

SENATE

Wednesday, October 23, 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. Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdial who is ill and Sen. Prof. Gerard Hutchinson who is out of the country.

SENATORS' APPOINTMENT

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

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND
TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. FRANCIS LEWIS

WHEREAS Senator Gerard Hutchinson, is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

UNREVISED

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(c) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, FRANCIS LEWIS to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 23rd October, 2024 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of Senator Gerard Hutchinson.

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.”

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, we are currently awaiting a second instrument, and when we are in receipt of such, we shall revert to this item in order to do the necessary.

AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Francis M. Lewis took and subscribed the Affirmation of Allegiance as required by law.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2024

[Third Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 22, 2024]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Mr. President: Those who spoke thus far are hon. Colm Imbert MP, Minister of Finance, mover of the Motion; Sen. Wade Mark; Sen. Sunity Maharaj; Sen. the Hon. Rohan Sinanan, Minister of Works and Transport;

Sen. Deeroop Teemal; Sen. the Hon. Hassel Bacchus, Minister of Digital Transformation; Sen. Damian Lyder; Sen. Dr. Sharda Patasar; Sen. the Hon. Reginald Armour SC, Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs; Sen. Dr. Paul Richards; Sen. Vyash Nandlal; Sen. the Hon. Randall Mitchell, Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts; Sen. Jearlean John; Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy; Sen. Ancil Dennis; Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdiel; Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye; Sen. the Hon. Donna Cox, Minister of Social Development and Family Services; Sen. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh; Sen. Dr. Mohammed Yunus Ibrahim; Sen. Helon Francis; Sen. the Hon. Kazim Hosein, Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries; and Sen. the Hon. Richie Sookhai, Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport. Acting Prime Minister.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister and Acting Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young SC): Thank you very much Mr. President, and it is with great pleasure that I enter the debate in this House here this morning. Mr. President, my presence here today is due to the importance of the energy sector for Trinidad and Tobago, because without a doubt, Mr. President, the energy sector continues to be the economic lifeblood of the economy of the Trinidad and Tobago with estimates of its contribution to GDP hovering around 45 per cent. But also, we have this constant debate with my colleagues on either side, the Minister of Finance, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, because the truth is, even when there is reference to the non-oil and gas sector, and you refer to manufacturing for example, some big

components in the earnings under manufacturing in Trinidad and Tobago are in fact ammonia and methanol production. Trinidad remains in the top two exporters globally in both methanol and ammonia.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: Also, the services companies related to the energy sector are significant contributors to the economy as it does in many other areas. Atlantic LNG, even operating with three trains is still one of the top 10 exporters of LNG in the world and has been on the global geopolitical conversation map with both the United States as well as EU. In fact, Mr. President, I can say to the country that it was only two days ago, in the last 48 hours, the director from the EU Commission, who I have met with on a number of occasions, who is in charge of the diversification of securing the EU's supply of natural gas, them having come off of Russian gas in 2022, we have had conversations and they see Trinidad and Tobago as an important part of the equation for the securing of gas in the future, and currently as our exports to the EU have grown since 2022, and she was reaching out to see whether I would be at a conference I was carded to speak in Paraguay in a few days time, because she wanted to meet for us to continue the conversations to make sure as we align ourselves going forward, that we were securing both the interest of the EU as well as Trinidad and Tobago.

10.10 a.m.

I start in that context just to let the population know through you, Mr. President, the importance of the continuation of the sector to the livelihood of each and every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. We have gone through

difficult times because of course, the first part of the equation is always linked to production and input of both oil and gas, so it was important, Mr. President, to come here this morning to give a brief update on where we are in the energy sector and what has been done and what we can look forward to.

I would like to start, Mr. President, with reference to the oil sector because we been exploiting oil in Trinidad commercially for over 100 years. Of course, by now, the population recognizes and understands two important components; firstly, that it is a depleting resource, meaning, as we pull oil up out of the ground, those liquids disappear, and until you find other large reserves and reservoirs, you are not going to be able to continue at the levels of production that you may have once done. Trinidad and Tobago is a small area, it is a small province, so we have limited resources, land and sea-wise as to where we can derive this oil from.

The second important factor is that Trinidad suffers from a 20 per cent natural decline of our reserves, meaning, that if we are producing 100 barrels of oil a day naturally, unless we bring on additional production, by the end of the year, you are going to drop to 80 barrels of oil per day. Even as you bring on additional production, it is really a stabilization and it is only if you find significant reservoirs, Mr. President, will you be able to increase significantly, the oil production.

Those are the difficulties that Trinidad and Tobago is facing. These are not the difficulties that any government in power at the time can say well, it is attributed to the United National Congress or the People's National Movement or any other aspirant. Mr. President, the truth is, it is one

Trinidad and Tobago. What I will demonstrate is that since 2015 to now, what you have seen that is irrefutable and cannot be contradicted truthfully, is a government that has been working overtime to secure the future of Trinidad and Tobago in this area.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: Mr. President, if I may start firstly with oil production, because I understand that in the previous days of this debate, certain elements of oil production featured in the debate, so it is important that the population be given the truth and that the population be allowed to make up its own mind but more importantly, it puts on to the score card, how this important energy sector has been managed over the period of time.

In 2008, our oil production in Trinidad and Tobago was 114,000 barrels of oil—in 2008. By 2010, it had dropped to 98,000 barrels of oil a day. By 2012, it had fallen to 81,000 barrels of oil a day. Immediately there, Mr. President, you can see that the period 2008 to 2012, our production of oil had fallen by almost 30,000 barrels of oil a day which is significant. By 2015, unfortunately, it had fallen to 78,000 barrels of oil per day. That was already a 50 per cent decline of our oil production from 2008. I pause, because the importance of understanding our domestic oil production is—as I will come to in a short while—the main stock and feeding product of the refinery in Trinidad and Tobago.

Every refinery across the world refines crude oil so the input into a refinery is crude oil. For that equation to equal to a profitable equation and one that makes sense, you have to have the lowest possible cost of your input which is crude oil. If you are facing a decline of 50 per cent of your

domestic oil production by 2015, down from 2008, immediately, anyone who can do the math would understand that you are going to find yourself in difficulty because the refinery processes 175,000 barrels of oil a day. If you are already by 2015, down to 78,000 barrels of oil a day, it means that you are going to have to import on the open market which is a global market with global prices being set to almost 100,000 barrels of oil a day in US dollars. You cannot go and pay on the open market for crude oil to put into your refinery in TT dollars. Therefore, under the period of 2010 to 2015, unfortunately for Trinidad and Tobago, our oil production fell from approximately 100,000 barrels of oil a day to 78,000 barrels of oil per day. Today our oil production stands at about 52,000 to 55,000 barrels of oil per day.

The truth is, there has also been a shift over the last few decades in what Trinidad and Tobago mines and exploits in terms of—fortunately for Trinidad and Tobago, in the 1970s, a Government in power at the time; a PNM Government, had the foresight to say that, you know what? The future may be in a gas based industry. We were one of the first jurisdictions in the whole Western Hemisphere that started to utilize what was then a waste product, flared gas, and monetize it via the production of ammonia, as well as, we subsequently went to electricity production and it is an input into steel production. That happened in the 1970s.

You have seen since then—and it has only increased over time, in particular, during the 2000 period; 2000 to 2008 period when you had the Point Lisas Industrial Estate become aflush with a number of plants, both methanol, ammonia and other plants being built during that period of time

because of the gas based industry.

I make that point because it indicates that Trinidad and Tobago moved away from being an oil production province. We move now to the refinery and this entity called Petrotrin that we are all, as concerned citizens in Trinidad and Tobago, concerned about the wherewithal and how it is doing, because it became an important part of the fabric of Trinidad and Tobago. This Government has never denied that.

I want to take us back first of all, a little bit in history. Trinidad and Tobago had a history in oil production as I have just outlined. I have only outlined the figures from 2008, but prior to that, even in the 70s and the 60s, we had begun commercially producing oil in Trinidad and Tobago. We had two refineries. Anyone going to Point Fortin now, will see the remnants of what is an oil refinery. Then, the history of Petrotrin as well, it was not always owned by the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Again, it was a PNM Government faced with the difficult decision when certain international oil and gas companies, Shell included, took the commercial and economic decisions to get out of the refinery business back in the 70s and before. That is why today, when you go down to Point Fortin, you will see that that refinery is unfortunately non-operational and will never become operational again because technology has improved.

The same thing happened at Pointe-a-Pierre with the Petrotrin refinery. We were not the initial owners or operators of this refinery. Even when our oil production, Mr. President, was at figures above 150,000 barrels of oil a day, the international operators took decisions based on the margins, based on economic profit and loss, to leave Trinidad and Tobago and to

leave the refinery behind. Again it was a PNM Government understanding, as we always do, the importance of the continuation of that refinery for the lifeblood of Trinidad and Tobago, not only from an economic point of view, but also from a job point of view and also, what it began to mean for us in Trinidad and Tobago, especially being an oil based industry at that time.

Fortunately, as I said, the gas based industry was being pushed and has grown. Let us fast forward to today, Mr. President, if I may, because you see it is very easy to stand up wherever you are, be it here, be it outside, and say all manner of things that are untrue and not grounded in facts. The UNC policy that has been declared by their leader, the Leader of the Opposition, is should they come back into power, they will reopen the refinery at Pointe-a-Pierre. First of all, that is going to cost the taxpayers billions of US dollars to do. This Government's position is that we would love for the refinery to be opened. I will go through in a short while, the steps we have taken, but we are not going to put that burden on the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago.

10.20 p.m.

And it is remarkable. I sat in the other place for a number of days, and I listened attentively to the Leader of the Opposition as she responded to the hon. Minister of Finance and in the whole debate—and I heard one of the Senators on the other side, Opposition Senator, Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdial, yesterday say, “We will find the revenue. We will do it as we did in 2010 to 2015.” That is for the people of Trinidad and Tobago to judge. Because by now, as we saw coming out of a Privy Council decision yesterday, just one occasion, we saw how the finances of this country were

run between that period, where you had increased oil production and gas production and much higher prices than we faced as a country since 2015 to date. So one questions, where will the money come? Where will the prioritization of revenue earn go to, and is it sensible for the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago to take on the burden? Because it is a burden of restarting a refinery, as opposed to what a responsible government is doing, finding an international operator with the wherewithal to restart the refinery.

Allow me, Mr. President—one of the major publications in the oil and gas industry is a publication called “OilPrice.Com”, the number one source for oil and energy used globally. If I may be permitted to briefly, through you, Mr. President, tell the population of Trinidad and Tobago what is going on globally with refineries.

This article, over—and I quote. It is dated the 28 March, 2024, and it has only gotten worse since then. We are now in October. In March of this year, author, Charles Kennedy, said, and the headline is:

“Over 20 per cent of the World’s Oil Refining Capacity Is at Risk of Closure.”

It was two days ago, I was speaking to one of the leaders, the global leaders, oil and gas players, and they were telling me of the difficulty they are having and how they are considering shutting down some of the state-of-the-art refineries, for example, in India, where they described to me—because of the technology being used there, it is actually possible to eat your sandwich off of the plant floor. It is so clean, what is being produced. Our refinery is not a state-of-the-art refinery, and they are saying that the margins have shrunk so much, there is no money in refinery business anymore, and

they are one of the world's leading producers of oil, and this is what this author says:

“Weakening refinery margins and carbon taxes put a fifth of global refining capacity at risk.

Europe and China face the highest closure risk due to declining demand and environmental regulations.

The rise of electric vehicles and bio fuels is transforming the industry potentially leading to widespread refinery closures.

More than 20% of the total global refining capacity is at some risk of closure as refining margins are set to weaken alongside demand, while carbon taxes could also burden many refiners, Wood Mackenzie has said in a recent report.

Overall, based on expected net cash margins in 2030,”—so this is the projection into the future, the period that we are about to enter—“Wood Mackenzie has identified 121 out of 465 screen refining sites ‘at some risk of closure’.”

Mr. President, this is the reality. As I said, it is easy to stand up on any platform, including a political platform, and to make promises and to spew what you believe is the best policy for Trinidad and Tobago, but the population must take note of the realities. This is a global sector. Trinidad and Tobago is only a small player in the global energy sector.

The outcome and the conclusion of what I have just read and what I am telling the population, without fear of contradiction, is the refining business is an extremely difficult one, even with a source of crude that you yourself are producing and have some control over the price, as well as even

with the most technologically advanced refineries in the world, which, unfortunately, ours in Trinidad and Tobago, is not. Bearing all of that in mind, these are the contributing factors that, unfortunately, led to the difficult—it was not an easy decision—the very difficult decision to take to mothball the refinery in Trinidad and Tobago.

Petrotrin had begun—I listened, and I continue to listen, hearing it is a net forex earner. It may have been a net forex earner when barrels of oil in Trinidad were being produced at 150,000 barrels, or even up to 78,000 barrels of oil a day. But the truth is, it is not, and it had not become any net forex earner. It was experiencing significant losses because it was an older refinery, because we had to purchase the vast majority of crude. We had to be purchasing over 100,000 barrels of oil a day on the open market. If you use a price of US \$75 a barrel of oil—work the math, and that had to be paid in US dollars—US \$7.5 million a day to put crude oil into an outdated refinery.

Unfortunately, it had become unfeasible, from a financial point of view, and unfortunately, Petrotrin had begun to face significant losses that had begun to threaten the economic existence of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is not an overexaggeration of words. Because you see, the rating agencies come here and they tell Trinidad and Tobago that if you are not checking certain boxes, they will downgrade you. The country should not forget, by 2017, we were looking at a US \$850 million bond; a US \$850 million bond that needed to be repaid between the period of 2018 to 2015. We had already begun to face significant losses at this entity called Petrotrin, and these are the facts.

In 2011, Petrotrin was making a profit, \$2.4 billion, but remember what I said about oil production, as well as the price of oil, which is the input. By 2012, that had dropped by 50 per cent to \$1 billion in profit, still profitable; by 2012, with oil production still at a high, compared to what it is today. By September 2013, they had only made \$15 million in profit. This is the reality, to go from a \$2.4 billion profit to a \$15 million profit. Any business owner, anybody who has to keep a business alive, must, if they are being responsible, begin to consider what is going on with my business, to drop from \$2.4 billion in profit to a mere \$15 million in profit.

By 2014, it had made a \$200 million loss. This is the reality of the entity called Petrotrin. By 2015, the loss had grown to \$1,000,042,000—a billion dollars in loss for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. In those four short years, from 2011, a profit of \$2.4 billion; to 2014, a \$200 million loss; and then by 2015, the loss had grown to \$1 billion. That is the reality of Petrotrin. By 2016, when we came in, we were now facing a loss, by the audited accounts, of \$5 billion. How do you continue a business in 2016, when we knew oil prices had dropped to \$25 a barrel? So your input of oil was at a low of \$25 a barrel, but you had made a \$5 billion loss.

By 2017, there was another loss of \$2.1 billion, almost \$2.2 billion. By 2018, with a looming US \$850 million bond, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, all of those in here, and more importantly, for me, as a representative from the other House, an elected Member, we had to face \$16.4 billion of loss at Petrotrin—not million, \$16.4 billion of loss at Petrotrin in 2018. What responsible Government, concerned about the future of Trinidad and Tobago—we did not even have the wherewithal to

continue. Where would the money come from to put the money in to cover such losses; those cumulative losses, significant, almost \$25 billion in cumulative losses?

10.30 a.m.

What business could continue? And there was no end in sight, all because of the refinery business, and the other costs that become associated with Petrotrin. So, population through you, Mr. President, consider very carefully, the fickle promises that are easy to make when you are not in government. But then, consider what I have just read. That over 20 percent of the world's state-of-the-art refineries, where they have access to cheaper crude oil and more significant volumes of crude oil, are currently at risk of being shut down by players who have very deep pockets, and do not have to make sure there are drugs in the hospital. They do not have to make sure our children have to be educated from every level up to tertiary; do not have to make sure that they have road infrastructure to be done; that public servants have to be paid; that our pensioners, we look after—that everyone who is falling in difficulty the Ministry of Social Development can look after. Because that costs us, the taxpayers, almost \$6 billion a year.

So, if you have an entity making a loss of \$16 billion by 2019—the accountants came to us with a loss of \$9 billion. Because these losses were cumulative, they were being hidden during periods of time. That is what this country faced. So, therefore you had to do the right thing as a responsible government, concerned about the future of Trinidad and Tobago, charged with the responsibility to do the right thing, and that, Mr. President, to the population through you is why we had to mothball the refinery.

But even in that decision, \$2.7 billion of taxpayers' money—\$2.7 billion—was paid to all of the employees and the ex-employees of Petrotrin, with plans to grant land to certain ones—\$2.7 billion, even in light of that

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. S. Young SC: Another, responsible decision taken, Mr. President, was even in light of that, the Government decided to preserve the refinery. Because you could have just shut it down, like the one in Point Fortin. You could have just shut it down. But, we took the decision—there may be someone out there with the financial wherewithal to restart that refinery, because they would have the access to crude oil and they would have the ability to pay the significant money to continue running a refinery, even in this. Because, it was an option to completely walk away. What did we do? We restructured Petrotrin—and I can tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago here today, that as a result of that, we created Heritage Petroleum Company. It is interesting, to hear people say, 'Oh, well they were always exploring and producing oil'. Yes, which you had by then begun to cost the taxpayers over \$16 billion in losses a year, which is unsustainable by any measure.

We restructured it. We created Heritage Petroleum Company. Not a single day—we created Paria—in the transition has any citizen of Trinidad and Tobago faced any difficulty, at going at the same fuel pump, whatever gas station it is, they use across Tobago and Trinidad and not be able to get fuel in their pump, because of the closure of the refinery. Not a single day. That was a logistic task. We ensured it.

And the last thing I will say as we close-off, is why we closed the refinery. The taxpayers need to know, through you, Mr. President. Today—

that was 2018, we are now in, in 2024, six years later, we, the taxpayers, are still carrying US \$402 million in short-term loans that continue to be rolled over at increasing interest rates, because of the importation of crude for the refinery; a US \$400 million bill, that is over TT \$2 billion, that we continue to roll. And that was used exclusively to purchase crude oil for the refinery. So, I would love to see how their maths “mathsing”.

Hon. Senator: [*Laughter*]

Sen. S. Young SC: There is no way it is “mathsing”. But I caution the population, make the wrong choice and they will crash the economy through the refining process.

Mr. Mark: “Alyuh doing that already” [*Inaudible*].

Mr. President: Hold on. Hold—Members. Sen. Thompson-Ahye.

Sen. Hazel Thompson-Ahye: Thank you, Mr. President. I have heard the passionate address of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries—Acting Prime Minister, forgive me. You spoke of the unfeasibility from a financial point of view that guided the decision to shut down the refinery. Mr. Acting Prime Minister, from a humanitarian point of view, was it also to your mind justifiable and feasible to shut down every single health facility that was—all of the facilities that were available to employees of Petrotrin, from the highest level to the lowest level? Thank you.

Sen. S. Young SC: Thank you very much, Senator. The answer is, we created alternative options—and it was just this weekend we had a testimonial from someone in southern Trinidad, who said that all his friends who feared as former Petrotrin workers—exactly the point you have made Senator—where would they get their healthcare from. Because before, it

was in the majority from the Augustus Long Hospital. We created the Point Fortin Hospital, state-of-the-art down in the fenceline community—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. S. Young SC:—We implemented more healthcare coming out of the San Fernando General Hospital. We created a number—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. S. Young SC:—of public healthcare facilities. And you know what the report to us was this weekend? I was most proud to hear it, that those Petrotrin workers, some—because of course you are not going to please everyone—were happy to report to the Government that the care that they are getting now at those institutions betters—does not equal—the care that they were previously getting under Petrotrin.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. S. Young SC: But you see Senator, with the greatest of respect, when you are in-charge of a country, it is always a balancing exercise, whilst personally you may want to keep things afloat. When you have to think, well how do you keep paying the pensioners at the end of the month? In conversation with the Minister of Finance, how do we continue paying public servants salaries? How do we continue keeping the schools alive? When you get bills from the University of the West Indies for almost \$600 million, just for the St. Augustine campus. How do you find the money to allocate it? So, is it better to continue investing in a company that is now accumulating losses of at minimum \$2 billion a year? We have a responsibility to everyone.

So let me tell you, Madam Senator and everyone else, what has happened. Heritage Petroleum Company, in some way—and this is only as at the close of the quarter of March 2024, we have had two more quarters since then. In summary, for the time period fiscal year 2019, which is when we started up Heritage Petroleum Company, to March 2024, Heritage has made \$40.3 billion in revenue. It has paid \$12.6 billion in taxes. What I failed to say during the periods that I referred to, they had stopped paying taxes. They could not afford to pay their royalties and they were not even paying taxes that were due in some instances.

So, Heritage Petroleum Company has made \$40.3 billion in revenue, paid \$12.6 billion in taxes and royalties and made a profit of \$6.5 billion. The US \$850 million bond that I referred to, that was threatening to sink our economy, we managed through the restructuring to refinance that—not once but twice, without a government guarantee and that is because of how we restructured it. So these profits that are being made by Heritage Petroleum Company—Heritage is carrying the burdens of that refinancing.

Paria has made \$52.6 billion in revenue, paid just under \$1 billion in taxes and made a profit of \$1.3 billion. And that is what we are forced to do. Because no one in government wants to close anything down. No one wants to affect thousands of workers, but that is what we had to do.

Very quickly, I heard a few days ago—and I have the *Hansard* report, of the contribution by the leader of the Opposition Bench, Sen. Mark, all about what we are doing with the refinery now, and unfortunately, putting certain misinformation into the public domain that I have come to correct with irrefutable facts. Because as I say, when you have no responsibility,

the easiest thing in the world is to say anything you wish, anything that comes to your mind, or any piece of paper that is pushed in front of you.

10.40 p.m.

What this Government has done, we went through three processes to try and find someone with the wherewithal, both the financial wherewithal, but also the access to crude to responsibly restart that refinery with the Government's assistance. Meaning, not that we are going to put money into it and burden the taxpayers, but come and speak to us; is it that you want to rent it, is it that you want to lease it, is it that you want to purchase it? What can we do without costing the taxpayers anything to get that refinery restarted? You would recall, Senator, that the first process was immediately, when we had shut it down, TPHL, which is the Holding Company, Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited, engaged Scotia Capital out of the United States, Scotia Capital (USA) Inc. to assist and manage the process.

The first was project Soca, in 2019 to 2020, where the preferred bidder was Patriotic Energies, and we worked, bent over backwards to try and find a way for the union to be able to run that refinery. We cautioned them at times, because some of the characters that we saw advising them, we knew were not going to give them the right advice. Unfortunately—and they were even given exclusivity, which no one else in the other bid rounds, the one that followed that and the current one were given, but we gave Patriotic exclusivity because we wanted to find a way. But it failed because they were unable to raise the capital for the transaction. That is what happened.

They came and said, “Let the taxpayers issue bonds, tradeable bonds

that they can then use”, but we came out of it because it was costing the taxpayers. We could not put that at risk for the taxpayers. So, unfortunately, that failed. Project Calypso then started in 2021/2022. It was terminated when it was determined and the preferred bidder, Quanten Consortium LLC, was unable to raise the capital as well. Then we came to the current, because, of course, you continue to get interest from all around the world, from local people, et cetera. They want a chance to restart the refinery.

So during 2023 and 2024, we continued to receive unsolicited expressions of interest. We then narrowed it down to 10. We said, “Look, this has to have a cut-off point because it is costing the taxpayers money to keep it in preservation mode.’

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

Hon. S. Young SC: Thank you. We narrowed it down to 10. We then opened it back up because we were still evaluating. Three more people came in, including the famous Jindal Steel and Power, Joonmore International, and BB Energy, as well as Sarge Enterprises.

Scotia looked at it, evaluated it; it came down to three. The Cabinet appointed an evaluation committee of experts, as well as a former Permanent Secretary who is now a High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, PS Dhanpaul, as well as a PS from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to do that evaluation. They did their own exercise and it came down to three, three companies that they think have the possibility of restarting. CRO Consortium is one, iNca Energy LLC is another, and Oando PLC.

Unfortunately, as is the modus operandi of the irresponsible persons in our society, the attacks on international potential operators does affect them because their brand is important. What we heard here in this House, and we the population outside heard from Sen. Mark in his contribution this week, is a complete figment of somebody's imagination, complete. I have here today, because I called for it as the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, "I want a current due diligence on CRO Consortium's profile", and I have it here, prepared on the 22nd of October by Scotia Capital (USA) Inc. for TPHL on Kenetech, D. Rampersad and Company Limited, and Ocala Services Limited.

The first thing is—

Sen. Thompson-Ahye: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. S. Young SC: Madam Senator. The first thing is that with respect to a consortium, a consortium does not in law—I am sure Sen. Vieira, Senior Counsel, would bear out—become a registered incorporated consortium. You may do so at the consummation of the deal, but a consortium is really a gathering of legally incorporated companies. The only one incorporated in Trinidad is D. Rampersad and Company Limited, and the directors and shareholders of that company are well known in a previous life to those on the other side. It is Mr. Nirmal Rampersad. It is a local entity operating in Trinidad with business in Trinidad for over 30 years, almost 50 years.

