billion, a significant amount.

**2.40 p.m.**

Subvention transfers to the Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation, \$515 million; fiscal incentives for farmers, \$200 million; senior citizens grant or pension—senior citizens pension as it is called, \$4.46 billion, a huge sum; social assistance payments, social grants \$325 million, public assistance that is; disability grants, \$640 million; subsidy on the sale of petroleum products primarily diesel fuel, which is subsidized at a rate way below the actual market price, \$500 million; subvention to WASA \$1.25 billion; transfers to GATE, \$450 million pensions and gratuities, and this is separate and apart from senior citizens pension, \$3.2 billion. Those are just some examples of what the money that is to be appropriated will be used for.

So let me just take a look at the global economy now. We all are aware of what is happening in the world. We had years of turmoil started by



the global pandemic, COVID-19. But in addition to the global pandemic, there is increasing geo-economic fragmentation, inflationary issues, widespread monetary policy tightening that has occurred over the last four years, and it appears that after four years of turmoil by all of these things and other things, war as well, the global economy appears to be stabilizing, but we are never sure because there is a lot of turmoil in the Middle East, for example, and we are not sure what the outcome of that will be.

The latest projections from the IMF indicate that growth for 2024 is expected to be stable at approximately 3 per cent, and this stability is attributed to a number of factors including a rebound in capital markets as Central Banks move away from restrictive monetary policies. We saw the Fed reducing interest rates for the first time in many years just recently, improved financial conditions, rising equity valuations, strong capital inflows into emerging market economies and some or several low-income, and let us call them, borderline economies, it is also called frontier economies, regaining access to capital markets.

The World Bank expects global growth to stabilize at 2.6 per cent this year. Global trade is projected to more than double this year, driven by low inflation, a robust US economy. However, the ongoing geopolitical challenges in the world are being compounded by simultaneous disruptions in critical maritime transport routes, such as issues with the Panama Canal and tensions in the Red Sea. That is an Asian corridor that takes you into the western world.

After reaching a historic high in 2022, inflation is now levelling off. Inflation is trending downwards towards pre-pandemic levels, and it is

expected that global inflation will decline to about 5 per cent in 2024. We all know it would have crossed over 10 per cent in 2021 and so on.

In terms of a domestic economy, our economy experienced a growth rate of 1.3 per cent in 2023, following growth of 1.5 per cent in 2022, and that is real economic growth, at constant 2012 numbers. In 2024, we expect real GDP growth to be 1.9 per cent. So 1.3 per cent in 2023, 1.5 per cent 2022, 1.9 per cent in 2024, so that is three consecutive years of real economic growth. This trend indicates a revitalization of economic activity in Trinidad and Tobago, an increase in confidence and a positive trajectory towards a more favourable economic environment.

I want to highlight the non-energy sector in particular. The strong performance of the non-energy sector is attributed to growth in key industries such as accommodation and food services, trade and repairs, transport and storage. The accommodation and food services sector is thriving due to a resurgence in tourism and increased local demand reflecting a broader recovery in consumer confidence.

The trade and repairs sector has benefited from a rise in retail activity as our economy gradually returns to pre-pandemic levels. The transport and storage industry is seeing heightened demand facilitating higher movement of goods and people as economic activity continues to grow. These three industries, accommodation and food; trade and repair; transport and storage, account for over 28 per cent of our nation's GDP highlighting their importance in driving economic growth. Looking ahead we expect increases in non-energy sector activity will be a key component of GDP in 2024, and contributors will be, trade and repairs, non-energy manufacturing, financial

and insurance activities, construction, transport and storage and accommodation and food.

Specifically the food, beverage and tobacco products sector, or sub-industry, is expected to grow by 9.1 per cent due rising local demand and export opportunities. Other sectors projected to grow include trade and repairs, construction and transport and storage. Further, an increase in the Retail Sales Index observed in the first quarter of 2024 indicates a trend of rising domestic consumption and spending, suggesting a positive trajectory for the economy that is likely to continue throughout 2024.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Mr. President, I am being disturbed by my Members.

**Hon. Senator:** What?

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

**Mr. President:** Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay.

**Sen. Mark:** What is going on?

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

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

**Mr. President:** Members, let us not start off on this type of footing. Minister of Finance.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you very much. It is alright. I do it in the other place as well. I have done it for years, so it is no big deal. So let us move on now. The transport and storage industry is expected to grow supported by increased movement of people and heightened mail and courier activities. Trade and repairs is expected to benefit from expanded trade and expanding trading markets overseas. The construction sector is showing signs of

vitality.

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

**Sen. Mark:** But what is going on here in the Senate?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Please.

**Mr. President:** Take a seat, Minister. Regardless, regardless the Minister is entitled to make his contribution with silence in the Chamber. I am not talking to my Members on the left. I am talking to whoever is speaking. Minister of Finance.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you very much. Our construction sector is showing signs of vitality with a year-on-year increase in domestic cement sales between January and June of 2024. This growth is encouraged by favourable trade policies including reduced duties and quotas, as well as a streamlined registration system for importing extra-regional cement. Our tourism sector is experiencing a revival following the challenges posed by the global pandemic.

In 2023, Trinidad and Tobago saw a substantial 77 per cent increase in total visitor arrivals compared to the previous year. This positive momentum has continued into the first five months of 2024 with our country receiving 250,000 visitors representing a 26 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2023, and I may say that we do expect tourism to be a growth area, and I want to congratulate the talkative Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts—

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:**—for the hard work that he is doing.

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

**2.50 p.m.**

**Hon. C. Imbert:** In 2023, air arrivals to Trinidad and Tobago experienced a 36 per cent year on year increase, fuelled by enhanced airlift from major airlines and a rising interest from major markets such as United States, Canada, and the Caribbean. Air travel for the first quarter of 2024 reflects continued enthusiasm for travel to our country, and underscores its appeal as a sought-after destination. Cruise tourism is also thriving in Trinidad and Tobago with cruise passenger arrivals increasing by 91 per cent during the 2023 to 2024 season. I want to repeat that.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Cruise passenger arrivals increased by 91 per cent during the 2023 to 2024 season. This underscores Trinidad and Tobago's growing appeal in the Caribbean cruise market supported by improvements to our cruise ship infrastructure and visitor experiences.

Let me look now to inflation and unemployment. Following behind inflation directly associated with COVID-19, our inflation rate dropped from 8 per cent at the end of December 2022, to 3.9 per cent in the last quarter of 2023, and by July 2024, inflation further fell 0.3 per cent. The last statistic I have from the Central Statistical Office tells me that inflation is continuing to be at extremely low levels with the inflation in August of 2024, being just 0.4 per cent. I dare say Trinidad and Tobago has one of the lowest, if not the lowest, inflation rates in this world. Not just the Caribbean. The world.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** This decline is attributed to a significant slowdown in global food prices, with global food inflation dropping from 17.3 per cent in

2022, to just 1.4 per cent in 2024. Our unemployment rate remains within internationally accepted levels. The latest data we have from the CSO tells us that our unemployment rate rose to 5.4 per cent in the first quarter of 2024, up from 4.1 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2023. However, this is typical because there is always increased employment in the fourth quarter in order to take advantage of increased sales in the Christmas season, and there is always a decline in the first quarter.

Regarding this country's fiscal performance, revised data for fiscal year 2023 indicates a fiscal deficit of 1.7 per cent of GDP. This is expected to rise to 3.5 per cent of GDP in 2024, as a direct result of decreased energy sector revenues, significantly reduced energy sector revenues into 2024 from low oil and gas prices and decline in production. I have been looking at oil prices and gas prices. It is very difficult to understand, because if you have all this conflict in the Middle East, with Iran now dropping missiles on Israel, and so on. You have to wonder what is going, why are oil prices so depressed? But there is an easy answer for it.

The United States is the largest producer of oil, shale oil. Inflation is a very big topic in the presidential campaign of 2024, and the US is releasing its reserves and producing as much oil as possible in order to keep prices down, because that keeps the price of gasoline down, and that has proven to be one of the largest factors in the 2024 presidential election. So that depressed oil prices is a direct result of the contest for the President of United States, which will take place next month.

So, moving on now. These deficits are within the international standard. The international standard for deficit is about 3 per cent of GDP.

Our external buffers remain extremely robust as of today. Our gross reserve stand at US \$5.5 billion providing just under eight months of import cover, while our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund stands at over US \$6 billion at this point in time. This is despite withdrawals during the COVID-19 period and after in excess of US \$1 billion. So even though we have withdrawn over US \$1 billion from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, it still is over \$6 billion. The last time I checked it was \$6.1 billion, and that is higher than it was when we took office in September 2015.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I want to congratulate the managers of this fund. We had a scary period in 2022, when, because of turmoil in the Global Capital Markets, every fund in the world, the Saudi Arabian fund, the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund, all of funds that are associated with oil producing countries. All of them lost 20 to 25, 30 per cent of their value because the stock market just crashed in 2022, but has since rebounded and we are now as I said, we have regained from a low of \$4.7 billion in 2022, we are now at 6.1. So, that is \$1.4 billion increase in the Heritage Fund just by prudent management by the Heritage Fund committee.

So, in terms of external buffers there are more than adequate. There is a nuance that I plan to deal with in fiscal 2025, and that is to encourage energy sector companies to pay all their taxes to the Government in US dollars. Currently, based on the information available to me, only 50 per cent of energy sector taxes are paid in US dollars, the balance in TT, and this is despite the fact that 100 per cent of the exports of oil, gas, and petrochemical companies are in US dollars. So it is something we need to

deal with so that we would have a greater inflow of US dollars coming into the Treasury which would deal with the reserves. Because there are many questions as to why being an oil producing country, we have difficulty with our fund reserve and this is the reason why. The energy sector companies do not pay all their taxes in US dollars. It was just thought that it was so, but I did a detailed analysis a couple months ago and discovered it is just barely 50 per cent.

In terms of projects and programmes that will be funded by the Appropriation Act, and major projects and programmes that are expected to occur in 2025, in terms of energy, we expect a number of projects to be completed in 2025, and this will help with oil and gas production. There are BP's Cypre project, there is a joint venture between EOG and BP targeting Teak, Samaan and Poui, Mento and Reggae fields, and this is projected to deliver gas in February 2025. Touchstone plans to introduce production from new wells in the Cascadura field in August 2025. These local ventures it stabilize our production and also complement the ongoing energy initiatives with the Government of Venezuela.

The Ministry of Energy and Energy Industry is also going to launch a deepwater competitive bid round before the end of this calendar year, as another opportunity to attract commercial interest from potential investors. In terms of renewable energy, because we are moving apace with renewable energy as well. There are several benefits to this, because if gas is no longer required for electricity production, it can be then sold to the petrochemical companies, because they are operating at way below what they call their nameplate capacity. The Atlantic LNG, the methanol and the urea plants,



are all operating well below their maximum capacity. So if you can produce electricity using renewables, solar in particular, then that gas that is not used for electricity production can be sold to our pet-chem sector and produce revenue for the country.

**3.00 p.m.**

So we have the Brechin Castle project taking place, there is a small solar project already at Piarco International Airport, and the La Brea Industrial Estate would also be seeking to be primarily dependent on renewable energy in 2025.

In terms of infrastructure, we plan to complete the Manzanilla/Mayaro Road in 2025. This would be a vital link for communities between Sangre Grande and Manzanilla to Ortoire. I mean, the road is already passable but it will be completed in 2025, and there are very scientific measures that would be implemented in this project to prevent/mitigate against flooding and erosion of the roadway in the future by using technology that helps to balance the flow of salt and fresh water, because we have Nariva Swamp on one side and the sea on the other side, and there is a significant salt water intrusion problem that needs to be dealt with

In addition in 2025, we will complete the construction of the O'Meara Road upgrade, and this will include a roundabout, two additional eastbound lanes for smoother traffic, increased capacity. In Tobago we will be completing the new state-of-the-art terminal building at the ANR Robinson International Airport

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** And I am satisfied that this airport will be the best in the

Caribbean when it is completed.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** We will also complete renovations to the Hilton Trinidad and Conference Centre and the Magdalena Hotel during 2025. In terms of National Security, we are carded to acquire four new patrol launches, eight high-speed interceptors to aid in border security, purchase two search—or put in an order for two search and rescue surveillance fixed-wing aircraft, acquire drones, unmanned aerial vehicles, they are also called, to assist with surveillance and search and rescue, and continue to upgrade and maintain the existing fleet of vessels.

With respect to the police service, we have given the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service the go ahead to acquire 500 new vehicles in 2025. In the health sector, we will complete the 540-bed Port of Spain General Hospital Central Block.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** And those of you who—I do not know how many Members on the Lower Bench do this, but I am sure on the Upper Bench they do. Those of you who drive down Charlotte Street you can see that magnificent new—

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Oh, yeah.

**Hon. C. Imbert:**—new hospital block which has risen into the sky.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** This will provide surgical, pharmaceutical and laboratory services, ophthalmology, Ear/Nose and Throat, paediatrics and various other services.

In agriculture, we intend to establish a community fresh vegetable and produce Shade-House programme to train a number of persons from at-risk communities across 30 communities in crop propagation and cultural practices. In education, we intend to introduce—complete the process to introduce an electronic book or e-book platform into the education system to offer more cost-effective learning resources and promote equitable access to quality educational materials. We expect this to be fully operational by the middle of next year.

In term of trade and industry, in addition to what I have mentioned with the rehabilitation of the Hilton Hotel and so on, the Dow Village Industrial Park, California, is being advanced to accommodate the development of 147 acres with estimated lease land space sub divided into 180 lots, and significant work is ongoing with the TTBizLink as well as the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency, the new agency all geared to continuing the great work that is taking place in the manufacturing sector, particularly export manufacturing sector.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I indicated in the other place that we have some special projects and I will repeat them: We wish to divest the Magdalena Hotel, we intend to issue a request for proposals to develop a new five-star internationally branded resort hotel on the Buccoo—did I get it right?

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Buccoo estate in Tobago. I know it has “Buco” eh, but I understand Buccoo is the correct pronunciation, just like “Auchenskeoch” is the correct pronunciation. I learnt that in the last month. So, in addition we

intend to issue an RFP for proposals to develop a yachting marina in Low Lands in Tobago. That is just at the south-western end of the existing Plantations Estate. We intend to divest Government's 49 per cent shareholding in Colonial Life Insurance Company, and we continue with our efforts to try to sell or lease the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery to enable the restarting of the refinery.

Let me look now at the fiscal measures very briefly: We continue to promote agriculture as a tax-free industry, and at this point in time, although many elements of agriculture are tax-free, there exists some lacunae—I hope I got that right?—and other areas of ambiguity in the various tax laws that relate to agriculture. So, I have already begun, I have spoken to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and his junior, with respect to sitting down with them, and they have done it already, but I will sit down with them and review all items using agriculture. All! So that we can remove all ambiguities that remain in our definitions and laws pertaining to tax concessions for agriculture to make that industry totally tax free. That is the plan.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** And we will complete that review by the end of this year and make a series of amendments in the first quarter of calendar 2025 to crystalize our vision for this industry being completely tax free. We are also establishing an agriculture internship programme through ECIAF for 30 associate degree graduates to transition directly into a work experience. In terms of our policy to encourage healthy lifestyles and to facilitate affordable access to sporting goods and equipment in 2025, we intend to

exempt all sporting equipment from taxes and duties with the exception of clothing.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** And there is something we have to be a “lil” careful about because there are many different definitions of what sporting equipment is. So we have to deal with that, because, I mean, track shoes are fashion items. Nowadays that is not really a sporting item per se, so we will discuss this with the sporting community to determine what is defined as sporting equipment.

We propose a tax amnesty—not “proposed”, there will be, it started already, an income tax amnesty, Value Added Tax, all forms of taxes, an amnesty which began October 01, 2024 and will run to December 31, 2024. In addition there are still some businesses struggling from the fall out of COVID and still not up-to-date with their National Insurance payments, and any Senator who is familiar with filling income tax returns and paying National Insurance will know that penalties and interest are the killer. Because someone may owe a million dollars in taxes but might owe \$6 million in penalties and interest. So, the whole purpose of an amnesty is to encourage people to pay the principal amount of their taxes and their National Insurance contributions which may be outstanding and be spared from having to pay penalties and interest. This is the last time we are doing an amnesty, the TTRA will be operationalized in 2025 and we expect much better compliance to them.

With respect to our very successful Housing and Village Improvement Programme, we have found that the price paid for starter houses is not

profitable for contractors. Right now contractors get a \$150,000 for these starter houses and it is simply not economical. I mean, just electrical wiring alone could run \$20,000, so we are increasing the price paid for starter-houses from \$150,000 to \$200,000, and that is the basic price on flat land. Obviously on steep terrain it will be different. But this still represents a vast improvement from the cost to Government of HDC houses. It could run up to a million dollars or more, so if we can provide these HVIP houses for just \$200,000 it would be a tremendous saving to the HDC and the Government and the Treasury as a whole.

**3.10 p.m.**

We expect that, in 2025, we can construct up to 500 HVIP houses—Housing and Village Improvement Programme houses. It is a basic house, two bedrooms, it is plastered but not painted, only the kitchen is tiled and so on, but it is certainly a vast improvement from some of the wooden shacks that people currently live in. This will be financed off-budget through loan financing if required.

The Ministry of Education is going to implement an online numeracy programme, because there is not just a problem with literacy, there is a problem with numeracy. Many people just cannot count. So that we are going to provide classes via the School Learning Management System to assist persons who have difficulty with mathematics, not just in arithmetic, but also interpreting financial and statistical data for every day decision-making.

We are also launching a national digital literacy programme, or project, because there are many people who are just simply not tech-savvy

and not literate, digitally. Young people are, but many older people are not, so we felt that it was necessary to have a national digital literacy project. And this follows our very successful adult literacy project that we did in the last fiscal, which has helped a significant number of persons to gain basic skills in reading and writing and comprehension.

In terms of students—so this national digital literacy project is for everyone, but we are also doing a digital literacy certification programme for students within the education system, because there are some students who do struggle with digital literacy.

Our School Supplies and Book Grant last year was very much appreciated and it does assist in deferring the cost of uniforms, supplies and textbooks, and we are repeating that \$1,000 grant in fiscal 2025, using the same means test that was applied in 2024.

We are also implementing a remedial mathematics programme for CSEC students at 26 secondary schools of focus. And these secondary schools of focus, for those who may not be familiar with the term, are the schools where the performance is the lowest in the country. So there are 26 secondary schools that have been targeted for improvement with all sorts of initiatives. And another one that we are adding in 2025 will be remedial mathematics. And it is interesting, you know, when—as a Member of Parliament when—by the way, how much more time do I have, Mr. President.

**Mr. President:** You end at 3.20 p.m.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Ten more minutes.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Seven more minutes.

**Mr. President:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Yeah, no problem. So it is interesting. As a Member of Parliament, people come to me for employment. Those of us who are elected know about this situation where persons—you are viewed as an employment agency. And it is interesting, you know, quite a few people have English, they have managed to pass English, but mathematics is always the missing subject, and there are so many employers that demand passes in mathematics and English. They do not always demand five subjects, but they demand math and English because they feel that is the basic. We are also introducing a solar-powered sustainability project in the same secondary schools of focus to introduce renewable technology to students.

In the public sector, I have already announced an offer—not an ultimatum, as the Opposition would like people to believe—of a 5 per cent wage increase over a three-year period, 2020 to 2022, for those public sector trade unions that accepted our previous offer of 4 per cent. That is going to cost us over \$1 billion in back pay and increase recurrent expenditure by almost \$500 million a year. It is difficult in the current situation but we think it is necessary.

With respect to continuing the thrust into renewable energy, I took note of comments made by dealers and other persons that while electric vehicles are exempted—electric cars—electric chargers are not. So we are going to exempt all electric vehicle charging equipment and related accessories from all duties and taxes. The reason for that is that you no longer need to go and charge your electric vehicle in a gas station or something like that, you can just plug it in at home but it is a particular



device that you need, and we are going to exempt these devices from all duty and taxes to encourage people—

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** And speaking from experience, I recently acquired an electric car and I am shocked that the cost of electricity at current rates for the same distance of journey is about 10 per cent of the cost of gas. And I mean that, 10 per cent. I drove to Blanchisseuse recently, and back, and I charged my vehicle and I checked how much kilowatt-hours it took—it consumed to get it back up, and it cost \$9.50, and that would have cost me \$100 in fuel. So even if electricity rates go up, electric cars are the way of the future in my opinion; in my opinion. Okay?

With respect to those public sector employees who are currently at the minimum wage, like MTS staffers and so on, MTS workers, we have decided to increase the amount paid to them by \$2 an hour, from the current \$20.50 an hour to \$22.50 an hour. This one was difficult because you have to balance between putting pressure on small businesses by increasing the national minimum wage and also, helping people at the lowest end of the wage spectrum. It was a difficult choice but we decided that we would not pressurize small businesses at this time, because the effect of increasing the minimum wage nationally could cause retrenchment. So you really do not help as much as one would think that you are helping. So we are going to increase the amount paid to persons in the public sector, MTS workers and so on, CEPEP workers, et cetera, from \$20.50 an hour to \$22.50. That is almost a 10 per cent increase and it will benefit over 20,000 persons in the public sector. It would put as much as \$500 per month in tax-free income

into the pocket of a security—MTS security guard, for example, and that is significant; an extra \$500 per month tax-free.

Let me now move to where we are going to be spending the money. We have appropriated and allowed for, including direct charges, in the area of education and training, \$7.5 billion in 2025; in the area of health, \$7.6 billion; national security, \$6.1 billion; public utilities, \$3.2 billion; infrastructure, \$1.9 billion; rural development and local government, \$1.8 billion; in the transport sector, \$1.4 billion; agriculture, \$1.2 billion; and in housing, \$750 million. So that what we sought to do in this budget, we have made a conscious decision, since last year actually, that we would not increase any taxes, we would not imposed any burden on anyone. We are in a very difficult financial situation—very, very difficult, it is not easy—but we have found ways over the last nine years—this particular Government has found ways to manage in these very, very, difficult circumstances, so that we have ensured that not a single public servant has not received their salaries over the last nine years—

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:**—and this is during COVID. When oil went to zero, we still managed to do it. We have managed to provide all basic services, such as Senior Citizens' Pension, public assistance, disability grants and so on.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** We have paid all our debt on time. We have made sure our utility companies operate, Water and Sewerage Authority, electricity company operate. We have spared the population from any structural adjustment that would have come if we had found ourselves in the hands of

the IMF.

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

**Hon. C. Imbert:** So this particular budget, in my opinion, is a good budget, as was last year's budget. I am proud to be part of a Government that has been able to do what we have been able to do, and to keep Trinidad and Tobago stable and to put us on a growth path, not just for the last three year but for the seeable future. I beg to move.

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

**3.20 p.m.**

*Question proposed.*

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

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you very much, Mr. President. I have listened very attentively to the Minister's presentation. He did indicate that this would be the last time the Government would be promoting tax amnesty in T&T. I want to tell the Minister of Finance if he has lost touch with reality, the people are saying this is the last time you will be given the opportunity to present a budget in this Parliament.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President, may I indicate that I would like to warmly congratulate our esteemed political leader who delivered a very powerful, excellent—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—response in the other place to the budget presentation of the Minister of Finance. And, Mr. President, just a few days ago it was predicted by the very hon. leader of the United National Congress, and I dare

say the incoming Prime Minister—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—of Trinidad and Tobago, that there is bacchanal in the PNM—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—and we only have to look at the papers today, headline—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—bacchanal in the balisier. That is what is going on, Mr. President.

So, Mr. President, we know what is taking place. A divided House cannot stand.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** It is only a matter of time. Mr. President, let me indicate as we get into this budget, several areas and so on we want to deal with but time would not permit us to deal with those areas, but Mr. President, may I say this is the tenth and final budget of the Minister of Finance. It marks the end of a lost decade of Trinidad and Tobago, a decade of despair.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** I dare say a decade of death, a decade of decay and decimation and destruction—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Senator:** Shame.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President, in this decade the economy contracted by some 19 per cent measured in real GDP from 2015 to 2024. In this lost

decade, foreign exchange became scarce, food prices at the groceries ran away, and the crime rate spiked and it is still rising, Mr. President. In fact, under this outgoing, limping, lame duck Government, Mr. President, 2024 will be the bloodiest year on record in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial:** Yes, 513 murders.

**Sen. W. Mark:** In that lost decade, Mr. President, our country was overwhelmed by illegal immigration due to a collapsed border, and our energy sector was decimated, as is evidenced by significant declines in both oil and natural gas and the closure of a number of industrial plants, including the Pointe-a-Pierre Refinery which may never—if you give the PNM the opportunity, it will never be restarted. These crushing blows inflicted by this incompetent and dangerous PNM Government did not spare the citizens. The Government, Mr. President, of the Minister of Finance is the most anti-worker, anti-labour—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—anti-trade union Government in history.

Mr. President, the most affected are not the elitist friends of the PNM who have passports and homes in the United States, but rather it is those who live in poverty, and the middle-class families, and the single mothers and parents who are struggling to keep their heads above water. These are the ones who are feeling the pain, the working poor including the public servants living on 2013 wages in 2024. The erosion of purchasing power and the constant increases in fuel prices at the pump are only part of the legacy of this outgoing administration and Minister of Finance, who, Mr. President, as you know, sings—that is the Minister—one song here in the Parliament and then,

Mr. President, he sings another song in an affidavit that was tendered to the courts earlier this year. That is what is happening.

So, Mr. President, the Minister speaks of three consecutive years of economic growth. That is his own narrative coming out of the Ministry of Finance and not from the Central Statistical Office. The growth figures reported for 2023 and 2024, as presented in the *Review of the Economy*, are from the Minister of Finance and not the Central Statistical Office. Mr. President, not only do we have a lost decade of economic growth, but we now seemingly have the usurpation of independent office—that is the independent office of the CSO—and the same thing is happening to the Central Bank. No one believes the Minister of Finance’s version of the economy. His reign is coming to an end, and even inside the PNM, his political sun will soon set. Mr. President, his legacy that is, will always be the lost decade. That would be his legacy.

So when we look at what is taking place in this nation, Mr. President, we see the Government, Mr. President, placing the workers under severe assault.

**3.30 p.m.**

We observed, Mr. President, that—and we have to remind the population—that under the UNC, we commenced the construction of 200 schools and completed over 100. We have to remind the people.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** The UNC increased the HSF by approximately US \$2 billion. We have to remind the people of this, Mr. President, less they forgot. Mr. President, we have to remind the population that under the UNC

a tertiary participation rate of over 60 per cent was achieved. We attracted the highest levels of direct foreign investment in Trinidad and Tobago. We improved the quality and access to health services and social services. We recorded the lowest crime level in 33 years in Trinidad and Tobago. So when we look at our situation in Trinidad and Tobago, we see where the United National Congress has held and has advanced the interest of the masses in a way that this PNM Government has failed to achieve that objective.

Mr. President, I want to tell you that under the macroeconomic framework, all the major indicators are showing us that the economy of this country is heading south. Whether we look at what has happened with the debt and the borrowings—Would you believe that under this Administration in the last 10 years, we have borrowed close to \$120 billion under this PNM Government? When we left office, our debt to GDP was just about 42.5 per cent. Today it is close to 76 per cent. That is where we are. So the Government is increasing borrowings, mortgaging the future of our country and our children in particular. So we have challenges under this regime.

