

SENATE*Tuesday, October 22, 2024*

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

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

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. Damian Lyder, who is ill.

SENATOR'S APPOINTMENT

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

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: DR. TIM GOPEESINGH

WHEREAS Senator Damian Lyder is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

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

UNREVISED

22nd October, 2024 and continuing during the absence of Senator Damien Lyder by reason of illness.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the
President of the Republic of Trinidad and
Tobago at the Office of the President, St.
Ann's, this 22nd day of October, 2024."

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

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

VISITORS

VISHNU BOYS' HINDU COLLEGE

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, I invite you to join me in welcoming the Vishnu Boys' Hindu College, who is sitting in the public gallery today to witness the budget presentation, as it continues.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2024

[Second Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 21, 2024]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Mr. President: The list of those who spoke were: Hon. Colm Imbert, MP, Minister of Finance, the mover of the Motion; Sen. Wade Mark; Sen. Sunity Maharaj; Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan, the Minister of Works and Transport; Sen. Deeroop Teemal; Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus, the Minister of Digital Transformation; Sen. Damian Lyder; Sen. Dr. Sharda Patasar; Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC, the Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affair; Sen. Dr.

Paul Richards; and Sen. Vyash Nandlal. The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell): Thank you very much, Mr. President. Mr. President, I too wish to join with you and with the rest of colleagues in welcoming the students of Vishnu Boys' Hindu College to this, our tenth budget debate in this House, and I thank you for recognizing me. My tenth budget debate, my tenth year defending the budgetary allocations for the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts means that we have been 10 years in Government, and it also means that the UNC has been 10 years in Opposition, and that is something to their credit, because that is somewhere, Mr. President, that they could do limited damage to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And, Mr. President, in that light, I thank the people of Trinidad and Tobago for choosing the premier political party in this hemisphere, the People's National Movement—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:—to represent their affairs in Government, not once but twice, stable and sober leadership in Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, Member for Diego Martin West. And, of course, Mr. President, I thank the hon. Prime Minister for reposing in me his confidence to lead the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, and the tourism and culture sectors. Mr. President, in this fiscal 2024, we can report some very encouraging improvements and growth in the tourism sector and, of course, a very, very exciting year in the cultural sector, with respect to the Carnival that we celebrated in 2024, and, of course, the

movements within the steelpan movement, very exciting, setting Trinidad and Tobago alight.

10.10 a.m.

Mr. President, the Minister of Finance and his team, they also have to be commended for keeping this economy stable and on a path to growth over the last three years and forecasted growth in the foreseeable future.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: For that the Minister and his team must be congratulated because, Mr. President, the numbers do not mislead. The Opposition could say what they want, the numbers simply do not mislead. And, Mr. President, I intended to go a lot into the macro-economic indicators that have been accepted, not just locally, but by all the international economic agencies. I intended to go in, but, Mr. President, I think yesterday following the very comprehensive and expert treatise in his maiden contribution by Sen. Nandlal—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:—it really makes no sense to go into those. Sen. Nandlal dealt with, as others on this side including the Minister of Finance, real GDP growth over three consecutive years with a forecast to the future. He dealt with our low unemployment rate, he dealt with import cover, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and, of course, he dealt with inflation being managed by this Government, kept low, at below 1 per cent, core inflation as well as headline inflation.

So our macro-economic indicators remain sound, there is no debate about that and there is no reason to go into it. But, Mr. President, there is something to be noticed. You see when it comes to macro-economic indicators, the numbers

tend to mean very little to the average citizen out there, especially when it comes to inflation. What does inflation feel like being at .3 per cent as distinguished from 1 per cent, 3 per cent, 5 per cent, what does it really feel like? The UNC will tell you that the cost of living is out of control. But, Mr. President, you know when you really understand the inflationary courses and the cost of living, you have to talk to those people who travel outside of Trinidad and Tobago or you have to travel yourself, to the Caribbean or to Canada, the US, to the UK, travel and go and see in those countries, in our Caribbean neighbours as well as outside, “what high cost of living really look like and feel like”.

Mr. President, you know, they say you have to feel it. It might sound like a Yung Bredda song, but you have to feel it. When you go out there and you experience the high cost of fuel, the high cost of utilities, the high cost of transportation, the high cost of accommodation, that is when you know how good we have it here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: But the travelers and they, they usually speak in very hushed tones when they return. That is when you see how sweet, sweet T&T really is and that is where you see how truly disingenuous the United National Congress, the Opposition, how they really are in terms of describing and bad talking the economy and the management of the economy. It is then you really understand how well we as a small island nation manage our economic affairs on the global stage.

But, Mr. President, I have to say the Opposition, in their response to this debate this year, has really been flat. You know, Mr. President, like when you leave an opened sweet drink on a counter, it just loses its fizz. You heard Sen.

Mark, Sen. Mark. He lacked confidence in what he was saying in his own contribution. He just rehashed and recycled, nothing going forward. We have seen more exciting contributions from Sen. Mark in the adjournment debates, just completely flat or perhaps they were caught flat-footed. Sen. Mark was really tame. I mean, he was really tame. And, Mr. President, of course with that he follows on from his leader, the Member for Siparia, the Opposition Leader, who was equally as flat in her contribution and what I did notice, because I paid attention, sometimes I wish I could have taken back those hours, but I paid attention and for the few hours that the Opposition Leader spoke, the Opposition Leader did not once mention the tourism sectors, the cultural sectors, the creative art sectors and following the Opposition's Leader contribution I thought well, I assume, and I take it as a given, that the UNC is quite fine and quite proud and pleased with the management of the tourism, cultural and creative sectors in Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Nakhid: "Wait ah minute. Me yet to speak."

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: But what the Opposition Leader did, the Opposition Leader got into her policy of populism. It is a policy of popular promises to the population, I did not intend to use so many "Ps", but that is what it is. It is just a policy of populism, making promises to people with absolutely no accountability. Because you are making promises to the population, each promise costs a significant amount of money to deliver and in stark contradiction to those promises you are saying to Trinidad and Tobago that you intend to axe the property tax. A property tax that is in its implementation phase, that is meant to fill the gap with respect to the delivery of local services in the municipalities to deliver more services to the citizenry. And on the other hand you are saying that you intend to

scrap the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. A revenue authority that intends to modernize and make more efficient our tax collection services and which also promises to close a \$10 billion gap.

So how are you to deliver on these promises? I just have a few here you know. Hear the promises:

“...increase the number of functional courtrooms. Right now, there is a deficit...”—that is a cost.

“...provide more courtrooms in highly populated areas outside the capital...”

That is a cost, notwithstanding there are a lot of virtual—matters being held virtually now, but, you intend to increase the number of courtrooms, that is a cost.

“...revamp and refurbish in Magistrates’ Courts infrastructure...”—that is a cost.

“...increase the number of safe houses for women and children...”—that is a cost.

“...install a centrally specialized burns unit...”—another cost.

“...create a national stroke rehabilitation centre...”—cost.

“...build cath labs...”—another cost.

Reintroduction of the baby grant, that is a cost.

“...establish...”—hear this one—“...a fill-fledged technical university to provide the highest level of...”—technical and vocational training, as though we do not already have the MIC and the UTT.

All of these things are cost, but it must really be a sweet life to just get up and make all sorts of promises without bearing the burden of one ounce of accountability or responsibility.

It is completely irresponsible. How are you going to fund all of these things? But that is UNC style.

10.20 a.m.

Mr. President, Sen. Mark in his contribution stated emphatically that there is bacchanal in the PNM, and that a House that stands divided cannot stand. The most incredible thing about that statement is that Sen. Mark said it with a straight face you know. Meanwhile in the other House you have one section telling the five down on the other section, the B Team, that, “Allyuh is ah set of B Team. Allyuh is degenerates”. And, then you have the B Team telling the other team that, “You all are a set of bullies.”

Sen. Roberts: “But allyuh cancel election.”

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Mr. President, I will go no further with that.

Mr. President: Have a seat. Sen. Roberts, we know that we do not brandish, whether you are on your feet talking or whether you are seated. I understand what it is you are trying to do, the crosstalk, and all of that while the Minister is talking, but just do not brandish.

Sen. Roberts: But good crosstalk.

Mr. President: Put it down. Put it down. Thank you. Continue Minister.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: No, Mr. President, Sen. Roberts is brandishing this document about division in the PNM. All I would say to Sen. Roberts, is “cockroach have no place in fowl business”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: And equally, we fowls here have no place in cockroach business.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024 (cont'd)
Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Sen. Mark, Mr. President, accused this Government of being anti-worker. Anti-worker?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Mr. President, it is this Government that reduced value added tax from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: It was at zero.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: It is this Government, Mr. President, that raised the minimum wage, not once, but three times. In 2019, we raised the minimum wage. The 1st of December, 2019, we raised the minimum wage from \$15 to \$17.50. In '23/'24, we raised the minimum wage, \$17.50 to \$20.50 per hour, and we are now seeking to raise the minimum wage again. It is this Government did that and we are anti-worker?

Sen. Roberts: Yes.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Mr. President, it is this Government that raised the personal allowance to \$90,000 annually—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:—and perhaps they do not understand what that means. It means that anybody earning \$7,500 and under pays—

Hon. Senator: A month.

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: A month—no income tax. Anti-worker?

This Government is pro-worker and has always been pro-worker and pro-labour. Always. And then Sen. Mark, of course, he spoke on the refinery, and Sen. Mark found himself on the usual page in the UNC playbook; the usual page. On that page in the UNC play book it says, “anytime there is an opportunity for

investment, either by locals or by foreign direct investment, anytime there is an opportunity for investment into Trinidad and Tobago, the UNC begins to scandalize everybody and anybody who is involved in that process.”

They did it with Jindal. Mr. Jindal who has perhaps the second or third largest company in India, family business, some of the richest people in Trinidad, in the world sorry, expressed an interest in the refinery. The Opposition goes out and begins to scandal—It is his company that wants to invest in Trinidad and Tobago you know. They say Mr. Jindal is a man accused of all sorts of things in his political life and, therefore, he is the worst. Scandalized the man’s name.

They scandalized Sandals. The number one hotel chain in the Caribbean says, “We believe Tobago is beautiful and we want to investment there. We believe that we can have a beautiful partnership with the people of Tobago, by extension, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and we wish to put down one of our flagship hotels in Tobago.” They scandalized the brand up and down the place, locally, internationally. All over they scandalized it. They say, “Okay, ah, our brand has worth, it has value, we are not here for that. Pull out.” And today, because of that, the people of Tobago suffer. The tour operator, the taxi driver, everyone involved in the tourism industry cannot get that promised economic boom because of the UNC. They do not care about Tobago. They have no interest there.

So what did we do with respect to the refinery? Mr. President, you know all Trinidad Petroleum Holding Company did was go out and say, “Listen, world at large. We have a refinery here, it could be sold, it be rented, it could be leased, it could be operated, express an interest. Just express an interest if you are interested.” That is it, express an interest and interests were expressed. That is it.

There is no RFP, no disposal process that was done. Persons, corporate entities expressed an interest in restarting the refinery and putting back the millions of dollars in foreign exchange that Sen. Lyder says we lost.

So they are so concerned about the missing million dollars of foreign exchange that we lost on the closure of the refinery, but every time we try to get an operator, or a sale, or whatever for the refinery, they scandalize everything about it. So that is all we did and persons expressed interest. Up comes Sen. Mark to scandalize those entities that have expressed interest. Now, Mr. President, what does that do? People are expressing an interest to operate the refinery. But you know, Mr. President, there is something you would know it. I know, Mr. President, you did not write exams and your book bag next to you open, but you know that when companies look to enter into a market into another country—especially if they do a PESTLE analysis—and one of the things they look at is the political environment.

There may be a very, very slim outside chance that the UNC may take office—very slim, “magga, meagre”—but those entities when they look at the behaviour of the Opposition they tell themselves, “Why? Why go into Trinidad and Tobago where we have such a hostile environment by these political actors?” And then the UNC will come and say that in Trinidad and Tobago we have negative foreign direct investment.

10.30 a.m.

Then they would come say that, while they are chasing away everybody. Mr. President, Sen. Lyder—well, Sen Lyder is out ill.

Sen Gopee-Scoon: Again.

Sen. West: Conveniently.

Sen. The Hon. R. Michell: I mean, we are not surprised. We saw the manifestations of those symptoms in his contribution yesterday and he really said nothing to respond to, save and except, Sen. Lyder and the UNC have this way of beating their chests triumphantly every time there is a travel advisory that negatively speaks travel to Trinidad and Tobago. You know, Mr. President, if you look at those travel advisory websites, you know they have travel advisories on every single country. Canada has warnings against travel to the US. The US has warnings against travel to the UK and vice versa. France, they all have warnings but they beat themselves—you know what they do in other Caribbean countries who are keenly looking at their tourism sector? Mr. President, in other tourism countries, both the Opposition and the Government get together and they fight those travel advisories, understanding how important tourism is, and travel is to their economy. In Trinidad and Tobago, the Member for Moruga/Tableland and Sen. Lyder, they beat themselves with the travel advisory, beat themselves on the negative travel advisories. As though that is putting money in their pocket.

Mr. President, I will respond to Sen. Dr. Patasar. The UTT is responsible for the academy. The NAPA property is split into three; there is the hotel, the UTT section and the auditorium. The UTT is responsible for the academy and I will endeavour to speak to the Chairman of UTT about those issues. The good news that I do have is that there is a project underway for the replacement of the HVAC system, which services the entire property. So those issues pertain to the air conditioning, those would be resolved in the near future. That project is underway.

Mr. President, going on to the tourism sector. Tourism continues to play a very crucial role in this economy and we have seen some steady improvements. Tourism is important being a labour-intensive sector, for job creation. It creates a

lot of jobs, directly or indirectly, there are multiplier effects. It is important for revenue generation, in the form of taxes and service fees, visitor spend, et cetera, and it is important for foreign exchange earnings and for local businesses. In the last financial year, we have seen some improvements.

In the other place, the Member for Moruga/Tableland incorrectly identified tourism's contribution to GDP at a mere 2 per cent. It is totally wrong, and that is not unusual for that Member. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council in the Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2024 report, the total contribution of tourism to GDP for 2023 was 7.3 per cent, or in other words, tourism's contribution to GDP was \$15.2 billion. In 2024, with growth, it is estimated that tourism's contribution to GDP would be 7.5 per cent or \$16 billion. That is good news, that is growth in the tourism sector, real data.

Well, let us look at cruise tourism and Mr. President, the cruise tourism product is very important to this country and to our earning potential. The average cruise ship that comes to shore as soon as they come to shore the cruise line will spend approximately US \$30,000, each cruise line. Mr. President, US \$30,000 on pilot fees, port dues and fees and of course, passenger head tax. As soon as the cruise line pulls up, US \$30,000 on average and this is excluding bunkering, when they purchase fuel. This excludes of course, services and supplies where those cruise ships must replenish their stores. Once the cruise passenger comes on shore, that cruise passenger usually goes on some pre-planned tour and transportation stakeholders, they benefit, our tour operators benefit from the onshore excursions and the cruise passenger has the opportunity to buy crafts, to buy beverages, to buy food. The average cruise visitor spend is approximately US \$50. So there is incredible earning potential when cruise lines come to our shores.

So in the 2023/2024 cruise season, we experienced—as the Minister of Finance said, significant increases, welcomed increases, increases of 91 per cent in arrivals. We received a total of 102 cruise calls to both Trinidad and Tobago which is 34 cruise calls more than the previous season. A total of 200,000 passengers arrived at our shores, 104,000 more than the previous cruise season. So when you take into consideration the economic value of the cruise season, the passenger spend, as well as the spend that the cruise lines make when they come to our ports, over the last cruise season we measured it at US \$12 million or TT \$81 million over the last cruise season, which is important foreign exchange and important spend coming into our country.

We expect a similar season this year. It was already stated and next year during the Carnival we will also welcome again the *Epic Carnival* cruise charter, which will come to our shores for five days during the Carnival weekend. Those persons, those cruise passengers will partake in all of our Carnival festivities, J'ouvert, parties, playing mas, they will spend money, they will use taxis, tour operators and at the last occasion we measured the spend of those passengers at approximately US \$2,500 per passenger and we expect about 2,000 passengers to come. So this is some good news for 2025 going forward.

With respect to air arrivals, Mr. President, we also had a gradual increase in our airlift. Copa Airlines now flies into Trinidad. They are offering 10 flights per week, an increase from 7 flights per week. They offer, of course, connections through North, Central and South America. The increase is approximately 4,000 seats and that increase is indicative of a demand to travel to and from Trinidad and Tobago.

Frontier Airlines also began service for the first time from Puerto Rico to

Trinidad and they operate three flights per week, and they have a monthly seat capacity of 8,280 seats. What is most important is that Frontier Airlines targets a different type of passenger. It is an ultra-low carrier so that travel to and from Trinidad and Tobago is very economical. Also importantly, their connections to 19 states from Puerto Rico and of course from those 19 states there is a connection in Puerto Rico to Port of Spain and we intend to use that to attract more visitors here to Trinidad and Tobago.

United Airlines also recently announced that for the busy Christmas holiday season and into the Carnival season it will restart the New York/New Jersey to Port of Spain route for about five weeks and we intend to work to ensure that that is extended and that flight is carried throughout the year, we continue to work on that.

10.40 a.m.

Caribbean Airlines, they have also added some new routes to Puerto Rico, to Martinique. And interesting, from Martinique, we intend to explore the connections from Europe, from France, through Air France, to Martinique, to Trinidad and Tobago. Because they have connections from France daily.

With respect to air arrivals, air arrivals for foreign nationals is up to 7.3 per cent for the period January to August, and we expect that trend, Mr. President, to continue over the course of the year and we intend to increase our visitor arrivals here.

Mr. President, as you are aware, we are had some major sporting tourism activities. Mainly, we hosted the ICC Men's T20 World Cup in 2024, and it was a very successful hosting of that ICC cricketing World Cup. According to the data collated from the Immigration Division, Ministry of National Security, 40,124

visitors arrived by air during the period May 23rd to May 26th; 13,380 of those arrivals were residents living abroad, while 26,744 were non-nationals.

We did some exit surveys and over the course of the period, the World Cup stimulated significant economic activity through visitor and domestic spending. In that exit survey, Mr. President—of course, those visitors who indicated that their purpose for visiting was to attend the games—visitor expenditure was estimated at US \$833 per person, and that accounted for accommodation, transport, food, leisure activities and, of course, the locals also spent money significantly on tickets, merchandise, food and other related expenses. We just also concluded another successful CPL tournament, also adding to our local sporting tourism sector.

Mr. President, the accommodation sector is also extremely important to the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, and to the non-oil, non-energy sector in Trinidad and Tobago. If you examine the *Review of the Economy*, if you examine the Minister of Finance's speech, you would see that one of the components leading to the growth of that non-energy sector is the accommodation sector, and growth in that sector is forecasted at, I believe, 2.5 over this financial year. And the accommodation sector is crucial because it is a core component of our travel experience and destination experience. At the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, by creating a facilitative environment, we have to ensure that we have good quality room stock.

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

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. President. We have to ensure that we have good quality room stock, and the accommodation sector is also important for our foreign exchange earnings, et cetera. For tax revenues, we get hotel tax

revenues, we collect value added tax, et cetera, from the accommodation sector.

Mr. President, hotel occupancy continues to be up. In 2024, with respect to hotel tax—and hotel room tax is charged at 10 per cent on rooms—Trinidad collected approximately \$55 million in hotel room tax and Tobago collected approximately \$8 million in room tax. We have been improving our room stock with our programmes, the Tourism Accommodation Upgrade Project, which is a reimbursable grant for up to 50 per cent for capital improvement on these properties, and in the fiscal year 2023/2024, four contracts were executed: Xquisitevilla, Courtyard by Marriott, Tradewinds Hotel, and Airport Suites.

With respect to hotel development, there are some exciting news in here. Over the last financial year, we reopened—well, the persons who—I believe it is HADCO Experiences who reopened the Mt. Plaisir, Grande Riviere, hotel property—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:—an excellent property, with a \$20 million investment that is smack bang in the middle of our ecotourism product with respect to leatherback turtle watching, et cetera, and they have done quite well. They have created a number of jobs in the Grande Riviere area and it is quite an exciting prospect. The Maracas Bay Hotel, that is also under construction; 120 jobs estimated during the construction phase and 48 jobs during the operational phase.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: The NAPA hotel. Sen. Maharaj spoke about the NAPA hotel. The NAPA hotel, we successfully did an RFP for the NAPA hotel. A number of people responded. Of course, I did not make that very known because I know Sen. Mark would have attacked every single one of those

components. But we are presently in negotiations for the operations of the NAPA hotel.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Construction is also underway at the Hampton Inn in Piarco, which is 103-room Hampton Inn. This hotel is expected to cost \$160 million. It will employ approximately 150 workers during the construction phase and 65 employees during the operational phase.

The Trinidad Hilton, as we heard, they are undergoing a property improvement plan, which will cost approximately \$400 million. Significant jobs will be created during those phases and we expect a much improved Hilton hotel. There is also a Hilton Garden Inn presently seeking their approvals to be built in South Park in San Fernando. This is a 125-room hotel and conference facility in South Park, San Fernando.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell: Construction is set to begin in the first half of 2025. The Marriott hotel, they are presently still pursuing their CEC and we expect that hotel to begin quickly as well—the Marriott Hotel in Tobago. These are all being done in our facilitative, incentive environment in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, 40 minutes is quite a short bit of time but I will ensure to communicate all of these matters, all of the good things that we have been doing in the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts to the national population, and with those few words, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. John.

Sen. Jearlean John: Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you for the opportunity to

contribute to this 2024/2025 budget. If I may, I too wish to acknowledge the presence of the students and teacher from the Vishnu Boys' Hindu College. Welcome to the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: Mr. President, Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity was read in the other place and this morning, quite frankly, I had an opening of beautiful economic analysis but the speaker who preceded me reminded us that, painfully, the PNM has been in office for 10 years.

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

Sen. J. John: We really did not need that reminder. I think that was a cruel joke, past 10 years. Only this morning, it is all over the newspapers, it is being reported that their General Secretary—and Mr. President, “this is nuh no cockroach in fowl business or fowl in cockroach business, yuh know”, this is our business because the people who are talking are the members of the PNM, who are Members of the Government, so this is our business because the Members of the Government, we have to say, is our Government, unfortunately, but they are. So what was being reported is that the General Secretary is asking his Prime Minister, or telling his Prime Minister—“because now ah hear he doh ask him, he does tell him”—he is saying:

“...there can be no uncertainty...”—with—“...who...”—is the—“...leader...”

So I ask them this morning, Who is “allyuh” leader? We know who is our leader, because our leader—

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

Sen. J. John: We know. You could say what about her, we know because she

tells us to put God in front and walk behind. That is what she tells us.

Sen. Nakhid: Correct. Beautiful.

Sen. J. John: And she tells to serve the people, serve the people, serve the people. That is what we get from her all the time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

10.50 a.m.

Mr. President, so this is a very critical question requiring urgent answers, because the last time I checked, Trinidad and Tobago is a democracy, and “yuh cyah handle de office ah de Prime Minister as if you are de queen”. It is a democracy, alright? So what they say, “cockroach ain’t know fowl business,” or vice versa. This is the people of Trinidad and Tobago asking a question—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John:—who is our leader, this morning. Because the papers are saying that they “buss up, dey tear up”. These are the people who jeered at the UNC and, you know, caused some people to walk over and throw themselves over a political cliff, you know, “taking basket”.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. J. John: “Taking basket”, right? “Yuh could say wah yuh want yuh know.” The UNC is a democratic institution. We know democracy is messy, right? But, when it is time to call our internal elections, we call it without fear or favour.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: We call our internal election, and we let the chips fall where they may, “yuh” understand? Let the chips fall where they may. We are not there hiding and bobbing and weaving—

Hon. Senator: And travelling.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. John (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Sen. J. John: —and afraid of the people. They have collapsed in our faces. They are afraid to face their own people.

Sen. J. John: Do not talk about the UNC business. We are totally unafraid of anything. We are totally unafraid.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: We call our elections when they are due, even before they are due. “So keep all yuh mout out of our business.” We are here preparing for Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: We will not be distracted, Mr. President. So this honourable party, that allows the politics of spite, malevolence, and easy answers, distraction and malicious bullying, and now they calling bullying sotto voce—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. J. John:—crosstalk, “yuh” know? That has become their comfort zone after 10 years in government, rather than facing the responsibility and reality of government. Politics reduced to an expensive, divisive, noisy performance, a game to be played, and not as the force that can fundamentally change the lives of those who represent. But they have taken it now into a whole other space. Looking at this budget of 2024 to '25, the Bill for this performance that they have put on, this bullying is now in, and I am afraid, if we do not take action, if the UNC does not take action, it is a cheque that will bounce. We cannot have this. This country is too precious.

I mean, they have left nothing, of course, after 10 years. Just yesterday, I was here in this Parliament, Mr. President, and what is coming up on my phone: murders, murder after murder, not one a day, or two a day; it is by the hours. I am

hearing right now—I think they killed two police officers yesterday, and one is in the hospital with two bullets in their head.

Yesterday, Mr. Vice President, homicide. 524, that was yesterday; homicide 527, that was at 1.05 p.m.; homicide, 526, 1.10 p.m.; homicide, 527, 1.16 p.m.; homicide, 528, 1.16 p.m.; homicide, 529, 1.17 p.m.; homicide, 530, 1.18 p.m. I got those by 3.30 p.m. yesterday, and I mean, the day still had about nine hours to go. That is what happens 10 years after the Government has been in office.

Mr. President, elections have consequences. I cannot see any Government tolerating 4,600 murders since coming into office, except one, who callously embraces a policy of “who dead, dead.” Because although every citizen is affected by crime, under the watch of this Government, it has been allowed to run unchecked, rampant, and murderously, particularly, in poor and vulnerable underserved communities.

So, Mr. President, that explains totally why this Government has tolerated a murder rate of 513 out there. I think they are saying, again, in the papers, they are trying to keep out a certain person. In the newspaper, I know I cannot hold it up, Mr. President, but it was in the *Express* today:

“There is a level of dissonance and anger...”—because people are resistant to this ready-made successor.

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

Sen. J. John: Ready-made successor. The PNM is behaving as if is “ah KFC two-piece and fries”. Ready-made, “yuh” understand what I am saying? They are resistant. That is coming out “yuh” know. After 10 years, they are now talking. You know why? Because it is affecting them. “All de time dey happy, yuh understand, dey playing for trump and follow suit, yuh understand?” You see, I

think it is because he is seen as part of a very elitist group that does not resonate with the rank and file of PNM except they see it in—Mr. President, “mout’ open and torry jump out”.

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

Sen. J. John: All “de” time they had nothing to say. As our dear colleague, Sen. Jayanti will say, they there with their mouths *pusoor pusoor*, but today, every one “ah dem” talking out. They are climbing over each other. They are fighting each other to get into the media to put their business out in “de” road.

Mr. President, the biggest problem facing us as a nation today, amongst all of the problems the PNM Government has visited upon us, is crime. Every road leads back to a Government that enables, a Government that creates the facilitatory environment to ensure crime and criminality is the biggest and most viable activity in Trinidad and Tobago today.

Mr. President, crime is everything, everywhere all of the time. If there is no justice and no security, there can be no peace. It does not matter how much or how big the budget or how impressive the budget is, right? So our children, Mr. President—there is no security for our people after we have spent \$26 billion over the last 10 years.

When we talking the story, “yuh must talk de full story, yuh know.” We have to say what has happened. Over the past 10 years, our children have been murdered. Twenty-six billion dollars did not save their lives. Twenty-six billion dollars—children doing the things that children do. Little Ezekiel, 11 years old, was riding his bike in Mapp Lands, going to the parlour. That is a joy for any 11-year-old. He was murdered. Nine-year-old Jomol, was playing in a savannah; that is what a child does. He was murdered. What did the Minister of National

Security say? He was in the wrong place at the wrong time because he was in a savannah playing.

There is a little girl, little Amara; the mother was in danger, and she was calling the child. The child thought they were playing hide and seek and doing the things that children do, but it was not hide and seek. There was danger. A murderer caught this little child and cut her in two. This is 10 years of the PNM governance. “They killed my children for nothing.” That is what Anisa Mohammed said of her five children; four were gunned down in one night. They said nothing then. They said nothing. They are talking now because, “ah elitist, come up like ah, two pieces and fries for dem.”

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

Sen. J. John: They now talking. Everybody talking, “yuh understand, because is ah package deal.” They say take it or leave it. The same thing they used to tell us out here. Anika Guerra, she got five bullets. She was just five years, five years, five bullets. You know where she was? Sitting in her mother’s lap, plaiting her hair. She was five years old, and they gave her five bullets. It is only under PNM, 10 years in office, too long, that a mother’s arm could become a crime scene. The place that should be the safest place on earth—I loved when my mother use to plait my hair. The safest place on earth has become a crime scene under the PNM after 10 years. That is “all yuh legacy after 10 years. Doh come here and gimme no talk about 10 years”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: And “yuh” could go on and on; whether it was Crystal from Scotia Bank who was excited to go into her house in the next month, it would have been for Christmas. She will never go into the house. Three men rolled up in front of

her children, who she had loved; ages six and nine, beat her in front of them, and then they told the children to go outside, to do what? To kill the mother, to kill that woman, who they said had loved her children so much. She did everything for them. Who now will love those children?

Pensioner, Hyacinth Danclair, from Arima. The woman had eye surgery, and she was found the next morning dead. They said besides the murder, she might have been sexually assaulted prior to, and on and on and on and on. Mr. President, whether it is people who are already murdered and buried in the grave, like what happened with a fella I think they called “Shrek,” Kevon Lucas, imagine he dead, buried, and they went and dig up the grave and burnt him. That is 10 years of the PNM. That is what is happening. These things are bizarre. These things are macabre. These things are crazy. This is a Government that has collapsed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: We have been telling them that all along. But now they themselves are admitting that they have collapsed. So, Mr. President, this budget is no blueprint to be steadfast and resolute, forging pathways to prosperity. In the 10 years, the only prosperity the PNM has forged is for funeral homes. And by their recklessness, failed policies, non-action, cruelty, and indifference, they have placed every citizen on the fast track to Lapeyrouse Cemetery. That is what they have done. That is the legacy. So the 2024 '25 Budget Statement has been described by Dr. Winsford James in his *Trinidad Guardian* published articles, and Dr. Vanus James in his notes on the budget, as budgeting for failure.

11.00 a.m.

Mr. President, in fact the only people listening to the PNM budget is us inside here. Out there in the street, no one wants to hear anything they have to say

because it matters not what they say. The ordinary people do not benefit, they see no improvement in their lives, they still cannot purchase food or school books, they cannot save towards a home for themselves and their families. After spending \$26 billion, citizens do not feel safe because we are not safe. All they see is a Government hell-bent on fulfilling their purpose, their mission, their arrears and debt, their policy direction, to make the rich richer. And then they have the temerity to come here and ask about how would Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the honourable, fulfil her promises that she made in the budget.

Mr. President: Senator.

Sen. J. John: Yes?

Mr. President: Did you give a date for the article? The date, did you give the date?

Sen. J. John: Which article?

Mr. President: The news article you just read out.

Sen. J. John: No I did not read out an article.

Sen. Nakhid: It was not an article.

Mr. President: It was not?

Sen. J. John: No I just referred to it. It was not an article, Mr. President, I know they want it to be an article, but it is not an article [*Laughter*].

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. J. John: It is not an article. [*Laughs*] Kamla Persad-Bissessar, unfortunately, did not have 10 years, she had five years, right? When Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the honourable, was in office you did not hear anything about high food prices, the murder rate was not as high as this for sure, mothers were not afraid. They had a baby grant. They might say why you give a baby grant? Because that might be the

difference between a child being nourished and a child being malnourished, you understand? They stood here or somewhere and they spoke about the laptop programme in the most disparaging terms. But that is because you can afford it, you see, the elitism. Today they are running from elitists you know.

Sen. Nakhid: Correct.

Sen. J. John: You understand? But that is who they are.

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

Sen. J. John: [*Laughs*] “Dey running today but that is who they are.” You understand, what I am saying? That is just who they are. “Dey” running from their description, you understand? But that is just who they are, right? Because it is only elitists who will say a laptop is too much for a child.

Sen. Nakhid: Correct.

Sen. J. John: Who else will say that “eh”? Who else will say a baby grant is too much for a child? What else Kamla Persad-Bissessar do? You know, there were so many of these programmes, early childhood centres. What it means is that some young lady who might have made a baby young, and really has seen no hope, they could go back to school knowing their child is placed in an environment that is safe, that is affordable, they could drop them and pick them up. Only an elitist could be against that.

Sen. Mark: Yeah.

Sen. Nakhid: Oh god.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: Who could be against that? So, Mr. President, after \$26 billion in security, we are not safe.

Mr. President, on page 9 of the budget statement according to the Minister of

Finance:

“In 2023, our economy grew by 1.3 percent, following growth of 1.5 percent in 2022. In 2024, real GDP growth...increased to 1.9 percent. This is now three consecutive years of real growth, which signifies a renewal of economic activity, a rebound in confidence and a promising trajectory towards a positive economic environment.”

The Minister cited, Mr. President, no other growth target in the budget statement. So 1.9 per cent must be his best expectation from the plan spending programme. But one must ask, growth leading to what outcome? Because the Minister did not talk about—I mean they have a way they present a budget, without context, without saying okay these are the things that we had offered last year, these are what we have achieved, this is where we going, and, of course, the big objective is *Vision 2030* or so they told us. But there is nothing in this budget to say how whatever—whether it is their growth pattern, whether it is the cost of borrowing, how that relates to where we are, where we are going, and if we are going to meet *Vision 2030*. I mean, I know they are not going to be there with us.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. J. John: But at least, [*Laughs*] you know, if it is a good plan, it is a good plan, right? But we know that is not a good plan because it comes from a 10-year-old PNM in Government.

Another compelling reason to be concerned is found in the data provided on the national cost of borrowing, on page 17 of the budget statement, the Minister gave us an indication that the Government borrowing cost is about 6.4 per cent. At least on a 10-year USD750 million bond. When compared, Mr. President, to the growth expectation of 1.9 per cent, which typically aligns well with degenerate rate

of profit on capital in the real economy, this signals that investors in the Government paper will fair significantly better than in investors in the real economy. And that is why they always say when they put out these Government bond offerings, it is oversubscribed; the Minister comes and he beats his chest. But it is business people, it makes sense, why you going to invest in something that will not give you the highest sale? That is why there is an oversubscription in these bond offerings as that happened in 2018, and especially in 2023, which is listed on page 40 of the budget statement.