The other one, Kenetech Group, Kenetech Group is an engineering and procurement and construction company, headquartered in the UAE, established in 1997. In all of these companies, there is no link to Jindal Steel and Power. The other ridiculous submission made was that one company

here is sanctioned by OFAC, by the United States, and that company is Ocala Services Limited. Mr. President, I have here, OFAC renews its sanction list every few days. The most recent one we could have gotten yesterday is dated the 17th of this month, and there is clearance from OFAC.

Not a single one of these companies in Ocala, including parent, including subsidiaries, any of them is on any sanction list. D. Rampersad and Company Limited is a local company, Kenetech. So all of these things are done to affect the psyche of the population of Trinidad and Tobago and to mislead them. It is most unfortunate. So I, standing here today, Mr. President, say without a fear of contradiction, none of these entities are sanctioned by the United States. None of them has any link to Jindal Steel and Power. All three of them are properly incorporated in their relevant jurisdictions. Ocala is in a South American jurisdiction. That is not Venezuela. It is Colombia, but they operate out of the United States in Florida. So this is the reality of what we are facing here, Mr. President.

So, once again, I am pleading with those who really care about Trinidad and Tobago, do not try to scuttle the Government's attempt to restart the refinery. Do not attack every individual who does not fit your narrative. A responsible government—and even those who may think they are governments in waiting would want what is best for Trinidad and Tobago, the refinery process will continue. We have three who are being subject to due diligence. The Cabinet has taken a decision. They are now—the evaluation team has been given the green light to enter into conversation and negotiation with all three to see what may be the most feasible result to the people of Trinidad and Tobago to redound solely to the benefit of the

people of Trinidad and Tobago.

So I conclude by saying, this Government's policy is, we will attempt to restart the refinery. This is the third time we have gone out internationally, and we will not do so to burden the taxpayers with billions of dollars in losses because the country simply cannot afford it. I thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, before I call on the next speaker, I crave your indulgence to return to item one on the Order Paper as I have received the following correspondence from Her Excellency the President Christine Carla Kangaloo, O.R.T.T.

SENATOR'S APPOINTMENT

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

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND
 TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Kangaloo
 President.

UNREVISED

TO: MR. DOMINIC SMITH

WHEREAS Senator Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdial 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, DOMINIC SMITH to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 23rd October, 2024 and continuing during the absence of Senator Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdial 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 23rd day of
October, 2024.”

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Dominic Smith took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

10.50 a.m.

Mr. President: Sen. Roberts.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Anil Roberts: Thank you, Mr. President. I did not know that we would have had the pleasure and the honour of having the Acting Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago here to debate. Had I known that “ah would ah stop in Diego Martin SuperPharm and buy some

UNREVISED

Kleenex because dat amount” of tears and crying and historical lessons—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—about oil and gas, when the facts of the matter are that that Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is the worst Minister of Energy and Energy Industries in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The facts are the Petrotrin Refinery is closed, closed by that PNM. So all of these stories that were given there, he should have begun with “Once upon a time”. The problem that I have is that I have heard “dat same ting” about 25 times. I am bored of it. It is pathologically false and untrue. The refinery is closed but yet he finishes by saying “There are entities that are interested in it. They want to reopen it”. “What yuh want to reopen it for? Why yuh close it in the first place?”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: “Why yuh close it in de first place?”

Sen. Lyder: Exactly.

Sen. A. Roberts: He comes here and miraculously talks about US \$850 million bullet payment, forgetting that his former client, Malcolm Jones of the PNM was the one who put Petrotrin and the country under that debt.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Lyder: Yes. That is exactly what happened.

Sen. A. Roberts: He then speaks about Heritage and says that they have taken that bullet payment of \$850 million, “kick de can down de road twice”, which means it has not been paid yet. Then he works the magic, one thing I have learned about this PNM, they are not politicians, they are

magicians, just poof, he says that the burden of the taxpayer has been eliminated because Heritage had to pay the \$850 million plus interest for a next 12 years and the bullet payment comes due in 2028. Who is Heritage? Heritage is people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Heritage is taxpayers. The burden is on the taxpayers. I cannot understand how we come into this Senate and just manufacture nonsense. The burden is there. Then he comes to say—talking about how oil went down and it is so difficult, the globe, the refinery is closed down but failed to state, that under his PNM, since September 2015, they did not manage, they did not invest, and they stopped the on-land oil production. Oil production went down below 40,000 barrels under the PNM, which was an accelerated decline not a natural God-given decline. “De PNM does damage God and all”, they are so incompetent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: This PNM Minister of Energy and Energy Industries stands there and tells us about 1972, when PNM had a good idea, to come with gas. “That is good but he probably born in 1972 so it have nothing to do with he”. What we are talking about under his realm is the 2017 gas price negotiation; NGC makes a loss for the first time in history.

Sen. Lyder: Wow.

Sen. A. Roberts: Point Lisas moves from 78 per cent occupancy, down to 28 per cent—

Sen. Lyder: Shame.

Sen. A. Roberts:—11 companies shutter and go, steel gone, everything gone. Right now, jobs in the oil sector, in 2015 under Kamla Persad-Bissessar and Kevin Ramnarine, 20,500 jobs in the energy sector annually, under that Minister who just “run out ah here”, 10,400. He is half “de” man of Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of order. Ministers are to be referred by their proper name or title of office.

Sen. A. Roberts: That Minister.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Okay, so the point of order raised is the sentiment that we do refer to individuals by their proper title. So it would be the Acting Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.

Sen. A. Roberts: No problem, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Continue.

Sen. A. Roberts: The Acting Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, the “just-come” PNM Member from 2014. Oil production under that Minister of Energy and Energy Industries—78,000 barrels under Kevin Ramnarine and the United National Congress, under this Minister now, 53,000. He came here to talk about 53,000 to 55,000, “he add on ah 2,000 to try and sound good” but it is still a failure. It is a failure on top of a failure. When you talk about gas, and we are a gas economy, we are at 2.6 Bcf per day, down from, under the United National Congress, 3.8.

Sen. Lyder: Wow.

Sen. A. Roberts: Yet, that Minister, the Acting Prime Minister, comes here with arrogance. I have never seen a failure be so arrogant, so confident. It is amazing. I think it the Balisier House, somehow they do some operation when they join. They take out two things, shame and conscience.

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

Hon. Senator: “Oh Gad Oye”.

Sen. A. Roberts: He said that they closed down the refinery. If all that he told us, he regaled us of was true, how come no other expert other than the PNM Cabinet said shut down the refinery? If all that he said was so true and created such a terrible situation, that Trinidad and Tobago was in such a dire circumstance, how come experts like Lashley, McKinsey, Solomon, \$64 million paid to experts, “not a lawyer who just reached here and jump into energy to go and read ah book” and tell us about 100 years of oil, it is not. It is 116 years because we first did it in 1908. I read the same book. But understand this, even the Petrotrin Board, under Wilfred Espinet, under oath in the labour court said they never told that PNM Cabinet to shut down Petrotrin. So how come the only experts who know it had to shut down, are not experts, have no qualification in chemical engineering, oil and no experience? But “yuh” come here to tell us a whole pathological book of untruths

Sen. Mark: Exactly.

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Sen. A. Roberts: Energy sector, rig days—

Sen. Lyder: Mamaguy.

Sen. A. Roberts:—I mean, I am going to move off from him because I did

not even plan to discuss the hon. Acting Prime Minister. Rig days under Kamla, “rig days is wuk”—work, money.

Mr. President: Leader of the Opposition or Member for Siparia.

Sen. A. Roberts: Leader of the Opposition, Member for Siparia, sorry, Mr. President. “Dey bad talk us so much it does come out, yuh understand but we know who we talking about.” Under the hon. Leader of the Opposition, 2,849 rig days back in 2014/2015, down to 1,227 but in PNM Maths they might think that 1,227 is more than 2,849 because I hear that these PNM Ministers did not even take or pass O Level Maths.

Sen. Lyder: “Wah?”

Sen. Nakhid: What?

Sen. Anil Roberts: Yes, the Leader of Government Business, in the Parliament, made a speech and had boasted that she had failed Mathematics.

Sen. Lyder: “Eh?”

Sen. A. Roberts: She said in—do not even—

Sen. Lyder: Who is “dat”?

Sen. A. Roberts:—she said—the Member of Parliament for Arouca/Maloney—in a recent speech that not only did she fail, she did not even take O Level Maths. So I want to know how “de Maths not mathsing”. I thought—when I did Maths, I had to take it in order—

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*] Fatima?

Sen. A. Roberts:—yes, with seven ones—

Sen. Lyder: Fatima [*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—and a two. I had to take my Maths and I know to move forward you had to have Maths.

Sen. Lyder: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Roberts: So how come, a Minister and Leader of Government Business—“da’is why no house eh build because she cah add. So I doh know what is going on with this PNM”. They will have to answer. Thehon. Minister forgot to tell us that all that debt burden, is his former client Malcolm Jones. If he is so concerned about taxpayers’ money, why did he take Malcolm Jones out of court as soon as they swore in on the *Bible* to be the Government?

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Sen. A. Roberts: The UNC Government had Malcolm Jones who was an executive chairman, which meant that he had the power of a CEO to make decisions and he took taxpayers’ money and put us in debt of \$13 b-b-billion. That is the debt the killed Petrotrin.

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Sen. A. Roberts: PNM debt.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Lyder: That is the debt. That is it.

Sen. A. Roberts: But he stands up there and does not mention his client’s name, talking about he is here to protect “de” taxpayers. “He protect Malcolm Jones, He take him out of court.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Lyder: Yes. “Da’is what he did.”

Sen. A. Roberts: Then the hon. Acting Prime Minister had the audacity to talk about the OWTU and their partners being of low character, [*Laughter*]. I will leave that alone. When we see this PNM Government and that

Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, every negotiation, every business deal they do, has to do—look they tried to run from Jindal. “The only reason that I know bout Jindal is that Jindal reach in de Diplomatic Centre shaking the hon. Prime Minister hand. Da’is when I first see Jindal.” Then they said that he was coming to put in some bid for the refinery even though bids closed about four weeks before, you know.

11.00 a.m.

The hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts did not even know that the Government that he is part of requested proposals and put out a bid and nine companies had put in. Yesterday, he said that there was no RFP and they were—“Just come and tell we if you interested.” There was an evaluation committee request for proposals, nine companies came in, it was being evaluated, then we saw that Jindal show up. Now they want to distance themselves from Jindal, but Jindal went in the Diplomatic Centre, just like Asdrúbal Chávez, Wilmer Ruperti and Delcy Rodríguez.

When citizens could not come home to their land to bury their dead, Hindus could not do open pyre cremations—you had to ask that very hon. Acting Prime Minister, if you could come home, please, and he would say, no, unless “you is ah PNM”. You all think we forgot? We do not forget. The people remember. But somehow, Delcy Rodríguez sanctioned jet landed and that same Minister said, “I doh drill down, is de Permanent Secretary approve.” No, only the Minister of National Security could approve during a pandemic, and it was him.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: And it was Delcy Rodríguez, PDVSA officials and they

walked into, during COVID, the Diplomatic Centre, no test. “Dey coulda have de Delta, Brazilian variant. Dey walk straight up to de Prime Minister”, putting his life at risk, because you know, “he does contract COVID plenty”, it was about six times. They did not check and they went straight in the Diplomatic Centre. That is that Minister who comes here to pretend like he cares about Trinidad and Tobago. He is talking about \$6 “b-b-billion” missed? Well, if you want to make back that, take back the money that—his brother’s company, NCB Global, got work from this PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Take back that \$6 billion. He talked about patriotic and the character—imagine these fellas are talking about the character of people, when they do business with Maduro. July 28th, “we eh see ah vote yet, but he say he win”. All the election, all the information is showing that he lost by 60 per cent to 40 per cent, but they are doing business with Maduro. Maduro indicted, Delcy Rodríguez indicted, narco-terrorist wanted, \$15 million bounty, but they are talking about character of other individuals.

They wanted to sell the refinery to some company called Quanten. It is the very Sen. Mark who tried to save the country because Quanten had a little office in a house in California and could not be found, and they are coming here now to say, well, that fell down, they could not find the financing. Where did they find Quanten? “Dey find Quanten de same place that dey find the Acting Prime Minister”, they have Jindal, Ohana. We actually have pictures with that Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Acting Prime Minister shaking the hand of one Tellechea. Do you know who Tellechea is? “Tellechea now get lock up by Maduro”.

This Minister is putting our future—and this PNM Government is saying that we have gas coming in 2028. They are saying it when they are signing our lives and our children’s lives away on the CARICOM—on an individual that ConocoPhillips, for example, had Maduro and Delcy Rodríguez and PDVSA in court for US \$700 million for the same Dragon because they breached agreements. How can you feel trust, and have trust in a man “who say he win de election, when he lost, and when millions of people protest, he say he win”, and if you said that he did not win and you would like to see some results, “he pelt you out de country”? That is who they are negotiating with, they are talking to. They are travelling back and forth, they do not care about character, they do not care about democracy, they do not care about propriety, and you come here to tell us about character when you are putting our nation’s future in the hands—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—of a dictator who could change “he mind” at any time? Tellechea, who was just the Minister of Energy, who shook that Minister of Energy and Energy Industries’ hand, now “he lock up” from the same Maduro. “Take care one of these days our Minister of Energy and Energy Industries go there and they lock he up to”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Talking about character—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of order 46(4).

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: It is offensive.

Sen. Nakhid: How is that offensive?

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: No, no. Members, I am on—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: I am on my legs. Okay. So, Senator, just be careful and temper. Continue.

Sen. A. Roberts: Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: I want the Minister—I want the Acting Prime Minister to be careful, because when flying over to a dictator who steals elections, who does not give a correct statement of polls, who is locking up Opposition, who puts “he wife cousin” in the Supreme Court, I am worried that our Minister of Energy and Energy Industries goes over there and next thing we “cyah see him, cyah find him”. So I do not know why, maybe the PNM is so divided that the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry would like him to go and stay over there—

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

Sen. A. Roberts:—“because it ha bacchanal”.

Nine years, the tenth budget of this beleaguered Minister of Finance. Practice normally makes perfect. Some coaches say, “Practice hard, practice makes perfect,” but real coaches will know that practice does not make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect. Practice only makes permanent and in the case of this Minister of Finance, 10 budgets, still failing. He is a perfect failure.

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

Sen. A. Roberts: I will deal with the hon. Minister in the Ministry of

Works and Transport, looking very good in his “kurta”. Shubh Divali.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Yes. Correct. Now, hon. Minister, after nine years, through you, Mr. President, I could not believe that the hon. Minister, who is a very intelligent, good businessman, done very well, that he would stand up in this Senate, on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and state that there is, coming in a few months, a national operation centre for buses, and this national operation centre would tell us when the bus is running late, and they will see it, and if there is a line for tickets and it is too long and—it “eh” reach yet, eh; nine years, it “eh” reach yet is, but it coming. Well, I want to ask the hon. Minister if that NOC centre could “tell we when grass growing in de bus, when de rain falling in de bus, when all de bus that dey have breaking down and ha no gas in it”, if that would help the poor people utilize the bus system, because at this point in time, it is worst run PTSC in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Lyder: Careful what you say there. The mike on, eh. Careful.

Sen. A. Roberts: Cashless society: I was once told that a certain Minister at that time—I will leave him nameless, hon. President, because I know that the bacchanal that is going on now, if you only talk something, you talk the truth, you are liable to get “pelt out”. You could ask Nicole Oliviere, you could ask Robert Le Hunte, you could ask plenty of the PNM. So I would not call my Tobagonian Minister’s name at all, because he is an honest, good gentlemen. He is trying his best, no resources, he has no recusals from the Cabinet, so it is hard for him to operate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: “But he talk de truth”. He agreed with the hon. Leader of the Opposition that a cashless society makes no sense—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—that you have to go hybrid. You must go hybrid. You could go some that way and some—but cash is very important, and he was very honest and truthful. But let me just tell him, because he tried to twist out of it and tried to suggest that the hon. Minister of Finance agreed with him about hybrid. Well, let me quote from the hon. Minister of Finance, Tuesday, 20th of August, *Newsday*, a Gregory Mc Burnie article. Speaking at the launch of the National Financial Inclusion Survey Report at Tower D, the hon. Minister of Finance, he:

“...noted on a recent trip to Denmark...

‘All transactions are done online or physically with credit and debit cards or mobile wallets.’

...there is a collaborative move among government ministries to push a transition to a cashless society.”

Now, maybe some Ministers in the PNM did not pass English either. Cashless “doh mean, piece ah cash, half ah cash”. Cashless means none, okay?

And if then if want a little back up, Prime Minister, the hon. Member for Diego Martin West, said on November 10, 2023:

“I look forward to Trinidad and Tobago moving towards being a cashless society...’

A cashless society will have tremendous effect on this country...”

11.10 a.m.

The hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Leader of the Opposition, said, no to this cashless society. There will be a hybrid—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—because cash would not help poor people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: There are over 150,000 citizens now, who do not have bank accounts. How are they going cashless? To get a bank account in Trinidad and Tobago under this PNM, “yuh cyah get no US, yuh know. If you have to go holiday, yuh gi’ing dem US \$200. The last time I checked if you want a nice 16-ounce T-bone steak with soup and ting, it will cost US \$200 outside dey. Right? If yuh going away where the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts tell us go, he tell us, the hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts told us here and I looked on at him in shock, I even tried to signalled him to ‘stop, do not embarrass yourself. There is a leadership vacuum in the PNM now, you might be looking to come through. Do not do that’.

You know, the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts said to us, dat people who travel outside, dem know how sweet Trinidad is. Well, leh meh tell you something, Sir. The 29.6 per cent of de people living below the poverty line, living on less than TT \$1,100 a month, dem cyah travel outside. Dem cyah even travel from Matelot to Port of Spain to collect ah food card or fill out a form. The people in Trinidad and Tobago who want to reach to a meeting on time have to leave three hours early because it is only traffic and torture, so they cyahr reach the airport to go nowhere”.

So this kind of out of touch, elitist kind of thinking is what has us in this problem. Imagine, you have only 6 per cent or 8 per cent of the population, is lucky to be travelling, unless it is a PNM Minister. You could travel as Prime Minister for 400 days and not do “yuh wok”, but leave the place in a total mess and shambles.

“So, hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts with all due respect, maybe you have spent too much time outside, but de dougla here, I walk around as a Opposition Senator, the dougla, as Anil, coach, and I talk to people every day, de doubles stand, pharmacy, grocery, anywhere—”

Sen. Lyder: Barber.

Sen. A. Roberts:—and the pain and “sufferation” that people are feeling, you might only talk to the people in business class on your travels to Denmark or London, I “doh” know, but the pain out there is real. The Forex crisis is real. The fear because of the crime scourge is real. The fair to the children getting beaten and bullied in school is real. Even if they go to school they bound to fail. Half the children fail maths, but to the children, relax eh, because if you fail maths is okay, you could be the Leader of Government Business in the PNM. You “doh” even have to take maths according to the PNM. You could reach. Now to the media I would like to know how that happen. I want to know. “Mey” child going to take SEA next 16 months so I want to how much I should really stress her on the maths. Oh, “doh” no bother. Just “doh” bother to take it.

The hon. Senator Vice-President, I “doh” know what to call my honourable colleague, whether Vice-President or the next candidate for Barataria/San Juan to “geh licks. Ah doh know”, but I will say the hon.

Vice-President for now. Right? He said—

Mr. President: Member of Parliament.

Sen. A. Roberts:—under your PNM our beloved country is not in a mere— oh, he tried to give us a new definition of recession. Three years of growth. Sir, a recession could in a simple terms, two consecutive quarters of negative growth equals a recession. In Trinidad and Tobago we do not get results, two to three years not quarters, but yesterday you said years. You are correct, though, in a way because we in that, but it is not a recession. The PNM has put us in a depression and the place is in a total mess.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: I was happy that the boys from Shiva Boys had left by the time you contributed or else they would be failing their exams like your Leader of Government Business.

The hon. Vice-President also said, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, that when United National Congress was there that a lot of money was put aside in the same, but we had to do it because of the formula. Well, hon. Member, the formula states that any amount owed 10 per cent over and above the budgeted or pegged price; you then automatically goes into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. So when you have a responsible Government that creates buffers, so when you predict or you check all your predictions and possible price for oil or MMBtu, you leave a buffer because you are not greedy.

So, if for example, when the People's Partnership was there, oil was predicted to go up to \$105 a barrel and so on, but we did not want to just take all the money and spend it. So the hon. Minister of Finance budgeted at

\$73 per barrel and \$6 or \$7 per MMBtu when it was predicted to go up to \$11. But your hon. Minister of Finance, he “crennah, he doh want nuttin to go in savings”. So when he pegged, when he saw that the price of oil might be \$92 a barrel, he came and read a budget for \$92 a barrel. When he sees \$2.75 per MMBtu, “he come and budget” at \$2.75 per MMBtu to leave no room for any savings. That is the difference between the PNM and a responsible UNC Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts called cricket world cup a success.

Sen. Lyder: Brilliant.

Sen. A. Roberts: Brilliant success, he said.

Sen. Mitchell: Correct.

Sen. A. Roberts: Chaos, park and ride. One match they had to do, you know, one match. Children, mothers, grandmothers had to walk for four hours to get out. They could not move, gridlock. Then on top of that, the next match was a semi-final, the whole world say, the pitch was unacceptable. The PNM has embarrassed Trinidad and Tobago. They come here to say, they proud of that. Well, I say, shame on you.

On top of that, I did not see “none ah dem” in the games. Remember before I said, they went and get some games that nobody wants to see, and the hon. Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs say, I bad talking Uganda and Papua New Guinea and I am not. It is sport. People want to see the best. People pay money to see the best. The ticket for Papua New Guinea versus Uganda was \$6. The West Indies versus New Zealand was

US \$60, but they want to give us that. It was a total failure.

Furthermore, the people who had to walk for three, four hours down in Brian Lara, when I said that it is “zapatay” mud and nothing around to spend any money, and it would have been better to have the games in the Oval because you have corn soup, music, drinks, restaurants, everything around there, the avenue that people—you could generate some money, “crowd come out and dey start to spend money. When I told them that they said, ‘No. I do not like south.’” I love south and Tobago and ah comin dey” Tobago too. When I said that they did not want to listen. People had to walk three hours and could not even buy ah water. They could not get a little chicken, a doubles, a roti, not to shop nowhere, they just had to watch out to not get bounce down on the highway for the other side when dey crossing. The hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts is an affable chap, you know. Unless yuh poor and yuh need a HDC home then he does get vex”.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Roberts: He said and it is very interesting. He said these travel advisories, you know, the travel advisories every country puts out one. Now this struck me as very strange, but then it showed me the DNA of the PNM and gives me insight into why the country has dropped into a chasm of anarchy. I hon. Minister and remember I said he is an affable chap, intelligent fellow, that is why “dey spit him out and he aint get San Fernando East because dey doh like brain in the PNM. He pass he exam”.

Sen. Lyder: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Sen. A. Roberts: Yes. He said, these travel advisories what happens in other countries, the opposition and the government get together to fight the

travel advisory to go and argue with the Ambassador and get them to change it. I thought that was rather strange. So rather than fix the problem that is existing in your country that will make someone write an advisory on you from an impartial point of view, rather than solve the problem, you want to go and bully the people to change it.

Sen. Lyder: That is the PNM.

Sen. A. Roberts: That is PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The hon. Minister said that. The hon. Minister said that, when in the last three days before he spoke, two police officers had been murdered by miscreant bandits, just shot and killed, and another police woman who just came back from representing Trinidad and Tobago with pan and music, as she land and she probably thought outside was sweet, “ent”. Oh, sorry. As she was away, she had to know how sweet Trinidad and Tobago is, but she was outside alive, but when she land, she dead or was shot. She is fighting for her life. Yes. But brain damage and we pray for her, but I am saying to this Minister, you are in charge, stop mamaguying people. People are living out there in fear.

A beautiful police woman, police officer, brilliant, talented person, young, shot, just like that, and rather than fix that, rather than put some policies, rather than bring a budget of resources to fight the crime scourge, rather than pump money into education to lift the mathematics level, the pan in schools, sport, increase the NPI Vote for sport, increase GATE, increase opportunities, put army and police in schools in the hot-spot areas, make sure that teachers are paid more than 4 per cent, “dey come to tell we they

going and argue with an Ambassador to tell them, take down the advisory”. That is wrong, but that is PNM, and PNM is wrong.

11.20 a.m.

“I would not even go. He talked about the cost of living. They talk about \$2 and boast. They not living in Trinidad and Tobago. Ah \$100 in 2015 you go in the grocery now it is valued \$69. You go in the grocery they cutting cheese in one-third blocks. They have milk for babies on lock and key. I thought it was in the nice container in Massy Stores. I thought aye-aye when you buy that milk you get a little thing to put some pasta or some channa or something in. You know that is a security device because poor mothers have to be stealing milk for their children in Trinidad and Tobago? It so sweet.