Inflation, the Minister says is at its lowest, yet still the cost of living is at its highest in this country. So on the one hand inflation is low and on the other hand, Mr. President, the cost of living is extremely high. Now, Mr. President, we want to look at what the Minister said about unemployment and underemployment. What we are seeing, Mr. President, is a situation where unemployment is supposed to be 5.4 per cent. It was supposed to be 4.1 per cent one year ago. It is now 5.4 per cent according to data coming out from the CSO. But it does not tell the full story, because from 2015 to

the present time, we have on had some 66,000 workers losing their jobs. That is the reality. Those are the statistics that we have before us.

Mr. President, under the labour market today, the labour force is shrinking. That is what we are experiencing in Trinidad and Tobago today. Unemployment among young people is rising in our nation. So, even though we are getting information from the Minister and the Government that unemployment is 58.4 per cent, and that it is reasonable, our estimation is that based on data from the Central Bank over 66,000 workers have lost their jobs, Mr. President. That is the reality. and then the Minister tells us Mr. President that he is offering a 5 per cent increase in salaries and wages to public servants and public sector workers and that he has assigned a \$2 increase in minimum wages to CEPEP, MTS and URP.

The last time I checked, MTS has a union called the Transport and Industrial Workers Union and they negotiate and bargain on behalf of MTS workers. So how can a Minister be telling MTS workers that they are now falling under the minimum wages law of the country? It just sounds confusing, like the Minister is not aware of what is happening in the arena of industrial relations. You cannot say on the Parliament Floor and simply by decree announce a 5 per cent increase in wages for public sector workers. The Minister instructs the CPO to meet with these unions. Mr. President under, this Government collective bargaining has [*Inaudible*]

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** The Government has destroyed collective bargaining in Trinidad and Tobago. That is what has happened. So they are negotiating and issuing decrees, Mr. President, from the Parliament Floor. So this is



highly dangerous. So workers are under pressure. You know, we experienced it, but the Government has to observe and they must at least respect the collective bargaining process.

Mr. President, the other point I want to address is youth unemployment. Youth unemployment, Mr. President, is extremely high according to the data that we have from the CSO. In fact, we have seen the largest share of jobless individuals among the age range of 15 to 29 years, Mr. President. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago does not fully appreciate that when you have so many young people unemployed, you lay the basis for these young people being attracted to recruitment and to be recruited via gangs because they are unemployed. That is a danger that I wish to throw out to your attention and to the attention of this nation.

Mr. President, inflation, and what I call the explosive rise in the cost of living. Data is showing that between September 2015 to December 31<sup>st</sup> 2023, there has been a noticeable increase across various price indices in Trinidad and Tobago. The Retail Price Index, according to CSO data, during the period that we are looking at, rose by 21.8 per cent, indicating a broad rise in consumer prices over the said period.

**3.40 p.m.**

However, the food price index saw an even steeper increase of 43.5 per cent suggesting that food prices have outpaced general inflation.

Mr. President, among the food items that would have experienced these huge price increases were butter, margarine and edible oils which experienced the most significant rise at around 65.8 per cent. The price of other essential food categories such as bread, cereals, meat and fish also

increased substantially with each category witnessing increases of 37.6 per cent, 34 per cent and 32.2 per cent respectively. That is where we are when it comes to inflation and the cost of living.

So when the Minister is telling us that inflation is at less than 1 per cent, Mr. President, that might be so, but look at the reality facing the ground in this country. Now, Mr. President, these numbers indicate that the cost of basic food items has become significantly higher, putting severe strain on ordinary workers and citizens.

Mr. President, I would like to draw to your attention, that the fruits and vegetables price indices have also shown significant increases of 45.8 per cent and 57.8 per cent respectively and this is particularly concerning for food security in this country. High prices, Mr. President, for fruits and vegetables are leading to decreased consumption of these essential food groups contributing to the process of nutritional deficiency and long-term health issues. I think the Government has to pay attention to what is taking place in this arena as it relates to the whole issue of food inflation, the high cost of living. These are issues that must be addressed by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, I also want to pay attention to what is called the growth of the non-energy and tradable sector. The rising non-energy tradable to non-tradable ratio of output in Trinidad and Tobago is a worrying sign of the country. The shift, that is the country's shift towards what is called the non-tradable sector which does not generate any foreign exchange, and this is cause for concern because this trend combined with a decline in foreign exchange reserves and rise in foreign debt, presents a serious economic risk

for our nation. So the matter of the Government paying attention to tradables versus non-tradables and giving more preference to non-tradables, this is leading to a drain of our foreign exchange and it is leading to rising debt and borrowings. So it is an area that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has to pay attention to.

Mr. President, I also paid attention to the Minister's budget speech when he spoke about reduced revenues and he just made the point, the hon. Minister that is, that Trinidad and Tobago is in a very difficult place but he said that here now, but when he made his budget statement in the other place, it was as if the rain had stopped and the sun was shining, but today we are being told that things are very difficult. So what will happen, Mr. President? What will happen is that the Government of this country will be selling out the family jewels. The hon. Minister mentioned some of the family jewels that the Minister is looking at, and it is in the budget.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** So we want to ask the hon. Minister which other family jewels he intends to sell in 2024/2025. We want to know whether the Government intends to sell out the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** We want to know if "they gonna" sell out the Port. We want to know if the Government intends to sell or to privatize further, First Citizens Bank. They must tell the country if they are going to sell out First Citizens Bank. We want the Government to tell Trinidad and Tobago whether their intention is to sell out National Petroleum under the guise of liberation and de-regularization. And Mr. President, we want the

Government to tell Trinidad and Tobago whether it is their intention to sell out TSTT. Is the Government going to sell TSTT to ATN, which is the Atlantic Telecommunications Network based in Beverly—Atlanta? These are issues that we want to know and the people are crying out for answers.

Now, in addition to this, the Government must tell this country how come they sold 56.53 per cent shares of Clico in MHIL, Methanol Holdings International Limited, for \$300 million less than the valuation. The Government must tell the country why undervalued that MHIL and sold it to the Proman Group of Companies through a company called Consolidated Energy Limited. We need answers on that question that I have raised.

Mr. President, this Government recently announced that they were shortlisting three companies to take charge of either the lease or sale of Petrotrin refinery, Pointe-a-Pierre. What is interesting in this matter and I am calling on the Government to provide us with some answers. Mr. President, three companies were shortlisted. One called CRO Consortium, the other one is INCA refinery and the other one is Oando. These are the three companies that were shortlisted.

When we checked the registry to get information on these companies, we realized that CRO consortium is made up of three locally incorporated companies. One called Ocala, the other one is DR Commodities and the other one is Chemie-Tech. These are the three companies falling under the CRO Consortium.

**3.50 p.m.**

Mr. President, what we found interesting is that when we did a search for CRO Consortium, it yielded no results. Mr. President, may I repeat? A

search was conducted on the online system for CRO Consortium, that is the parent company of these three locally-incorporated companies, and the search yielded no results. It means that CRO Consortium is not legally incorporated under the laws of Trinidad and Tobago. Therefore, Mr. President, the question must be asked, if this company is not legally incorporated under the laws of Trinidad and Tobago, how come this company was shortlisted by the Cabinet of the Government of the hon. Prime Minister? How? How, Mr. President?

Mr. President, what is even more alarming, if I may say, is this. You have—every company there is questionable and is suspicious; every one. You know, the DR Commodities was formally DR Logistics. But when we checked DR Commodities, it is the parent company of this local company but it is based in India. When we checked the Indian company, we realized that on the board of directors were two associates and family members of Jindal. That is what we are seeing. Two members of the Jindal family are on the board of directors of the parent company called DR Commodities. So, Mr. President, we are calling on the Government to scrap that entire process.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** We are calling on the Government to scrap that entire process. What is even more important, Ocala is a Venezuelan company engaging in oil and gas. It is a holdings company, Mr. President, that is sanctioned by the United States. How come this Government is shortlisting a company, that is sanctioned by the United States, to take over our

Pointe-a-Pierre refinery? Mr. President, you know what has happened? Jindal went through the front door, and he came through the back door.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** That is what is happening. So, we want the Government to scrap that entire project. It is too corrupt. And the Government must answer. In fact, we need a criminal forensic investigation into this entire transaction.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President, the title of this budget is Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity. Mr. President, I want to ask Trinidad and Tobago, and you, through you, Mr. President, pathways to prosperity for whom? Mr. President, I want to ask if it is pathways to prosperity for the gentleman who built the most expensive road, from the main road to Blenheim, official residence of the Prime Minister, for \$5 million. The road is less than half a mile. I want to know if that is a pathway to prosperity. Do you know who the company is? Allan Warner companies. Mr. President, the Prime Minister of this country must tell us why his residence in Tobago started off at \$5 million and it has gone to \$40 million and counting. Why? Why this exorbitant increase? We need answers.

Mr. President, we also want to bring to your attention a law that was passed in this Parliament in 2016, that exempted anyone who is building multi-dwelling, multifamily and multi-residential properties in this country between the period of July 2016 to December 31, 2025. They are not paying any taxes on the sale of their units. So we ask questions. There is a building

on Picton Street, owned by a senior Cabinet Minister, with 20 apartments contained therein, being sold at \$3 million a piece, which is \$60 million. We want the Government, through that Minister, to tell Trinidad and Tobago if he has been exempted under the law from paying any taxes, including property taxes.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** No, I said a senior Member. Mr. President, I also want to ask the question, the 46 private townhouses that were constructed by Inez Gate—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—we want to know if those apartments were, in fact, exempted from profits—from taxes. The last one I want to get clarification on. There are five apartments located in a place called Landate, now known as Forest—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Forest, Forest—

**Sen. Hislop:** Standing Order—

**Sen. W. Mark:** Forest Hills.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark, there is a Standing Order being raised. Sen. Hislop.

**Sen. Hislop:** Standing Order 46(1), Mr. President. What is the relevance to the Appropriation Bill?

**Sen. W. Mark:** I am dealing with pathways to prosperity.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Mark, you are wrapping up. You have four more minutes.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President, so I am asking the question, we want to know if those five palatial apartments, multi-dwelling, multi-residential, multimillion-dollar apartments that is at the location called Landate, now known as Forest Hills, whether the Prime Minister is the owner of those five apartments, and whether the Prime Minister is, in fact, paying any taxes on those apartments.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** These are questions that the people are asking.

Mr. President, I think that there is also an issue of monopolization of the pharmaceutical and the food industry by a small group of people, supported by the Government, that is causing pharmaceutical and food prices to go up in this country. So we ask the Government to level the playing field and we ask the Fair Trading Commission to awake from their deep slumber like Rip Van Winkle.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** There is a monopolization of the pharmaceutical and the food industry by this monopoly that you have in this country.

Mr. President, I know that I have limited time because of the 40 minutes, and I have a lot of things to say, but I cannot. What I would like to say in closing, Mr. President.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** “You eh say nothing”.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Yes, for you it is nothing because you are nothing.

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



**Sen. W. Mark:** Mr. President, in closing, may I say, Mr. President, it is only a matter of time before the people decide. The sun will rise again.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** And when the sun rises in this country, its powerful rise will envelop and illuminate the pathway of all and discriminate against none. We are saying, Mr. President, that the people are calling for elections now. The people are saying that the PNM has to go. We are seeing from the measures announced in this budget, an outline that will not make the poor rich, but it will make the rich richer. It will not improve the livelihoods of the middle class. It will depress their entire living and working environment. So, Mr. President, the Government has failed the people. The time has come for the Government to call elections and let the people decide in Trinidad and Tobago. You cannot continue institutionalizing robbery in this country. You cannot continue, Mr. President, utilizing and weaponizing the Government apparatus to make a few of the people in the Government, and outside of the Government, rich and healthy.

In closing, Mr. President, the property tax. I want to ask the question, in closing, is a former Attorney General, whose family is collecting \$200 million at the end of this decade, will that family, or will these members of the family of that Attorney General, former, be paying any property tax? Will they be paying commercial tax? No, Mr. President, they will not be paying commercial tax. That is why we say, "Scrap the property tax." Mr. President, I thank you.

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

**4.00 p.m.**

**Mr. President:** Sen. Maharaj.

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

**Sen. Sunity Maharaj:** Thank you, Mr. President, for allowing me to join this debate. I will be organizing my thoughts on this budget under four headings: Economic viability of the Republic—economic viability and sustainability, I may say; security of the person, property, community and country; institutional effectiveness and efficiency; and the climate change imperative. These are just broad themes that my thoughts on the budget will be presented across sectors. I should say that it says a lot when the biggest topic of discussion following the budget presentation was the length of the budget, five hours and 11 minutes, during which the Minister I would say, “tread water”. An occasional, you know, splash here and there but it was an exercise in treading water, and I perfectly understand that.

Our revenue is so dependent on forces outside of our control that we really are in a “wait and see” mode right now. It depends on what happens in the Middle East, is Israel going to bomb Iran? What is going on in Ukraine? The Minister himself mentioned the extent to which prices of oil and gas are affected by the US shoring up its own energy supply to reduce its dependence in the event of—and they have to keep prices low, it is not only a matter of elections, it is a matter of their own viability. And, of course, closer to home, we await the outcome of the elections in the US in the next few days to see how our projects with Venezuela may go.

So, whatever else may be real, finding himself in an ocean of uncertainty, the Minister really has no choice but to keep treading water until some of these things are realized. I think what is missing in the budget

**UNREVISED**

process, in its reporting to Parliament, and its presentation, is not just a review of the economy we need a review of the budget that has passed. We need to hear from the Ministry of Finance a report on how were the objectives achieved, the effectiveness of the measures. We found out some of that during the Standing Finance Committee meetings when the Ministers are routinely asked to account for why expenditure is much higher, much lower, and the explanation has to do with people who, you know, the Public Service Commission, service commissions have not appointed and so on.

I think we need an evaluation of the budget exercise afterwards as part of making sense otherwise all we are doing with every budget is dealing with measures to come. What exactly happened? What is the evaluation? What is the monitoring of it? That is missing. So I want to put that as a suggestion to be considered. In the context of the economy, some of the big-ticket issues that the Minister had to deal with were foreign exchange, food—the cost of imported food, employment, underemployment, recurrent expenditure, and so on. What would be helpful is for the Minister to say to what extent his budget is dependent on foreign exchange. The Government has the first call on foreign exchange when we earn it and we get our taxes and royalties, I imagine the first call is for servicing debt. This Minister has been very scrupulous about that and I think that is important.

But the budget items itself, what the Government intends to pay for and buy goods and services, there is also foreign exchange consumption. So while we focus on the public, and on private sector, and individuals, I would like to know what the budget's call on foreign exchange is. How dependent is this budget on foreign exchange? And I think that is getting other

requirements for a lot more granular assessment of the expenditure items. Beyond that, these are issues that we are constantly promising that we are going to deal with and not dealing with. And one of it is the food import bill, \$7.3 billion. And as the Minister said that is with low inflation, if any of the issues that I mentioned, exogenous issues of war and so on occur, it is outside of our control. As long as we sustain that import bill for food it is outside of our control what will happen to food prices.

And it is not only a matter of inflation that affects the population, it is affordability. Food prices do not even have to go up for you to not be able to afford food if your own income is declining, if it is being caught up, if you have depleted your savings because a lot of people have depleted their savings. There is a kind of odd situation where we are talking about low inflation but the anecdotal evidence suggests growing poverty. And we are saying, “Well, if you have low inflation what are people complaining about?” The fact is, if you do not have the money it does not matter what price it is. And you will see it in the demand and you will see that inflation is low because it is a demand issue if you have the supply but you do not have the demand. So I think we need to interrogate the question of the inflation figures a little more than what we are doing—a lot more in fact.

And so we have given up on this idea of 25 by 2025, which is the CARICOM pledge, the commitment that, you know, took up considerable time and energy. Not to mention money when these Heads of State get together and decide that by 2025, the region and all of the members would have reduced their import budget by 25 per cent, which is probably about two point something billion for Trinidad. We would have been talking

about a five point something billion next year. And while some of those countries may have the excuse of Beryl because Beryl was devastating on some of these economies, what is the excuse of Trinidad?

The Minister made much about incentives and having a tax-free agricultural sector. But is he saying taxes are the inhibiting factor in a productive agricultural sector? Have we examined enough what are the factors that are inhibiting the agricultural sector? Because a lot of vegetable headings, production is down, and those are the more popular ones. There are some like cauliflower and so on that have experienced an increase, and that is because farmers are shifting to shorter-term crops that have a higher value in the market. Rice production, forget it. Where are the points? If we look at this point of \$7.3 billion for imported food, and we are aspiring to anything that is less than that, we have to meet the problem and understand what the problem is. And clearly, taxes alone are not the problem—not the whole problem.

People have problems of inability, land tenure is still a major issue for a lot of people, they have problems with the price of certain fuels, the fishing community will tell you about the price of diesel for them, and they have been looking for a relief on that matter. In fact, the fishing community is talking about the decline—and I will deal with it when we get to climate change—in the supply of fish out at sea. Which is, of course, if we would eat more fish that we catch in our own seas, that is one way of cutting the import bill.

Instead, you go to the supermarket and you see all kinds of imported tilapia, and even tilapia, and salmon, and lobster, and so on, for those who

can afford.

**4.10 p.m.**

The Minister has also topped up the salaries, minimum wage salaries, of government workers who are at minimum wage, \$2.00. And, he has argued that he is not going to touch the private sector. The Government, of course, is the largest employer, and, never mind they are in deficit, but they are able to top up that salary. I am glad for these workers. But the rationale he gave for not having an across-the-board, through private and public sector increase, is that small businesses are going to suffer, because they cannot afford it. But what about big business?

Why are employees of companies that are announcing hundreds of millions of dollars in profit, why can you not have a scale that says companies with a certain threshold, across a certain threshold of income, their employees get an increase? Why is it that you do not deal with that, but you are talking—of course SMEs cannot handle it. A lot of them are running on their own steam with a few people.

The other factor that we are not calculating, at that level, is the impact of migrant labour on labour costs. Because a lot of those people—anecdotal evidence, because we have no statistical data available on this matter—anecdotal evidence suggests that many are not being paid even minimum wage, but are fearful of reporting anybody, because, of course, half a cake is better than none. And, what is the impact of that on the labour force at the lowest end, when you have a number of migrants who are willing to work at that level, because they are in desperate need? And so, these are the things we need to calculate, and I see absolutely no reason why companies that are

earning huge revenues and profits, cannot pay their workers more. In fact, they can afford it more than the Government.

So, I want to move on to security of the person. Because a lot of things in this budget, not the least of which is tourism, and just quality of life, require foreign investment, require a safe and secure environment. And with murders at the current rate, it would be a surprise if we did not establish a new record this year, probably between 630 to 650 murders. I hope not. But at the rate with 1.7-something per day, that is the current rate, and you extrapolate to 366 days. That is where we are heading. But it is not only murder. What we have, the things that are undermining our sense of security, is organized crime, that is, the gangs who are the minions of the chiefs.

We have opportunistic and random crime. I am of the view that we have crossed a threshold in that kind of crime where a person might not even be planning to commit a crime, but they just see you walking down the road with a handbag and say, well, “What she doing walking down the road with a handbag just so? Take it. I will have more by just even pretending I have a knife, without even having a knife.” Because it is becoming the thing to do, just to get a few dollars. It is random, it is opportunistic, it is anywhere, anyhow, anytime, any day. So that, the peace of mind—until recently you might say, well I am going to avoid this and I will go here. I can do this, I cannot. That is no longer the case. So when you are in an environment like that and you cross a threshold, it has a way of galloping.

To this, the Minister has several measures that he mentioned there; more cars for the police, more expenditure in the communities. But we have

seen those, and clearly, if crime is on the increase, those measures are not working. And so, the question is: What is under this that is capable of being resolved at a fundamental level to get change? I see nothing of that in the budget. What I see is a replication of the same failed measures.

I want us to pull back and ask ourselves—I mean we hear over and over that the problem with the police service is that it is a continuation of the colonial construct of a colony that selected and created a police force of brawn. Remember the days when you could not have flat foot and you have to have a height and all these things, because you are supposed to be muscular and women were not in it?—when what you need is, of course, intelligence and strength. And more and more you do not need that because what you have is technology. But what we are is an island.

The greatest threat to our—given the crimes that we have, and we know it is the inflow of guns and human trafficking and assorted criminals, where we need to deploy our resources most is on the coast. And yet, the coast guard is the smallest unit of our protective and defence apparatus. Because that is what we inherited. We did not need a big coast guard because the British always had an HMS Frigate or something around patrolling the seas, and wherever there is a riot they would say head to that country, head to that country. That is the transformation that we need to look at; what are our needs for security? And, the first thing we have to secure is our borders.

So that is where the numbers are. The regiment has more people than the little coast guard. Of course, the police is the biggest. We have to look at it. Because if we could block that, if we could deploy not just our human



but our financial resources, I do not see anything here. In fact, we all know that the coast guard is in dire straits. Several coast guardsmen are at various police stations, being drafted because they do not have the vessels. And so that is the first priority.

I should mention what we paid a price for with that lack of patrol in the southern coastline. You will recall when we locked down the country for COVID “and you couldn’t get through the airport no how”, it was somebody who came in illegally with the Delta variant, which was the most punishing of all the variants in terms of claiming lives in Trinidad. Because, is it that the Government is too Port of Spain? Do you know what is going on in the southern peninsula? And that is where we need to—We have to have a barrier and I see nothing in this budget that recognizes that is a priority.

I also see an allocation of \$50 million for the community recovery, based on the recommendations of the community recovery report. That report, as you would recall, was by a committee headed by Mr. Watkins, following the protests, days of protests in Morvant, after the police killing of three men. I think it is three, right? That was in July 2020. The Government was going to election in August, the next month. We had a very quick assembly, put it into—gave us a report. Now that report, I do not know if it has ever been laid, I do not think so, but interestingly, this report met all the communities and established from the communities what its priorities are. Interestingly, the number one priority was social support and cohesion, 100 per cent demand from these communities for things like parenting.

I want you to think about that, because we are always saying and casting aspersions on people too for their parenting skills; the single mothers, families, this, that, and the other. These families are aware, and they are asking for investment, for us to invest in family structure, stability and efficacy, mentoring and leadership, community groups and activities. Because they know their problem. And I hope this is not going to be another case where we spend a lot of money in what we call cultural and sporting activities, and that the money runs through a party group, people get— Because the communities understand that, they expect that, and they are waiting for when the minute, when the time comes, that they get a little piece of it, and they move on and the problem will be even worse, because what you will get is a spike in killings over money.

**4.20 p.m.**

And so, I am waiting to see what are the implications, because these are the communities that we say are the hotspots, and they are the ones that we are saying are breeding criminals, and they are the ones asking for parenting skills and help. I was astounded when I saw we turned the sod for a massive Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, which I think is somewhere on Tragarete Road, where the old printery was because I thought this was a time to invest in social services at the community level. Take the money and deepen the engagement with people, and have it permanent, and close to them.

So, we know, the employees will know, who is the one in trouble? Who needs a little help? Who needs help in filling out forms? Right. Who needs a little mentoring? Why are we not deploying our resources in the

community? Construction projects do not give the qualitative change that we need. They run money through the system, which is why I am looking forward to the campaign finance reform Bill. They run money but a police station does not give you law and order, a school building does not give you education, and a headquarters for the social—does not give you social services. Take the money and put it where it is needed, and I must say I “doh” see anything like that here. And I am hoping that I see that there is a project for which money has seemed to be isolated already. A \$15 million for the Brian Lara project, and I hope that that project, when it is actually done, is monitored and evaluated with clear objectives to establish that what it was aimed for is actually achieved and is quantifiable. As they say, “What is not measured cannot be...”—whatever.

So, in terms of, staying with the heading of security, I asked a question, I think, some time ago, about how many children were out of their schools being educated in community centres, and so on, and so forth. And I think it was like about 1,500 or something. And I think that we do not understand what a school is. We think if you shut down that school for reasons of instability, and infrastructure or whatever, degraded building, and whatever, and you get an accommodation for them, that is a school. A school is a lot more, and in fact, if you look at the list of schools that have been shut down, and children are being educated, some of them never went into that school building, they went into a community centre for their entire primary school. I think it is about 23 of them all over the country, and one high school.

Do you think that is a school? No. A school, especially in rural Trinidad, is a community. That is a community centre. That is where people grow up, and have relationships, and teachers who know them, one after the other, and that is a safe space, and when you break—when you do not understand that education eco-centre, that eco-system, and you just think, well, okay, because you can move children there, put some of them in this school, and put a few in the other school, and you wonder why the community breakdown is happening? That is why. It is breaking down because of public policy. That public policy is responsible for a lot of damage. Public policy that is unaware. It is innocent, and I do not even want to say the consequence is damaging, but a lot of it is, “Yuh don’t know, and yuh don’t want to know, and yuh don’t try to find out” because you are not interested in the science to find out what is the impact.

Why are you doing certain things, and while I am at it, and I promise that I will be jumping across because I am just going under headings. Why I am at it—it is—we are hearing all these buildings that are going up. I do not know what is the extent of consultations with any community when the Government announces it is putting up a building here, and a building there, and a building all over the place. Who decides that? Because this is taxpayers’ money. Do those things come to the Parliament? Is there some agreement? This is why when you do not have an agreement—and we will deal with that at the institutional deficiency. When you do not have this, you end up with waste, because one government comes and does something, it wants to do it, and the next one comes, and “park up that”.

We have a hotel of all things around the Savannah at NAPA that has never been opened except when the Cuban nurses came. How do you explain something like that? And this is just one example of waste. I can give you a whole history of wastage by the State. It is not the public. It is not people, it is not citizens. Look at what happened to Caroni (1975) Limited, one day they shut down, the next day everything, all the whatever was in the trees, the oranges, whatever, the buildings, those that were not assigned just went into disrepair. Well, we know about Chaguaramas, when the Americans left. We seem to—oh, and it is happening with Petrotrin. We seem to prefer to watch public assets disintegrate before our eyes because we have no plan for anything that is public money, it is coming out of nobody's pocket.

So, we have what is going on at the Zoo, right? So, we are putting a commercial operation at the Zoo on that little piece of land. Right across the road is the Queen's Park Savannah which needs so much work as a prime asset we have, recreational asset in the country, but you try to go into the Savannah and see how many holes your foot is going to go into, and "how much canal you have to jump". Why can we not improve the Savannah to make it more than just the perimeter. Why can we not light the place properly? Why can we not have spaces designated for children to play? Artistic spaces without putting huge buildings because that is not allowed, and we do not want that, we want to work with that environment. That is where our attention—but you know why? There is no big building, a multimillion-dollar building to be put there. So, the Savannah remains, you

know, a thing for some football and little sweat. People are mostly around the perimeter.

I see we have now the Pan Trinbago headquarters which, with all respect to whoever is the architect, there is a facade of some pan on it, but really it is a box. And I hope the Minister of Tourism, Culture, and the Arts will explain this quite anomalous thing when he speaks, which is, who owns that building? It is described as the Pan Trinbago headquarters. Is it to be owned by Pan Trinbago? And what is the role of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and the Arts—we are reading that the Ministry is going there, and NCC, which are State. And, are they tenants of Pan Trinbago which is an association representing the interest of steelbands? And, is it appropriate for the Ministry to be in that building? And, are you a tenant, are you paying them or not? What is it? What is it? We are just hearing it is Pan Trinbago headquarters. Is there a traffic feasibility exercise in terms of the traffic impact in that area? Is it that there is too much room and so it has to be rented out? What? So, I am sure we will get a full report on that from the Minister.