Mr. President, however, this reveals a huge problem of debt on sustainability attending the budgeting practices. In fact, to avoid a mounting debt stock, the budget should be calibrated against the capital expenditure plan to achieve a growth rate in excess of the borrowing rate of 6.4 per cent. Mr. President, that kind of growth calculation is not to be found anywhere in this budget, in particular, in terms of the growth targeted by the PSIP—the Government’s capital spending programme—neither is it in line with their *Vision 2030* objective. Instead, what is evident is that the country is being asked to gamble, to roll the dice, to wish upon a star even, and hold strain that the cross-border gas fields with Venezuela will come on stream, and deliver an impressive, massive, positive shock that rescues us at some time after holding strain of 2027. “That and God face alyuh eh seein.”

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. J. John: Nobody “eh” holding strain until 2027 [*Laughs*], right.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: Trinidad and Tobago “done” with this Government and as Kamala Harris saying in America, “And they are not going back.”

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

Sen. J. John: “Dey not going back.” So, Mr. President, if you want additional evidence that the Government is betting the House on perspective energy, look at the plan at the bottom of page 14 of the published budget statement:

“In 2025, to further bolster our reserves, we plan to introduce legislation to encourage energy sector companies to remit all their taxes to the Government in US Dollars.”

The Minister said yesterday he realized the late in the game that only—I think—that 50 per cent of the energy sector taxes are paid in USD although 100 per cent of the oil and processed gas and petrochemicals are exported. Now, in the same budget statement, the Minister of Finance says that he expects the non-energy sector to play an increasing role in generation exports. So then why not set the same rule for that sector? Surely one should ask how much USD does the non-energy sector generate and what share of the non-energy sector taxes is remitted to the Government in USD, right? Because we should not forget that back in the days when sugar was our main export and we relied on it to deliver 100 per cent of our foreign exchange, it did not cover the country’s import bills.

So the matter is not trivial, Mr. President, yet the Minister is silent on that matter likely a testament that his faith really lies in the energy sector after all, at least when it comes to generation of foreign exchange. This, in a context in which the import cover fell by about 12 per cent from 8.6 months in 2022 to 7.7 months in 2023. As I said before, Mr. President, this matter is not at all trivial and that is indeed the case. I hope the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries’ alignment of perspective includes a focus on the energy sector because recent events verified that they have more than Georgia on their minds.

Hon. Senator: What?

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. John (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Sen. Mark: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Senator: Georgia?

Sen. J. John: You get that? [*Laughs*]

Sen. Nakhid: Yes, oh gosh.

Sen. J. John: You late bad, why is he so late?

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Sen. J. John: He only know Yung Bredda.

Sen. Mark: Yeah.

Sen. Roberts: He only know Yung Bredda.

Sen. Nakhid: You have no soul.

Sen. Mark: [*Laughs*]

Sen. J. John: Performance of the non-energy sector. Mr. President, the Ministry of Finance approached an analysis of the non—

Sen. Nakhid: He is an elitist.

Sen. J. John: He is an elitist, that is the point he would not know “Georgia on my mind.”

Sen. Mark: Yeah.

Sen. Nakhid: Nah, nah, nah, nah.

Sen. Roberts: “He doh know dem” [*Inaudible*].

Sen. J. John: He must be only know Tchaikovsky.

Sen. Roberts: “He doh know dem” [*Inaudible*]. He is an elitist.

Sen. J. John: Yeah, yeah. Performance of non-energy sector. Mr. President, the Ministry of Finance approached an analysis of the non-energy sector is also a recipe for developmental failure. In the budget statement, the manufacturing sector is represented as the main driver of the non-energy sector, and specifically as

contributing 22 per cent of the total exports in fiscal 2023, down from 26 per cent in 2020. Mr. President, there is no explanation for the significant decline in contribution. Most interestingly, there is no mention of productivity growth in the sector, no cogent explanation can be offered because the sector is understood as a hodgepodge of activities. Here is how the Minister represented growth of exports amongst the subsectors of manufacturing.

Several manufacturing subsectors experience significant gains in export over the fiscal 2020 to 2023 period, including food and beverages, 40 per cent; paper and paper related products, 47 per cent; plastic and rubber products, 66 per cent; basic chemicals and fertilizer, 46 per cent; glass and glass products, 161 per cent; furniture and light fittings, 34 per cent; clothing, textile and apparel, 63 per cent; and wood and wood related products, 46 per cent. Mr. President, nothing can be learnt from this hodgepodge approach. Mr. President, the Government's inadequate approach to economic restructuring, plus a growth rate well below the cost of borrowing provides a basis for understanding the prospects and implications of rising deficit, spending over time illustrated by an increase from 1.7 per cent in 2023 to 3.5 per cent in 2024.

The reason given for the expected increase in the deficit ratio is an expected shortfall in the energy sector revenue caused by low oil and gas prices and declining production.

11.10 a.m.

So, since the non-energy sector is a highly import-dependent sector and since the sector is not transforming towards capital production, then the growth of its exports, as documented by the Minister, will create a rising demand for import that is not matched by its growth of foreign exchange earnings and import

displacement. Combined with a fall in energy exports, the result will surely be a fall in import cover. This is a Government who, without cogent explanation, closed down our main foreign exchange earner, Petrotrin.

And now that the Minister has told us in this Parliament, companies in the energy sector only make 50 per cent of their forex available to the Government, Petrotrin as the then net earner of forex, as it was, and state-owned company would have made available 100 per cent of their forex. So closing down Petrotrin was professional malpractice at best and really we do not want our imagination to run wild as to what is the real reason. So this observation, Mr. President, reinforces the snake oil properties of the development strategy evident in the budgeting for 2025 by the Minister of Finance.

Yet, the Minister of Trade and Industry in the other place claims that the private sector always does better under the PNM. Just as Sen. Lyder before me, I pose the question, which private sector? This is not unlike the question posed in the *Express* editorial of 16th October, 2024. The title:

“The vulgarity of Stuart Young”

I quote:

“He”—meaning Minister Young, that is a quote—“then goes on to humble brag: ‘I hope and trust that my record of service to our—’”

Sen. The Hon. Mitchell: Mr. President, I hate to disturb my hon. friend. References to Members of the House, whether it be the Opposition Leader or the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West, should be just that, or by their ministerial portfolio.

Mr. President: Okay, yes, the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts is indeed correct. If you are referencing a Member of the other House, it is by their

constituency, or if they are a Minister, by the ministerial title.

Continue, Sen. John.

Mr. Roberts: A next leader of the PNM.

Sen. J. John: Sorry. Hon. President, I was quoting the *Express* editorial. It said 16th October, 2024:

“The vulgarity of Stuart Young”

But if he wants me to say the PNM Prime Minister—

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

Mr. President: Have a seat. Yes, if you are quoting and you are going to use a name, you could also come after and indicate the title, which should correct the situation. Continue, Sen. John.

Sen. J. John: I would not go over it again, because it seems as if they are unhappy when I put his title. So, they are unhappy when I put his real title. So, right. So:

“He then goes on to humble brag: ‘I hope and trust that my record of service to our country speaks for itself.’”

And the *Express* went on to say:

“What exactly is that record, Mr. Young?”—

—well, the Prime Minister, the acting Prime Minister. I ask the Government what exactly is your record and which private sector says they fare better under a PNM Government? Is it the T&T private sector, who is out there barely holding on after all that they went through during COVID? The ones that you all will not give their VAT refund, a Government who cynically withholds their VAT refund? Which, in many cases, are financial lifelines for their businesses.

I ask again, which private sector? The one who suffers as the Government brazenly doles out scarce forex to their friends and financiers, whilst alternatively

giving people who are less blessed and favoured the— they have to line up for \$100 at a time, from the bank? Then those people on the black market now have to—some of them purchase forex at 7.5 or \$8. They could never compete with those who are getting it at the bank, who the Government are keeping their doors open to give. So which private sector? Who told you they are doing so well?

I noticed the Minister did not comment on the cost of extortion, home invasions and even murder on the business sector. Because, Mr. President, there is a cost. The extortion racket and home invasions are causing an erosion of the SME sector, accompanied by difficulties to obtain forex from the bank. But the Minister of Finance does not appear to know these things. Maybe the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry should advise him.

Five months ago, National Security Minister Fitzgerald Hinds responded to a question from the UNC in the other place, acknowledged that the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service has noted an increase of reports of criminal elements demanding money by menace from the business community. But this was already old news to businessmen and the country as a whole.

Then-President of the Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce, Baldath Maharaj, had said then that the business community is under siege. This is evidenced by the plight of businessman, used car dealer, Sachel Kungebeharry and he sadly is just one of many. He is now a statistic.

Mr. President, Sachel Kunjebeharry was from Cunupia. That probably is the reason he has not been mentioned. Perhaps his plight does not matter to the Government. His life probably does not matter. After all, he is from Cunupia. He was probably not highfalutin enough; not elite enough.

Sen. Roberts: He is not from Westmoorings.

Sen. J. John: Because, during the budget debate in the other place, all this happened. And they found—they asked for \$500,000, half a million dollars and even after it was paid, they killed him. They killed him after it was paid. You know, the mother in her pain said, “I wish the Commissioner of Police could feel my pain”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: But I wish the whole of the PNM could feel her pain. I wish they could feel her pain.

Because right now, they have another one in, I think, some Suvesh Ramnarine. They are now asking for \$3 million. We have not heard about him as yet. And there is a video circulating where they just walk into the man’s yard and pick him up like a DHL package you know, and “gone with him”. Under this Government, this is what is happening.

Then yesterday, I do not know, the president of, it was reported, the President of Penal/Debe Chamber of Commerce, Rampersad Suraj, he was home sleeping. They killed his dog, went into his house and “chop up de man”. Poisoned his dog. That is what is happening. You understand? So we do not know. This is what the Government should be paying attention to.

Over and over, everywhere—Mr. President, this is not Gaza. These terrifying events are now not only everyday occurrences, they are hourly occurrences, just as I mentioned earlier. So who is commending? Which private sector is commending the Government on this? Did they ask for this? I want to ask, did the private sector ask for this? The *Express* editorial, the day following the reading of the budget, they said:

“Throwing more good money behind bad”

I quote, the *Express* then:

“Evaluating the yawn”

They said that.

“Some five-hour-plus budget presentation by Finance Minister Hon. Colm Imbert by T&T’s number one problem—crime—there is little for the Government to crow about and even less to inspire public optimism that the wanton white-collar and violent crime will be stalled.

Occupying the national stage for what is likely his final theatrical moment, Mr. Imbert spoke persuasively about the impact of crime on individuals, families and communities but was far less convincing on solutions.”

Mr. President, as I said before, crime is everything, everywhere, all at once in this country.

Mr. President, kidnapping for ransom and missing people is up. Mr. President, the extortion business is growing. Mr. President, criminal gangs and murder for hire “is booming”! So, Mr. President, the Government’s budgetary provision to address the scourge of rising crime is perhaps the best example of how to budget for failure.

Here is how the Minister admitted to the failure of his crime reduction policy after two consecutive terms in office, 10 years. One area of greatest in transition, difficulty which remains and continues to resist our best effort is violent behaviour, crime and criminality, largely highlighted by violent murder involving the use of illegal firearms.

Approximately 4,600 murders, since 2015, and for the year, over 530. But this Government of shortcuts only interest is in locking up a man named Christ Must List who could come here and in a week or two, he found every gang. He

could have documented it for international consumption. Yet our state cannot find these gangs, even as we are told that the gang-related crimes account for 55 per cent of our suffering. And we who live here cannot find one gang. But of course, Mr. Christ Must List is the issue.

And now if “dey locking up Christ Must List, I feel children have to be careful because Christmas is almost next month”. “Dey go lock up Santa Claus.” Because they are always trying to find a distraction. That is what they do; it is a Government of distraction. They have no policy, no programme, no solution.

So, Mr. President, over the last 10 years the police have extracted 7,683 illegal guns and 153,510 rounds of illegal ammunition from the criminal element. Notwithstanding this, 3,986 persons have been killed over the same period with the use of firearms. So that is our biggest problem. Yet, of course, we talk ad nauseam about the borders being open, you understand? And they thump their desks when they say they are in office for 10 years, when they should really be hanging their heads in shame.

11.20 a.m.

Reporting that 3,986 persons have been killed over 10 years is a slick way to avoid reporting that the surge of crime, especially violent crime, is now out of control, with murders expected, at the end of 2024, to be more than any previous five years. The policy response of this Government can be described as focused on more policing rather than more effective policing. Despite its claim, the Minister said:

“...the Government has financed the Police to the tune of \$26 billion over that same 10-year period and will continue to provide all possible available financial resources to the Police in the fight against crime.”

So they have taken the position—and I mean, I too will quote a rapper, Tupac, you know:

“They got money for wars...”—and none for—“...the poor”.

Sen. Nakhid: For the poor. I know that one. “Yuh” know that one?

Sen. J. John: “Dais wa dey have money for”. Because the statistics underscore the seriousness of this intractable problem.

Further:

“In 2024, initiatives executed under the Ministry of National Security to combat crime and criminality focused on building capacity and strengthening the national security apparatus and institutions. These initiatives included instituting more proactive and effective policing methods, being committed to a greater sharing of resources, making improvements in technology, advancing equipment procurement and dedication to more focused intelligence driven operations.”

So this, I think, is the Minister. The steps taken are summarized as:

“...increasing the number of police officers, strengthening the criminal justice system, deploying more technology and implementing a number of social programs...”

So, Mr. President, the Government’s list of its priority response areas also reveals its policing focus. Of the seven priorities, six are related to policing:

- “• Enhanced Border Patrol and Protection;
- Immigration;
- Enhanced Cyber Security;
- Expansion of the Electronic Monitoring Programme;
- Establishment of a National Forensic DNA Databank;

- Expansion of Rehabilitation programmes within Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service aimed at reducing...”—repeat offenders.

Noticeably, the other area is administered by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago's:

“• Social programmes aimed at reducing criminal gang violence;”

That is found on page 93 of the budget statement. And it went on to talk about the defence force.

So, Mr. President, even when it is recognized that crime reduction requires more than police work, the Minister is still wedded to a police-managed effort. If your return on investment is a higher murder rate year after year, then basic reasoning indicates that you cannot keep doing the same thing and expect a different result.

Mr. President, I urge the Minister of Finance, when you are in a hole, you have to stop digging, because according to the Minister of Finance:

“The approach of the police to reducing crime will be multi-faceted and driven by a commitment to both immediate and long-term solutions. It is a strategy grounded in the understanding that effective crime reduction requires more than just enforcement; it requires the active participation of every segment of society.”

Mr. President, therein lies a prescription for failure. An effective crime reduction strategy that brings all segments of society into the effort cannot be managed by the police. Instead, the efforts of the police and related organizations must be complemented by efforts undertaken by well-placed civic institutions dedicated to development generally—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John:—including both crime prevention and the facilitation of an effective response to criminal activity. The best place of such civic institutions are communities in which people live and with which they identify. All criminals come from some community or the other. For the most part, the community watched them grow up in their households and watched them emerge to make deviant choices. It is at that level that criminals are well known and that the causes of crime is well understood—

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

Sen. J. John: Thank you, Mr. President—and most easily studied, and that crime prevention strategies can be best defined and implemented. Correspondently, it is at that level that the socioeconomic success of each individual and each household can be most effectively facilitated.

So, Mr. President, whilst they are busy giving themselves an A grade, I say, in this period of Divali, we may have come on different ships but right now, we are in the same boat, and as Michelle Obama said recently, “We need to do something.” But we cannot keep doing the same thing, we have to do something to mitigate against our little children being murdered in their beds. I mean, domestic violence is another major area. I am seeing bullying now has taken centre stage. Mr. President, 404 missing persons in little Trinidad and Tobago. So all of this, as we said, based on the budget and its perspective on crime, it is budgeting for failure. So out there, we are on the ground, Mr. President, and everywhere is the same pain, the same hurt, the same despair, the same “fed-upness”, the same disgust for this Government of bankruptcy, bullying, blood and brutality.

Mr. President, it is now time that we turn the page. As I said before, the UNC will fix the foundations of our economy and build a new Trinidad and

Tobago, more secure, more prosperous, more dynamic and more fair. Unlike the PNM, our leader, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, always tells us in the UNC to put God in front and walk behind. Today, she stands steadfast, resolute and resilient like a rock—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John:—forging a pathway for equity for all, prosperity for all, security for all and with a focus, vision and hard work, together, we will turn around Trinidad and Tobago to give our children the start in life they deserve by unlocking the potential of every single citizen.

You know, I mean with all that is going on in the newspaper, in my final thing, you see, water is more than flour. Today, we see the former Minister, Jennifer Baptiste-Primus, speaking openly in the media, quoting—and this is action is unprecedented. You see, she is saying: She did express the view that:

“...it was unprecedented and undemocratic and it undermines the democracy of the PNM...”

You see, right now, the PNM now realizes, just like Quavo, that Dr. Rowley does not walk it like he talks it. You understand? That is—

Mr. President: Senator, senator, remember the title.

Sen. J. John: “Ah finish”?

Mr. President: The title when you are using the names. “Prime Minister”.

Sen. J. John: Oh, the hon. Prime Minister does not walk it like he talks it.

Sen. Roberts: The honourable traveller.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John: Right? So now, the chickens have come home to the roost, Mr. President. I remember the then Opposition Leader, Mr. Patrick Manning, had told

the UNC, who was in government at the time, in realcrosstalk, “One must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day has been.”

Sen. Mark: [*Laughter*]

Sen. J. John: For the people of Charlotteville, we say, “What eh meet yuh, eh pass yuh.” Mr. President, Trinidad and Tobago, “Don’t worry about a thing, ’cause every little thing is gonna be all right.” “It has been a long time coming but I know change is gonna come”, and when that time comes, I urge the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to choose their Prime Minister wisely. I thank you.

Sen. Nakhid: Tobago’s finest.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Dillon-Remy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy: I thank you, Mr. President, and good day to you and all my colleagues in his honourable Chamber, and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I too welcome the students from Vishnu Boys’ Hindu College, and I welcome my fellow Tobagonian, Sen. Ancil Dennis.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: No, no. He was there, he is old he is not new.

Mr. President, I am grateful and humbled to contribute to this Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024, which:

“...seeks to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending September 30, 2025 by, authorising the issue from the Consolidated Fund of the sum of...(\$49,097,035,525)”.

The budget, Mr. President, is crafted amidst continued economic challenges locally, regionally and globally. In a foreword to a World Bank Group Flagship

Report entitled: “Global Economic Prospects”, June 2024, the document explains, and I quote:

“Yet, more than four years after the upheavals of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global shocks, it’s clear the world—and developing economies, in particular—has yet to rediscover a reliable path to prosperity. Global growth is stabilizing at a rate insufficient for progress on key developmental goals...”

Despite a global economic environment that is both hostile and volatile, this 2025 budget heralds a bold theme: Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity. Mr. President, the theme evokes much thought. And as I reflected and meditated on the current state of the country, as well as what is needed to breathe life into these words of this mission statement, I could only think of the Apostle John who offered this statement in 3 John 1:2 that says:

“...I pray that you may prosper and be in good health, even as your soul prospers.”

11.30 a.m.

Mr. President, I think this scripture reading is applicable not just to the theme but also to the times. It is a prayer that engenders holistic prosperity and infers that external prosperity is intrinsically linked to inner prosperity. This proposition is transferable from the individual and human stance into the nation’s domain.

I read this article titled “Defining Prosperity” by the Legatum Institute, which is a philanthropic endeavour of the global investment firm Legatum. The:

“...Institute exists to promote the prosperity of individuals, families, communities and nations”

The dissertation defines the concepts of prosperity from a State’s perspective at

page 2, and it is explained in the following manner, and I quote:

“Prosperity is far more than wealth; it is when all people have the opportunity and the freedom to thrive. Prosperity is underpinned by an inclusive society, with a strong social contract that protects the fundamental liberties and security of every individual. It is driven by an open economy that harnesses ideas and talents to create sustainable pathways out of poverty. And it is built by empowered people, who contribute and play their part in creating a society that promotes wellbeing... True prosperity entails more than wealth: it reaches beyond the financial into the political, the judicial, and... wellbeing and character of a nation — it is about creating an environment where a person is able to reach their full potential.”

And Mr. President, I like the contents and the context of it. The institute goes on to say, goes on to outline some characteristics of a prosperous society, some of which I highlight. On page 3, they list, and I quote:

“In a prosperous society:

- People live in peace, free from the threat of violence, oppression, and crime.
- Everyone’s inherent dignity is respected, and freedom of speech, worship, and assembly are protected.
- Governing institutions act with integrity, are accountable to citizens, and are subject to the rule of law.
- Stable families and supportive communities instil the values that shape the culture and build the bonds of trust needed for society to flourish.”

Based on these attributes, it is abundantly clear that if our Government seeks

to forge pathways to prosperity, which is the theme of this budget, it will require more than just economic development. It is possible to create avenues for success and birth prosperity in a land where the leaders and people lack the integrity to carry its increased capacity with grace. This is not the type of prosperity that we want in Trinidad and Tobago. The goal is not wealth absent of values.

The institute succinctly captures the in-depth comprehensive development required with the following statement at page three, and I quote:

“.. prosperity is not just about what we have; it is...about who we become”

And I think that it is important for us because we are here bantering across the table “who right, who wrong”, et cetera. We are talking about who we are becoming as a people; who we are becoming. Prosperity is not just about what we have. It is not just about the GDP. It is not about the amount of money that we have, but who we become. In light of this, I am compelled to ask two questions. One, who are we becoming as a people, as leaders, and as a country? And two, what is being done to remedy the situations that affect the soul of our nation?

Mr. President, even as we think of this budget of \$47 billion-plus that we are asking to be approved from the Consolidated Fund, what is going to be done to remedy the situations that affect the soul of our nation? Mr. President, I firmly believe that a nation with a corrupt and perverted soul will produce prosperity that is depraved, whereas a nation that seeks to develop people at all levels with ethics and values, will produce prosperity that is principled and substantial.

In my contribution to this budget debate, my focus will be issues related to Tobago, to crime, and to education. I look at Tobago, and I apply this twofold inquiry first to our dear sister isle and my hometown. The allocation this year is \$2.599 billion, with \$2.376 billion going to recurrent expenditure, \$205 million

allocated to the development programme, \$18 million to URP, and \$9.2 million to CEPEP. And this represents 4.35 per cent of the national budget.

It is worth mentioning here that the Chief Secretary, Farley Augustine, of the Tobago House of Assembly requested \$3.956 billion from the Government when he presented the THA budget in June 2024. Mr. President, I do not wish for any comments that I make on the budgetary allocation to Tobago to be misinterpreted as a lack of appreciation for the issuance of a full allocation for fiscal year 2024. That is what is expected. And the additional \$678.5 million allocated to various Ministries and state agencies to undertake the executed major projects in Tobago, in keeping with their responsibility under the Sixth Schedule, again, that it is expected.

The representatives of Tobago East and Tobago West mentioned in their contributions in the other place, that no Ministry gets its full allocation. And, Mr. President, that is true. They never get, and they will most likely never get. Tobago has never gotten its full allocation. That is what I see, and that is true. And that they did go on to say that “each entity should take what they have been given in the budget and do the best with it”.

Mr. President, I am reminded of the former Chief Secretary, Mr. Hochoy Charles, who took his little that he got. He looked to the needs of Tobago at the time, and he made significant progress over those years, those early years. I wish our current leaders would do the same. And I am talking current, not just in terms of the present, but current in this season and in this time, that we would look at what we have and do the best with it over time.

While Mr. Hochoy Charles was doing the best with what he had, the little he had, he was also asking for more. And I would like all of us to reflect on this. But

I would remind our leaders, that the Tobago population is growing, and so do the needs of the people in Tobago. The rate at which the population is growing is apparently faster than the growth rate of Trinidad because people are flocking to Tobago. Particularly, as it deals with crime, they are trying to get away from crime in Trinidad but unfortunately, things are changing in Tobago right now.

In addition, in terms of the allocation, this allocation, I do not think contemplates many of Tobago's current and long-term liabilities. Further, we must be mindful that Tobago is still rebounding from the crippling effects of COVID-19, specifically as it affected the tourism industry and the oil spill off the coast of Cove Eco-Industrial Park earlier this year.

I now look at tourism. Tourism is the breath of Tobago, and one such challenge that we have had over the years is the decline in the visitor arrivals. And even though things have improved a bit since COVID, the sector has not yet reached the heights of the 1990s. And as I contemplate the much-needed boost required in this sector, I am reminded of my contribution in 2019/2020 budget, and I explained, and in that budget statement, my budget contribution, I explained that the people of Tobago, and I quote:

“...are not currently receiving adequate amounts of funding to really compete with the other islands of the Caribbean and I am hoping that this can be addressed...”

In that budget, '19/'20—

“...let us get...serious about the business of tourism...for Tobago...”

I said then—

“...and Trinidad also. This industry can provide the country with badly needed foreign exchange while at the same time providing many jobs

and...sale of our agricultural and manufacturing products. This would be a very good step as we are talking so much about diversification. This is an opportunity for such diversification.”

11.40 a.m.

Mr. President, this statement is still valid today. This budget promises that Tobago’s tourism and creative industries will get support through infrastructure upgrades, community tourism support, artist development programmes, and cultural events. This will be achieved through ventures such as the renovation of the four-star Magdalena Grand Beach and Golf Resort following the sale or lease of the Magdalena hotel, the development of a new five-star internationally branded hotel on the Government-owned Buccoo estate, and the development of the yachting marina in Lowlands.

Mr. President, hearing that Tobago’s tourism is poised for such expansion deserves honourable mention, particularly since such changes are expected to generate much-needed revenue and create jobs. However, in the budget presentation of 2019/2020, the Minister of Finance highlighted a similar effort as it relates to the Magdalena. He said, on pages 23/24 of the 2020 Budget Statement:

“Madam Speaker, a reputable internationally recognized brand manager has been identified as the operator for the Magdalena Grand Beach and Golf Resort. The vertically integrated travel and hospitality conglomerate has shown confidence in Tobago as a destination poised for growth and expansion.”

Mr. President, time has elapsed. It is now—I am talking about 2020. We are now four years later, and I do not know what has happened to that plan at that time. I certainly have not heard why it has not happened, but we know it has not

happened. How can we be sure that this particular plan for the Magdalena Grand Beach and Golf Resort—what will be done differently to ensure that this project succeeds this time around? I must point out that there are other key initiatives and fiscal incentives proposed in this budget that promise to boost tourism investment in Tobago. This includes the major hotel developments such as Four Points by Sheraton and Mount Irvine Bay Resort.

Additionally, the Minister of Works and Transport indicated that the ANR Robinson expansion would be completed in early 2025. The Minister of Finance explained in his budget statement at page 19 that the country's airport and aviation industry have been identified as a major contributor to the growth in tourism and commerce sectors, and by extension, the economy so the completion of this project, the ANR Robinson terminal building, is going to be welcomed in Tobago. However, I note here that there have been some concerns about the level of collaboration between the central government and THA over this particular project, and I ask, what meaningful collaboration will there be going forward with the major hotel developments that are coming? I am saying that in the context, Mr. President, of greater autonomy for Tobago.

Even before the passage of the Self-Government Bill, may I humbly suggest that no developmental project should occur in Tobago without the involvement of the THA. I say again, that no developmental project of any kind should occur in Tobago without the involvement of the THA. And I say this, Mr. President, regardless of who is in government, either in Tobago or in Trinidad. Regardless of who is there, there should not be just collaboration, but agreement as to how it goes forward.

I turn my attention to a matter that is of concern to the people of Tobago now, and that is the operationalization of the Roxborough Hospital. And, I am pointing this out because recently there was a situation where there was a death of a mother from Speyside and her newborn baby at the Scarborough General Hospital. There was talk about the problem was as a result of the lack of operationalization of the Roxborough Hospital. There was, and still is, the toing and froing that the problem is Tobago's fault. The current Administration in Tobago did not do what they had to do to operationalize the hospital and Tobago is saying the problem is from Trinidad because they have not given enough funding for the hospital.

Mr. President, I am inclined to question whether poor planning is the root cause for the prolonged mobilization of the Roxborough Hospital. And I am saying that from the inception—I still remember I was here and I asked about that project when the sod was turned. I think it was 2021 when I asked about where the money was coming for development. Not only that, I asked again at another budget presentation, “Where is the money coming to fully operationalize that hospital?” I got no answers. But the hospital was opened, and some people think that it was a project that was done before the election and stuff like that.

I do know that the people in Tobago East are happy about having the hospital but a hospital does not come just like that. It comes with a plan before, then you build, and then you know how you are going to finance the operations, what services you want to give and how many hours the services are going to be given for. All of that has to be put down before. I am suggesting that that kind of stuff was not put down before this happened, and now people are running and blaming. Anyway, there is blame going on.

By the way, I must congratulate the people at the Scarborough General Hospital for the service and the heroic service that they did. From what I understand, it was a great effort to try to save the life of that mother and baby. Unfortunately, they died, but the people were devastated as a result of it. At the end of it, this is what is happening; they are blaming. That should not be, Mr. President. Plan before. It is most likely that Roxborough would never have a 24-hour service where you have in-patient obstetrics and gynecology. Most likely, I do not know. If that were the situation, it would have had to be planned before and that is what would have saved that baby's life at that point in time, from what I understand. I am saying the operationalization of the hospital is important. My understanding is that there should be a properly staffed 24-hour emergency service at the Roxborough facility with an efficient working ambulance service and that would alleviate much of the inconvenience, stress, and risk to those who must come from the east of Tobago to west of Tobago for health care service. Mr. President, that costs.

On page 146 of the budget statement, the hon. Minister of Finance explained that the THA intends to fully operationalize the Roxborough Hospital with digitized health services, equipment upgrades, and social programme expansions. The allocation for the TRHA in this budget is \$567 million. It is \$9.98 million more than last year. Mr. President, I do not know if that \$9.9 million is going to fully operationalize, giving a 24-hour service. I do not think it will. I think that we have to sit when we are planning, and even now, sit and make sure that we understand what it takes and fund it appropriately. I am saying that because the people in Tobago East should not be quarrelling with their leaders when the leaders did not tell them exactly what they were supposed to get in the first place.

Mr. President, I want to put on the record here—I have never talked about this before, but even as we are talking about tourism development in Tobago and the lack of appropriate developmental funds, et cetera, I am going to talk about the Studley Park Enterprise Limited. This is a company that is owned by the Tobago House of Assembly. They operate the quarry in Tobago, and the quarry is deemed one of Tobago's prized resources; an industry with great potential for revenue generation. The range of products offered by SPEL—that is Studley Park Enterprise Limited—for sale on local and international markets includes aggregate, crusher run, rotten rock, and boulders, among others. The operations also include a concrete batching plant and a hot mix batching plant.

Mr. President, there seems to be that there are issues in terms of things like licences for the operation of the quarry. For instance, my understanding is that an application was made for a blasting licence in April. The licence was supposed to expire in June, and as of last week, the licence has still not been granted and therefore, blasting in the quarry had to be curtailed.

11.50 a.m.

This is a quarry that is producing aggregate for some of the major projects in Tobago, including the ANR Robinson expansion, and also for projects that are going on in Trinidad. I would therefore like to utilize this opportunity to inquire about the status of that mining licence as well as, the blasting licence and also, they have been asking for licence to export and that has been also a concern.

I am just saying that we are talking about diversification. We are talking about the declining oil and natural gas. We are talking about Tobago not getting appropriate money for the kind of development and here we have, there is a resource that can be developed appropriately, but it needs the collaboration of the

leaders in Tobago and the leaders in Trinidad. I am suggesting that that should be done to ensure that this resource could be maximized to bring great needed foreign exchange. Yes, Mr. President.

Crime is one of the things that is affecting Tobago at this point in time, and has already been mentioned and we know what is going on right now. It is something that grapples at the very soul of our sister Isle, with alarming increase in crime rate and these issues threaten the lives of the Tobagonians, negatively impact the business, including the tourism industry.

In an article—I quote an article, the editorial by the *Guardian* of 10th July, 2024 and I think it encompasses, what I want to say and I quote:

“Every murder in Tobago has serious implications for the prospects of Tobago’s entire population, both from a mental health perspective and an economic one. The fact that Tobago is far behind other Caribbean destinations in terms of hotel stock and the quality of the tourist product on offer is made even worse when the tiny island’s homicide rate begins to exceed that of other Caribbean nations.

If Tobago fails to attract more European and North American tourists due to the unruly behaviour of a few, there isn’t much that the island has to fall back on.”

Mr. President, Tobago used to be known as unspoilt, untouched, the place where people go to relax, used to, but that has changed significantly. So therefore, what is happening now, if we sit and just look at it, it is not being said right now, the unspoilt and untouched, and we would continue not to say it unless something is done.

I am going to proffer, Mr. President, that what is required right now in Tobago is an urgent need for the—not just a bit here from the police, you quarrel here with mothers who are not supporting their boys, I am saying it needs a comprehensive approach. I am suggesting that what is needed right now is discussion, meaningful, with the Tobago House of Assembly, leader, Government of Trinidad and Tobago, leader, Ministry of National Security, the Commissioner of Police, the people in education in Tobago, the churches in Tobago.

There are people—the community development, the business people, they all need to sit, Mr. President, and make plans as to how this is going to be addressed. It cannot be a piece here and a piece here, it has to be coordinated. Because, Mr. President, the persons running the gangs right now understand unity. They understand the collaboration. They understand that there are no borders between Trinidad and Tobago, while at the leadership level, we have put up borders.

This is Tobago's responsibility. This is Trinidad's responsibility. They are involved in every sector, business, they are in the tourism sector, they have gone into the schools, they are involved in those sectors. These things we have to do to reverse that trend, Mr. President, and I would suggest that we take a serious look not sitting behind here and saying that, the Government blaming the Opposition for not sitting down and talking with them, and the Opposition blaming the Government for an increase in crime, that would not work.

I am suggesting that in Tobago right now, like now, Mr. President, something like that be done because it is urgent, and we just cannot continue to do what we have been doing, otherwise Tobago is not going to be a place where you could go and lime, Mr. President. You will not be able to go back home.

Mr. President, I would just like to talk about governance in Tobago, and I am going to be on my proverbial soapbox again, to advocate for the advancement of Tobago self-governance. In answer to who we are becoming, I would like to look at a Tobago which comprises of people, leaders with integrity, who are vested in the economic and legislative authority to make decisions in the best interest and in accordance with the unique needs of Tobago.