That hon of Minister of Energy and Energy Industries said the same thing that the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts said, but he said it two years ago on Quest. Me eh know how much dey pay to reach on Quest on CNN, but he said we living good. Well yes, dem living good because dem have 60 recusals, dey brother getting contract, father in IFC \$15 million, boasting about Scotiabank, not telling us that his father was the head Scotiabank, Trinidad and Tobago for the last 45 years, but speaking about it like this is some independent—The people are fed up of this PNM.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The convention is that you come, you make your debut speech, maiden speech, and you come and try to impress with intellect and so on. But, a Senator from Tobago came in this august House, this Chamber, and he just went off, regurgitating untruths from the platform,

adding nothing to debate, criticizing fellow Tobagonians. I never see ah Tobagonian come in the Senate to attack other Tobagonians, talking about—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Roberts: “I will get to him just now. But since you open yuh mouth I will go back to the Minister of Tourism. Let me tell and to the nation.

Sen. Lyder: Give him a touch again.

Sen. A. Roberts: “Yeah, let meh see. We on this camera here? Right, ‘cause ah talking to the nation, not to the PNM.”

Sen. Lyder: Fixing up for he replacements.

Sen. A. Roberts: It is unbelievable and remarkable that no matter how much facts, how much research, how much paper, how much information that you give the PNM, they continue their pathological untruths unfettered. They came here, the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, and the new Senator that replaced another Senator, and they said that the Opposition removed an investment from Tobago, Sandals’ investment was coming and the Opposition was so unpatriotic the investment and the investment. Sandals was not investing \$1 in this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Lyder: Not one cent. And they spend \$7 billion. \$7 billion.

Sen. A. Roberts: The PNM was going to borrow \$7 b-b-b-billion for tax payers to pay back. At the time when I researched they were 13,645 hotels under construction in the globe, and I research, and I look, and I check to see how many were being built with taxpayers dollars. You know what the answer was? Zero. But they talk about investment and they say that move

from—the Sandals’ investment jump from Tobago to St. Vincent. Sandals spend dey own money in Grenada, two hotels, US \$150 million approximately each; Barbados two; St. Lucia three; Antigua two; Bahamas; Jamaica; Dominican Republic. Sandals spend their own money because it is an investment.

In Tobago, the PNM was going to take taxpayers money, borrow money at 6.2 per cent, \$7 billion to build a hotel. When I calculated it if the hotels, the beaches, and the Sandals were total 100 per cent occupancy for a year, we would have broken even in 99 years.

Sen. Lyder: Whoa, wow.

Sen. A. Roberts: “If you were occupied with 100 per cent, so you had no lull you ain’t dip for 60, you ain’t dip for 40 you understand? In 99 years the people of Trinidad and Tobago would have broken even. They come to say bout we would ah get some job, to put on gloves and hand out glass, saying could I get you a drink, Sir? We pass that, we in oils and gas since 1908, since 1972, right? So, please PNM stop telling untruths. Sandals was not spending one red cent. If they were spending, I will be the first one, I would have go and book a room dey in Sandals and all and go, not in de other one that gone down, but the hon. Senator spoke about Double Palm. I ain’t know how, he know bout that reach Tobago, but then again, when he reach home all he clothes was in ah garbage bag, so maybe it was from—”

Mr. President: Senator. Senator, again, again do not, no.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Mr. President: Please. Continue.

Sen. A. Roberts: Hon. Senator from Tobago came and said here that the

UNC did nothing for Tobago and built nothing.

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

Sen. A. Roberts: “Oh goosh let meh go fast”. He said—

Sen. Mitchell: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Excuse me please, do not disturb me, Sir.

Sen. Mitchell: [*Laughs*]

Sen. Lyder: Go back on him again!

Sen. A. Roberts: “Yes. Na, na, enough of him. Just like the PNM had enough of him in Sando East and elsewhere I had enough him.”

Sen. Lyder: [*Laughs*]

Sen. A. Roberts: “The hon. Senator from Tobago on top of attacking Tobagonians he came to say that this UNC does not respect Tobago and did nothing expect build a meteorological building and so on, and then ah pumpkin house. That is what he said in the Senate. Well let me just remind him of some off the top of muh head. I did not go and call and research and thing. But the gas station on the other side of the island is UNC build that.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: The MIC Centre, the Roxborough gas station, the Dwight Yorke Stadium track, which was certified 1A, which means world record could be broken there, was put down at \$10.3 million by this Minister of Sports.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: This Minister of Sport also approved and got from the Ministry of Finance a \$120 million to do over and refurbish and renovate the Dwight Yorke Stadium.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Because the guts of it, because of the sea blast, the infrastructure, the metal, the electrical, the plumbing needed to be redone. “But that Member from Tobago say when dey reach they had no money in the Treasury. But his Prime Minister is on tape, go and check social media, talking about grass and pointing at this and saying in 2014, you see this big tall red line that is cash in bank. Yes, that is Kamla cash. The Member for Siparia and the Leader of the Opposition cash in bank 2014, reserves US \$11.4 b-b-billion.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: “US \$6.8 b-b-billion in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, 14 months of import cover. They come and dip and dip in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and boast now, it reach back above \$6 b-b-billion. Nine years later had you manage the economy properly the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was growing at an average of \$1.2 to \$1.8 b-b-billion per year. Nine by 1.2 it should have gone by at least US \$10 b-b-billion. They use out, they spend out, and then they doh want to account for it here, they want to argue with Auditor General to challenge ah mind like the travel advisory.

We also have the renovation of Dwight Yorke Stadium, WASA did five pumping station in Tobago during that time. The UWI Campus was due to come to Tobago, so Tobagonians children doh have to come down here to study. We also finished the Scarborough General Hospital.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: “Yes, we could not find the materials that went by

Landate, but we had to but new material and finish the Scarborough General Hospital, so that Member of Tobago to come here. The seabridge was flowing perfectly, the vessels purchased by the hon. Patrick Manning, the *Express* and the *Spirit*, and maintain by the Canadian Company, were maintained by the hon. Member for Siparia. On top of that she got the *Superfast Galicia* that was making it to Tobago in two hours and 25 minutes. Dem collapse the seabridge, to put Tobagonians thing on barge for salt water to go all in their engine, and on their banana, and so on, and then come to tell is that UNC disrespect Tobago. You know they also say that the PNM is a national party and the UNC doh even want to go in Tobago. Let me tell you something, the PNM cannot even understand respect, self-governance, understanding that what UNC and the Member for Siparia believes, is that Tobagonians must see about Tobago.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Roberts: Therefore, not only did she bring the Constitution (Amdt.)(Tobago) Bill, 2013 and the PNM did not vote with it. The Member for Diego Martin West is on *Hansard* as quoting an exact verbatim from an article written by another noble Tobagonian, word for word without giving credit.

11.30 a.m.

So when they talk about respect, we respect Tobago more than the PNM, the PNM feels that they must rule Tobago from Trinidad, from Balisier House here, but one thing I learnt about Sen. Ancil Dennis, I learnt three things yesterday when listening to him: One—

Sen. Lyder: Was not much to learn.

Sen. A. Roberts: It was not much to learn, but listen carefully, the three things about the new replacement Senator, one: Somehow I now understand how he managed to lose a fixed election; two, I now realize that former Sen. Laurel Lezama-Lee Sing was not that bad; and three, while he criticizes Tobagonian Ashworth Jack about some pumpkin house, whether pumpkin house, “bhagi” house, or cassava house, Ashworth Jack never reached home and see “he” clothes in a garbage bag outside.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Senator. Senator, Senator.

Sen. A. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Caution—Sen. Roberts.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Mr. President: Members. I have cautioned Sen. Roberts on going down that line. You have a few seconds left in terms of your time—

Sen. A. Roberts: Few seconds?

Mr. President: Yes. Yes. It is 11.30, your five-minute warning was at 11.25, but I will allow you to just wrap it up.

Sen. A. Roberts: Let me wrap it up like a roti. So, let me just say that I would leave Sen. Nandlal for another time. Okay? But I would say that PNM, they are magicians, everything goes poof. They borrowed \$127 “b-b-b” billion, poof, “it gone”; the Treasury empty, poof; the refinery, poof, “it gone”. Beautiful brilliant magicians, but the PNM is a classic catfish for the young people who now understand, because if they watch the PNM is Simran from *Sweet Bobby* on Netflix. If you know, you know. God bless. Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: The Minister of Public Administration.

The Minister of Public Administration (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West):

Thank you, Mr president, for allowing me the opportunity to participate in this debate. Before I get on to the substance of my contribution I would like to respond to a couple of comments made on the other side, not so much by the Member who just ranted about all kinds of things, but let me start with Sen. Mark's comments about how much the PNM increased the public debt, and compare that with what happened under the UNC reign to give us context. So the UNC moved the debt from 32.1 per cent to 50.9 per cent.

Hon. Senator: What!

Sen. The Hon. A. West: To 50.9 per cent, which is a 58 per cent adjustment over five years. The PNM moved it from 50.9 per cent to 75.6, which is a 50 per cent less than 8; 50 per cent adjustment over the 10 years. So we are comparing a 58 per cent adjustment to the debt to a 50 per cent adjustment over five years under the UNC and over 10 years under the PNM. Okay?

Sen. Roberts: We had CLICO—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: More importantly than that, let us look at the context in which that debt adjustment took place. The UNC came in at a time when oil prices were high and production was high, prices were increasing culminating in the second highest oil price and the second highest income earned in 2014 under the UNC. When PNM was facing a similar situation in 2009 when they generated—when they earned the highest level of income from the energy sector, what did we do? We declared a surplus in

that year and left some money in the kitty for the future. What did the UNC do? Having earned \$64 billion in income in that year, they borrowed an additional \$5 billion and took the budget up to the highest level ever in history, either before or since, no other Government has taken the budget up to \$89 billion.

Sen. Mitchell: Irresponsible.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Completely irresponsible. Let us look at more context. When the Minister of Finance came into office he was met by the Governor of the Central Bank who told him that we had three days of cover for our expenses. Obviously in those circumstances it was necessary to borrow. What did the UNC meet when they came into power? They met \$16 billion in the NGC account and \$12 billion credit in the Central Bank. So not only were they operating in circumstances where the oil prices were rising and income was rising, they had \$28 billion in savings residing in two accounts. What did they do? They spent every cent and increased the public debt by 58 per cent. So Sen. Mark, when you want to complain about what the PNM has done, check first and see what the UNC has done in comparison.

Sen. Mark: You are misleading the Senate.

Sen. Mitchell: You are misleading yourself.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: I am not misleading at all.

Sen. Mark: Wrong figures.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: The other comment that I would like to respond to was Sen. Maharaj's comment about, why is the service commission so inefficient? I would like to let—we had this debate based on a Motion that

Sen. Vieira brought a couple years ago. The service commission was introduced at a time when the public service was much smaller. The Service Commissions Department is peopled by fewer than 500. There are 500 bodies or less in that organization and they are required to hire, discipline, terminate, treat with the affairs of 60,000 public servants. When one does the Maths that means each individual in the service commission deals with 120 people-odd. Obviously in those circumstances it is inefficient, because there is no way an organization of that size can treat with the mass of human beings we have in the public service.

So whilst some would think that the answer to that would be to add more people to the service commission, that is not my view, and fortunately does not appear to be the view of the service commission. What the service commission has attempted to do to treat with that, is to delegate some of its powers to the agencies. We have had two problems with that attempted delegation: one, the PSs and other heads of division are not assuming responsibility for the delegated roles, and at the moment we do not have an effective way to treat with that, but we are trying to develop an effective way to deal with that. The other problem with that is, even as the service commissions delegate some of its authority, the delegation in my view is not as complete as it should be. They are still retaining, in my view, too much of the authority to treat with.

So, for example, in the Ministry of Public Administration we tried maybe about a year ago to engage a director for the Property and Real Estate Services Division, and while we assumed responsibility under the delegated authority for engaging this person, we had to double check everything with

the service commission because that is the way their delegated authority works. So we drafted the ad to engage people. We had to run that by service commission. We shortlisted, we had to run that by service commission. So unless we have more effective delegation of power, we will continue to have the delays. But, fortunately we have reconstituted the Strategic Human Resource Management Council and we are working with the service commission and the CPO to come up with more effective ways to manage the human resources in the public service, and presumably we will come to a landing in the not too distant future.

Sen. Roberts made the comment that—he was talking about where they pushed the price of oil so that they will have money available to put in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. He said they did not need to take all the money and spend it. But as I indicated earlier, when the UNC Government made the highest income in any year in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, \$64 billion, they did not only take that money and spend it all, they borrowed and spent more.

11.40 a.m.

So if that is not the most irresponsible approach of any government, I do not know what is. They keep saying that they are the government in waiting, I say that that is a disaster waiting to happen. And hopefully, Trinidad and Tobago will not allow itself to go down that road again, because I can tell you, we cannot afford to do that.

So, Mr. President, let me get into the reason I am here, to report on what the Ministry of Public Administration has been doing and what we will be doing over the course of the 2025 income year. So our most significant

project is the introduction of a comprehensive electronic Human Capital Management System. That is a cloud-based solution, with the cloud based in Trinidad and Tobago. This will allow us to properly manage HR across all aspects, from recruitment to termination, and make it more efficient.

At the moment, our IHRIS system really focuses almost completely on payroll, but this human resource management system that we are seeking to introduce—and it will be ready for rollout during fiscal 2025—will allow a full range. So that even the Service Commissions issues that I was treating with earlier should be more efficiently handled because the recruitment will be based on the platform. So we have things like recruitment, we have leave processing, we have pension processing. So everything dealing with human resource management will be done on an e-cloud system. Different modules of that system will be controlled by the different elements of the HR ecosystem, because as you may know, the HR ecosystem in the public service is handled by Ministry of Finance—sorry, the Ministry of Public Administration, the Personnel Department and the Service Commissions Department. So they will be responsible for their relevant elements of that system, so there is no compromise on confidentiality or sharing information that should not be shared.

This will facilitate an enhanced user experience, comprehensive HR functionality, standardized processing, cost efficiency. And because we are computerizing a lot of the processes that are normally handled now manually, we will no longer need people in HR units to be taking a physical record of leave entitlements, for example, or having to check those things.

So what we are doing, even as we build the system, is revisiting the

structure of our HR units to restructure them, to allow them to be more strategic, to allow their focus to be on more career development of public servants rather than on keeping records. So the new HR units will be expected to do things like chart careers for individuals, ensure that they receive the right kind of training that they will need to allow them to follow that career path and more strategically manage our HR resources to get better HR results. So, as I said, even as we develop our e-HRM system, we are looking to restructure our HR units to make them more strategic; HR units. And we will be taking a note to Cabinet shortly to seek approval of those new structures.

The second project that I will talk about is the modernization of our Public Service Academy. The Public Service Academy is a unit of the Ministry of Public Administration that is committed to training and development within the public service, ensuring that our workforce is equipped to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. Now, while the Public Service Academy is a solid unit, it has been doing good work—and I got a couple of commendations from people who have recently attended courses and they told me how great the courses were—it is, of necessity, a small unit and therefore, there is only so much training they can do in a year. So they have ranged from training 500 people a year to 1,500 people a year.

At the moment, they are on the 1,500 mark, but we are talking about a public service of 60,000, a civil service of 40,000. So training 1,500 people a year is just not adequate to allow for the kind of continuous training and development, which any employee in an organization requires. So, what we have recently done, even as we try to get the best approach as to how to

restructure the Public Service Academy, what we have done is we have entered into a memorandum of understanding with the University of the West Indies to offer two public servants, at the Government's expense, training in various relevant areas, so that we can increase the level of training that we provide to our employees, and we can make the training more continuous and more impactful.

The first cohort is—actually, it started today. The training started today. The aim is to train 3,000 people per term, and so this term—because it started a little later, it would probably run into January, and then the second cohort will start in January. So we are hoping to train either two to three cohorts per year, which will be 6,000 to 9,000 people, in addition to the 1,500 that the Public Service Academy is training, while we go about the work of improving how they operate.

We are also in the process of coming to an arrangement with the University of Trinidad and Tobago to allow for different kinds of training to public servants for things like web designs and animation, and those things that people in communications, for example, can use to more effectively communicate government messages, will be something that we will training people in. So this is a programme that we are proud of and we are hoping that, moving forward, we can have a public service that is developing and growing and being better able to serve the public as we move forward.

Digital Transformation: As with the rest of Government of Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry of Public Administration is embarked on a programme of digitally transforming its operations. We started with the Property and Real Estate Services Division, we then went to Public

Management Consulting Unit which advises government on organizational structures within the public service, and we then completed our HR unit.

So one of the things I had indicated to this House, when I spoke on it earlier, was that the digitalization of the Property and Real Estate Services Division was anticipated to allow us to get more ready access to properties that are available on the market, because it allowed people with properties to register on the system, therefore, giving us a wider choice and presumably, in that context, a better negotiating power to reduce or to manage government rentals. I am happy to indicate to this House that having reported to the nation when we were dealing with the issue of the DPP rental and the issues coming out of that, that our monthly rent at the time was \$23 million per month; government rent.

11.50 a.m.

At the moment, we have successfully managed, partly through our digital platform, to reduce that rent to \$19.6 million, a 20 per cent reduction in the rent—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West:—and we are continuing along that thrust, and we hope to bring it down even further before the end of fiscal 2025.

I read in the newspaper a couple days ago where somebody was saying that Government should acquire the Trincity Mall and use that to create an all-inclusive government space, but I would like to tell the person who wrote the article that this is an idea which the Government has not only already thought of but has embraced and has embarked on a plan to do that exactly. Not a plan to acquire the mall, but we have launched the Point Fortin

heritage complex in April of 2024, and we hope to open it within the next six months to provide a one-stop shop for all of government services in and around Point Fortin. So it is anticipated that that building will house all government services. So if you want to engage with Government you go to one place and you can get everything done from social services, to licensing, to Inland Revenue, everything.

In addition to that, we will have spaces in that complex to allow persons who need help with applying for things digitally, to go in and get the help in a particular area from trained staff with access to devices that will allow the staff to work with them to get their things done. And in those complexes as well, we are going to have areas where individuals who live in the area but work further away can go to those areas and work out of those areas for certain days with the agreement of their supervisors.

So I have heard myriads of stories about people who live in Point Fortin and have to get up at three o'clock in the morning to get to Port of Spain in time to work and that kind of thing. These people will now have the option after this complex is built, with the agreement of their supervisor, to work out of the hoteling spots in the complex and avoid on certain days the trials of having to get to up early to get to Port of Spain to work, so that should create some more work-life balance.

We also have on the drawing board, an admin complex similarly as comprehensive and all-inclusive in Arima. So my vision would be to have such admin complexes throughout Trinidad—well in the relevant major areas throughout Trinidad and Tobago. So you will have one in San Fernando for example, one in Chaguanas for example, so that people will be

able to go to these admin complexes and get all the government services that they require. So at the moment we are working with two, and while we work with those two new ones we are also in the process of refurbishing and better outfitting the two admin complexes that already exist in Siparia and Tunapuna.

Now those admin complexes were not built to be as all-inclusive in terms of the provision of government services as the new ones, but those services which we do offer through those locations, we should be able to offer them in more comfortable circumstances. So we are working on improving the look and feel of those centres.

A project undertaken by the Ministry that has the public very excited, certainly members of the public service, very excited, is our remote work policy which we are in the process of designing. Now during COVID when we are forced to essentially shutdown the economy but had to keep the public service operating for certain essential services, quite a few public servants were required to work from home. And since then, they have been asking, “Well, if I successfully worked from home during the COVID why can I not work from home now because there are so many benefits to be gained from working from home?” And our response to that is, “Yes, while we had to work from home during COVID and we managed to keep things afloat, there were tons of things that were not ready, that did not run as smoothly as they could because everybody is not as able to work from home, as ready to work from home, or as self-motivated as they should be.”

So what we undertook to do was a study to determine, one, whether Trinidad and Tobago is ready for remote work; two, what categories of jobs

can accommodate remote work; what is required to facilitate remote work; how do we treat with it; who will be responsible for what, that kind of thing. So we have engaged a consultant. They have embarked on the study consulting with a wide range of people and so on. They will come back to us with—we will do our project pilot. Within the next month, we will start a pilot project, and the plan is for them to report to us by February so that we can take to the Cabinet a position with a recommendation on whether we move forward with remote work or not. And I keep saying to people who ask me, that the most significant decision we will have to make in respect of whether or not we introduce remote work, is how the introduction of remote work will impact on the productivity in the public service.

We are not prepared to introduce remote work if it is going to decrease the level of production, decrease the quality of service to the public. So that is an important element. So when we report to the Government and the Government makes a decision, we will advise the members of the public service and others as to whether we move forward with the remote work.

While we are building out our digital platform and our new way of working, a few policies we are looking to introduce is succession planning because we must have realized that that is not something that the public service in particular does well. We will see it all the time when we come to hire a new commissioner of police. There is no sense that people are being readied to move into those positions, and that is true across the public service. We are not ensuring that people are properly trained, that career paths are identified, that the right steps are being taken to ready people to step into those positions. So we have come up with a succession planning

policy. We are taking that to Cabinet within the next week or two to seek approval of that, and hopefully going forward we will have a more structured way of ensuring that people who are there to take over from their more senior people will be ready to step into those positions because they have been prepared for that.

One of the areas that I have been focused on, that I have been trying to inculcate into the ethos of the Ministry of Public Admin, in particular, and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in general, is a focus on citizen-centric service. Because if we realize that the reason that we are there is not just to earn a salary. It is not just about a job. We are there to serve the public, and if we take the right approach to that then we will come up with the right results nine times out of 10.

12.00 p.m.

So we saw this introduction of a new visitor dress code. We all know about the complaints we have been getting over the years about people going to one Ministry and being told they cannot be let in because of what they have on and then they go to another Ministry and they are let in. So there was inconsistency and the focus was more on how the person looked than on providing the person with a service. So we looked at it, came up with a new dress code policy that was more relaxed and that was more consistent with where we live. We did not only do the traditional approach of sending out a circular and saying this is the new dress code policy. We brought together 400 frontline officers, security officers and their supervisors to train them, not only in the new dress code policy, but in the approach they should take in treating with members of the public.

So our message to them was even if somebody came in inappropriately dressed notwithstanding the relaxed code, because you can get that, unless their look was really egregious the objective should always be to provide the services being requested. So even if you have to take them into a separate room and help them there, the objective is service to the public and we launched that a few months ago. It has run smoothly, we have had no new complaints and I think as a general rule people are happy.

I actually spoke to the lady who ended up in the newspaper because she draped a curtain over her to get into an office and she said she was very happy with the new policy and as far as she was concerned it was working well. So that is just an indication of the new approach that the Ministry of Public Administration is trying to introduce into the ethos of the public service that the focus should always be on serving people because that is why we are there.

So Mr. President, the Ministry of Public Administration, as I keep saying is the public service's best-kept secret but it has an important role to play in ensuring that we take a whole-of-government approach to serving the public and stop operating in silos. We need to get to a place, and working with my colleague from the Ministry of Digital Transformation with the interoperability, we are trying to get to a place where service to the public becomes easier. That you no longer have to run from location number one to get an ID, to location number two to get a form, to location number three to make a payment that we can base on a digital platform but with a change in the way we do things, serve people better and easier.

In trying to do that, what we are doing is reengineering our processes

because a lot of what we do is based on ancient history and we are questioning the need for certain things to just make life easier. Do we, for example, need two forms of ID when you go into an office and if we do need two forms of ID can they be available on the digital platform so that when you go the employee could just pull it up and yes you are confirmed so you do not have to keep going and coming. Do we tell people up front?

Do we make it easily enough available to them the information that they need, the documentation that they need to get a service done, rather than having to tell them okay you need this form? When they come with the form so say well you need an ID and you have to go back and get the ID and when they come back again, they need something else. So reengineering our processes to one, reduce the number of things people need and to what is essential and two, letting them know in advance of when they approach the Government service what they need to make life easier for them. So the reengineering of processes is important.

Having public servants change the way they have operated over the last how much many decades is not the easiest thing in the world. It is something that they hold on to, but we are working diligently to inculcate that change and we are seeing some improvement in that. So we will continue to work with that and try to ensure that the government service is a place that you can go to, to get the service that you need. And, if you cannot get the service, that you get a clear understanding of why it is not possible. As opposed to the frustration you have now where you have to wait forever, you do not understand why the wait, you do not understand why you are not getting what you are getting. So that, our aim is to devise a service that is

citizen-centric user friendly and easy to navigate. So with those few words
Mr. President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Smith.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dominic Smith: Hon. President, Members of the Senate, citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, today I rise not merely to respond to the Government's budget but to speak on behalf of the citizens of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. A nation that in many respect and regard feels neglected. A nation that feels unheard. A nation that feels disillusioned and a people who feel—and I submit to the gentlemen and ladies across there—they feel as a people without a voice. A people scared and scarred and anxious about the future of their country and not only the future of their country, but the lives of their children. And so, on this occasion and the honour of addressing this Senate, I must first express gratitude to a woman that is indeed a person of great empathy and kindness and a leader for the future of Trinidad and Tobago the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC.