Institutional effectiveness and efficiency. You know, we have just engaged in an exercise on constitutional reform, and the reason we did that, and the reason that governments keep doing that is because the system is not working. We know that. The Constitution requires significant reform to be relevant to this time and age, and to support the aspirations of a democratic people to make governments more accountable to the people and more transparent. We want for people to play a—for it to generate the instinct

towards a participatory representative system. That is why people keep demanding—

**4.30 p.m.**

Every now and again, we come up to a crisis—a constitutional crisis, and we recognize that this thing is not working. And so it remains like—it is a mirage in the desert, you know. We see that with hope and we go towards it and then it just—poof, it is gone. Well, we know that this one is not going anywhere because we have already read the position of the governing party and it is at odds with some significant proposals, and so we might deal with the less significant ones, I should say.

However, it is evident in the various institutions that are the pillars on which our governance system is built, which is the Executive, the Judiciary and then we have the other—the Service Commissions, the police service, you know, the JLSC and so on, it is evident that not only are they all in a state of disrepair, but that public trust and confidence in them are at an all-time low. The last survey that was done on this matter, and it was a few years ago, the police, the Judicial and Legal Service Commission, and the media were at the bottom of the pile of people—they enjoyed the lowest level of public confidence. I am guessing that all of them might be even lower at this stage.

Then, what does the public have confidence in? Because what you need to go into the future is confidence, things are working. I could rely on maybe the sun or the rain on the mornings, one of them. What can we rely on? But what we approach our life with all the time is, “Well, we are going to do this, I do not know when it will come out of the system. I am going to

apply for this, I do not know when it will come out of the system.” And that starts with the Cabinet. Because a number of things that are stuck in Cabinet—we know that the Cabinet needs to review all the things that they should be looking at. They should not be looking at, some public servant had to travel, and this and that. It starts with the Cabinet, but you have to be willing to decentralize power. And the decentralization of power is what? Constitutional reform. That is one of the big-ticket items. It is how do you decentralize power. And that is why I am of the view that no government can do that because it is almost counterintuitive to expect a government to decentralize power.

You will get something like local government reform, as we have, but not local government reform. You will get the mirage of it because it is hard to let go the power. And in fact, you will be thought to be foolish because your own people will tell you, “Why are you doing that?” Right? So it is a momentum that has to come from the people, but I will come back—the reason I raise those things is because expenditure, the number of Ministers whose explanation to the SFC, in terms of delays of, you know, the promises and so on, and the conflict, the apparent—the seeming conflict in expenditure was that they had applied for staff and got none, the Service Commissions is slow. But the question is, why is the Service Commissions slow? Is it men and women who are sitting down there just doing nothing? No, because it is arranged badly

You have a Service Commissions board, a small group of people, and you have another group—and the Constitution regarding certain things like section 85(1), where what is the relationship between the senior public



servants and the Ministers, between the political directorate and the civil service? These are things that we need to look at, and sort out, and clarify, so that when we sit down with the budget, we have a machinery that moves, that things are not delayed, things are not wasted. By the time it happens, you know, it is almost moot, that we have to have—we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We need a public service, we need a JLSC, we need the police, we need all these people who are working for the country, all these Ministries to be lean, mean, engaged, not stuck as though nothing ever changes. And it does not matter who is in government, it is the same thing.

So what we have done, we have created a whole—instead of dealing with that problem, we invented the contract system, so you can bring in a number of people and show—and I do not want to go into those problems, but I am saying, it is a source of some of the problems that are strangling the Ministries. Right?

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

**Sen. S. Maharaj:** Well, let me move on quickly to climate change, because climate change is so important and we are not treating it with the importance it deserves by having—I think, it is time for a dedicated Ministry. It is that important. We are talking about 500-room hotels in Tobago. Just have one tourism season, one peak season with sargassum and bleached coral that nobody wants to come and watch, that is the end of that tourism season, and that is the peril that is facing Tobago.

We know about all the coastal erosions and so on, about 63 points around this island. In fact, if a cartographer drew a map of Trinidad right now, I am pretty sure it is changing. You may get some new deposits that

extends in some areas, but there are about 63 areas. We know that there is sea level rise. We know that—I do not know how much work the Minister of Works and Transport can do in Port of Spain, but he is up against a force greater than just plastic and garbage and all these things. He is going to be tired of trying to clean up because sea level rise is a reality, and it is here.

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

The Minister has some allocations for renewable energy and is touting, you know, electric chargers. We should not be going to electric chargers. We should not be pushing that. We should go to solar-powered chargers because you are still using natural gas through electricity. And this is the time—if you are talking about trying to encourage people to go to solar, there was a survey done that 75 per cent of the population is interested in solar, but they cannot afford and they really do not have enough information. This is the time to subsidize solar PV systems because that is a one and done cost, unlike electricity that you are subsidizing all the time. Subsidize solar-powered systems, help people put it in, install it—who wants to do that—and then after that, the extent to which they are going to be drawing—we have a lot more things on that.

We need a building code. All these buildings that the Government is paying for, where are the solar panels? Are they going to be drawing on electricity? We need a climate change relevant building code that is promoted through the public sector, and it will influence everybody else. When you see we get to the point where electricity goes up and people cannot pay their bill, and elevators and things start to shut down, and old people have to walk up and down stairs—schools, all schools should have

natural ventilation where they can and solar.

Those schools you mentioned, I know they are part of an ODPM project, so that when there is a disaster, those are the schools that people are going to go to. I think it is 26 schools. That will help because if they are solar powered, at least they would have if everything else goes down. We should be looking at basic things like school uniform, and socks, and shoes and all these things, redesigning a world relevant to the impact of climate change, and with that, I thank you.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister of Works and Transport.

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

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

Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, let me start by thanking you and Members of this House for the opportunity to contribute today to yet another debate, or something that ought to be a debate on the budget, and to use the opportunity basically to report on, not only the last year at the Ministry of Works and Transport, but basically to give a full statement on basically what we promised this country from 2015 to 2020, and where we are today.

I want to start again—firstly, let me congratulate the Minister of Finance and his team for doing—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—an excellent job on what some people termed to be an “election budget”. I think, from the onset of this budget, a lot of non-supporters of the Government felt that this budget would have been a

budget of pain because the Minister of Finance had to raise taxes and we were in trouble.

The Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Planning and Development have done a wonderful job in changing that around and then we have Members opposite to us saying, “It is an election budget.” If it is an election budget, it means they have endorsed the budget because they feel that this will win the hearts of the population.

**4.40 p.m.**

Mr. Vice-President, it is never easy to run a country, especially like Trinidad and Tobago, when we grew accustomed to having more and more every year. This country, from 2015, must remember where they came from. We came from five years of chaos, corruption, and bad management.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We were tasked with first stabilizing the economy—

**Sen Gopee-Scoon:** Which we did.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—which we did, and bringing this country back on a path of some level of sanity.

**Hon. Senator:** And sobriety.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We were faced early in the term with basically a collapse of the energy sector and we had to run this country with a revenue stream that we had not seen before. We managed that and just as we were about to go back on a growth path, the world was struck with the COVID challenge. The Prime Minister of this country and his team were able to manage this country in a way that our health sector was admired and

complimented by all the international players around the world.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We went into the election, the Opposition said what they had to say, we said what we had to say, and the population said “Never again UNC.”

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** They were convinced that the People’s National Movement was a party that they would put their faith in, at least for the next five years, and so they did. We came out of that and immediately, the world again went into a little turmoil. You had the war in Ukraine, we had Israel, then we had Gaza, and we were able to manage all this and still keep this country, at least over the last three years, on a growth path.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Again, I want to compliment the Minister of Finance for being able to do that. The population will have to judge us soon again. They would have to judge us soon and that is why in today’s debate, on our side, we will say why you should vote for us, and if I am to judge from the contribution of Sen. Mark—

**Hon. Senator:** Flat.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—the population would then say “Why we will not vote for them”.

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

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We must congratulate our Minister of Energy and Energy Industries as well—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—and our Prime Minister—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—for what they did to secure the future of this country. We can speak a lot about diversification and we can speak a lot about agriculture, tourism, or whatever, but our economy is driven more than 75 per cent by the energy sector and we will not move away from that in the short to medium-term. What they were able to do is to secure this country's future in the energy sector for at least another 25 years.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** So when you decide very soon to vote, these are the things you have to take into consideration; where or who is better placed to manage Trinidad and Tobago. That is basically where my contribution really is based on where I am coming from; the Ministry of Works and Transport. I would speak about the Ministry of Works and Transport, what we promised, what we delivered, and how we plan to approach the future, and then you will be able to judge my contribution against Sen. Mark, who I think as the opening bowler trying to bowl to the opening batsman on this side, pulled a hamstring.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** He was not able to deliver anything at all of substance.

**Hon. Senator:** He pulled a [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Sen. Mark opened the bowling by talking about how a house cannot stand divided. Mr. Vice-President, as Minister, I

am allowed to go to the other place, which I did for the debate and I spoke in the other place. What I saw there was an Opposition Bench or a UNC Bench where five Members left, went on another end and sat, distancing themselves from the Opposition with every single Member starting their contribution by saying in different words that “that set is about party and leader and we are about country.”

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—and telling the Government, the People’s National Movement Government that “You bring legislation and we will support you.” Now which house is really divided?

**Sen. West:** Good, good question.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Which house is divided when more than 25 per cent of your Members said “We doh want to have nuttin to do with you”.

**Sen Lutchmedial-Ramdial:** [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Sen. Mark came with a big long run and pulled a hamstring, and all he could talk about was Landate, Jindal, Heritage, and nothing that would allow people to say “Let us give the UNC a chance again”. I am hoping that when one bowler pulls up, they should have someone else to tell us something that the UNC could do. Come up with something because the population listens, and then they act. We are not a perfect Government, but we are far better than them.

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

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Mr. Vice-President, I would now want to talk about what we promised the population and where we delivered. When we

came in 2015, our manifesto was quite clear, it was about “Let us do this”. Remember that?

**Sen Gopee-Scoon:** Yes.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** And I can stand here and say we did it because, despite the challenges that I spoke about, we promised this population, several—one, major projects and a plan to take Trinidad and Tobago forward. I am very happy to say today, that we promised the population the San Fernando to Point Fortin highway and we delivered it.

**Hon. Senator:** Oh yes.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We were able to stop the corruption, go back, and collect a billion dollars from some of their friends. We spent that billion dollars on the project and we were able to deliver it. Only last week I was able to go and again, hand over another interchange on that project. So the work continues but you could now drive from San Fernando to Point Fortin in 20 minutes.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—something that took two and a half hours before.

**Hon. Senator:** Yeah.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We promised the population to continue the highway from Wallerfield to Sangre Grande. Despite the challenges, we expect access on that highway by January 2025. Most of the work is completed work and work is ongoing. We keep our word.

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



**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** This Government would have built highways all around Trinidad. They attempted one and they failed. We built interchanges around this country. They never built a single interchange.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We promised the population that we have a programme called “The removal of all traffic lights and construct overpass”. It is known as the East-West Corridor transformation where we remove all the lights and we put interchanges from Port of Spain to Sangre Grande. The Curepe Interchange is one such project, the Diego Martin Interchange is one such project, and that will continue. The next step would be the Macoya Interchange.

**4.50 p.m.**

But we are able to do it. Again they attempted to do it. It was marred in corruption, they had to cancel it. We took the same drawing, the same plan. Because we had to retender it after the corruption, we could not just put the same package out, because people knew the price. We added two more roads to it, added two more roads because we had to change the scope and we brought it in for half the price, half the price. We took that money and we built the Diego Martin Interchange. We kept our promise.

We knew the state of the infrastructure in the country and we promised to have a comprehensive programme for construction of roads and the repair of roads. We have completed that and that is why, in Trinidad—and you could see now, every day, every night, bridges being built, roads being repaired, new roads being constructed.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** That is right.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** So we actually have a programme and a plan for the road, for the infrastructure in the country. We did that.

We saw the challenges with climate change and the Senator referred to it, and I will come to some of the things that we are doing in the Ministry for that. We decided that we needed a national drainage plan. Mr. Vice-President, 2017/2018 we embarked on creating a national drainage plan for Trinidad and Tobago because just going and desilting the normal rivers, clearing the drains and so, that will not take us too far. We had to get and develop a national drainage plan that we could work on to take Trinidad forward. We need to find more capacity, we need to look at our streams, look at our rivers and have a national plan. We have been able to complete the national drainage plan. Never before was there a national drainage plan in Trinidad, never before.

So every Minister that comes, they will say, “well leh we do dis, leh we do dat, it eh working”. But with what is happening around the world, we recognize that we must start to think outside the box. We engaged the Andean Development Bank. They brought in consultants, they worked with our local team and we were able to put out a national drainage plan, which will basically be the plan we will use going forward over the next five, 10 years to try to mitigate flooding in Trinidad. So there is a plan for that. It is not just getting up and saying what we are going to spend the money on. We are going to do this, somebody says, let us do that, let us do that. We have a plan.

We spoke about traffic and how we are going to develop Trinidad and Tobago. We talked about rapid rail, we had this, we had that. The last national transportation plan in Trinidad and Tobago was in 1967. So every road we develop in Trinidad, every time we take a decision to buy a boat or to buy two more planes or to cut a highway, was coming out from discussions of a 1967 plan. The Minister of Finance, now, who was then Member of Parliament, in his budget in 2015, said, that once and for all we will have a national transportation plan for Trinidad, because he was the Minister to 2010, and he knew that several attempts were made for a new national transportation plan. None was ever completed, none.

We now in Trinidad and Tobago have completed the first phase of that, working with international partners, working with the funding agencies, and we are now on to finalizing that national transportation plan, which takes into consideration land, sea and air. It is about moving people and moving vehicles and that is being done in consultation with all the stakeholders. It is a massive undertaking. That is why the last one was done in 1967, but finally, Trinidad and Tobago can say now, we are on our way to having a national transportation plan, a national drainage plan, and as I go on, I will show you where we are not just operating in a vacuum. We are looking at down the road, even in terms of the aviation sector, in terms of the maritime sector and all these other areas. We actually have documents now that we can say Trinidad and Tobago knows exactly where they want to be, 10, 15, 20 years from now.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Mr. Vice-President, we promised the people a first class road to Toco and a port in Toco. Remember the whole idea of having an international standard road?—because we can move people from Toco to Tobago in one-third the time. It takes from Port of Spain one-third the time. It is one-third the difference and it will take one-third the time and depending on the mode you use, it could be one-third the cost as well.

So you can have a system running to Tobago. Maybe every hour, every two hours you could have smaller vessels going. The first phase of that programme was to upgrade the road. The road phase was done in different phases. We have been able to complete the first phase of that. If you go from Valencia all the way to the Toco road, you will see a brand new road, wider shoulders, lights, to an international standard. The second phase is now what we are approaching from Toco road going all the way up to Toco. Some of it will be greenfield, some of it is using the existing road and upgrading the existing road.

In terms of the port in Toco, all the statutory requirements are being addressed. So you may not see any boots on the ground, but you do not just go and build a port just like that. You have to satisfy all the statutory requirements, which include the environment, and that has a lot of consultations with the stakeholders and so. All that is happening as we speak. Again, we are delivering on our promise.

We spoke about a first-class road to Moruga and a port in Moruga. Well I am happy to report that the first phase of the port is completed. We are hoping to have—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—an opening and a handover very soon, maybe next week, once the budget is finished. So winning the Moruga constituency will be much easier for Sen. Gopee-Scoon—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—when the general election is called, because we have completed the land site of the port, the seaside will be started and the road construction continues. Right.

We also promise the people of Tobago that they will get a brand new airport, and I must say the Minister of Finance was correct. In the first quarter of 2025, Tobago can boast of having one of the better airports in the Caribbean.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Yes, Tobago can boast, delivered by a People's National Movement Government—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—one of the best airports in the Caribbean.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We did not just talk, we walked the talk.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Mr. Vice-President, those are just some of the major projects. But the Ministry did not just do major projects. We broke it down into several areas. The Ministry of Works and Transport is definitely one of the largest Ministries in Government. I think it is like about 16 state enterprises and about maybe 18 units. We cover the airport, PTSC, the ports, civil aviation; several. So, work going on in the Ministry is not only

about roads, but we do our roads and we would have done the highway build out. We have been rehabilitating secondary roads, bridges, landslips, that whole programme.

We have a major flood mitigation programme. That is where we have the national drainage plan. A major Coastal Protection Unit and we will go into that, because I know Sen. Maharaj spoke about whether attention was being paid there. A lot of attention is being paid to the coastline in Trinidad under the Coastal Aviation Unit.

The civil aviation sector. At the Ministry of Works and Transport, we see two sectors that could generate significant foreign exchange to this country, and two areas that were not really capitalized on in the past. One is the aviation sector. The other one is the maritime sector. We have done significant work in both sectors which I will get into.

**5.00 p.m.**

Our ports—we have paid significant attention to the ports. Right now, only today, I signed off on the Committee for the La Brea Dry Docking Facility—major project. But these things do not happen overnight. And sometimes we speak about it, budget after budget, because that is the time it takes to get the statutory requirements in place—the planning. Those are big projects. They are not completed in one year. But I can tell you, that the work is ongoing. And—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—a dry-docking facility in La Brea, of that size and that magnitude will put again, our maritime sector, way above other countries in this region. In terms of digital transformation—I think the

Minister of Digital Transformation always complements the Ministry of Works and Transport.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Because, we have embraced digital transformation. And that is why, a place that nobody spoke anything good about, the Licensing Office.

**Sen. Hosein:** Yeah, man. Yeah.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We are almost at the stage where you will only have to go to Licensing Office if you have a problem. You will do everything from home on your computer—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—including, renewing your Driver's Permit. You could imagine, if you could stay home and renew your Driver's Permit, and they bring it home to you and they collect the old one?

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Service.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** That is what we have embraced. But, going into the details—because time is always going to be a challenge when you are dealing with a Ministry as large as the Ministry of Works and Transport. I would want to, just now, touch on how we have approached the road sector. We spoke about all the big mega projects that we have been able to deliver, despite the challenges but we cannot just neglect the existing road network. And what we did at the Ministry, we have broken that down into three areas. We would have looked at traffic congestion, and we looked at the existing layout of the road networks. So, we do have a programme to upgrade the existing road network. We have a programme looking at traffic

alleviation. And then we have the programme for the build out of the National Highways.

What we can expect, this year on the National Highways—as I said we will be opening the Wallerfield to Sangre Grande, the first quarter of next year. We have the Moruga road, ongoing. We have the Valencia to Toco road, ongoing. We have just completed the San Fernando to Point Fortin. So that project is ongoing. In terms of the traffic alleviation, there are several projects that will come out of that, in 2025. One being the O'Meara upgrade, which should open before the year is completed. And that will eliminate a lot of traffic in the Arima—trying to get from Arima onto the highway. But more than that, just to get a snapshot of some of the traffic alleviation projects that we have—that we are hoping to earmark for this financial year, which will bring a lot of traffic relief to the population .

And one of these projects—a major project we are looking at, is an east-south corridor. An east-south corridor. Cabinet has already approved the project. We are now, at the design stage, and looking at the—we have to do as—Sen. Teemal will know—you do not just go and build a major road like that. You have to do all the tests on the soil, and everything. But this east-south corridor, if you are coming from Sangre Grande—Mayaro, if you are coming on this side, and you want to go to San Fernando, you have to come all the way down to Grand Bazaar, right, if you do not take the little back roads and so. If you are coming from Trincity—if you are coming from Arouca, anywhere, you have to come all the way down to Grand Bazaar. Sometimes the line to get into that sort of tunnel there, starts all the way in St. Augustine. This corridor will allow you to come across by



Trincity Mall, on the other side, and come all the way down, and join the highway in south, by the Caroni flyover. Because that interchange there was built for that. So, what that will do, it will allow you to avoid coming all the way down to Grand Bazaar, and then to go to south. If you are coming from south, and you want to go to the airport, then you do not have to come all the way down to Grand Bazaar, then go up the highway in the traffic, and then go back down to Piarco. This will allow easy access and these are some of the projects that we are looking at for traffic alleviation, which will be rolled out.

We are also looking at the—in this fiscal year—sometime this fiscal year to have the improvement to the Endeavour Interchange, Phase 2. That is a Chaguanas traffic alleviation project. The Barataria ramp underpass upgrade. So, we are looking at the existing areas. Looking at widening some areas. Putting a little extra lane—the Churchill Roosevelt Highway construction, the third lane. If you look at the highway all the way up, just before Mausica there, the highway comes back down into two. Two lanes. So, we are going to extend that third lane, all the way up to Arima. So, by the time most of the traffic comes out into Arima, then going further up, the two lanes will work. And as time goes by, then we will continue to extend the highway.

Similarly, what we are doing in Chaguanas. Some people are complaining, “You are taking too long”. Yes, I find it is taking a little long, however, the challenge you have, is that you could only work for certain hours of the day. So, we start the project at nine o’ clock, after the traffic, we stop at two o’ clock. And sometimes we will restart in the night, at 9.00

p.m. and finish at 4.00 a.m. If we have to get progress, there is a level of sacrifice. And I have seen and—I spoke to my colleague, Sen. Roberts, who gave me a little tongue lashing this morning, and said I was going to shut down the highway, and the Divali Nagar, and all kinds of things. But I cleared that up. I mean, there is no truth to anything like that. Work will continue from 9.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m.—Sen. Teemal—and we will stop the night work until after Divali.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Right. So, that is the plan for that. And the idea is to extend the highway, all the way to San Fernando, on a phased basis. You cannot come off the interchange on four lanes, go into three lanes and then when you reach Chaguanas, you are into two lanes, all the way into San Fernando.

**Hon. Senator:** Right.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** So, we have projects like that. We have the Tunapuna road upgrade, the Southern Main Road upgrade. Again, the road from Sangre Grande, all the way to Mayaro. For those of you who traversed that side, you will see the new road that will be taken all the way to Mayaro. For the first time an international standard road with lights, shoulders and everything, all the way to Mayaro, on phased basis of course, and then from San Fernando, you upgrade the existing road, all the way back to San Fernando from Mayaro. Yes, the project of a highway, but we know these things take time. And, while these things are taking time, there is no reason why we cannot upgrade the existing road. Because there will still have people living there. So, there is a plan for that.

The Paria Main Road, the Maraval access road—because we know the problem we have in Maraval, getting in and out of Maraval. Right now, there is a project started to widen the bridge, to bring the bridge to four lanes. And wherever there is land, we are going to utilize it. At least get three lanes going in and out, and we reverse the lanes. So that project again, has started. And those are just some of the traffic alleviation projects.

**5.10 p.m.**

In terms of the existing road projects, in 2018—sorry, 2022, just after we came out of the COVID, the Prime Minister did announce to this country that a major road rehabilitation programme would start, and we did exactly that. We have done in the Ministry, over the last couple of years, over 6,000 projects. Nobody has ever attempted anything like that; over 6,000 projects.

**Sen. Hosein:** So much?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Yeah. That is a lot of projects over the last nine years, but that has been ramped up.

Every day, when you look at the Ministry's website, when you look around what is happening, there is road paving going on around this country, east, west, north, south, central, but those are the road rehabilitation works being done under PURE. And then we have the Highways Division, which has implemented a system where we—we cannot pave all the roads. It is impossible to do that at the same time, so we have a project running where we engage smaller contractors to do patching work. Last year, we engaged about 25 of them. This year, we have ramped that up to 50.

So in every district, we would have at least two small contractors that we can call on, that we can patch the roads, until we get around to paving

them. We have done, over the last couple of years, over 70 bridges in this country. We identified that bridges were a challenge.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We have at least 70 bridges at different stages. They are either completed, work is ongoing, or some of them are about to start. Seventy bridges, that is quite a lot.

We have done close to 200 landslips over the last couple of years; over 200. But landslips are formed in Trinidad on a daily basis based on the soil type and the area. The Member for—Paula Gopee-Scoon, every day will call me and tell me, Moruga—Moruga has a major challenge. Every day, the soil moves in Moruga. A lot of our roads evolve over time and they were built on ridges, and once you have soil movement, the roads will move. So it is an ongoing challenge, but we are not scared of the challenge and we are doing what we have to do.

Mr. Vice-President, our work just does not just stop there. Let us talk about the drainage department. Early in my term, I saw the challenge of flooding in this country and we knew it was only going to get worse with climate change. Sen. Maharaj was quite correct, climate change is serious, it is real. We are an island, we are surrounded by water, there is sea level rise. It is taking place. I see it on a daily basis because the Ministry of Works and Transport, we are tasked with that. Flooding is a major problem for us here in this country and it will be a challenge going forward—not only for us, it is for around the world.

I made a statement in the other place where I said that we will not be spared. The low-lying areas in this country will not be spared because the

big, developed countries, with the army corps and the best engineers, and everywhere, they are facing the problem. We see what is happening in the United States, in Europe, in the most developed countries in the world. There are certain countries that you have a bush fire taking place on one end, flooding on the next end. Right? It is a challenge, and that is why we engaged the Andean Development Bank and we said, “We have to find a way to deal with our problem when it comes.”

So we have embarked on a major—every year, a major desilting programme. We have been able to repair a lot of our bridges, river walling and things like that, but we had to go deeper into the problem. Coming out of the national drainage plan, we would have been able to identify several areas that needed fixing in this country and needed attention, and we were able to negotiate a loan facility from the Andean Development Bank. Because what had happened before in this country, we did a lot of studies—I think there were about 15 studies done—which costed hundreds of millions of dollars, but not a single study was completed. Because when you do the study—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Four more minutes? “Wow”—you have to do a programme—a work programme. We never got around to doing that.

When I came in, we had just cancelled—or the IDB had just failed the last plan where millions were spent, and then I was approached, “We have to do something again. We have to have a plan.” And I said to the Andean Development Bank, “We are not going to spend any more money. You engage the consultants. We will work with them and when we come up with

the plan, then you will fund the plan,” and that is how we approached it. We got the plan, it was approved, and we were able to get the funding to do the first phase of the project. That first phase will go for five years. We got US \$40 million and we got projects coming out of that. So that is why you have a lot of projects now going on around the country to help us with the flood alleviation.

Mr. Vice-President, in four minutes, I have not been able to even reach half of what I wanted to speak about and the amount of work that we would have done, and why this population have, or should ensure that when they go to cast their vote, that they cast it for a responsible government—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:**—because we can report on what we did and what we intend to do.

**Sen. Hosein:** Correct.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** We have engaged renewable energy and that is why I am happy that the Piarco airport has the first commercial solar park in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** So we would have done a significant amount of work.

In the port right now, we are evaluating an RFQ, I think it is, for a partner to help us to take the Port of Port of Spain to a different level, and I can tell you, we have had good interest. Unfortunately, my time is running out and I will not attempt to try to even go into the headways in PTSC that we are making. My colleague, Sen. Sookhai, will deal with that. The

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan (cont'd)

successes that we are making even on the sea bridge, I mean, it is unbelievable. We have five vessels that are running up and down. When last have you heard anybody talking about problems? We have a big Carnival taking place in Tobago—

**Sen. Hosein:** How many vessels?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Five.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Five vessels.

So we would have done a significant amount of work. We have plenty more work to do, but I want to give you the assurance, and the population, that they have a responsible Government in office. Be careful.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Look at our Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, “look who dey proposing”; look at our Minister of Finance, “look who dey proposing”.