This will partly be accomplished through the—let me say, significantly accomplished through the Tobago self-government Bill. The hon. Prime Minister, in his contribution to the budget speech said, that he was going to be looking into bringing back the Bill, or at least bringing the Bill out of where it is right now. He said he was going to do it after the budget.

Mr. President, I am so sorry that this Bill is going to be discussed in an environment that we have right now, where everybody is only thinking election. Unfortunately, Tobago's business will be, I think, like a football. The possibility that Tobago's business is like a football, where people are only looking at, "I will make this decision if I think it will benefit me politically", and that is unfortunate, very unfortunate. But you know what, Mr. President, I am an eternal optimist, so hear how I am going to spin this around.

The THA cannot bring forth Tobago self-government in the way that they wanted to. Neither can any government or opposition do it. The Government needs the support of the Opposition. So, in other words the three parts of the stool—a three legged stool, all three parts have to function efficiently: the THA, the Opposition and the Government. I would like to suggest that when this Bill is passed next year, when this Bill is passed, Mr. President, we will be saying, we will be saying, this Bill was passed and Trinidad and Tobago wins.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: This Bill is passed—yes, yes, yes, yes. Clap for it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy: This Bill is passed and Trinidad and Tobago wins. Why? You would need to be negotiating on both sides. The THA is not going to get everything it wants. The Trinidad and Tobago—anyhow, Mr. President, I have done, I think I have said what I needed to say. Tobago's development—we were talking about empowered people in terms of a society that is prospering—empowered people, Tobago people need to be empowered more than they are empowered right now.

Okay, so, Mr. President, I just want to bring one point that I think is going to look at this point about increased—for greater autonomy. Tobagonians have had to contend recently with excessive and unnecessary delays in the Registrar General's Department. This is an issue, which I believe greater autonomy can resolve. Within recent months, attorneys and or/their support staff visited the Registrar General's Department to register various types of deeds and were met with different degrees of success.

The challenges required some attorneys to make multiple visits to accomplish what should have been done in a first attempt, and by the way, from what I understand, these things used to be done very efficiently before, but now the system has broken down.

The general consensus is that we have moved from having essential services available in Tobago, to a position which is now unreliable and in some instances, Tobagonians are told when they go in there, it is better you go to Trinidad, jump on a plane or a boat, go to Trinidad to get it done, because you will get it done there

quicker. Mr. President, that is not acceptable. There used to be a resident Assistant Registrar General in Tobago, and that person was there full-time, the service was efficient and from what I understand, the lawyers are saying that something like that has to happen again. I remember I brought this in my 2020 budget contribution. I think it was last—yeah.

12.00 p.m.

I spoke about this before here, and when I listened to the Standing Finance Committee, the Member for Tobago East said that matter was sorted out. The matter may have been sorted out, in terms of the Administration, because she said it was a Cabinet decision, but it is not sorted out on the ground. And I would like the Attorney General, the Prime Minister and anyone else who is responsible for it, to look into it because the people of Tobago are not being served properly now.

Mr. President, crime in Trinidad and Tobago—I think it has been mentioned already and I would just say that—I would just like to put on the record this quote, again, from the Legatum Institute, the 2023 Prosperity Index. They quote—which adjudges the prosperity of a nation based on 12 pillars: “Safety and Security”; “Investment Environment”; “Governance”; “Living Conditions”; “Personal Freedom”; “Enterprise Conditions”; “Infrastructure and Market Access”; “Social Capital”; “Economic Quality”; “Health”; “Education”; “Natural Environment”.

Trinidad and Tobago’s rating, as you know—well, based on what we are saying and what we know, particularly as it relates to crime and violence, Trinidad and Tobago’s rating was ranked 56th out of 167 countries in 2023. That pillar of crime and of—the security pillar—“Safety and Security” pillar measures the degree to which war, conflict or crime have destabilized the security of individuals,

both immediately and through longer-lasting effects. I need to say no more, Mr. President, because it has been ventilated, I think, sufficiently.

I do believe though—and I want to congratulate both Sen. Teemal, who talked about the relationship between broken families, and also, Sen. Richards, who talked about the link with education.

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

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: Thank you, Mr. President. As far as we are talking—Sen. Teemal talked about families. Mr. President, I will just like to say that broken families is not all we have to look at, we have to look at the values of the family. I am saying that because we have many stable families that are producing people who are criminals at different levels, and particularly, the high—in what is called “white-collared crime”. I am saying that so the broken families is not the only thing we have to look at, we have to look at the values of the families.

Mr. President, I would just like to end by saying, no—one other point about education, and the highest budgetary allocation for education has already been said, and the link of education to crime, that was already mentioned yesterday. But I must talk about—I want to commend the Tobago House of Assembly, that since 2005, they have instituted a values-based character programme in Forms 1 to 3 of the secondary schools. This is one programme that has spanned administrations. It started under Mr. Orville London, and it is still continuing. The programme has suffered issues with funding over the last couple years, but that programme needs to be expanded into the upper forms. It also needs to go into the primary schools, so that the values and principles could be adopted, not just in those three forms, but also throughout the school. Values need to be also adopted as a whole-of-school approach, so that we have situations where teachers are also a part of the

discussions, in terms of the values-based education, and also, another part that includes the families, including discussions with families.

Mr. President, constructive initiatives are oftentimes proposed and presented. However, they must be backed by proper leadership and management. And when I talk about leadership, I mean, leaders leading with skills—appropriate leadership skills and character. I firmly believe that a country cannot exceed the capability or capacity of its leaders. Therefore, if you want to increase the input, if you want to increase productivity and efficiency of our plans, projects and people, we need to develop the minds, skills and character of our leaders. They are so key in the whole equation. Because many people are only looking at the boys on the block who are shooting and killing themselves, but they are not looking at the other areas, which we know. There are many other areas that are contributing to this and they are not being addressed appropriately right now.

Mr. President, I would just like to do one final quote from John Maxwell's book on *High Road Leadership*. He identified some things that high road leaders do and these include:

1. They bring people together.

—and I say, not keep them apart.

2. They value all people not just some.

In other words, not just my tribe, not just my—as some people are saying here, who are in my ethnic group, or whatever, they value all people.

3. They acknowledge their humanness.

They are not perfect, but they are able to say, “Listen, I have done wrong. Honestly, I have done wrong.” That is the number three, acknowledge their humanness.

4. They do the right things for the right reasons.
5. They give more than take.
6. They develop emotional capacity.

The ability to show empathy. In other words, this is not just your problem. “I empathize with you, I know what you are doing and therefore, I am concerned about you.”

7. They place people above their own agenda.

And I would add, they put country before self and party.

8. They embrace authenticity.

You could look at them and know that they are real.

9. They take accountability for their actions.
10. They live by bigger picture.
11. They do not keep score.
12. They desire the best for others.

Mr. President, a culture of trust, openness, inclusivity and values-based leadership invariably takes time to become established. But we can start now, and I am recommending that—what is happening to our society right now, to me, we have to work for a culture change.

In conclusion, I will go back to the two questions: Who are we becoming as people and as leaders of the county, and what is being done to remedy the situation and soul of our nation?

Mr. President, I have faith in God, and I have faith in the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And I pray that starting now, we would seek to spend—with this allocation of \$47 billion, start to think differently to rebuild our people, by teaching and modeling good values everywhere; Parliament, police service—everywhere;

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. Dr. M. Dillon-Remy (cont'd)

2024.10.22

schools, universities—everywhere, and putting in a management system, so that we can indeed forge our way to true prosperity. I thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Dennis.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Ancil Dennis: Thank you very much, Mr. President. It is indeed a pleasure to stand in this august House to deliver my main contribution on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: And as a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, I am also a Tobagonian and therefore, I am happy to join five other Tobagonians in this House.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: Of course, Sen. Dr. Dillion-Remy, who was my pediatrician as a child—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Hislop: Why did you do that? Why did you do Dr. Dillon-Remy that?

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Hislop: Why did you do that, Sir?

Sen. A. Dennis: Sen. Jearlean John, while I do not approve of her company at this time, she is also a Tobagonian.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Dennis: You yourself, Mr. President, a distinguished Tobagonian—and I want to take the opportunity, speaking in this Senate for the first time, to congratulate you on your ascension to—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis:—the position of President of the Senate. My brother Laurence Hislop, he is also here and the hon. Minister, Sen. Hassel Bacchus. So it is a good time for Tobago. The Senate comprises approximately 20 per cent, if my math is correct, Tobagonians, and I want to give the Minister of Finance the assurance that it does not mean we will be asking for 20 per cent of the national budget in the future.

12.10 p.m.

But, Mr. President, so much has been said thus far in this debate, so much has been said by us on the Government side, and a lot has been said by those on the other side. I have to be careful when I refer to those on the other side, because on the other side, you have at the back, the Independent Senators, who have brought so far a lot of relevance and sensible contributions to this debate, but in front of them you have the Opposition. Sometimes I am not sure if they should be referred to as an Opposition, because based on my assessment on what they have done for the last 10 years, they have been nothing but an obstruction—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis:—to the progress of Trinidad and Tobago. So permit me, from time to time, to refer to them as an obstruction.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Dennis: And of course—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Dennis: I would respond to that—

Hon. Senator: “Doh worry with dem”.

Sen. A. Dennis: And, of course, their main topic this morning, instead of focusing on the budget, they are asking us in the PNM, who is our leader, and I want to say

to them that we know clearly who is our leader. We know who is our Prime Minister, we know who is the political leader of the PNM. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis:—is his name. But more important than knowing who is your leader, Mr. President, you also have to know the attributes of your leader, and I want to say to them that our leader is a man of integrity—

Hon. Senator: Oh, yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis:—a man of character, a man with an impeccable track record in the politics of Trinidad and Tobago, from 1986, I believe it was, before I was born, to now, a man who has demonstrated courage in his leadership of this country—

Hon. Senator: Correct.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis:—and, of course, a man who has been sober at all times, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: So they should not engage us at all in a conversation on leadership, Mr. President, because we understand what leadership is on this side.

So, Sen. Wade Mark, and he is absent at this time, but he spoke about some article about bacchanal in the PNM, and I want to give the population the assurance, there is no bacchanal in the PNM.

Hon. Senator: Correct.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: There is no bacchanal in the Government of Trinidad and

Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: And, you see, they should be very familiar with bacchanal, because I can recall during the period, 2010 to 2015, there was a People's Partnership Government, and in that partnership, we had "traitorship", we had dictatorship. We had everything else except leadership, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: And, of course, their actions have no relationship to the development and progress of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. President.

So there is no bacchanal on this side. There is no bacchanal in the PNM, because, of course, at one point in time, the famous Jack was on the attack, attacking the then Prime Minister who is their leader in the Opposition at the time, and then, recently, we heard the same Jack was back. Of course, we have had scandal after scandal during that period, 2010 to 2015. The famous LifeSport man is here. We have had all kinds of scandals, all kinds of bacchanal during their time in government, but they are coming to tell us about bacchanal, Mr. President. There is no bacchanal on this side.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: So when it comes to Tobago, I want to talk to the people of Tobago first and foremost, because 40 minutes tend to fly by very quickly, Mr. President. I want to say that the people of Tobago and the island of Tobago have benefited significantly under this PNM Government over the last nine to 10 years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: Because I want to remind them that when they were in government, there were two significant developments in Tobago during their

period, 2010 to 2015.

We had a new meteorological centre constructed and a famous pumpkin house. That was all that was constructed, Mr. President, in Tobago during that period. Under the leadership of this Prime Minister, who is a Tobagonian as we all know, under the leadership of this Government, Tobago has been transformed through the contributions, the direct involvement and direct investment of the central government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: I will mention a few of the projects, and I want to leave the biggest one for last. During their time, the PNM Administration, before them, had on the table two police stations, Mr. President. They came in, they had other priorities, and guess what, they cancelled it. And I am not surprised, because when you operate like how they operated, then they would not be interested in advancing anything to do with police stations, so they cancelled that.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Dennis: When this PNM Government came into office, we ensured that we found the available resources to construct those two police stations, and now we have a situation where we have a new police station in Shirvan Road, Mr. President, and a new one in Roxborough as well.

I want to say, next door to the police station in Roxborough, there is also a new fire station, thanks to this PNM Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: And not only that, the Government partnered as well with the Tobago House of Assembly, the then Tobago House of Assembly, led by the PNM at the time, and we ensured that we brought to the people in Tobago East, through

the involvement of the Member for Tobago East, and of course other Members of Cabinet and Members of the THA at the point in time, to ensure that a new hospital was constructed for the benefit of the people of Tobago East in Roxborough.

The Independent Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy highlighted some issues there, but I want to say that by the time the last THA Administration left office, everything was in place to ensure that that hospital be put to 24-hour use, Mr. President. Therefore, the current THA administration has no excuse because it has to do with priorities. They have been allocated this time around, \$2.599 billion, and when we compare the numbers from 2019, 2020 and 2021, the PNM THA got \$6.7 billion for that three-year period; 2022, 2023, 2024, this current THA administration has gotten so far, \$7.7 billion. So, in other words, the PNM Government, at the central level, treated this current THA administration better than the previous PNM administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: With \$1 billion more available to them, they have not prioritized the full operationalization of that hospital, Mr. President, and therefore they have to take full responsibility.

Sen. Mitchell: Shame.

Sen. A. Dennis: But I also want to mention the new airport terminal building, because that is a significant development in the Tobago space, because the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts spoke a lot about airlift and we, in Tobago, tend to depend a lot on the domestic air bridge, Mr. President, to bring people to Tobago, whether it be our domestic tourists, and in some cases our international arrivals. Because, unfortunately, we have gone from having two flights out of the UK, to now one flight, because the current THA administration

decided that they were going to send Virgin Atlantic packing.

Therefore, this new airport, with a capacity of three million passengers annually, is expected to attract significant new airlift direct, Mr. President, to the island of Tobago. But, you see, an airport by itself cannot do that, and that is why as part of our developmental plans for Tobago, this central government had on the agenda, a Sandals, a Sandals resort. I want to tell the people of Tobago especially that we missed out on a great opportunity to accelerate our progress in the tourism sector, because we saw what happened. As soon as Tobago—well, a few Tobagonians said, no, that they do not want it, supported by some operatives in the Opposition, because of course their intention is to obstruct, and any opportunity to develop Trinidad and Tobago, any opportunity that this Government will bring to the table to advance the people of Trinidad and Tobago, they believe they must obstruct it, because as far as they are concerned, it is party first and people after.

12.20 p.m.

So, anything to advance their political intent, anything to advance their political ambition, even if it means obstructing development, Mr. President, they are going to do it. They did it with Sandals. They had people like Watson Duke and the current Chief Secretary telling the developers to put Sandals on Carrera and telling the developers that Tobagonians “doh” want Sandals, which was an absolute lie. So we missed that opportunity—an untruth, Mr. President. I withdraw the word “lie”. I saw the facial expression.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Dennis: So it was an untruth. Not too long after that, Sandals went to St. Vincent and the Grenadines and within a month of that hotel opening, Mr. President, we saw a number of flights, and new airlifts. All of a sudden, St.

Vincent's tourism product transformed significantly, JetBlue, United Airlines, American Airlines, British Airways, Virgin Atlantic, new flights coming to the destination. Had the people of Tobago been able to benefit from a Sandals and a Marriott, which is under construction, with the new airport and the marina that this Government is promising, guess what? Our tourism sector, Mr. President, would have been significantly transformed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: I want to say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that an advanced tourism sector in Tobago will benefit the overall country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: Exactly.

Sen. A. Dennis: Sandals by itself was going to create 2,000 new jobs in Tobago, Mr. President, right. In addition to that, I am sure a hotel of that magnitude would consume thousands of eggs per day and thousands of vegetables and other produce. Who do you think, Mr. President, would have been in a position to produce what was required for the operations of that hotel? The people of Tobago and if not the people of Tobago, the people of Trinidad.

Hon. Senator: That is right.

Sen. A. Dennis: So agriculture would have benefited significantly.

Another ridiculous claim made by people in the Opposition was that when Sandals came it would kill off all the other small hotels and guest houses; ridiculous. Sandals, of course, provides five-star accommodation and when Sandals attracts new airlifts, let us say a new airline signs an agreement with Sandals and a plane comes with 200 people to Tobago, do you think that all of them are going to Sandals, Mr. President?

Hon. Senator: The front of the plane goes to Sandals.

Sen. A. Dennis: What Sandals would have brought was the linkages between Tobago and other international destinations, our source markets in Europe, in the United Kingdom, in North America and South America as well but we shelved that. Do you know what we have in Tobago now, Mr. President? Do you know what is the big investment in Tobago, apart from the Marriott that the central government brought?

Hon. Senator: Double Palm.

Sen. A. Dennis: Double Palm. Tobago now has a Double Palm, Mr. President.

Hon. Senator: I hope “yuh” paying hotel tax.

Sen. A. Dennis: So, the contributions of this central government to the people of Tobago have been significant, Mr. President and there are other things that I can mention, the Hillsborough dam, \$60-odd million spent to ensure that it was desilted, to increase the water capacity. A number of other projects were done by WASA to improve the water capacity in Tobago, Mr. President, and all of this was geared towards ensuring that Tobago was well-poised to be more competitive in the tourism sector, Mr. President, but certain people in Tobago did not want it.

They also want to talk about crime, Mr. President, and I heard Sen. Jearlean John, she had a lot to say about crime. I want to say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we have had a crime problem for a long time now. Even in the period 2010–2015, we had a crime problem. I do not know if you recall, during that period the entire nation was shaken by the assassination of a prominent attorney during that period, Mr. President. So I am not going to have a debate about who had more crime and who had more murders. That is not the debate we want to have. The debate we should be having on crime is that it is the responsibility of all

of us to ensure that we do what is required to make Trinidad and Tobago a safer place. What is their record?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: Because legislation brought to the Parliament to treat with the bail arrangements because you recognize that sometimes the police will detect crime, arrest people, take them before the court, and in a short period of time they are back out in the streets committing the same crimes. We brought legislation to treat with that. Guess what they did in the Opposition? They did not support it. Legislation to protect whistle-blowers, they did not support that, Mr. President. Anti-gang legislation, they did not support that, Mr. President, but they are coming to talk about crime because you see crime for them is about political benefit. Crime for them is a campaign platform topic.

Hon. Senator: True.

Sen. A. Dennis: They are not serious about treating with the issue of crime, Mr. President.

I want to address decent, right-thinking UNC supporters because I believe that within that party there are some decent people who support them. I want to encourage them to rescue their party from the rut and the morass that it is in because come 2025, for the next general election, I want that when you end up back in Opposition, at least on that occasion you would be a credible, respectable and competent Opposition that will support the next PNM Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: It cannot be that the—and this applies all over the world, Mr. President. I have seen even in the United States Congress because of bipartisan political interests, have frustrated and obstructed even the President of the United

States from advancing the important agenda of the people of the United States of America. The same thing is happening here in Trinidad and Tobago. So I am saying rescue that party from the leadership of the Member for Siparia. Rescue that party from the people who are in the Parliament and on bail.

Hon. Senator: Let him stay, let him stay, let him stay.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: Let him stay “nah”, let him stay, let him stay. Let him stay in the morass.

Hon. Senator: He cannot come out.

Hon. Senator: Licks sharing.

Sen. A. Dennis: Because it is foolish of us, Mr. President—I am hoping that word is parliamentary—to expect that people who are unethical in their ways, nefarious in their operations and a cartel by nature to be serious about solving crime; UNC. That is what UNC means, Mr. President. So that is the debate we must have on crime. The Opposition must be prepared to support critical legislation that will assist the Government—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis:—and other state agencies in fighting crime, not to come here and read out the crime statistics, as if under the UNC there was no crime. There was crime in 2010--2015 even in the Cabinet, Mr. President.

Sen. Mitchell: Somebody get lock up.

Sen. A. Dennis: People were arrested.

Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Dennis: As we speak—you talk about that person but what was the action taken by the PNM and its leadership?

Hon. Senator: Correct.

Sen. A. Dennis: On the other hand, you have people sitting in the Parliament and on bail, million-dollar bail for serious offences. That is the debate we should be having when it comes to crime, Mr. President, but of course, leadership is about courage because there are some—and I want to read an article, I did not come to read but I will read this. I will refer to this article, Mr. President, because there are some in this place and in this country that are very hypocritical.

12.30 p.m.

So we are in a situation where Trinidad and Tobago and its economy, like every other country in the world, is influenced by global forces, and therefore, the Government has to take particular actions. So the Minister of Finance brought a budget, a very contextual one, applicable to our circumstances because when things happen globally whether it be wars, whether it be recessions, or whatever might be taking place globally, it impacts on us, Mr. President, and that is obvious. So particular actions were prescribed: number one, the Government decided that we will implement, not introduce, eh, implement the property tax to ensure that we can attract an additional \$1 billion in revenue specific to local government.

They are talking now about “axing the tax” and I want to read a little bit of this article dated Thursday 1st August, *Newsday*, Mr. President, 2013. I want to read a little bit that will remind the population of how these people operate:

“Speaking with reporters following the presentation of the report, Howai said Government is ‘looking at all the subsidies right now, to see where it will make sense to start shifting what we do.’ Explaining the country’s overall fiscal situation is better than anticipated, Howai said ‘there was no need for dramatic changes’ but there should be a re-calibrating of the

process of subsidies for the country.”

And, of course, he was speaking about the fuel subsidy, Mr. President.

“Noting that general elections are constitutionally due in 2015 and local government elections are due later this year, Howai observed, ‘That will always be a real challenge because to be frank, you’re going into an election, it is unlikely that you want to make very dramatic shifts.’”

That is how they operate, Mr. President. This Government, we are prepared to make the necessary decisions that will keep this country on an even keel in election season, and out of election season because we believe in doing the right thing for this country because it is the right thing to do.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: So they were discussing fuel subsidies, as a matter of fact, at one point in time they were prepared to introduce the property tax, then it was called a land and buildings tax. They were prepared to introduce it, but of course, whenever an election comes, and because for them it is party first and country after, they prepared to pull back and they want to talk about leadership, Mr. President. So in the budget, the Minister of Finance mentioned the current context, the current climate, global inflation at 5 to 6 per cent, oil prices at a particular level, and the proposal is that we will have an expenditure of \$59-odd billion based on revenue of around \$54 billion, a deficit of let us say, \$6 billion, Mr. President.

The Leader of the Opposition in her response, goodies after goodies, promises after promises, and you know what I did, Mr. President? I attached an estimated cost to these promises and best-case scenario, the cost of the promises advanced by the Leader of the Opposition in her response is going to be a minimum of \$10 billion, best case scenario, Mr. President, could be more, eh, but

that is the best case scenario, \$10 billion in promises, right. In addition to that, they are saying “axe the tax”, right. If we “axe the tax” we are going to lose \$1 billion. They are saying as well, Mr. President, we should have kept Petrotrin open in the state that it was in, leaking \$4 billion annually from the Treasury. So they are saying we should not have restructured Petrotrin into the competitive profitable entity that it is now, we should not have restructured that. So that is 4 plus 1, \$5 billion, Mr. President, follow me. In addition to that, they are saying, Mr. President, that we should have retained the fuel subsidy, we should not have touched it, although they were preparing to touch it back then. As a matter of fact, they increased premium fuel during their term in office and they were preparing to withdraw the subsidies gradually, Mr. President. But of course, elections coming and they are more concerned with winning the election than to keeping Trinidad and Tobago progressive and moving forward.

So they are saying now, no need to remove the fuel subsidy which is, by the way, \$3 billion to \$4 billion a year so that is how much, \$9 billion. So they are saying to us, add the \$10 billion in promises to that, that is \$19 billion, plus the current deficit which is \$6 billion. They are saying that they could run this country at a deficit, Mr. President, of \$25 billion. And my economist friend will tell me that that will be a deficit to GDP ratio of 12 per cent. The healthy ratio, Mr. President, is 3 per cent thereabout, that is what they are saying to us.

So they will obstruct what the Government is doing with respect to crime, with respect to tourism because as far as they are concerned once the Government progresses and looks good, that is not good for them on election day, to hell with the country, Mr. President, it is all about elections for them and winning elections. But they do not understand, they do not understand, that the people of Trinidad and

Tobago are wise, and therefore we see through that, and that is why in 2015, Mr. President, notwithstanding all the promises that were thrown at them they voted out the People's Partnership Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: And in 2020, Mr. President, notwithstanding all that transpired with the pandemic and the difficulty that we were facing with our economy in Trinidad and Tobago, with the pandemic and all of that, they understood the quality of the leadership in the PNM and they voted for the PNM once again.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Dennis: Because, Mr. President, as that transpired with the people of Tobago—"ah coming to dat,". "Sometimes yuh does be in good house and bad house does call yuh." So the people of Tobago—and thanks for bringing me to that point, the people of Tobago for 21 years, under the PNM, Mr. President, enjoyed development, they enjoyed an arrangement where Tobago's resources, whether it be \$2 billion, \$2.3 billion, what was given by the Ministry of Finance to the Tobago House of Assembly, we ensured it was spent in Tobago to the development of the people of Tobago. You know what is happening now, Mr. President, you know who is benefiting the most—

Hon. Senators: Tell us.

Sen. A. Dennis:—from the money given to the Tobago House of Assembly, it is their friends in the UNC, Mr. President. All the Tobagonian businesses and contractors, all of them have been blacklisted, and of course, Sen. Mark was in here talking about "guanas" and "Landate" and all kinds of foolishness. Talk about the "pumpkin house," and the "pink palace".

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

Sen. A. Dennis: Talk about Seecharan and Lalla and all the other south Trinidad contractors in Tobago now, sidelining the Tobagonians, that is what is taking place in Tobago.

12.40 p.m.

Over the last three years, Mr. President, in Tobago—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Mr. President: Okay. The crosstalk is getting a little bit high, thus making it difficult to hear Sen. Dennis. Senator, continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: Over the last three years in Tobago, Mr. President, some 2,000 Tobagonians who were employed in the construction sector have lost their jobs. You know why? Because the Tobagonian contractors, who got contracts from the THA and who employed Tobagonians, all of them have been sidelined. We have a company called California Stucco. In one year, Mr. President, \$300 million almost in contracts. The entire development budget for the Tobago House of Assembly gifted away—

Sen. Mitchell: Shame.

Sen. A. Dennis:—to one particular contractor. That is what is happening in Tobago, Mr. President. Their friends are enjoying it, and I understand why and I will tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago why. Because you see, they believe— and if you notice, they are not a national party, eh, Mr. President—

Hon. Senator: That is right. That is right.

Sen. A. Dennis:—they are a Trinidad party. The PNM is the only national Trinidad and Tobago party.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: So they will never put a candidate to run for Tobago East or Tobago West.

Hon. Senator: Never. Never.

Sen. A. Dennis: But you know what they will do? They will meet with Farley and others quietly at night, and they will plan their strategies and they will ensure that Tobago's resources, that were originally withheld in Tobago and circulated in Tobago to the benefit of Tobagonians, they will plan and they will concoct and they will ensure that those resources are no longer available to the people of Tobago, because they believe if they do that, they could empower and enrich their friends to ensure that they put themselves in a position to benefit. That is what is taking place in Tobago.

Tobagonians were in a good house under the PNM and, of course, bad house called them. I want to warn the people of Trinidad and Tobago—because we run the risk of doing the same thing at the national level. We are in a good house. Yes, we have challenges—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Sen. A. Dennis: Yes, we have challenges, Mr. President, I will acknowledge that. We have challenges with crime. We have challenges economically. The oil prices fluctuate, that happens. It happened to them in 2015, in their last days of government, but I am saying, generally, we are in a good house, and I want us to remember the quality of leadership that we have in our Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis: Let us not, Mr. President, take God out of our thoughts and fall for the ridiculous promises. One of the promises included the bail amendment. That is one of the promises they included, but the same attempts made by this Government to fix exactly that, they did not support it, but they are prepared to go and promise it. So you are not prepared to work with the Government to give it, but you are promising the people of Trinidad and Tobago that when you get into office, you will fix those things.

I am saying to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, we are in a good house. With challenges—any good house has challenges. Sometimes you have to dust the curtains, sometimes you have to throw out the garbage, but we are in a good house, do not let the bad house of the UNC call you, because you know who and what you have, you do not know what you are going to get. Well, let me change that. Well, you know what you are going to get. Because we saw what they did in the period 2010 to 2015. We saw what they did in that period, Mr. President.

So I am saying to us, this budget is one that considers the global economic context within which we operate. We have prescribed policies, we have a manageable deficit, and we are going to make sensible decisions going forward in the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. President. That is what this Government is about. So having said all of that, I want to congratulate the Minister of Finance—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis:—for his stewardship of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago in very difficult circumstances—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Dennis:—because we inherited a Treasury that was almost empty. Then

we had the pandemic, Mr. President, and, of course, following the pandemic, we have had serious global economic shocks, creating some challenges here for us. I am saying, notwithstanding all of that, no public servants were sent home and we have managed the economy of Trinidad and Tobago in a way that ensured that we steered the course, we stayed out of the hands of the IMF, unlike some of our neighbours, Mr. President. So with that said, congratulations to the Minister of Finance and congratulations to this Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, before I call on the next speaker, permit me to congratulate Sen. Dennis on his maiden contribution in this Senate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Thank you.

Sen. Roberts: I now see why he lost his seat.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to contribute on this debate on a Bill entitled:

“An Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending 30th day of September, 2025”.

Mr. President, permit me to congratulate Sen. Dennis on his maiden contribution. He has proven himself true to form, really a thoroughbred Member of the People’s National Movement—

Sen. Roberts: [*Laughter*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial:—who can speak for his full speaking time and say absolutely nothing.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
 Bill, 2024
 Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial (cont'd)

2024.10.22

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

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: So he has lived up to all of our expectations and I am certain that he has lived up to the expectations of his political leader. And I am just very grateful that he did not take five hours and—what was it?—44 minutes?—five hours and 44 minutes to say absolutely nothing because, Mr. President, this budget that we are here and we are talking about today—and you know, they are so critical—and I will spend some time responding to the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, and also, to Sen. Dennis. They are so critical of the concept that an alternative government, the Opposition, the duly elected Opposition of this country, has actually put forward, through our political leader, the Member for Siparia, a woman with heart and soul and passion for people—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial:—has actually forwarded better plans than this Government has done for the last 10 years. They should be ashamed. They should be ashamed that in 10 years, they have not been able to produce real, material plans and put it forward to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and worse than that, they have not be able to deliver even on the meagre plans that they have come up with. They have not been able to deliver on them. I will spend my time going through to show you how they come here year after year and promise things and promise allocations and make all sorts of, you know, comments about what they are going to do, and they deliver absolutely nothing.

Mr. President, I want to commend my colleagues on this Bench for their outstanding contributions.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Particularly today, we had—again, after our

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial (cont'd)

2024.10.22

political leader, Sen. John—if my political leader is like my political mother, Sen. John is my political big sister and I want to say that—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial:—Sen. John reminded me this morning of something. I saw a clip of presidential candidate, Kamala Harris, speaking about an issue and she said, “We are going to call their names because you have to put names to the people,” and Sen. John did that this morning. She called the names because I think this Government forgets—they forget that this is not a numbers game.

Hon. Senator: Yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: This is not a numbers game. It is about people. So it is not about whether it is 400 murders or 500 murders, or we are heading towards 600 murders for this year, you know. It is about the actual people. It is about the children collecting bullets, sitting in the arms of their parents or sleeping in their beds at night. That is what it is about. So I congratulate Sen. John for a very passionate contribution today.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

12.50 p.m.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Mr. President, we continue to stand here to give a voice to the voiceless people of this nation. The people who are the poor, the underprivileged, people who lack access to basic necessities like water and proper housing. We have to highlight their plight and we have to show how because that is what a budget is. A budget is supposed to address the plight of the people and this budget contains absolutely nothing to address the real plights facing the people

of Trinidad and Tobago. Crime is just one of them but there are many others, but crime is the major one and it is impossible to speak about crime and not touch on education, social services.

This Government, they come here and they cry down social interventions like baby grant and milk grant and all of these things. They insult things meant to help women take themselves out of poverty and raise their children. What kind of Government is that? What kind of people are you, to stand here and criticize things like that given to people? You do not understand that a milk grant is the difference between a 15-year-old boy seeing his siblings hungry and deciding to go join the gang and pick up the gun and commit a robbery.

Sen. Nakhid: Yes.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: That is what they do not understand. They do not see linkages. They do not understand that the milk grant is the difference between the child, the older child, having books to go to school and get an education, and not come out there and commit crime. That is what the milk grant is, but it is “Kamla milk grant”, and that is why they will cry it down, Mr. President. So, they do not care about people and the real people, and is why they could stand here and commend this budget. This vacuous budget that lacks any sort of real promise or possibility to bring this country out from the darkness that it is currently existing in.

Mr. President, our comprehensive all-inclusive plan laid out by the Leader of the Opposition to rescue and restore Trinidad and Tobago to the paradise that it was between 2010 and 2015, it is something that I want to fully commend and I encourage every right thinking citizen to go and listen. I heard it this morning, I was trapped in traffic as usual, coming from San Fernando. I heard the Minister of

Tourism, Culture and the Arts speaking and saying “how we going to afford this—”. I will tell you something, two things. One, we will do it the same way we did it from 2010 to 2015. We will do it the same way that we did it then, but more than that and the bigger thing what we will do, is we will have proper priorities. We will cut out wastage and we will cut out corruption and that is the way that we will be able to afford to deliver.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Because, Mr. President, we were not the ones running from procurement legislation.

Sen. Roberts: 600 recusals.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: And “kick the can down de road” as far as we could to avoid it.

Sen. Roberts: “You eh geh none”.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: We are not the ones who when Sen. Jearlean John was in charge of the HDC had to cancel a whole housing project because somebody a local contractor decided to challenge it and rather than face the OPR and deal with the challenge proceedings, they cancelled the whole project. What does that tell you? What does that tell you about what is taking place in this Government?

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts stood up and say “this is my 10th budget defending tourism, and the sector, and the culture and the arts”. He probably thinks that we forgot that at one point in time he was the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, and then a certain Senator who was sitting there at the time was accused of clearing down lands owned by the HDC, and he ordered an investigation and suddenly he moved from housing and “get put in tourism” and

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial (cont'd)

2024.10.22

did not get back his seat in San Fernando East.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: Oh lord! Poor fella. “When yuh do good, dey pelt yuh out.”

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: “Dat is how it is, that is how it does go.”

Sen. Roberts: “Dat is why dey bring Dennis.”