So given this opportunity it caused me to reflect on what we are really here to do as Members of the Senate and as Members of Parliament and the word politics and its derivative comes to mind. Where does this word come from? Its first origin is *politiká* which means city and state. And we look at the derivations as time went on it evolved into the Latin *politicus* which pertains to civil administrations and governance. But the most important aspect of the budget presentation and the most important aspect of politics is service to the people, service to the members and the citizens of the nation to

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whom which you must represent. Unfortunately, nine times over—

Mr. President: Senator, can you just do me a favour and push the mic away from you a bit. A little further. Good perfect, that should be fine because your voice is carrying quite nicely, so the mic is picking up more.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: No, you were loud too but we are going to fix it now.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Mr. President: Continue.

Sen. D. Smith: Noted hon. President. So forgive my boisterous nature. It is with passion that I come to you this morning.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Smith: And it is passion that is indeed needed—

Sen. Lyder: The love of passion.

Sen. D. Smith:—to take this country into the future.

Hon. Senators: Yes—[*Desk thumping*]

12.10 p.m.

Sen. D. Smith: And you see when you are sitting on your laurels for nine years, it is difficult to come to this Senate with passion because it is almost as though you are doing this for too long. But not to fear, you do not have to sit on your laurels for too long, a time will come where that too shall pass.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Smith: And so colleagues, as we embark upon what a budget presentation is meant to do, it is not merely a matter of arithmetic. You know I have heard persons in the other place as well as here speak about expenditure and revenue and they play with the lives of the citizens of

Trinidad and Tobago as if it was merely a balance sheet. I even heard the hon. Prime Minister in his acting capacity speak to the cycles and the booms and slumps of an economy. But I want to suggest to him that only a mismanaged economy, an economy that has been managed for nine years poorly, has that level of inconsistency. But with a well-managed, well-appropriated government, these problems will be a thing of the past.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Smith: And so the budget, friends, it is about governance and decision making. It is about representing citizens' interest. It is about participation in public affairs, but it is also about the rights and responsibilities and the accountability of a Government for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And so, in my estimation of the budget and in coming to this honourable Senate, a lot of the times, the Government is of the view that the Opposition and anyone opposed to their views is politicizing an issue and they always have this way of saying well, do not speak about x, y and z, you are politicizing.

But I want them to understand that it is not political when our young people are being murdered daily in our streets, when families are forced to bury their sons and daughters. It is not political to ask for accountability. It is not political for our people to feel safe in their homes and for security and decent human rights to be observed. It is not political, friends, when floods invade your homes in all areas of the country. It is not political when we cannot have decent lives and economic prosperity without fear of extortion by criminal elements. It is not political, friends, when we want a clean and reliable water supply. It is not political, friends, when we want

accountability and transparency when you are delivering a budget. It is not political, it is personal because each and every one of us have an invested interest in the future of our country and so it cannot be simply political.

So as I look at the theme of this year's budget, it had me thinking after nine years, what were some of the themes have been presented by the hon. Minister of Finance in the past because a trajectory of nine years, a record of nine years must demonstrate to the people of Trinidad and Tobago some level of progression, yes, some level of sustainability, some level of forward-thinking. So let us go to 2016: Restoring Confidence and Rebuilding Trust: Let's Do This Together; 2017: Shaping a Brighter Future: transforming a new economy; 2018: Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path; 2020: strengthening the foundation: building resilience for innovation and growth.

Mr. Imbert: Standing Order 46(1). I distinctly remember introducing the Appropriation Bill, 2025, not that.

Hon. Senator: What?

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: All right. Okay. Members, let me—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: No, again. A Standing Order has been raised, Senator, from what I get that you are doing, you are just calling out the titles of past budgets. Again, I understand the point that you are making, you do not need to call out every single one from 2015 to now. We get the point of what you are doing. You have done a couple already, so I would ask you to just

continue along and make your contribution.

Sen. Roberts: Okay, former Acting Prime Minister.

Sen. D. Smith: I am guided, Mr. President.

Sen. Mark: No, past, past.

Sen. D. Smith: You see, a challenge that we have is called self-awareness and when you know where you come from, you can know where you are going and so that is why this is important. But I want you to understand coming to terms with all of these many years of fantastical themes that we have had to deal with, the main theme in all of these are challenges. The Government has been challenged for so many years, challenge, upon challenge, upon challenge. Well, I submit to them if you are not up for the challenge, you can vacate.

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

Sen. D. Smith: So this budget is almost as though we are in the twilight zone, déjà vu; a Government of déjà vu. I will tell you today if you look at the prospectus, if you look at the objectives of each budget, year on year, it seems that they have repeat offenders in the budget. Repeat offenders in the budget because the same thing occurs over and over again.

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

Sen. D. Smith: I wonder if in the spin cycle of the preparation of the budget, if it would be worthwhile before the hon. Minister of Finance comes to present, if he can please put the budget in “ah sack of rice” before you present to the people. Maybe that will fix the problem.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter and interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: Standing Order 46(1). We are supposed to be debating “An

Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day...”—

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous interruption*]

Mr. President: All right, okay, no, Members. No. I cannot hear the point of order being raised by the Minister of Finance so therefore it becomes difficult to rule. Minister of Finance, your point of order.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you so much, Mr. President. We are supposed to be debating “An Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September 2025”. Not all of that.

Sen. Mark: [*Interruption*]

Mr. President: Sen. Mark, Sen. Mark.

Sen. Lyder: The new Prime Minister spoke about the last years.

Mr. President: So the only person to respond to a point of order is myself. Shouting across the Floor does nothing than allow the time to run on the Member speaking, so you understand what the detriment is. Member, I understand what it is that you are doing, right. Yes, we are debating budget 2025, yes, you are correlating it to budgets past and the economy past and so forth, so I will allow you to continue in that respect. Continue.

Sen. D. Smith: I am guided by your astuteness and wisdom.

Sen. Roberts: “Doh worry”, that is why he is not Acting Prime Minister, he is being rejected.

Sen. D. Smith: Look, comrades.

Sen. Singh: Not comrades.

Sen. D. Smith: [*Laughter*] Hon. Members, it seems as though that anytime something is said that irritates, that tickles, there seems to be a problem but

that is okay because the truth sometimes hurts—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Smith:—and so we understand. We understand that the truth sometimes hurts.

But I want to go into the meat of my contribution and if the hon. Members across there will allow it, I shall continue to the benefit of the nation. So a couple of areas I want to speak about which are significantly pertinent to both the citizenry but specifically to the younger generation, to the persons who now have to inherit what our leaders have presented for them. So when I look at the economics of this Bill as well as past, it seems that it is a broken economic model. It is broken because when we look at the data, year on year, it does not paint a picture of a grand future. It does not paint a picture of prosperity.

12.2 p.m.

You see, we have the Bill which was pegged on a 1.9 per cent projected growth rate. Some of the highlights that we are featuring here are issues of inflation. There was a boast that inflation is down and that, year on year, we have seen a reduction. But I want to submit to my colleague across there that inflation matters not when there is high unemployment. Inflation matters not when there is high underemployment. Inflation matters not when persons cannot even afford to go to the grocery or to the parlour.

And so when we look at the macroeconomics, we must also consider the microeconomics in our approach. When we look at food inflation, specifically, we see that there is an increase from 2.3 per, from 1.9 per cent year on year. When we look at basic food prices and the basket of goods,

over the years 2015 to 2024, we see that there has been an increase of almost 73 per cent on a basket of goods. When we look at health inflation, it is upwards of 7.5 per cent. When we look at communications inflation, we look at an increase of almost 8.5 per cent. When we look at oil and gas reliance, as the hon. Prime Minister would have mentioned, there is a 51.4 per cent decrease in energy reserves year on year. So this is a broken economic model, friends. This is a model that is not sustainable. This is a model that we cannot rely on.

And so it is always appropriate to come here and say, “Yes, the Opposition is singing songs of despair.” But just as they would have mentioned, the fact is the fact. Over the past nine years, our country has been moving down an economic path that is not sustainable. The hon. Member, in her contribution, spoke to debts and debt-to-GDP and matters related to debt. She mentioned that borrowing happened on the other side. I want to submit to her that debt is good if done in a responsible manner. If you incur debt, it must be with the responsibility to invest in areas that will drive the economy, that will accelerate the economy, that will bring growth and prosperity to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. But what we can see is a track record of indebtedness. And no pun intended, but debt under this PNM Administration has led to death—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Smith:—in our nation and in the streets of Trinidad and Tobago.

But let us look at the numbers as it relate to the GDP of our country— and we are speaking about real GDP. Let us look at the numbers as it relates to unemployment over the past nine years. We have central government

debt of plus 3.4 per cent. We have external Government debt of over 15.4 per cent, year on year. So that is why we are in a crisis of debt accumulation over time.

I remember a few years ago, not too long ago, there was talk of a surplus. In the midst of the ocean of debt, suddenly, there was a surplus, and so this was something we should have been proud of. But if, on average, Sir, you are in a deficit, you are managing the economy in deficit year, on year, on year, where is the light at the end of the tunnel? Where is the chance for prosperity?

In my time in university, professors and economists have been speaking about diversification for year, on year, on year. My good colleague, a calypsonian, Senator, he mentioned in his contribution that we have been speaking about using other areas to monetize and develop our tourism sector. Much has been said about that. But there has been much ado about nothing under this PNM Government; much ado about nothing. Because there has been talk, after talk, after talk without implementation, without operationalization, and that cannot be a recipe for success.

Sen. Roberts: Did you pass mathematics?

Sen. D. Smith: I did, Sir; I did, a distinction.

Sen. Roberts: I want to think so. “Dem over dey doh do dey test yuh know”.

Sen. D. Smith: Thank you, but I digress. The point being, when we look at 2019, our debt-to-GDP ratio was at 58.8 per cent. When we looked at June 2021, it skyrocketed to 65 per cent. When we look at the data, as it relates to our existing debt-to-GDP ratio, we are almost at 76 per cent. How long will

we borrow until our debtors come knocking at our doors? How long will we borrow and kick the can down the road? Friends, colleagues, comrades, as Trinidadians, as citizens, we have to be mindful of what is our diversification strategy, if any.

When I look at the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago, do you know that we are ranked at 105 out of 190 countries? Did you know that many organizations have suggested that our problems with earning foreign direct investment is directly related to the bureaucracy involved in the process of investing in our country? In fact, one of the Big 5 accounting firms suggested, based on budget insights, that our main issues are:

1. Corruption;
2. Foreign exchange controls;
3. Crime and security
4. Low productivity y in the national labour force; and
5. Government bureaucracy.

You see, so it is only so much that we can do to sell our country if our systems are not incentivized for foreign direct investment. So what we can say to these people is, “Come join us, where we embrace inefficiencies, where we embrace operational chaos, where we embrace all of these issues.” They will not come. And so whether you stay in Trinidad, go to Miami, or travel wherever, it does not matter. You have to fix home first. You must fix home first, and that is a problem that we are having.

So let us be fair, in 10 years, a lot can be done. So I wanted to look at what similar economies in the last 10 years—given such a time, a boy can become almost a teenager in that time, families grow in that time. What can

be accomplished in that time? And so if you look at the United Arab Emirates, in 10 years, new revenue streams, tourism, logistics, financial services, successes. While initially oil dependent, the UAE diversified into tourism. Dubai became a global hub for financial services and logistics. The results—and I want you to understand the process—investment, time, results. Investment, time, results. You put in the work, you operationalize the work, and you expect a result.

So the result was significant GDP growth due to non-oil sectors, now contributing to a whopping 70 per cent to the economy; 70 per cent. So you come here today with the stories of, “We are challenged by our oil and gas, our natural advantages and disadvantages, and we challenged here, and if you look at how clean the floor is in these oil and gas competitors, you can eat a sandwich off the ground.” There are no sandwiches left for the people of Trinidad and Tobago because you have mismanaged the economy. You have mismanaged the natural resources that we have had in this country.

Look to Vietnam, where they have grown their GDP by upwards of 15 per cent by investing in electronics, manufacturing and technology. Look to Chile, where there are non-traditional exports. They are now looking at fruits, wine, salmon and renewable energy. Look to Costa Rica, where they have invested in technology, medical devices and ecotourism. Look to Ireland, our friends in Ireland, where they have contributed now to the text sector, the pharmaceutical industry and the financial services industry. They have had major attractions, the likes of Google, Apple and Pfizer. All of these companies go to where there is an opportunity and an appetite for growth.

12.30 p.m.

And so if persons have not come to Trinidad and Tobago in nine years, what does that suggest to you? This is not a place for investment. And so you have to create the environment, the ecosystem that is required for diversification. If you look at Ethiopia they have had GDP growth in Africa in manufacturing, agriculture, and infrastructure. If you look at Bangladesh, they have had growth in textiles and apparel and pharmaceuticals. And so I could go on, and on, and on. If you came and you said, “Sir, after one year not much progress can be made.” The population has given you another year, they have given you another year, they have given you another year, they have given you five years, you went on to six, you are at seven, you are at eight, you are at nine, and now you coming to tell me—

Sen. Lyder: About pathways.

Sen. D. Smith:—about steadfast and resolute? About forging paths to prosperity? What have you been doing in all that time?

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

Sen. D. Smith: What were you doing?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Smith: You are now forging paths to prosperity? I mean a blind man can see—

Sen. Roberts: “Dey was recusing demselves.”

Sen. Lyder: “Wat dem could see”?

Sen. D. Smith: A blind man can see that not much is happening, not much is happening. If after 10 years as a businessman, I cannot present to you

means of revenue generation, or alternative sources, I tell you by the afternoon the CEO will be fired.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Smith: I tell you, in another place they would be exiled out of the country but in Trinidad and Tobago, forging pathways to success, steadfast and resolute. How long must the people of Trinidad be steadfast and resolute? I mean you are asking for too much now, you are asking but we do not have anything else to give. We have zero to give, zero to give, there is nothing to give. And so—

Sen. Mitchell: Why are you undressing?

Sen. D. Smith: I am emptying my pockets so you can see how the common man on the ground feels.

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

Sen. A. Roberts: “Dey cyah afford to plan”.

Sen. D. Smith: Because it is empty.

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

Sen. D. Smith: I did not want to have to speak to my colleagues on their contributions, but if you do not have bread and butter to feed your children, I wonder how you are going to get to the US and these other aristocratic countries to benefit and see how sweet Trinidad and Tobago is.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. D. Smith: If you cannot find 10 cents to rub together as a common man in Trinidad and Tobago, how are you to enjoy—

Sen. Roberts: London.

Sen. D. Smith:—lamb and life in London, as the hon. Members across the

Floor.

Sen. Lyder: You have to get foreign exchange in the bank to travel.

Sen. Roberts: Or Samoa.

Sen. Lyder: “Cyah get no foreign exchange in de bank to travel”.

Sen. D. Smith: You know the audacity sometimes, it is incredible. But as you say, “Wa...eye doh see, heart doh...”

Sen. Roberts: Feel.

Sen. D. Smith:—“...grieve.” So you not in a situation where you have to do that. And so that is what we are challenged with in Trinidad and Tobago. How do we identify with the people that we are meant to serve? How do we treat with the man on the ground who has to work a taxi service to pay for his children to go to school and then you want to suggest a \$1,000 book grant? Sir, do you know the cost of books in this country for our children? And you want to give \$1,000 for book grants? I mean it is ridiculous.

Think about the man who has to come from Sangre Grande to Port of Spain and then has to send his children down the road, and has to take a taxi down the road every day. I tell you I have walked the ground in Trinidad and Tobago and I can tell you, you know what one of the main issues facing single mothers in Trinidad and Tobago? They do not, not want to send their children to school, they cannot afford it. They cannot afford to send their own children to school because the cost is too much, and so they have to make a choice, do I feed my son a meal today or do send him to school?

Sen. Roberts: “But he say let dem fly London.”

Sen. D. Smith: Friends, these things do not make logical sense. And if you have an illogical government you have to get rid of them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Smith: And in speaking about diversification, I want to speak to a particular issue and it relates to innovation. Because you have to understand the theory and the academics behind your implementations, your policies, and your systems. There must be policy, and innovation and diversification go hand in hand, most scholars would tell you this. Do you know that we had in this country an innovation policy? Did you know we had a national innovation policy? We did. When the PNM Government came into power they scrapped it, they reintroduced it again in 2017 to 2020 and then they closed it again. You have no plan for economic diversification, you have no policy for economic diversification but you want to say, “Well, the manufacturing sector is growing about 3 per cent.” How is that meant to provide a robust future for the people of Trinidad and Tobago?

It is either you are incompetent or you are not aggressive enough, because you do not see the warning signs, and friends, the warning signs even if you are a Member of the Opposition or you are a Member of the current Government, I know deep down in your hearts each one of you knows that we are in trouble. That is why the hon. Prime Minister in Acting came here and sold us a sad story.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. D. Smith: I have never seen the gentleman so sad in my life. The man came here looking sad and downtrodden, I do know what is happening. But I want to suggest to the national population that do not worry if they are sad now, we will make things better.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Smith: We have plans for the people of Trinidad and Tobago to bring prosperity and happiness, not sadness.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. D. Smith: So, friends linking innovation and diversification is so important. In fact, the UNDP said that innovation is crucial to ensuring that economic diversification is sustainable in the long-term. In fact, if we go to other noteworthy sources, the OECD said for economies to successfully diversify there must be an emphasis on technology and innovation as key drivers in growth. The World Economic Forum has suggested that economic diversification hinges on the development of innovative policies that foster new sectors and improve competitiveness.

Friends, you want to speak about facts? The fact is that scholars, academics, and persons engaged in the science of economics, the social science of economics, have been speaking about diversification but we have not taken the steps to truly diversify our economy. And so yes, we are bombarded by these exogenous factors, these national and international issues of wars and rumours of wars. But that cannot be an excuse for how you manage an economy moving forward. Because if that is the issue and if that is the excuse, is best you pack up. That is what you are telling the nation. Things are bad, there are ups and downs, we do not know how to manage it, so let us pack up and go. I mean it is ridiculous, it is ludicrous to think that this is where we are in 2024.

And so friends, economic diversification—in fact in 2021 when there was the Economic Development Advisory Board, which was eventually scrapped, many economists locally called for a reintroduction of this

innovation policy. And so, had this been done in the time that the existing Government has a part, I am sure much more progress would have been secured by our nation and the citizens of our nation. And so, ‘steadfast and resolute, forging paths to prosperity’, I do not know. I do not know if I can look at the inflation rates, I do not know if I can look at the debt to GDP ratio, I do not know if I can look at unemployment levels, I do not know if I can look at infrastructural decay, I do not know if I can look at any of these indicators of what a healthy economic system looks like and suggest to you, in good conscience, that we are forging paths, that we are moving steadfast, and that we are heading in the right direction. I cannot.

12.40 p.m.

Now friends, I want to speak a bit about a topic that many of my colleagues have spoken about already, and that is the issue of crime. The reason that we must touch on crime is because crime affects even the economics of a country. You see, there is a direct relationship between economic prosperity and the levels of crime. There is a direct correlation that when economies are doing well, certain derivations of crime are reduced. And so, the economics suggest, because of the crime levels that we have been experiencing, and it is no stranger to any one of us.

I have spoken to individuals in my private time, where persons are now scared to go and make a grocery run. “You go to a grocery, you come out your car, you get hold up, you lose your car”, potentially you could lose your life. These are areas that even Members on the other side, in their quiet time, they might not say it here, but you are also scared of the crime situation in this country. You are also afraid of the crime situation in this

country. And so, if there is a problem, where we are now at 500-plus murders, and there is no real call for action, what are we saying to the population of Trinidad and Tobago? They are forgotten, they are displaced, they are terrified. Those are not symptoms of a developing nation. These are not symptoms of a country on the rise and forging its path. These are symptoms of calamity, and they must be addressed.

And so, when you contemplate in your private time, and you take off your political hat, I want you to consider that one day you too might be a victim of this spiralling crime situation. And then, who would be to blame? Would it be the Opposition, once again, to feel the brunt? Nine years in Opposition, and you are still blaming us? Nine years? So how long? Will it take another five? So crime is an issue, a national issue.

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

Sen. D. Smith: It is a national issue. When we look at the percentages, as it relates to the distribution of this expenditure and Appropriation Bill, we are always seeing that the numbers, national security is at 18 per cent of potential expenditure, education at 22 per cent, healthcare at 22 per cent, and then coming down the line, there are changes, the numbers get smaller. But the point is that you have had a situation where a significant portion and contribution of your expected expenditure has been on three critical areas. It has been on security, it has been on education, and it has been on healthcare. It is sad to say that in those three areas, these are where the country is failing the most. We are failing the most in these critical areas. Now, who is responsible? Who is responsible for this?

As I said, governance and politics are for the people. If you are

enshrined with the responsibility to deliver for the persons that you suggest that you care about, why is the result so far from the expectation year after year? It saddens me that I only have about five minutes again; it really does. I know Members on the other side enjoyed so much of my contribution so far. I want to tell them, have no fear you will be hearing from me quite soon. You will be hearing from all Members on this side quite, quite soon. I leave you with this quote. I think it is quite fitting, and in your quiet time again, reflect on this friends, Exodus 3 and verse 9. When you go home, look it up in your Bible. And the Lord said:

I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt—you could switch that to Trinidad—and I have heard their cry by reason of their task makers.

I invite you to consider who the task makers are in this situation.

For I know their sorrows—and there are a lot of sorrows friends—and I have come down to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians.

My good friends across the road. And so friends, the verse says:

To bring them up out of the land onto a good land and a large onto a land flowing with milk and honey.

That is what we in the Opposition will bring to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, not doom and gloom, milk and honey. I know you must know about things like honey. That is something that you would have in your house, right? Yeah, we on this side we are using granular sugar, but you could use honey.

But the point is, a time will come when people will have to make a decision and that decision will determine the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

I am confident that the United National Congress, under the leadership of Kamla Persad-Bissessar is the answer to this call. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister in the Office of the Attorney General.

The Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal): Mr. President, thank you for recognizing me in this debate. Mr. President, I apologize in advance for having to rise to share licks on little children. But I must do what I have to do, Mr. President. The hon. Senator tried his very best, Mr. President, but his contribution was as empty as his pockets. So there is very little, Mr. President, that I will have to address in my contribution.

Mr. President, as I begin immediately, and I do not ever, I hardly ever do it, but I want to use some of the words of the hon. Sen. Anil Roberts, in his contribution. I want to use his words, but to my benefit, Mr. President, he is correct about something. Perfect practice makes perfect, but perfect practice makes perfect the PNM Minister of Finance. I want to join with my colleagues and recognize the Minister of Finance for what he has done in this Appropriation Bill.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: I also want, and I hardly ever do it, I want to use the words of Sen. Roberts again when he spoke about poof. Well, Mr. President, I want to remind the UNC, the Members of the Opposition, in 2025, poof, my friend on the right here will be taking Chaguanas East, just like that. Mr. President, I want to remind my friends in

the Opposition in 2025, my good friend, senatorial colleague, poof, will be taking Barataria/San Juan. And of course, Mr. President, I want to remind my colleagues on the other side, in 2025, just like that, poof, I will be taking St. Augustine as the next Member of Parliament for St. Augustine.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Mr. President, the hon. Senator, Sen. Smith, he compared Trinidad and Tobago with Dubai, Mr. President. Let us, and I am speaking now to the citizens, the sober, prudent-thinking citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I have been fortunate to visit Dubai several times, and not on Government funding, by the way. And, what I want to say, Mr. President, is what we are failing to realize, or what the Senator forgot to mention, is that the systems of government that exist in nations such as Dubai is very, very different from the systems of government that exist in our nation.

Well, first to begin with, I agree with my colleague, the first thing Dubai does not have is the UNC. So that is probably half of their problems, or three-quarters of their problems solved. Apart from that, Mr. President, you are looking at autocratic systems of government where leaders could put into place whatever they want to do, not having accountability for populations. And, you want to make that comparison?

Mr. President, that is why, unfortunately, I said I had to rise to share a little licks on children, and I made mention that the contribution was as empty as the hon. Senator's pockets, Mr. President.

12.50 p.m.

Mr. President, just a few hours ago my goodly colleague here showed

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

me an article in the *Express*, two hours ago by the *Express*, by a global travel authority which identified Trinidad and Tobago in the top 10 places, must visit places, Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. President, in the world.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: And that was posted two hours ago. Trinidad and Tobago was identified in the top 10 best places to visit, Trinidad and Tobago. So, when we go on, and on about the lack of foreign direct investment, and we produce a sense as if there is doom and gloom—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. President, Standing Order 45(1).

Mr. President: Yes. Again, the crosstalk is getting to a level which is making the Minister have to raise her voice in order for it to carry. So, just try and temper the crosstalk so it does not rise above the level of the contributor. Continue, Minister.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Thank you very much, Mr. President. So, Mr. President, I just want to remind the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, let us not get caught up with all the politicking that took place today, and over the past couple of weeks when this Bill was debated. Let us remember, and let us still continue to have faith in our country, and the direction in which our country is going, Mr. President.