**Sen. Hosein:** The Minister of Works and Transport.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Well, the Minister of Works and Transport, I mean, oh God.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:** Look at the people you have in office and look at what they are proposing and ask yourself, “Do you want to chance your children’s future, your grandchildren’s future?” Trinidad and Tobago, the time will come very soon when the decision we make will say a lot for what we, as Trinidadians, look at as standards. Mr. Vice-President, I want to thank you for the opportunity and I really wish I had more time, but I will

leave that for my colleague. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Deeroop Teemal.

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

**Sen. Deeroop Teemal:** Mr. Vice-President, I do thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the Bill that is before us here today. Mr. Vice-President, the *Social Sector Investment Programme 2025*, which was circulated as part of the budget documents, on page 28, 1.1.4, Goal 4—and I would quote from that publication—states that:

“The foundation of Trinidad and Tobago will be strong Families and Safe, Sustainable Communities.

Families as the bedrock of society, continue to play a critical role in the nurturing and socialisation of all individuals. The family as an institution, must be protected against the various endogenous and exogenous factors that continue to threaten its effective functioning. As a consequence, the...”—Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago—“...is cognizant of its obligations to protect and support the family as the primary social unit, and enable citizens to raise families in a safe, secure, and peaceful environment.”

I end the quote there from that respective document.

**5.20 p.m.**

Mr. Vice-President, when we look at the budgetary allocations for national security, education and health, these Ministries have been given the lion's share with no significant increase for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. I am sure that there are many justifiable



reasons for these substantially large allocations, but I will like to submit that if we are to conduct detailed research into the reasons for these large allocations to these respective Ministries, what we are going to find lying at the root of the problems and challenges is that the allocations are intended to address non-stable, broken and dysfunctional families; the root cause.

Why is family essential to TT's national identity and development? Families play a key role in transmitting cultural traditions, festivals, languages and religious practices from one generation to the next. The family is the first place where children learn social norms, values and behavioural patterns. Good family structures foster respect, empathy, discipline and cooperation, all of which are essential qualities for building a harmonious nation. Families form the foundational blocks of communities. Strong family ties strengthen local communities, creating networks of support that enhance societal cohesion, reduce crime rates and encourage civic engagement.

In Trinidad and Tobago, families often provide emotional, financial and caregiving support across generations. Elderly members for example, are cared for within the family, while younger generations receive guidance and mentorship from elders. Family structures nurture future generations, preparing children to become productive members of society. Strong family environments often correlate with better educational outcomes, which in turn contribute to a more skilled and competent work force. Mr. Vice-President, many small businesses and agricultural enterprises in Trinidad and Tobago are family-owned, playing a crucial role in local economy. These enterprises often sustain local communities and offer employment

opportunities. For families connected to the diaspora, remittances from abroad provide economic stability and contribute significantly to national GDP. Families abroad maintain ties with their homeland and the financial support they send helps reduce poverty and promote growth.

Mr. Vice-President, I will continue in the same vein. Families in Trinidad and Tobago provide emotional stability and support during times of adversity, whether through communal living, frequent family gatherings or family-centred social activities, Trinidad and Tobago families offer a safety net that promotes mental health and emotional resilience. In times of national crisis, such as natural disasters or economic downturns, families are often the first line of support for individuals, helping them cope and recover. This resilience at the family level translates into national stability.

Strong family support can prevent delinquency and youth crime by providing guidance, structure and positive role models. Families that emphasize education, discipline and respect help mitigate social challenges such as crime and violence, which are major issues in our country. Families help instil patriotism and a sense of civic duty in younger generations, reinforcing values like respect for diversity, equality and mutual tolerance that are key to national unity in our multi-ethnic society. Families, through their values and teachings, influence the political and social engagement of their members. This engagement, whether through voting, community involvement or advocacy, strengthens democracy and participatory governance.

As in many parts of the world, the erosion of the family unit in Trinidad and Tobago can have detrimental effects on social stability, and we

are seeing it happening right in front of our eyes. It can lead to increased poverty, mental health issues and crime. In Trinidad and Tobago, I put forward that families are more than just a social unit, they are the backbone of the nation's cultural heritage, our economic stability and our social cohesion. Recognizing the central role that families play in shaping individual and national identities as well as promoting national development is crucial for Trinidad and Tobago to handle our current challenges and ensure continued success as a nation.

Mr. Vice-President, I would just like to focus in connection with family, two major aspects. One is that of crime and one is that of education. In terms of family and crime—and I am not talking about crime families like the Mafia et cetera—the breakdown of families have a profound and direct impact on crime. Now when I use the term “breakdown”, I am using it not in any disrespectful sense. I am using it in a sense of unstable, non-effective families, as well as all families that have the challenges that living in the present time they are faced with, especially in communities where family units play a central role in socialization, emotional support and the instilling of values, we see the impact on crime.

In Trinidad and Tobago, as in many societies throughout the world, disintegration of the family, whether through divorce, absentee parenting, challenges faced by single parent families and other forms of dysfunction, it leads to serious issues contributing to the rise of criminal behaviour. The effects of the family breakdown on crime—due to limited time I would just like to point out some, emotional distress and trauma. Family breakdowns can cause significant emotional distress for children, experiences such as

divorce, domestic, violence and substance abuse within the family or even the death of a parent can lead to trauma and feelings of instability.

This turmoil often manifests as behavioural issues including aggression, rebelliousness and risk-taking behaviours, which can increase the likelihood of crime. Children from broken or dysfunctional families may experience mental health challenges including depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. When these issues are not addressed within the family unit, which most of them are not equipped to handle in the first place, they contribute to antisocial behaviours, substance abuse and criminality, as those affected seek out unhealthy coping mechanisms to escape from their problems.

**Gangs and criminal networks:** Children and teenagers who lack strong family support systems are often more susceptible to the influence of gangs or criminal networks. Without the guidance and protection that a family provides, they may seek a sense of belonging, identity and purpose in these groups. Unfortunately, gangs offer a false sense of security and community while pushing youth into criminal activities. **Peer pressure:** Adolescents who grow up in unstable families and environments may gravitate towards peers who are engaged in delinquent behaviours, we see this so many times.

### **5.30 p.m.**

Peer pressure can then play a major role in encouraging or reinforcing criminal activities as a part of gaining acceptance, trying to be of the group, or proving oneself within the group.

**Poverty and financial strain:** Family breakdowns often lead to

economic challenges, particularly in single-parent households where one parent has to bear the full burden of raising children. Financial instability may force children and young adults to turn to crime as a means of survival, especially if they feel the legitimate avenues for economic advancement such as through education, and gainful employment, are out of their reach.

Increased vulnerability to crime: Families facing economic hardships may reside in communities where crime is more prevalent. We are seeing that a lot in Trinidad and Tobago. These environments can exacerbate the risks for children. Economic inequality often drives criminal behaviour and family breakdown further exposes individuals to these dangers by removing the protective barriers afforded by a stable family.

Lack of role models: In stable families, parents or guardians often serve as role models—well, a lot more in the past than in the present—demonstrating how to live productively and peacefully within society. However, in non-functional families, children may lack positive role models and they may witness negative behaviours such as domestic violence or criminal activity within the home, normalizing these behaviours, thinking that it is okay for them to behave the same way, and adopt the same patterns of living that they are seeing right in front of their eyes.

Then there is criminality that is passed down. In many cases, crime becomes intergenerational, and we are experiencing that here in Trinidad and Tobago where children who grow up in homes where parents or close family members engage in criminal behaviour may follow the same path. Dysfunctional family dynamics, including substance abuse, domestic violence, and involvement in illegal activities do create an environment

where criminality is normalized. So children are growing up thinking that it is okay to be criminals, it is okay to do these actions, because they are growing up in such families and they are desensitized to violence. Desensitized to violence where we can have a 12-year-old and a 13-year-old and a 14-year-old just watch somebody with a gun and just shoot them dead.

Children from broken or violent households may become desensitized to violence or aggression thinking that that is the norm. When violence is witnessed within the home such as through domestic abuse, it really can influence attitudes towards the use of force, making them more prone to using violence themselves. Broken families often experience higher levels of domestic violence and substance abuse. These issues not only contribute to the breakdown of the family unit, but also create environments of fear, instability and insecurity and we are seeing that children raised in such environments are more likely to develop anti-social behaviours or engage in violence themselves.

Families are the foundations of communities. When families break down, community ties also weaken—and we are seeing that—reducing the ability of communities to monitor, support and protect their members. A lot of us would know, the family and the community were so integrated at one point in time that effectively the community would discipline, you know, the youths within a community. Not again, not again. So there is a weakening of community ties and without strong family and community networks individuals feel alienated and marginalized, pushing them towards crime as they seek connection with whatever is outside there or they seek survival. We see a reduced support system such as mentorship, guidance from

extended family members or community-based organizations and this lack of support makes it harder for individuals to cope with challenges in a constructive way, leaving them more vulnerable to criminal activities.

In concluding this part of my contribution, in terms of families and crime, the breakdown of families have a cascading effect on crime, contributing to the erosion of social norms, economic instability, poor education and weakened community structures. A stable family is the first line of defence against criminal behaviour. I will repeat it, a stable family is the first line of defence against criminal behaviour, and when it breaks down consequences can reverberate through the lives of individuals and society at large as we are seeing.

Mr. Vice-President, I would just like to go now to some of the effects of family breakdowns on the education system in our country. The breakdown of the family structure in Trinidad and Tobago has significant repercussions on the education system. Remember, when I started off I said the bulk of our moneys was going to National Security and also to Education. When that unit is compromised, it leads to a range of challenges that directly affect students' ability to succeed and the education system is often left to cope with the fallout. So the schools are being burdened by the fallout from unstable families and non-efficient families and broken families, and the school system has to try to fill the gaps that a stable family would normally provide. I mean, decline in academic performance; we could talk about lack of parental involvement.

Family breakdowns such as those caused by divorce et cetera, absentee parents, and single-parent households under stress often result in a

lack of parental involvement in the child's education. A lot of us here would know, those who have been successful education-wise, you could always trace it back to the interest and the detailed interest, right, sometimes over exuberant interest from parents or guardians or your mentors to ensure that you would have a good education because no matter what you look at, parents are the key to reinforcing learning at home, not the teachers, not the church, not the temple, not the mosque, but parents are key to reinforcing learning at home, overseeing homework and fostering a positive attitude towards school. Without this involvement, children may struggle staying motivated and fall behind as we have seen.

Emotional distraction: Emotional distress caused by family instability can significantly distract children. In fact, it distracts adults, so you could imagine children, from focusing on their studies. Emotional issues such as anxiety, depression, and insecurity would of course negatively affect concentration, memory and academic performance making it difficult for children.

**5.40 p.m.**

Increased absenteeism and dropout rates, and right now we are grappling with that as a nation. Children from broken families are more likely to experience higher levels of absenteeism and this may stem from several factors: parents' inability to provide transportation to school, lack of discipline at home or the child's emotional withdrawal, and we all know, regular school attendance is critical for success. Higher dropout rates, the family breakdown contributes to school dropouts in Trinidad and Tobago. Adolescents from unstable or economically disadvantaged households may



feel pressured to leave school. Why?—because they feel the need to seek employment, contribute to family income or even as we are seeing in Trinidad, a growing tendency to take care of younger siblings. This inability to complete their education severely limits their future of opportunities perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.

Then I go to behavioural issues in the classroom. Again, children coming from broken families may exhibit behavioural problems, aggression, defiance, withdrawal are often rooted in feeling of frustration, insecurity or emotional trauma from family issues. This leads to disruptive behaviour in the classroom and, of course, hinders both the affected students' learning and the ability of teachers in particular to maintain a positive and productive educational environment. I mean, if you talk to our teachers, you know, how increasingly difficult it is for them to maintain a positive and productive educational environment due to disruptive behaviour. Lack of discipline, of course, where there is a breakdown of structure and authority, children may not develop the discipline needed to succeed in school.

Emotional instability: I would have mentioned some of that, and then the need for psychological support. Schools are increasingly required to provide counselling and emotional support for students from broken homes. We know the challenge there. You know, resources are often limited and schools may struggle to meet the mental health needs of their students. We are seeing it happening. Without adequate psychological support, children may internalize their problems leading to longer term emotional and academic difficulties. Then I must mention the increased burden on teachers, the schools and the entire education system stemming from broken

families.

Teachers in Trinidad and Tobago are often expected to play the role of surrogate parents for children from broken families. This may involve not only providing academic instruction, but also offering emotional support, discipline and guidance. Whilst many teachers in the profession rise to the challenge, this additional burden for teachers can be overwhelming and can also distract from the primary focus on education. So our teachers are being burdened as a result of this, to have to be surrogate parents, they have to be counsellors, they have to offer emotional support, and for a lot of them who are not professionally trained in this area, it can be overwhelming. You know, a lot of the teachers in the system are paying the price for it, then, of course, the strain on school resources. We would see from some of the budgetary allocations how much money now we have to pump into this thing, where schools are forced to address the challenges that stem from family breakdown.

So, we are taking—the problem is being transferred, to some extent, from the family to the school, and whether or not as an institution whose primary function is to educate, you know, where do we strike the balance? How much money do we put into the education system to counter balance what is not happening in the family?

So additional support services such as counselling, remedial education, we heard about the budget allocations for remedial education, and behaviour management programmes however, limited resources and overburdened staff make it difficult for schools to adequately support every child in need, resulting in uneven outcomes for students.

So, you see, in uneven outcomes where we have the successful and we as we uncharitably say, those who have failed, and consider the impact on that of the psyche of the child where the child thinks “I am a failure, I am no good” and becomes ripe fruit to be picked by the gangs, the gang leaders who are experts in working with these conditions, you know.

Now, I would like to extend it to higher education because we are grappling with primary schools, secondary school education, we see the many challenges, but also we would know as a nation and for national development the importance of higher education. Because if we do not have and develop our cadre of professionals and, you know, management experts and, you know, all the various professions, you know, we from a development point of view, we are in trouble. So for many students from stable families, parents play a critical role in supporting their transition to higher education.

So in a situation where homes are challenged and the parents are under so much pressure just to survive, just to keep things moving, this thing about, you know, channelling your children into higher education suffers, and the absence of this support may prevent students from pursuing further education, and especially in a case where, you know, financial assistance is difficult.

So are we a society, are we a nation in which education is being devalued because of family situations? We are seeing a devaluation of education, and in some broken families especially those who experience cycles of poverty or criminality, education is not valued, and children raised in these environments may not view academic achievement as a priority,

resulting in a lack of engagement in school, and the devaluation of education erodes social norms around the importance of learning and self-improvement.

I do not need to go into much detail about school discipline. We have seen a gradual deterioration of discipline in school, school violence, you know, the impact of it and the disruptive aspects of it in terms of the overall education system. So are we in a state of, we are seeing a cycle that is happening? One cycle after the next cycle of underachievement in our country. Is underachievement becoming the norm? If so, with that underachievement, how is it connected to non-stable and broken and dysfunctional families? I am proposing that there is a very close connection. It perpetuates poverty. It perpetuates crime and it is a fact, children who drop out of school or perform poorly academically, have fewer opportunities for legitimate employment and it increases their vulnerability in engaging in illegal activities or becoming dependent on government assistance.

So just to wrap up in terms of education and families, broken families, the breakdown and lack of stable family structures in Trinidad and Tobago has a profound and far-reaching impact on the education system. The education system is left to address these challenges, placing additional burdens on teachers, schools and limited resources, and addressing family breakdown and stability through policies that support families would go a long way.

Now, when I look at the *Social Sector Investment Programme* outlined with this year's budget, it is a very noble, you know, document. Within it there are proposals. There is no doubt there are proposals. There

is a national family policy that is through its initial stages, so it is dated 2023 to 2028, that is within the *Social Sector Investment Programme*.

**5.50 p.m.**

There is also a National Parenting Policy. So steps are being taken. I mean, a lot of work has been done with youths, parenting, all of these areas. Yes, it is a step in the right direction, but the point I would like to make in my contribution, Mr. Vice-President, is the pace at which it is being done and the priority that is being given to it. Now, I know it is difficult, what do you allocate money to? Where are you putting your lion's share of money? We have a practice here in Trinidad and Tobago over the many, many decades, infrastructural needs soak up a lot of money. Sen. Sunity Maharaj was talking about these projects and all of these things.

So there is a lot of focus on the hardware, a lot of it on hardware and the hardcore facilities that go with national development. Here we are looking at the soft side of things, the software, the software that would put persons into these buildings, into these system and everything that we are, to make it work, and to make it be productive in an efficient and sustainable manner. I think all of us share that vision.

So I have just highlighted two areas, but there are other significant impacts of non-stable families on the national grid that lies at the very root of the same issues that we are trying to solve. I am saying, as a nation, we need to have a paradigm shift in budgeting to all of our increasing and accelerating interventions in family support services, aimed at resolving the fallout from broken and unstable families; paradigm shift. These inventions must be commensurate with the extent and reality of the problem that we are

facing in the medium and long-term future. Yes, things are being done, but is it commensurate with the reality of the problem that we are facing?

We will see a definite return on investment if we go this way, in my view, by a marked decrease in expenditure, necessary to deal with increasing crime, poor educational achievements and poor health support. I did not spend time on the family, and impact on health and public health, but that is an area as well; health hazard, a huge chunk of the budget. And a lot of it stems from poor lifestyles, all of sorts of things that send up the health budget every year.

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

**Sen. D. Teemal:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. In the five minutes that I have remaining, normally, I would talk about climate change—I have been talking about climate change for years—and just to renew the call that I still submit for climate change, adaptation not mitigation. We need to have a coordinating body that pulls all the work that is being done in silos into one coordinating effort. Adaptation requires coordination and I am still of the view that people are working in their silos, we are duplicating efforts, we are not supplementing each aspect of climate change, and to call for a central coordinated unit that will pull climate change adaptation all together.

In the last couple of minutes, I know it has become a culture in Trinidad and Tobago, where we use the words, “road paving works”. The thing is we use “road paving works” and “road rehabilitation” interchangeably. We have established a culture in Trinidad and Tobago, “to fix ah road, yuh have to pave it”. The Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure, we had an enquiry into road rehabilitation works,

and it is a culture that we have to break.

I know the hon. Minister of Works and Transport did not intend—and I am sure the language put by the Minister of Finance in the budget when he said, road paving works, I think \$400 million or something, let us think about road rehabilitation. It is not road paving, so much so that the public expects you to “pass with ah Barber-Greene, pave de road and dey happy”. No matter what, you are paving over a pothole, you are doing—so road rehabilitation works, and I know it is not the intention of the Government, based on the last couple years and the work being done by the PURE unit, that we are talking about road rehabilitation.

Now, let us change terminology now, road rehabilitation works. Do not forget that road rehabilitation works has to go hand in hand with roadside drainage works. We see it all the time. “We fix ah road, we doh fix de drainage, de road mash up” soon after. Road rehabilitation and roadside drainage improvement works have to go hand in hand under the umbrella of road rehabilitation works. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

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

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister of Digital Transformation.

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

**The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus):** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for recognizing me and allowing me the privilege to contribute to this budget debate. I must acknowledged the presence of our newly minted Senator from Tobago—

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:**—and his stellar tribute to one of our fallen

comrades, the most honourable. I am going to, in the time that I have, try to address the things that the Ministry of Digital Transformation will be doing, and has done, relative to the allocations that we have within the budget. I am going to, again, try to demystify some of the things that we do. Having contributed to this debate in the other place, I probably will not rehash a number of the things that I said there, but to really seek to put the majority of the most important pieces of what we are going to do with the expenditure, through you, for public consumption.

One of the first things that I want to talk about, that is not within the scripting that I had, has to do with what I want the general public, through you, Mr. Vice-President, to understand that technology, when used for the nefarious reasons, can be a very dangerous thing, and I am not saying that to frighten anybody.

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

I am saying it so people understand that you have to be wary and you have to treat this technology like you would treat anything else. You have to learn how to use it, you have to understand its dangers, and find ways to protect yourself and mitigate yourself against the things that people will tend to use it for to do you harm.

What caught my eye and why I decided to start there, Mr. President, is an article in the daily *Express* today, and it says:

“Another imaginary Facebook car has been purchased”

Now, there are two things about this that should worry you. One, is that it says “another”, which means that they have been before, and other word about it is “imaginary”. This is where people are using technology to



create fictitious things, put them into the public domain and lure people, all with the intent to rob them. This is not a fault of the technology, this is how people have decided to use it, and it is up to you and up to us to give you the tools to discern and understand when something like this looks like this, it is probably too good to be true.

**6.00 p.m.**

So I just thought I would put that into the public domain, through you, as I begin. This year's budget debate, and the statement made by the Minister of Finance, was significant as he took us through a journey, as he presented the Government's plan for expenditure during fiscal 2025, and for all intents and purposes, he provided an understanding of the wider context and particular circumstances in which we find ourselves today, that challenging environment in which he was speaking. But the theme for the budget presentation being "Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity", I would like to adapt it a bit to use it within what we are doing at the Ministry of Digital Transformation.

So firstly, we are steadfast and resolute in our pursuit to success and achieving the commitments of the digital agenda. And the digital agenda is well-known, but we are steadfast and resolute in where we are going there. We continue to be focused on implementation, that is the phase in which we are now in our projects, so it will be determined and decisive in our actions. And finally, of course, we will continue along the pathways to shaping a digital society and our digital economy and our digital Government. So we are very well aligned within the Ministry of Digital Transformation with the theme of this year's budgeted presentation.

Let us contextualize a “lil” bit on what we have done over the last year with the allocations that we had. What we are seeing in Trinidad and Tobago now is an emergence of a digital Trinidad and Tobago, but at the same time it is trying to coexist with the tangible and physical Trinidad and Tobago that we know. And while people look at that and see there is a transition from one to other, it is really a fact that what we are trying to do is to have both ecosystems coexist in some level of harmony and unity.

Now, the United Nations has an E-Government Development Index, and it was introduced in 2003. And if you go back to Trinidad and Tobago’s foray into digital things and ICT things, it really started around that time. We were at that time one of the leaders in the world, and our first programme that we did was called “Fast Forward”. For those who did not know it, it is the first national ICT strategy we had from 2003 to 2008. But this survey surveys all 193 United Nations Member States, 193 of them, and it is done every two years. Well, we have had fluctuating fortunes in that, and of course you would understand why, we were really good at it at one time, things were left in abeyance for a while. We have had a resurgence, and since the formation of the Ministry of Digital Transformation, we have been working on an upward trend.

I would not go through the history of all of it but I would just tell you what has happened right now. We were rated 93<sup>rd</sup> of the 193 in the last survey that was done. In this year’s survey, we were rated 86 of the 193, so we are trending in the right direction. But if you really want to understand that context of when we were the best in the world, and particularly in our Caribbean region, and among the best in the world, in 2003 we were rated as

high as 65, and we were rated even higher than that in 2008 at 54, so we still have a ways to go to get to where we were, but the trending is in the right direction.

But for context, if you look at our CARICOM partners in 2024 and see what this listing says, remember we are at 86, Barbados is at 91, Jamaica is at 96, the Bahamas is at 83. So we are there and thereabouts, but the intent is to continue to improve and get better. Rankings can be strange things when you look at them in isolation, and I mean that from the point of view that you can actually not get better and get a higher ranking. But in this case it is not just that the ranking was better but the actual GDI score improved, whereas we are at .634 in 2022, we are now at .697 in 2024. So we are talking about actual progress reflected both in the GDI number, but also in the ranking that we have gone ahead with.

In the budget, one of the things I get asked about a lot, is that, is this allocation that you have for the Ministry of Digital Transformation enough to do all of this work that you want to do? Well you will never get enough, but what I want people to know is that that allocation does not represent the entirety of the spend of the Government relative to ICT projects. Every one of my fellow Ministers will stand, and if they have the time, will go through and they will get to some point in their allocation where they have something that they set there for digital transformation, and that is a lot of how this thing is happening.

Just to put it into context, last year it was just over \$400 trillion across all the other Ministries, Divisions and agencies outside of the Ministry of Digital Transformation, this year it is 396, so the variance is quite small, but

the progress you can see is there. People look to the Ministry of Digital Transformation to see where the progress is happening. The previous speaker on this side, the Minister of Works and Transport spoke about what is happening at the Licensing Division. What is happening at the Licensing Division is happening with the progress that is being done in the Licensing Division. There is guidance coming from, and support being provided by the Ministry of Digital Transformation, but they are using their own resources and using their own money, in terms of allocation, to be able to get to where they need to get to.

So if you wanted to understand what the Government's spend on digital transformation is going to be, you will have to go through all of the yellow books, looking through all of the lines of expenditure, identifying which one of those projects or programmes are set with digital transformation pieces. I tell you it would come up to about \$400 million, which is quite a significant sum. If you look into some of the Ministries, the Ministry of Education is a significant one because they have significant ICT infrastructure work to be done as well as their digital education programme. The Minister of Finance spoke quite a bit about that. I know there is line that comes up all the time about laptops, they continue to buy a number of them to put them into the hands of where they are.

But more importantly than putting them into the hands of the students, the rest of the infrastructure within the schools also have to be upgraded. Meaning, Wi-Fi has to be ubiquitous throughout the school so that people can use these machines. The curriculum has to be focused in such a way that there is an emphasis on using digital technology inside of it. The other

pieces of infrastructure in the school have to be there, and then of course you are moving towards having digital literature placed in the devices. All of those things are happening, and all of those things are happening within the expenditures, in this case we are talking specifically about the Ministry of Education.

The Ministry of Finance, as another example, has the same kind of initiatives going on. They have, again, upgrading of IC Technology for the Inland Revenue Division, development—well, they continue on IFMIS, the document system for pensions and civil registry, the networking for the Treasury building. All of those things, the upgrade of the ICT infrastructure for the FIU, upgrade of the security at the Ministry of Finance. All of these projects are not being funded out of the allocation from the Ministry of Digital Transformation, they are being funded under the allocations for the individual Ministries. So I have used those as examples, I am sure you get it.

How is that being used apart from the build of infrastructure? Sen. Teemal was talking about, we seem to have a focus on infrastructure and large buildings and equipment. But a lot of this is really supposed to translate into services. And a really good example apart from what the Minister of Works and Transport had given—I will talk a bit about what is happening with e-Services at the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The Ministry of Trade and Industry represents another one of those forward thinking and progressing Ministries in the ICT space.

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Yes, it is. A couple weeks ago I spoke at

length—

**Sen. Cox:** And the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Yes, as is the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Couple weeks ago I spoke at length about TTBizLink and what they have been doing in that, but let me put a “lil” bit more context into it again, through you, Mr. President. There are currently more than 250 e-Services available to the public and the people of Trinidad and Tobago, of these more than 40 of them are currently offered through TTBizLink, coming through by you Minister of Trade and Industry, and in the last few months we have just launched another 11—

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** That is right.

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:**—to get to where you are, and five, there is another five that are currently under development in what is happening. They developed as hub which is an arm of what we are doing within the Ministry of Digital Transformation. We have another five that are coming out, and these things are being built and customized for use on basically your cell phone.

The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has the rural TT app introduced again, built by their own people, launched and are available and being used today to identify things. The cybersecurity investment tax allowance there is an app built by CITA. That is in there, that was launched since June. The DevelopTT portal is there, which is replacing traditional paper-based and in-person applications for approval.

All of this is happening under the general rubric of what we are pushing towards under the guidance of the Ministry of Digital Transformation, are being executed by the Ministries themselves.