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: “And den dey talking about we have bacchanal, and don’t talk about dem bacchanal and all kinda ting. All of dem with dey mind obsess with Mayaro for the last six months, but now dey coming to tell us doh get in our bacchanal”. At least we have a democratic party that will hold elections and give people the ability.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: “Dey could sit down where dey want, stand up where dey want, say what dey want, they doh have to go as Sen. John say, dey doh have to *pusoor pusoor* by the *Express* and ask for anonymity like if dey in witness protection to talk about what going on inside de party”.

Sen. Roberts: [*Laughter*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: We “doh” have that because we have a leader. And as I listened very carefully to what they talk about, all the attributes of their leader, but you know what they never talked about? They never talked about kindness, and that is something we could talk about in our party. We could talk about kindness in a leader, we could talk about a leader with heart, with generosity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: We could talk about a leader who is fair. So we do not have to sit down and accept whatever is handed to us, alright. But that is enough of that, I do not need to—

Sen. Roberts: Take small pin.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Yeah, I do not need to waste more time, that is what you all choose. Sen. Dennis came to talk about the record and our record while we were in government. Our record was the lowest crime rate in over 30 years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: That was the record of the People's Partnership Administration. Our record was community comfort patrols that gave people a sense of security "alyuh" scrap that. They try to reintroduce it in COVID and it had some "bobol" and they had to shut it down. Again, our record was that we passed good legislation to ensure that you had proper procurement and disposal of public property. You all brought amendments three times to water it down and make it almost ineffective to remove a whole chunk of government expenditure from over side. That is your record not ours.

Sen. Roberts: Nine years.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: In nine years that is what your record is and you all will hit a new record this year by the looks of it, when comes to crime. Our record is making sure that there was equality in the distribution of resources within this country. I hear Senator is talking about what "south contractors". I "doh" know why it is, and then they come here and they bring one person from central Trinidad and all of a sudden they think that they love central Trinidad, and they putting him forward as the alternative candidate and all of this, and et cetera that, but you coming here to cry down contractors from south Trinidad. So what happen? People from south Trinidad are not people to? We are not citizens of this country?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: We get treated like second-class citizens, by the PNM. All the time, we always get treated like second-class citizens. No wonder “dey” put you out of San Fernando East, because you sat down here Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts and listening and talking about “south contractors getting work in Tobago”, as though contractors from south are not entitled, they are not entitled to put in a tender to get work in Tobago. That is uncalled for. I want to say they should apologize for that statement about south contractors. Everybody who wants to put in a tender for work in Trinidad and Tobago have equal rights to do so.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: Not in his mind.

Sen. Gopeesingh: Under procurement law.

Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdial: “But that is what happen when you come to Parliament, change a whole law, make three new seats, and still get licks, and loss the six seats you had before.”

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

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: “Dat is why dat does happen.”

Hon. Senator: “And that is why he in Opposition.”

Sen. Gopeesingh: That is why he is Opposition.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: And he talking about what and what we should do to be in Opposition because he was in Opposition and get put in Opposition.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: And get put out by the people of Tobago. The people of Tobago rejected the PNM.

Sen. Gopeesingh: Overwhelmingly.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Overwhelmingly. Then they come here, and the leader of that rejection, of that rejected bunch, has now come here to lecture the UNC.

Sen. Roberts: Bring back Laurel.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: To lecture the UNC about what to do, and what to say, and about south contractors. Mr. President, really they have nothing to talk about and that is why they have to come here and bring up all of these things. But let me talk today about, as I said, I want to talk about crime. The number one issue facing this population. Every single day you open the newspaper all you see, about three or four pages dedicated every day, murder, rape, domestic violence, home invasions, and of recent times more, and more cases of kidnapping and extortion in this country. What is the Government doing? Nobody knows.

Security tax be imposed by criminals on hardworking business people in this country, Mr. President, and the response we get from the Government is well you should not pay, you should not do this. Are you coming to keep people safe at night? Are you resourcing the national security agencies sufficiently, to be able to keep people safe at night? The answer is resounding no, Mr. President.

Mr. President, last year in the budget they promised 1,000 new vehicles. They come back this year now to say “no it is 2,000 vehicles with approval for 200 in this year”. Where are the vehicles? The bigger issue than purchasing of vehicles for the TTPS, is the maintenance of those vehicles.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: You have a literal scrap yard of vehicles purchased with the money from taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago piling up. We

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial (cont'd)

2024.10.22

have had issues, I think it is up at Wallerfield—

Sen. Gopeesingh: Yeah.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Somewhere is where VMCOTT [*Inaudible*]. In Marabella right next to the area, by Tropical Plaza there. There is a whole yard full of derelict police vehicles parked up there, an environmental hazard. Just sitting there, they are not repairing the vehicles. When the vehicle management corporation came before—

Sen. Gopeesingh: VMCOTT.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Yeah, VMCOTT, came before a joint select committee, they talked about the challenges they were facing from collecting money from state agencies, just like T&TEC, people owing T&TEC and other state agencies. The biggest headache for VMCOTT is just collecting the money from other state agencies.

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

1.00 p.m.

It was so bad that VMCOTT was actually falling behind on paying NIS, Health Surcharge and PAYE, and remitting their own taxes for their employees to the Board of Inland Revenue. Could you imagine that? Government not paying Government who have to then remit taxes to Government. “They in ah mess.” They are in a complete mess, and nothing, when you talk about they are going to buy 2,000 vehicles for the TTPS, no mention whatsoever on how you plan to fix VMCOTT as the first port of call for the agency that will repair and maintain vehicles. So without a plan to repair and maintain the existing fleet, adding vehicles that will eventually just end up in the stockpile of scrap iron makes absolutely no sense and it is not value for money, and that is what budgeting is

about and that is what you will expect to hear in a budget debate, about how you will earn money, how you will spend that money, and how you will ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago get value for that money that you are spending, and we have heard nothing like that, Mr. Vice-President

When it comes to vehicles as well, we have to talk about the coast guard. I do not know by what or how it ended up at this stage, but our coast guard vehicles—we have one vessel working. One vessel. We have a problem. They had a whole big seminar and conference down at the Hyatt to talk about Crime and Violence as a Public Health Issue, and we recognized that the influx of guns into this country is what is contributing to the crime problem. The majority of our crime is committed using illegal firearms. Two or three years ago the SSA put out a statistic, they said they estimated that there were about 12,000 illegal firearms in Trinidad and Tobago, I could only imagine what number they have arrived at now, because from that period to now we have had a breakdown of our coast guard patrols and we have had a breakdown of one of the scanners at our legal port of entry. So if it cannot come through the illegal port of entry it will come through the legal ports of entry

In the last budget we talked about the scanner issue at the ports, we heard about it at the Joint Select Committee on National Security, there is one fixed container scanner working at the Port of Port of Spain, nothing in Point Lisas. The mobile scanners that were donated they said it was too expensive to service it so they put them out of commission. Big fanfare, every time we have budget, every time we have Standing Finance Committee we have to sit down and listen to the Government try to defend their big expenditure. Big fanfare, “we buying scanner, we buying scanner”, accelerated procurement process now for scanner. Scanner

coming, first it was sometime January, then we hear August, now you get all the way down to November. Every single day that there is a delay in putting those scanners in place and getting our security at the ports in order is another day for weapons to come into this country to take the life of a child, it is another opportunity for a Harpe Place, a repeat of what happened at Harpe Place

The Attorney General spoke about the plans for his Ministry, and I do not fault him, this is his portfolio. He says, you know, that he has draft legislation that they are going to outlaw the high powered weapons and so, AR, whatever, the types of weapons and all of that. Well, that is all well and good, but you do not need to put it on the statute books and outlaw it, for what? So that all the illegal—so that people cannot get a licence for it. They do not have licence for them. The people who are murdering our children do not have FULs. They do not. And this Government has spent an excessive amount of time, energy, money and no end to the propaganda surrounding investigations into FULs, and who have FUL, and how much this one has and how much that one has. None of the crime being committed, none of the unsolved murders, none of the children that we have to bury every day in this country were killed using a licenced firearm, so why is that your focus and not securing our borders?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Last year vehicles and equipment purchase, the 2024 Estimate, \$1.5 million, what was the Revised Estimate for the coast guard? Zero. Purchase of specialized equipment, \$500,000, what is the Revised Estimate? Zero. Acquisition of a hyper-barrel chambers, something I have heard a lot about it, I know in Tobago at one point in time they wanted to get one to protect persons and so on, \$5 million allocated, Revised Estimate, zero; Upgrade to Facilities, \$3

million allocated. All of this is found, Mr. Vice-President, in the *Development Programme*, the details are there; \$3 million for the upgrade facilities, how much spent? Zero. Ask them how much they spent investigating legal firearms and the grant of FULs. They would not be able to tell you that, and they cannot talk about that.

Every single year under PSIP they mention porous borders and the issue of porous borders. Every single year we come here and talk about it. Every single year they make allocations and every single year they have nothing to show for it. They cannot show a single thing that they have done and put in place to really and truly secure our borders. We have had the influx of narcotics, we have had the influx of illegal firearms, we have had an influx of illegal immigrants all under the watch of this Government during the last decade of destruction that they have presided over in this country, and that is why we are in a—they talk about a state of rot in the UNC, this country is in a state of rot under the PNM. The country is in a state of rot under the PNM. The entire country is in a state of rot under the PNM.

You all perhaps, I do not know, are drivers sleeping in the back seat so you do not pass by every single traffic light and see mothers with children holding up signs begging for money. We did not have that when we were in power with the prevalence that we have it now. Every ATM you go to withdraw money there are three women sitting down there begging for money, begging for help, “women who could have get milk grant under Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC”, the Member for Siparia, and her Government. That is what the milk grant used to do, for everybody who wants to talk about the milk grant.

It would remove those mothers and children from the streets begging for money to go into a pharmacy and buy a tin of milk, or from, I mean I cannot

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial (cont'd)

condone it but I could sympathize sometimes when I see mothers shoplifting to afford school books. There was a news story of a mother, she apologized and so on, and I do not condone what she has done, but she was actually stealing school books. Because when the UNC Government—and I am sure my learned colleague Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh will talk about it—when we had an extensive textbook programme implemented throughout all the schools they wanted—

Sen. Roberts: A hundred and thirty-three million.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: A hundred and thirty-three million for textbooks to make sure that every child had textbooks and no mother had to send their child to school without textbooks, and no mother had to resort to stealing textbooks, they want to save money on that, to do what? To do what, to travel all over the world?

Hon. Senators: No—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Or for how much a \$50 million Entertainment Allowance. Entertainment Allowance, \$50 million Entertainment Allowance they take away textbook grant programmes. That is what their priority is.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: A 100 days now to get it back.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Yes. Sen. John said it best, that is elitist. That is elitism at its highest. You need \$50 million to entertain, well, you are trying to bring foreign investors and whoever, some people who cannot withstand a little bit of scrutiny, they run, they are running. The minute you ask a question about them they “dus” it because they cannot withstand scrutiny, just like this Government, and those are their friends that they want to bring here as investors. So you need \$50 million to entertain but they do not care about mothers and children having school books and uniforms and milk. A basic thing like milk. I really do

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial (cont'd)

sympathize with the people of this country who have to live under these conditions. Mr. President, everywhere I go people say and people approach me and they tell me that it is only when they listen to the Leader of the Opposition speak in Parliament that they feel any sense of hope that this country could come back.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: That we could come back, because the PNM created—they do one thing, I would give them a compliment, they do one good thing, the PNM does one thing with exceptional efficiency and sufficiency, they create propaganda.

Sen. Mark: Yeah. Yeah.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: They create propaganda and then drown the population with propaganda. That is what they do, you know, and they repeat it over and over and over and that is why people are in the position that they are in right now in this country, because they believed in propaganda.

1.10 p.m.

They believe when a Minister gets up and says, “we finish a highway”, but when you are driving on the road it has a big crack and you have to divert around it and up to now they will not make the report public, but we have the report, and we know what happened. We know what happened but they will talk about this highway and this propaganda and how much money they saved. They saved money but the highway, a whole section of the highway to Point Fortin you cannot drive on it, you have to divert around it and it is a set “ah barrel”, it is a hazard quite frankly. I go down there every weekend. I go there to buy doubles on the Creek. And every weekend I drive there—

Sen. Nakhid: By the crack?

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Pass the crack by the cremation site and you always—and I wonder to myself how these people could stand there with a straight face, how you could stand there here with a straight face and pat yourself on the back and talk about saving money and what you deliver. Even when you cut ribbons, you smile for the media and so on, but everything is defective, everything is deficient and nothing works.

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts actually stood here with a straight face and talked about the ICC Cricket World Cup. As my colleague said, Sen. Anil Roberts, the \$1 “b-b-b” billion stadium that the ICC then had to call the pitch “unsatisfactory”.

Sen. Roberts: Shame, shame.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Unsatisfactory.

Sen. Roberts: And six hours to reach down “dey”.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Six hours to reach down—and afterwards people walked, people walked from—they could not even, they could not even coordinate transportation. People walked from the Brian Lara stadium to South Park to get back to their vehicles.

Sen. Roberts: “Dey get tourists an all vex.”

Sen. Nakhid: But they cannot do—

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: They cannot deliver “nothing” properly but stand here and talk about successful, successful. You have the international cricketing body of this country calling your \$1 “b-b-b” billion scandalous stadium—

Sen. Roberts: 1.3, eh.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial:—I think—and running because they did some repairs to get it ready. Imagine they spent additional money to get it ready for ICC

and they called it unsatisfactory—

Sen. Roberts: “And ball only ratting.”

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: The coach from Afghanistan said the pitch is dangerous.

Sen. Roberts: “Yeah, ball ratting.”

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: They described it as dangerous, and you come here to boast about a successful ICC World Cup. I felt ashamed for my country. I felt ashamed and everybody knows I love cricket.

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]*—*a seat in Presentation, so that is brilliance there.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Well, I did not say that, eh. Right. But, I mean, really, everybody knows I love cricket. It “cah” have cricket anywhere in this country and I am not there. And I felt very, very, ashamed. I felt very ashamed to see what transpired at the end of that Cricket World Cup, having regard to the amount of money and then to sit here and see them boasting about it. But that is not the only thing they boast about, so many things that they cannot deliver.

Mr. Vice-President, when it comes to the crime situation—this might be my last, well, this is my fifth budget contribution, so let me say it again, the same thing I said in my first budget contribution. When you are dealing with crime, you are dealing with prevention, the middle is detection, prosecution, conviction and then you have to deal with rehabilitation. Let us deal with that middle ground there. You cannot continue to depend on eyewitnesses to convict people in this country, particularly when matters are taking very long to go through the court.

It was either today, I think it was this morning or yesterday I read in the newspaper of a man who is on retrial, the only evidence the State could put forward after he spent about two decades in prison, on remand, the only evidence

they had is eyewitness evidence from two children who said that they witnessed the murder. And the police ended up admitting that they did not properly investigate his alibi and all these kinds of things. The police did not, they had arrested additional—all those things are in the newspaper today, you know, they arrested another suspect, they swabbed his hands for gun powder residue, but they let him go before they could have gotten back the results.

Now, in my mind I thought to myself there, imagine if we had, imagine if we had rapid forensics and a functional forensic sciences centre in this country, how different crime detection could be and we have said it over and over and over, the last time I asked a question in this Parliament about samples awaiting testing it was about 9,000. When the Forensic Science Centre came before the joint select committee it was 14,000 samples of different kinds awaiting testing. That is probably translating into, God knows how many, but thousands of cases that cannot be heard. So you could say that we are spending money, and we are implementing AJIPA, and that will speed up trials and so on. The trial “cah” go nowhere until you have the forensics and you cannot even do proper detection of criminal, you know, when it comes to crimes if you do not have proper forensics.

Mr. Vice-President, in the 2018/2019, and I went back on YouTube and I am so grateful for technology, and I went back on YouTube to check this because I did not want to believe what I read in the newspapers. I went back and I checked it, the 2018/2019 budget, in the Standing Finance Committee the then Minister of National Security now acting Prime Minister said that we had \$10million of free funding for a state-of-the-art—state-of-the-art forensic science centre at Mount Hope. Well, I say that must be, I think they call that kind of art surrealism, because you have to use your imagination to see it. Because from 2018/'19 to

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial (cont'd)

now, not a blade of grass has been cut on the piece of land that that forensic science centre is supposed to go down on. We are in 2024, and in 2024 you have employees of the Forensic Science Centre filming a leaking refrigerator containing tissue samples with maggots swimming in it being passed through the media. It was reported this year in the media. That is the state of forensics in this country.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Shameful.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: That is beyond shameful, it is beyond shameful. And then we expect, we expect that these employees of the State will produce evidence that could help us to convict criminals. There was a big boast at one point in time, they said, oh, the whole backlog, this was in 2019, the backlog, they will come to an end with ballistics training, they trained officers in what used to be SAUTT, up in Cumuto to do ballistics training and so on. Propaganda again, because when I had the opportunity at the Joint Select Committee on National Security to question them on that, you know what it turned out to be? All they could do was process the bullets and so on, but it still has to go down to forensics. They could swab and look for DNA or whatever up at Cumuto but it still has to go down to forensics to complete the report that it is necessary in order to progress a matter in the court.

So, I do not—someone told me recently that no group of people could be so incompetent and it has to be that this is deliberate. It has to be that the way that they run this country is deliberate because I do not believe that anybody could be so incompetent to not see that you need to fix the way that things operate if you want to get some results. Because you are just running around like headless chickens, we spend “ah money” here, we will allocate a \$10 million there and only spend \$1 million. We will allocate \$9 million there and we will cut back some

funding during—but nobody knows and nobody can see the finished product or a result. What is the result? We are heading toward more murders, more suffering, more rapes, more unsolved crimes and more people waiting for justice before our courts.

AJIPA cannot take the place, AJIPA cannot solve the problem of people waiting years and years and years for the State to be ready to progress their matter through the court system if you do not have proper forensics, if the police do not have enough resources at their disposal. All of those things you have to deal with it and they are not dealing with it. If the police “doh” even have vehicles to respond and proper working vehicles to respond, we have to look no further than the fire service to see what is taking place. This year the Fire Service Association came out and they complained, they complained about the conditions under which they were working, they asked, they wanted to know why it is they are being—so many things—in fact what the fire service said was that equipment shortages were crippling members and this is what they came out in the media and said. They said:

“...six of the 11 fire stations in the Northern Division lack functional appliances to respond to fires nationwide, nine out of 23 fire stations are similarly incapacitated.”

This was the Fire Service Association, (Second Division) President saying this.

Mr. Vice-President, how could we sit and talk about a budget and commend ourselves and talk about the fact that we are on a pathway to prosperity when basic things like having a well-equipped fire service so that people are not dying as a result of fires breaking out. How can we talk about pathways to prosperity when our fire service lacks basic equipment? Mr. Vice-President, under the PSIP

Programme only 8.5 per cent of the budgeted estimate for last year was actually spent, \$1.6 million, and what was budgeted was about \$18.7 million, \$18.7 million they budgeted.

1.10 p.m.

They believe when a Minister gets up and says, “we finish a highway”, but when you are driving on the road it has a big crack and you have to divert around it and up to now they will not make the report public, but we have the report, and we know what happened. We know what happened but they will talk about this highway and this propaganda and how much money they saved. They saved money but the highway, a whole section of the highway to Point Fortin you cannot drive on it, you have to divert around it and it is a set “ah barrel”, it is a hazard quite frankly. I go down there every weekend. I go there to buy doubles on the Creek. And every weekend I drive there—

Sen. Nakhid: By the crack?

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Pass the crack by the cremation site and you always—and I wonder to myself how these people could stand there with a straight face, how you could stand there here with a straight face and pat yourself on the back and talk about saving money and what you deliver. Even when you cut ribbons, you smile for the media and so on, but everything is defective, everything is deficient and nothing works.

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts actually stood here with a straight face and talked about the ICC Cricket World Cup. As my colleague said, Sen. Anil Roberts, the \$1 “b-b-b” billion stadium that the ICC then had to call the pitch “unsatisfactory”.

Sen. Roberts: Shame, shame.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Unsatisfactory.

Sen. Roberts: And six hours to reach down “dey”.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Six hours to reach down—and afterwards people walked, people walked from—they could not even, they could not even coordinate transportation. People walked from the Brian Lara stadium to South Park to get back to their vehicles.

Sen. Roberts: “Dey get tourists an all vex.”

Sen. Nakhid: But they cannot do—

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: They cannot deliver “nothing” properly but stand here and talk about successful, successful. You have the international cricketing body of this country calling your \$1 “b-b-b” billion scandalous stadium—

Sen. Roberts: 1.3, eh.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial:—I think—and running because they did some repairs to get it ready. Imagine they spent additional money to get it ready for ICC and they called it unsatisfactory—

Sen. Roberts: “And ball only rattng.”

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: The coach from Afghanistan said the pitch is dangerous.

Sen. Roberts: “Yeah, ball rattng.”

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: They described it as dangerous, and you come here to boast about a successful ICC World Cup. I felt ashamed for my country. I felt ashamed and everybody knows I love cricket.

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]—a seat in Presentation, so that is brilliance there.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Well, I did not say that, eh. Right. But, I mean, really, everybody knows I love cricket. It “cah” have cricket anywhere in this

country and I am not there. And I felt very, very, ashamed. I felt very ashamed to see what transpired at the end of that Cricket World Cup, having regard to the amount of money and then to sit here and see them boasting about it. But that is not the only thing they boast about, so many things that they cannot deliver.

Mr. Vice-President, when it comes to the crime situation—this might be my last, well, this is my fifth budget contribution, so let me say it again, the same thing I said in my first budget contribution. When you are dealing with crime, you are dealing with prevention, the middle is detection, prosecution, conviction and then you have to deal with rehabilitation. Let us deal with that middle ground there. You cannot continue to depend on eyewitnesses to convict people in this country, particularly when matters are taking very long to go through the court.

It was either today, I think it was this morning or yesterday I read in the newspaper of a man who is on retrial, the only evidence the State could put forward after he spent about two decades in prison, on remand, the only evidence they had is eyewitness evidence from two children who said that they witnessed the murder. And the police ended up admitting that they did not properly investigate his alibi and all these kinds of things. The police did not, they had arrested additional—all those things are in the newspaper today, you know, they arrested another suspect, they swabbed his hands for gun powder residue, but they let him go before they could have gotten back the results.

Now, in my mind I thought to myself there, imagine if we had, imagine if we had rapid forensics and a functional forensic sciences centre in this country, how different crime detection could be and we have said it over and over and over, the last time I asked a question in this Parliament about samples awaiting testing it was about 9,000. When the Forensic Science Centre came before the joint select

committee it was 14,000 samples of different kinds awaiting testing. That is probably translating into, God knows how many, but thousands of cases that cannot be heard. So you could say that we are spending money, and we are implementing AJIPA, and that will speed up trials and so on. The trial “cah” go nowhere until you have the forensics and you cannot even do proper detection of criminal, you know, when it comes to crimes if you do not have proper forensics.

Mr. Vice-President, in the 2018/2019, and I went back on YouTube and I am so grateful for technology, and I went back on YouTube to check this because I did not want to believe what I read in the newspapers. I went back and I checked it, the 2018/2019 budget, in the Standing Finance Committee the then Minister of National Security now acting Prime Minister said that we had \$10 million of free funding for a state-of-the-art—state-of-the-art forensic science centre at Mount Hope. Well, I say that must be, I think they call that kind of art surrealism, because you have to use your imagination to see it. Because from 2018/'19 to now, not a blade of grass has been cut on the piece of land that that forensic science centre is supposed to go down on. We are in 2024, and in 2024 you have employees of the Forensic Science Centre filming a leaking refrigerator containing tissue samples with maggots swimming in it being passed through the media. It was reported this year in the media. That is the state of forensics in this country.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Shameful.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: That is beyond shameful, it is beyond shameful. And then we expect, we expect that these employees of the State will produce evidence that could help us to convict criminals. There was a big boast at one point in time, they said, oh, the whole backlog, this was in 2019, the backlog, they will come to an end with ballistics training, they trained officers in what used to be

SAUTT, up in Cumuto to do ballistics training and so on. Propaganda again, because when I had the opportunity at the Joint Select Committee on National Security to question them on that, you know what it turned out to be? All they could do was process the bullets and so on, but it still has to go down to forensics. They could swab and look for DNA or whatever up at Cumuto but it still has to go down to forensics to complete the report that it is necessary in order to progress a matter in the court.

So, I do not—someone told me recently that no group of people could be so incompetent and it has to be that this is deliberate. It has to be that the way that they run this country is deliberate because I do not believe that anybody could be so incompetent to not see that you need to fix the way that things operate if you want to get some results. Because you are just running around like headless chickens, we spend “ah money” here, we will allocate a \$10 million there and only spend \$1 million. We will allocate \$9million there and we will cut back some funding during—but nobody knows and nobody can see the finished product or a result. What is the result? We are heading toward more murders, more suffering, more rapes, more unsolved crimes and more people waiting for justice before our courts.

AJIPA cannot take the place, AJIPA cannot solve the problem of people waiting years and years and years for the State to be ready to progress their matter through the court system if you do not have proper forensics, if the police do not have enough resources at their disposal. All of those things you have to deal with it and they are not dealing with it. If the police “doh” even have vehicles to respond and proper working vehicles to respond, we have to look no further than the fire service to see what is taking place. This year the Fire Service Association

came out and they complained, they complained about the conditions under which they were working, they asked, they wanted to know why it is they are being—so many things—in fact what the fire service said was that equipment shortages were crippling members and this is what they came out in the media and said. They said:

“...six of the 11 fire stations in the Northern Division lack functional appliances to respond to fires nationwide, nine out of 23 fire stations are similarly incapacitated.”

This was the Fire Service Association, (Second Division) President saying this.

Mr. Vice-President, how could we sit and talk about a budget and commend ourselves and talk about the fact that we are on a pathway to prosperity when basic things like having a well-equipped fire service so that people are not dying as a result of fires breaking out. How can we talk about pathways to prosperity when our fire service lacks basic equipment? Mr. Vice-President, under the PSIP Programme only 8.5 per cent of the budgeted estimate for last year was actually spent, \$1.6 million, and what was budgeted was about \$18.7 million, \$18.7 million they budgeted

1.20 p.m.

So they understand the needs, and that is why—and I heard one of the Members say that we are talking about management of the economy because budgeting is not just about putting down figures in a book. It is about management. It is about releasing the money in time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: It is about ensuring—I do not think you pull these figures out of the air. In fact, I know about the budgeting cycle and the process

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial (cont'd)

that officers and public officers go through every year, and send in their estimates, and talk about what they need and they negotiate, and the PS gets involved and so on, and then you are given an allocation. But what is the sense in understanding and acknowledging that \$18.7 million is needed in development funding for our fire service and you only spend \$1.6 million?

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Incompetence.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: That is criminal incompetence. And when you do have a fire appliance that can actually respond, they cannot pass on the road and that is why the two elderly people were—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Leave them, “nah”. Let them talk.

Sen. Roberts: They need to have some decorum.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: They have none. That is why they cannot—you cannot expect decorum from people who want to—anyway.

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

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Thank you. So, Mr. Vice-President, there is a criminal element of incompetence when people are trapped in a house, in a fire, and you do not have enough appliances to respond in time. And even when you have an appliance, the road is so bad—and it happened in St. Julien Village in Princes Town.

Sen. Roberts: Yes, it collapsed.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: It happened there. They could not reach the house of an elderly couple because of the condition of the road. The fire service appliance could not even pass and two elderly people burned to death. I wonder sometimes when this Government stands here and they talk, if they do not have

parents and grandparents and so on, and they do not think about them, when you understand how the level of incompetence in the execution of their functions hurt the people of this country.

Sen. Roberts: “Dey does steups when dey ask for house”. “Minister, ah want ah house. Steups”.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Yeah, yeah. Mr. Vice-President, there is no end to the number of initiatives that we have been clamouring for, and that the country has been calling for, in order to treat with serious issues facing this country.

There is one more I want to touch on, and that is the issue of electronic monitoring. And apparently, the newly minted Sen. Dennis does not pay attention because he came here to say that we do not support the bail amendments and so on, that they want to restrict bail. I just want to put on the record that what we did not support was an unconstitutional illegal type of bail restriction that was ruled by the Privy Council to be illegal. But that when—thanks to us—the Government came with a proper piece of legislation that did not interfere with the separation of powers, we, all six of us, voted and supported a good law.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: We supported a good law to place parameters on the judicial grant of bail, because that is where the discretion lies, with judicial officers, not with the PNM.

Sen. Roberts: Correct.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: But the bigger issue to that is, you cannot keep people in jail forever. You cannot keep people in jail for 20 years on remand, waiting on a trial, only to be told, “Not guilty and go home,” because the State only has two eye witnesses and no forensic evidence. That is what has been happening

and we do not support that. But the solution, and a major solution to that would be proper electronic monitoring.

The People's Partnership government passed the law. They have been in power for nine, going on 10 years, and in this decade of decay, destruction and disillusion by the population, we cannot have a proper Electronic Monitoring Unit functional.

Sen. Roberts: Shame.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: And it is simple as this, you know—they like to talk about, the reason why we have to restrict bail is because of repeat offenders. Sen. Dennis repeated it here today, but it is this simple. If me, and Sen. Roberts, and Sen. Nakhid decide we are going to commit crime somewhere, and we know Sen. Nakhid has an ankle bracket, we are leaving him home. It is simple as that, you know. And you will cut down on—they might try and go and recruit somebody else, but we would not—

Sen. Roberts: The same one Faris has.

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial:—go—you just stymie the ability of people to go out and repeat crimes when they are out on bail if they have proper electronic monitoring. I do not know how much more basic I could break that down because that is just common sense.

And when you look at the cost of keeping someone in remand versus the cost of purchasing ankle bracelets and staffing the Electronic Monitoring Unit properly, it makes absolute perfect sense that you will want to put your resources into programmes such as those.

Mr. Vice-President, I know my time is running out, but I just want to say that budgeting has to be about people and it has to be about solutions, and this

budget and the presentation of this budget, and every speech coming from the other side has had absolutely no focus on solutions to make life better for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And so we say that the PNM and their Government, whoever their leader might be, this will be their last because people are tired—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Lutchmedial-Ramdial:—people are fed up, and at the end of the day, it is the people who they do not care about, when they bring these budgets and they put these things forward, are same ones who will vote them out of office. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. If there is one speech in the Parliament that is eagerly awaited and eagerly dreaded, it is the budget speech. If there is one debate that has parliamentarians chomping at the bit to express their views, it is the budget debate.

Before the hon. Minister of Finance reads his budget, there is much speculation, some wild, some educated guesses from intelligentsia, who may not or may not be past or prospective politicians. Print and electronic media create the space and there is no shortage of eager beavers for whom a lack of knowledge of economics is no barrier to advising the Finance Minister how to do his job.

Some citizens are hopeful that the budget will contain goodies, tidings of good joy, while some are filled with despair, even before the first syllable is spoken and recorded in *Hansard*. They believe that when, in 1764, Voltaire wrote in his philosophical dictionary:

“In general, the art of government consists...”—in—“...taking as much

money as possible from one...”—part—“...of citizens to give to the...”—
other, he was absolutely correct.

A Minister of Finance is traditionally not one’s favourite Minister. The hard work he does goes unappreciated. He is maligned and accused of many things. In October ’56, Paul Ramadier described a Minister of Finance as a “legally authorized pickpocket”. I would never describe our hon. Minister of Finance in those terms. I would not say he is completely innocent, not with that less than cherubic smile of his, but he will get forgiveness because there are many praying for him. And like the Commissioner of Police, I believe in the power of pray. I am a living testimony of that.

John F. Kennedy, addressing the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1963, stated:

“The Federal Government is the people, and the budget is a reflection of their needs.”

Is this budget a reflection of our needs?

I always pay attention to the description of the budget statement. It is always impressive. This year it reads: Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity. What a promise. But does it promise more than it delivers? I wonder. In his budget statement, the hon. Minister painted a dismal picture of the economy when he assumed office. He described it of being so bad, it could not have been worse, ergo anything done would have been an improvement. The only direction we could have gone was up. To quote the hon. Minister of Finance:

“We not only redounded, but our economy is stronger and more resilient than it was before COVID-19. Indeed, by 2023,”—he said—“just three years after the arrival of the COVID-19 virus, government revenue had improved

by \$19.4 billion, when compared to 2020, an increase of 56 percent. Revenue in 2023 was also \$6 billion more or 13 percent more in 2019. Even in 2024,”—he said—“with severely reduced prices for oil and gas and declining production, government revenue is \$3.6 billion more, or 8 percent more, than...in 2019;”

1.30 p.m.

He boasted,

We have also been able to increase expenditure from \$50.8 billion in 2019 to \$59.7 billion in 2025. Thus, putting almost \$9 billion more into the local economy, which is a significant factor contributing to our sustained economic growth.

He deemed his performance a remarkable achievement by any yardstick and offered hope for continued growth of the economy.

As I listened to his success story, Shadow’s Bass man was playing in his head “pom pom pe de pom, pom.” Mr. Vice President, like he was saying “I doh want to but I have to prance.” That budget speech was delivered on September 30th. A few days ahead of the budget on September 27th to be exact, the Prime Minister speaking at a function at Atlantic LNG in Point Fortin had cautioned the population thus,

this year, until the second quarter of 2027, would be a period of difficulty for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

He said this was so:

“...because the current levels at which we are producing, and the market situation, would cause us or should cause us to be responsible and, hold...the fort, with a very good view and good confidence that come 2027,

we will be in a better position with this industry”

Whom shall I believe? The Minister of Finance who painted a rosy picture of sustained economic growth or the Prime Minister who urged us to be responsible? The two views seem irreconcilable. I do not know of any attempt to reconcile the opposing views. Where irreconcilable differences exist, it leads to divorce but I see love and respect between them and in those circumstances, the marriage will continue. I am inclined to side with the Prime Minister on this one.

Diversification of the economy. I agree totally with the need to diversify the economy, I have spoken time and time again of the hard work being done by the Minister of Trade and Industry with her numerous trade fairs and encouragements of entrepreneurs and I notice she is clapping herself there.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Yeah.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: Revenue Authority: I have also spoken before of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority and have referred to the Towers of Strength Community, the prayer group that meets at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception every Monday up to yesterday. They are mainly retirees of Inland Revenue and Central Bank, and have been praying for an end to the corruption they have witnessed over the years at our financial institutions.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: They view the Revenue Authority as a step in the right direction. Mr. Vice President, if we are serious and I have doubt that we are about the collection of taxes, why then is it that the taxi drivers, the pie men and the women, the doubles vendors, the clothes vendors, the market vendors and

numerous people in the informal sector not paying taxes and they know what to do, eh? We know what to do.