Mr. President, now in some serious matters, again, as I continue my contribution. I want to go back to yesterday, on the debate that I would have paid attention to, and a contribution made by Sen. Jearlean John. In the Senator's contribution, the Senator focused significantly on the crime situation that exists in Trinidad and Tobago. Sen. Smith also spoke about crime, and yes, crime has taken up a significant part of the conversation in

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

this budget debate both in the other place, and this House. But, Mr. President, I went back—the *Hansard* was not available, so I looked at the video recording, and I want to read into the record the exact words placed on the record by Sen. Jearlean John, and then I will get into the danger, and explain why crime, and criminality continues to be a problem in this country.

Sen. Jearlean John, and just like her Members, are positioning themselves to be the next Government of Trinidad and Tobago. They call themselves the government in waiting, and these are the types of statements, Mr. President, that persons who are positioning themselves for leadership will make to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And, I read, Mr. President, this is my verbatim notes from that recording. The Senator said, in making reference to the death of businessman Sachel Kungebeharry who was from Cunupia. The Senator went on to say, in her contribution, Mr. President:

Businessman Sachel Kungebarry was from Cunupia. That is probably the reason he hasn't been mentioned. Perhaps his plight does not matter to the Government. His plight does not matter, because he is from Cunupia. He probably was not highfalutin enough, not elite enough, because during the budget debate in the other place all this happened. They asked for a \$500,000 ransom, and after it was paid they killed him.

But this is what I want to go on to read too. The Senator said:

His mother in her pain said that “I wish the Commissioner of Police could feel her pain...”

And she went on to say:

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

I wish the whole of the PNM could feel her pain.

And this is a Senator, Mr. President, who has gone on the record to wish pain, and suffering to the Members of this entire Bench. So, she is hoping that we experience the pain of loss that this family would have suffered. You know why I read this into the record, Mr. President?

Sen. Lyder: “Because allyuh have new lights, da’is why.”

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder, you had your chance to speak. Continue, Minister.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: Why I raise this, so you have a Member of a Senate who is positioning herself to be a leader in this county, and you could stand before this country, and wish pain on another side. Yes, we understand we are from different political backgrounds, we have different opinions. Yes, we are in the political hustings, Mr. President, but no responsible person positioning themselves to lead a Government or lead a country, will wish any kind of pain on any citizen of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, and that, why I raised this issue is because that is the division, and the hate, and the anger that the UNC continues to spew, and we ask the question why there is violence in Trinidad and Tobago? We ask ourselves why there is hurt, and why there is suffering, and why crime has spiralled the way—? Because when leaders could stand, and wish bad upon other people—people are supposed to be responsible, Mr. President—could stand, and make those kinds of statements, it tells you about the leadership that the other side is offering. Mr. President, the Senator also, in her statement—but what I can say, though, and I am sure I can speak on behalf of my Ministerial colleagues on this side when I say, you see the PNM, we

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

have taken an oath to serve all manner of people in this country—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—and we will never wish that pain, and suffering not even on our enemies much less colleagues in this Senate, because we understand what responsible government is all about. The issue of crime it is a serious issue. The Senator also made the point of this Government not understanding what it is to lose persons, and making it appear to the citizenry that we run past in our blue lights, and we are out of touch. Mr. President, I have no fear to read into the record, because contrary to what the other side believes, and contrary to what they sell the people, the citizens of this country, we on this side, we continue, through this Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024, Mr. President, to ensure that the police, and ensure that our protective services, as best as we can do, are given the necessary funding in order to ensure that we protect our citizens. Yes, we are not where we want to be, Mr. President, but because we understand the pain, and the suffering of our citizens, because it has also hit home for some of us, we will continue to fight that fight.

Mr. President, Sen. Jearlean John in her contribution, she spoke a lot, and identified by names, persons who would of died and I say I send my deepest condolences to all those family members. But I would say this, Mr. President, police constable Ravindra Harrinarine, who was shot down. I could say to Trinidad and Tobago that was my cousin, my first cousin. I attended his funeral, he was outside, shot down and killed. Alan Babwah, who, a home invasion not too long ago killed, a client of mine for 10 years, Mr. President. Samantha Isaacs, we have heard in this Senate the Tot

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

Lampkin case, a domestic violence landmark case, Mr. President. Samantha Isaacs, I taught her for five years at St. Francois Girls' College. She was one of my best History students, and if you see the pictures of that child in the papers, it did not do her justice. Pretty little girl.

So, when they come here, and they make it seem as if this Government, we do not understand what the man on ground is going through, I can say to the Members, and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, why I will continue to do my little part, why every single Member of this Government will continue to do their part is because we do understand what the citizens of this country are going through, but what we will not do, is give up, Mr. President. What we will not do, is wish death upon our—even the Opposition. What we will do, is continue to bring legislation as the Attorney General has done. What we will continue to do, is to fight corruption. You know, Sen. Jearlean John spoke about, “There was no crime or limited crime during the UNC’s time”, I will tell you why, because the crime was in the Cabinet.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: And I will make reference now to my leader in the Ministry in which I serve, the Attorney General. Sir, I want to congratulate you on that landmark decision yesterday—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—that we received from the Privy Council. They say—suddenly, I hear a man on the other side, you know, “he backtracking from the decisions of the Privy Council”. The same hon. Member who did not want to support the CCJ, they do not want to hear

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

“nothing” about the CCJ, but I understand the story about the Privy Council change now, because the decision did not go into their favour. And for the members of the public who may have missed it, you see, I also have a responsibility, Mr. President, to report on the Office of the Attorney General, which I have the benefit, and the blessing to serve alongside this distinguished Senior Counsel, who do not have a criminal record to his name—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—who has never been to the court to answer to any criminal offence other than to represent criminals, and represent people.

1.00 p.m.

And I want to make reference to that landmark decision, Mr. President, of course, the Minister of Finance and the—and let me congratulate, of course, the brilliant Minister of Finance as well in this decision.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal: “Not no bush lawyer, not no bush lawyer he is”. The Minister of Finance, on their win—and, of course, that is *TN Ramnauth and Company Limited, Taradauth Ramnauth, Kallco Limited, Mootilal Ramhit and Sons Contracting Limited, Fides Limited v the Estate Management and Business Development Company*, Mr. President. That matter yesterday, Mr. President—and the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs would have issued the release, which spoke about the court. It was an application that was made, and I will get to

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

some of the nitty-gritty of that matter just now, because I am reporting on the Office of the AG and Ministry of Legal Affairs, and we do law, we represent the State. So I can—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagramsingh-Sooklal:—talk about this case, as I report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago where your money is spent in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs.

In this particular matter, Mr. President, it is no secret to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that a Member of Parliament, who currently sits on the other side, is party to this matter, Mr. President. In this particular matter, an application was made to the Privy Council to strike out the case that was brought against them, and the Privy Council said, “No, we are not striking it out”—in very layman terms, because I want the people on the street to understand—“Go to court, file your defence and defend your matter in court.”

But hear is what is critical for the people of this country to understand. Mr. President, these men and women, who are putting forward themselves again—apart from wishing “everybody dead”—as the alternative government of Trinidad and Tobago—and one is the lead spokesperson in the other place. This is a matter—and for the benefit of my hon. Senators here, and for the benefit of the listening public, you know what this matter involves?

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

Let me tell you the kind of issues that are raised in this matter, Mr. Vice-President, unlawful means conspiracy, bribery, receiving unknowing

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

receipts, dishonest assistance, breach of fiduciary duty. That is the matter that is coming up before the court, that the chief spokesperson in the other place, that many of us on this side—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]—leader.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Show me your leader? Huh. But anyway, that is the nature of this matter that now is before the court, that the Privy Council said that they tried to—the defence tried to show that they did not have a matter, the State did not have a matter, and the Privy Council said, “No, no, no, your application is dismissed. Go back home.” I think it is on the 4th of—sometime in November—4th of November, they have to put in their defence before Justice Seepersad. And I will say nothing more about that matter, Mr. Vice-President, but just to reiterate the point to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that is why crime was low during the UNC time, because it was in the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Mr. Vice-President, and to go back to the points that I made when I made mention to these young people, these persons who—it hit home for me, Mr. Vice-President—it was to make the point that, and for the people of Trinidad and Tobago to understand that every Member that sits on this Bench, contrary, and I know—and I have to belabour the point. Contrary to what the UNC will come and try to fill your heads with, understand that on this side, you have Members who have taken an oath to every single citizen of this country.

And I end there because—not my contribution. I end there making an oath for every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago—because, yeah, this is

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

the season of politics. Sen. John, together with some Members of the other side, throughout the length—even though it was irrelevant, in their contribution, suggested to this nation—they spoke about bacchanal in the PNM, they suggested that there were runners for the leadership of the PNM, and underlying that conversation, Mr. Vice-President, was a suggestion that it seems that if you belong to another race, that is not the base of the PNM, that you do not have a chance to lead this party.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Mr. Vice-President, let me tell you why I am raising that issue. Let me tell you why I am raising that issue. Sen. Lutchmedial-Ramdial, I wish she was here, she spoke about Members of the PNM, *pusoor pusoor* to the media, *pusoor pusoor* about issues that took place at a meeting that the PNM recently had. Well, I am not going to *pusoor pusoor*, I am going to say it here. What I am going to say, Mr. Vice-President—and I am sure—and I am willing to break confidence of that meeting to say one thing. Whoever their informer should have *pusoor* and tell them, was that at that said meeting, our political leader reminded us that the People's National Movement is a movement of all people for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: And he reminded—so he does not just do that on a platform—our political leader does not just mount a political platform and speak about unity, Mr. Vice-President. Our political leader, even behind closed doors, in the confidence of his own home—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—which is in Balisier House, yes, he will speak to us, Mr. Vice-President, about the PNM having a place for every single citizen. And I raise that point to speak to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago. And I say to you, I am a representative, that there is a place for East Indian, Hindu, young women in the PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Sen. Richie Sookhai is an indicator that there is a place for bright, young, Hindu, Indian men in the PNM. Avinash Singh—“doh talk about we bright boy”, Vyash Nandlal. Sen. Nandlal.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: The UNC, Mr. Vice-President, with all due respect, they push themselves as the premier East Indian party of Trinidad and Tobago, because that is where their base is. Mr. Vice-President, show me one bright young person that they were able—every time there is an absence of a Senator, poor uncle Tim. They have to call him back. They have to call him back to come and represent from retirement. They have to call him back from retirement. Mr. Vice-President, if today or tomorrow I am to leave this office for whatever the reason, trust me when I say it, “it have ah hundred young, bright, Indian people line up—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—waiting to come and defend de PNM”. Sen. Smith, “ah glad, boy, ah glad dat yuh here. Dey give yuh ah lil bligh”. Sen. Rambhajan, I was actually very impressed with her. But you

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

see, “people does come to *pusoor pusoor* to we” about what happens in the UNC, and I heard the poor Senator could not last long because she was brighter than three-quarters, or all of them on the Bench—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—so that is why “dey sack she one time”.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: I “doh” know, that is the *pusoor pusoor* I got in my ears.

So, Mr. Vice-President, and that is to remind you—because as I said, we are in the political season, and I want the young people of Trinidad and Tobago, I want you to know that the PNM is a place and a space that every single one of us, once you have talent and a true dedication to serve this country, to Trinidad and Tobago, you have a place.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: And as we talk about Tobago, Mr. Vice-President, the other side tries—“they cyah step in de shoes or de shadow ah the hon. Sen. Dennis”. “Yuh” understand?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: And in this Parliament, in the People’s National Movement, there is also a place and a space for “dem bright boys, good-looking boys, dem from Tobago”—Sen. Hislop as well. That is equality. I sat here for the last three days, and I felt so proud, prouder than ever to be a member of the People’s National Movement; when I look down this row and I see the kind and quality of gentlemen, that I

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

could feel safe, I could feel respected, I know they are not going to cross “no” line. That is the kind of Government I want to associate myself with.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: And it begs the question, Mr. Vice-President—that is why I cannot see “no good, decent family on de other side, wanting dey children to link up on dat side”, because you would know what you are exposing your children to. Anyway, but I would leave that point there, Mr. Vice-President.

Mr. Vice-President, and mind you, as I still deal with the case, that case that I would have mentioned, this is a case where the claim is for \$275 million that the—

Sen. Mitchell: Wow.

Sen. Mark: Point of order 46(2). This matter is before the courts, it is sub judice.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

1.10 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal.

Sen. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Yes?

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal, please continue.

Sen. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Yes, Mr. Vice-President. I am a lawyer, not a bush lawyer—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—so I know very well what the sub judice rule applies to. What I am responding to, Mr. President, is the decision of the Privy Council—hot off the press, in Trinidad and Tobago—that was

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

before this country yesterday. And in that same matter, Mr. Vice-President, that is not sub judice, mention was made about the claim for the \$275 million which the State is pursuing. I would leave that right there. Mr. Vice-President, those were just some of the things that I wanted to remind the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago of.

Contrary to what the other side says, crime has struck home for many of us. We understand what you are going through, but what we will never do is give up, Mr. Vice-President. We will make Tobago safe through our Senators and our minority leaders. And pretty soon, we will take back the assembly too—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—so we will make Tobago safe. Mr. Vice-President, in this country, there is no geographical discrimination, as the UNC likes to put it off. They want to feed Indian people that they are being neglected by the PNM Government. I stand against that, Mr. Vice-President, because I believe from the depths of my being, that the PNM is being led by a political leader, the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. And for those who are asking who our leader is; the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—who will ensure that every citizen in this country is taken care of. Mr. Vice-President, as I jump into—of course, there is a responsibility, the hon. Attorney—and you know, to that end, I want to sincerely thank my Attorney General. It has been an absolute pleasure, Mr. Vice-President, to work alongside a man of more than 40

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

years' experience.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Mr. Vice-President, as I try to briefly talk about the Ministry, the Attorney General in his contribution would have spoken about his legislative agenda. I want to add, and join with the Attorney General as he thanked the members of the AGLA family. I want to thank our Acting Permanent Secretary, Indira Rampaul-Cheddie. For the first time, the Ministry is privileged to have a lawyer who sits in the seat as the Acting Attorney General, and I believe that is a benefit to the Ministry, the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—to have an attorney at law as the PS who understands what the dynamics of the legal practice entails. So I need to thank our PS, our Deputy PSs, Ms. Lewis and Cher Augustine-Hamilton, and all of the AGLA family, because the AG is correct. We are indeed a family at the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. No family is perfect, Mr. Vice-President. We recognize that, but we continue in the Office of the AG to bring the pieces together.

To that end, Mr. Vice-President, I am glad Sen. Teemal is here. As I report briefly on some of the other areas of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, I know Sen. Teemal spoke at length about the family and the importance of the family. And there is one department at the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs that I want to make mention of, and that is the Vacation and After School Centre. It is led by the Coordinator, Ms. Rewati Maharaj. Why I am

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

making mention, Mr. Vice-President, it is actually in the public service—believe it or not, I have mentioned that before—it is a daycare and after-school service that we offer.

I am a mother. During my years of practice, I was a relatively young mother with young children, and I know what it is when you are a professional person and you need that care for your children. I want to recognize that is where, to the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago, your moneys are being spent; to maintain this after-school programme, to ensure that our public servants are equally given a place and a sense of comfort that their children are being taken care of, because Sen. Teemal, we too recognize the importance of the family.

As I start to wrap up, Mr. Vice-President, I want to speak, of course, of the Public Defender's Department. I will tell you particularly why I want to mention the Public Defender's Department. Throughout the length and breadth of this budget debate, and even in other debates, we always speak about the backlog that exists in our criminal justice system. I must say, the Public Defender's Department is one of the greatest spends, I believe, that our Ministry—our expenditure paid a good investment for our Ministry, and I will tell you why. Because it helps the overall landscape of the criminal justice system.

I want to recognize Senior Counsel Hasine Shaikh. Mr. Vice-President, as I briefly report to Trinidad and Tobago, 462 matters have been completed by virtue of the Public Defender's Department. What is unique about the Public Defender's Department, Mr. Vice-President, is a staff of 30 lawyers, and they utilize arbitration measures, for want of a better

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

word, plea mitigation. It is not that these 462 matters are litigated, Mr. Vice-President, they revert to issues of plea bargaining legislation, where they work with the prosecution in the interest, of course, Mr. Vice-President, on the mandates of the Attorney General, and of course, in an effort to save taxpayers money in Trinidad and Tobago. There is a sense of the encouragement of plea bargaining and the utilization of that legislation because we recognize at the Office of the AG that you cannot simply trial matters out of a system. There are other means of resolving. And I must say hats off, of course, to the Public Defender's Department.

Mr. Vice-President, believe it or not, just to remind the public, do you know the cost to maintain one prisoner? It is almost \$25,000 a month to one prisoner on remand. That is the approximate cost. If you multiply that \$25,000 a month by 12, you are looking at \$300,000 in a year. If you multiply that \$300,000 by 15 years—let us say 15 years is the maximum amount of time that a man stays in remand, you are looking at about approximately \$4,500,000 to maintain one prisoner on remand.

Why I make mention of that is because the Public Defenders are doing their part and trying to get these matters to conclusion. We are moving people even out of the remand system. What does that do? That frees up money, Mr. Vice-President. Money that was previously spent in the prison, could be spent on young people to ensure that they do not reach to the prison. So, Mr. Vice-President, as I wrap up and give my other Members of this Bench an opportunity to jump in, this too, indeed may very well be my last budget contribution, but only in this House, because soon I will be packing my jahaji bundle—

Sen. The Hon. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal (cont'd)

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal:—and heading over to the other place and joining my ministerial and Government colleagues, Mr. Vice-President. Yourself too, as you bring home Barataria/San Juan in the other place. As I conclude, I want to thank the hon. Prime Minister for the opportunity afforded to the young people in this party. And just look at us, Mr. Vice-President, all the Backbenchers as a strong Backbench. I want to thank him for giving us an opportunity, because he recognizes that we are the future of the People's National Movement.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. R. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Mr. Vice-President, with those few words, I thank you for the opportunity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Minister of Trade and Industry.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President, and I rise just for a brief intervention. You could be sure that there will be no *pusoor pusoor* from me or any poofing or so. I am just going to clear up four bogus points that were left on the table by Sen. Damian Lyder, and I will clear the record on those points to ensure that there is the correct message put out there.

I had a chance to speak in the lower House, and I think that I would have covered most of the work of the Ministry of Trade and Industry there, but I will give a little recap. Before doing that, I would thank the leadership of the party, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, for his astute guidance in taking

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

us forward as a party, and as a Government. I also will thank the Minister of Finance for his astute leadership in terms of the finances of the country, especially after a very difficult period. So, just to recap a little bit that in the lower House, I would have commented on the three years of growth in GDP achieved by the Government—2022, 2023 and 2024—and then I went into facts on the non-energy sector. I make the point again that since 2015, the non-energy sector has been growing and that the economy is much more diversified because of the strengthened manufacturing sector and other sectors as well. The facts are there.

1.20 p.m.

In 2015, non-energy sector output, \$61 billion, that is, GDP excluding petrochemicals at constant prices. In 2024, \$107 billion, that is, GDP excluding petrochemicals as well at constant prices. What we have seen, then, is a 75 per cent growth, and this is clear evidence of diversification and a very strong non-energy sector. Now there is a difference between non-energy sector output and manufacturing output, okay? When you are talking about non-energy output, you are talking about a wide range of activities. Now I am going clearly to manufacturing output, but I speak excluding petroleum and chemical products, which I must do.

In 2023, we were at \$9.9 billion, contributing 6.5 per cent, that is manufacturing output, to GDP. In 2024, \$10.6 billion contributing 6.8 per cent. In fact, that is the projected figure, which is 28 per cent higher than in 2015, when it was, in fact, TT\$8.3 billion. That is the difference. But I will tell you where the bogus claim is, that is, by Sen. Lyder, that manufacturing GDP has declined by 14 per cent or 4.5 billion since this Government

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

assumed office. But the facts are, and he ought to know, that according to the CSO—

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: No, no, no. According to the CSO—if you listen, you may learn something—according to the CSO, manufacturing GDP in 2015 was TT 8.3 billion at constant prices. Why? Because the TT\$30 billion in manufacturing GDP, which Sen. Lyder referenced, includes \$22 billion for petroleum and chemical products, and you know that it should have been excluded. He knows very well, or he is supposed to know, the CSO's methodology, and that is to calculate manufacturing GDP, that it includes petroleum and chemicals and therefore manufacturing less petroleum and chemical products make up the non-energy manufacturing numbers. Right? And that figure—

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And that figure—

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: You were wrong, okay.

Sen. Lyder: Totally [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And that figure, that figure would include food and beverage and tobacco, textiles, clothing, and wood and paper, and printing leather and leather products as well, and other manufacturing products. And, in 2015, as I make the point again, that it was only TT\$8.3 billion and it is now 28 per cent higher than it was in 2015. Right.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

So you fast-forward to 2024, 28 per cent higher than it was in 2015. So, Sen. Lyder has to get his facts right. I think he has been very influenced by his friends in the UWI Department of Economics, at UWI.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: That is where you—you need a private course, because obviously you are not getting it right. But I went on to talk—

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Senator.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Sorry.

Mr. Vice-President: Unless she is giving way to you, you have had your chance to speak.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Yeah, I have to deal with the bogus points made by him. But speaking about, I go again, I recap, and speaking about the export performance and the expansion of exports in the manufacturing sector that between 2016 and 2023, I must mention again, the non-energy manufacturing—exports we are talking now—grew by \$3.7 billion right, from \$9.6 billion to \$13.6 billion and the food and beverage increased by 49 per cent from \$2.1 to \$3.2 billion. Very impressive indeed.

I have spoken in the other place about our trade missions. I have to move very quickly. In 2015 to 2024, 71 trade missions and trade shows were conducted. As we speak, there are 30 businesspersons and 23 companies on the ground in St. Vincent doing the work that they normally do. I spoke about the strides made in increasing market access for exporters through our new trade agreements. The Trinidad and Tobago/Chile Partial

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Scope Trade Agreement. I will tell you it is a very inclusive approach “eh”, because even in our trade and our manufacturing, it is also about our SMEs, and not only about big business. So that TT/Chile Trade Agreement would provide opportunities for exporters to access a market of 19.2 million persons and that agreement will include about 500 products between the both countries.

Then, I also spoke about the Trinidad and Tobago/Curaçao Partial Scope Agreement, which commenced in July 2024, which has the potential to displace many imported products extra regionally into Curaçao. I want to tell you that this agreement will be completed by January 2025. We are working very quickly on it. I want to say to you that that new shipping line that is now established between Port of Spain and the ABC islands, crunching deliveries from two to three weeks, if it had to pass through Miami, to two days to reach the ABC islands. That is now in place, it is doing very well. I can tell you, even last week when SM Jaleel—I spoke at their 100th anniversary—that on the basis of that new transportation arrangement, they are now renewing their exports to Aruba and the rest of the ABC islands.

I also spoke to a very holistic approach to development of the steel pan industry, including the expectant launch. I know that there are two Independent Senators that are pretty keen on what is happening in the cultural framework. I can tell you that we have an approach. There are grant funds that are made available to steelpan manufacturers, and we continue with that but there is also to be the expectant launch of the steelpan tuners apprenticeship programme. This is going to start very soon. Also

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

going to be launched pretty soon, a private sector—where we participate in the launch—a private sector chroming factory. I spoke at length about the support provided to SMEs. I do not think it is necessary for me to go into that, but I am talking about all sorts of in-market promotions, grants, research and development, et cetera, co-financing, labelling, et cetera.

I spoke about inflation and food prices as well. I am not going to go much into that, but I expect to say that Trinidad and Tobago has had one of the lowest inflation rates, and since, with regard to food inflation, we in this Government have been doing everything to curtail inflation, which is amongst the lowest, definitely within the region, within the hemisphere, and one of the lowest in the world. Every year since 2015, I remind the population that we have secured what is called the suspension of the CET, on a number of basic items that is, removing all of the duties, and of course, we have implemented VAT reduction on all of the basic food items as well.

But I go to our investment performance, which I could not deal with in the other place. In there you would find bogus number two by Sen. Lyder. So, those on the Opposition Bench continue to peddle the very misleading narrative that there has been no investment activity in the country. And I say, peddle, right, the very misleading narrative that there is been no investment activity in the country. Nothing can be further from the truth when one examines the facts.

Investment activity in the economy continues to be fairly strong in both the energy—in fact, I should say strong—especially in the energy sector, and also in the non-energy sector. I can tell you, for fiscal 2024, we—and this is what passes through the Ministry of Trade and Industry—we

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

have had more than \$3 billion in investments and also creating thereby, doing job creation close to 3,000 jobs. That is on the non-energy side, right.

So we have had investments directly passing through us of \$663 million, with 1,187 jobs. We have had 88 reinvestments within the manufacturing sector, amounting to \$2.27 billion, so much is their confidence in Trinidad and Tobago and doing business under this Government, and creating, within those investments, an additional 1,800 jobs. That is only in fiscal 2024. In addition, there is been another \$200 million, creating close to 500 jobs that we have assisted in some way or another. And all of these new opportunities and job creation were in the sectors of agro processing, manufacturing, construction, real estate, the business process outsourcing industry, and I will speak to that as well.