**6.10 p.m.**

It is distributed in a way in which it is being done so you can get more done using less resources, and have it all happen in parallel as opposed to one Ministry trying to do all of it on its own. To give you an idea of how that 250 is broken down, and every year if you go back through my contributions from the first one you will see, one, that the number of e-services continues to increase, but the ratio of services that I am going to talk about now also changes in the direction that you want. Two hundred and fifty e-services are being offered; 112 or 44 per cent are limited to basically just providing information or downloading forms, basic interactions; 43 of them—17 per cent—are partially transactional online support. So you could submit forms, you can make appointments, but you still require a visit to a government office. But 58 services, 22 per cent of them, are fully online, meaning that you can start the transaction and complete the transaction on line. The intention is to continue to grow that to where the majority of services fall into that category.

For fiscal 2025, the digital transformation agenda is focusing more on personalizing government service delivery, which is really, through you again, Mr. President, we are trying to bring all of these services that we either have that are being launched or will be launched shortly towards what the individual person will get out of it. Then for us to be able to do that we have to engage in, and as Sen. Teomal engaged, some of the softer skills;

some of the communication skills; some of the continuous training skills; some of the sensitization and even more than that in some cases, some of the training skills that we have to have. If you do not have the basic digital IQ you are going to struggle in the digital world. The same way if you do not have the numeracy and literacy skills you struggle in this world. If you do not have the same thing in the digital skill you would struggle in that world as well.

We are trying our best to bring and raise the digital IQ of the society to where people not only understand how to use these things but they trust them and they want to use them. It is almost being a victim of your own success. We are hearing now more and more clamouring for being able to use ICT and services like that to get services done. A few years ago it was just the opposite, “leave things the way they are, is alright, I afraid this technology thing”. That part of what we want to do is taking route, so much so that people are making noise with things that really should not even be yet in the digital domain because we do not have all the necessary things to make it work. But, people are demanding and clamouring for it; that is something that we like.

But I will get to it in a “li'l bit”, something that I attended with the Minister of Finance, which was the Financial Inclusion Survey done by the TTIFC and that gave us some very, very, startling things which we have to consider as we roll our services out. Because if that is the state of play then we may verily be moving in the direction that would create another divide when we are trying to fix something to make it easier for everyone. I will talk a bit about it on where we stand.



One of the other things that people ask is about the road map, what are we marching this drum towards? Well, the *National Digital Transformation Strategy 2024—2027*, has been released. It has been approved by Cabinet, it is now a government policy and I will endeavour to bring the bound versions of it and distribute it to all Members of this august Chamber. There are free copies of it available, but I would certainly bring them here. The reviews we have had on them both from a technical content and from an aesthetic, visually pleasing, it is quite a nice document to have. But if you go through it you will find where all of what we are doing is anchored and what our projections are and where we need to be going. I suggest it to be reading for all Members of this Senate. And, in it you will find a lot of the history of how we went from one place to where we are and where we are going to go with that.

I want to talk a bit about data as a strategic national resource, and when we talk about that it invokes different types of emotions. We have to find the right balance between securing our sensitive and confidential and private data on one hand while ensuring that open data is widely available for the benefit of the private sector, citizens and the Government itself. So understand the juggling that we have.

I have stood in this place and made contributions, speaking about interconnecting Ministries, speaking about validation of information across and between Ministries and have—You will listen to various levels of adversity in some cases, trepidation in others and I dare say lack of understanding in others. When we talk about data as being a national resource we are talking about the actual information that you and me hold

dear every day that we want to protect, that we do not want other people to know about. But we are also talking about the information that you need to be able to access government services using ICT technology.

Let us use an example. The Minister of Works and Transport talked about renewing drivers permit online. Let us take that, fairly simple. We have built, with the help of the Estonians, the Interoperability Network. It is opened today, it works. It is built by our people with the help of the Estonians, meaning that it is sustainable. So all of its development, all of the other things that we are doing it is being done by our own people and guess what? We own the IP, it is ours. But to use it in the example, you sit in your house and you want to renew your drivers permit, this is a renewal so the information already sits within the Ministry of Works and Transport Licensing Division. They have your picture, they have all the things associated with you, but to renew it you still need certain things.

You need to make an application, sure we can do it online. You need to submit a new picture, sure they can validate that against the one that you have with your picture. What about the other things? One of the things that they ask you for is a birth certificate or a birth paper pin. They do not need the certificate, they just need the pin because they want to validate that is one of the things, that you are actually you. You know how that works in the current state? It is either they believe that the information you submitted is correct or they have to validate it. You know how they would validate it? Send the information down to Civil Registry somebody there will look at it and say, yes, this pin matches this name, matches this number, matches and then go back and tell them.

In the world in which we live now with the Interoperability Network that happens in less than a second. The information is input, it validates it against where the single source of truth is. It is not asking them to send the information or anything, they are just saying does this information match? It does, great, go ahead. So this fear about people's information being sent all over the place, it does not go anywhere, and that is the kind of education that we have to have, not only for the people who are using the systems but for us as legislators so we understand the difference between exchange of information, validation of information, et cetera, et cetera.

These are key components, and like you, Sen. Teemal, jargon is also important. When we look at that and we said this data being the renewal we have to figure out ways to protect it. There are some things that I have given commitments to that will happen in this Parliament. One of them of course has to do with the Data Protection Act, based on a motion that came I had given a commitment to this House that we will bring the necessary legislation to allow for the proclamation of that to happen before the end of 2025. I remain committed to doing that.

There are things within the allocations that are not necessarily visible to most people. The fact that the operationalization via the search for the competent people to fill the roles as commissioners and so on and so on, is actively underway. The fact that the budget, there must be an allocation somewhere in there to deal with what happens when those people are found, all of that exists. So without going through the fanfare of it, it is to understand it is not just the fact that we have given a commitment to come with the necessary legislation, the things that need to be behind that are also

in existence and continuing to work.

Let us talk a bit about some of the infrastructure that we are going to build. And you heard me speak about this before, one of the things that we talk about in this large mass of infrastructure apart from the Interoperability Network, apart from the EID stuff, one of the things that you heard me talk about quite a bit, Mr. President, is this data centre and the fact that we said that we are going to build tier-four data centre.

**6.20 p.m.**

We are well advanced in terms of where that is, the contracts for the building of the modules. It is a modular data centre so you will understand that you have to build these things, test them, and then ship them into Trinidad and then assemble it like a jigsaw. What we are working on now is the civil works. The intent is to have it built, tested where it is in Europe, shipped to Trinidad, and have the civil works ready so when it gets off the port we do not have to store it anywhere. We simply bring it, assemble it, and turn it on.

We are working on that and it is in Phoenix Park. You are quite correct.

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Minister, it is being built in what is one of the most advanced industrial parks certainly in this hemisphere with all the technology that is inside of there. It will go in there. And it is going in there not with the intent to—by building this we are not shutting down the data centre operations of all the people that we work with today. There are five Tier 3 data centres on the island. We are already doing the infrastructure to

connect all of them together and they will be connected to our Tier 4 data centre. We will have an ecosystem that represents a national interest in addition to tying it to another Tier 4 data centre in Curacao which is part of the Caribbean Datacentre Association.

We are making this investment in infrastructure to protect the same data that everyone wants protected. Tier 4 data centres are by far the best you can get in the world. What does that mean to the citizen? A focused roadmap for digital transformation as we work towards the realization of division, like I said, I would bring the copies; higher levels of transparency and accountability in data storage and management, and we talk about how we use the intolerability and store things properly; sustainable and continuous operations with the creation of the data centre, it is the most reliable thing you can build; and, of course, for the people, a peace of mind and knowing that your information is in the best and most secure place and locally here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Digital inclusion: Well, digital inclusion represents one of the things that can really derail transformation if you do not do it right. Digital inclusion means that we are trying to do everything for everybody at the same time leaving no one behind. Extremely difficult when you consider you are doing it across four areas: people, process, technology and legislation. We have to do all at the same time across a wide cross-section of people with varying talent levels, with varying ambitions, varying levels of fear, varying levels of competence, and still get it all to work at the same time. That is what we are doing. It is not difficult. It is not easy. It is actually quite difficult. But the idea is to introduce things in pieces,

demonstrate that they work, develop confidence, communicate what it is, ensure that all of the underlying requirements exist, and then have people gradually migrate to it on its own.

This is not about deciding today that we are going to introduce this, and the only way we are going to be able to do it is via an electronic means. That does not work. You get into something that I have termed “efficiency by frustration” when you do that. All of a sudden you realize well, there is no rush to do it again, everything is working fine. It is not that. People have abandoned it and they do not want to do it anymore. We have to find ways to make sure that that does not happen. But the key about having these services be available is that when the citizenry starts to use them, I think they will understand and rush towards getting them done.

I was talking about what was happening with the National Financial Inclusion Survey. This is the worrying part. The National Financial Inclusion Survey undertaken by the TTIFC and highlighted by the Minister of Finance in his budget presentation indicated that many in our national community remain financially excluded. These are the numbers: 25 per cent lack basic bank accounts; 77 per cent of MSMEs operate without business bank accounts or accounts where digital payment options are available, 77 per cent; 56 per cent of the population finds mobile banking and financial information challenging to navigate. If that is the backdrop on which we are and then we are going to introduce systems where the only way you could pay for it is using an electronic medium, does that work, why would we do that? And that is why sometimes when the Minister of Finance says the clamour for certain types of services to be available relative to the execution

of things, he worries about it because he wonders who are those things being targeted for.

We have not spoken about the unbanked. We have not spoken about the unbankable. When we do what we do in the Ministry of Digital Transformation, we have to be extremely careful that we are not too focused on the technology and leaving out the people. So this thing about cashless is a problem. In my mind it is a problem. And again, Sen. Teemal, I am glad you raised what you raised relative to what the Minister of Works and Transport says. I like my jargon, the way I like it, it is less cash. I like less cash. Cashless payment systems is not the same as a cashless society. Again, cashless payment systems is not the same thing as a cashless society. So I am thinking that what has happened is that people have raised and misconstrued when the Minister of Finance says, “Cashless payment systems”, people have taken that and turned it into “cashless society”. We are dealing with a less cash society.

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** So, Mr. President, to be clear through you, and to the wider community, the introduction of cashless payment systems does not in any way mean the end of cash.

**Hon. Senator:** Explain it to them, “nah”.

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Let me say this once more time, Mr. President. The introduction of cashless payment systems does not in any way or form mean the end of cash. I just want you to understand that.

**Sen. Roberts:** We understand, Sir. We agree.

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Okay. So now that that is so, Mr. President—

**Sen. Mitchell:** Mr. President, I would like to hear my colleague speak. 51(1)(e) please.

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

**Mr. President:** Okay. Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Mr. President, just over a month ago the Government signed a technical licence agreement with the National Payments Corporation of India in their Payments Limited NIPL to develop a real time payments platform using India's Unified Payment Interface. And I want to thank again the Minister of Finance, the Governor of the Central Bank, the TTIFC, the Government of India and NIPL and, of course, the staff at the Ministry of Digital Transformation, for working assiduously on getting this done. This is something we started back when I visited India on August 11, 2023, and this is one of the initiatives that has come out of that that I think can incorporate, and in alignment with the other local services that we have, represent a major thrust towards a less cash society. Notice the words, "less cash society".

The Unified Payments Interface was developed by NIPL and the solution facilitates—this is what it does—interbank transactions through the use of mobile phones, and it is currently in use by over 1.4 billion users in India. Mr President, I had the opportunity to visit India and I can tell you that the UPI and what they use is extremely popular, it is terribly widespread, and it is extremely easy and simple to use. One of the things that I think the Minister of Finance likes about this, is that it has the potential



to significantly reduce the transactional cost of moving money around and you using what you are doing. It is key and important to that. It is not technology that is there just to be technology. It is technology there to improve efficiency, ease of use, but more importantly reduce cost of financial transactions. So it is good.

There is another one we have called the social benefits wallet. Again, we are building these things—let me use another one of my Ministers. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services is quite integrated in what we are doing with this. What is this for? It is for non-cash items and it is designed to reduce waste. If I could use—let me try and use a different example for this one. The food box grant. You will get a box with so much of this, so much of that, so much of this, but you may not be able to use it at the same time. But the box is the box. These are not cash items. These are consumables. Think about them being placed in a “social development’s wallet”, basically something that you could have on your phone so when you go, you only take what you need.

**6.30 p.m.**

I only need one pound of tomatoes, a half-pound of onions, three pounds of this. The rest stays in the wallet, it does not waste and rot away in your house, it is available for other people to use because it is sitting in the place and so other people—you only use what you want.

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** This is really pioneering technology. We are doing it in conjunction with international societies and we are getting something.

**Sen. Nakhid:** [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** What does this mean?

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** What does it mean? Again, through you, Mr. President, I am speaking to the citizens, what does it mean? Personalized benefits by you and for you—it is our own people building this, so you can directly access the things that you need; access to banking services through mobile phones and online platforms in rural and other areas; a more immersive and inclusive and innovative and resilient financial system; and a framework for innovative business models, because if we can build it, then anyone in the private sector can build and develop it.

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

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

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** One of the things I want to just touch on is the TTWIFI. TTWIFI is designed for—if you want people to use digital services, they have to have access to it. You are talking about ubiquitous broadband coverage. So 187 Wi-Fi sites all over, and we are talking about public transport hubs, libraries, public health institutions, public schools without connectivity and there are still are some of those primary schools, et cetera. We just did four more at the Ministry of Health. We have 17 more locations that we are going to turn on within a short time and those would include the Esperance Regional Complex, Las Lomas No. 2, Cedros

Community Centre, Pleasantville, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. There are a number of them, we can do it there and, of course, we are training over 4,000 persons from the CEPEP and URP programmes in digital literacy to get them, so they also benefit from the things that we have.

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

**Sen. Nakhid:** PNM policy. PNM policy.

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

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** I cannot, Mr. President, leave this without talking about cybersecurity. Cybersecurity represents one of the most important components of what we have to do. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has partnered with a number of international agencies and local ones to ascertain the current security posture of all Ministries, divisions and agencies in Trinidad and Tobago; identify the gap between them and where they need to be; putting together the necessary things to bridge those gaps, and you will recognize to fix those gaps, some of it simply involves the reconfiguration of things that you have but in some cases, it requires that you add new technology to be able to protect things in the way we need to.

We have done a number of things, not just in the technology. We have had a cybersecurity mini workshop series with the Government Information and Communication Technology Leadership Advisory Council, and that is the GILAC, that is all the technology people in the Government. We have done that in partnership with the CARICOM IMPACS, who—by the way, I should tell the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, the testing of the system that you are so eagerly awaiting relative to the ED cards, when you come into Trinidad and Tobago, you do not have to make

up that form, it is well underway. I just want you to understand that.

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

**Sen. The. Hon. H. Bacchus:** But could you imagine us not doing it within an environment where it is secure and safe? Those are the things that we have to do.

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

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

**Sen. The. Hon. H. Bacchus:** The last thing, our Global Cybersecurity Index. If you want evidence of the fact that what we are doing is working—the score is out of 100—in 2020, we scored 22.18; in 2018, we scored to 18.8; in 2024, we scored 56.23. We have more than doubled where we are going with this and so we continue to improve.

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

**Sen. The. Hon. H. Bacchus:** So, Mr. President, there is a lot more that I can go into but I reiterate the promise, I will bring the things I said I will bring relative to dealing with the data protection. I will—I could give agriculture an applause too because they have done—

**Sen. Hosein:** The farmer registration card.

**Sen. The. Hon. H. Bacchus:**—the farmer registration card being done exclusively—[*Inaudible*]

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

**Sen. The. Hon. H. Bacchus:** I could not leave that out, Mr. President. By the way, the Prime Minister got his card first. I remember saying it in the—after a successful expo as well, highlighting a lot of technology. I will bring those things. We will continue what we are doing with this.

**Sen. Roberts:** Rowley is a farmer?

**Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:** We will continue to use our local resources to develop the technology that we have and we will continue to do this for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. With those few words, Mr. President, I thank you.

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

**Sen. Nakhid:** The new leader of the PNM.

**Mr. President:** Sen. Lyder.

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

**Sen. Damian Lyder:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Mr. President, I thank you for this opportunity once more to contribute to this Appropriation Bill, 2024, this being my fifth response to the Government and I hate to break the news to you here today but this will be my final response to the Government as a Member of the six Opposition Senators on this Bench, Mr. President. But I do not want you to be alarmed because within a year, I will be joining the six on this side as we go on that side to present the budget presentation, Mr. President.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** So, Mr. President, I also want to take this opportunity to—

**Sen. Roberts:** To tell them goodbye.

**Sen. D. Lyder:**—congratulate the Leader of the Opposition, who not only responded to a failed budget in the other place, Mr. President, but she appeared to be a Prime Minister coming in, as she rolled out some of the best plans to take this country forward for the next five years.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** So when I see the Minister of Works and Transport—and I am glad he has just returned, so I am glad he can be here to hear this. When he said that Sen. Mark had no plans to give, I merely have to ask him to go back to the Lower House and he will see all the plans of the UNC as we take government.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Mr. President, I also want to congratulate my colleague, Sen. Wade Mark, who completely exposed the failed economic plans by the Minister of Finance as well as the collapse of the labour market.

Before I go further and leave Sen. Mark, I want to stick a small pin there because I must also recognize that my colleague was fostering quite a bit of information with him today, that he primed us all up today to show “de bacchanal in de Balisier”.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** And if there was ever a time to see “de bacchanal in de Balisier” today, we only had to see the hon. Minister of Finance stand up on a Standing Order on his own colleague. Mr. President, I say no more when it comes to that. This Government has come here, year after year, using various titles for a budget presentation and this year is no different. They have come here to say, what? This year’s title is, we are Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity. How troubling it is that 10 years later, this Government is now coming to us to tell us about pathways to prosperity?

Mr. President, if a UNC Government was still in power, we would

have not lost prosperity, we would have been basking in prosperity today, and that is the truth. What I want to say, instead—when I look at steadfast and resolute, pathways to prosperity, instead of steadfast and resolute, I see a Government that is indecisive and weak, and instead of pathways to prosperity, I see a Government that has come to this country to put pain, chaos and calamity on the citizens of this country.

Mr. President, this is the PNM's tenth budget in this term and it has been a year where they come, once again, with these grand, lofty plans, lofty statements, broken promises, and what are the people saying? We are hearing it from the various civil society and chambers of commerce. We have said it. Even a former PNM Minister has indicated how this budget was yet again a failure and brings no hope to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, the people are fed up with the PNM because for the last 10 years, they have devastated this economy and put it into decline. They have put people into suffering. We have simply experienced a decade of destruction under this Government. So while the Prime Minister is telling us that we should hold strain for three more years, I am saying to the population, "You do not have to hold strain for three. Just hold strain for one more year when the United National Congress, led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, puts this PNM into the political graveyard."

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

**Sen. Lyder:** Mr. President, before we get there, we have to understand how we got to the point we are here today. So the Minister of Finance in the other place, when I was listening to him on TV, said:

“...our economy is stronger and more resilient now than it was before COVID-19.”

We heard a different story here today. He said, “We are in trouble,” but that is what he said. He also said that Trinidad and Tobago was experiencing three years of consecutive growth. That was the boast, three years, Mr President. But you see, the reality often tells a different story from this PNM.

**6.30 p.m.**

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**Sen. Lyder:** Mr. President, before we get there, we have to understand how we got to the point we are here today. So the Minister of Finance in the other place, when I was listening to him on TV, said:

“...our economy is stronger and more resilient now than it was before COVID-19.”

We heard a different story here today. He said, “We are in trouble,” but that is what he said. He also said that Trinidad and Tobago was experiencing three years of consecutive growth. That was the boast, three years, Mr President. But you see, the reality often tells a different story from this PNM.

**6.40 p.m.**

Firstly, allow me to congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance for

finally using the correct measure in GDP, which is real GDP instead of trying to hoodwink the population using nominal GDP. So he finally did that, but he did it for the last three years and I just find it interesting that he only quoted the last three years coming out of a pandemic to say that we have had growth between 2022 to 2024. It is quite obvious, Mr. President, if we have had a country that has been “locked down, brock down and shut down” for two years under this Government, you must expect some level of economic growth when we reopen. But you see, I do not stop at three years, I take it way back because there is a decade of destruction under this Government

Let us take a look, Mr. President. The CSO reporting of real GDP gives us the actual measure of our economy and real GDP in 2015 under a UNC Government was at \$187.5 billion. That is what it was. And then in the last reading with a decade of this destruction, the PNM’s last reading for real GDP was \$150.3 billion. Mr. President, this Government has collapsed the economy by 20 per cent. That is the fact. When it comes to jobs, the CSO tells us that between 2015 and now, we have lost up to 64,000 jobs under this Government, while Kamla Persad-Bissessar put on 50,000 jobs in her five-year term.

When it comes to debt from the point that the UNC left office, central Government total debt outstanding, according to the Central Bank, was \$78 billion. Mr. President, hold on to your seat. The Central Bank Economic Bulletin for July 2024 indicates that total debt is now outstanding at \$141.1 billion. This PNM Government in the nine years, since 1962 independence, has almost doubled our debt, our total debt. Last year, our debt to GDP ratio

hit 70.9 and in the *Review of the Economy*, we have been updated and we have seen that they have grown the debt to GDP by 5 per cent to 76 per cent debt to GDP, all the while debt continues to rise. Let me remind this country that when we left office, we left debt to GDP at 44 per cent. So this PNM Government has increased debt to GDP by 30 per cent in their tenure.

Mr. President, the Government continues to exacerbate the debt issue for a decade and then comes to us to talk to us about a \$5.5 billion in deficits that they are presenting. But I say to you like I said last year, if this Government really took serious to pay back bills such as VAT refunds, such as all the billions owing to the contractors and not play “accountant” with our revenues and expenditure, I put it to you that the deficit in this country will be surpassing \$13 billion by the end of this financial year. Mr. President, I put it to you.

But, Mr. President, when we look at manufacturing, the Government not only says questionable things about the economy but they speak a lot about manufacturing. The Minister of Trade and Industry, I listened to her in the other place, I did not get the opportunity yet to hear her, but she said that manufacturing is doing well, but you see facts are a very stubborn thing. I have the numbers here. The facts of overall manufacturing sector GDP at constant 2012 prices in 2015 stood at \$30.3 billion under a United National Congress Government. Now today, it has fallen to \$25.8 billion by the latest measure from the Central Bank. But hear this one, even before the pandemic, it had dropped to \$27.6 billion which is higher than today.

So when the Minister of Finance says we are doing better today than we did back in 2019 as he said in the other place, I say show me where



because before the pandemic, it was better. It has progressively gotten worse under this Government. Mr. President, manufacturing GDP has basically fallen by 14 per cent or \$4.5 billion since PNM came into Government and this has worsened by the billions of dollars of foreign direct investment that has exited our shores under this Government.

When you have considered these indicators, how damning they are to the economy, you ask yourself the question: How does this Minister of Finance or how does the Government deal with the shortfalls in these revenues? Because we would think diversification, we will think of new streams of revenue, but no. How this Government has dealt with the shortfall of revenue is what? Remove subsidies. Seeing fuel go up some six times. They have removed grants that Kamla Persad-Bissessar put like the milk grant, the baby grant. They have reduced the school feeding programme. They have reduced expenditure on certain parts of our education like laptops, taking away laptops. Closing the GATE, reducing funding on GATE. But there is one thing they like to do more than anything else to get that revenue, Mr. President, and that is to implement new and increase taxes in this country.

Mr. President, in their nine years, they have increased Green Fund levy, they have increased business levy, they have increased corporation tax. They have put VAT back on 7,000 food items that Kamla Persad-Bissessar removed it from. They even implemented a tyre tax. That is what they have done. Mr. President [*Laughter*] I mean I cannot make this up. So citizens are now trying to survive in this failed economy and you know what they come to do? They come now to implement the dreaded property tax. Let

me say for the record that in the five years that Kamla Persad-Bissessar was Prime Minister, she never increased one single tax and she never implemented one new tax.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Let me echo the sentiments of the Opposition Leader when I say that the United National Congress does not support the implementation of this property tax in any shape or form at this time. We join the thousands of suffering citizens who are finding issues with the way in which the tax is being collected as well as the flawed valuation process being used to arrive at the tax value.

We see PNM chaos foisted upon citizens of the country when they have not provided enough places to pay this tax, not providing online options to pay the tax, forcing the hon. Minister of Finance to rush here and extend the deadline for the tax to the end of September. We see that. But citizens were also questioning the valuation process and the methodology used in receiving the valuations on their properties. And they are also questioning the quality and the persons who are actually assessing these properties whether they are experienced enough to do so.

Mr. President, I will tell you why because I need to remind this Senate that the United National Congress, we received a document in our mailbox and this document, I remember it highlighted the flaws on how this process was. We have in our possession, I have it here, I cannot show it to you but I have it here, this memorandum. But we have in our possession an internal memorandum from the Valuation Assistant III Committee to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance dated November 12, 2018, regarding a

complaint with respect to the hiring procedure and the contract position of the Graduate Valuation Surveyor II of the Ministry of Finance Valuation Division.

These are men and women who are coming out to assess your property and tell you how much your annual rental value is. In this was a lengthy document. The qualifications for Graduate Valuation Surveyor was made very clear in that document and after outlining the qualifications required by a surveyor for this property, the memorandum goes to state this and I am going to quote now, Mr. President:

None of the candidates invited to interview possess the successful completion of the final examination of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

It goes on to say:

This is a fundamental prerequisite at the level given the duties and responsibilities.

And then it goes on to say that:

All applicants should have been disqualified from the interview and the position re-advertised seeking persons with the proper accredited degrees for a valuation survey.

**6.50 p.m.**

Mr. President, not one single one of those valutors that went out there to judge the value of your home is currently properly qualified to do this job, not one. And, knowing how unqualified the valutors are, the stories that I hear now make sense to me. "I have heard stories, Mr.

President, where you will see ah fella living in ah wooden shack on ah land getting \$90,000 in annual rental value, Mr. President.” I have heard stories of some persons who are getting two and three valuations on their property, and none of the valuations are equal, some are drastically different from each other.

Mr. President, I received two valuations for my property. I have it in my hand. I cannot show it to you. However, I am happy to bring it up to you after. Mr. President, these two valuations, you will not believe, hold on to the arms of your chair, a \$100,000 difference in the valuation, from the first valuation to the second valuation in the annual rental value. How could you make a mistake like that of \$100,000?

Mr. President, most of the citizens of the country have not had valuers come into their properties. No one has entered my properties. I do not know if somebody took a ladder and climbed up on my tall wall and looked through my window to see how the inside of my property looks. But I know that when a bank is lending you money to buy a property, Mr. President, they send accredited valuers, like Linden Scott, like Brent Augustus, to walk your property and to inspect your property, to give you a valuation. Mr. President, I challenge anybody to tell me who came inside their property, Mr. President, and valued, looked, and walked through their property to see if their toilet was broken down or if their kitchen was in a mess.

Mr. President, furthermore, the Government has committed such an injustice to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, when they have just gotten over the 50 per cent of the roll, Mr. President, and come now to charge 50

per cent of the citizens of this country, when the other 50 per cent “doh” have to pay nothing. And “doh” talk to me about this thing we call valuations or assessments on commercial industrial properties, you know, Mr. President, because they have not even started that process.