Property tax. There have been loud and sustained objections to the property tax, but Mr. Vice President, we who have been paying land and building taxes for years have been quietly compliant and have no problem with the institution of that tax. Our only hope is that the tax will benefit regional corporations as has been promised. I see roads being paved in my community and our long-awaited community centre is becoming a reality. They already booked me to come and give a talk to the community in the centre. When we began our Resident Association, we took turns hosting meetings at our respective homes then when a school was built in the area we held meetings there and I remember sitting on an uncomfortable student desk for hours, discussing problems in our community and proffering solutions. We did not even have a postal service and a member of our organization did the needful.

Tourism: Mr. Vice President, unless we get a handle on crime, we will have great difficulties increasing our share of the tourism pie. I love my country with a passion. As one who belongs to three international organizations and interacts with two others, I have had to defend my country time and time again from charges that crime is a runaway horse here or a runaway train. I have been a member of the International Society of Family Law for many years. It is an international organization of law professors, judges and lawyers from over 50 countries. I was invited to sit on the executive council of ISFL around 2005. In 2016, they made me a vice-president—I never even applied.

Every three years, we have an international conference and between these international conferences, we have regional conferences. When I organised two

regional conferences in the Bahamas in 2011 and 2014, there was great enthusiasm and widespread support. I head the Family Court in the UK. Lord Justice Thorpe and the legendary Oxford don, John Eeklaar attended. I remember Justice Rolston telling me “Girl how you get John Eeklaar to come to your conference?” I said I wrote him a Dear John letter and when I came to introduce him I sang “Dear John.” So he had to be there. Emboldened I decided to put on a bid to host an international conference. I was faced again with the travel advisory by the US Government about crime levels in Trinidad. I was ashamed and angry but determined to at least mount a world conference in this part of the world. So in our meeting in Strasbourg, I won the bid over Cambridge University—they still have not recovered from a little country winning a bid over them. The executive council would not agree to Trinidad though, so I settled for Barbados but then the Barbados Government changed, the UWI Principal was very interested, the dean as well, changes occurred, COVID came, and plans had to be scuttled.

At our exco meeting in Portugal, the venue for the world conference changed to Belgium. I asked for a regional conference in Tobago and it was very successful but I still had a dream of convening a conference here. So at our executive meeting, I went to Buenos Aires to look at them in their eyes to see if they would tell me no. Will I put in a bid to host a conference in Trinidad I was coming off next? It was not an easy sell but I was determined to hold a conference at home to mark the 35th anniversary of the Conventions on the Rights of the Child.

Mr. Vice President, the crime here is real. Again, I make a plea for the return of the Comfort Patrol as it provided a degree of comfort. When I am coming from a show at Queens Hall in the night and these Comfort Patrol people

are there, you know, I feel so much comforted. Why was it discontinued? I am sure my fellow villagers would be quite prepared to pay whatever it costs so we could have this service again. We now have meetings and we have a crime watch but when read of home invasions, and the like, the fear becomes palpable.

I must admit though it is not always warranted. One Saturday I visited Trincity Mall—normally I would walk in accompanied but to save time I decided while my decidedly better half was parking, I would go ahead. There seemed to be a great deal of activity on that day with several booths around the mall. Suddenly I found myself cornered by a young man who had blocked my path near a booth. There was no place to run. He brought his face close to mine. I could feel his breath. I was scared to death. He then said in a quiet voice, they looking all about for the puma and the puma right here. Mr. Vice President, I had on an animal print outfit and he was making a joke on me. I had met my match. It was at the time that you were hearing all about that somebody had sighted a puma and people were hunting for it. So I was supposed to be the puma now.

The Ministry of Security is given a large slice of the budget in the hope that it will make a difference and that crime will be reduced. Let me start with domestic violence. Domestic violence is a crime, I am not sure if the police get it. They seem to not fully appreciate it, they are failing our women who are victims of domestic violence. One night a senior counsel called me. He was apologetic for calling so late. Apparently, he did not know I was the sister of Lady Macbeth who had murdered sleep. He wanted assistance for a relative. I heard his story, I phoned the officer in charge of the police station, he gave me a story, which was contradicted by my colleague. I have had a great relationship over the years with Claire Guy who was for years in charge of the domestic violence unit. She always

answers my calls, so I called her. She heard another from the police. Finally, the matter was properly handled.

I am tired and fed up of hearing contradictory stories from relatives of deceased domestic violence victims who state they give a report to the police, the police are stating they never received a report. They have said sometimes I have given several reports to the police, the police say they might have received one report and nothing was done. The relatives are saying. It is time that this nonsense stops.

I am proposing that the domestic violence form for the police be amended. I do not see the Attorney General in the House here. I hope he is listening. We must adopt the Barbados amendment Act—the Barbados model from their Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Amdt Act, 2016. It differs from ours, in that their domestic violence police report, Form 6, is very extensive. It not only requires the police to state previous reports, but also what action was taken on those reports and if none, the reason whether an arrest was made, whether charges were laid and it not the reason why charges were not laid. Very importantly, it provides that a copy of the police report must be given to the victim.

1.40 p.m.

In Trinidad, it is different. You get a receipt for the complaint. I have a receipt in my possession which states the name of the complainant, the nature of the domestic violence complained off, the officers taking the report, but the space for name of the perpetrator is missing. There is no name there. “Why, yuh asked? Why? Why yuh think?” He was a police officer. One night, the victim called the police and made a report. Next, his phone rang, he then came to her and say “so yuh call the police on meee, wait and see if anybody coming”. As he predicted,

nobody came that night or any other night. She is now dead.

Mr. Vice-President, we do have a big problem with crime. We are not so worried about white-collar crime you know, save on the political platform, we worried about blue-collar crime. The urban youth are blamed for the high level of such crime. Our young men from the inner cities and other hotspots are the ones who generally fall in a hail of bullets. “Mr. Big” who brings in the guns and bullets still escapes detection and prosecution. He protected and celebrated as an astute businessman at times. Who remembers the youth of a lighter shade of pale who was caught in Miami with drugs and received recommendations from persons high on the protocol list? Do you think is only Minister Solomon whose son was removed from a police station? Remember Sparrow’s song?

“If I say that Solomon will be Minister of External Affairs and yuh ain’t like it”—and you know the rest.

Mr. Vice-President, there are middle-class youths involved in drugs. One was killed last year. His mom was well known to me, occupied high office. His dad too occupied high office. Mothers get blame more than fathers, even this week, for sins of their children. Mothers are accused of encouraging crime and profiting from the criminal acts of their children. Many of us remember how Commissioner of Prisons Hercules met his death at the hands of the youth and his mother said, “He didn’t go to kill, he only went to rob”. All mothers are not like that and should not be blamed.

I recall some years ago, a client pleaded with me to talk to her son. She begged me: “He selling drugs, talk to him for me”. I spoke to the young man. Put him to sit down in the chair in the office and after I gave him a good talking, in return he said, “Ma’am, dem fellas want dey thing, if dey do not get it from me,

they will buy from somebody else so I might as well sell them”. “Ahhh”, it is not easy. Some mothers are suffering and some fathers too.

At times, the police ignore evidence of criminal activity. I told you before about a confession statement in the court. The person who had made the confession statement, the teenager said he rented a gun for \$5 to commit armed robbery and the gunrunner had said “I do not like to rent allyuh guns eh know because yuh does waste bullets and yuh bring no profit”. The youth identified the person from whom he had rented the gun. Long after I asked about the investigation, the police had done nothing. I complained to then Cooper, Inspector or whatever rank he was at the time, who was head of community police, a good, good man. He said he was fed up of the police. Why do people in particular, the youth, get involved with the crime? Unless we know the reasons, we cannot solve the problems.

One of the most illustrious judges this region has produced whom we lost not too long ago, the Honourable Madame Justice Désirée Bernard O.R. C.C.H., answered the question when, at my request, she delivered the feature address at the International Society of Family Law, Caribbean Regional Conference in Bahamas November 2014. The theme of that conference was: “Our Children, an Endangered Species”. In her address, Justice Bernard spoke of many causes of crime. And, Mr. Vice-President, excuse me while I go through some of what she said. It should be very edifying for the population.

Abuse and violence. She spoke of the alarming rise of violent incidents with children between the victims facing on a daily basis the trauma of dodging bullets or experiencing the constant verbal and physical assault of adults in hostile environment. This reminds me of Composer Calypso’s “Child Training”.

“Yuh father eh give meh ah...cent, tomorrow ah have to pay de...rent”.

He begged parents to train children properly.

Judge Bernard gave us another type of abuse. The scourge of deviant sexual abuse in dysfunctional households. Fathers and stepdaughters committing acts of incest on trusting and unsuspecting girls and boys who had been catapulted prematurely into the adult world of sexuality. Lack of parental control or misguided perception of parental roles lead inevitably to character traits, which encourage the use of violence as a means of settling disputes or as coping skills in a world which they perceive to be hostile. I remember a teacher told me about this child carrying on in the savannah in a very strange way. When we investigated, that child was being abused and I mean I knew the family, I just could not believe it.

Drug use and drug trafficking: She spoke of the pervasive use of habit-forming drugs and the by-product of trafficking which spawns mules and swallows attracted by lucrative payments for shipments out of the region. I do not know if you have been listening to *Eye on Dependency* but there have been so many stories of people who have gone through this.

She said poverty was the main incentive for young men and women undertaking risks inherent in embarking on these potentially dangerous enterprises with children sometimes used as couriers and foot soldiers for drug dealers. She said the drug trade had spawned the formation of gangs with rivalry among them resulting in premature deaths of young males. She saw the proliferation of guns and ammunition as the Siamese twins of the drug trade and a cause of the early demise of our youths when they fail to conform to the rigid codes of the gang. She said youths find within a gang the discipline, comfort and understanding which

they never find within their families.

Prostitution and pornography: Justice Bernard condemned the abhorrent practice of luring young children, particularly girls, into prostitution, of trafficking in children and young persons and said parents are sometimes complicit. Parents who should be protecting children, selling children for financial gain or living off the earnings made from such trafficking. She said pornography had even crept into the school system with teenage boys and girls engaging in these practices and capturing them on mobile phones, and I see our audience of teenage boys have left us.

Abdication of parental responsibility was another factor mentioned by Justice Bernard. She bemoaned the large and ever increasing number of female-headed households as adequate testimony of neglect and failure of men in our society to fulfil their responsibilities as fathers, particularly in abusive relationships leaving the women holding the baby literally and figuratively.

Children, in particular boys, enter adolescence and adulthood without the guidance, love and care of a father, thereby forcing some of them into the arms of gang leaders who they regard as “father figures”. She said mothers often throw up their arms in despair when they can no longer cope with the twin burdens of nurture and discipline leaving adolescents to fend for themselves. The result is a generation of angry young men and we see so many of these angry young men, teenage female prostitutes and street children soliciting arms.

Mr. President, we have laws against indecent behaviour and against pornography. They are not being enforced. I raised this issue on a Motion for the Adjournment for a question to the Minister of National Security. The response was that the police have to be trained. The inference was that the police cannot

identify indecent behaviour and indecent dress. Really? So with impunity, the daily newspapers display women in all their near nakedness and no one thinks of the effect on the youths.

I recall when the Probation Officers Association was celebrating their 50th anniversary, I was asked to speak to high-school children about sexual offences. It was at City Hall. The place was packed with young people. A young man came to me privately afterwards, he did not want to ask this question in front of everybody, but he wanted to discuss a matter that seemed to be disturbing him greatly. I tried my best to answer but I felt it was better if the question had been posed to a man. I felt inadequate. I looked around me. There were no men on our panel. We need good experienced men to talk to boys.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: There are many men who are capable of doing so. We have to press them into service because these boys need direction.

1.50p.m.

Justice Bernard spoke of girls dropping out of school through teenage pregnancy and ending up without skills, finding themselves unable to subsist financially, and ending up sometimes, in other relationships, which lead to the birth of other children, a vicious cycle from which they cannot extricate themselves. She advocates that they may have to extricate themselves and their offspring.

I know there is the Emmanuel Community. There are little pockets here and there, but it is not enough. Justice Bernard said if we were serious about improving the status of children in our region and ensuring that they are raised in a safe and healthy environment, free from violence, drugs, abuse, and fear, we have

to hold ourselves accountable by taking seriously our obligations under treaties, re-ratifying, and complying faithfully with their provisions.

Mr. President, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which we ratified in 1991, is not well known to children and adults alike. There is an obligation under article 43 of the convention. The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, responsible for gender and child affairs, the hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy, an honourable woman indeed, spoke in the budget debate about our efforts and those of the Children's Authority in that regard. How successful have been these efforts? People must not only know the CRC, but they must understand it. I would be hard-pressed to find anyone in this Senate Chamber who can tell me today the fundamental principles of the CRC. Any takers? Thank you, I paused for a response.

I had a similar experience with senior staff of the Children's Authority. Can anyone say how often we must report, or even to whom we must report, on the progress we have made in implementing the CRC? Are we compliant? UNICEF mounted a training session for parliamentarians not too long ago. All of us were invited, but it had to be cancelled. Not one single parliamentarian came. Are parliamentarians interested in the human rights of children? There is great deal of work to be done.

The harvest is rich. The labourers are few. Training is a continuous process. The staff of the Children's Authority informed me that they did a child rights course with Harvard Law School. I wondered about that, since the US is the only country in the world that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. I recall being invited by the President of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges to their conference in Oregon around 2002. During the

conference, a number of magistrates and judges stood up and expressed their frustration about the disparity in the respective ages in their courts for waiver of juvenile matters into the High Court. I told them the problem arose because of their lack of a uniformed standard, and that they should ratify the CRC. During the coffee break, a number of them gathered around me and said, “tell meh nah, how we could get our congressmen to agree to ratify”?

In 1996, Hillary Clinton was our future speaker at a joint conference of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts and the World Congress on Family Law and Children’s Rights in San Francisco. She attended remotely because she said Chelsea was graduating, and she could not be there with us physically. She said the Bill is going to ratify. “A-A”, Bill left office. He did not ratify. Trump left office. Bidden—is there hope in Kamala? I need to talk with her.

I wonder that the US law school is teaching child rights with staff of the Children’s Authority. Child rights is not a part of the curriculum of any of the law schools of the Council of Legal Education. When I worked at the Bahamas Law School, I introduced my students to the CRC. I did public lectures in the community and for the defence force. A great deal has been said about bullying in schools. In all of the comments arising from the death of that child, all of the hype, you know, no one has actually taken on board the fact that both the perpetrator, the alleged perpetrator, and the victim are children and ought to be treated in a particular way.

We are perhaps, a kind word is “ambivalent”, about restorative justice. But you know, it teaches empathy. It teaches children, adults, and whomsoever, to understand the pain that they imposed on someone else. And you get an opportunity to give retribution, to make up for what you have done. There was a

justice Ministry, and that Ministry was working on restorative justice. I remember I was asked to comment on a policy that was drafted. I do not know where that policy has gone.

Hon Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: I “doh” know if the PNM threw it away. I “doh” know. I just know, I “doh” know where it is. It is probably somewhere on my old computer. But it is very important that we continue with restorative justice. Jamaica has taken it fully on board and has instructed their Minister of Education to work with the justice Ministry. They have legislation. The Eastern Caribbean also has legislation. Restorative justice is New Zealand’s gift to the world. So many countries have it in their legislation.

I was at the Central Bank, Eric Williams Memorial Lecture about some Fridays ago. We were in a food line, and a woman came to me, and she said, “yuh doh remember me?” Well, I “doh” lie well, so I looked at her, and I smiled non-committally. She said, “You trained me in restorative justice, you know, and I tell you, we do not know if the guidance counsellors or the social workers who should be doing it, but I really need to use it”. Two days after, I met another young lady, and she told me, “you trained me in restorative justice.” I went back to my notebook, and I saw I had trained over 120-something people in Trinidad and Tobago in restorative justice.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: I have been invited to St. Lucia and trained a whole group of people there. We have a number of people from the islands, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, and Dominica who came to Trinidad to be trained by me. I heard the Minister of Education say that there is a pilot project, and that, in about 10

schools—I heard things about 11 schools, and I wonder, it is over a year now, have they reported so that we would know what has happened during that project? What about all of these people? They have people who came and did the four-day course, and they got three textbooks. They have all the books there. They have the skills, and they want to go, and we are dilly-dallying about something as important as that.

When you look at Singapore, and all of them—the two Singapore people, they did a beautiful video for me about restorative justice in school. There is a load of material. As a matter of fact, I realized I have some extra books. So, when I have my conference, that is going to be one of the door prizes that people get. That is if you come, eh.

Mr. President, the Ministry of Education has received the lion's share of the budget. I love teaching. I love my students. I have been a lawyer for 42 years, but part of it was in teaching. Even before that, I have taught at every level, from 5-year-old infants to law students in their 60s. I taught for over 25 years at the Caribbean Law School. I am very proud of my former students, DPP, so many senior counsel and judges.

I remember when the former Attorney General announced in this House that I had taught him at law school. I said, "I tried, I really tried," and these wicked Members of Parliament pounded their desks; both sides, you know, of the House, pounded their desks. I met him some months after, and I realized I had hurt him. Today, I want to put on the record of the *Hansard* my unreserved apology to the former Attorney General. And still, I am very proud of his hard work in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. Like Flip Wilson used to say,

“the devil made me say that that day.” I just love to tease, and I guess the puma incident was for me to learn to behave myself.

I am very concerned about the state of education in my country. I complain all the time about the standard of English spoken and written; even here, it is not standard English at times. I love our dialect, but we must be able to switch registers as the situation warrants. The newspapers are atrocious. The electronic media have me flabbergasted at times. I have had to write a quick note sometimes to Achsah Gulston to remove a ticker tape. A centenarian was described as a “centurion.” And we cringed when an MP made the same error at a public function.

In the late 1970s, Ken Gordon gave me a lift and told him, I will love to get a job as a proofreader. And he told me to write him. I wrote the letter, and he never replied.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: I told TV6 of a mistake in the morning prayer to open their programming, they said, “Ms. Ahye, it will take too expensive to fix it”. So, I listen to it every morning. But when I compare the writing of law students from around the Caribbean, I am pained to say that we are the worst. The Guyanese are the best. Every other jurisdiction produces students who write proper English. We are deficient in that regard.

2.00 p.m.

I used to tell some of my law students, when they submit affidavits to me, that Justice des Illes, who always insisted on correct grammar and punctuation, must be turning in his grave. I found a similar problem with the Bahamian students, with the exception of the mature second-career law students, who had

attended government high schools in the Bahamas. Their writing was perfect. I designed a special course for my students because the numbers were very small. I went right back to agreement of subject and verb. One day I was parking my car, two mature students approached and asked, “Ms. Ahye, Ms. Ahye, who is the prettiest?” I responded that I would answer that question upstairs. That day I was teaching comparison of adjectives and when I said, “Pretty,” one of the ladies shouted, “Prettier, prettiest,” and they started laughing.

One of my colleagues told me I should not be teaching these low-level language skills to postgraduate students.

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

Sen. H. Thompson-Ahye: And my students shouted, “We need it Ms. Ahye.” I spoke to someone involved in teacher training and she told me—in Trinidad—“It is really bad, Hazel.” I said, “You have them for four years, we were at teacher’s college for two years and you cannot fix it?” She shook her head, she said, “The Ministry of Education is aware of the problem because these people write letters to the Ministry of Education asking for leave and those letters are replete with grammatical errors.”

Mr. President, I have written letters to the press and they have sought to correct my letters because they do not understand grammar. I once wrote a speech for a Government Minister, who said to me on the day of the function, “Your speech was great, I loved it, you made one mistake, but I corrected it,” she said. I apologized most humbly and I asked, “What was the mistake?” And the Minister replied, “You wrote ‘if I were’ but I changed change it to ‘if I was’.” All CARICOM countries have a movement of skilled workers law, but we are the only jurisdiction that shows to all the world that we do not understand that dependant is

the noun, meaning the person, and dependent is the adjective.

When I taught Common Entrance class, my pupils knew the differences between each and every, less and fewer, one another and each other, comprise and compose of, all the rules of grammar, prepositions govern the objective case. Even the spelling is a problem. I saw something in the newspaper about a Member of the other House who “beared” her ribcage, B-E-A-R-E-D. Well, really, in a newspaper? I used to wonder if they went to school in August, then I remembered that I taught English language and literature in August '77, when junior sec. transitioned to senior sec.

There is so much more I could say about education, but I must make a plea for the relocation of South East Port of Spain Government Secondary School. I made that plea in the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity, I received no support. Some say it is a heritage site but do they want their children to go there? No. You know, the teaching is excellent. My daughter went there and was traumatized after a shooting incident in 2002. She has three degrees and is now a public defender in Florida. She phoned me yesterday, she said, “Mummy, the judge commended me and cannot believe this is my first case, you know.” But when I wanted to move her she said, “Mummy, it is a seven years school.” When she was going to Queen’s College in Nassau, she realized that no one was understanding a math concept and she said, “Miss, why you doh do it another way?” The teacher called her up to the board and when she explained it, the class had an “aha” moment. She said, “Mummy, I learned that in South East, you know.” I paid thousands of US dollars in Queen’s College in Nassau and she was teaching the students there. You know, there is so much that could be done.

I remembered that one of the tax benefits last year was for schools, but I

want to propose that the Minister of Finance bring another tax benefit and let people pay for the repair of schools. The situation is ridiculous, the Government needs help, let some of the taxpayers do that. We need an amendment to the Unit Trust Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Act to stop what is happening now, refusing to give information about people's benefits unless there is an executor, or it is that, if it is somebody who is suffering from dementia, you cannot get information. I want to also propose, again, the amendment to the Co-operative Societies Act. This nonsense about the \$50,000—I came to this Parliament full of research about what is happening in all the jurisdictions. Why are we limiting that? Why do we not look to the bankers Act and see that more benefits are given to people who are banking, instead of making problems for credit union people? We ought to change that as well.

So there is a lot that needs to be done and I hope that some of my concerns that I have raised will be dealt with. I hope to see that some of the issues that I have raised over the years, a sexual harassment Act will be enacted. I hope that we will also take on board some of the other things that need to be dealt with, the age of criminal responsibility and an amendment to the Equal Opportunities Act. So there is work to be done, I am always available to help, I love to do research, but the political will must be there. And I hope we will see a legislative agenda with all of these matters that need to be attended to. Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox): Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. I thank you for the

opportunity to speak in this debate today. Well, I must start by congratulating Sen. Ancil Dennis on his maiden contribution in the Senate today.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: I must also congratulate the Minister of Finance for presenting yet another successful budget.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: This budget shines a light on the commitment to remain Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity. Allow me also to congratulate the Minister of Planning and Development, and the staff of both the Ministry of Planning and Development and the Ministry of Finance for their contribution towards this budget preparation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: It is my distinct pleasure, given the portfolio I hold, to highlight just a bit of the investment the Government takes and makes for the people of this great country. The poor and vulnerable are always at the heart of the numerous initiatives that we create, fund and implement. Many in the national community have expressed appreciation for the Government's ability in the budget to balance caring for our citizens, with the prudence that is required.

Mr. Vice-President, it is, however, not surprising to hear that some would have negative criticisms, but I must applaud the numerous initiatives that are contained in the budget, and many of them are to help the poor and vulnerable. So while some may seek to continue without offering solutions, this Government continues to deliver real, tangible results for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, focusing on sustainable development and fiscal responsibility. And I just want to quote five of these initiatives.

One, the online numeracy programme for adults, and this life skills enhancement programme targets persons who pursued literacy through the Adult Literacy Tutors Association; secondly, the national digital literacy project, where vulnerable persons will gain digital skills and learn about the digital wallet, through which many of them will be able to access grants; the digital literacy certificate for students, individuals would be equipped with digital skills to compete in a digitally competitive world; the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate, which is the remedial maths programme, where secondary school students would be able to strengthen their knowledge and skills in mathematics; and, of course, the book grant. The provision of a \$1,000 book grant each will assist 20,000 needy students, many of whom are recipients of social welfare grants. And these initiatives are not isolated efforts, they form key parts of our commitment to *Vision 2030*, ensuring that every citizen has the tools and the opportunities to thrive in a modern, digital economy.

Mr. Vice-President, the mandate of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is to enhance the quality of life of the general population, with emphasis and a particular focus on the poor and vulnerable. And we take this mandate seriously, and all our efforts have been geared towards staying true to this journey to enhance the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, by providing a high standard of service. You would undoubtedly agree that our clientele is as diverse as it is huge, and every day we attend to the needs of the elderly, men and women, children, persons living with disabilities, widows, socially displaced persons, victims of substance abuse, families, deportees, victims of human trafficking.

2.10 p.m.

The Ministry is working diligently to ensure that every person who visits our offices receives the requisite social intervention to address the financial, physical and psychosocial challenges that he or she may face. To achieve this mandate, the Ministry has consistently distributed grants, delivered customized programmes and support services and provided several facilities to address the multifaceted needs of our clients.

The Ministry's social safety net is wide and far reaching as it responds to those most in need. Whether they are from the rural, peri-urban or fenceline communities, we ensure that our social services are provided without prejudice to race, colour, gender, religion or political affiliation and we provide grants and services in the best interest of all poor and vulnerable persons in Trinidad and Tobago.

While we are proud of our wide-reaching social safety net, we recognize that improvements in efficiency are needed, and that is why we are streamlining our processes and employing digital solutions to ensure that every citizen receives the health they need in a timely manner. During fiscal 2024, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services expended over \$5.1 billion to provide services and a suite of grants designed to support the poor and vulnerable.

Mr. Vice-President, there is an interesting point to note, as some of our neighbours in CARICOM, especially those who are poor and vulnerable, they wish they had the opportunity to access all the grants and programmes and services that are provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Trinidad and Tobago. Even the amount our clients receive is much more than what is received in other islands, and these social service grants continue to act as a buffer for poor and vulnerable clients.

Given what we know about the expenditure on social service grants in Trinidad and Tobago, it is not surprising that the World Bank highlighted in a recent social expenditure draft report that social protection expenditure in Trinidad and Tobago surpasses the rest of the Caribbean and Latin America by 17 per cent and this only excludes two much larger countries, Brazil and Argentina.

The Ministry's core grants are as follows: Senior Citizens' Pension, this Government continues to be steadfast in its commitment to providing financial support to senior citizens in this country. The pension is provided to citizens age 65 and over, who meet the qualifying criteria for the grant.

As for the past fiscal 114,242 citizens received the senior citizens pension at a sum of \$4,059,421,287. During the past fiscal 9,647 persons were new beneficiaries of our senior citizens programme. So, to repeat the amount of persons on our programme, we have 114,242 citizens in receipt of our senior citizens pension at this time.

One of the other areas that we assist persons is with respect to our Disability Assistance Grant for both adults and minors. Our Disability Assistance Grant provides financial assistance to citizens and legal residents who have been medically certified as permanently disabled and as a result cannot be employed. For the past fiscal, a total of 21,639 persons received the Disability Assistance Grant to the sum of \$552,118,256 and 1,031 persons were added to the programme in past fiscal. This grant is for persons who are permanently disabled and, therefore cannot work. However, we have found many persons on Disability Assistance Grants who are gainfully employed and, of course, these matters are being investigated.

The Public Assistance Grant is available for persons who have partial

disabilities, and I will share more about this grant later on. But persons opt for the Disability Assistance Grant because it is more than the Public Assistance Grant. The Disability Assistance Grant (Minors) is accessible where a child is medically certified to be either severely or permanently disabled. And for the past fiscal, a total of 3,897 persons benefitted from the Disability Assistance Grant (Minors). Of this number, 561 children were added as new clients of the programme and this represents a 16 per cent increase in the number of children receiving Disability Assistance Grants (Minors) over the past fiscal year. So, the total expenditure for the Disability Assistance Grants (Minors) was \$73,426,295. This was the amount utilized for that grant.

On May 01, 2024 the Ministry introduced new guidelines for the administration of the Disability Assistance Grant and these updated guidelines are designed to target families who are facing financial hardship and therefore ensuring that assistance is directed to where it is needed most.

I move to our Public Assistance Grant, and these are grants, we had 15,654 persons benefitted from this Public Assistance Grant. And of that figure 1,587 were new beneficiaries of this programme. So as of September 2024, the sum of \$291,227,678 was expended.

Mr. Vice-President, I wanted to comment on something that Sen. Paul Richards said earlier on when he spoke about where do every creed and race find equality in Trinidad and Tobago. I can say that with regard to our grants, whether it be elderly, public assistance, we have General Assistance Grants as well. I want to say that every citizen has an equal opportunity to access the grants and services and programmes of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. We do not discriminate but rather provide help for all, so they can accomplish their

goals and enjoy a better standard of life.

We have the General Assistance Grants as well, which offer a range of grants to persons who are in dire need of temporary assistance. So as of September 2024, there were 602 applications approved under this grant, at a cost of \$8,285,943 and these grants continue to help the poor and vulnerable persons in the areas of household items, clothing, dietary needs, funeral assistance, medical equipment, pharmaceutical prosthetics, rental assistance and school supplies.

Yet another social intervention strategy is our Food Support Programme. As of September 2024, there were 14,979 households benefitting from our food support grants. So a total expenditure on food support as at September 2024 was the sum of \$116,388,820.

We also have a National Social Development Programme and this programme is a social intervention that seeks to improve the standard of living conditions of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago through the provision of various grants. And some of these grants include Minor House Repair Assistance; 479 persons benefitted from this grant. The minor house repair grant is intended to provide up to \$15,000 in materials only for the repair and upgrade of dwelling houses and up to \$20,000 in materials only to effect repairs and upgrades in the event of a disaster. This cost \$2,273,465.56.

House Wiring Assistance Grant, and through this grant beneficiaries were able to wire or rewire their dwelling homes. This grant can be accessed under normal circumstances and in the event of a disaster where the electrical wiring of the house has been impacted.

2.20p.m.

For fiscal 2024, 138 persons benefited from this grant at a cost of

\$496,053.21. Another one of our general assistance grants include a sanitary plumbing assistance, and this is intended to provide up to \$15,000 in materials only under normal circumstances, and in the event of a disaster, for the repair, and upgrade of toilet and bathroom facilities for a dwelling house. The grant also allows for the upgrade of outdoor latrines to indoor facilities where space permits. As of September 2024, 169 beneficiaries have been positively impacted, at a sum of \$568,903.55 was spent.

We also have a Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development Programme, and, Mr. President, the theme of this budget, “Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity” is no better exemplified than in this grant. This is a programme funded by taxpayers through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. It provides the funding required for poor and vulnerable persons who have an interest in starting or improving their businesses, and are unable to get funding through the regular financial institutions.

This programme also provides funding for training or retraining to further encourage the persons to become employable. To date, 179 persons benefited at the cost of \$758,554.95. You see, by empowering our most vulnerable citizens through initiatives like SEED, we are not just providing immediate relief, we are fostering long-term economic resilience by encouraging entrepreneurship, and self-sufficiency. I wanted to mention—Sen. Paul Richards also spoke about the fact that we need to look at persons being more independent, and this is one of the programmes that we have to assist persons to move from dependence to independence.

We are also looking at a step up programme. The Ministry has a programme called STEP UP, meaning stepping up and stepping out of poverty or

stepping out of dependence. We have now been moving with some of these programmes, and this SEED programme is one, because at the end of the day if you go to a bank, and you do not have collateral or so, you cannot get a loan. So, this a soft—not a loan, but it is a grant to assist you with a small business or to improve the business that you have already, and you cannot afford to go to a bank or go to another financial institution. So, this is one of the programmes that we have in the Ministry that we are not just talking about people accessing grants, but the mere fact that they can now try to move out of it. Because, what we have seen sometimes too is a whole cycle where you will have a mother, a grandmother, same persons just coming, and being on grants, and this is move now to move persons away from grants. So, we believe that through SEED, citizens can receive the financial support required to break free from poverty, and that is one such initiative.

We also have disaster relief grants, and for this period 743 persons from 260 households benefited from disaster relief grants. A total of \$1,562,714.41 was expended. We also provide temporary food support for persons, and 105 households affected by natural disasters such as flooding were given temporary food cards as well. The expenditure for these cards totalled \$58,850; a total of 401 persons benefited from this initiative. Besides our senior citizens pension, we have some additional support for the elderly.

I want to mention that the pension is provided to persons 65 and over who meet the qualifying criteria, but this is not the only grant that is provided nor the only type of assistance that is given to our senior citizens in this country. Senior citizens have access to several programmes, and services such as, our life and residential declaration where we have made an arrangement with tconnect. A toll

free number and e-appointment system to submit their live and residential declaration forms where they would not have to come into the office, but they can now do this through the tconnect offices. They can also submit applications for identified grants to seven of our tconnect offices located throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

We also have a community care programme, which caters to level one to three patients who are sixty years and over, and have been discharged from the hospital. These are patients who are no longer in need of hospital care but are essentially in need of accommodation, and social support. And there are many persons that I am sad to say, persons who have been abandoned by their family, abandoned by their loved ones in the hospitals. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has a responsibility to free-up some of the beds in the hospital, and we have to move them out, and of course, pay for them, all right. As at September 2024, there are 14 community care programme homes across the country, and we have a total of 87 clients benefiting from this programme at a total cost to the tax payer of \$3,664,582. So between October 2023, and September 2024 though, 12 new clients were placed into this programme.

As of September 2024, the Ministry provided financial support for the operation of nine homes for older persons. A total of 106 persons have been provided with residential accommodation through these homes, and we also have a national centenarian programme. I must go now to a much appreciated programme for our super seniors, as we call them. The National Centenarian Programme. This programme recognizes, honours, and celebrates older persons who are 100 years and over.

We have 213 centenarians registered in our system, which does not mean that we have only 213 centenarians in the country. These are just the persons who we have registered, and as of September 2024, we honoured and recognized 60 centenarians for the past year. So, I encourage all Members of this House, and other members of the population, to identify the centenarians in their communities, and help us to get them registered. It is said that when an elder dies, a library dies with them. So, help us to tap into to the wisdom of these centenarians by ensuring that they are registered with our programme. So, the Ministry eagerly awaits the opportunity to celebrate with them as they reach this significant milestone, and I also wish to take this opportunity to thank our private sector stakeholders for partnering with us.