1.30 p.m.

But there is much more happening all across this country. I would have gone through that when I spoke in the Lower House. But let me say on the point of foreign direct investment now, where you would find bogus number two, from Sen. Lyder. Sen. Lyder seems to be flapping about—and he continues to do it, about this US -\$3.35 billion between 2016 and 2023, under this Government. That is okay. You could peddle that. But if you peddle—

Hon. Senators: The UN statistics. [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: No, no. If you are peddling, you must give information to explain what you are talking about. I speak to you, Sir. Yes. And yes, that information which you gave about the US -\$3.3 billion, he would have sourced—and I can tell you, either from the Central Bank, or

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

from a UN agency. But I used the Central Bank, since it is a Trinidad and Tobago establishment. Okay? And I went in straight into the handbook of Key Economic and Financial Statistics, which was published by the Central Bank. And I suppose that is where you go and, or you see the UN agency and so on.

But it is important to note that the data is reported as direct investment in accordance—and I am educating the population, and you could take note as well—in accordance with the International Monetary Fund's Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual, Sixth Edition (BPM6). So, FDI, as it is reported involves the initial transaction, which we would expect. Right. Usually reflecting the initial capital provided in the form of capital expenditure, including machinery and equipment working capital, et cetera, and any subsequent capital transactions. So you will have flows coming in, in terms of equity transactions, reinvestment of earnings and intercompany loans, et cetera—befitting the company located here.

But it is important to know that the data is collected on a liability basis. That is the basis. So, it does not speak truly of investments only. It speaks to the liability basis, and it shows the net changes, increases less decreases, indirect investment liabilities. And you should have explained that. So, what is captured on a liability basis would be the repatriation of profits. And you would expect that. Returns on equity—you are talking about dividends and foreign debts services. Many of these large companies would have foreign debts, externally as well. So it is totally erroneous to conclude that these figures represent inflows of foreign direct investments only. That is absolutely wrong. And it includes outflows. As you would

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

imagine—and I would make the point that this is an energy province. And over the years you would have had hundreds of billions, in terms of the asset base of those kinds of companies, domiciled in Trinidad and Tobago. Hundreds of billions. And you must expect that there would a substantial repatriation of profits. There must be. If they do not send their dividends and their profits back to their—I am talking about their—

Mr. Imbert: Their owners.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—their owners—

Mr. Imbert: Shareholders. Shareholders.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—their shareholders, but then they would not be able to exist here. That is what it is. And he is sitting there talking about the worst he has ever heard. But I have to explain to the population that—you continue to be deceptive, in reporting to the population.

Hon. Senator: The worst—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: You continue to be deceptive and I am not allowing that to stay on the records.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: So, what it captured, I repeat, it is on a liability basis. Okay? And I make that point. And you know the fact is, if you even wanted to go there, but then you must use that same yard stick in saying what you have done.

Hon. Senator: Correct.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Use the same yardstick. Do not be deceptive to say that is what the PNM does.

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: No, no, no, no, no. No. And if you could use that same yardstick, you would recognize—and I am talking both energy and non-energy, in the mere five years that you were there, you were talking about the negative liability. In the mere five years that you were there, there was negative liability of \$2.155 billion. Why did you not say that? Always deceptive. You must speak the truth. And do not underestimate the population. Okay? You are giving facts, explain it.

Sen. Lyder: UNC—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And then, we go on. Please. Please. Please.

Hon. Senator: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Lyder: UNC had no—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Cannot help him—

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder. Sen. Lyder,

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: He cannot help himself.

Sen. Lyder: Who is he? [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder.

Sen. Lyder: Sorry, Sir.

Mr. Vice-President: Please, for the rest of the contribution, keep silent please. Proceed.

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Yes. So, I am on bogus number two.

Hon. Senator: What?

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Lyder, for the rest of her contribution, I will ask you to remove yourself from the Chamber please.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Sen. Lyder: “Worst in the world”, that is what the UN said.

Mr. Imbert: Some “kinda” personality disorder, you know. He needs to be evaluated.

Sen. Lyder: “Worst in the world”, that is what the UN said, not me. Argue with the UN.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And, I continue with bogus point number two based on Central Bank information. And if he even looked at the non-energy side—non-energy side you would see, using this same formula that the non-energy side has been very robust and resilient. And according to that same data, the net flows—when you look at the non-energy side, looking at 2016—2023, you would have seen a net—and I am using figures, net increase of US \$1.3 billion. That is it. Right. That is US and TT dollars net inflows of \$9.2 billion in our non- energy side over the last eight years. And if you had looked at their side, 2011—2015, a net inflow of US \$497 million, which is \$3.2 billion, a mere one-third of activity, exhibited under us. And I will leave that point, and trust that he has learnt and never comes to this House to mislead and misinform the population. And I will not go into the billions of dollars that were invested in this country under the energy sector, which will run into more than TT \$100 billion. But it is not my portfolio and I will not speak to it. Alright.

So, as we talk about new investments—allow me to just clarify a little bit more—of course the other side, they continue to cast clouds of doom and gloom on Trinidad and Tobago, to scare away investments. And the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts would have spoken to that. We knew of the potential possible investment from Jindal Steel and many—two

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

people have already spoken about it. So, I fear about being chided by the Chair. But I just want to quote from the letter sent by Mr. Jindal, he said:

The behavior exhibited by the Opposition, set a troubling precedent for potential investors planning to invest in Trinidad and Tobago...

And he went on to say:

In this instance, it risked causing significant economic and reputational damage to Trinidad and Tobago...

That is from the Opposition. And we know the rest was Sandals, et cetera. And we know that at one point they were writing the US to impose sanctions on Trinidad and Tobago. That is what they have been. They have been anti-Trinidad and Tobago; and anti-job creation; and anti-opportunities for citizens; and anti-tourism, scaring away Sandals; and anti-the aluminium sector as well.

And despite all of that, this PNM Government has managed to generate significant investments, despite of the declining world investments in a post COVID-19 environment. But as I said, in fiscal 2024, I want to leave it on the table that between October 2023 and September 2024, \$3 billion was invested in Trinidad and Tobago with close to 3,000 in jobs and reinvestments from our manufacturers of \$2.27 billion.

And again, I want to thank the manufacturing sector of Trinidad and Tobago for their confidence shown in Trinidad—in this country, with such substantial reinvestments, new and advanced machinery and equipment being incorporated into their processes. I thank them all. And of course, even at the larger levels. And I can tell you large conglomerates—I am only going to speak for a little time, so I am turning my points—but large—I

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

mean I am talking about Coca-Cola, Blue Waters—It has been hundreds of millions of dollars invested in this country under the PNM Government.

1.40 p.m.

Nestlé, hundreds of millions invested in Trinidad and Tobago. ANSA McAl, more than \$1 billion invested in this country under a PNM Government as well. You know, he stood up here and talked about—let me see, I have his notes—ArcelorMittal leaving. Since 2014, ArcelorMittal had been having trouble, you know, and the Government knows that, and it is on the records. They could do nothing about it. So the Opposition knows that. They could do nothing about it when they were in office; nothing about it. By the time we came in, ArcelorMittal closed, but their problems in this country were well established to have been happening since 2014.

Lever Brothers, you know they were brought on by a foreign company, but Lever Brothers is still in Trinidad and Tobago and there is a high possibility of return to manufacturing in Trinidad and Tobago. You take that from me, and when I leave this place, you will see that actually manifesting.

But even at the level of SMEs, I can tell you that there has been continual reinvestments, Mr. Vice-President, because as we support them with grants, they are supporting with further investments. I want to congratulate all of these SMEs for believing in our country under a PNM Government. I can tell you that, on the table, pipeline investments for fiscal 2025—this is what we already know about—totally—this is what we are involved in—more than \$1.5billion in pipeline investments.

Let me talk about a relatively new industry, because it is new to you

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

all, and that is nearshoring investments, the creation of the BPO industry. We are now, just in the business under us, we are ranked as the fifth top value designation for business process outsourcing in Latin America and the Caribbean region.

Mr. Imbert: Nice. Nice.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: In 2015, there was one local operator. Now there are 11 BPOs in Trinidad, providing 3,000 jobs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Nice.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Nine of them are foreign investors. Okay?

Mr. Imbert: Nice.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Nine are foreign investors, and we continue to—

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: It is not about money, it is about jobs.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: That tells you that you do not understand the industry, which focuses on call centres. It is about job creation.

Mr. Vice-President: [*Inaudible*]—too much direct crosstalk.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: [*Inaudible*]—Senator, proceed please.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you. How much time do I have?

Mr. Vice-President: You have until 1.58.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Right. I will be quick. So that I will tell

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

you, between 2016 and 2021, iQor, with the number one BPO in Trinidad, invested \$134 million and created 1,707 jobs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Only last week, I had a meeting with the CEO—I will tell you what his name is, CEO Crowley. They are going to continue to invest in Trinidad and Tobago, and in fiscal—and in 2022, \$31 million invested and two other foreign companies came in; 2023, \$38 million invested, three other companies came in; in fiscal 2024, \$43 million was invested, with three new foreign companies. These three companies will, in fiscal 2025, commence full operations and generate 950 new jobs. That is Horizon—I could call their names, Caribbean LLC, Nearshore Teleservices and Carenet Health.

There are also five BPOs that are set for expansion within the sector and those will create—and by 2025, take us to 4,600 in that particular sector; by 2025. But now, with our SEZ in place, there are another two BPOs that are coming online and they have put in their applications: ZS Associates and Clear Harbor, a whole new industry, Mr. Vice-President, and that is diversification.

I will just go to bogus point number three, our industrial parks. And I do not know why he would challenge me on industrial parks, because the UNC never completed a park in this country; not one.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: They started Debe, they could not even finish Debe. It is us. It is us who have done—in the last nine years, we have done five new parks, and before that—

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—we now have 24 parks across Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Imbert: All PNM.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: All under a PNM Administration. That is right.

There are another two, Factory Road, which is almost to completion, and Dow Village, which is soon—which we are going to begin construction on as well. We are doing the groundwork for that as well. And that is where you get your growth and your efficiencies and your increased production, and you get your innovation and so on. That is where you will get it. Right? So Phoenix Park, all we have left—how much time do I have?

Mr. Vice-President: Right now, you have 13 minutes again.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Oh.

Mr. Imbert: You have plenty time. You have plenty time.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: No, I do not want to take my full time, we have others to speak. Phoenix Park, I can tell you there, that there are only 19 per cent of lots available for future investment opportunities, and that in less than one year of opening, 81 per cent of this park has already been taken; 81 per cent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Then, with regard to Factory Road Industrial Park, we have not even completed that park, but that park is already sold out, with 10 investors and, of course, investing an estimated \$722 million, creating more than 1,000 jobs; 1,156 to be exact.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Dow Village has not even started; 147 acres, but already there are 15 interested parties. That is the progress we are talking about. The same Moruga that they keep talking about all the time, right now, we have six closed investments, five factory shells and one land lot. Okay? So there is only one factory shell left. There are four companies that are operational. There is a fifth, which is Trinidad chocolate company, they will start up. They are specializing in cocoa and chocolate manufacturing. They will commence their operations in fiscal 2025. There is another investor we are speaking with—

Hon. Senators: *[Interruption]*

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Look, if you do not like rural Trinidad and Tobago, keep quiet. Okay? There is another investor that we have earmarked for there, that is Greenheart Farms. I am moving quickly because I want to speak to institutional reforms.

So the Trade and Investment Promotion Agency, I am pleased to say that it is a huge initiative by us. And I have been speaking about this for so long that I could not understand that the Leader of the Opposition in her response will speak about, “No money for CreativeTT, no money for film, no money for fashion, no money for music,” when it is all been subsumed under the new Trade and Investment Promotion Agency, and I could tell you that we are not leaving out any of those subsectors and sectors. We are not leaving them out. They are all subsumed.

So what we have done, we have amalgamated into one entity, and the value proposition would include the simplifying of administrative oversight, reducing operational costs, because you are consolidating your office

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

locations and so on, your digital assets, all of your administrative processes and so on. There will be a consistent focus on increasing our non-energy exports on marketing Trinidad and Tobago to attract non-energy investments, and even tourism, we would work with them, also providing enhanced support for exports and investments in the services sector. We keep talking about exports of goods, the focus has to be on exports of services as well, and utilizing those agreements which we have, which allow us an advantage, in terms of our exports of our services, like the EPAs, the UK EPA and the EU EPA.

And, again, of course, it is about creating linkages between export sectors in investments to provide policy alignment and to coordinate all our initiatives, streamline processes and so on. So when we go out to market Trinidad and Tobago, global Trinidad and Tobago, it is not just about exports, it is about investments as well.

So we are going to be executing, and we are first going to be finalizing our first year of strategic plans and begin its execution as well. We are working on the corporate branding of the agency as well. And I mean, with all of these efforts, we will build a unified, strong and globally competitive image, aimed at enhancing Trinidad and Tobago's competitiveness.

I will tell you, our commercial officers and attachés, the five that we have appointed, are very busy out there, benefiting our exporters and looking for investments. They have had, among them, 400 business meetings, and that is facilitated for manufacturers, potential buyers, government officers, et cetera, service providers, logistics and distribution companies and so on.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

They have participated in 31 international trade shows and they have been generating more than 150 business leads.

1.50 p.m.

I just want to talk about the special economic zones because Sen. Helon Francis raised it. It is operational and we see this as a major area of institutional reform and another “pathway to prosperity”. We took some time to fully develop the policy and the legislation. It was proclaimed in July 2024, repealing the Free Zones Act. The fact is the Free Zones Act did not work for us. It was non-workable there were hardly any benefits to be derived and plus it was counter to Global Forum— it is Global Forum and the OECD as well, right?

Hon. Imbert: Yes.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: It was counter to that. We had to get rid of it. Also, to remain competitive, recognizing that other countries were introducing SEZs, Trinidad and Tobago, many years ago, started developing its policy. So you spoke about Cuba, it would have been the Mariel Zone that you may have gone to, which started off pretty well. I myself visited the Mariel Zone. It is a pity that because of particular circumstances, it is not doing as well as it should but it has the potential and we could not be happier for Cuba. Jamaica has introduced this many years now and there is a line-up for businesses entering that special economic zone activity. We are quite certain that this will spur investment on account of very attractive incentives that we have introduced both for foreign firms and local firms align. Of course, what we have ensured is that we have met all the minimum standards under the OECD and also the base erosion and profit-shifting framework. I

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

am pretty sure that we have done our part in the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

We have set as well, various thresholds, which will ensure that not only big businesses benefit but also even micro, small and medium-sized businesses as well. They have to benefit as well. So there have been six types of zones. I do not need to go through those but I will tell you the sectors which would apply would be the manufacturing; agriculture and agri-processing; maritime; aviation; fish and fish-processing; ICTs; the creative industries; financial services; medical tourism; renewable energy logistics and distribution, and BPOs.

We already have four applications in and we expect this to be rolled out—EY. All of those financial services agencies, they are independent of the Government, have spoken to the sound policy that we have put forward and the benefits that are to be derived from this arrangement. We expect to attract quite a mix of economic activities and we have already designated Pheonix Park Industrial Estate, Dow Village Industrial Park, Piarco AeroPark, the Tamana InTech Park, Cove Tobago Eco-Industrial and Business Park and Factory Road Industrial Park, and the Debe and Point Fortin Industrial Parks as well.

Mr. Vice-President: Minister, five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you. We expect to create jobs. This is about job creation as well not only within the zones but also spiralling outside of the zones into the local communities, where you will have many small business owners involved in retail and catering and so on, maintenance, IT services and so on, all of them are going to benefit, inside

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

and outside the zones as well. We are attaching ourselves, as I said before, to development zones to ensure that we develop not only those parks that I have pointed out but also development across Trinidad and Tobago. They too will benefit from this policy.

This policy is about lifting people up, lifting businesses up and lifting communities up as well, and you know the incentives. No import—that is bogus point number four coming in there. There is a 15 per cent corporation tax, there is no value added tax, and no import duties. I know bogus point number four, property tax, they like to remove themselves from it but I can tell you that they were the ones who talked about property tax and not just property tax. It was Larry Howai, under the now Leader of the Opposition, and they talked about introducing it to industry and commercial owners. That is were they were going first. They were going for the private sector, they were going for the business persons.

Sen. Roberts: For the rich.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Go back and listen to it.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: He talking about rich?

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: You talking about micro and small enterprises being rich? You have no idea about what is going on in the business community.

Mr. Vice-President: Please allow the Senator to continue her—avoid the crosstalk please.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Mr. Vice-President: She is winding up.

Sen. Roberts: Thank the Lord.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I am.

Mr. Vice-President: And you are responding very shortly.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: So as I have said before, no property tax, no stamp duty as well, this regime is going to work very well and we will ensure that the efficiencies are there.

Just to speak about the ease of doing business. I mean, I could talk on and on, and on but with regard to the ease of doing business, you know that we have worked very hard in enhancing the e-services under the TTBizLink platform, there are now 48. We introduced 11 of them last year, 48 services online, 25 of them offering online payments and you are now in an even more secure system now that we have modernized it as well. We have another five services coming on in 2025. So TTBizLink is doing very well.

The Port Community System, that project is progressing well and you are talking about the integration of the IT platforms for customs, ASYCUDA; for the ports, NAVIS systems, and the goods declaration module of the TTBizLink platform, benefiting all of the businesses in Trinidad and Tobago. Even though this is a three-year contract that will end in 2026, various modules are being rolled out; by December we will have the administration module rolled out; by March 2025, the maritime module; by June 2025, the ocean, import, voyage and manifest modules. We are doing what we have to do to ensure that we can strengthen the global competitiveness of our ports et cetera and the way we do business. You talked about—yeah.

Let me tell you, you keep going back, going back; going back to the World Bank's ease of doing business, which was since 2018 or something like that. I will tell you, since then—it does not exist anymore but you seem to want to stay on it—we have implemented several reforms including dealing with construction permits, DevelopTT throughout Trinidad and Tobago, all of the applications are online. Registering property: The implementation of the Property Business Registration System in December 2021, by the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs.

Starting a business: The introduction of the new Companies Registry Online System in February '23 by AGLA again. Trading across borders: Under the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Trade and Information Business Portal, launched in May 2022, the Port Community System being launched now and the enhanced application system in July 2023, resolving insolvency. We have created and we have operationalized the Office of the Supervisor of Insolvency that is under the Ministry of Finance with a recent execution of a consultancy with the World Bank in December 2023. There is now an e-Tax system for managing taxes. Am I right? E-Tax system in February 2022, under Inland Revenue Division, digital payments all under now, the Trinidad and Tobago Financial Centre. Enough work is being done, of course. Also, with regard to the Companies and Civil Registries as well, that too, the Intellectual Property Office, much work done on business reform.

I want to thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for allowing me to speak in this House as well. Again, this Government will continue to do the work that we have to do to ensure that there is prosperity and there is participation

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

in prosperity from all of Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. David Nakhid: In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful. Mr. Vice-President, coming after the last two submissions, I must say that it has made my job very easy, but we will deal with first things first. The Minister of Trade and Industry is the ideal example of what this PNM means and stands for. They live in a bubble, they speak to themselves, they have no resonance with anything on the ground and they behave like they are in Pharaoh's court, Pharaoh's palace.

2.00 p.m.

They speak with arrogance, they speak with contempt, they speak as if Trinidad and Tobago is for them, their friends, and their financiers, and everybody else can go to hell.

Sen. Lyder: Yes

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: I will give one example. The United Nations report states very clearly—the United Nations—that we have the worst foreign direct investment in the world. We came and get some—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: You spoke already, keep quiet.

Mr. Vice-President: Hello. Senator, have a seat please. Have a seat. Please.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Be careful how you talking to me, eh.

Hon. Senators: What?

Sen. D. Nakhid: “Because doh tell me have a seat.”

Mr. Vice-President: Have a seat.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Vice-President: Hold on. Sen. Mark, let us deal with this issue here first and foremost. You have your entire 40 minutes. There is no need to tell a Member across the Floor to shut up.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I did not tell her to shut up, Sir, I told her to be quiet.

Mr. Vice-President: That will be done through the Chair. Continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: So, in the face of those—Not by us, we did not invent those statistics. We are quoting from the United Nations. They come and try to convince the population that we somehow have good foreign direct investment. I mean that is so ideal or the epitome of what this PNM stands for. It is all about smoke and mirrors, mendacity of the highest order, speaking absolute foolishness. If I am to quote the Minister of Finance in the other place, “absolute rubbish.” They have no idea what they are doing and then we always have to come and address them, when we expect in a budget debate, at least one of them, at least one of them will come and tell the population what they intend to do right now. Not after three years, not after four years. They already had 10 years. What do they intend to do for the man on the ground who is experiencing rising crime, horrific crime?

Sen. Lyder: Unemployment.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Unemployment at the highest, cost of living, standard of living, everything. I will go right into that immediately because, you know,

giving the porosity of good sense on that even—what we say, “A one-eye man is king in blind man country.”

So Sen. Vyash Nandlal, who gave a decent response among that group very easily, he rose above the mediocrity that we heard. But then my aunt used to say very clearly—Uncle Rudolph mother—“Tanty Georgie, book bright but street light, book bright, but street light.” Speaking academically but not telling us what is happening on the ground. So, you came and talk about inflation, parroting the Minister of Finance. What the people understand about 0.3 per cent inflation? Every time you go to the supermarket you “cyah buy a thing.” Two hundred dollars and you coming home with one bag. That is the reality. That is what is the man on the ground is concerned about, but you telling us about 0.3 per cent inflation. Well if that is so, and unemployment is so high, then people have less money to demand goods and services. So what you will have is a state of deflation. But, we are not experiencing that. In other words now, the value of our money has gone down and that is point finale.

Sen. Lyder: That is the bottom line, yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: That is the bottom line there. But you all are trying to—and this is the PNM, “eh”. A horrific economic situation that you all have created, exacerbated it with your corruption. Three billion dollars gone. Somebody try to—“I ain’t calling he name”—somebody try to gangster the Auditor General and the Parliament by not laying it when called upon by not laying—

Sen. Lyder: No name was called.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Point of order 46(4). Nobody is “gangstering” any organization.

Mr. Vice-President: Continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Called upon to lay the Auditor General’s Report then they refused, when asked, to account, refused to account, could not account. When given more papers, the Auditor General said, “Well that is not enough.” Still they tried and they tried. Why? They try to twist the fabric of reality to suit their own selves and their narrative. You all have failed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: You all have failed, time to go. You know, if anybody goes fishing—I know my brother here likes to go fishing—you catch that fish and just seeing it beating up and beating up, but you know you have it, and it beating and beating up. That is how you all looking right now. “Allyuh” just beating up all over the place. Personal insults, arrogance, but you all had 10 years. You all had 10 years and then telling us wait another three years. And, not only that, in that same bubble that you all like to live in, you all coming and want to believe alternative facts and present an alternative reality.

I will give you an example. I will give you an example. In the other place, one of the MPs came, Mr. Vice-President, and actually said, “Oh, the UNC like to talk about the 106 schools that they built but nobody could see it.” You believe that? That is where they reach. Nobody could see the 106 schools. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh came and read out one by one every single of the 106 schools with pictures, created, built by the United National

Congress; 106 schools.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: That is where they have reach to, eh. Well, I could understand it somehow because I have seen, I have lived enough, long enough and in different countries to see when dictatorial behaviours have gone beyond the boundaries of logic. That is where they are now. They have gone beyond the boundaries of logic. So when you talk about proof and magicians, they are exactly like Pharaoh's magicians. I "doh" know if anybody know—I "doh wanna" quote the Bible—they are exactly like Pharaoh's magicians. They came and they threw down their rod, it turned into a snake. But, when the truth came, when Prophet Moses [*Arabic spoken*] when he came and threw down his rod, that was the truth, and that ate up their rods and they had to run. That is what they are and that is what they do when the UNC comes and tells them what is going on.

So we had the hon. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal. Imagine when Sen. Jearlean John spoke to the situation of crime in the country, spoke so eloquently, gave examples, you tell me anybody in their right mind would interpret that to mean that we wish death upon them? Your policies and programmes have wished death upon the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: That is a fact.

Hon. Senators: Shame.

Sen. D. Nakhid: You cannot tell us that today 500—and what?—30 deaths for the year, that is because of who, because of what? You cannot address crime. Why? You do not understand the linkages that involves that

ecosystem of crime. You do not understand it, because none of you all addressed it here, none of you all. Ask anybody, talk about investment, talk about tourism, talk about economics. Ask the man on the street if he feels safe to go out with his family to any event in Trinidad and Tobago.

I swear to God, Mr. Vice-President, I was coming up to the Parliament yesterday so I swung up from Wrightson Road. It had some traffic, swung up from Wrightson Road and gone up. I do not know why sometimes I get placed in these situations. I saw a woman coming out of her house in Woodbrook. I do know if you all know, but I am old enough to know Woodbrook used to be a residential area without all the restaurants. It was an area people used to love to see, affluent and all that. A woman, kind of half “chinee-ish” woman, coming out to a car, who comes out before her, her daughter looks left and right and does the mother like this—[*Senator Nakhid gestures*]

2.10 p.m.