So, you have industrial and commercial properties that exist within the same neighbourhoods as these residents, Mr. President, who are depleting the resources and wear and tear on the infrastructure of that neighbourhood, who are requiring the same benefits from the corporations that the citizens are requiring. But yet, they get away scot-free, Mr. President. So, I am calling on this Government to tell us, because that is the elite nature of this Government, you know, Mr. President. Let the poor people suffer, and let all the big people and “dem” get away scot-free.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** So, maybe somebody could stand up and here and tell us who is the friend and financier who is being protected from this property tax, Mr. President. Who is it? Mr. President, let me tell you something eh, I will tell you this, this tax is simply unfair. It is simply unscrupulous, and this tax is undemocratic, Mr. President. It is undemocratic. It is suppressive.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** When the United National Congress comes back into power, Mr. President, very soon, we are going to axe that tax. That is a given.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** One of the first matters of business. Mr. President, let me move on very quickly to the manufacturing sector. You know, time is

flying. Once more, Mr. President, I stand up here in a case of déjà vu. I stand up here, Mr. President, as though I am listening to a stuck record, Mr. President. We have a Minister of Finance who is boasting, once again, about the increase in the non-energy manufacturing sector while attempting to gloss over the fact that overall manufacturing has declined, but not only overall manufacturing, you know, but non-energy exports have declined in this country.

Mr. President, I stated already that we saw a 14 per cent decline in manufacturing overall. I want to go further to tell you about non-energy exports because they boast about it. I have the numbers here. Non-energy exports. In 2015, Mr. President, non-energy exports were \$2.64 billion. In 2023, non-energy exports drew just \$1.89 billion. Mr. President, that is a decline of non-energy exports of 29 per cent. So, Mr. President, even though facts are a stubborn thing, they must try and stop the cherry-picking to try to impress the nation. Everybody knows the true state of this economy, Mr. President. Everyone knows it.

Mr. President, the Government, which is clearly not serious about manufacturing, has returned to the Senate with promises of prior years. We come back, and we hear once more about special economic zones. We hear about investment, promotions, and trade facilities. The hundreds of millions spent on these empty industrial parks, Mr. President, we hear a lot of that. We hear about the trade promotion agency over and over. All of these ideas have been repeated, or delayed, or have cost overruns, or have simply just not been implemented, Mr. President. That is what we see, Mr. President. That is what we see. But that just shows us on this side and many in the

business community how completely disconnected the hon. Minister of Finance and the Minister of Trade and Industry are from the realities of the situations impacting the manufacturers in this country.

You see, Mr. President, every businessman in this country today can attest to how difficult it is today to conduct business in this country, and how seriously difficult it is to even survive in this environment after 6,000 SMEs have shut their doors, Mr. President.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Yes, I will keep repeating it. I will keep repeating it. Facts are a stubborn thing, Mr. President. The Government boasts about manufacturing surviving. But this is not the result of any initiative coming out or any fertile ground laid by this Government. I agree, non-energy manufacturing increased, but, you know why, Mr. President? It is because of tenacity, and the hard work, and the risk taken by the private sectors in this country, who are fighting not only to survive but to grow in this environment. That is why we are seeing it. We are not seeing it because of any initiative by this Government.

Mr. President, again, I say, facts are a stubborn thing. But no matter how much the Government may come here and bluster about the manufacturing sector and diversification, the numbers say that the key industries have been in trouble for a decade, Mr. President. The biggest challenge to a business, and especially for the SMEs in this country—you know what that challenge is—they could come with all the programmes they want, but unless they fix the ease of doing business in this country, we will not see businesses properly prospering.

I saw one page saying ease of doing business in this 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the “red book of fairytales,” as Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial calls it. You know, I expected to see so much more. I only saw one thing about TTBizLink, nothing else. Mr. President, I want to remind everyone that it was under Kamla Persad-Bissessar when the last ease of doing business index was done—In 2020, Mr. President, this Government placed at 105 in the world. When Kamla Persad-Bissessar was in Government, back in 2015, we were at 76<sup>th</sup> in the world, Mr. President, 76<sup>th</sup>. “We doh need this measure, even though they does continue it we doh need the measure to check this”, you know, because we know it has gotten worst. If we had a measure, we would be worse than 105 in the world. But what are the four key areas?—what we call the four PNM crises of killing business in this country. Mr. President, there is the port crisis, there is the foreign exchange crisis, there is the VAT refund crisis, and of course, a crisis that impacts every industry today, which is the crime crisis, Mr. President. That crime crisis.

Let me move quickly on to the port crisis, Mr. President. You see, businesses continue to suffer at the ports, as several shortfalls cause delays and, therefore, unnecessary rent and demurrage incurred. Last year, I warned this Senate about the understaffing and the lack of support that existed with the workers at the port, Mr. President, and it has gotten worse since then.

Let us look at what the country is seeing today. I want to quote the *Guardian* report on October 03 in an article entitled: “Port operating at ‘limited capacity’ after workers walk off the job”. That is this month, eh, Mr. President, this month eh:



“The workers, who have been frustrated by broken promises over the last two or three years, have reached their breaking point...”

This Government has spat in the faces of unions, Mr. President. That is what they have done, and now the business community has to suffer for this failure. Mr. President, I remember, it was the Couva/Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce that put out, in a press release on October 10 this month, highlighting that the container examination station for Port of Spain has been down for more than five weeks because of a rat infestation. You hearing that? So it is not just schools now, you know, Mr. President, “is the port that have rat infestation.” Mr. President, workers have been made to operate in inhumane conditions to the point of closure.

Mr. President, the breakdown at the port does not stop there, because according to a *Loop* article on October 02, 2023, entitled, “Budget 2024”—which is the last budget—“\$90 million for port scanners”.

“Government will allocate 90 million for the purpose of procuring four container scanners at the Port of Port Spain.”

However, Mr. President, *Loop* also went on to say on July 02, 2024 that:

“The”—main—“pallet scanner at the container examination station is... non-operational...”

So they supposedly put \$90 million spent on scanners yet one of the most important pieces of scanning equipment was down halfway through the year.

**7.00 p.m.**

Mr. President, even yesterday, just look at the newspaper yesterday, in the *Express*. Look at what it says, they still continue to have issues at the port. Under this PNM Government workers are fighting rats, citizens' goods

have to be left stranded on the ports, and businesses continue to be hammered by demurrage and rent. And let me tell you what happens when they have to incur all this demurrage and rent, Mr. President, on food and hardware products. That increases the cost of food and hardware products to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, so the citizens have to pay more money for food. And, Mr. President, they have to pay more money for food, let me tell you. You know, just two years ago we saw the food import bill was just over \$5 billion. I could not believe my ears when I heard the hon. Minister of Finance say in another place that now over \$7 billion is our food import bill. My colleague will talk about agriculture, and he will tell you why it probably reached there.

But, Mr. President, let us move on very quickly now to the foreign exchange crisis in this country. So, this is perhaps the most blatant example of a PNM failure in governance. In the last 12 months the population has been hit with a number of drastic cuts in credit cards, SMEs have had to cut back because of restrictions on foreign exchange from banks, Mr. President, and facts are a stubborn thing. And the facts indicate, and this is from the Central Bank, that in September 2015, the United National Congress left a net foreign reserve at US \$10.45 billion. And as of September 2024, Mr. President, Trinidad and Tobago's net foreign reserve stood at \$5.66 billion. So this PNM Government has wiped out half of our foreign reserves while debt continues to skyrocket.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Yeah, yeah, well, that is what I say, debt continues to skyrocket. So, Mr. President, you can only trust the PNM MPC Government

to create such a perfect storm, eh. But, Mr. President, many on the other side have misled the public, they have told us that the problem with forex is because of grapes and apples, online purchases, and so on. But, Mr. President, nobody believes the PNM when they yap about these things. Let me tell you what really caused the foreign exchange crisis, a number of things but I will tell you the main key ones, Mr. President.

Firstly, they could say what they want, the closure of Petrotrin took out of this market, US \$350 million. That is how much Petrotrin was bringing in, in foreign exchange every year. You shut that down, it is out of the system. Let me tell you what else, Mr. President, foreign direct investment dried up. Under this PNM, big companies such as ArcelorMittal, such as Lever Brothers, one-third of the Point Lisas industrial estate—I think it might be down to a half now, have shut their doors, Mr. President, with billions of dollars in Foreign Direct Investment leaving our shores. And I listened to the Minister of Trade and Industry laughing, I hope the hon. lady with very soft hands laughs when I give her the figure of the FDI escaping this country. I have it.

**Sen. Nakhid:** Give them.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** I am going to—you know something, let me give it to them one time.

**Sen. Nakhid:** Give it.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Mr. President, let me give it to them one time. You see, Mr. President, it was in 2021, we were the worst in the Caribbean when it came to FDI. We were the worst generation. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, World Investment Report 2024

bears worse news, listen to this, Mr. President, I have to hold the paper to tell you this. Mr. President, the report reminds us that in 2021, I am taking it from the report, eh. Trinidad and Tobago drew US \$-935 million in foreign direct investment inflows. Mr. President, in 2022 Trinidad and Tobago again draws \$-913 million in foreign direct inflows. Mr. President, in 2023—take a deep breath, take a deep breath for this one, Mr. President. The report tells us that Trinidad and Tobago drew a \$-1.3 billion in FDI inflows making Trinidad and Tobago—and they state it—the worst FDI performer of all small island developing states in the world, Mr. President.

**Sen. Nakhid:** Shame, shame.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** The worst in the world.

**Sen. Nakhid:** The worst in the world.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** That is almost \$3 billion in negative FDI inflows in three years. Mr. President, you know it is very simple, you know evil “cah create, you know, evil does only ruin”.

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

**Sen. Nakhid:** Oh, god.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Mr. President, everyone is hurting because of this multi-year foreign exchange crisis, except, of course, the PNM friends and financiers. But the SMEs, individual citizens who struggle to purchase goods, send their children to school—Minister of Tourism, you know, send their children to school abroad, you know, and maybe even to go away to get medical care, Mr. President, right? But, I want to tell you the one that hit us the worst recently now, Mr. President. I told you that there were several crises, but the third crisis is actually one of the greatest contributors to the

foreign exchange crisis that we have today. You see, that is the crisis of the VAT refunds in this country. You see the PNM treats foreign exchange as though, you know, it is not killing the business at all, you know, they favour—let me tell you, Sen. Roberts, you will love this one, man. The PNM's favourite pastime is to create a crisis, then use an expensive solution to fix the crisis, and then expect you to praise them for fixing that crisis while creating an even bigger crisis, Mr. President. That is the PNM philosophy.

So what do we see? As of March 2023, the Government was owing \$7.8 billion in VAT refunds. Then the Minister announced that the Government would address this problem by issuing some \$3 billion in bonds at 3.15 per cent interest to pay these VAT refunds. Mr. President, for their failure to pay back VAT refunds, you know what the citizens of this country have to pay after three years? They have to pay \$283 million in interest, citizens have to pay, and taxpayers have to pay for these bonds, Mr. President. Because you see they have not gotten away from this debt, they have simply shifted the VAT refund debt from the manufacturers now over to the banks who have cashed in the bonds.

**Sen. Nakhid:** I like that one.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** That is what they have done.

**Sen. Nakhid:** I like that one.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Mr. President, and what is even worse is the Minister himself in the other place admitted that the payment of this \$3 billion, the lion's share, over 80 per cent was to these energy companies. Well, Mr. President, if you understand the way these energy companies work, they sell

their products for foreign exchange. They then trade this foreign exchange into the Central Bank for TT cash to pay their local bills, to pay their staff, x, y, z. So, that is a very important amount of foreign exchange coming into our economy. But, Mr. President, when 80 per cent of the \$3 billion has gone to these energy companies, they no longer have to change their foreign exchange. So you are literally wiping out above \$300 million more US from the economy. That is what you are doing, that is how the crisis happened or was exacerbated last year, Mr. President, and not just me alone, you know.

I listened to other chambers like AmCham speak about this, energy sector companies speak about this. In fact, the hon. Minister of Finance even admitted in the other place that this caused a problem. I want to read it for you, Mr. President, I want to read it for you. But what I want to tell you is this, since that \$3 billion was paid, do you know earlier this year I came again and asked the Minister where we were with VAT refunds, and let me tell you this, eh, hold on to your seat. “Ah keep telling yuh, hold on to yuh seat.”

**Sen. Nakhid:** [*Laughter*]

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Is “rell” rough information, Mr. President. When I asked a question, Mr. President, I found out that in March 2024 VAT refunds went back up to \$6.5 billion. You hearing that, \$6.5 billion.

**Sen. Nakhid:** Went back up.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** And when I asked the Minister of Finance what would the Government do to implement a proper management system to alleviate the problem of this heightening VAT refunds—

**Sen. Nakhid:** “What he say?”

**Sen. D. Lyder:**—here is what I said, Mr. President, it was on March 25<sup>th</sup> by the way—I planned this time, right? I asked:

“Does the Government have a new...”—substantial—“...formula that will help to regularly pay off...”—the VAT—“...refunds so it stops this continuous climb back up to \$7 billion...”

Which it probably is right now. You know what the hon. Minister’s response to me was?

“We are actively working on that.”

That was it, that was his response. Mr. President, so, I demanded a plan for this because without VAT refunds this is akin to a Government taking an interest-free loan from manufacturers in this country. Mr. President, an interest-free loan from manufacturers who need this money, SMEs who need this money to be able to expand and invest in their operations, Mr. President.

**7.10 p.m.**

But then, Mr. President, the Minister of Finance went in the other place.

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

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Thank you, Mr. President. The Minister of Finance went in the other place and announced another bond for the exact same purpose. I could not believe it, Mr. President, for the exact same purpose and the exact same amount. And what is odd is that the Minister gracefully acknowledged the damage that the previous bond did to the foreign exchange and comes back again to offer yet another bond of \$3 billion, and then we have to pay another \$200 and something million in interest, Mr. President, and create another foreign exchange crisis in this country again. That is what we heard,

Mr. President.

Mr. President, you know, I will tell you something. I want to run along here now because I was going to talk about crime and its impact on trade and industry, and the fact that business people now have to pay so much more to move money, to pay for cameras, to pay for security, and some of them have to pay a ransom, Mr. President, when their sons get kidnapped by people dressed as police. But I will leave that until the end.

I want to touch a little bit on tourism. I have to touch on tourism before I go, Mr. President. Because I heard the Minister of Finance boast about tourism. Mr. President, after this Government has spent \$2.5 billion in tourism, I want to give you—the Minister said, “Tourism is going great. We are rebounding.” Let me remind him, Mr. President, in 2015, air and sea arrivals—and this is from the CSO—under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, amounted to 442,000 persons coming to our shores in 2015. But under this Government in 2023—remember, excellent work being done by this Government—that dropped to 310,000, Mr. President. That is a 30 per cent decline in tourism under this Government today, Mr. President. So they are doing fantastic. They are doing fantastic, Mr. President. They lost 10,000—we have 10,000 less arrivals from the US and from Europe today, less foreign exchange into our country, Mr. President.

What is the plan that they have? The grand plan of coming with a new airport wing that they are boasting about. And the Minister “playing smart” and is telling us that it is \$800 and something million for that airport, when we know he had to pay \$3 billion to move people off their land. So it is \$1.2 billion that went into that project, Mr. President. You must never



forget that. I have the article here. I do not have the time to quote it, but that is what it is and I stand by that.

Mr. President, so no matter how much they do to fix, to build—they could build two or three airports. They could waste \$400 million on a Hilton hotel. They could put \$56.6 million to fix up the hotel for one of their friends and finances to come and take it and hoist a flag on it. Mr. President, they could come and try to fix the problem with the CAL pilots who are striking, so that they could get flights to go into the Tobago Carnival. “Ah see two Tobagonians here, dey are hoping fuh dem pilots tuh come off, so we could get de Tobago Carnival”. They could spend all the money on all these grants but, Mr. President, unless you deal with the problem that impacts trade and industry, and impacts agriculture and tourism, that of crime, you will not see growth of tourism in this country.

And I will tell you why, Mr. President. Quite simply, when we go and we look at the US immigration website, the Canadian IRCC website and the UK Government page, you see travel advisories all over the world that are putting damning reports on us, Mr. President. So that impacts our ability, Mr. President, to bring people into this country for tourism, to bring them for Carnival.

So as I close, Mr. President, crime is a central problem in this country, under this PNM, that has impacted the three pillars of diversification that they have boasted about: Trade and industry, agriculture and tourism. And I want to quote what the Ernst & Young Chairman, Wade George, said, where he actually echoed the Leader of the Opposition, the next Prime Minister, where he said, and I quote it to you today:

“... ‘there can be no prosperity without’”—safety and—“‘security...’”

So, Mr. President, as I end now, and I wrap up, Mr. President, I want to wrap up with words from another era, and the Minister of Finance will know this, Mr. President. Mr. President, this budget presentation is vacuous. This budget presentation is tenuous. Mr. President, it is frivolous. It is vexatious, Mr. President. It has no basis and no purpose. It is absurd, Mr. President, and I refuse to continue. I am out of here. “And if yuh name man, allyuh call de elections now”. I thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Patasar.

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

**Sen. Dr. Sharda Patasar:** Thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate today. I would like to focus my contribution, really, particularly on the Academy for the Performing Arts and the Creativity Campus. There is an allocation for \$1 million for NAPA for the maintenance. I have a question as to how much of that maintenance goes to the Academy for the Performing Arts, because I am aware that they are both now under two different Ministries. The Academy for the Performing Arts, that is under the Ministry of Education.

Now, the Academy is attached to NAPA. Right? That entire building is at the back of the NAPA building. It seems that that building is actually caught in some sort of tiff going on. I am not sure, so maybe we could have some clarification on that. But think of this, in a sense, as a wish list from the Academy, because the \$1 million allocation does not cover the maintenance of the Academy, and there are some issues where that teaching

faculty is concerned.

There are, first of all, the elevators. The elevators have not been working for at least two to three years. There are three floors in that building. The elevator also does not connect the most used section of the facility. So if there is an emergency and an ambulance has to be called, there is only one working elevator towards the southern end of the building. So they are asking that that be addressed somehow. There are students with disabilities, staff with disabilities. There is the teaching faculty, teaching classrooms on the second and third floors. There is also a music production programme, which requires the transportation of heavy equipment to lecture halls that are at the bottom floor.

So, the third issue is the transportation of instruments as well, because we have steelpans, we have cellos, we have drums. And recently, at the renaming of the Queen's Hall, we had the story about Winifred Atwell's hands. While we may not see an elevator as—perhaps, it is something trivial, it is very important for musicians, because they depend on their bodies for their livelihood basically. So, the faculty has asked that some consideration be given to the maintenance of those elevators—the fixing and maintenance of those elevators. The AC system as well needs to be addressed, because when there is a programme at NAPA, the AC has to be switched off in APA for that to be cooled properly.

There was a question about the Minister of Finance's \$500,000 incentive for businesses. Does that cover the tertiary education institutions?

**7.20 p.m.**

Thirdly, seeing that we are also focusing on youth development, there are instruments in the basement of APA which have been unused, and were previously supposed to be used for youth education, so those are youth-sized

instruments. Those have been deteriorating over the years with mould, the head of the academy thinks that they can be rehabilitated. So, perhaps we can have somebody do an inventory, because currently that basement is also dangerous, it is a health hazard.

So, then given that we are also focusing on the diversification of the economy, we are looking at the gaming programme that is offered, the game art specialization at the creativity campus. That programme actually is probably one of the things that covers the creative arts in technology, because the development of that industry will require people like writers, programmers, people in animation, music, sound, et cetera. The faculty currently has equipment that is 12 to 13 years old, so they cannot run a proper programme, so of course, that is frustrating over their instructors. The sum quoted for at least 25 machines is \$250,000. That is all you need. So, that would be one issue plus the security, because the campus is a very easy place to break into. So, the security has to be looked at there. So, for me, the creative arts, of course, is something that I am very, very invested in, the education in the creative arts is something that I am invested in.

The Government is currently on a drive towards boosting a sense of national identity. We have looked at the GI status for pan, and we have been renaming monuments, looking at the Coat of Arms, we have recently renamed the Queen's Hall auditorium, but that building of national identity does not simply lie in your buildings, it has to be in the human resource. It lies in grounding—giving us accordingly that sense of belonging and pride. So, I think that the robustness of the tertiary education situation is something

that we have to focus on. I see the national university as a very good idea but it needs work. So, with that, thank you.

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

**Mr. President:** The Attorney General.

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

**The Attorney General and The Minister of Legal Affairs (Sen. the Hon. Reginald Armour SC):** Thank you very much, Mr. President, for the opportunity this afternoon, this evening rather, to join this debate, and I want to say, that I am once again standing here with a sense of pride, and a sense of honour to participate on behalf of the Government in this debate.

Mr. President, I begin by unreservedly stating my full endorsement of the fiscal package presented by the hon. Minister of Finance on September 30<sup>th</sup> a well-thought-out, well-crafted, and disciplined fiscal plan in very trying circumstances. I am proud to be associated with the budget.

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

**Sen. the Hon. R. Armour SC:** Today, Mr. President, I am pleased to report on some of the progress that the Office of The Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs has made over the last year. We have worked to upgrade our legislative framework, introduced reforms through amendments and stand-alone legislation, and to address inefficiencies within our justice system over the past year. Our achievements are part of our ongoing efforts to continuously improve the outputs of the Ministry, and reflect our commitment to justice, ease of doing business, transparency, fairness, and good governance in Trinidad and Tobago.

May I say, immediately, Mr. President, that as I give this account, and comment this evening on the work, and accomplishment of the departments, units, and institutions under the remit of the Office of The Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, I can only skim the surface, and I wish to advise the listening public that they must appreciate that none of what I report on today could have been accomplished without the dedication, and very hard work of every individual who, together make up the AGLA family as I always refer to them on our chat group.

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

**Sen. the Hon. R. Armour SC:** AGLA, being the Attorney General and Legal Affairs.

**Mr. Imbert:** [*Inaudible*] [*Laughter*]

**Sen. the Hon. R. Armour SC:** Mr. President, the criminal justice system is an area that I will spend a little time on, in addressing the issue of crime, it is an important area for us to look at in the work that has been done by the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. It remains a central focus shaping the legislative, strategic, and operational priorities of my Ministry and this Government at every level. Reflecting on the progress which we have achieved, and while there is still much left to do, there is much to commend, Mr. President.

The legal landscape of Trinidad and Tobago has undergone significant and thoughtful reform. I am pleased to report that over the past year, we have seen several key developments that are positioning our criminal justice system for enhancement and resilience. The work of the Office of the Attorney General has been one of balance, modernizing where needed, while

preserving the foundational principles guiding our rule of law. The amendments and legislative initiatives introduced this year are the product of careful deliberation and strategy. They are not just responses to immediate challenges, but concrete steps towards a strengthened justice system that is more effective and more accessible to every citizen.

Mr. President, you would have heard me say, and members of the public would have heard me say a number of things from the abolition of preliminary inquiries through the amended Administration of Justice (Indictable Proceedings) Act, the vital work of enhancing public safety through the Bail (Amdt.) Act, and firearms legislation, and I will focus on some of those this evening.

I am proud to say, Mr. President, that in the discharge of my constitutional function as Attorney General, and I said it in the other place when I was at the Standing Finance Committee, I am humbled to play the role of what is referred to as the constitutional conduit between the Judiciary, one arm of the State and the Executive, another arm of the State in the governance that we are all committed to, in helping this country to move forward and develop. And, I say that quite deliberately, and I have said it differently on other occasions, because it is important for the public to understand as the different arms of the State work together to advance society that there has to be a comity of relations to keep open the lines of communication between the hon. Chief Justice, as the administrative head of the Judiciary on the one hand, with his administrative team, and the Executive and its agencies and departments, to ensure the resources and

Government's support are provided for judicial operations and court improvement initiatives.

That brings me to the subject of the abolition of preliminary inquiries, Mr. President. With the 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2023 proclamation of the amended Administration of Justice (Indictable Proceedings) Act, 2011—so, bear in mind the 2011 Act, proclaimed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, 2023, and the simultaneous commencement of the Criminal Procedure Rules 2023, a decade-long consultative process has now birthed a significant legislative accomplishment.

**7.30 p.m.**

Prior to the implementation of AJIPA, Mr. President, stakeholder engagement was undertaken to ensure readiness. In December 2023, the Judiciary of Trinidad and Tobago, in collaboration with the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, embarked on a sensitization programme for stakeholders in the criminal justice system on AJIPA and the systems and processes contained therein. The simultaneous commencement of AJIPA and the Criminal Procedure Rules has, among other things, empowered the Judiciary to take charge of the speed of trials by establishing and insisting on adherence to strict timelines, ensuring an expedited criminal trial process, among other things.

This accomplishment has played a pivotal role, Mr. President, in addressing long-standing delays in the criminal justice system. AJIPA, coupled with the Criminal Procedure Rules 2023, represents a bold and necessary step in modernizing how we handle serious criminal matters. This is tangible progress in the fight against crime and the efficient, expeditious



and humane delivery of justice. I stress humane, particularly because by the application of Rule 1.5, among others, of the Criminal Procedure Rules, all criminal courts are now given comprehensive powers to ensure that children who come before them have their matters appropriately addressed before the Children Court, as opposed to ordinary Magistrates' Court and masters' court. That court is itself a phenomenal and caring, unique institution like no other court. I had the privilege to visit it and spend a couple days there when I took office, and it is truly a unique institution in this country.

I stress that as I listen, because I listened to Sen. Teemal when he spoke caringly and feelingly about the crisis that we have in our society with the breakdown of the family unit and family structure. I emphasize the point in answer to Sen. Teemal, that one of the things that we have to ensure that we do as we build our institutions is that we build them to be sensitive to and to help restore the fabric of our society. And, one of the things that has taken place with AJIPA and the Criminal Procedure Rules, coupled with the pre-existing Children Court, is to emphasize the importance of healing and providing care for our young children who are going astray.

Mr. President, AJIPA replaces that previous criminal justice system of preliminary enquiries, which sometimes took as long as 10 years to complete. We remind ourselves that this was the process before the actual trial and indictment could even begin, which itself, the trial, could take another three years. AJIPA introduces new procedures for handling indictable offences, establishing a framework for sufficiency hearings instead of preliminary enquiries to proceed to trial. The system empowers the Master of the High Court to review evidence, witness statements and

exhibits before a case reaches trial to ensure that the cases with merit can move forward.

We have already begun to witness the benefit of that. There was a recent case, *The State v Sheldon Doodnath*, published by the Judiciary on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, in a rare media release, which the Judiciary put out to alert the public to the significant progress that had begun to take place under AJIPA. This was a matter in which the case was filed on the 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2024. The offence—remembering that AJIPA came in, in December 2023, the offences charged included kidnapping and larceny of a motor vehicle. The sufficiency hearing was concluded on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024. So within a space of four months, what would have been a preliminary enquiry that could have taken six to 10 years was completed. The case was determined within the space of that year. So that is part of the significant improvements that have been made under AJIPA.

When the Chief Justice spoke at the opening of term, we had the material which was given to us, so we were able to see that under AJIPA between January the 1<sup>st</sup> and June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 20 persons were discharged before a Master, 43 persons were able to enter guilty pleas. That is the process by which AJIPA has already begun to impact and expedite the criminal justice system. And, we had that one case which, as I said, went from beginning to end in a matter of months, within one calendar year.

So that is part of the progress that we have to recognize that we are experiencing and as we enter the new fiscal year, we will continue—the Government will continue—to support the Judiciary with AJIPA and the necessary resources. Importantly, because speed must not come at the

expense of procedural fairness, the procedural fairness enshrined in AJIPA affords both the prosecution and the defence the opportunity to present their cases, before a Master makes any decision. The Act defines the rules and responsibilities of all legal actors, thereby providing greater clarity and accountability in the criminal justice system.