Our senior activity centre. So, Mr. President, for fiscal 2025, some of the senior activity centres will be reopened to provide the opportunity for senior citizens across this country to have a place to socialize, and participate in activities that would strengthen their sense of well-being, and belonging. Additionally, there will be opportunities for the training of caregivers, and we are exploring opportunities for senior citizens who want to work, and we intend to host a function for the elderly, persons 90 and over in fiscal 2025.

I spoke about disability before, but apart from the disability assistance grant, persons with disabilities will receive additional support from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. They receive assistance such as food support, free bus passes, medical equipment, such as wheel chairs, commodes, special beds, dentures, glasses, and prosthetics. These initiatives are not services. They represent this Government's unwavering commitment to upholding the rights and dignity of all our citizens, particularly persons with disabilities. They can also

apply for the dietary grant, the minor house repair grant, the sanitary assistance, and the electrical wiring assistance under the National Social Development Programme.

The rent assistance and the disaster relief grant are also available to eligible applicants in the event of a national disaster. These grants are also available to persons on the senior citizens pension, and the public assistance pension. We also have continued to collaborate with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the provision of subsidised mobile devices for persons with disabilities.

2.30 p.m.

The Ministry verified 529 applications made by persons with disabilities to the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. The Ministry and PTSC officials have been meeting to re-engineer the ELDAMO bus service to ensure that clients in most need of the service can access it. And I leave that up to my friend, Sen. Sookhai to speak about.

I move on to the free bus service. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services continues to provide free bus service for older persons as well as persons receiving social service support. A total of \$5,948,589 was paid to the PTSC for this facility. For persons 60 years and older, the sum of \$5,532,912 was spent. And elderly persons used the service 1,229,536 times in the past fiscal. So for persons who receive public assistance grants and disabilities grants, a total of \$415,677 was expended to cover the cost of 92,451 trips. So clearly, our disability and elderly grant recipients are on the move, and, Mr. Vice-President, the Ministry intends to keep them mobile.

So yes, we do care about our elderly and we do care about our persons with

disabilities. We have some new social welfare initiatives that I would like to speak about, Mr. President. So as we seek to bring the services of the Ministry closer to the people, I can advise that persons who live in the borough of Arima and environs will no longer need to travel to the local public assistance district and board in Tunapuna, but will be able to access social welfare and other services in their own district. And this new centre will be opened in this fiscal. We have already acquired the office space and the tender went out for the outfitting of this office.

Additionally, the workload of the social welfare officers will be equitably distributed. Recently, the Ministry opened a social service centre in Port of Spain, a new centre, and this centre accommodates four social service delivery divisions of the Ministry: Family Services, the Social Welfare Division, our National Social Development Programme, and the Citizen Engagement and Outreach Unit. And this convenient one-stop shop provides clients with an integrated approach and a greater ease of doing business with this Ministry. So no longer will you be required to come to one area to get something done and then go to another department for assistance. You can now access about four of our services in one building.

So, of course, your money and time will be better utilized coming to this one-stop shop. This new facility consists of counselling rooms, a playroom for children, several offices, storage rooms, and other essential rooms to assess and respond to the social needs of our clients. And the Ministry will be using this social service centre model to establish various offices in the region. Additionally, we have been strengthening the capacity of the Social Welfare Division with the recruitment of additional social welfare field officers and is expected to shorten the

processing time for application.

Mr. Vice-President, as part of our ongoing efforts to be more client-focussed, I am pleased to inform this House that some of our social service offices will be open from 7.00 a.m. to accommodate our senior citizens, and we all know that many senior citizens like to conduct business early. So, effective November 1st, the following offices will be open from 7.00 a.m., which will be Aranguetz, Point Fortin, Siparia, San Fernando. Other offices will be open from 7.00 a.m., but it will be dependent on the staff being willing to be there from 7.00 a.m., all right? So, this is one of our new initiatives, this fiscal.

Our Citizen Engagement and Outreach Unit. The overall purpose of this unit is to enhance the performance of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services in the delivery of our social services to our clients. The significant role of this unit is to understand the needs of our clients and other persons who submit applications to the Ministry and to respond to their concerns in an efficient and timely manner.

The unit resolves queries as follows: 297 disability assistance grant queries were resolved; 1,288 senior citizens pension queries resolved; 331 public assistance grant queries resolved; 142 general assistance grant queries resolved; food support grant resolved was 178; disaster flood relief grant resolved, 151. So, Mr. Vice-President, in one year, there have been 2,387 resolutions due to the work of the Citizen Engagement Unit. And we recently assigned some of these hard-working officers to the social welfare offices in Tunapuna and Port of Spain in order to assist with the backlog of home visits. So, we propose to relocate them to assist where the need arises.

I move to family services. The Ministry recognizes that families are the

bedrock of society. And I understand that Sen. Teemal is very concerned about the family, which, of course, we all are indeed, and we understand the importance of family. In fiscal 2024, our National Family Services Division provided thorough preventive, developmental and remedial programmes and services to members of the public. Information on healthy family life was disseminated through community workshops, radio talk shows, outreaches, lectures upon request by various organizations.

And during the period October 2023 to August 2024, the family services provided psychosocial support to individuals and families through delivery of the following services: counselling, 6,112 beneficiaries of the counselling from the Family Services Division; parenting support and counselling, 225 benefited from this; advocacy, 226; referrals and other forms of support, 373; crisis interventions, 38 beneficiaries. Also, the Ministry is an implementation partner on the National Strategic Action Plan on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence, and therefore, all programmes from 2025 will take a gender-sensitive approach to the social sector.

Suicide prevention. Mr. Vice-President, suicide has been a challenge both on a global and local level. The presence of many silent triggers continues to present a real sense of depression, which can be overwhelming for an individual. In most instances, the benefits of coping mechanisms from state institutions, family, and NGO support groups can make a huge difference in the healing process.

In a recent article published in August 2024 by the World Health Organization, it was stated that up to:

“...(73)% of global suicides occurred in low and middle-income countries in 2021.”

Trinidad and Tobago is not immune from this phenomenon. And a recent study by the Ministry of Health stated that:

“Trinidad and Tobago ranks 3rd in the English speaking Caribbean region for the highest suicide rates”

To combat this, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services launched a 24-hour suicide crisis prevention hotline, 800-COPE, to provide the necessary social protection factors and improve their overall mental health and well-being.

Mr. President, a review of the data collected from that hotline revealed that 65 per cent of the persons in need of this type of support were outpatient clients of mental health clinics. A number of these persons were not compliant with their medication. But by investing in mental health support, this Government is addressing the often overlooked challenges of our lives. The 800-COPE hotline is just one part of our comprehensive approach to mental well-being. Through this facility, we were able to reroute them back to their treatment plan. Additionally, the remaining 35 per cent of the persons who called the hotline experienced situational crisis, including family, spousal and financial issues. So during the period October 2023 to August 2024, the hotline received 3,459 calls under the remit of the National Family Services Division.

2.40 p.m.

This 24-hour crisis hotline continues to be operated by specially trained personnel, who efficiently and confidentially address crisis issues related to suicidal ideations and other critical issues faced by citizens.

We have been liaising with the Ministry of Education with regard to students with deviant behaviour. Children that might have been expelled and so on, the National Family Services Division counsels the family. They now send the

information to our Ministry, it is sent to the National Family Services Division, and they contact the family and counsel them, because they cannot deal with the children on an isolated case, the family must be dealt with. I just want to say that this is what we do. I understand Sen. Teemal has some serious concerns about that, and yes, we are concerned too.

Our National Family Services Division has been rolling out a lot of programmes. I would like to say that we have been doing parenting programmes, and we have also included grandparenting seminars and training. Because many of us would have grown up with our grandparents, many persons live with their grandparents and therefore, we cannot only tackle the parents, but we also have to deal with the grandparents, and this is what is also happening. I move our legislative agenda—

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

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Okay, good. Thank you. I move to our legislative agenda, and I will speak specifically on one of the key areas that we need to deal with, and that is our draft persons with disabilities Bill. I am pleased to announce that the Ministry received proposed amendments to the draft Bill from other Ministries, state agencies, NGOs and persons with disabilities. The proposed amendments have been incorporated into the Bill, after a careful review by various departments and units in the Ministry. The Ministry completed its own revision of the Bill and is awaiting feedback from two key stakeholders. When this is done, the next step will be to submit the Bill to the Legislative Review Committee, and we intend to bring this legislation to the House in short order.

Sen. Mitchell: Excellent, excellent.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: I want to speak quickly about some of our projects because we have a few projects in the making, which really costed a lot, but it is really for persons who are socially displaced. When we say “socially displaced”, we are not just talking about persons on the street, we are talking—because people think of street dwellers, but we have many persons who are socially displaced maybe because of a fire, family situation or some persons just have nowhere to live, so we have been working on having places where we can assist in accommodating them. We are calling them “transition homes”, so we can assist them temporarily. One of these places would be the Carapo House. Actually, we are about 99 per cent completed. Another place is the Penal Transitional Facility, and this facility is 98 per cent completed. This consists of six two-bedroom apartments, five of which have been assigned to house families in crisis. We also have the Couva Transitional Facility for socially displaced women and our National Therapeutic and Resource Centre, which is 75 per cent completed, and we hope to open this fiscal.

Our digital transformation efforts are ongoing. I know that the Minister of Digital Transformation did speak comprehensively on this, and I just want to take this opportunity to thank him and his Ministry for their assistance to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, because we have been working closely with them because of our digitalization efforts. So I really have a whole set of stuff about what we are doing and where we are at—

Hon. Senator: The time—*[Inaudible]*

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—but we do not have the time.

Sen. Mitchell: Plenty, plenty.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Plenty, plenty. Our partnering with NGOs, our National Register of Vulnerable Persons. That is one of our key projects because of the fact that how do you know where the people are, who are vulnerable? How can we assist them? We need to meet them at the point of their need, so therefore, we have this National Register where we have been—this is a work in progress with UWI and UNDP.

Mr. President, as I conclude the reporting on my stewardship at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, I thank God for his grace, guidance and protection, and I am eternally grateful to the Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley, for his leadership and confidence in my ability to lead this challenging and yet very important Ministry. I am grateful too for the support, dedication and commitment of the Permanent Secretary, the executive and staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and as we look forward to fiscal 2025, we will continue to innovate, collaborate and improve service delivery to ensure that no one is left behind in our journey towards prosperity. The Ministry remains resolute in providing continuous improvement in the quality of service and delivery to our clients. By God's grace, Mr. President, as we submit to a boundless faith in our destiny, we will succeed in forging pathways to the continued prosperity of all our citizens. I thank you and may God bless you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Tim. Gopeesingh: Mr. Vice-President, may I, at the commencement of my contribution today, acknowledge, with graciousness, the privilege afforded to

me by our internationally distinguished and brilliant Opposition Leader, former Prime Minister—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—and Prime Minister-to-be once again in 2025, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, to contribute on this 2024/2025 finance Bill in the Senate today, a place, which I entered 23 years ago in 2001, until 2007, and then elected to the other place until 2020.

Our political leader, in her powerful, brilliant and formidable budget response to the Minister of Finance, which was themed, “A Decade of Debt”—\$120 billion borrowed by this Government, almost 10 years of consecutive deficits in the budgetary allocations, destabilization of the economy, deaths, killing fields in our hospitals, COVID deaths, NICU deaths, and destruction; destruction of almost every aspect of life in Trinidad and Tobago.

Our political leader, in her powerful and formidable response, presented a deep and incisive analysis of the Minister of Finance’s statements on health and education, two areas which I will speak about today, once given the time. The Opposition Leader presented far-reaching policies, programmes and recommendations for implementation in health and education, amongst other Ministries, when she once again regains prime ministership in 2025.

I will now address some of the issues on health related to the budget 2024/2025 finance Bill and, if time permits, on education. Mr. President, we are all critically aware that both health and education are the cornerstone and fundamental pillars of any civilized and developed country, and it is a constitutional requirement for the provision of equitable, efficient, high-quality

health care and education in any country. It is a constitutional requirement for the citizens and for the Government to provide these types of services.

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Mr. President, with this budgetary allocation of nearly \$7 billion for health in 2024/2025, it is supposed to take care of expenditures for the management of the four regional health authorities, the Ministry of Health, 10 hospitals which we have, 105 health centres and nine district health facilities which are supposed to be opened 24 hours.

Mr. President, why is it in Trinidad and Tobago, with all these hospitals and health centres—10 hospitals; nine district health facilities; 105 health centres; thousands of medical workers, doctors, interns, registrars, house officers, staff nurses, paramedical professionals—why are we in this state in the health sector? Why are patients continuing to suffer and we have loss of preventable lives? This is unsatisfactory and cannot be allowed to continue.

We still have a widespread shortage of nurses; 1,300 nurses needing to be employed and they are not being employed. Nurses are not even given contracts. They are given three-month contracts. They do not have any justice in their employment and they are played upon by the regional health authorities' boards and chairmen, with month-to-month work and so on, the young doctors as well. So you are damaging the psyche of these professionals, of nurses and doctors and paraprofessionals as well, in not giving them secured contracts, so that they can earn a living, they can go to the bank and borrow money to buy a car and they can put money for a house. This is the state of affairs in the health sector, being played upon by the chairmen at the regional health authorities' boards, and by the CEOs, and by the executive management.

2.50 p.m.

So, Mr. President, we have a health system. which over the last nine years has spent close to \$63 billion out of over half a trillion dollars, more than \$500 billion has been spent by this PNM Government over the last nine years. In fact, \$550 billion and counting more, 63 billion of that has been spent on health sector for these nine years, and another seven allocated for this year and where are we? Where are we? Patients are dying like flies in the hospitals, the hospitals are like killing fields, and today, the population is still finding it difficult, Mr. President, for their health needs to be adequately fulfilled. We are now with a health system, which has been over the last nine years, particularly, unable to cope with the demands of the population for effective and safe health care and delivery.

Thousands of patients are suffering at home for months and sometimes years, at home are waiting for a call for surgery, for clinic appointments, and they are waiting for proper medicine to be given to them.

Mr. President, I just want to quote a little article that I saw just a few days ago on *Newsday*, Friday, October 18, 2024, last week, Friday, and the headlines:

“Waiting years to see doctor at complex”

“The Editor: I write a highlight a severe problem at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, Mount Hope.

Presently, there are patients of the heart, kidney and other clinics who have not seen a doctor for at least three years or so. What is happening at the complex is that every six months the patient goes in and receives a new prescription for CDAP medication.

Why are the patients not being given an appointment date and time to be seen by a doctor in their respective clinic? Is this some kind of shortcut?”

And it goes on:

“I know of people who have had stent insertions”—that is cardiac stents insertions—“for three years or so and today it cannot be seen by a doctor...”

Imagine you have a cardiac insertion done, and three years after, you cannot see a doctor:

“...as well as people with heart and kidney problems who would have last seen a doctor three years ago.”

That is a state of our health sector, 63 billion spent, and another 7 billion to be spent. The article goes on, the person says:

“We must do better than this. These are people with medical conditions who would have worked and contributed to the health surcharge and other taxes and now have to be at the mercy of others in authority.”

And it is signed by the person.

Mr. President, it is an indisputable fact that patients continue to die on trolleys and wheelchairs in emergency rooms of the hospital, waiting days to get an inpatient bed.

Just last night, one of my colleagues who had been my partner in medicine in surgery for 50 years, one of my anesthetists, took his grandson to the hospital, in the paediatric hospital, and had to wait for more than 12 hours for that child to be admitted into a room, into a bed. And right next door, there was an empty pediatric ward.

So where is the healthcare management? Patients await for days in the emergency department. You know many calls I get on a regular basis being a senior member in the medical profession, “doctor, please try and help me. My family is there for almost three days and cannot get a bed in the hospital”, and

there is no one to call, no one to answer any questions, and the patients die. They die on the wheelchair or the trolleys in the hospital, and this is the state of our healthcare system.

They wait for days to get on a patient bed, having to get blood tests done privately. They do not even have reagents in the hospitals to do blood tests. By the time the family goes out, get the blood test done and have the result, the patient is dead. Lack of surgical equipment—I have a few colleagues in here who are doctors, and they will know that their surgical equipment and instruments you need for neurosurgery, for orthopaedic surgery, for cardiac surgery, and then these surgical procedures need equipment and instrument, and they are not there.

There are ineffective, outdated drugs within the CDAP programme, many of which are unavailable. “We tired beg” the Minister of Health to improve the types of medicine for treating diabetes and hypertension. Five cents drugs—how can you treat hypertension and diabetes with drugs, which are not effective? You have the worst—metformin and the anti-hypertensive drugs are the cheapest.

How can you treat non-communicable diseases like this, which gives rise to blindness, to heart attacks, to strokes, to kidney failure, to amputation? We have over 500 amputations per year in Trinidad and Tobago because the diabetes and hypertension for the patients are not controlled. The Minister of Finance himself said there are over 260,000 citizens depending on the availability of these pharmaceuticals in the CDAP programme. I read this in the presentation of the Minister of Finance, in his five hour-plus budget presentation.

So, Mr. President, 260,000 citizens, nearly a quarter million citizens of this country, have to depend on CDAP drugs; that shows the poverty and what is happening in this country. Quarter million citizens have to get CDAP drugs, and

when they go, they cannot get it because most of the drugs under the CDAP list are not there. So why is it that this population have to be subjected to this gross mismanagement and incompetence and incapacity of the Ministry of Health and the head of this sector, the Minister of Health, to deal with this?

For the last nine years, this country had been subjected to a number of infections with the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, chikungunya. I do not know how many of you remember that—chikungunya, which gave rise to serious musculoskeletal disorders of the joints and muscles, long lasting.

Then you had Zika infection of pregnant mothers, and the Minister of Health was silent then, causing microcephaly and congenital malformation in the infants, which is a congenital Zika syndrome where scores of mothers were infected. The hon. Minister of Health refused, or possibly unashamedly refused, to inform the population of how many mothers were affected and now having to care for their young children, who have developed major congenital abnormalities, which are considered worse than cerebral palsy.

They have microcephaly, these little poor children and their brain is dysfunctional. Their mothers, who develop Zika during the pregnancy, gave birth to these babies, and the Minister has done absolutely nothing about that. There are scores of mothers in this country who have to take care of babies who were affected by the Zika virus and nothing is being done to help these mothers and so. Ashamed, Mr. President. So these mothers now have to care for these young ones and young children for the rest of these children's lives, like a cerebral palsy child and for the rest of their mother's lives.

Then came COVID, Mr. President, in 2020 and where we warned the Government that this COVID is coming on, and we raised Motions both in the

Lower House and in the Senate, which were not approved for discussion, COVID came in few months later and we raised it in January 2020, when it was declared an emergency.

Hundreds of preventable deaths occurred, Mr. President, 4,600 died as a result of the COVID infection. When the Ministry of Health was pressed, and the Prime Minister was pressed into doing something about it, he said, alright, I will have a Seemungal Commission, which he gave them one week to have an inquisition into it.

3.00 p.m.

They asked for more time. They got one month. And so, Mr. President, the Seemungal's Commission met; 120 pages of documentation and 19 major recommendations made from this Seemungal Commission of Enquiry. One hundred and twenty pages. In one month they did the work; five top professionals. We congratulated them, and we thanked them for their work. Nineteen major recommendations made, and up to today—that was in February 2023, 18 months ago, Mr. President—18 months ago the recommendations—and not one of those recommendations has been fulfilled. What a shame and disgraceful attitude from the Minister of Health and the Government as a whole. Who monitors the Ministers? Does the Prime Minister monitor the Ministers to see what work they were doing? I remember when we were Ministers of Government, our Prime Minister would ask us on a regular basis, where are you going, what are you doing? But to inflict this present Minister of Health and this population for nine years into the tenth year is unpardonable.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: It is criminal in nature, Mr. President. It is morally wrong to have this present Minister continuing as Minister of Health in this country. I stand in strong objection to that. I am a doctor for over 50 years and I worked in 19 hospitals around the world. I have trained at four universities. I have taught over 3,500 young doctors.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: I was a professor at the university. I helped to pioneer a programme for the medical school in Trinidad, Mr. President. And this is what we are going—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of order, 46(1), I do not need to hear a résumé of Tim Gopeesingh, at this time.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Okay. Okay. Members, allow me to—Members. Members. Sen. Nakhid and all other Members. Okay. Senator, again, the budget debate is relatively wide, but not too wide. So, if it is that you are going down that road, you could just—you know, give an understanding of your qualifications and do so briefly. Do not spend too long doing it, and move on.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: So, Mr. President, here it is, that we have to spend another \$7 billion. So we spent \$63 billion already, and we do know where we are going and what we are going to be doing, as far as the health sector is concerned. So, we know that the Seemungal Report has been there. It has 19 recommendations, nothing has been done about it. And you know what Mr. President? A week after the report came out, the Government put out an ad, Tuesday February 14, 2023.

“REQUEST FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST CONSULTANCY TO
CONDUCT AN ASSESSMENT OF THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH’S
RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC”

A big full page advertisement from the Procurement & Contracts Management Specialists, Health Services Support Programme.

Today, we have nothing. Nothing, in terms of what is being done about the Seemungal Report and its recommendations. So, are we going to be spending parts of this \$7 billion that was given to Health? Are we going to be looking at that? I want to recommend that we take an active interest in ensuring that we try to determine what has happened to this request for expression of interest, and what has been done, or what will be done with the \$7 million, if it is going to analyze the Seemungal Report recommendations and implement some of the recommendations.

So, Mr. President, then we continue to have more deaths, following the dengue epidemic, or dengue infections. What has the Minister of Health done with the money from last year in terms of fighting the dengue virus? Whereabouts 20 have died so far, and is continuing. This is what is being reported. So, there are serious morbidity of hundreds of others citizens from the infection by the aedes aegypti, which the Minister and the Ministry of Health failed miserably to address, and continue to fail and deal with from a preventative aspect, but continues to blame the citizens and threaten to jail some of the citizens in the midst of his widespread incompetence and mismanagement.

So, this \$7 billion allocated for Health, Mr. President, would it be able to address and deal with some of these situations, similar to those in the past? We say no, based on what has happened over the last nine years and the serious

mismanagement and incompetence by the Ministry of Health, by the Minister of Health, and by this Government of Trinidad and Tobago. And so, \$63 billion spent on health sector, but hundreds and thousands of complaints about mismanagement in the health sector by citizens on a yearly basis. I want to state, Mr. President, that when we get into Government in 2025, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago will be rest assured that we will establish a hotline so that citizens who feel disfranchised and they are hurt by the health situation, will be able to call in, and get redress on a regular basis.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Even though there might be two or three telephone lines that we will have to use—Mr. President, in fact the Leader of the Opposition, in her response to this budget, gave 50 policies and programmes that over 54—that as Prime Minister in 2025, she will establish in the health sector—and she enumerated those 54 policies and programmes in her budget contribution. And for those listening, you can find it on YouTube and the Parliament's channel, of all the recommendations that the hon. Leader of Opposition gave on the health sector for the future in 2025, when we take office.

Mr. President, the health sector has reached a stage where criminals were murdering citizens at emergency departments of hospitals. Criminals entering wards with patients and nurses scared to death—to infrastructure problems of collapsing ceilings near operating theatres, flooding in hospitals, refrigeration systems failing in the mortuaries, with corpses rotting. I was just informed that just one week ago, by my colleague, one of the refrigeration units in one sector of the hospital went down again. One of the standby generators, and there was no access to patient notes and other things were disenfranchised for that 24 hours.

How could you run health centres, hospitals, without proper standby generators back up, Mr. President?

There had been repeated widespread electrical outages, malfunctioning standby generators, with one particular incident with patients in the Intensive Care Unit at Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex. Ventilated patients—patients on the ventilator having to breathe with the ventilator with an electrical outage, having to be resuscitated. So the electricity gone, the resuscitating equipment gone—stopped. So what do you do, let the six or seven patients on ventilators die? The nurses and the doctors had to go in, and start pressing with Ambu bags. Twelve presses per minute to put air into the lungs of these patients, to keep them alive. And then, five or six patients had to be transferred from the Mt. Hope Hospital to Arima Hospital, being ventilated manually with Ambu bags. The Minister stayed quiet, the Government is quiet. How many patients died as a result of that? They transferred—no not a word, silent, keep it quiet. That is very unfortunate. You are running a health sector, you are running hospitals, one of the fundamental is to have standby generators and check every day. Everyday these standby generators—

3.10 p.m.

I remember when I was Chairman of the regional health authority, in '97 to 2000, I ran two of the four regional health authorities. In my second month standby generators at the Port of Spain General Hospital went down. I was amazed. I had done nothing, but I made sure, within one or two months, that all areas of the North West Regional Health Authority had standby generators functioning efficiently. That is '97/'98, and here it is in 2024, we have standby generators going, and \$63 billion spent and you cannot buy standby generators and having them functioning

properly.

So blame has to be put on the management, the regional health authorities, the boards of the RHAs whom the Government appoints, the CEOs. You have a CEO at Mt. Hope who is really fit to be a manager at Ms. Atwell's centre in St. Ann's. That is the Queen's Hall, the old Queen's Hall. He is best to be suited for the Carib Theatre, best suited probably for NCC, but he is the CEO of our hospital, Mt. Hope medical complex. He started as an attendant. I mean, God, it is not to cry down anybody, but somebody with no health care management skills and competence running the Mt. Hope medical complex with so many district health facilities and a whole complex like Mt. Hope. No, Mr. President, that cannot work in today's time. It is pathetic. It is shameful, disgraceful.

So your biomedical engineering team, where are they? Who determines what is happening in the hospital? Who checks the biomedical engineering team? You have boards of directors who do not know regional health authorities, have not been under hospital wards to see what is going on in the hospital. When we were in Government, Minister Khan, and a number of us used to walk the hospitals, see what is going on. We asked a CEO one day, "When last you made a ward round"? He said, "A month ago". We fired him. So we do not know how many died as a result of this transfer of the patients from the standby generating system that was not functional.

There was another blackout at the San Fernando General Hospital where patients were being operated on in the operating theatre and a blackout occurred. You could imagine as a surgeon—I am a surgeon about 40-something years—and a blackout occurs? A nurse has to come and shine a torchlight for you. Private nursing homes do not have that, they have standby generators that kick in right

away. But, thank God, we do not know what happened, and there are six operating theatres at least in the San Fernando General Hospital functioning at that time, so we do not know what happened as a result of that.

So this cannot be allowed to happen in any health system, in any delivery, in any developed country, Mr. President. It is because the regional health authority boards, which the Minister and the Government appoint, are really incompetent, and I say that unashamedly. You cannot put square pegs in round holes. Health care is something by itself. It is not running a sweetie parlour, or anything. You are playing with people's lives, so you must have the best people at the top. You cannot get political appointees to run a regional health authority board or to be a CEO. They run without any management capacity and capability, and it rots from the head, and if the head is rotting, everywhere else will rot.

Sen. Mark: That is what PNM does.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So we have basic drugs that are lacking.

So, Mr. President, are we in this 2024/2025 budget reallocation of \$7 billion? Are we going to be moving to prevent any exacerbation of neonatal deaths in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit as we had this year with 19 babies dying in the short period? Neonates dying within the short period of time, and while the Minister of Health and his team were trying to fool the population, boasting almost on a yearly basis, every time you hear the Minister, "Decreasing maternal mortality, neonatal mortality decreasing all the time", and while it is increasing, and he was trying to gaslight and hoodwink our population.

Mr. President, when the population became angry and the newspapers flooded with articles, "Hoggish conduct at NICU"; "...nurses in 'emotional turmoil' over deaths of Babies, says TTNNA boss". Our political leader said,

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
 Bill, 2024
 Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh (cont'd)

2024.10.22

“Deaths of babies a ‘blight’; proof of health crisis”. Then the NWRHA put out a little article about the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the Port of Spain General Hospital. The TTNA boss said, “...nurses in ‘emotional turmoil’ over deaths of babies”—

Mr. President: Senator, date and time and the actual newspaper if you are reading from the article in your hand.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Oh, you want the—right. Saturday, April 19, 2024, this is—

Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: It is the *Guardian*.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: The *Guardian*. This here, the Saturday *Express* of 20 April, 2024, deaths of babies at the Port of Spain General Hospital:

“Kamla calls for immediate opening of children’s hospital”
 ...slams Govt for ‘malice and spite’”.

Then you have the *Newsday*, Saturday, April 20, 2024, NWRHA, they are saying only seven babies died of bacterial infection, and there were 19 babies who died. Then, Sunday, April 21st, the *Guardian*:

Nine hundred and fifty-one neonatal deaths in Trinidad and Tobago between 2018 and 2022.

Four years, 951 neonatal deaths. Neonatal death is the death of a baby within the first 28 days of life. A perinatal death is within the first seven days of life. So 951 babies died in four years within the first four weeks of birth.

Progress in reducing mortality rate hit hard; and there is one article, “UNC”—supporters—“call for Children’s Hospital”—to be opened—“in Couva”, and so on. So many articles, Mr. President, too much to read. Then on April 20, 2024, the Leader of the Opposition, Saturday *Express*:

In the face of 11 baby deaths, Kamla calls on the Prime Minister to have a conscience and show humanity, open Couva Children's Hospital, and so on. "Tobago mom wants answers..."

So I just decided to bring these articles along to show, Mr. President, that this country had been subjected to improper health care, the citizens, the babies, the young ones, and when the pressure was put on the Government again, then they asked for an investigation to be done into what was happening at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

PAHO sent a review mission to Trinidad and Tobago and a report was published on the 21st of June, 2024, Review Mission, Clinical Events, Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Port of Spain General Hospital, April, 2024. Mr. President, it is a very damning report on the management at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the Port of Spain General Hospital. The Minister of Health has to take the responsibility. The boards have to take the responsibility, the CEO, the management, and of course, ultimately, the Government.

Some of these findings:

"Prevention & Control Strategies-

1. Institutional policies for central line insertion and maintenance in NICU are not used consistently.
2. Policies and procedures for prevention of surgical site wound infection in...—the operating—"...theatre is not done.
3. Antimicrobial stewardship programme is not implemented.

...

1. Inadequate ratio of nursing professionals to patient ratio is present consistently."

I think there was an article today or yesterday, where the head of the Nursing Association said that nurses are still not being employed to fill the vacancies in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. That is the head of the Nurses Association. And this is what continues:

“Policies and procedures for use of multi dose medications on NICU need to be developed.

NICU unit dose medications are not prepared in sterile conditions by pharmacy.

There are no policies nor procedures for high level disinfection for equipment such as laryngoscopes.

Limited hands-free alcohol-based hand rub dispensers in NICU.

Breaches in personal protective equipment (PPE) protocols observed in the NICU, indicating a need for improved compliance monitoring and training.”

And there are so much more, about—

Sen. Thompson-Ahye: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Yeah.

Sen. Thompson-Ahye: You mentioned just now that the nurses are not being employed, is it that they are not applying or is it that the institution is not taking them on board? Because of the fallout that you had before, they may be reluctant to apply, so could you clarify for me, please?

3.20 p.m.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: From for my understanding, Senator, they have been applying, because the President of the Trinidad and Tobago Registered Nurses Association wants the employment of these nurses. There are over 1,300 nurses wanting jobs, and they are not being employed by the regional health authorities

because the regional health authorities say that they do not have money and they are not employing anybody, and when they employ them, they frustrate them. They do not give them any contracts. They give them—and my colleague, Dr. Dillon-Remy, one of the best paediatricians this country has ever seen, I have tremendous respect for her competence, I am sure she will agree with me, they are treated badly. You have over 400 young doctors in this country wanting jobs and they cannot get jobs. Their parents paid millions of dollars to educate them and they cannot get a job. We have 32 different units in a hospital system, where you just take two young doctors—

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

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Ten more minutes?

Hon. Senators: Five.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Five?

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: What?

Hon. Senator: Four now.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Well, I think, Mr. President, the country, the Ministry of Health and the Minister, and the Government has gotten the message from the Opposition loud and clear. They have been very incompetent in dealing with the health sector. A lot is to be desired and we expect a lot better from them, but when I am closing that, I will make a concluding statement.

I was hoping to be able to deal with some parts of education, which is another area which the Government has fallen badly on. From my one or two minutes left, it is unfortunate, again, hon. President, that this Government within

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
 Bill, 2024
 Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh (cont'd)

2024.10.22

the first year of us demitting office, there was a swift and precipitous reversal of all the gains that we made in the education sector between 2010 to 2015. They reversed almost everything. They stopped the laptop programme, they stopped the construction of schools programmes, they stopped the—

Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Textbooks.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—early childhood education programme, they stopped the textbook programme. We had given out over 2 million textbooks to students over the period 2010 to 2013. Every child, in every class, in every school got a textbook. Then, we gave out 97,000 laptops and in 2020, when COVID came on, over 100,000 students in this country were left without an IT device. They were left out of the education system for two years, Mr. President. So you could understand why 9,000 students failed to get more than 50 per cent in SEA?

Sen. Nakhid: Tell them that—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: That is why—

Sen. Nakhid: Tell them how many failed under this Government. That is the point right there.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: This is where the crime is coming from.

Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial: Turning to a life of crime, exactly.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: This is where the crime is—9,000—

Sen. Nakhid: Forty-seven per cent failing under “allyuh”.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—students—

Mr. President: Sen. Nakhid, there is one speaker currently on the Floor on your—

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Mr. President: Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Sen. Nakhid, I am on my legs, one. Two, please face the other side, your back is to the Chair. Thank you. Sen. Gopeesingh, continue.

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Yeah. Mr. President, they stopped the tech/voch education programme. They stopped the school construction programme. They stopped the Continuous Assessment Component of SEA. They stopped the areas of morals, values, ethics, and citizenry development and character development within teaching. Music, art and drama in primary schools were stopped. Mr. President, 402 homework centres were stopped. We had up to three computer labs in secondary schools, all of that were destroyed, 150 IT technicians were sent away from their jobs. They reduced the amount of social workers in the Student Support Services Division from 700 to 350, hence the rise in the problem of violence in the schools. We could talk an entire day on that but 40 minutes is not enough for me to speak about it. They have reversed the early childhood education programme, when we were the first country in the world to have achieved early childhood education.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: We had the best academic performance in 2014, in SEA, CAPE and CSEC, and we bettered it in 2015. We are now last in the world. We were on par with Finland, Singapore, Hong Kong and Korea. We were awarded medals for our work in education. We were the centre of a Virtual Educa in Latin America and the Caribbean. We were the leaders in ICT in the world. Putin in

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Russia was trying to follow us; 3,000 schools. He started around the same time we started. President Obama started the laptop programme around the same time that we started. We led the Latin American Caribbean with ICT in education.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So, Mr. President, as I conclude, I reiterate that the Government is on a rapid, dangerous road of fostering a complete economic collapse of our economy. Never before has this country ever seen such wanton incompetence, corruption and mismanagement of our economy. Where has the over half of a trillion dollars gone? Where has it been spent?