The mother comes out, opens the door, jumps in the car, the daughter runs back in her house. That is where we have reached in Trinidad and Tobago. “Da’is” where “allyuh” PNM have Trinidad and Tobago right now—

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—and “allyuh” coming to tell us what we should not tell “allyuh”. You all are death itself. The PNM is death itself—

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—and you all have no appreciation of it. You all have no appreciation of all the economics and tourism and trade “yuh” talking about.

You all do not know that at the end of the day, you all are so anti-people in your policies and programmes. I will break it down in this way.

A South African freedom fighter called Vusumzi Make. You know, everybody talks about Mandela and Thabo Mbeki and all that, but they had people behind the scenes. He was married at one time to Maya Angelou and he spoke about what was his fear, what was his fear for democracy in South Africa. He spoke what will betray the revolution, and we must not be afraid of that word “revolution”. What will betray the revolution is the thinking of the black bourgeoisie. You know why?—because they feel they have something to lose, and we, meaning the revolution must rely on the poor and working class because they know they have nothing to lose. You all always cater to that black bourgeois class in how you all think. That is why the poor and working class are sinking further and further—

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—into unemployment, despair and crime, and you all do not recognize that because you all are not linked to the ground in any form or fashion.

Sen. Lyder: Disconnected.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Disconnected from anything to do with the reality of Trinidad and Tobago. I do not want to go again into the contribution of the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts when talking about flying out. Just speak to anybody who flies out, I mean, come on. I mean, I and all was surprised that he would say something like that, when right now in Trinidad and Tobago people are studying how to put food on the table. People are studying how they could send their children to school.

A fella used to drive for me. He had a decent income. He called me the other day. No money to send his child to school. He had no gas in this car, no food, three daughters he has—three daughters. You could imagine the situation? I have to bring it down to the ground to them, but for them, talk to somebody who flies out to see how sweet Trinidad and Tobago is. How disconnected you could be? Well, I mean.

Then further exacerbated by somebody who with a little more than thinly-veiled racebaiting, comes and talks about how the PNM represents all the parties and all of that. She only had to look two seats down to the Senator from Tobago, Ancil Dennis, and listen to his contribution talking about how the UNC—how Tobago is now favouring south contractors. What does that mean?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: What does that mean? So what? East Indians, the same East Indians who are sitting down next to them do not realize that East Indians have a chance to get contracts in Tobago. I “doh” understand. How you all could speak out of the both sides of “yuh” mouth in the same debate.

Much more than that is your failure to recognize the room. That has always been the PNM problem. My father used to say that. Their failure to recognize the room and how to speak to the room. You all want to come and tell people about, the Senator said what? She “doh” want to give little children “licks”. The country is rife right now with child abuse.

Sen. Lyder: Wow.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Six thousand cases—

Sen. Lyder: That is what she will say.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—of sexual abuse reported in the last four years.

Sen. Lyder: That is the insensitive comment.

Sen. D. Nakhid: In the last four years. In the last 10 years from earliest reports, almost more than 10,000 cases. None of them spoke to that. Justice Judith Jones report on the desk of the Prime Minister since when, colleague Anil? Two and a half years.

Sen. Roberts: December 2022—

Sen. D. Nakhid: Minister in the Ministry in of Gender and Child Affairs came with a lot of tears, a lot of tears, still nothing has been done. Save your tears. The taxpayers are not paying you to come and cry and tell them, you empathize with them. They are paying for action. They are paying for you to come and tell the Prime Minister, the Member for Diego Martin West, why you have a report of child abuse, sexual abuse, abuse in the homes and you have done nothing for two and half years, and then want to come and tell us, that you all care for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. You “allyuh” care for? “Allyuh” care for yourself. “Allyuh” care about politics, about politicizing this the whole thing of child and sexual abuse. You all have done nothing.

In the back of me Independent Sen. Vieira and I are in a committee to go and see the homes, ask him if we can get anything done. Twice I have seen reports. When he asked, who is coming? We need a quorum to go to the homes. The PNM Members of that committee, they always have something to do.

Sen. Lyder: Too busy for children.

Sen. D. Nakhid: I think he sent out two or three, three times. We need to

go and see these homes. Every time they have an excuse. They cannot come and see the homes, and then coming to tell us, with 6,000 reports by the Children's Authority, you know what that means? It is probably about 10, because in many of those cases of child sexual abuse, they go and report it.

So all this talk about tourism and jocularly and picong and all of that, we have to come back to the ground. People are suffering. The children are suffering. This country is so great if you listen to this side. The country is so great, but children suffering, sexual abuse, domestic abuse rampant. In the schools, bullying, rampant. People losing their lives by suicide or otherwise. People getting chopped, stabbed in the schools, innocent people.

Take it up a notch, we go to all the unemployment they have created. We now have with 6,000 SMEs that shut down and they "doh" like to hear that. "Oh, God, stale news." That is how they move as a Government. They never like to accept what they have done and inflicted upon the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Sen. D. Nakhid: They never like to accept it. So they do not want you to speak about it. Propaganda of the highest order. I have never seen it before and I hate to make this macabre comparison, but it is like watching the settler colonial State of Israel in their propaganda, you know. So when they—and I have to address it. Forty-something killed today in Sidon. My academies are 10 minutes away from there, 40 killed today. In the last two, three weeks almost 3,000 innocent Lebanese civilians killed, but what is the propaganda? Hezbollah had terrorist bases. Hezbollah had this. They were

in residential areas. No proof. No proof given, just basically like them. I know it might be a bit of a macabre comparison, but what is it to a mother in Gaza or Beirut whose child has nothing to eat or to a child here in Tunapuna or Morvant or Laventille who has nothing to eat. What is it to them? It is the same. It is the same suffering of a child that you all have not addressed.

Sen. Lyder: Yes.

Sen. D. Nakhid: So it is either you die under the guns of the settler colonial entity, call it Israel or you die by the policy and programmes of this corrupt, incompetent PNM Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: It is not about games with them and about looking for laughs and to see who has a nice quip or picong, and if you see them shaking each others' hands and feeling nice, but you all have the country in a mess. That is just reality.

Sen. Lyder: Reality. Yes.

Sen. D. Nakhid: You all have the country in a mess. Proof of that is, every single thing that could address the poor and working class, they did not address it, you know. You could imagine with all the furore and lines that came because of the ships, the three ships, what “yuh” call them? The *Niña*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria*—and education, I will get into that after. An educational curriculum that they never addressed, eh. They are in Government almost 52 years. They never say, well “leh” we come and move away from this colonial Eurocentric history that we teach. Let us make it a little more geared to our people, afro and indo Trinbagonians. They never come and say that, you know, but they keep it. All of a sudden

now, “leh” we move that and put pan. Okay? Okay. Nobody ever said no. Nobody here will disagree with that. We love pan, certainly more than “allyuh”, but they come now and talk about what?—

Sen. Lyder: Pay rent.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—ask them, how many times or minutes here in the Senate they gave to talking about pan. How much time? Almost none.

2.20 p.m.

Almost none. Telling us about the panyard model, but the panyard model has been in existence from the time the first pan was made. They do not even understand that. The panyard model to protect the community, facilitate the community, the ills, the woes, adjust the economic concerns of the community, was there from the first—that is why pan was created, allyuh so dunce, allyuh cyah even see that”. That is why it was created.

The pan came of that oppression. It was their expression. You tell me? I grew up among the pan. “Allyuh could say wa allyuh want, address wa allyuh want, allyuh could put who in Pan Trinbago allyuh want. Allyuh doh know nothing about pan and will never know where it come from and what it means for us in Laventille”; never know. But the panyard model that they are coming now and talking about, first of all, they did nothing about it. All they had were the political meetings around it. That is all. Everything is to politicize it.

The panyard model, where they should come—or we are expecting them to come and say, “Well, here is what we have for pan.” They came and talked about chroming a pan. If I am a panman, who is making \$500, is getting \$500 from the Government, maximum, if I play for three pansides, I

might make \$3,000. And half this Government is talking about, “We want to present pan to the world.” What does that mean to a panyard?—\$3,000 in four or five months? What kind of money is that? Are you telling me that a panman could live on that? Mr. President, \$3,000 for four—“allyuh” know how pan people practice? You all know? They know? Other than they go in pan and sip scotch and eat—what?—

Sen. Roberts: Shrimps.

Sen. D. Nahkid:—eat shrimps, and play like they love the pan?

I know Sen. Vieira, we are at odds on many things, but I know he is a panman, I know he loves pan. That is a Despers man, by the way. They did not come here once—they did not come and say, “Well hear what, in this new budget that we used to mamaguy most of the people, at least as far as pan is concerned, this is what we have in place for the panmen and panwomen of Trinidad and Tobago.” How wonderful that would have been? “This is the allocation that we are going to do to increase, that pan people, in order to excel in the arts and crafts”—that she was talking about there, that we never saw—“here is what we are going to do.” So anybody who is playing, you rank it—and this a solution, by the way, “so allyuh listen up, allyuh might learn”.

So we will have the top pan sides over the 20/25 years—use your own yardstick as you want—based on their contribution to the national culture, we will grade them according to a payment system. So people are coming in now and saying, “Well, I am playing for the Renegades”—I do not even want to talk about Desperadoes—“I am playing for the Renegades, I am playing for the All Stars, I am playing for”—who else does it have down in

the west there? Starlift, or whoever, Silver Stars.

What we will do—because there have contributed so much, participated in almost every panyard, that means they have helped communities. That is what they do not understand. These pan sides have helped communities just by being there—we will give them this amount of money. You “cyah” give Desperadoes the same money that you want to give a band that you created two or three years. You cannot do that. That is fundamental unfair. They have invested in that pan side, panyard, their community, for almost over 50/60 years, but that would require a certain logic, a certain thought that they do not possess. “Dey doh have de capacity”. So when they talk about hybrid this and hybrid that, “the only hybrid I see is dotishness on their side. It is ah hybrid of dotish”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: “Is either dey wilfully dotish, or dey just doh understand”.

Sen. Mitchell: Mr. President, 46(4), please; 46(4).

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Nakhid, whilst you make your contribution, I ask you temper your language.

Sen. D. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]—I will remove—not even remove the “dotish”. I will say it is either wilfully incompetent, or they just ignorant on what is needed to progress anything that makes sense in Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Roberts: Did you pass math?

Sen. D. Nakhid: So, this Government—I would not even mention the elitist; the elitist nature of the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts’ contribution as he comes in. I would not even mention. But at least, I

thought—you know, Trinidad and Tobago must be getting fed up. We had nine years of a budget of delusions. Every year, they are going to do this. Every year, they are going to do that.

Sen. Lyder: Fairy tales.

Sen. D. Nakhid: The Minister of Finance came in the tenth year of budget, a budget of delusion. It did not make sense. And if five hours and a half, I think—

Sen. Lyder: Fifty minutes.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—five hours, or thereabouts, of the delusions, who would have thought a budget presentation that was so universally pant, by anybody that made sense, could be put in the shadows by his closing in the other House, that was even worst? And that was only one hour, eh, that is to tell you how bad it was. His response to the Member for Siparia, the Leader of the Opposition—

Sen. Lyder: Next Prime Minister.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—and I am paraphrasing here. The Minister of Finance said, “And the Opposition Leader comes with all these figure and statistics,” and he said, “This is a budget, and it is not only about figures.” That is what was said. So with all the figures and statistics that he came with, the Opposition Leader came and showed, quite cogently, in a most coherent fashion, that your numbers are not making sense, and this is the case. His response to that was “A budget is not only about the figures.” Well, it is not. In reality, it is not. But if telling us it is not about the figures, tell us about the human capital that you omitted completely in the budget. So, again, I go back, book bright but streetlight, not connected at all to what is happening

on the ground.

Sen. Roberts: “Dem might think is bulb yuh talking about”.

Sen. D. Nakhid: No, streetlight; streetlight, the light on “de ground”.

Sen. Roberts: “Dey want to give LED bulb, we eh get none yet”. Six years, we are waiting for a LED bulb.

Sen. D. Nakhid: And not only that, again, the Minister of Finance, when we thought that his closing in the other place was worse than his opening, than his actual submission, he came here in the opening here in the Senate—and I must say, “oh gosh”, if every body language, every fibre of his body showed that he knew his time is up, it was in that opening.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: I could not understand a thing. I mean, I went back over in the *Hansard* and that was confirmed, a mess. This Government is running on fumes; on fumes. Why would they feel that they could come and try to ascribe things to this Opposition that, you know, is clearly not there. And I go back, unfortunately, to the hon. Sen. Sagrainsingh-Sooklal, because I really did not understand it, and it was not only the egregious nature of how she tried to cast aspersions on the Opposition and on Sen. Jearlean John, I was wondering why she would feel it necessary in the Senate—when I must say, very diverse here, there, and there—why she would try to insert that. And I realized that that race-baiting, about if she moves, they have a hundred East Indians ready to follow her—

Sen. Lyder: Race-baiting.

Sen. D. Nahkid:—is that necessary? “Who cares if ah East Indian follow yuh, if a Chinese follow yuh, if it is ah Portuguese, it is ah Lebanese? Who

cares? If all ah allyuh could make vacuous contributions like you all have, who cares?”

2.30 p.m.

“In my opinion, and all yuh talk about remedial and remedial, half ah all yuh should be in the remedial classes dat dey have in July and August, half that Bench qualify to go. Half ah dem. Poor. I hear a MP from dem, because they brought it up, she said what, the hon. Senator? ‘She said none ah dem good, all ah dem not bright’ and all kinds of things.” I listened to the MP for Toco/Sangre Grande, and by the way he was one of the better ones from them. The man paint he house green, green verbs up and down the place, whoever want—the concerns about climate, the environment would have been happy with his contribution.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: “And you know I do not want to cast aspersions on the Member, but ah doh like when they jump out ah dey lane. You know what I mean? If somebody who has a little intelligence on that side jump out of their lane and want to give a lil picong I might be able to stomach that, like the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, he does that, although we do mash him up”. He could do that.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: No problem.

Sen. Lyder: Yeah, yeah, we good with him with that one.

Sen. D. Nakhid: “But when somebody so obviously ill-equipped—doh get nervous, hon. Sookhai—to speak to us about anything having to be done, because we have the solutions. When you allyuh tell us—but allyuh spend

money and all yuh spend this, but we show you all tangible things we have done. We show you all in the health care sector what we have done. ”

Sen. Mark: Where the money gone?

Sen. D. Nakhid: We show you all in the education sector what we have done, and you know I will go in depth a “lil” bit, Mr. Vice-President, about that education, because I think it is the key. I think it is the key to this crime situation we are seeing. The panyard model, the sports, all of that is relevant, extremely relevant, and that shows by the amount of investment we made when we were there, that is why we had the best Minister of Sport. They could say what they want, that is why we invested in sport because we understood what sport means to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: “Ah doh have Gucci bag though”.

Sen. D. Nakhid: But let me go to the education sector. I would give you an example of how this Government continues to fail us in the education sector. A few weeks ago I was asked to a press conference to speak to the crime, and by coincidence that same day the *Guardian* newspaper came out with a whole list of allocations, do you know, Mr. Vice-President, in critical catchment areas, where the crime is at its highest—by the way PNM constituencies eh, all of them—you know the allocations for schools they have never done it, they have never allocated—so Piccadilly Government that they were supposed to rebuilt since nine years—

Sen. Roberts: They built it?

Sen. D. Nakhid: “Dey eh build a damn—dey eh built a thing. Dey eh build a ting.”

Sen. Lyder: “River dam and a ting.”

Sen. D. Nakhid: Piccadilly Government, all they do now because I did it with Twiggy who holds down that community. “I doh care if she is PNM, I doh care about dat”. I care about if a child going to school or not.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: If a child could use education as a pathway. So do not come and give us all this about pathway to prosperity when you all cannot even give people pathway to education, how they going and prosper? How they going and prosper?

Hon. Senator: “Oooh. Oooh”.

Sen. D. Nakhid: They just going and prosper just so? That is why when you get a bunch of people and they get inbred in the PNM is a kind of inbred thinking because they only listen to themselves, so they end up just totally distorting and warping the whole process. Piccadilly Government, St. Phillips Government Primary, all of these schools, St. Roses was closed down. Going into a school where, in Rosary Boys—I went there, I went to Rosary Boys, so I went in. All the St. Roses Girls pack up, cramp up with Rosary Boys in one “lil” building, because they do not care the education.

So you see, you saw all the allocations, allocation for this, allocation for that, money spent but the schools not built, not rehabilitated, the same for Mount D’Or, the same for Tunapuna, the same in all the schools along the east-west corridor, do not talk about the schools in the rural areas. Imagine this Government want to tell the UNC about rural areas and we do not care about rural areas. Something wrong somewhere, Senator. Something wrong somewhere. I passed by a school the other day, rat infested, down in

south—

Sen. John: Like the port.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Rat infested. Those children going to school in a community centre now for the last eight/nine years that they promised to build, and hear what, they allocated the money.

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

Sen. D. Nakhid: “Geezan ages.”

Sen. Roberts: “Time flies when yuh talking sense”.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Yeah, but I am keeping on this education sector because I want to go—I have to skip and go to this. “Because ah doh want the only one to come and tell—you know what, the country is so fed up ah all yuh, I doh want to come and tell keep talking that all yuh ain’t do this all yuh ain’t do that, the whole country knows. Everybody fed up, they just waiting. I just feeling sorry because half ah all yuh unemployable, nobody ain’t go want all yuh, so it go be real trouble for all yuh. ”

So I want to give a solution, and listen to this, Mr. Vice-President, this is very important: It is a critical four or five months we have seen problems with bullying, we see problems with getting students adjusted for secondary school. As they reach in secondary school it may be the pressure, may be students coming in from other schools, fight all over the place. I could tell you that is a challenge. Even if you went to a school like St. Mary’s or Fatima or Presentation, there is that pressure, maybe less because people coming from so-called better homes.

“It is a fact because—it is a fact, and that is because ah all yuh. All yuh have put so much pressure on the ghettos you all have”—well I would

not say the ghettos, the hotspots that you all turn into ghettos because those communities used to be striving communities. Laventille used to be stable, I used to go up there and I used to walk from the grapefruit track factory all the way up the hill without a care in the world, spend two/three weeks with my grandfather and mother and uncles and them and then come back. Down the road my father pick me up and I go home. You think anybody could do that now?

That three months period after the SEA exams when students are basically left in limbo, I see that as a critical time that we could reach those students who eventually go on to secondary school, or go in a different direction in a life of deviancy, but what that will call for? It will call for a government, and that will be us the UNC, who will direct resources into that period by giving talent identification officers, by giving mental, social workers, identifying that time, because you know how many students sit the SEA? How many? Tell them. Almost 17,000. You have 17,000 kids basically on free time for three months, some of them do not even go to school, because when they go the teachers tell them no classes, because they finished SEA, they are just waiting.

Why do we not use that time to identify children who might create problems in secondary schools? Why do we not use that time on a positive note to identify students who can give something positive to sports, to chest, introduce them to new things, new ideas. But that will call for a government that sees the possibilities of that time wasted. Not a government who is only interested in just passing them through like an assembly line, as soon as they primary school send them to secondary school. Some of them in secondary

school cannot even read and write. Why not use this time as an assessment period, whether in sports, track and field, football, that way you create employment for all the coaches in Trinidad and Tobago who do not have—the ex-players who do not have work. All of them now just depending on the PNM to give them something. Why do you not create an ecosystem around that education system? But to do that, Mr. Vice-President, what you would have to do, you will have to invest in the school infrastructure, and somebody spoke to that.

And I think Sen. Sunity Maharaj said a school is a community centre. Well I would posit that not only the school is a community centre, the field of a community when they have a sport day or a family day becomes the community centre.

Mr. Vice-President: One minute.

Sen. D. Nakhid: “The panyard becomes a community centre. When you live in a village in a community any period of meeting, a house can be a community centre, the Nakhid house—[*Inaudible*—the Minister of Finance used to come there and eat from university with my brother, because he is living in the west. He used to come and eat. I am telling you all, get off your high horse in the “lil” time that you have left, put your resources in the people. Do not come here and tell us about this and try and raise bait, and try and tell us about who could travel. Give some investment to the human capital that exist in Trinidad and Tobago, that we can use in Trinidad and Tobago to finally get rid of the crime, escalating crime, criminality that we are so inclined to.”

And my last thing: Every accusation that the PNM makes is actually a

confession. If you all accused us of corruption of this, of squandermania look at yourselves, look at your 10 years, look at where we have reached as a country and then come back, and given that assessment, when you all are in Opposition next year, and I thank you, Mr. Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

2.40 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President: Sen. Laurence Hislop.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Laurence Hislop: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, I want to start from this point, eight speakers, eight, not six, but eight speakers, the UNC or the Opposition placed into this debate, eight, Mr. Vice-President. I want to highlight it as being the hallmark of the United National Congress, that unethical behaviour equals the UNC.

Sen. Dennis: Yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: Because whereas, Mr. Vice-President, it may not be—well let me put it this way, the UNC has found—what is the legal term? “Ah lacuna.”

Hon. Senators: A lacuna.

Sen. L. Hislop: “Ah lacuna. Yes, the UNC has found “ah” lacuna in the Standing Orders, Mr. Vice-President, and has exploited it, not used it, you know, exploited it.

Hon. Senators: Every time.

Sen. L. Hislop: I am not here to determine whether or not—I am not a medical doctor—Members opposite get sick and recover, but, Mr.

Vice-President, it leaves a sour taste in the mouth when you exploit something knowing that it may not be illegal, but it is unethical. And the UNC—

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Sen. Lyder: 46(6). Mr. President, 46(6). He is clearly in his statement saying that we are faking, exploiting and so on. Mr. President, I was sick, I was sick. I am happy to be well today. The Prime Minister was sick as well too and went away. He came back—casting aspersions.

Sen. Mitchell: Mr. President, I would also like to raise a point of order, and that is 42(6). We just heard from the hon. Senator. The Standing Order says that he should stay in his seat after he finishes speaking when another Member is speaking, and he has beaten a very hasty retreat. Mr. President, would you please remind this Senate of that Standing Order?

Sen. Roberts: When the Acting Prime Minister left after talking—

Mr. President: Okay, okay, okay. Enough is enough.

Sen. Roberts: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Sen. Roberts, all Members—

Sen. Roberts: Nonsense.

Mr. President: We have been going quite—

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: I am speaking. We have been going along quite nicely for two days. This is the third day and we have very few speakers left before the entire process is wrapped up, okay? So let us continue with a certain level of decorum and allow the Member to make his contribution. Continue Sen. Hislop.

Sen. L. Hislop: Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: Mr. President, I will leave that behaviour where it is because the public has seen it over the last few years and unfortunately it will continue, even into the other Parliament, because they will remain right where they are, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: Mr. President, Sen. Roberts in his contribution, or what it may seem to be a contribution, wanted to make the fact that the UNC loves Tobago and highlighted some things that they did in Tobago. I want to make it clear that the UNC, the UNC has shown its hand over and over again. “Dey doh like Tobago because Tobago doh like dem.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: And so, even with these minuscule projects that he wants to talk about, how we prefer the gas station in Roxborough; that was done on the cusp of an election that sought to buy Tobago East; that did not work. But when you want to talk about projects that central government has done in Tobago, there is no comparison when it comes to the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: You build one gas station in Roxborough, you jump in. Talk about hospital.

Sen. Roberts: Scarborough Hospital. Talk about that.

Hon. Senator: It was finished by the time—

Sen. Roberts: Nonsense.

Mr. President: Have a seat. Members make this the last time that I have to rise to my feet to indicate that when a Member is speaking shouting across the Floor does nothing.

Sen. Roberts: Let him continue to lie.

Sen. Mitchell: That is an unparliamentary word.

Mr. President: Again, allow the Member to make his contribution. Continue Sen. Hislop.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: Thank you, Sir. And you see, Mr. President, if the Senator would have allowed me to finish, he would not have been reprimanded. Because when I spoke, I was speaking about the fact that if you want to talk about comparisons of projects done in Tobago, I only stayed in Roxborough when it came to what the central government delivered to Tobago. You talk about a gas station in Roxborough, well, let us talk about a hospital, let us talk about a police station, let us talk about a fire station, let us talk about an administrative complex. That is just Roxborough. And then, if you want to move even further you rest, you came into office and completed the Scarborough General Hospital. That is what governments do. Well, you opened it.

Sen. Dennis: Yeah, that is all they did.

Sen. Roberts: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. L. Hislop: So when we want to talk, let us talk about an airport. Sen. Lyder likes to call the terminal building that is being built, a state-of-the-art terminal building, a wing. Well listen, I do not know if the Senator knows the difference between a wing and a building, because what I see being

erected in Tobago is not a wing. It will rival any terminal building in the Caribbean.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: I am sorry, and the only reason why it may not rival others in the world, Mr. President, is because of its size. But when you talk about quality of construct, quality of design, quality of technology—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: But, no, the UNC wanted nothing, they want nothing good for Tobago. The Prime Minister talks about purchasing ferries to the tune of \$1 billion; they find that is a problem. The airport is too much money to spend in Tobago. Come on man, come on. And then you want to come talk about a self-governance Bill that the UNC bought. A Bill that was rejected by all of Tobago, not the PNM. Even Mr. Hochoy Charles said the Bill was inadequate, the Bill did nothing for Tobago, and, Mr. President, there was no consultation. Well I should not say that. They had consultation with one who at the time, was what? What was he at the time? Nothing more than a leader of a party of two.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Roberts: What Bill you bring?