Mr. President, my Office has ensured that stakeholders are continuously engaged to obtain their feedback on how AJIPA is operating. This continuous dialogue has already led to further amendments, which we have brought to this august Chamber. So we brought the Administration of Justice (Indictable Proceedings) (Amdt.) Act, 2024, which provided greater clarity on who qualifies as a police officer under the Act. Later in this very year, we amended Section 33 of the Preliminary Enquiries Act to ensure that that Act continues to apply to extradition matters. So we are continuing, as we say, to improve our legislation.

Mr. President, bail is another very important area in which my Office has been working very hard in coordinated legislative amendments. And, as I talk about legislative amendments, Mr. President, let me make it very clear that the work that we are doing on bringing legislation to this Parliament could not take place without the very committed hard work of some of the departments of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. We have the Law Reform Commission—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:**—which researches the policy that informs the law. We have the Chief Parliamentary Counsel, who drafts the law. We have our Criminal Justice Unit, who function as a Legislative Review

Committee Secretariat and brings a lot of the material to the fore. So that work could not take place but for the very hardworking units within the Ministry.

The Bail (Amd-t.) Act 2024, Mr. President. In 2024, we passed an Act in this Parliament that bail can be granted to a person charged with murder in exceptional circumstances, and a key component of that amendment is the shift in the burden for bail in serious offences. So individuals charged with such crimes must demonstrate exceptional circumstances to justify their release on bail. The Act has imposed bail restrictions on persons charged with specified offences, or where firearm or prohibited weapon or imitation firearm was used or found to be in the possession of the accused, or any other person involved in the commission of the offence. The High Court will continue to hear applications for murder under AJIPA. Those applications are now speeded up, and allowances are made for the accused or the prosecution to appeal decisions of the High Court to either grant or refuse bail in certain circumstances to the Court of Appeal.

Mr. President, consistent with the commitment to maintaining a responsive and very relevant legal framework, the Bail (Amdt.) Act 2024, also introduces a mandatory five-year review of the Bail Act. So we are keeping the legislation under review to ensure that we keep up with the reality as the society is evolving. These measures embody a balanced thoughtfulness, which has been characteristic of this Administration's approach, safeguarding individual rights while protecting the society from those who would exploit a lenient bail system. We are sending a strong and

unequivocal message. While we uphold the rights of every citizen, we will not allow our justice system to be undermined by a relatively small number of individuals who pose a threat to the interests and security of our people.

Mr. President, continuing on the topic of bail, but from a slightly different perspective, I am also pleased to report that the Law Reform Commission has brought recommendations to me, which I have under consideration for further potential amendments to the Bail Act, consistent with our anti-money laundering and counter-financing and terrorism laws, and our unwavering commitment to combating money laundering in Trinidad and Tobago. Among these recommendations is a provision that could grant the court, of course, we have to take it to the Cabinet and bring it to the Parliament, but it could grant the court power to order an investigation into the source of funds or real property used to secure bail, so that the source of funds of the persons who are offering the bail will come under scrutiny.

**7.40 p.m.**

These recommendations are currently under consideration and will undergo stakeholder consultations before I take them to Cabinet.

### **PROCEDURAL MOTION**

**The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):** Mr. President, in accordance with Standing Order 14(5), I beg to move that the Senate continue to sit until 9.30 p.m. Thank you.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**APPROPRIATION BILL (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2024**

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:** Thank you very much, Mr. President. I was about to move to the subject of firearms; the menace of illegal firearms and weapons which continue to threaten our society. We have been working on this as well in the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, Mr. President, and this Chamber will recall the Firearms (Amdt.) Act No. 18 of 2019, which had introduced the offence of firearm trafficking and implemented a tiered system of penalties for first, second and third-time offences and significantly increased the fines and the penalties.

We have moved beyond that, and with the passage of the Firearms (Amdt.) Act, also known as Act No. 2 of 2023, this has represented a significant step by this Government towards addressing critical policy objectives in the area of public safety and security. Key provisions of this legislation which we have put into law in the work that we have done last year include permitting prison officers to carry firearms while off-duty, subject, of course, to the discretion of the Commissioner of Prisons; permitting officers of the municipal police service to have in their possession certain non-lethal devices, such as Tasers, to assist these officers in discharging their duties and responsibilities in a more effective and safe manner and; the introduction of the Firearm User Identification Card, a significant innovation equipped with advanced security features designed to ensure that firearms are meticulously tracked and their users clearly identified. So we have continued that work on the amendments, Mr. President, and additional to the amendments just mentioned, in its policy and legislative capacity, my office continues a very comprehensive review of the entire Firearms Act.

Only recently, this country was advised by the hon. Prime Minister in his budget remarks in this debate—on this very budget in the other place—that the Government was considering further amendments to the Firearms Act to ban automatic weapons and long-range rifles. I am pleased to advise this august Chamber, Mr. President, that in consultation with the Ministry of National Security, with input from the Office of the Commissioner of Police, the Law Reform Commission, on Friday last, the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, has presented for my consideration, draft amendments to the Firearms Act, and in this regard, I shall shortly be taking these to the Legislative Review Subcommittee of the Cabinet, and in due course, to the Parliament for passage. And that is to say, firearms amendments to ban assault weapons and long-range rifles.

Mr. President, additionally, there have been a number of legislative review workshops that have been continuing under the auspices of my Ministry at strengthening firearms legislation in Trinidad and Tobago, and these have been conducted since April and June of 2022, and continuing to May of this year. These workshops have been funded by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and in collaboration with my Ministry, have facilitated the attendance and participation of a large number of organizations, with representatives from the Ministry of National Security, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the Public Defender's Department, Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, Customs and Excise, Tobago Forensic Science Centre, and a number of other national defence agencies and arms.

The Office of the Attorney General was represented by officers of the Legislative Drafting Department, the Law Reform Commission, the

International Law and Human Rights Unit, and the Criminal Justice Unit. Mr. President, this suite of criminal justice legislation which is being enacted, the training and the workshops, the stakeholder consultations, and international partnerships represent this Government's continuing commitment to the advancement of our efforts to strengthen the regulation of firearm control and use across Trinidad and Tobago, ensuring that appropriate measures are in place for both law enforcement and the wider public.

In January 2023, in conjunction with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the Bureau International Narcotics and Law Enforcement of the United States Department of State, the Pan American Development Foundation, and the Office of the Attorney General conducted a capacity-building exercise. This initiative aimed to enhance processes for evidence-gathering, strengthening the enforcement of the Anti-Gang Act, and improving the overall effectiveness of our fight against gang-related crime, and to significantly enhance the knowledge and skills of participants from the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service Intelligence Unit, focusing on the effective use, maintenance, and organization of information obtained from informants.

Additionally, a further workshop was conducted in April 2024, which focused on examining the evidence and investigative processes required under the Civil Asset Recovery and Management and Unexplained Wealth Act, 2019, particularly concerning cash seizures. I am pleased to report, Mr. President, that all of this work has recently culminated in the production of a gang investigations handbook, specially tailored for the Trinidad and



Tobago Police Service, which is serving as a valuable tool in their ongoing fight against gangs.

We also have a piece of legislation which the Prime Minister also referred to recently in the budget debate in the other place, Mr. President, and that is the controlled operations Bill, which is a piece of legislation that is in draft and we have under consideration forming part of the Government's comprehensive efforts to modernize and strengthen our legal framework. That Bill will be a significant step forward in addressing the challenges faced by law enforcement authorities when it comes to gathering evidence in complex investigations, particularly those involving criminal organizations and transnational organization offences.

The significance of that Bill is that it goes beyond the present Firearms Act, which provides that evidence obtained through controlled deliveries is admissible in court, but is confined to firearms-related offences. In today's world, where criminal networks are becoming more sophisticated and operate across borders, the controlled operations Bill will provide law enforcement with the tools necessary, beyond just firearms-related offences, related to serious offences necessary to investigate and dismantle those operations.

And I mentioned those two pieces of proposed legislation; the Firearms (Amdt.) Bill with respect to assault weapons, and now the controlled operations Bill, from the perspective of confirming to the Opposition that as soon as these Bills are ready for discussion, I will be taking it to them to invite them to join with us in the fight against crime

when we bring these Bills to the Parliament. I will be taking it to them before I take it to the Parliament to invite their agreement on the provisions.

Mr. President, I move to anti-terrorism and the National Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism Committee, NAMLC. As we strengthen our legal framework for international cooperation, our efforts are equally focused on ensuring the integrity and resilience of our financial systems. That is very important in the context of the very strong fiscal plan that the hon. Minister of Finance has laid out in his budget remarks on this fiscal plan. Mr. President, over the past year, Trinidad and Tobago has made remarkable strides in enhancing its financial governance, with significant progress towards compliance with international standards. This is particularly evident in the work achieved in relation to the Financial Action Task Force and the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes. These advancements reflect this Government's unwavering dedication in upholding a transparent, secure, and rigorous financial system, essential to our economic stability, and continued growth. The role of the FATF, Financial Action Task Force, as the global standard setting for combating money laundering, terrorist financing, and proliferation financing, is critical to ensuring a secure and viable international financial system.

In the Caribbean, we have the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force. Work has been done very effectively to remove Trinidad and Tobago from the grey list in 2020, and we are now going into our Fifth Round of Mutual Evaluation with a view to moving Trinidad and Tobago forward even further.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:** The introduction of significant pieces of AML, anti-money laundering, and CFT legislation represents a cornerstone of our efforts in the financial sector, introducing much stricter compliance obligations for financial institutions and designated non-financial businesses and professionals.

**7.50 p.m.**

These entities are now required to adopt far more stringent AML and CFT protocols, contributing to a stronger, more resilient system, capable of detecting and preventing financial crime. At the same time, Mr. President, considerable investments were made to boost the capacity of the Financial Intelligence Unit of Trinidad and Tobago and other key agencies, ensuring that they are better equipped to enforce these regulations and monitor compliance across the financial sector.

Mr. President, the improvement of the diligent oversight at the Registrar General's Department, in ensuring compliance with all relevant laws concerning financial transparency, whether under FATF, the Financial Action Task Force, the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force, or the Global Forum, or other various tax information exchange agreements, has been instrumental in our progress, so that the steadfast commitment of Trinidad and Tobago has allowed Trinidad and Tobago to successfully extricate itself from blacklisting by FATF and CFATF. Additionally, thanks to the tireless efforts of the hon. Minister of Finance, in tandem with his high-level committee, we are well on our way to satisfying the requirements of the Global Forum framework.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:** These achievements have sent a strong message, Mr. President, to the international community, reinforcing our standing as a compliant and stable financial institution. The implications for our economy, as we discuss this budget, are profound. Investor confidence, adversely affected by our former grey listing, has been notably restored. Foreign direct investment is on the rise, buoyed by the perception that Trinidad and Tobago now offers a safer and more reliable environment for international business. FATF compliance is an ongoing process. The Government is fully aware of the need to sustain the momentum of reform. Continued adherence to FATF's evolving standards will require further investment in our regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms.

Specifically, Mr. President, there is growing recognition of the need to address emerging threats, such as those posed by virtual assets and the ever-evolving landscape of financial technologies. Our legal framework must remain adaptable, and amendments to existing laws may be necessary to stay ahead of these developments. The Government is already working on initiatives to strengthen oversight in these areas, ensuring our compliance with the FATF standards.

Through my Ministry, Mr. President, this Government has been working assiduously in training sessions for our FATF assessor trainers, as we work towards our fifth round mutual evaluation. We have already participated and continue to contribute in the CFATF plenary and working group meetings. In fact, Trinidad and Tobago will be the first CFATF member country to enter the fifth round mutual evaluation process and will

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC cont'd)

present the mutual evaluation report no later than December 31, 2026, and there is ongoing work at every stage along the way.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:** This process will be rigorous, much more results-oriented, focusing on specific actions to tackle money laundering, terrorist financing and the financing of weapons of mass destruction. The shorter cycle, the greater scrutiny and the strong follow-up mechanisms will ensure that the Government stays focused on taking effective action to detect, prevent and punish money laundering, terrorist financing and the financing of proliferation. We have participated in a number of meetings already: February 2024, June 2024, one in May 2024, and an upcoming meeting in December 2024, all of the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force body.

Mr. President, along with the efforts on FATF, Trinidad and Tobago has made equally significant strides in aligning with the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes. The Global Forum plays a pivotal role in promoting transparency, combating tax evasion, through the exchange of financial information between jurisdictions. Our commitment to these principles was enshrined in law with the recent passage of the Miscellaneous Provisions (Global Forum) Bill, 2024. This legislation marks a major advancement in our drive to meet international standards for tax transparency.

Mr. President, the framework that we are building is a cornerstone of global efforts to ensure tax authorities have access to the necessary data to detect and combat illicit financial activities, and for Trinidad and Tobago,

this is a pivotal moment in modernizing our tax administration. And I will mention a little later on, the tax matter that we recently won in the Privy Council, which is an important part of our building out of our Revenue Authority. So by implementing the protocols, we have significantly enhanced the capacity of our tax authorities to prevent evasion and ensure compliance with international tax obligations.

Mr. President, recovering criminal assets remains a critical element of Trinidad and Tobago's strategy to combat money laundering, terrorist financing and proliferation financing. By successfully confiscating and forfeiting assets linked to criminal activities, we not only disrupt the profit motive behind crime, but also deter future criminality. Our commitment to FATF compliance is demonstrated by the implementation in this jurisdiction of the Civil Asset Recovery and Management and Unexplained Wealth Act. There was landmark ruling on 31 January, 2023. The Court of Appeal upheld the constitutionality of this Act and reinstated preliminary unexplained wealth orders against three nationals of Trinidad and Tobago, remitting their cases for further hearing. This ruling is a significant step in ensuring that those who profit from criminal activity are not only convicted but are stripped of their ill-gotten assets.

It is a remarkable piece of legislation that allows, on the basis of reasonable suspicion, law enforcement to seize assets and to require, on a shifted onus of proof, the person in whose name those assets belong to prove that they have the means by which they have come to afford that asset. So the onus of proof is shifted to allow them to demonstrate that these are not ill-gotten gains.

Mr. President, we continue to work continuously in the FATF and Global Forum areas, and I would mention, in our commercial viability, the Arbitration Act, which we passed in 2023. Only last week I was to speak on it, and because I was involved in the Standing Finance, I was privileged to ask my good Senator, Sen. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal, to stand in and make remarks at the very important arbitration conference, which took place right here in Trinidad and Tobago. And we remind ourselves, when I spoke here last on that Bill, that that piece of legislation, which came into effect in 2023, replaced a 1923 piece of legislation and has breathed life into our commercial climate and our capacity to attract foreign-based entities.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:** Mr. President, as we continue to develop, I have already mentioned the Registrar General's Department, and apart from the contributions to the Financial Action Task Force and Global Forum work, that Registrar General's Department has long been a cornerstone of our nation's administrative and legal framework. It is responsible for some of the most essential functions in the public service, including the registration of births, marriages, deaths and deeds, as well as the administration of land titles. I will say that the incident, which has been causing some concern in Tobago with the Registrar General's Department, was resolved by a very clear Cabinet Minute that has transferred the functions of the C-A-S-T, CAST, to the Registrar General, with responsibility to look after the affairs of the Registrar General's Department for all of Tobago, and I am optimistic that that is going to make a significant difference.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC cont'd)

Over the last few years, Mr. President, the Registrar General's Department has embarked on a journey of digital transformation, and we would have heard from the hon. Minister of Digital Transformation already, and I thank him for the work that he has done in assisting this in the whole-of-government approach that we as a Government have towards evolving all of our Ministries.

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:** Thank you—to contribute. So we have spoken there of the work of the registry, the Registrar General's Department.

There is the Central Authority Unit, Mr. President, which deals with extradition matters and they are also a key member of the National Anti-Money Laundering and Counter Financing of Terrorism Committee, working to align our standards with the global framework for the Financial Action Task Force.

Very recently, only last week Friday, with the work of members of the CPC's department and the Central Authority Unit, I was able to commit Trinidad and Tobago to putting forward the CARICOM arrest warrant, as a model Bill, to the Heads of Government—

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:**—and we will shortly be bringing local legislation in Trinidad to make, as our domestic law, a CARICOM arrest warrant domestic piece of legislation.

**8.00 p.m.**

Mr. President, I turn to record my appreciation to the leadership of two persons in particular in a recent development, about which I am quite



proud. And I am speaking here of the passage of the Miscellaneous Provisions (Judicial Legal Service) Act, 2024. I want to acknowledge the very hard work of Ms. Rachel Thurab, immediate past Acting Solicitor General, and Mr. Sean Julien, Chief State Solicitor, now Chief State Attorney, under the new law that is introducing a sea change in the Civil Law Department that is going to enhance the efficiency of the service to Trinidad and Tobago, of significantly improved legal services. That is also bringing the Children's Attorney, under the rubric of the Civil Law Department, and has also introduced significant amendments to the Patents Act, to give contract officers the authority to do much more expanded expert work for the international—for the IPU, international—sorry, I lost my trend of thought there. The IPU office.

So, we are—Intellectual Property Office, Mr. President. So, we are looking forward to the sea change that has been introduced by that particular piece of legislation. And as I come to a close, Mr. President, I want to spend just a little bit of time on acknowledging a very significant endeavour that the office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, participated in last month, September, and that is a national consultation domestic violence in our society. This Government recognizes the ills of domestic violence in our society. We seek to build consultative mechanisms within government, international and regional agencies, academia, non-governmental organizations—I was very impressed in that consultation, which took place on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September, 2024, at the considerable body of work that is being done by the hon. Minister Ayanna Webster-Roy, in the Office of the Prime Minister—

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC cont'd)

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

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:**—on that particular area of domestic violence and giving support to persons who are in need of greater protection, and who can rely on the resources of the Government, particularly through the Office of the Prime Minister, under Minister Ayanna Webster-Roy. And, Mr. President, the crime symposium is something that I will mention briefly. We know that we had a very important public health issue, crime symposium in Trinidad and Tobago in October, 2023. There has been a significant development on that crime symposium. Since then, there have been developments on that, in Guyana, Barbados and Belize. And there is actually a follow-up crime symposium taking the cue from our lead in October 2023, a further crime symposium, that is going to be hosted in Guyana, next month November, by Barbados, in Guyana, because Barbados is taking that second crime symposium, following on our lead in October last year to Guyana, to coincide with the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Guyana in November. So, it is going to be quite an interesting conversation that is going to take place, in the context of something that Trinidad and Tobago led on, that is to say, crime as a public health issue.

Mr. President, that brings me to the close. As I said at the beginning, I could not do justice to the work that this Ministry has been doing over the last year in the 40 minutes allocated to me, but I want to go on record to thank hon. Minister Sagramsingh-Sooklal, Minister in the Office of the Attorney General—

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

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC cont'd)

**Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:**—and all of the other very significant—and it is invidious to call names, so I will not, but I do want to acknowledge Mrs. Sagramsingh-Sooklal, but I thank every Member of the Office of the Attorney General for the very hard work and I am proud to be associated with. Thank you very much.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Richards.

**Sen. Dr. Paul Richards:** Thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to participate in this budget debate, 2025. And like the Minister of Finance, it seemed like just yesterday I was making my first budget contribution and—that was actually almost 10 years ago, already—my, how time flies. Before I begin my substantive contribution, I would like to take a moment to send condolences to the colleagues and family of former Laventille West, MP, NiLeung Hypolite, who recently passed away, and I think the few interactions I had with him, he was such a gentleman and such a good soul. So, may he rest in eternal peace. I am sure he will be missed, and not only in the political arena, but certainly he was a very active Member of the Lions—and made so many contributions to civil society. So, to his family, friends and colleagues, condolences and sympathies and prayers, go to you. And also I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate and welcome Sen. Ancil Dennis, to the honourable House, that his appointment today, brings it to six Tobagonians in this honourable Chamber.

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

**Sen. Dr. P. Richards:** Which I think including—not wishing to draw the hon. Chair into debate. But six?—

**Hon. Senator:** Six?

**Sen. Dr. P. Richards:** Yes. I think it is six. Yes. Sen. John, Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy, Sen. Bacchus, Sen. Dennis, Sen. Hislop and the Chair. So, six. I think that is a pretty resounding development.

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

**Sen. Dr. P. Richards:** [*Member laughs*]. So, my contribution will be very focused. I have learnt not to be too ambitious, and try to cover too many areas. So, it will be focused on an overriding theme, given the Minister's budget statement title of "Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity". And I see some initiatives focused on one, stabilization and two, some pathways. But, I ask the question, earnestly, are the pathways equitably available to all, all groups? And, I know you operate in a particularly capitalist environment, which generally does not tend to favour equity all the time, particularly, when it comes to wealth creation. But I will go through some of my concerns, particularly in the areas of education, which our colleague Sen. Teemal went into. Crime, in which I will focus specifically on vulnerable groups, children in particular, intimate partner violence. The hon. Attorney General, just spoke about the public consultation, the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, held late last month, which I had the honour to participate in, as a moderator to one of the panels, which really presented some really startling and disturbing trends in Trinidad and Tobago. So, I think that needs some more attention.

And I also want to focus a bit on the issue of the CSO and the National Statistical Institute, which is long in coming, given the issues related to contemporary data in Trinidad and Tobago, and the need for that

institute. I know there have been many stumbling blocks and political some otherwise in the establishment of that institute, but I think it is a critical institute to come on stream in Trinidad and Tobago. Because, we seem to be making decisions, on extremely delayed information and data, while other jurisdictions are making decisions with contemporary data, putting us at a significant disadvantage, coupled with that, the recent imbroglio between the office of the Auditor General, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Legal Affairs, over audited financial statements in the country, which I think there are some resolution to come out of that. And if we are having, these kinds of basic—well, what I should consider basic information, being the subject of so much controversy, it leads to an erosion of confidence in the systems that provide even basic data upon which the State is making significant decisions. And I think in that situation—to his credit—the Minister of Finance came to the Parliament and identified the \$3.4 billion understatement, which started the whole imbroglio.

**8.10 p.m.**

So the budget statement focused the largest share on education and training, \$7.512 billion; health, \$7.571 billion; national security, \$6.113 billion, of which the Minister indicated in the other place that the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, over the years, over the last 10 years, has received \$26 billion of the State's investment in national security and public safety. We have to ask ourselves, \$26 billion and nine-plus years later, has that investment, which is a significant investment—it is almost half of the investment in almost \$60 billion to \$70 billion in national security over the last 10 years—has it redounded to us feeling safer? Are we a safer country

after \$26 billion being spent? Because everything else does not matter if we are not safe and if we are under constant threat, and if our women and girls are under siege from rapes, domestic violence, and murder on a regular basis. It is a profound question, and the answer is, no.

We are not safer after \$26 billion spent in 10 years on the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, and there is a plethora of reasons for that, some social, many operational. I do believe this is after two acting commissioners and two substantive commissioners, including the present officeholder. We are not safer as a country after that investment. As a matter of fact, we are more unsafe as citizens and as a country, and I dare anyone to challenge me on that. Equally bad to the unsafe environment that puts us all at risk is the feeling of insecurity, the anxiety and the psychological distrust that comes with the uncertainty about our safety, which is even having a profound effect on us whether we want to admit it or not.

So one of the main themes of my contribution will be about equity in society. I “doh” know, I seem obsessed with our national anthem in recent times, particularly the last words, which are the lines repeated:

“Here every creed and race find an equal place,  
And may God bless our Nation.”

I think those are profound words. Maybe Patrick Castagne was trying to tell us something. Does every creed and race find an equal place in Trinidad and Tobago? Well, maybe a rhetorical question.

Many believe a budget is supposed to provide a framework, and the hon. Minister of Finance, I think he broke the record in the other place, spending five hours and 11 or 13 minutes, depending on who you speak to.

**Mr. Imbert:** Five hours and 30 minutes.

**Sen. Dr. P. Richards:** Five hours and 30 minutes, I stand corrected. And, even with that lengthy presentation, still people were saying, “Well, he didn’t cover everything.” Even with the Ministers and rebuttals from the Opposition, the wider society still has areas of interest that they would like covered, because it is almost impossible in any budget presentation, from any Minister of Finance, to cover everything.

It is a framework, but it should also give us a sense of how we have done and what we intend to do, and where we are going, and how we intend to fund it, how we intend to manage it, how we intend to execute, and hopefully measure our country’s performance in various sectors. To me, that is what a budget should do. It should present us with a framework. Generally, unfortunately, the budget does come down to in Trinidad and Tobago if gas going up; if food prices going up; if minimum wage is being charged; if we have additional taxes, revenue, expenditure; how much they are putting the gas and oil prices at; what is the overall expenditure, which in this case is \$59.74 billion; revenue, \$54.224 billion, projected, with a projected deficit of \$5.5 billion. All these are projections, as we have seen, because we are price takers in our environment. Our economy is an energy commodity-based economy. We are at the whims and fancies of international players and geopolitics.

So different sectors in society look for different aspects of the budget, the poor, the middle class, the business class, et cetera, all look for different areas of the budget that may be seeking to deal with their issues. And, of course, there are the questions pre, during, and post-pandemic about levels

of poverty in Trinidad and Tobago, particularly post-pandemic, which is a valid concern. Very often we think that there are provisions in the budget, and there are many provisions in the budget that seek to provide opportunities, but there are huge swathes of our population who do not even think that those are accessible to them for many different reasons.

There is a sense of learned helplessness. There is a sense of dependency. It has been developed. Grants and transfers have a place in society, but, to me, grants and transfers should be moving people to states of independence as opposed to constant dependence, because we cannot, as the Minister said in the other place, the hon. Minister of Finance, continue with the levels of transfers and subsidies that this country has become accustomed to over the last two, three decades. Even with that said, there is a sense by many of a sense of deep marginalization. Social divisions are growing, poverty, educational inequality, underperformance, which Sen. Teemal dealt with, and also the issue of crime.

You know, very often there are opportunities in sectors look down on in society. One of the examples of that is a glaring example to us all where a marginalized community in this country, looked down on as “Bad Johns”, the dregs of society, created an instrument which has turned out to be the pride of the country, which has the potential to actually lift us out in terms of the creative sector in so many different ways that we continue to overlook. And, yes, we are making some progress, we have passed legislation recently, commendably, to ensure it is the national instrument, but according to Sen. Patasarand Sen. Maharaj, what next?

What next is the plan for the steelpan to be monetized? I saw a



documentary on TikTok last week about the biggest pan factory in the world. One would imagine that is in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Senator:** In Japan.

**Sen. Dr. P. Richards:** I wonder if my colleagues think it is in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Senator:** Japan.

**Sen. Dr. P. Richards:** The answer is, no. One is in Japan and one is in the United States, putting out steelpans and making millions of dollars and we invented the instrument, and it is now our national instrument.

We have failed to make meaningful progress in monetizing to the level that we should, our creative sectors in this country, which is a trillion-dollar industry around the globe, and we will see people come and take our creativity and monetize it and leave us in the dust. Parallel to the pan as a symbol of our creativity and our ability to take nothing and make it into something, we have to look at our people in this same way, our human resource in the same way. Very often those—and ironically the pan came out of those communities that were looked down as nothing, dregs, because they are Laventille, crime area, hot spot, but those areas and those people created the only new musical invention in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century lauded around the world. It tells us that we have what it takes to come out of whatever situations we are and make something out of nothing.