Taxpayers' dollars, where has this gone? They have failed for almost a decade now to create new revenue streams, new industries, job creation and stimulation of businesses, to improve our country and ensure the progress and prosperity of our citizens. Their only concern is about spending money and they are not even interested in accounting for the money spent as the Auditor General's report notes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: In this budget and in the previous nine budgets, they have delivered since 2015, they have consistently and shamelessly come to this country with failed policies, numerous broken promises, wanton misstatements and wastage. This budget, like all their previous ones, will continue to embroil our citizens and nation in a hopeless cycle of poverty, joblessness, criminality, violence and despair. They have no choice now but to resign, for they have failed and continue to fail the people of this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. President, let us call the elections and let the people decide.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. Dr. T. Gopeesingh (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Mark: The PNM has to go.

Mr. President: Sen. Ibrahim.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Muhammad Yunus Ibrahim: Good afternoon, all. Mr. President, thank you so much for allowing me the opportunity in the second day of debate in this Senate to speak on the Appropriation Bill before us, as it applies to the statement that was placed in the other place a few weeks back. Mr. President, the reason why I am extremely happy to be able to give a response at this point in time is that I am bewildered by the amount of misinformation that I just heard from Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh.

I will start off where he left, speaking about the doing nothing in education—well, he said closing down of the rebuilding programme, throwing out of initiatives immediately in 2015, as what was implemented by the previous Government before in 2010 to 2015. These are things that this Government has done, not over the last 10 years in education, but just in the last four years of this term in office. It takes into consideration many things that have been mentioned. I believe Dr. Richards yesterday, spoke of it, and one other Independent Senator as well spoke about it.

And it speaks towards the fallout of students, building a better society through adult literacy and other educational programmes, in addition to which, something that was making a lot of noise just now across the Floor, the students who would have fallen on the side, based upon the failure of not being able to adequately receive an education for a period of two years during the pandemic period. May we recall what occurred at that time, whereby we recognized and

became extremely proactive in outfitting the schools with the necessary IT needs for the purpose of communication and the handing out of devices to allow distance learning and remote learning, as school spaces were not able to be inhabited by the students and teachers.

3.30 p.m.

The introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Adaptive Learning System is an initiative being taken by January 2025. It is a platform that will facilitate the creation of diagnostic databases and a tailored numeracy experience to foster numeracy development, remedial and progress monitoring for all students. Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh spoke about the closing down or the shutting down of the rebuilding of schools programme, but since 2020 we have spent \$41.5 million for the completion of the cultural centre and science block 4 classrooms at the St. Augustine Girls' High School. The San Juan Boys' and Girls' Government Primary School, the Ministry of Education: completion of four main blocks to accommodate classrooms, auditorium, cafeteria, administrative offices inclusive of external works at a cost of \$28.8 million. The Chatham Government Primary School, Mr. President, and I must spell these things out, simply to dispel what Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh was just saying.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Where Chatham is?

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: The completion of a two-storey, L-shaped school—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Mr. President: Senator—

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: Comprising administration—

Mr. President: Senator, just remember to refer to Senators by their official titles.

So it is Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh.

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: Thank you, Mr. President, I remain guided. The completion of a two—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*] geography.

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: Still on Chatham. Completion of a two-storey L-shaped school comprising of the administration and classroom sections, cafeteria, multipurpose hall, and external works at a cost of \$13 million. We also attended to the Santa Flora Government Primary School, such as the project of completion of the main building including administration, classrooms, computer, art and science rooms at a cost of \$24.6 million.

The Siparia Union Presbyterian Primary School also benefited from the completion of the main build including administration, classrooms, computer, art, science room and external works totalling \$29.7 million. And I have a few more examples here, such as the Marabella Anglican Primary School, with the completion of a previously constructed facility comprising two reinforced concrete steel-storey structures, one three-storey and two two-storey structures with structural steel frames at a cost of \$24.9 million.

Holy Cross—the list goes on, Mr. President, just to rebut what Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh said. The Holy Cross College, completion of a classroom block with washrooms, laboratories and other multipurpose rooms, auditorium and refurbishment at the existing school to the tune of \$32.1 million. Construction of the Fanny Village Government Primary School, completion of construction at a cost of \$37.2 million. And the last example I will raise is the Malabar Government Primary School, completion of the main building including administration, classrooms, computer, art and science rooms at a cost of \$25.8 million.

So it is clear to say, that the construction and expansion of our schools is something that has never ceased, and the current Administration continues to use what it has, seeing the schools that are in need of facilities and expansion and betterment to actually continue our good work. I would like to remind the Senate and Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh, that in the 2023/2024 Budget Presentation, a School Supplies and Book Grant of \$1, 000 to assist economically disadvantaged students at the primary and secondary school levels. Following a thorough means tests and an extensive review process, over 20,000 eligible students were awarded grants, which assisted parents with their back-to-school expenses to a total cost of \$20 million.

For the purpose of responding to those who were concerned about the students who fell off the grid and needed the remedial work, in 2022, the Vacation Revision Programme, which focused on improving proficiency in Mathematics, English, Language Arts and writing was held. In July 2024, approximately 5,000 primary and secondary school students accessed these classes during the July/August vacation period, and we made a pledge that the Government would continue to do this strategic intervention in the 2025/2026 academic year. So to come in the House, in this Chamber and to state that all these projects and programmes, and education has stopped is misleading the community.

The last speaker, Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh also spent much time, as expected of his contribution, on the health sector of Trinidad and Tobago. The question was, where is the money going? What is the Government doing? He even spoke about a gentleman who is managing the NCRHA and basically said that it was not someone who is supposed to be there at this stage. But I would let you know that that particular individual from when you knew him, to being an apprentice or an

assistant, has gone through extensive learning and also graduation to be able to perform in that position where he is at right now.

Under the External Patient Programme, an arrangement with private health care intuitions funded by the Government over 3,400 individuals received dialysis services, at a cost of \$380 million to the State. While over 2, 000 beneficiaries received radiation treatment at a cost of over \$160 million. In addition, almost 4, 000 citizens received cardiac services at a cost and \$50 million and over 3, 000 vitreo-retina surgeries were performed.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: That is a four-year period?

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: Yes.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Four years.

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: Four years. Correct. At the same regional health authorities over 13, 000 persons received dialysis, over 7, 000 people received cataract surgeries and over 135, 000 diagnostic eye examinations were conducted for persons with visual impairment.

Additionally, Mr. President, a total of \$721 million was spent on pharmaceuticals and non-pharmaceuticals and \$185 million was expended on medical equipment upgrades. In addition to that, Mr. President, over 265, 000 persons benefitted from the CDAP at a cost of \$119 million to the State over the period of 2021 to 2024, and hundreds of millions more were spent on the treatment of diabetes, hypertension and cancer.

So what we are seeing here, in response to the last speaker, Mr. President, is regardless of the capacity within the health sector or not, the goal and the modus operandi of the Government is to try the very best so that the wider citizenry can receive healthcare, even if we have to subcontract to private institutions and being

paid fully by Government.

You touched also on NCDs, Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh, mainly heart disease, diabetes, cerebrovascular disease and cancer, and the goal of this Administration is to reduce the burden of mortality, to reduce the burden of preventable mortality before the age of 70, due to NCDs by 25 per cent by 2025.

3.40 p.m.

The broader response focuses on the provision of targeted programmes and services from birth to elderly status securing a healthy future for our population. These include a gestational diabetes management programme; the restriction of sugar-sweetened beverages in all government and government-assisted schools; TTMoves junior programme to promote the adoption of healthy lifestyle habits amongst children ages five to 17, Mr. President; TTMoves health lifestyle campaign for adults; TTMoves behavioural change campaign and the launch of the HEARTS initiative to address the issue of high blood pressure. This Government has also established a 24-hour hotline offering medical advice and support for individuals who use home blood pressure kits and glucose monitors and have health-related questions about NCD-related issues. Yeah?

So as it applies to treating of the NCDs and also treating of patients with chronic diseases within the health sector and external to the national health services, we subcontract for the purpose of our citizenry throughout the nation the best private health care centres they have.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: “Umm hmm”.

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: But let us talk about the investment in health, asking about, “where de money gone and where the money is spending” and the mismanagement and so on. Over the past five years, the healthcare infrastructure, we have

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. Dr. Yunus Ibrahim (cont'd)

2024.10.22

completed several hospitals.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: Completed a 150-bed Arima Hospital at the cost of \$1.6 billion, Mr. President, a 100-bed Point Fortin Hospital at a cost of \$1.3 billion, and the Roxborough Hospital at a cost of \$133 million. We also have a new, Mr. President, \$1.1 billion Sangre Grande Hospital which was opened earlier this year.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: It serves over 155,000 individuals from neighbouring communities. State-of-the art facility. I know staff who work there, they do not even want to work anywhere else. They think it is one of the best facilities they have ever been part of—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim:—from the welcoming of the patients to the screening of the patients. The patients experience is receiving a five-star rating continuously throughout the health care sector.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: We also have a 106-bed adult emergency department intensive care unit, imaging department and other essential services designed to improve health-care deliveries. Eastern residents now have that opportunity to do.

Now on top of all of that, a 540-bed Port of Spain General Hospital Central Block is currently at a 60 per cent completion—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: 60 per cent completion, and upon completion it will allow the growth of other clinical services, surgical, pharmaceutical, laboratory services, diagnostic and treatment, as well as the expansion of some of our existing

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. Dr. Yunus Ibrahim (cont'd)

2024.10.22

services—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim:—such as ophthalmology, ENT, paediatrics, and that project is scheduled for opening March, 2025.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: First-class health care.

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: First-class health care.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: We also can boast that the Ministry of Health has now instead of having all its branches littered all across Port of Spain and environs, a singular building where the population can go to and get all of their issues when it comes to receiving everything under what the Ministry of Health has to offer, from food and drug to inspectorate to the screening of products for entry for consumption which is part of the food and drug responsibility, everything under one roof. So when it is you say opening to the public of Trinidad and Tobago that we are not doing the right things in health, that is purely misleading the community.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Yes.

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: Absolutely in its full, Mr. President. It also points towards them saying things to incite and create activity with respect to creating a headline. Case in point yesterday, to come this morning with a headline flashing around in front of us because of what was said in our Chamber yesterday.

But, Mr. President, going back to what I would have originally planned to say or what I would hope to contribute in the few short moments that I will take up, I want to respond to a couple Senators who spoke yesterday. It bewilders me at this stage of the game, having spent numerous sessions within this House, and

understanding why and going through stages of Bills, why it is persons on the other side still see it fit to even state that they would axe the tax when it comes to property tax, you know.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: “Umm.”

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: The reality is that, an entire holistic system has been proposed so that what our number one complaint is in our municipals needs to be addressed is given the power to not only collect the money, but also spend it within their local burgesses, hence not even placing pressure upon the spend of the central government. To actually, Mr. President, want to take away that system points towards the angle that they are coming with which is what they just told us we did, destroy and eradicate and disrupt a good service and a good system that is working.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: “Umm hmm.”

Sen. M. Y. Ibrahim: It is a counterproductive point. Trinidad and Tobago I believe I may not remember the exact figures, but we had I believe was it about \$90 million already being collected at the time of the reading of the budget, and that money will be kept by the burgesses to be utilized within their areas and regions.

Now, when we listen to the budget, or when it is the general population listens to the budget, they listen with a sense, somebody just said, of the culture of the past, of anticipation, of okay it is a big day, something big is going to happen, but what they do not realize and what they have to know is that, the theme of this budget statement was “Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity”.

Many comparisons, Mr. President, were made to 2010 to 2015 versus what is happening now and what is being spent now versus what was being spent then. We have to remember that when Sen. Lyder yesterday came forward and he made

some claims that, besides axing of the property tax, he was speaking about the analogy of saying that, all we could show is growth because where we are starting off from is zero. He stated that we reached to zero in 2020, and now what we are boasting of it is obvious and we do not need to boast about it or record it simply because it is an increase from a low point. But very, very, very early in the presentation of the budget the Minister of Finance stated, and it is clear to see, that the revenue in 2023 was \$6 billion more or 13 per cent more than 2019. We are not talking about 2020. We are talking about a 13 per cent increase over 2019.

May I remind everyone here what 2019 was. It was not just the year before COVID. It actually was the year where in our first—the last term, that was the actual year that it was pegged and all markers were in place for a budget that realized a surplus. 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 took a lot of re-engineering and reorganization of our economy to be able to achieve that. 2019 came and then COVID hit thereafter putting the country into a spiral. A boast was made yesterday as well that under the previous Administration that more money was deposited to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund that was done in our term, this term and the last term.

3.50 p.m.

But the reality is this, that contribution is not something that you decide to do if you have necessarily, but it is pegged on the revenue of oil and gas. So, if it is you have 2010 to 2015, oil and gas and the world economy in a very different state, and you have more robust sales, and you have higher prices, well, yes, it is bound by law to put in a certain percentage of those sales, which means that more will go into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. So to actually—

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. Dr. Yunus Ibrahim (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: Yes, yes, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was utilized within the years of 2020 and 2021.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: *[Inaudible]*

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: 2020 and 2021, to maintain the livelihood of the country and its citizens.

Hon. Senator: That is right.

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: In a year when revenue dropped as much as 35 per cent or by \$19 billion or \$13 billion, to be able to ensure stability, the continuous turning of the economy, and to keep the safety net there for our citizenry, that is when we took out from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

Sen. Mark: \$19 billion?

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: Sen. Lyder also weighed in on the VAT refunds. Well, it is clear that by 31st December this year, as stated, that small and medium businesses will be receiving a refund, and then after January next, they will be getting bonds in it. Bonds to clear off that debt. Mr. President, when you talk to the man on the street about the budget and what their expectations are of a Government, and what really are the burning issues to individuals, you will get many things. With people on the ground, from the small man on the East-West Corridor, to the businessman, have concerns, a wide array of concerns. Everyone has infrastructural needs which we are addressing, and the Minister of Works and Transport yesterday, and I am sure the Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport, will actually spend more time on that, will show how they are addressing the infrastructural needs and structure and network in this country.

The availability of US dollars is also a major concern for the turning of business, and human development, and more money and spending power within

the national community. These are the things that I picked up from speaking to people on a one on one basis. Mr. President, I am proud to be part of this Government.

Hon. Senator: Yeah, man.

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: Knowing very well that when we say it is a steadfast and resolute for greater—for generating pathways to prosperity, these things have been addressed in the national budget this year. When we say it is steadfast growth, we mean that it is a movement away from financial difficulty, it is a movement away from grappling and restructuring to the point now, that we are more stable to move on to the next stage.

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: People's National Movement.

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: And that is under a People's National Movement Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: The small man part, if you did—you would—Sen Nakhid. No, no, I will come to that.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: No, “I coming to that”. “I coming to that.”

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: No, no, it is part of my contribution, I will do it. I have to say it because you cannot deny—

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: The MP for Barataria/San Juan.

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: You cannot deny the modes that have been made within the economy to ensure that the citizenry does have that extra spend. Yes, they

have had periods and time where the international inflationary indices have been high, but that has been stabilized. When it is we take the allowance and we recognize that we have—the personal tax allowance has been expanded to \$90,000 per annum, whereby, there are now tax free—and giving person's money back in their hands to the tune of \$7,500 per household, when we take into consideration the several moves in the minimum wage, recognizing the diminishing power based upon inflationary issues that we face, that we went up to \$20.50 last year, and take into consideration what has been proposed, soon to be put in place with the \$22.50 per hour, where persons have now, \$500 to \$700 more within their remit for liquidity purposes per month.

That is what I was alluding to when speaking about the small man being placed under pressure for a period of time, and us now making policy to ensure with a controlled inflationary, with a low inflationary index, and a low inflation rate, which went to its lowest in the history of Trinidad and Tobago to 0.3 per cent in 2019, has now been the re-realized by July this year. It goes to show that this Government does listen and does understand the plight of those who say they are having a difficult time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: But to start off contributions stating that we are destabilizing, and we are funding deficits, I remember a few years back that we faced a scenario where all the economists were up in arms and there was a big discussion, upon “are we in a recession”? The answer to that was unless we had unstained growth, or negative growth for a period of three years, we say that we were in a recession. That did not happen and I am proud to be here, to state that the GDP has increased for the last three years, inclusive of this year, and it is

projected for future growth, as it applies to the availability of the US dollar, within the budget. The Finance Minister has also alluded to willingness to negotiate with the energy companies who trade in US dollars, to pay their taxes to us in US dollars. Downstream to that, we have energy deals on the horizon, which can only yield positive results when it comes to the foreign exchange issues that we face right now.

Mr. President, I not only support this budget, but I have seen over the last four years, first-hand, the growth and steps, step by step to be able to stand proudly and say that this People's National Movement Government has without a doubt, repaired, fixed, stabilized, and it has a vision for the future, for the wellbeing of Trinidad and Tobago as a whole.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Y. Ibrahim: I support this budget and all its implications to follow. Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Francis.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

4.00 p.m.

Sen. Helon Francis: Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you. Good afternoon, distinguished colleagues. It is truly a privilege to be here to present my critical analysis of the 2025 national budget, with the title, Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity. I would like to thank Almighty God for the opportunity to be here alive and well, and to be in this moment to give service to my country.

Like I previously said, the title is, Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity. In understanding the landscape, this budget comes at a time when

our nation faces significant economic challenges. I can see that it outlines various fiscal measures, social policies and strategic investments, aimed at transforming our country's economic and social landscape, which I applaud. But with all due respect, my job today must lead me to question how effective it would be and will achieve the desired outcome. My contribution today will touch on key aspects in relation to economic development, social progress, crime reduction and education, and all that is connected to them, starting with economic development.

This budget, in my humble opinion, acknowledges Trinidad and Tobago's continued reliance on our energy sector, which obviously accounts for a large portion of our revenue and foreign exchange. I could see that this year's real GDP growth was 1.9 per cent and reflects an improvement, which is good. When the hon. Minister of Finance said natural gas production will remain constrained until at least 2027, for me, that raised two critical questions, and these questions will be the substance of my contribution. Can we depend on a constrained and unstable energy sector to sustain both our short-term survival and long-term growth, and if not, why does the budget allocation towards the non-energy sector remain so small?

When looking at provisions related to economic development, the Government has laid out the plan to diversify the economy, while trying to balance the long shadow of the energy sector. However, in this energy sector there is a dim light, and in that dim light, we hear the murmurs; murmurs about driving commerce into our sectors. While you would often hear about the success in the manufacturing sector, I believe there are many other industries in which we have tremendous potential to extract export revenue.

But when looking at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and its PSIP budget

allocation of \$22.9 million, I cannot help but see it as token of support rather than meaningful fiscal incentives, which would be needed to attract investments or to build pathways. For me, as a calypsonian, of course, creative and cultural industries come to mind, a sector where support is always glorified, maybe patronized, but never commercialized. And let me say that again, a sector where support is always glorified, maybe patronized, but never commercialized. For example, in a move that was long overdue, we declared the steelpan as the national instrument this year, and in this year's budget presentation. the hon. Minister of Finance acknowledged that the United Nations declared August 11th as World Steelpan Day. However, where is the meaningful PSIP support for these following, sorry—meaningful PSIP support that follows these ceremonial accomplishments? Is it solely in the provision of a \$120 million building for Pan Trinbago? Is that the project's best position to push commercialization and sustainability? It is the same for me with tourism, agriculture and the positioning of renewable energy as an industry suited for business innovation, youth development and entrepreneurship, especially concerning the direction the world is going.

These industries are mentioned very loudly in words but very softly, to me, in figures. I see where provision on incentives were made to ignite trade in the non-energy sector, but in my opinion, it felt more of the same, or maybe same of the same. We heard about provisions and incentives with respect to special economic zones, or from my research, some could call it free zones. Same dog, just a new name. So, yes, it may be more robust perhaps, more allocations accommodating a wider range of industries in an enabling environment for foreign direct investment, but what assurance do we have in its success? Do not get me

wrong, I believe these are well-intentioned initiatives, so I cannot knock it, but at the same time, I am interested to know how well have these zones performed in the past, back in the free zones days? What were the problems identified? How were they fixed?

This query applies, not just for this incentive but for all. What was the uptake in the past? How many applications were made? How many were approved? What has been the value of these approvals in terms of Government revenue? And in turn, what has been the wider economic benefit, in terms of revenue generation, jobs, sustainability and new industry growth? What are the projected economic benefits for the implementation of these provisions in this budget? While the special economic zones and other fiscal incentives are a step in the right direction, the success of such initiatives depend on whether we can genuinely administer them and create an enabling environment for foreign direct investment. Because this year, I was a part of the delegation to visit Cuba, and they had huge economic zones and they looked very promising. But because of the embargo that they faced, their economic zones are suffering. Are we in the position to have successful zones, and if yes, what are the indicators that we are? Because at the end of the day, investors will need more than tax incentives. They will demand transparency, ease of doing business and policy consistency.

In a similar vein, as it relates to the consumer, I am also very wary of the opportunity for abuse, and this is for the people. I have noted that the hon. Minister of Finance proposed incentives in sport equipment via a removal of the duties and taxes, a move intended to lower prices for consumers and make such equipment cheaper to athletes and sporting institutions. However, many times, while these taxes and duties are removed, as with LED lights in the past, the price

to the consumer does not decrease, but instead the margin to the retailers increase, which is counterproductive for the nature in which this tax break was intended. How can we rectify this issue so that consumers and local athletes will benefit? And this is not just for this issue but for even the things that we try to initiate in the future.

Moving on to social development and public services. In terms of social development, I commend the Government's commitment to providing essential services, with notable allocations for health and education. These investments are much needed, particularly with the health care system, as it remains overburden and underfunded. On the housing front, however, I found the remarks around the Housing and Village Improvement Programme both commendable and worrisome at the same time. Whilst touted as the solution for low-income families, history has shown us that these volatile short-term conflicts in the price point between Government and contractors are always paid for in the long-term by the same low-income families, like everything in this country sometimes.

4.10 p.m.

Like everything in this country, sometimes the most vulnerable people get the short end of the stick and pay the price for poor quality craftsmanship, compromised structural integrity and subgrade infrastructure, which we should know by now is the blueprint for many of our ghettos today. So I urge the Minister to be careful, perhaps there are better ways. It may be better perhaps to teach a man to build a house rather than to give him a poorly built one. That is not about housing, that line. [*Laughter*]

Crime and public safety: One of the more pressing issues for the nation is crime, which continues to be a major challenge. The budget allocation of \$6.1

billion to national security, a sizeable figure aimed at addressing the rising crime rates. However, despite this allocation, there is a lack of clear detailed strategy on how this funding will effectively be used to combat the underlying causes of crime, such as unemployment, poverty and social inequality. This brings me back to my earlier comments on the provisions as it relates to trade and industry in the non-energy sector, at a sum of \$222.9 million for PSIP. This is less than 4 per cent of the overall allocation for national security and less than 0.5 per cent of the national budget for 2025, a drop in the bucket, as many of the learned Members of the House would know.

Trade and industry, to me, is the engine for economic growth, job creation, making an honest living. When there is a substantial investment in these areas, it fosters business development, entrepreneurship, diversification of economy. This leads to more jobs, higher incomes and eventually an improved standard of living. However, if we continue underinvesting in these sectors it can lead to higher levels of unemployment, illegal activity, particularly among young people. As a result, the same vulnerable population that you are building these lower income houses for could turn to illicit trade to survive, contributing to higher crime rates. And in that regard my recommendation would be to allocate more spending on trade and industry to save us billions on curbing crime tomorrow.

Moving on to education. As we can all appreciate, education is the foundation for our long-term development as a nation. And in this budget, I think the Government's allocation of \$7.5 billion towards education and training recognizes its pivotal role given the deteriorating performance of the nation's teenagers in the CSEC examinations, particularly, in basic subjects like math and English. One of the positive initiatives highlighted in the budget is the CSEC

remedial mathematics programme, which aims to improve the alarming low pass rates in mathematics. This is a critical skill for the modern workforce, and I am sure many of us have witnessed firsthand the practical deficiencies in the workforce when workers are unable to apply basic mathematical principles to their everyday work tasks.

In 2024, the pass rate for CSEC mathematics was only 42.1 per cent, a drop from previous years. I believe this strategic intervention is necessary. But the question remains whether it is enough to address the systemic issues within the education system, such as outdated curriculums, inadequate teacher training.

Furthermore, with respect to allocations related to education, I noted that the budget proposed a national digital literacy programme aimed at bridging the digital divide that exists, particularly, in the rural and underserved communities. In the rapidly evolving global economy that we now live in, this programme is a step in the right direction. However, the budget allocation is a meagre \$5 million.

Hon. Imbert: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. H. Francis: Given the scope of this challenge and the urgency of this implementation, it is worth questioning whether this amount is adequate to ensure real transformative digital literacy across the country. I believe that while the budget directly places emphasis on improving educational outcomes especially in mathematics, digital literacy, the allocation of the fund may fall well short of the transformative investment needed to build a competitive workforce.

In conclusion, I believe that the 2025 national budget sets ambitious goals in the narrative and presentation, but leaves critical gaps in definitive dollar allocations that needs to be addressed for lasting impact. While it acknowledges the need for economic diversification in sectors like culture, tourism and renewable

energy, they lack substantial investment that is required for growth—just my opinion. The Special Economic Zones offer potential but need clearer accountability and results. Improvements in health and housing are welcomed, but programmes like the Housing and Village Improvement Programme risk falling short without greater attention to quality and long-term sustainability. The heavy focus on national security without significant investment in economic opportunities like trade and industry may not effectively address the root cause of crime such as unemployment and social inequality.

Finally in education, while the emphasis on improving outcomes in mathematics and digital literacy is important, the funding allocation may not be enough to drive the kind of change need to build the competitive workforce. But this budget provides a foundation, but its success will depend on turning these proposals into actionable and well-supported initiatives and that, to me, is what we would need for the progress that we speak of. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein): Thank you very much, Mr. President, for giving me this opportunity to take part in this 2025 budget debate. I want to start off by saying a special thank you to the Minister of Finance and his staff for this present budget on the 10th year. Mr. President, in my view you need a strong person to be the Minister of Finance, and this Minister of Finance is one of the strongest persons we have in the Cabinet.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I hope the Minister of Finance just heard what I said.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Hon. Imbert: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I say you are the strongest person—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: “He now get the message.”

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. President, I would also like to thank from the bottom of my heart—I am working in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries with one of the best young persons and that is Minister Avinash Singh.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. President, he knows agriculture. I have been there two years and some months, I have learned a lot about him but the advantage I have on him is that he is learning from me also.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

4.20 p.m.

Mr. President, I would like to thank the hon. Prime Minister for giving me this opportunity to serve first as the first citizen of the City of San Fernando, one; the first servant in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and now in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries which I see as the most important Ministry in Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. President, in 2013, as I said I was the first servant in San Fernando, the Mayor, and I met a young man in Tobago who was going up for election. I think he was around 25 years, 26 years, and today I want to welcome him here in this honourable House, Sen. Ancil Dennis.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: He was one of the youngest persons fighting the

Tobago election at that time and I was pleased to meet him at that time, and I am also pleased that he is here in the Senate in his maiden speech this morning which— He is a future leader of this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. President, our allocation under the Consolidated Fund and the Infrastructure Development Fund in fiscal 2024 was \$951,573,400. This was utilized to enhance several strategic areas including one, improving infrastructure, in particular agricultural access roads; improving water management system in major food basket areas; improving service delivery; institutional strengthening; improving access to grants and incentives; improving land tenure; increase focus on youth and agriculture; encouraging the adoption of climate SWAT technology and innovation; improving all activities oriented towards enhancing food security and reducing the food import bill.

Mr. President, I want to take this opportunity to highlight some of the projects achieved in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for 2024. We have done a lot in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and this time that I have would not be sufficient. So my colleague, the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries—who I do not treat as the Minister in the Ministry, I treat him as a Minister with me. I give him all the opportunities and he is a very humble hardworking Minister. He will speak more where I left off.

Mr. President, the Food Security and Food Prices Committee established in 2024 brought together key stakeholders across various sectors to address the issue of the food rising prices, and to ensure that nutritious food remains accessible to all citizens. This committee, Mr. President, consists of 13 members of the public and they are experts in agriculture, economics, trade and consumer advocacy, has

already began meeting, analysing the root cause of high food prices in this country. The results of their ongoing work will be critical in guiding future policy interventions with the agricultural sector. Their findings will help us shape targeted strategies to stabilize food prices, increase local production and reduce our dependency on imports ensuring that we respond effectively to both domestic challenges and global market pressures. Mr. President, this is just one of many ways in which we have been leading progressive conversations with key agricultural partners to ensure that food security becomes a reality.

Mr. President, the Agricultural Finance Support Programme or Agro-Incentive Grant as we call it, stand as a testament to this PNM Administration's unwavering commitment to empowering farmers promoting sustainable agricultural practice. Since this inception in 2019, the Ministry has disbursed more than \$27 million—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—with over 300 small and medium-sized farmers. This strategic financial support has played a pivotal role in driving increased food local production directly contributing to our national food security goals.

During fiscal 2024, we executed three distributions, assisting over 100 farmers with a combined value exceeding \$11 million. Furthermore, just within the last week we received another 116 cheques at a value of over \$11 million for distribution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. President, this PNM Administration continues to demonstrate that it is not just talking and supporting farmers, but actually we are supporting the farmers. Mr. President, at the Ministry we provide a suite of—we

have 92 incentive programmes through the agricultural incentive programme: fisheries incentive programme, forestry incentive programme to support the development.

Mr. President, we have over, as I said, 92 programmes, and I want to just name a few. As a registered farmer you have vehicles. They come purchased with subsidy from \$15,000 to \$200,000 based on the type of vehicle: wheel tractors, pick-ups, lightweight vehicles, trucks, all-terrain vehicles. We also have a rebate of 20 per cent of the purchased price to 50 per cent of purchased prices allow to depend on this type of vehicle. Installation and refrigeration is a subsidy from \$6,000 to \$30,000 based on the type of vehicle, pick up, light hybrid vehicle, et cetera. There is also a rebate of 25 per cent of the purchased price.

Mr. President, we also have machinery and equipment as another subsidy. Subsidy from \$4,000 to \$50,000 depending on the type of equipment, Schuler, et cetera. Mr. President, 50 per cent of a purchased price is allowed. We have another subsidy for water and agriculture, a subsidy from \$20,000 to \$40,000 depending on the nature of its type, whether it is ponds, wells or dams, water pumps, irrigation. Mr. President, 75 per cent to 25 per cent of the course is allowed depending on the nature of its use. Mr. President, we also have livestock, a subsidy from \$50,000 for milking system; another subsidy from \$15,000 to \$150,000 for infrastructure depending on his cattle, goat, sheep, poultry, et cetera; and as a subsidy of \$10,000 for waste management.

Mr. President, with all these here we have fisheries, we have fuel subsidy for fisheries depending on the type of fuel. They use gasoline, diesel, et cetera. We have fisheries equipment subsidy from \$7,000 to \$30,000. We have the youth and agriculture subsidy, which is \$30,000, 50 per cent of the production course. We

have security incentive also, \$30,000 to \$25,000 depending on fencing, praedial larceny, et cetera. These are some of the incentives that we have available.

Mr. President, you will be surprised to know the amount of people getting into agriculture, the amount of young people getting into agriculture, and the Ministry has a lot to offer. Since I got there into the Ministry, I make sure that the public knows about these incentives and they are actually reaching out to apply for these incentives.

4.30 p.m.

Mr. President, we also have through the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO), which is a very important part of the Ministry of Agriculture. This is where the farmers come out and sell their produce directly to the public. We have nine of these farmer markets throughout the country, Macoya, Couva, Diego Martin, Chaguanas, Point Fortin, La Horquetta, San Fernando and Arima. We have four wholesale markets, Norris Deonarine Market, Northern Wholesale Market, Orange Valley—they have a couple of these markets and what I want to say to the public is, by the time these farmers get there about six o'clock in the morning, by 7.00, half past 7.00, eight o'clock, everything is sold out.

I have been to these markets and I encourage the people of this country to eat properly, fresh fruits and vegetables because as I said in the other place, inside this body, there is no PVC pipe or metal where food could just go down. This is tissue in here so you need to treat your body properly. Do not eat things that take long to digest—and I realized this since I went into the Ministry, eh. I take this thing seriously since “I gone” to the Ministry. Before I was eating any and anything. Now, I am particular about what I eat—fresh fruits and vegetables. I

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein (cont'd)

2024.10.22

want all my colleagues to follow me and to eat healthy and eat properly.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yes, eat properly. I want to thank my colleague the Minister of Digital Transformation for coming to the Ministry and offering his services to ensure that we have a farmer registration data management system.

Hon. Senators: Yes—[*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: With this, we have been waiting for this for years. You know they had the long-time process where you had to sign up and—Minister of Finance I see you are shaking, you could be a farmer too, you know.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: You will get the incentives and so on. It is so easy now, you come into the Ministry and everything is digitized. You just come in there with your proper registration and so on and you will get your farmers identification card and you could apply, you could go to the ADB, you want your loans, and so on. So I want to thank Sen. Bacchus for coming to the Ministry and ensuring that we have this—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yeah. It is very simple. Mr, President, I must say, I have to thank the Permanent Secretary and the staff at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for being people-friendly—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—because I do not know how much of you all know me, but when you come into the Ministry, you must treat people like people. Do not treat them like you are better than them because all of us are here for a short

space of time. Whether it is inside this House or you are a doctor like my friend over there or the best Minister of Finance, we are all here temporarily.

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

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: All of these are temporary positions. So with that being said, I want to touch on a very important subject, which is praedial larceny. This has plagued the farming community for years and years and years. Mr. President, I want to say praedial larceny has really been a real major challenge in this country. I do not know why—somebody would buy a goat, or sheep, or a cow, you would plant your rice, your bananas, your tomatoes and somebody just wants to come and claim it and say, “that is mine, I taking it from you”. That is wrong. That is wrong. You should not be stealing produce from people who take—farmers work very hard. Fishermen work very hard. When they get up in the morning at three o’clock to go and sell, we are home sleeping. So this is a wrong thing that is happening and since we went across to the Ministry, I want to say that they had a complement of 34 officers in 2022, and we have now 100 officers strong.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. President, also we just got four new vehicles and the fleet has risen from six to 10. I said something in the other place there and I want to say it here, because we have to treat vehicles like they belong to us when we drive them. You just do not drive it and ill-treat it all how. One of these brand-new vehicles, an officer put on his blue lights and siren and decided to break the traffic light. I do not know where he was going and so on, and that was wrong. He “write-off” the vehicle—brand-new vehicle and action was taken at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, where he was dismissed and legal action was

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein (cont'd)

2024.10.22

taken for him to pay for the vehicle.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: So there should be no abuse of blue lights and sirens.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yes, public property, especially the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. We are taking a dim view—and you want to put on blue lights and sirens and go through these areas. We are not tolerating that. Mr. President, they work very hard, these praedial larceny officers. From October 2023 to 2024, they did 2,338 patrols, 27,900 visits to farms and 2,863 farmer interactions, 156 visits to markets and these are not just figures coming out of my head. These are actual figures, data from the Praedial Larceny Squad. In the upcoming fiscal 2025, the Ministry remains committed to enhancing the operational effectiveness of the Praedial Larceny Squad.

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: I would just like to Minister—

Mr. President: Minister, Point of Order.

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: No, it is not a Point of Order. I just want to ask a question. In terms of the visits made by the praedial larceny officers, I am just wondering is it that they do like high—in other words, you have areas which are considered high prevalence areas for praedial larceny because I am not sure how you are covering all of Trinidad. I am just trying to understand because I think it is almost an impossible task that officers are going to patrol and as soon as they are gone somebody comes and steals then. I am sure how it is going. I am just asking.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Okay, well thank you, Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy. They really actually make these visits. From the time they get a call—we have a site called the Praedial Larceny Squad site on social media where we take complaints

and we do visits. They are out there now in full force. If you just go and log into that page, you will see the actual work that they are doing. They reach out to the farming community, the farming community reaches out to them now. I do not know if before it may have happened in such a big way but it happening in a big way now so.

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: [*Inaudible*] They intercept—

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yes, they did imprisonment and convictions and so on, you know. They did plenty of work and you see—and it is a good point you made. It is just that I was speaking before. Why do we have to have these praedial police policing these people or the praedial larceny?

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: [*Inaudible*]—lack thereof.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: “Why yuh cah leave de people goat and sheep and pumpkin, yuh know? Why yuh have to go and steal these things, yuh know?”

Hon. Senator: “Yuh get ah whole pumpkin house.”

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: A pumpkin house.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]—Tobago.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. President, I want to commend the praedial larceny officers for the good job that they are doing. They are trying hard.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: They will have the support of the entire Ministry. I want to compliment all of them. Mr. President, we have been working very closely with Minister Foster Cummings in the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service and we have recognized that not just our small island of Trinidad and Tobago but across the region even globally—I just want to stop—and as my friend, Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy just said something to me there.

4.40 p.m.

In these incentive grants, a lot of people from Tobago come and receive these grants, \$100,000, \$50,000, so it is not a Trinidad thing alone, it is a national incentive. So you could send your people across to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—I will really be happy to—

Sen. Mitchell: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yeah. So that is why we are involving the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service now, because the agricultural sector has an aging population, which presents a significant challenge for the continuity of this sector. As a result, there is a suite of programmes formulated for young people of our country between the ages of 35, and some of those programmes are: The Shade House and the Agricultural Homestead Programme, and these are just two. However, I am certain my colleague, the Minister of Youth Development and National Service, the hon. Foster Cummings, will deliver further into this segment during this 2025 budget.

Mr. President, all of this is to emphasize the seriousness of agriculture and the importance placed by this Government to ensure that there is continuity and progress across the industry. Food and nutrition security remains a crucial part of our mandate, aimed at lowering the food prices. We have a lot to say.

Mr. President, I did something recently—I tried it and it worked—in the office that I have temporarily in Chaguanas, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. I got some boxes and we planted some tomatoes and “baigan” and kale, chive—

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Sen. Mitchell: What?

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yes. I get up and I water them when I come to the office. And do you know—I mean, I cannot take out the picture and show them—the tomatoes “in ah little box”, there are about 40 tomatoes, green ones.

Hon. Senators: *[Interruption]*

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Well, “I like tomato choka”, so I want to carry something here.

Hon. Senators: *[Laughter]*

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: It is growing. It is growing. And if you see “baigan”, big.

Hon. Senator: *[Inaudible]*

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Divali is coming, I will get some of the “baigan” to you, Senator. The chive is growing in boxes. So there is no excuse for really not planting. We all should plant something, you know. Get something and plant it. Everybody wants to get something and wave, get something and plant. Yeah.

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

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yeah. I hope the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts gets that into the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. Get something and plant, we should all plant. Minister Singh is a farmer, sweet potato and pumpkin and so on. I am not a farmer and I just planted this, and in less than—Minister, less than three weeks?

Sen. Singh: Three weeks.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: In three weeks, we could pick the tomatoes.

Sen. Mitchell: Green thumb.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yeah. I am not just making up this to impress

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein (cont'd)

anybody, you know, this is a fact. And I noticed that a lot of children in the schools now, they are doing this same something, hydroponics and so on, and it grows.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: Yeah, it is part of the curriculum.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yes, yes, yes. It happened under the PNM, eh. **Hon.**

Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Oh, I see my colleague reached back in. Sen. Dennis, I just gave them a little introduction about how I met you when you were 25 years.

Sen. Dennis: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yes, but we will talk about that soon.

Mr. President, I really want to say, we had a Trinidad and Tobago Agri-Expo, the second one we had for 2024, and this was a real success.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: A remarkable success. This was not “no show business, eh”, this was something that involved a lot of people, young people, people starting to get involved in agriculture. They saw a lot of things that are happening, where they could invest in, the ADB bank, so much. Over 70,000 people passed through there from Friday evening to Sunday, and the people did not even want to go home. So it was in Port of Spain.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: How many people?

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Close to 70,000.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Wow.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yeah, because we have a record—and “dais who pass through de front gate, eh”, it had the back gate. “Yuh know everybody does storm, right?” But it was free so—so this year—well, the next agri-expo, we want to have

it in San Fernando, south, because we had it twice. We could not have it this year in south because we had the cricket in the Brian Lara and some other things that were happening. So the agri-expo will take place in south.

A major highlight of the expo was the business-to-business, B2B Segment, which facilitated 61 meetings between 17 buyers and 42 suppliers. One buyer, recognizing the breadth of opportunities available, requested additional meetings. Another highlight was the livestock area, where we had prizes and so on. People came out with their big sheep and their goats and their cattle and so on, and it was really something remarkable. All the children there were really happy. They came out and they were so happy. We walked through there.

So we have some plans, Mr. President, for 2025. And in fiscal 2025, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will continue on the path of strengthening the agricultural sector and will seek to sustain increased food production, to do this with intent of, one, reducing our food import bill through increased local production and import substitution. This is something so important.

Sen. Dr. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I am coming down to that. You know, I will go to the supermarket and sometimes and so on, but listening to people—in agriculture, you have to listen. But anyway, God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason. You listen more and you talk less. And I hear people talking about, when you go to the supermarket and you are seeing this frozen chicken, and sometimes it there for weeks and months, and you are leaving the fresh chicken like Arawak—I mean, because the chicken is bigger, “yuh buying it”, but it is frozen chicken, it is not healthy, right? It is not healthy and “nobody cyah vex with me for saying

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein (cont'd)

something”. Go and buy local chicken.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: It might be smaller, but it will be better for your health. Right? Because nobody wants to die, everybody wants to live a little longer, so you have to eat healthy. And Dr. Gopeesingh, you will agree with me. We will not agree on certain things, but you will agree with me, you have to eat healthy. Right?

Sen. Mitchell: “He is ah gynaecologist, yuh know”.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Enhancing our food security, contributing to the diversification of the economy, creating sustainable employment and earnings in the agri sector.

As I spoke about the frozen chicken also, I want to put the public on notice, be careful how you are buying these imported animals that are coming through the western peninsular. When they are down there, you do not what diseases they are coming through with. Be careful. We have the praedial larceny and we have the other forces, the coast guard and so on down there, so we have to be careful not to buy these animals. Buy it from the local farmers. Right? “I does go and buy goat. I from south, San Fernando, I does go down Tarouba Road and buy my goat right.”,

Sen. Mitchell: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yeah. “Yuh getting fresh goat.”

4.50 p.m.

These farmers take care of their animals. Why are you going to buy those things down there and get sick because “yuh gettin ” it cheaper? They have a

reason for it, be careful of these things that you all are buying that are coming through that western peninsula. In 2025, priority focus will be on a number of areas, including strengthening agriculture and infrastructure, commodity and value chain development, youth development, credit and financing for agricultural development, enhanced PPP, livestock development, farmer training and community outreach, managing risks, and a whole infrastructure, as I say, with management construction and rehabilitation. There is so much that we have to offer. Mr. President, I want to close off here now and give my colleague the opportunity, when he speaks. This is my last budget contribution, and I “doh” want you all to jump the gun, I am talking about before the general election.

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

Sen The Hon. K. Hosein: But I really enjoy serving the people of this country. Wherever I work, wherever I go because I started off—I mean, people do not know me really. They are seeing me now, but I was born in the ghetto. I was born between seven steel bands in San Fernando. Minister Mitchell, you will know, you are the Minister of Tourism, Culture, and the Arts.

Sen. Mitchell: Correct, correct.

Sen The Hon. K. Hosein: And I grew up very humble, and I remained that way because if we have to serve, we have to listen to serve the people that put us into office.

Sen. Mitchell: Yes. PNM standard.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. K. Hosein: I want to close off by thanking all of my colleagues. I have more friends than enemies. And the people who “doh” like me, it might just be because of envy because I have nothing against anybody in life. I will continue

to work for the citizens of this country until I am ready to meet my maker, which could be anytime. We are here for a short while, and this is a temporary office. So, Mr. President, with these few words, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity. I am not supposed to say this, but I think “yuh might give meh de opportunity”, I enjoy working with you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon Senator: You cannot bring the President into it—

Sen The Hon. K. Hosein: I know I cannot bring the President into it, but I just looked up and say I enjoy working here. So, thank you, and may God continue to bless all of us with good health and a long life. Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport.

Hon. Senators: Desk thumping

Minster in the Ministry of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Richie Sookhai): Mr. President. Once more, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute today to this Bill, the Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024, which was ably themed, “Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity.” Mr. President, I want to start off with firstly thanking the Minister of Finance and his team, as well as the Minister of Planning and Development and her team, for being able to produce such a meaningful, frugal, and precise budget—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:—that will cater for what our country is experiencing and how we can steer our way forward for a prosperous Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. President, the Minister of Finance’s shoulders have to be truly broad because balancing our economy is definitely an act that he has to understand, not only what

is going on locally, but also understand the effects of geo-politics on geo-economics. The Minister of Finance, rightfully, you know, stated, I know it is quite an interesting analogy “where you have wars all over, and you will expect certain fluctuations in prices.” However, stating with the impending US elections and the way that they manage their economy, it then sort of answers the question as to why our prices are where they are for today.

I remember going to school when I was in the States doing my studies, and as students, we lived on a budget. One of the things that I always looked at was the gas prices. At that time in particular, I looked at the cheapest gas option, which was less than a dollar per gallon compared to what it was today, which is almost 15-plus years ago. And every time you have higher prices, you have an increase to where the gas prices in the United States are what they are today.

So, this, in itself, with global pressures, with energy reserves being where they are, with revenues being where they are, we understand how important it is for us as a Government, as a reasonable, sober, and sound Government, to be able to manage our economy and produce as such. You know, Mr. President, we should be mindful. I would also like to thank the hon. Prime Minister and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries for their initiatives at times when negotiations for gas prices, at the very early stages, were at almost a standstill, and they had to then bring interventions to bring all the players back to the table.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: Had they not done that, Mr. President, I think we would have been in a worse position today. Because they were able to negotiate prices—I mean, the agencies were now able to come back to the table and have the conversation for better prices.

While I am on that, I want to thank my hon. line Minister, Minister Rohan Sinanan for his guidance and the confidence he has placed in me amongst certain agencies within the Ministry of Works and Transport. You see, he has not only been a guiding factor when it comes to the Ministry, and the public life, but also amongst the political atmosphere and what I deal with. You see, coming from the private sector, into the public sector, actually being even an advocate for the Chamber of Commerce, it is very easy to speak on the outside. It is very easy to come up with these grand plans and talk about grandeur, and you want to do this. But when you are actually getting into it—and I have the fortunate opportunity to understand both sides of the coin—it is not as easy as everyone thinks it is.

Some of the suggestions I may have made as chamber president, I look back now, and I was quite gullible to think, when you actually see what the reality is. So, Mr. President, it is not an easy task in managing a country like ours. It is not easy, especially when you have criticism appearing on all sides, especially from the Opposition, and you see it plastered all over.

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Only obstruction.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: You know, when you listen, sometimes, you know, your social media feeds, you have misinformation, you have scare tactics, you have where they are basically spewing venom in the society. And you know what? The only scare I see is—as soon as I see the face I does get scared one time, the face and a voice I does just go like “oh gosh,” I have to move that. Because that is their scare tactic. It is not about the information they are giving, it is the mere fact of just their presence.

So, when you look now at some of the scare tactics, they speak about the Revenue Authority coming into our country, and then what? The information of

our people will be out there. I wonder what was the scare tactic was when they were looking at Cambridge Analytica?

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Aaahhh.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: You know, I mean, it is a conversation to have. It is a conversation to ask—

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Remind them, remind them.

Sen. Gopeesingh: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: And hon. Senator, I have full respect for you, but it is the truth. When you look at what they speak about, when you hear the hon. Senator “keep on” talking about 6,000 businesses, 6000 businesses, close down. I could tell you flat, we have more than 6,000 projects doing right now under the Ministry of Works and Transport.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: So if you want to say 6,000; 6,000 projects that we are doing now at the Ministry of Works and Transport.

5.00 p.m.

And again, they continue to spew misinformation to the public. When we talk about climate change and the effects of climate change, it is real, you see it. Sen. Sunity Maharaj stated in her contribution and we see it on a daily basis. Dealing with an infrastructure that we have here in Trinidad and Tobago, an ageing infrastructure, a population that is growing exponentially where roads were once dirt tracks, tasca roads, unpaved, without the proper infrastructure. And now you have ten-wheelers passing you up and down, and then you know what, at the end of the day, protest outside the Ministry of Works and Transport, burn tyres in the streets, “alyuh eh doin alyuh job.” There is only so much that the Ministry can do

with limited resources because it is not Internet. Mr. President, as we are talking on the topic of climate change, you know, I just want to touch on this because when I have been walking around my constituency of Chaguanas East—I will say my constituency.

Sen. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: “Ah-ya-yie, ah-ya-yie.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: We recently did a clean-up campaign through there and it had me thinking, you know, on a national basis. What sort of capacity of garbage do we collect and not tonnage capacity, I mean volume. Because really, volume is what it takes when you are clogging these arteries and drains. And I asked the Drainage Division to give me a rough estimate, a calculation per se. So when we looked at the entire projects like from ‘21 to ‘22—and I am not discounting the other areas because it is affecting the whole of Trinidad and Tobago. I just took a sample size and we more looked between north and central. And again, not discriminating against the rest of the country, but north and central are more or less the biggest contributors out of the drainage during the desilting programme. While desilting we take a large capacity of garbage out. On an average of 80 cubic metres per day, given the length or duration time of the project and the type of desilting that we are doing, you get— From 2021 to 2022 we have an average of 70,000 to over 10,000 cubic metres of garbage. This is space you are talking about.

Let me quantify that for the people to understand better, that is from 4,000 to 6,600 truckloads of garbage. That is 2021, if you look at 2022 to 2023 it actually increased, 7,000 to almost 22,000 truckloads of garbage that are within our water courses and that we, as citizens could help prevent. Because, once again this is a

frugal Government, we are not looking at wastage but to be to manage with what we are given and how we handle it. We have a desilting programme for the Diego Martin River and so far I can tell you we have moved over 40,000 cubic metres of material. Out of that, you have almost 13,300 cubic metres which equates then to about over 830 truckloads coming out from that one river mouth during the desilting programme.

And, you know, it led me to think you know, we need at the Ministry commissioned by the Minister, a national drainage plan. And what do we mean by a national drainage plan because we need to have of the way forward, it cannot be willy-nilly. It cannot be done just haphazardly, it has to be done structurally, it has to be done with an understanding of where Trinidad and Tobago will be in the future, understanding climate change, understanding variation in weather patterns, understanding how the building codes are, and how buildings are developed, and certain areas are developed. That is why when we had the consultation all stakeholders from the different agencies were a part of it to create that document, that policy document, that will then eventually become a work plan, a work schedule plan, and it would be a work schedule plan that this country could use for the next couple years until we revisit once more.

And then I started to think, the area of Chaguanas East, Enterprise, Crown Trace, they had been suffering for years from flooding and a drainage problem. And when you think about it, well, the Ministry of Works and Transport, we deal with the major river courses and byways and all the other arteries that flow to them, the major ones. However, some of these communities, like many others in Trinidad and Tobago, I am pretty sure, that are suffering from severe flooding need to now create a drainage plan. Because what I have seen is drains that are run

maybe a metre, and then during an election time for whoever what and then it stopped, nothing for years on end. I can tell you the last time that that constituency saw any meaningful development was when a PNM candidate was there and that was over 15 years ago.

So as a people, we should decide on who, when, and where we put our votes if we want changes. I mean meaningful changes because now we understand that we need to create plans to be able to come out. It cannot be the same old, same old, because the capacity of water or rain that comes down within a short period of time is a lot larger and all these things are due to the effects of climate change. And that is why maybe it could be something that we look at, open up the conversation as to have regional drainage and road agencies reaching out so that they could now look at these fallout drains, and side roads that are not even marked or earmarked anywhere. I walked the constituency and you have some roads that even are popping up from all over, and they will complain. At the end of the day, it would not fall under our schedule at the Ministry of Works and Transport, but then who is looking on? Maybe it is a conversation we need to have going forward because we cannot be like this. The citizens, they deserve and they demand more and as a Government, a responsible Government we will look at developing plans to be able to assist in the future.

Mr. President, I am tasked with talking about transportation. And transportation in Trinidad and Tobago, we could either look at how—you know look at two folds. And we are in the process of developing a national transportation policy, and how we are now going to do it. The last one done—as the hon. Minister stated before—was in 1967. But what would this policy create, what would this policy bring? It will bring changes that are sustainable, and

certain initiatives that will help our country. You know, I saw an article recently where people, you know, they were saying the Ministers, we like we float on air or something, we do not be in traffic. I can remember going to visit a site with Minister Sinanan and both of us, both Ministers of Works and Transport stuck in traffic.

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: *[Laughs]*.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: For almost an hour and a half we were stuck there right, and everybody passed, and guess what? We were right there together. We stayed in the traffic, we chitchatted, I got to learn more about him.

Hon. Senators: *[Laughter]*

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: Fantastic man, and also he could sing.

Hon. Senators: *[Laughter]*

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: He singing. *[Laughs]*

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: But I will tell you, Mr. President, it is not that we are immune from the problems of everyday society—

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Exactly.

Sen. Bacchus: Correct.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:—we face it ourselves, we are not lucky you know, like the other side that had the blue lights flashing up and down, right? I will tell you that.

Sen. Bacchus: Helicopter.

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Helicopters.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: And helicopters, that is a different story, we will not do that. Anyways, whenever it comes to that we understand, and that is why to do meaningful changes we have already implemented—Minister Sinanan spoke about

it about some other plans that we had which is like the O'Meara interchange, we have the Curepe interchange was done, the highway to Point Fortin and then the other projects. In the central region, we understand. Again, every day I traverse from Port of Spain back to Chaguanas, and I can tell you, I understand how bad the traffic is.

5.10 p.m.

But at the same time too, we have plans as we are rolling out. One, the widening, and I can tell you the widening is not really the issue, because when you look at it, we have made the provision of these by-lanes, what is now the side lane that they use, or the lay by-lane, you can use it to go and flow. Sometimes it might be even what we call this colloquially, "maco-traffic". Right?

We have looked at the traffic management and the way that we are looking. You can never totally eliminate traffic, neither could you—we build infrastructure to cater for our expanding fleets as we go forward. But we have to have, once again, a sustainable plan and a way forward.

So when you come to that—before I move even further into it, I would like to touch basically on the traffic wardens. Recently, my hon. colleague from the Maraval area called. She wanted some wardens. She understood that wardens were positioned. Sen. Dr. Ibrahim would even attest to it, the wardens were positioned in Maraval. They were not there for a week or two weeks or so. She called me immediately. Where are they? Down in Chaguanas. We understood that there is a conflicting turn that takes place at the Medford Gas Station. They have seen traffic wardens there. The Nagar is coming up soon. We had conversations with the Divali Nagar. I was present there, along with the Chief Traffic Warden, Mr. Neville Sankar, to be able to help filter traffic. And that is

why the population, when they pass and they see wardens doing their work, be respectful because they are disrespectful to the wardens.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: They are not there to make your life hard. We are just trying to filter backlogs and traffic with the limited resources we have, until we can roll out a plan for the infrastructure that is needed to alleviate as such.

So, Mr. President, in the Ministry of Works and Transport, all these things cannot be done without the use of proper equipment and heavy equipment. And that is why I would like to take this time to recognize the Minister of Youth Development and National Service for some of the programmes he has created. The HOIST Programme, the Heavy Equipment Programme, these other programmes to give incentives to young individuals to learn. The HOIST Programme, operating heavy cranes, operating a forklift. I grew up in that industry. I know how to operate a forklift. I know how to operate a crane, as a matter of fact.

Understanding the center of gravity and how you lift is very important. And that is why it is not just by jumping behind the driver's seat. Sen. Avinash Singh, you have your tractor. You must know that there are certain terrains that you can go on and you cannot go on. And that is understandable. We understand this. And that is why we put certain initiatives in place for the young individuals. And these are young individuals who will be taken into construction projects when we have it at the Ministry of Works and Transport. They will be consumed and absorbed into the construction sector when we evolve and we have things going forward, doing development in the communities and the nation as a whole.

So, Mr. President, when you look at transportation, the Ministry of Works

and Transport is responsible for transportation, both air, sea, and land. Let us look at air. Mr. President, upgrades to our airport terminal have been ongoing and we are currently working and expanding the opportunities of improving our airlifts. On November 24, 2023, Trinidad and Tobago signed an agreement with the Kingdom of the Netherlands focusing on Curaçao strengthening ties with the region. On May 23, 2024, we expanded our horizons signing an air service agreement with the state of Qatar establishing a vital link with the Middle East through Doha.

And most recently, on September 27, 2024, we entered into an agreement with the United Arab Emirates paving our way for increased connectivity with that thriving hub in Dubai. Additionally, in September, there was an agreement with the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the text of the SAS, and our delegation have engaged discussions to once more commence signing of such airlifts. Such initiatives done through the Ministry of Works and Transport, and I could go on to many other countries that we already started discussions with on various degrees, such as South Africa, China, Colombia, Chile, Dominican Republic, Panama, Peru, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and it goes on down to Rwanda, Singapore, Kuwait, and France. Such air service agreements bring the opportunity of more airlifts to our shores, passengers through our country, and it allows for economic development, it allows for connectivity, it allows for trade and it allows us to grow and the opportunities to expand as a country.

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts who is here exporting his products. While we are known through Carnival throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago, the sweet sounds of pan originated from here, and this is our way in helping us to drive that initiative forward so that the world can

understand Trinidad and Tobago is the birthplace of pan.

In August 2024, the Airports Authority actually hosted the CAPA Summit. It was a summit for the airlines from both the Caribbean and Latin American region, which has been successful and has already started bearing fruits by certain arrangements or proposed signing arrangements going forward. So, Mr. President, as you can see, the airlift services are more or less taken care of by the Ministry of Works and Transport and improving on a daily basis. And so far, we know that the airport at Piarco has won accolades over and over, and I believe on the completion of the Tobago airport, they may start to win the accolades now, and Piarco may have to start a step up their game.

Mr. President, let us look at sea, and we will look at the sea bridge when I am talking about such things as the water taxi service and inter-island service. The water taxi service, once more, as you know, we have the *Calypso Sprinter*, the *Paria Bullet*, and the *Trini Flash*. Participation in these services is almost 99 per cent annually, and the demand for such services is growing, because people see it as an alternate and safe, reliable method to move from one part of the country to the next.

At the Ministry of Works and Transport, through the Ministry of Digital Transformation, we are looking to actually have our passengers pre-registered before, so that the boarding will be even faster. You will have now the purchase of online tickets and also be able to have a central look, well, actually detect. You see, one thing we are looking to do is even show trackability of arrival times, so it could be on time.

Now, it is quite interesting when I say this, because if you have ever traversed on the water taxi service, you will understand that sometimes the knots or

speeds that they go at could be improved, depending on the water condition. Depending on the water condition, another thing is also the garbage that they see, because sometimes, if during that traversing from south to north and vice versa, there is garbage, the jets tend to be clogged and then when that happens they do the reverse cycle and that is what takes place usually most of the time. It will cause delays or even sometimes, if it is too many, cancellations. So having the travelling population being more knowledgeable as to what is happening with the service in a meaningful and timely manner, the Ministry of Works and Transport will hope that this could help the travelling population ease any sort of burden and pressures and make reasonable decisions on where or how they would like to commute. So that will touch on sea.

Let us come to land. When we look at land transportation and how the transportation in Trinidad and Tobago service has developed, land transportation that is, from the days of horse-drawn carriages to cattle and carts pulling sugar cane through the fields, we evolved the first train line. We went to trains, and the first train line actually ran from San Fernando into Princes Town. That was transporting sugar cane. It then evolved to transport passengers, and that is how we had the train line running the length and breadth. At that time, when cars became available or different buses, the service became available, people started to use their cars, and then the service then became maybe not as economical to run as before.

5.20 p.m.

Then was the creation of the PTSC. Our bus company was created from the origins of that. And as they celebrate a hundred years of existence at that South Quay building—

Sen. Bacchus: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:—you know, it proves to be a testament of a past that we had, and a trajectory as we go forward.

Mr. President, as the Minister in charge of PTSC, I do understand the concerns of our travelling population, especially those who use the bus service. And why I say this? As Minister, I regularly walk these terminals to have an idea of what our commuting public, especially those who use this service, undergo, what pressures they may feel, bus delays, shutdowns, the unavailability of the routes and not having correct information to make sound judgement. Right? And that is why, at PTSC, the transformation is coming. It is not about just buying buses and putting them into the fleet. We have studied and we understand exactly some of the problems that they have in buying a bus with mixed manufacturers, and what challenges come from it, especially when it comes to parts and logistics when choosing. We would then have the rollout of the first trench, hopefully, by next year of the first 100 buses—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:—and when that rolls out, we should start looking at a standardized fleet.

Sen. Hislop: Yes. Very good.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: But in doing that also, we pay attention to what is currently happening in the service management side. We understand that PTSC has the capacity—it does have the capacity to perform the service. I will say that our men and women there in the service department do put their hearts and souls in. However, I understand their challenges, in terms of sourcing certain parts, having to make things work. I work with them on a weekly basis, trying to

understand how we could get more buses out. Sometimes we are literally trying to milk everything out of these buses, but you know what? They work with me. They work, so we can try our best to provide for the travelling population—

Sen. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Beautiful.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai:—until we know—but during that time, we are putting structures in place for improving—so when you have a bus run out in the morning, you go to the first line, what we understood and what we realized was that some of the first-line checks are not as comprehensive as they should be, and we have improved the first-line checks. So when they go out on the roads, we would not have this, “Aye, the bus shut down five minutes after, eh.” We understand, and that is why it is a work in progress, that we continue to work with this entity, this agency, to be able to provide that service.

We look at the engineering aspect to it, and we ensure that the engineering is equipped. This is where, now you have a relationship between VMCOTT and PTSC. And you know, it is strategic, because if you know where PTSC is, this is in Port of Spain, South Quay, when you drive a couple of metres down, you see VMCOTT. They share almost the same space. They have the same sort of technology, in terms of the manpower, the knowledge, shared services, and with a marriage and an arrangement as such, we are looking to provide improved services to the buses. I will get more into VMCOTT, because that will be the last part of my wrapping up, but I understand now, I just want to focus on PTSC and how it will rollout, and that is just Port of Spain.

In San Fernando, we also have where the OAS compound—the OAS compound is where the bus service is located there for right now, and VMCOTT is

not too far away from there. In Tobago, they have it even nicer, because they are in the same yard. Right? And you know what? We have not forgotten Tobago in all of us this, because as Minister, visiting Tobago, I understand that some of these buses cannot go up some of these smaller roads. The terrains are impossible to pass, and that is why we need to have better communication with our travelling population—right?—to be able to handle and to cater for the needs of our people of Tobago.

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Correct.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: As Minister, I take pride in going to ensure that some of these projects come to fruition, that the travelling population could have at least an ease, because when you look at the travelling population, it is not just the elderly, it is not just the younger folks, it is working men and women who use these services every day. And because of inefficiencies and hardships, they sometimes miss their appointments, and we know, as a Government, we need to advance and step up, and that is what we are doing.

To further improve communication with the public, the PTSC, Public Transportation Service Corporation, will be rolling out, with the assistance of the digital transformation, a national operating centre. This is a first, this has never been done. Right? It is done by this regime. The national operating centre, in the next coming weeks, the population will get to understand a little bit more of it, but the operations department—this is key—we will be able to track where buses are; we will be able to see the speeds of buses; we will be able to understand when there are failures, how it takes place; we will be able to monitor terminals, when there are long lines taking place at terminals, why that is.

The operations department, they could then call, figure out, find out from

engineering what is going, find out when is the schedule of the buses, understand basically what is going on inside of the bus, driving habits, we know about accidents. Some of these things will now be recorded at the national operations centre at PTSC, providing efficient, safe and reliable service, and this is what is testament and a promise that this Government will hope to deliver in the coming months.

Mr. President, lastly, I want to speak about VMCOTT, and where VMCOTT—and I know I heard Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial—and unfortunately, she is not here. Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial and I sit on the same Joint Select Committee when it comes to National Security.

Hon. Senator: I sympathize with you.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: But the goodly Senator, I understand where she is coming from, in terms of, you know, the service, you know, we are buying cars, buying cars. But we identify, as a Government, that that is not the solution, we need to bring a level of service once more, and this is where VMCOTT is, once more, going to play a pivotal role. It has been done in the past and a lot of people say it failed. This time, there will be a lot more transparency; transparency as such, that when a vehicle comes and there is a major repair that needs to be done, reports, such as picture reports, evidence as to what goes on inside, be it an engine, a chassis, or whatever, will be then documented and sent to the TTPS, so they will understand exactly where their failures comes from.

We are looking at efficiency, and the only way to understand efficiency is to understand how to do proper and good service. It is an industry that I am a part of and I am proud to be able to bring my knowledge to this and assist the people of

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai (cont'd)

2024.10.22

Trinidad and Tobago with that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: The fight against crime is amongst all of us, and at the Ministry of Works and Transport, we understand our position and what we need to do to be able to support, and we are willing and able to be able to assist the TTPS to providing a far more efficient service, in terms of having vehicles available. Right? I could even go further, that, you know, they should even build their own command centre to see what is going on with their own vehicles, because this is something that is important. The population is suffering from it and we need to be able to improve. We need to take the measures now, so that we can benefit and reap the benefit of having a better service, a better police service, and this is part and parcel of what VMCOTT is. VMCOTT is also gearing up themselves to handle electric, and electric-type vehicles—not the hybrid, but electric also.

5.30 p.m.

They have already started to have the training, the necessary training, and the way forward, you know, in terms of doing their service.

You know, Mr. President, before, when I finished the VMCOTT, I just realized, with PTSC, there was one thing that I forgot, when I saw my hon. Member, Sen. Donna Cox, was about the ELDAMO system. The ELDAMO system was designed to support the differently-abled and the elderly individuals in our society. Over time, some of the buses have lapsed due to availability of parts and servicing. This really took place during the COVID time, when parts availability became very rare and very scarce, and some of the buses went down, right. I can tell you, we are actively looking.

Coming out of it, some of these supplies will come back. Some, not all, because some of these buses have been discontinued for years, and it is virtually impossible. Way back we have actually tried to even repurpose or re-engineer some of these items, but it is just not, because we have to look at the safety first, the safety aspect. And when you manufacture, you manufacture with certain specific safety requirements in there, and it is unfortunately unable to re-engineer some.

However, in the next trenches, we are looking to now improve our service, and the ELDAMO system will also benefit from certain things as tracking availability, so people can know, the elderly could understand where their buses come in, where it is going to be dropped off. But more importantly, all over that, the ELDAMO system was designed—it is paid for, yes, by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Service and managed by PTSC. Conversations are now arising between both entities and how we can improve it, because I can tell you, Mr. President, the service has been abused over time.

I have reports coming in where some individuals are actually calling for a bus, and they are going to a party, right. And it is only when they arrive at the location, then they figure out what is going on. And this is what we, as a population, have to—we cannot entertain, this is meant to help the differently-abled and the elderly, right, for a specific purpose—and that is why the conversation we had—we are not ignoring them. We will continue to support them. As a Government, we understand our role in supporting these individuals, and we are doing what is necessary to be able to support them going forward.

Mr. President, again, VMCOTT is there on the forefront. It is now improving their services.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
 Bill, 2024
 Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai (cont'd)

2024.10.22

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

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: Thank you very much, Mr. President. They are improving their services, and we are looking to cater for both PTSC and the TTPS going forward, right. It is a work in progress, and I assure you, with steadfast dedication, we will get it done.

Mr. President, as I close, I want to thank all the chairmen, my PS, directors of the different agencies that fall under the Ministry of Works and Transport. I also want to thank my line Minister, once more, for his guidance and support.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: Mr. President, also, October being Breast Cancer Awareness Month, to all the women, all the mothers, all the sisters, please, early detection and screening is important. Get it done, right, because prevention is better than cure. At least you will have an idea of what we face.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: Mr. President, there is a song. I know we like to sing in the Senate sometimes, and there is a famous calypso, right, that says—

Sen. Sagrainsingh-Sooklal: “Like yuh line Minister”.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: What? Just like my line Minister, I learned from him.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sookhai: You ever hear about, you know, there is a song:

“Last train to San Fernando.

Last train to San Fernando.

If you miss this one, you cyah get ah next one.”

I am sorry, but the Opposition was on that last train when they were in Government, out of government, and will not be back here. I thank you, Mr.

President.

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

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Mr. President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Wednesday, October 23, 2024, at 10.00 a.m.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 5.35 p.m.