One of issues I want to start by focusing on is the issue, of course, of educational marginalization, and I know there is a lot of input in the budget. Of course, the budget gives the largest share to education and training, \$7.512 billion, and I will go into some more details about some of the

initiatives inside the budget, including the numeracy portal that the Minister identified that is coming, I think, next year, and the investment in remedial lessons. But I will tell you, looking at the data, a lot of it is not working. A lot of it is creating or maintaining, or creating further marginalized groups and gaps in society.

You know, one of the things we have to ask ourselves when we are investing that much money, because we take a lot for granted in this country, what are the functions of education? A really basic question. We are spending \$7.5 billion, we spent over the last 10 years, almost \$80 billion in education and training, what are the functions of education? Well, I will tell you. One, socialization, creating core values across society, morals, norms, values that we all share that we can believe this is right and this is wrong; this is how to behave, this is how not to behave, and systems that keep us in check as human beings, because if we are not kept in check, we know how human beings can get.

**8.20 p.m.**

Two, social integration; promoting shared values, especially in a particularly pluralistic and diverse society like Trinidad and Tobago, easier said than done but if we understand that that is one of the functions of education and an education system, maybe we would spend and invest that money a bit differently. I will tell you, in Japan, which is very often—Singapore in particular—one of the changes they have made and also in the Scandinavian countries, in understanding the functions of education, the basic functions of education, before Math, Language Arts, Chemistry, Physics and the like, is understanding that from the very early stages of

human life you have to start to inculcate the values you want in that human being because you understand the values and the type of human being that you want to create to develop the society that you want down the road. So they have started many, many decades ago, understanding that the first three to five years of life is not necessarily about Math and English, it is about manners, politeness, values, what their society means. They go very hard on inculcating those values—discipline—so when they start the Math, Physics and Chem, the discipline is there and the understanding of who the human being is on path to be, has already started. So social integration.

Three, social and cultural innovation, another function of education. Skills development, human interaction skills, academic, vocational skills, critical thinking and problem solving. Is our Education system inculcating those values in our children in our learners at every level? Ask yourself. I am going to go through quite a bit of data to show you that it is not or it is not for a large segment of society.

Four, creating the type of citizen that best serves the advancement of that particular civilization because every culture and every civilization is different and the education system that is supposed to support the education of the person involves the family, the community, religious and cultural groups, mass and social media, and of course, the formal education system; early childhood care, primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary education. Is our education system—is this \$7.512 billion going towards that sort of system? Is it maintaining the status quo of a system that is not serving our society? For a large cadre of our learners, particularly in primary and secondary schools, it is not. It is not at all. As a matter of fact, a lot of that

money is going to maintain social divides; “prestige school/government school” and the implications that come with those sorts of divisions that create fractures in society that continue to drive us apart.

So let us start by using one of the main barometers by which we measure our education system’s success, the SEA examination, which many people want to abolish but, in any system you are going to come across standardized examinations, whether you like it or not. Whether you call it SEA or Common Entrance, at some point you are going to come across a standardized examination to test your performance against peers or a benchmark. This year’s SEA examination was analysed according to the percentage of students attaining three important thresholds, the percentage of students scoring above 50 per cent, 30 per cent and below, and above 90 per cent.

Now, from the very start those metrics are off to me. They are convenient but they are very off. They are off because they do not tell you the devil in the details and I know—I understand the 30 per cent is because that is the matriculation grade to move from primary to secondary school. That is one of the main problems we are facing with the education system, why we are seeing such high levels of underperformance at secondary school. If you tell me that you are moving students forward when they have attained 30 per cent or even 40 per cent, you are setting them up for strife and failure, “plain talk, bad manners”. It means that they do not have competence in most of the content they are supposed to have competence in, and you are putting them in a situation now, in secondary school, where they are not fully conversant with the material, they are going into a whole new

paradigm, a whole new curriculum, more load, and the ones who are under 40 per cent, not even 30 per cent; 40 per cent, start to struggle and the cracks start to show.

In 2024, the percentage of students scoring 50 and above on the SEA was 57.91 per cent, versus 58.06 per cent in 2023 and 37.06 per cent in 2022. As one would expect, coming out of the pandemic and lockdown and face-to-face classes resuming, the performance would increase. Additionally, in 2024, the percentage of students scoring 30 per cent or below was 14.39 per cent compared to 13.55 per cent in 2023, and 27.81 in 2022. So despite the investment from 2023, and let me get the numbers that I got out of the budget statement: 2023, the State spent \$12.618 million on remedial lessons; 2024, \$10 million, revised to \$7 million; and in 2025 it is envisioned that the State will spend \$8 million on remedial lessons.

Despite this investment, the percentage of students scoring under 30 per cent went up, more students scored under 30 per cent and that is also concerning. A total of 18,177 students sat the SEA examination in 2024. There was a slight decline in overall scores of students. The Ministry, reported—education that is—that 57.9 per cent or 10,524 students scored 50 per cent or above. That means 42.1 per cent or 7,653 students scored below 50 per cent, 7,600 students scoring below 50 per cent. Is that a successful benchmark? Is that something that says that the investment is paying off? Remember this is 50 per cent, eh. If I went home with a 50 per cent grade, I was in trouble, when I was going primary and secondary. I was in trouble. Yet, the State is boasting about this. We are failing our children.

Also, the communiqué from the Ministry indicated—hear the

wording—45 per cent of those schools showed a decline in percentage of students scoring 30 per cent or lower in SEA—45 per cent of 80 schools showed a decline. That means that 55 per cent did not. That is what that means. Those scoring under 30 per cent numbered 2,115. As I said before, keep in mind that we are investing \$7.5 billion and \$10 billion in remedial work of which I think 5,000 students would have accessed it. We have no data to see how well it did. We are spending another, \$8 million this year. So what are we doing? Are we really analysing the effect of this huge investment? More than the investment, are we understanding the position it is putting these children in, in terms of vulnerability to dropping out, which is a big issue and criminal activity in some cases?

So let us deal with the drop out issue. Unicef 2010:

“Generational Limited: the Well-being of Young People in Trinidad and Tobago...”

At that time:

“271,500...In 2020 according to UN population projections, there were around...”—that number of—“...young people (10-24) years in Trinidad and Tobago...”

**8.30 p.m.**

And among the factors that were considered in this UNICEF report was the issue of poverty as a contributor to underperformance. Poverty is a serious issue in this country. In 2016, it was reported that 17 per cent of people in Trinidad and Tobago were living with poverty, with 1 per cent indigent.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Inaudible*]

**Sen. Dr. P. Richards:** Mr. President, 1-7. Some reports put it at 14 per

cent.

“In 2004, 12% of lower secondary age...”—students—“were out-of-school; lower than the average 7% for the...Caribbean.

In comparison, in 2018-2019, 30% of boys and 25% of girls were out-of-school...”—in the Eastern Caribbean, including Trinidad and Tobago.

These are startling statistics. We want to know where the lost generation is going? The school is running them out. Because the schools are not catering to their needs and identifying their learning disabilities, their other challenges, including emotional behavioural disorders, poverty, in some cases, et cetera. We are failing them. Let us not get it twisted.

“In 2010, the secondary school enrolment rate was only 73%; secondary school...slightly higher for girls (75%) than...(70%)...”—for boys.

Right?

In terms of primary and secondary school completion rates, the completion rate was 95 per cent girls and 95 per cent boys in 2010. Lower secondary completion rate was lower: 81 per cent boys, and girls, 89.6 per cent. This meant that 24 per cent, or almost a quarter of the average of 9,000 did not complete secondary school. That is 2,250. Again, the dropout issue that we are underestimating, if we are conservative with that and take that dropout down to 1,500 a year for the last 10 years—we wonder where the gangs are getting recruitment from? That is where they are getting the recruitment from.

In the *Newsday* article dated Thursday, 22 August, 2024, by Shawn

Douglas, Education Minister, Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly:

“...suggested pupils from T&T have surpassed the dismal 36 cent pass rate across Caribbean CSEC and Math.”

So the Caribbean, as a region, did not do very well, but Trinidad and Tobago did a bit better than the rest of the region comparatively.

“...the statement said 58 per cent of pupils passed five subjects and 45 per cent passed five subjects, including maths and English.

This meant that the number of passing maths lay somewhere between 45 to 58 per cent.”

In a *Guardian* newspaper article dated June 02, 2023—and this one is really profound to me—written by Akash Samaroo, titled:

“Secondary schools system breeding uneducated gang members”

—the article quotes:

“Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley is blaming”—and this is last year—“the current education system for creating a conveyor belt of uneducated young gang members.”

This the Prime Minister of the country. Let me repeat it:

“Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley is blaming the current of education system for creating a conveyor belt of uneducated young gang members. And he believes it is time to start a conversation about it.”

He was:

“Speaking with members of business community at Breakfast with the Prime Minister at the Hilton Trinidad...Rowley lamented that significant amounts of young people pass through the secondary



school system without learning anything. He blamed the automatic promotion of all children into secondary school as a main contributor...”

That 30 per cent benchmark is destroying the system. We need to recognize that and change it. And with if we are investing the money, let us put the money where the remedial area needs to be.

The Prime Minister went on to say:

““Because once we’ve made the decision that everyone goes to high school, the questions remain, what about those children who enter the secondary school system having not been readied in the primary””— school—““system? When they get into the secondary school system, what is the curriculum that they are going to follow?

Those are the ones who largely end up in the clutches of the drug dealers and the smart men who organise gangs.””

This is the Prime Minister.

““And what is the skill they can carry? Criminal conduct.””

And this is about our education system that we are investing all this money in, so we have to take cognizance of that.

There are also issues in the education system related to vulnerable children and children with special needs, that I think everyone in here knows I have a deep passion for.

“Mom threatens to sue State as disabled son prepares for SEA  
 ...visually disabled...”

—by Rickie Ramdass, daily *Express*, October 16, 2024, updated October 17, ’24.

“The Ministry of Education is being threatened with a lawsuit by the mother of a visually disabled child over what she says is its failure to provide him with an aide at primary school.

The boy is set to write...(SEA) next year, but his mother says that by him not being provided an aide since 2022, it would significantly impact on him performing at his best in the exam.”

He already has a disability. The State of Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry of Education has a stated Inclusive Education Policy, which means as far as possible, students with disabilities are included in the general education classroom setting. Keep that in mind.

“...the boy was diagnosed with congenital cataracts in both eyes at birth. In 2014, he underwent a...surgery and right and left cataract extractions.

...the boy’s mother has taken all the steps necessary for her son to be provided with the aide, but all those attempts have been unsuccessful.”

Right?

“...in 2022, the boy was transferred to the School for Blind Children in Arouca...his mother has been concerned that he was being deprived of the opportunity to receive a proper education and to prepare for...”—SEA.

Now, in this day and age, if you know anything about special ed, school for the blind and school for the deaf is 40 years ago. We should not be encouraging that. It is not best practice.

Another one—and keep in mind my overriding thesis is

marginalization and neglect of some sectors, vulnerability:

“Mother alleges systemic failures in child services”

—Tia-Marie Lander, *Newsday*, October 20<sup>th</sup>:

“MARY, a mother of three from Mt Lambert is seeking help to address the challenges she faces with her teenage daughter Jane...”—names changed to protect identities, for—“...what she describes as systemic failure by agencies meant to protect the teen.

In an interview with *Newsday* on October 14, Mary raised concerns about the handling of Jane’s case by the Children’s Authority, the police and St Jude’s Home for Girls.

She alleged the support and interventions provided were inadequate and discussed gaps in the state’s approach to at-risk youth.”

Long story short is that she had to go to court, and the court indicated that the State, including the Children’s Authority, was:

“...criticised...for its handling...saying the unit had failed to fulfil its obligations to provide progress reports on her daughter’s well-being.”

The child was sent to a home.

“Ultimately, the court ruled that Jane should be returned to her mother’s care in August 2024, concluding that ‘the authorities had failed to properly address the child’s needs.’

Since Jane’s return, Mary claims the Children’s Authority has not made any follow-up visits.”

But we are spending money on the Children’s Authority.

Minister Ayanna Webster-Roy, responding to questions about

budgetary allocations in the other place, which was dropped in 2023 from \$129.5 million to a Revised Estimate for '24 of \$90 million, and now for 2025, down \$85 million, indicated that the:

“...Ministry of Gender Affairs which falls under the OPM, had been ‘very fortunate’ in the level of assistance received from private and international sources.

She stated that should...”—the Children’s Authority—“...require more funding, the ministry would return to Parliament mid-year.”

She also indicated that the present model of the Children’s Authority needed to:

“...be reviewed and a decision made...whether the current model was offering the best service to the children of the nation.

She said staff at CATT was expected to increase by the end of the...”—year.

Well, that speaks for itself. I do not need to be sarcastic where that is concerned. Minister Webster-Roy also indicated—

**8.40 p.m.**

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

**Sen. Dr. P. Richards:**—thank you—that 376 children in 2016 were being assisted through the division’s pay-per-child system including several homes.

My last five minutes, I will use to go through the issue of domestic violence, that is why I told myself I would not be too ambitious. As I said, I was invited to participate and honoured to have participated in a public consultation held under the auspices of the Office of the Attorney General

and Ministry of Legal Affairs focusing on domestic violence, and these are statistics presented at that and they are worth repeating because women are under attack in this country, siege daily.

Data on domestic violence for 2019 to 2024 up to the 21<sup>st</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup>, '24: 2019 reports including homicides, sexual abuse, assault by beating, et cetera, 1,078; 2020, 2,442; in 2021, 2,270; 2022, 3,883; 2023, 5,362; and 2024 at date, 2,520. Persons charged in 2019, out of 1,078, 133; 2020, out of 4,442, 306. 2021 out of 2,270, 359. Out of 2022, out of 3,083, 196. In 2023, out of 5,362, 174. In 2024, only 68 were charged, and those are charges, eh. We have to understand that we are not doing enough. We came to this Chamber and passed legislation regarding electronic-bracelet monitoring which, to my understanding, as presented by Justice Ramsumair-Hinds at the public consultation has a lacuna, where one individual makes a decision as to whether an electronic device is fitted by a potential killer, and history has shown over and over again that protection orders are not working in this country.

I want to just go through quickly some questions for the hon. Minister to answer in terms of the online portal, and this is to the hon. Minister of Finance. Are there provisions and also the e-books which I think are a step in the right direction because the efficiencies and the cost savings are going to be tremendous, has it been contemplated that as we saw during COVID-19, while e-books will be more efficient, there are many thousands of students who do not have devices and no Wi-Fi at home, and what is the plan for them to access the e-books at home or the numerous e-platforms at home because that is going to be an issue as we saw during the COVID-19

pandemic. Right? That is of great concern to me because people think well, they have a phone. You ever tried doing homework on a phone? Try doing work on a phone or one phone with three children and see how that works out for you.

While I commend the initiatives, I think they are steps in the right direction, more clarity is needed on how those students are going to—if devices are contemplated—access the e-books, either it be through the schools or through other agencies or donations from the private sector.

So, I know I am running out of time. I would like to indicate that when we do these budgets, we need to contemplate that not all sectors in society can always access the provisions in the budget in the same way, and I think we need to take a serious look. I did not even get to the CSO on contemporary data because I ran out of time, but we need to look at whether or not the provisions in the budget are focused enough on minimizing the societal gaps and class gaps that have been created. With those few words, I thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Mr. President:** Sen. Nandlal.

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

**Sen. Vyash Nandlal:** Thank you, Mr. President, for granting me the opportunity to join this debate and in so doing to make my maiden contribution in this House.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** I join the Appropriation Bill, 2024—I join the debate on the Appropriation Bill, 2024 which seeks:

“...to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the...”—  
2025 fiscal year.

In so doing, Mr. President, please permit me to thank the hon. Prime Minister for appointing me as a temporary Senator, and in so doing allowing me to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago in this capacity.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** Mr. President, as I commence let me congratulate the Minister of Finance, and by extension the Government, on a job exceedingly well done in managing—

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:**—very difficult economic circumstances over the years and continuing to develop and present budgets which take into account our current economic circumstances which are well-designed, which are innovative and strategic responses to the myriad of unique challenges we face as a country from both external and internal sources.

It is clear, Mr. President, in light of the challenges we have faced, the Minister of Finance and the Government would have done an excellent job in navigating these challenges and have brought us to a position of stability, returned us to growth, managed inflation, protect the vulnerable in society and have placed us on a path to revitalize the energy sector in this country which is our life blood, Mr. President.

But, Mr. President, do not take my word for it, as some Members the other side would have suggested that this type of opinion comes from this side, the Government's side. In the aftermath of the budget, we had a number of independent commentators speaking on the budget and giving

their assessment, and I want to turn to that.

Deloitte is an international firm, accounting firm, a business consulting firm of very high repute. In their national budget 2024/2025 analysis, this is what Deloitte had to say.

“In addition to the fiscal measures referenced in the 2024/2025 budget and the growth in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, we have seen a strong emphasis on societal development - educational and entrepreneurship initiatives. The non-oil and gas sectors have continued to grow to make significant contributions to the national GDP.”

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** Mr. President, KPMG another very well-known international organization, well-versed in finance and accounting, business consultation. The Trinidad and Tobago 2025 budget commentary, this is what KPMG had to say.

“The 2025 National Budget lays...a comprehensive framework for addressing the challenges and opportunities facing Trinidad and Tobago. The focus on diversifying revenue streams, bolstering sectors like tourism and agriculture, and enhancing governance and compliance are critical steps towards achieving sustainable economic growth.”

Ernst & Young touched on a very important topic, which I know the Minister of Trade and Industry would have discussed and would also be touching on. This is Ernst & Young again, in their EY “Focus on Trinidad & Tobago Budget 2025”.



“The introduction of Special Economic Zones...legislation and regulations represent a pivotal opportunity to catalyse investment across various sectors, extending economic development and opportunity beyond urban centres and into designated municipalities, regions and boroughs through the country.”

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** Lastly, Grant Thornton, GT 2025 Budget Review:

“The Trinidad and Tobago economy is forecasted to register real GDP growth of 1.9% in 2024...” followed by “...moderate growth of 1.3% in 2023. In a challenging global landscape this growth whilst modest is indicative of the Economy’s resilience and continued public and private sector efforts with respect to diversification.”

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

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** [*Inaudible*]—very good.

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** Mr. President, these are independent agencies of very high international repute who are commenting on this budget and complimenting the work of the Government and the Minister of Finance.

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

**8.50 p.m.**

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** This is not the Government, this is not the Ministry of Finance. Also too, pre-budget we have an agency, the International Monetary Fund. There is no one who could argue about the independence there with respect to the Trinidad and Tobago. The IMF has this to say in their article for consultation dated to June 2024. I know this document is very well known to Members and this IMF in the article for consultation:

“For the first time in a decade, Trinidad and Tobago is undergoing a gradual and sustained economic recovery...”—

And it goes on to state the growth in the growth in the:

“...GDP... reflecting a strong performance of the non-energy sector. Inflation has declined sharply, mainly due to decelerating global food and imported goods prices. Banks’ credit to the private sector continues to expand and the financial sector appears sound and stable.”—

This is the IMF, Mr. President.

So, I presented the analysis of some of these independent bodies to also show that this is not just the opinion of those on this side. However, Sen Lyder made a statement, which I do agree with, that facts are stubborn things. So I will repeat and stick to the facts, Mr. President.

**Sen. Lyder:** Good idea.

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** In conducting an economic analysis, I would look at some key vital signs to take the pulse of an economy, and I will go through some of these economic vital signs. First of all, we look at GDP growth, real GDP growth as outlined in the *Review of the Economy 2024*, presented 2022, 1.5 per cent, 2023 1.3 per cent, and forecasted for 2024, 1.9 per cent. Now, if you look at the IMF as well too, the World Economic Outlook Database, you will also see growth forecasted for 2022/2023/2024, and growth is also forecasted for 2025 and 2026 going forward. So, even the international agencies and the international analysis are projecting a sustained economic recovery.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** Mr. President, inflation, and we tend to sometimes, when I listen to commentary, to think that Trinidad and Tobago is simply just floating by itself, disconnected from global events.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** Because inflation has not only impacted Trinidad and Tobago, inflation has been a global phenomenon. So our inflation figures, according to Central Bank data, in fact, for this year so far, looking at the monthly year on year, has not cross 1 per cent. In August it has been 0.4 per cent and in July it is had been 0.3 per cent. But, let me place this into perspective, and I quote some data from the IMF World Economic Outlook Database.

So Trinidad and Tobago, we are looking at the most recent inflation figures of 0.4 per cent. Jamaica 5.5 per cent, Guyana 3.6 per cent, and also too if we look at what has happened in the past, the global inflation would have started in the aftermath of COVID-19, because of a confluence of events. We would have had global supply issues, we would have had energy prices skyrocket, because of the war in Ukraine. Ukraine is considered a breadbasket in some cases for grain, and that would have skyrocketed food prices across the world at the point in time in 2022, and going forward.

So you would have seen high inflation in 2020/2021. So Jamaica 5.2 per cent, 7.3 per cent. In Brazil for example inflation in 2021 peaked at 10.1 per cent, Argentina and Suriname would have been going through some hyperinflation. In the UK 10.5 per cent, 7 per cent in France and so on. Trinidad and Tobago has not experienced inflation by itself internally and it has not been the cause by any policy or lack of policy thereof on the part of

the Government.

External buffers, this is another vital sign that I tend to look at, and we have official reserves, seven months of import cover, US \$5.5 billion, and a Heritage and Stabilisation Fund despite withdrawals over the years, is standing at US \$6.1 billion. I think that offers us protection as a country and it offers us some degree of flexibility and buffer. Our unemployment rate stands at 5.4 per cent, and though we may look at it as increasing in the first quarter of 2024, when we look at it comparatively it is relatively low. Per capita income, Mr. President, is another measure, which is really GDP divided by population, and that gives a good idea of where we stand in comparison to others, measured in US dollars.

In 2016, and we are looking at, again, the IMF's Economic World Outlook. Per capita income would have been US \$17,000 by 2024, it is approaching US \$20,000, Mr. President, so we are making progress in terms of that, but per capital income by itself is not a very good measure of the development and therefore there are international benchmarks and indices. So we have benchmarks such as the human development index and the latest report looks at a number of factors, long and healthy life, knowledge, decent standard of living, et cetera. Our HDI, out of 193 countries, ranks Trinidad and Tobago at 60, very high human development. So these are some of the indicators that I would look at to give me a good idea of where we are at as an economy. And, I think we are doing very well, Mr. President.

However, we must also place this in context because these statistics and this data does not stand alone. It is as a result, and the policy prescriptions and strategies of the Government are in response to certain

external environmental conditions, and internal conditions, and what were there? This country endured a number of shocks over the last 10 years, some of it unprecedented. We had dramatic decline in energy prices that began in 2014. We had a sustained decline in production. During that time there would have also been some ill-conceived tax concessions granted to energy companies, which caused our energy company tax revenue, and our energy revenue to decline. We had to face COVID-19. We had to face a second oil price shock, and a second oil price collapse when oil prices went down to negative. So these are some of the issues that we had to face as a country. What were the impacts of this, Mr. President?

Revenue declined and energy revenue would have been the major area that would have declined. However, I want to look at the impact on total government revenue over the years, and I would have pulled these figures from the Central Bank as well too; Central Bank data. In 2014, government revenue would have been \$58.4 billion. Energy prices, oil prices, WTI would have hovered close to \$100 a barrel around that time. In 2015, prices started trending down. \$57.2 billion would have been the revenue. What happened the very next year with the energy price collapse? By 2017, total revenue was \$36.2 billion compared to revenue, total government revenue from 2015. This new Administration at the time would have seen almost \$20 billion fallout in revenues.

**9.00 p.m.**

And, Mr. President, it did not end there, it did not go back up to 57 after; 2018, 43.2; 2019, 46.7; in 2020 this country faced the impact of COVID-19 and with that we saw revenue decline to \$34.4 billion in 2020;

\$34.4 billion in 2020. How the Minister of Finance and the team managed our economy during that time, some say it is a miracle, some say it is magic, but it was really good and proper economic sound management.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** And I congratulate the team for putting this country on an even keel taking the strategic and well-thought-out decisions that have placed this country in a position right now, where I could quote statistics from various agencies within the country and outside of, that are telling us the country is going through a sustained economic recovery.

**Sen. Mitchell:** Yes.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** I only intended to make a brief intervention, Mr. President, so I will move forward—

**Hon. Senator:** You are going good. You are going good.

**Sen. Bacchus:** Take your time. Educate them.

**Sen. Mark:** [*Inaudible*]—energy money.

**Sen. V. Nandlal:**—because we would have engaged in a number of strategies, and as I said it was good management. And from my perspective what I have seen is that one the major strategies that the Ministry of Finance engaged in, and the appropriate one I must say, when faced with the oil shocks, would have been one of fiscal consolidation, and it is a big word for the layman there.

**Hon. Senator:** “Oooh.”

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

**Sen. Mitchell:** Break it down for them.

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** But fiscal consolidation simply means, reducing our expenditure to manageable levels while trying to narrow that deficit gap and increase revenues at the same time.

**Hon. Senator:** “Oooh.”

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** Because if we had to reduce our expenditure by that \$20 billion in that year, it would have shocked the economy to such an extent—

**Hon. Senator:** Correct.

**Sen. V. Nandlal:**—put people on the breadline, we would have had to stop paying pensions and all of the social programmes that protect the vulnerable, and that was important to the Government, so the Government engaged in a deliberate strategy of fiscal consolidation to soften the landing. So the Government did not simply just cut expenditure, the Government softened the landing by using the buffers that were there, our strength. Heritage and Stabilisation Fund engaged in a level of borrowing, and the Members would have criticized the borrowing, but the borrowing was absolutely critical to keep persons employed, and that is why the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance could boast that not a single gazetted public servant has lost their job.

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

**Hon. Senator:** The Minister of Finance—[*Inaudible*]

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** So, Mr. President—

**Mr. President:** Please allow the Member to make his contribution.

**Sen. V. Nandlal:**—we looked at a number of strategies such as dealing with structural weaknesses. We had a Petrotrin that was losing \$2 billion a year, now it is earning billions of revenue paying billions in taxes.

**Hon. Senator:** Correct. Correct.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** We reviewed our energy tax regime and we are now earning more revenue from what we produce.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** Restructuring of Atlantic LNG to give this Government a greater stake in the consolidated company.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** We have looked at digitizing our economy, and the Minister would have made great strides, and history will note that it was this Government that started and moved forward and made significant progress down the road of digitization.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** And there are a number of items there, I just want to make the point on fintech and financial technology, which I am totally in support of, I think there is a lot of misconception about it and fear-mongering, but the world is moving in this direction and whether you like it or not, whether you say yes or no, the world is moving forward and if we do not move there we will be left behind.

**Sen. Bacchus:** Yes.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** So in conclusion, Mr. President, in my brief maiden contribution, I would say we have done a well job—we have done well and I believe with the immense work done to restructure and recalibrate our economy and to put it on a firmer footing, and with the work done by the



Prime Minister, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, and all the other Ministers, that we will—

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Minister of Finance.

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** And Minister of Finance, sorry.

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

**Sen. V. Nandlal:** The Minister of Finance—we will continue to progress as a country and as a society bringing human and socioeconomic development to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and with those words, I thank you, Mr. President.

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

**Mr. President:** Hon. Senators, before I call on the Acting Leader of Government Business, permit me to congratulate Sen. Nandlal—

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

**Mr. President:**—on this his maiden contribution in the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago. Acting Leader of Government Business.

### ADJOURNMENT

**The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):** Thank you, Mr. President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Tuesday, October 22, 2024 at 10.00 a.m.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Senate adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 9.05 p.m.*