Sen. L. Hislop: But this, this, you see—

Sen. Roberts: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. L. Hislop: No, just keep quiet. Mr. President, Mr. President—

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: He is trying to throw you off.

Sen. L. Hislop: No, no, he cannot throw me off. Mr. President, if he wants to ask about what Bill was brought ask your colleagues in the Lower House

to support the Tobago amendment Bill.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. L. Hislop: Both of them, both of them.

Sen. Roberts: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Please, yes, it is a debate. I understand but, yes, it is a debate and the Member has to make a contribution. Talking across at him that is not—it is not a conversation, it is a debate. Member, continue.

Sen. L. Hislop: Thank you, Mr. President. You see—ask your colleagues when it is brought back fully on the Order Paper to vote in favour. The Bill is in committee stage of the House of Representative right now, Mr. President, it is still on the Order Paper. Ask your colleagues to vote for it. Ask your colleagues to vote for it and then when it comes here we will debate. Because I am sure that every Government Member of Parliament in the other place is in favour of giving Tobago additional autonomy.

Sen. Dennis: And independence too.

Sen. L. Hislop: And up here I could guarantee all of the Government side and I am sure, not seeking to pad any votes, but I am sure there are Independent Senators who will be in support of the Tobago autonomy Bill, Mr. President.

2.50 p.m.

The last thing I will touch on from Sen. Roberts, is this narrative of the Dwight Yorke Stadium, and that as the Minister of Sport he refurbished it, put down a track that was of inferior quality and 2015 the track was unusable. If it was not for the current Minister of Sport and Community

Development that spent significant funds of money to refurbish the Dwight Yorke Stadium, to this day we may still not have had the use of the stadium.

I want to touch on Sen. Nakhid's point, and Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdial yesterday as well spoke about that, trying to push this narrative that we have a problem with Trinidad contractors getting work in Tobago and that is far from the truth, Mr. President. The point that my colleague from Tobago was making—Mr. President, could I have some protection and some injury time please?

Sen. Mitchell: Mr. President, on a point of order.

Mr. President: Raise the point of order.

Sen. Mitchell: Mr. President, 53(1)(c). Keep quiet.

Mr. President: Right. So Sen. Lyder, are you leaving, are you staying? What are you doing?

Sen. Mitchell: Mr. President is on his legs.

Sen. Lyder: I saw you on your legs.

Mr. President: Let us not fall away with procedure in the Chamber. Yes, we are all tired. Yes, it has been two days. I have stated this before. The next time I have to rise to my legs I will bring this House to order. Continue, Sen. Hislop.

Sen. L. Hislop: Thank you, Mr. President. The point that my colleague from Tobago—and I want to welcome Sen. Dennis to this House.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: I believe that his contribution will add value—him being here would add value to this august Chamber, Mr. President. The point that he was making, local content that previous Tobago House of Assembly

Administrations made it a duty to build. The capacity of contractors on the island, the previous administrations, previous PNM administrations, made it a duty to build the local content in Tobago, we are now seeing that being eroded and eroded by clear policy decisions by the current Administration.

Because what they are seeking to do, Mr. President, is that work that can be done by contractors based in Tobago are given—not even tendered, Mr. President—to contractors, and all of the contractors that have been given these contracts, Mr. President, are coming from one particular location. This has nothing to do with the location, with their race. It just simply boils down to economics and facts. You are demoralizing Tobagonians by doing this. You are destroying a sector, and that is the point that was being made yesterday. So for this to now switch to the subject of, we have a problem, Trinidad contractors have worked in Tobago for years—for years they have worked in Tobago. But you see, that is how the UNC interprets and spins things to suit their narrative.

Sen. Nakhid, well, yes, he also spoke about pan. I sat here and I was wondering if it was déjà vu, if we were debating the Bill to make the pan the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago. Because Sen. Nakhid spoke nothing about the Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024, and spoke about pan for practically all of his contribution, and we do not need to rehash who loves pan and who “doh” like pan. Everybody here, we debated that a couple of months ago at length, Mr. President.

I want to just respond to Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy concerning two items that she raised, on two items that are significant to Tobago, and that was the one with the Roxborough Hospital and her call for the Roxborough Hospital

to be 24/07. Mr. President, you see when persons come into office who do not understand what they are doing, you are going to have those kinds of actions and those kinds of repercussions. Because the plan that was in place for the Roxborough Hospital was always for the hospital to be twofold, and information I have is that the hospital or the health facility was supposed to operate both as primary and—how do you put it, primary and secondary?—secondary care. So you have your health centre facility which was supposed to operate from 8.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m., and then you have the hospital facility which was supposed to operate 24/07.

And when I say hospital services, it also included, Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy, the obstetrics and gynaecology operation, full 24/07, maternity ward, everything, and what could not be handled by Roxborough, assistance would be given from Scarborough. And so the plan was in place, full service for the Roxborough Hospital. It was not built as a health centre. It was built both primary and secondary. According to one of the former secretaries of health, it was a unique setup in Trinidad and Tobago that in the same space you will have both your primary and secondary operations taking place simultaneously. But the administration that we have in Tobago, for whatever reason—it is what? It is almost four years and that facility has not yet been fully operationalized.

You see, we have been making the call over and over again for that to be done because it was built with taxpayer's money to facilitate a service to the people of Tobago East and that has not been done to this point.

Sen. Roberts: Couva hospital took nine years—

Sen. L. Hislop: As it relates to SPEL, there were some outstanding

requirements that SPEL had to meet, and the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries is working with SPEL to have all of those requirements met so that the blasting licence can—in fact, the information is that SPEL did not even a quarry licence. And so that has been sorted, blasting licence and the export licences will be coming. Based on the information that I have, it will be coming once all of the additional requirements or the outstanding requirements are met. And I feel the pain because I operate in the industry where we require aggregate, and that is one of the challenges that we have been having. The sad part about it is, it is the domestic market, because I could tell you that right now because SPEL is way below its production capacity—and it really has nothing to do with requirements but more management, and because SPEL is way below what it used to be, we now have a situation where gravel has to be coming from Trinidad to Tobago. That never happened and that is what we are facing right now.

So let me move on quickly, Mr. President. We all spoke well. We all know the microeconomic issues in Trinidad and Tobago so I do not need to rehash that. We have gone through all of that for the last two days into today. The Opposition did not treat with it because they clearly do not have a clue of what is going on. Mr. President, one of the things that I want to treat with is that this Government has made it its business to secure the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: That is what this Government has done, and it has been securing that on several fronts. We know the work that has been done in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries and the work that continues to be

done in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to secure an industry that we have been part of and we have been at the forefront of it for over 100 years, and I do not see Trinidad and Tobago in the near future going too far away from energy and the energy industry. But you know, I think sometimes we forget that this country faced two pandemics, you know.

3.00 p.m.

Because we faced COVID-19, and then between 2010 to 2015, we had the PP, which was a pandemic of all sorts when it came to just spending as they saw fit and not recognizing that, “ay”—well, not even spending, spending and pilfering.

Sen. Mitchell: “Tiefin”.

Sen. L. Hislop: And when they want to talk about—according to Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdial, we ought—we will do it just as we did it. Well, remember how you did it. And the sad thing about that is that my colleague, Sen. Sagramsingh-Sooklal, reminded—

Mr. President: The Minister in the Ministry.

Hon. Senator: *Pusoor pusoor.*

Sen. L. Hislop:—sorry, the Minister in the Ministry, spoke to the Privy Council ruling; spoke to the—and you see, in that document, it says, the—calls the names of the company—and others. And the interesting thing is one of the others is one of theirs.

Sen. Mitchell: Oropouche East. Infamous.

Sen. L. Hislop: And, Mr. President, that is what we faced.

Sen. L. Hislop: But when we talk about people development, we could also speak to the significant work, Mr. President, that takes place—and it is just

one Ministry I will like to single out in this regard. There are so many others that have been doing significant work but you see the work that the Minister of Youth Development and National Service has been doing?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: The work that that Ministry has been doing, Mr. President, is extremely critical and vital to Trinidad and Tobago. That work—and you see, it took the foresight of Dr. Keith Rowley to select—to first and foremost, create a Ministry that is focused on youth development.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: Because when we talk about youth development, we are talking about the future of Trinidad and Tobago. That is what we are talking about. That is what we are talking about. So whilst we are securing what we already know, in terms of our energy, we also have to secure our people and we have to secure the future of our youth. When we talk about the Opposition, it is just about crime talking about crime, but we to bear in mind that our young people need direction. Because at the end of the day, it is not the Prime Minister or the Minister of National Security who makes a decision to rob somebody or to kill somebody, it is an individual decision to commit a crime. So we are holding everybody else responsible in this country—Prime Minister, Minister of National Security, everybody—except the person who commits the crime.

Sen. Mitchell: Exactly.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: That is what we are doing.

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: That is so true.

Sen. L. Hislop: I know about individual responsibility because I grew up with three older brothers; four of us. And being the last, I could not come and tell my parents, “Well, it is da one dey make me so it.” “You gehin blows for doing wa yuh do and saying somebody cause yuh do it. So yuh gehing double licks. And I cyah be here and promoting dat kind of ting. We in ah new era. But I could tell yuh bun skin is what use to keep some of us on the straight path because outside of dat, we woulda do wa we want”.

Mr. President, even in the tourism and the creative sector, the work is ongoing towards securing our future and divesting our economy. The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts spoke about the significant strides and the increase in arrivals to Trinidad and Tobago. You know, we behave as if tourism is a curse, but yet we ourselves get on the aircrafts and go to our Caribbean brothers and sisters and enjoy their tourism products, when Trinidad and Tobago has a significant product to offer.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: And you know, they made light when the Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs brought to the fore—I just missed the article, eh—the Lonely Planet article, Mr. President. They made light of it. This is an international magazine, an international organization that has cited Trinidad and Tobago as being in the top 10 places to visit in the world. But you listen to the Opposition and you would think that they are living—I do not want to call any other country, but they are living in hell, when I know, in Trinidad and Tobago—listen, I live in the best country in the world.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: “You living in de Balisier House.”

Sen. L. Hislop: Mr. President, there are even projects—and those projects have been highlighted in the budget statement—that are seeking to secure our future based on our tourism and creative sector. When we focus on bringing people to Trinidad and Tobago, we have to offer them a package, we have to offer them an experience.

So when we talked about hotel development—and my colleague from Tobago, Sen. Dennis, spoke at length about the Sandals project and listen, we can try “all how” to diminish the Sandals project, we can try “all how”, it is a fact that if Trinidad and Tobago—if Tobago had received the Sandals project, as planned by the Government, that Tobago’s tourism product would have been a different place today.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: Mr President, and not just the tourism product, but all of the spin-offs that a resort of that magnitude and that quality brings to an island. I do not know, every other Caribbean island has it—almost every other Caribbean island has it. It is good for them but Tobago must not get it, and the UNC wants to say that they love Tobago, but everybody else must get it. They themselves go and visit Sandals, but Tobago must not get it.

You know, these kinds of projects Mr. President, are not just about those who are in senior positions at these resorts, but this speaks to every single individual. You have the opportunities there for agriculture, for culture, for tour guides, for taxi drivers. That is what a project of that magnitude would do. But no, once it is the PNM that is building it—and it is not even your proxy anymore, you know. The folks in the administration

in Tobago is “yuh” spawn. They are not “yuh” proxy. They operate just like you, they look like you. The only difference is that the colour might be different, but listen, their modus operandi is the UNC outright.

And when we talk about—you know, the marina development, Mr. President, it is a significant development for Tobago, eh, and I am looking forward for that project coming on stream and being in operation. Because listen, marinas—it has been proven over the years that marinas provide, not only jobs in construction but high-quality jobs during operation.

Sen. Roberts: “So why you eh do it yet”?

Sen. L. Hislop: Because you see, Mr. President, it requires skilled labour within a marina operation to treat with vessels that are within a marina.

Sen. Roberts: “So why yuh eh do it yet”?

Sen. L. Hislop: I am surprised that Sen. Roberts will be in opposition to a marina because he is a man—

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]—“why yuh eh do it yet”?

Sen. L. Hislop: Mr. President.

Sen. Roberts: Nobody is making—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: All right. Okay. Enough is enough. Sen. Roberts, do me a favour, just take a 10-minute walk and come back at the end of the Member’s contribution.

Sen. Roberts: Mr. President, that is unfair.

Mr. President: Sen. Roberts, just a 10-minute walk and come back at the end of the Member’s contribution.

Sen. Roberts: Sir, only out of respect for you but that is very unfair, you understand? I am not opposed to any marina—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. Mitchell: “Wa happen? Yuh doh have de Floor”.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Members, Members, Members, okay. I have asked for something to happen. Please let it happen.

Mr. President: Sen. Roberts—

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Sen. Roberts—

[*Member exits Chamber*]

Mr. President: Continue.

3.10 p.m.

Sen. L. Hislop: Thank you, thank you, Mr. President. Because you see a marina development speaks to high-quality jobs, high-paying jobs and outside of that, I am sure one of the things that can be developed in conjunction with the marina project is a duty free zone. There are citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who travel even as far as—you go right to St Maarten and you see the operation of the marinas and duty free system in St Maarten and you tie that in conjunction with a new airport operation terminal building in conjunction with increased cruise ship arrivals, that is a significant boost.

We are talking about foreign exchange coming into your country from your duty free system, from your increased cruise ship arrivals, from your increased airlift. Those are the kinds of plans and projections that this Government has been putting on the table for Tobago and for Trinidad and Tobago. Because you see, we do not see Tobago as being—there are some of us who do not see Tobago as being critical to the diversification of the

economy of Trinidad and Tobago and it will play a significant role.

Mr. President, if I am to just read very quickly from an article, a magazine dated the 25th of January 2020 and let me give you—it is from *Global Marine Business Advisors* and it speaks to what are some of the benefits of a marina and it says:

Other studies have estimated that a typical owner of a large yacht will...spend...—an estimated—10 per cent of its value...—annually—on maintenance and upkeep.

Mr. Imbert: Much more.

Sen. L. Hislop: [*Laughter*] I am going based on the study, maybe the study is an old study. But many factors make up this figure including:

...payments to marinas, crew, boatyards, contractors...

What is it? Chandeliers.

Mr. Imbert: Chandleries.

Sen. L. Hislop: ...chandleries...—yes, Sir. Well I give you Buccoo, I will take—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. L. Hislop: Yeah.

...bunkering and insurance companies.

The ripple effect trickles downstream to hotels, shops, restaurants, bars, visitor attractions and travel agents...—and so on.

Sen. Mitchell: Foreign exchange.

Sen. L. Hislop: And this is foreign exchange we are talking about. So Mr. President, let me just help you. Some of my colleagues are in a better position and they may know what I am speaking about so it gives you the

details here of small, medium, large, super, mega and they give you the average value or average cost of a vessel and this is in US: \$500,000 to 2.5 for a small; \$2 million to \$6 million for a medium; \$6 million to \$15 million, a large; super, \$10 million and more, mega, \$600 million and you take 10 per cent of that, Mr. President—and this is just one yacht eh know, this is one. And if you build out a marina that can take upwards of 100 yachts and you consider this, what this will bring to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, it is well worth the investment. It is well worth the investment.

And you know what—the Caribbean has over 100 marinas. But do you know what Trinidad and Tobago has on the rest of the islands? Location, outside of the hurricane belt. Well we know we got a little scared this year but the majority of it is outside of the hurricane belt. Mr. President, how much time do I have left? What time do I finish?

Mr. President: You end at 3.20.

Sen. L. Hislop: All right, thank you. Oh, time flying boy. So I just want to touch on the management of Tobago's allocation. Tobago received \$2.599 billion, 4.35 per cent of the national budget. You know for those of us who read the scriptures, there is a parable that talks about the talents. Man had his workers. One he gave five, the next one he gave two, the next one he gave one. The one who got five doubled the investment by the time he came back, the other one who had two doubled but the one who had one bury it. When the master came back, he said to the master "Well I was afraid that you woulda—so ah hide" and so for me, Mr. President, that talks about what you do with what you get. It talks about management of what you get.

Very quickly, Mr. President, the Tobago House of Assembly from

1996 to 2024 has legally received its allocation and the thing about it is, and I will go as far back as Mr. Charles and Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy highlighted that. Mr. Charles operated at a time when the resources were significantly lower. But you know what we got? We still got work in Tobago. We still got production, we got development under Mr. Charles. Mr. London came on the scene after we went through a dispute resolution issue. Mr. London came on the scene and operated with additional resources and the development of Tobago, listen, it just skyrocketed, it just accelerated.

Then we come to this Administration in Tobago now who has received more than the previous THA and Sen. Dennis made mention of that, \$7 billion in three years and you ask the question what have we received. And for me, the issue, Mr. President, is not what you get, is how you manage what you get. Because let us even start with the Minister of Finance. I am sure the Minister of Finance would like for there to be more revenues coming into Trinidad and Tobago, would love to have a windfall but he has to work within the confines of what we get and this is what—you know, you grow up as a Tobagonian, you understand that you work within what you have, make what you have work and when you make what you have work, you will see the benefits of it. But no, we have an Administration that continues to beg and plead and cry and—yeah?

As I wrap up, Mr. President, I want to make a plea to the Administration in Tobago. There are projects in Tobago that were at different stages of completion that were for the benefit of the citizens of Tobago and I want to ask the Administration, I want to put it on *Hansard*, ask the administration to do the right thing and complete the projects in

Tobago East, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop: The Bertille St. Clair indoor facility, the Goodwood Pavilion, the Goldsborough agro-processing plant, the Charlotteville Community Centre. Those projects would have been completed by now if we did not allow spite and “bad mind” to operate in the space. So I am asking the administration please do the right thing and complete those projects not for the benefit of PNM “yuh know” but it is for the benefit of Tobagonians and that is what we are asking for.

Mr. President, the last thing I would briefly touch on is this oil spill issue in Tobago and the call by some that are saying that the Government does not care about the fishermen and so on. The Minister of Finance was very clear that he is waiting, he is waiting on the Tobago House of Assembly to submit the documentation for the oil spill.

Hon. Senator: Still.

Sen. L. Hislop: Still waiting. You cannot just give out money. The Central Government has already incurred \$241 million, \$241 million. This is the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, \$241 million and then the THA got a \$50 million to see about treating with what they were responsible for. But when you consider the Ministry of Energy—I heard the Secretary for finance saying that the oil spill took place in Tobago so how come the Ministry of Energy getting money for an oil spill that took place, and I am saying to myself but where did the expertize and the equipment come from. Heritage Petroleum is based where? Heritage Petroleum is an entity under which Ministry?

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. L. Hislop: Well—but \$241 million, that is for what we are talking about, the recovery of the vessel and all of that work that was being done.

But, Mr. President, I want to compliment—and I will leave that there, and I am asking the THA to do what they are supposed to do. They know what they are supposed to do, they are playing games.

Mr. Imbert: “Who get that \$50 million?”

3.20 p.m.

Sen. L. Hislop: Well that is a question they have to answer. The \$50 million that they got, who got the \$50 million? Because out of that \$50 million, I am sure that fishermen should have gotten some sort of compensation by now if they had managed their business properly. So, we need to ask them, who got part of \$50 million? But the thing about it, I want to compliment the Minister of Finance, Mr. President—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop:—for his nine year, well going on his tenth year stint. I also want to thank the Prime Minister for his leadership of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. L. Hislop:—and leadership of this Government. Mr. President, with these few words, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Francis.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Francis Lewis: Thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of our national budget. As I stand back and I look at the budget and its supporting documents, it is a complex document. It is a competent budget. It is a competent document. I want to commend, through you, Mr. President, to the Minister of Finance, and through him, to the officers in the multiple Ministries, but particularly in the Ministry of Finance, who have worked on this. This is hard work and it is good work that I think is well done.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Lewis: In recognizing its work and the worth, I want to also add that in the field of planning it is an area that I am somewhat associated and familiar with. It is a good budget, but I want us to aim perhaps for the next year for a great budget. In saying that, I would not want it to be read as a criticism as much as an encouragement for the future. A good budget is a necessary starting point. A great budget does so much more. It sets the stage for a positive ROI. You know, in another place, I teach, and one of the questions we sometimes use, just as a matter of a tease to students, is, what is the difference between an expense and an investment? Because, in both cases, money is going out. Good expenditure gets the job done. Good investment generates a rate of return. That difference is fundamental to the difference.

A good budget seeks to efficiently manage our tangible assets in a professionally competent way. A great budget recognizes that assets are not just the tangible ones but the intangible ones. Three that would spring to

mind would include trust, hope, and credibility. Not because we cannot touch it does not make it less real. They are very real.

As we move forward, how do we move and create positive movements and sense of progress? In being invited to speak, I am so conscious that there are 71 persons who can formally speak for the 1.4 million people in our country. The responsibility of the 71; 30 in this House, and 41 in our sister assembly is awesome. In researching the market—and I would like to share a little bit of that work that I do—in talking to citizens, when I ask, “How are you going?”, especially if they are running a business, because this is something I do on a fairly frequent basis, I get a variety of responses. But by far, the one that stands out, as in the large majority of time, of the responses I get is, “I am getting by,” said with a shrug.

Often they hasten to add, “I want to do better. I mean, I am okay with where I am you know, for the moment, but I really want to do better.” And, they express a very strong need to have an access to opportunity, and especially, the opportunity to grow. Hope, and that sense of opportunity, is a tangible budget output and a tangible output of planning. More is required of us. I do not wish to be churlish because I recognize the amount of work that has been put into creating and getting us to where we are, but that is not enough. There is a strong, strong sense that better can be done. COVID, as terrible as it was, was horrible, but it is now in rare-view mirror.

As a number of respondents have said, let us do better, and we can, and it is about having a growth mindset. So, when I look at budget, I am looking for a growth mindset. Let me hasten to add, and to point out, that these concerns are not targeted simply at the Government. It is certainly not

just targeted to the Opposition, or to my own Independent Bench. They are for the country. If we disaggregate GDP there is much that is not under the control of the State. So, my comments, in talking about a budget, is much broader than the particular document presented by the Minister of Finance on behalf of the Government. It is extending to the entire private sector to the role that they must play in moving this country forward.

We keep talking about diversification. What often gets missed is the Government should, and I do not deny that they are actions a Government should take, but beyond that, what are the responsibilities of the businesses that are across this country, and in the people's sector? Credit unions for instance, and of our other institutions that have a major role to play in both the management of the economy and setting its direction. What the immediately comes to mind is the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. That is an independent institution, and has a responsibility in this sphere.

Let me give my remarks a little bit of context. I work as a business consultant, and in that capacity, in order to serve clients, and potential clients, effectively, just as other service providers, starting with the people in this House, we are continually seeking to reinvent ourselves. If we are to remain relevant, valid, and current. In talking to people, I am really trying to understand—the zeitgeist—the sense of the time, the spirit of the time, the mood, the expectations, the aspirations, and the aspirations of the people that I am so very conscious, in affirming and being sworn in this morning, that I am sworn to represent.

When I am talking to people, a large number of them point to 2024. When I probe, and I say, “Well okay, tell me a little bit more about this?”,

what they describe is—and let me find a way to describe it more effectively. In the life cycle of the country we have five-year jubilees. “Jubilee” has a very particular kind of meaning in this context, in which, as a people we affirm through our democratic tradition, our faith in the future, and more especially, our faith in ourselves.

In this cycle there is a periodic great accounting, and there will be an accounting next year. So, when I look at the budget, and all that is proposed and provided for, it is in the context that all of us are going to be held accountable. The heritage of the democracy, which we have inherited, and from the heritage country and many of traditions and practices, is exercised by many in our sister democracy. More recently, in the UK, many European countries, as far as part of India and South Africa, and in fact our sister democracy, the power north, will be experiencing their own sovereign right to choose within the next couple of weeks, and those choices will be profound.

As I did in my budget contribution last year, I want to use traffic light analysis in making an assessment of this budget, starting with what works, from my point of view, and what does not work. We would need to have work done on it, and innovations we would want to consider. When I think about what works, the green of a traffic light, I appreciate the sense of stability that this budget brings. I think there is clarity, and I think there is reasoned choice. Let me be clear when I say that. I may not agree necessarily with each of the decisions made. Chances are, if I were having to make some of those decisions, I may make a difference of the decisions. I

am sure others would. But I could appreciate when I say why are you making this choice, there is a reasoning to it, and it is not arbitrary.

3.30 p.m.

And further, I particularly respect the respect offered in the budget of which the discussion in our sister assembly and in this House is testimony to. Broadly, the budget is logically consistent. What are the reds, what are some of the things that I think might need to work and work better? I would argue that the budget is perhaps a bit cautious, it is not moving ahead fast enough. I am not a big fan of deficit spending, I am not against it but it makes the assumption that you can grow past the deficit so you are not leaving a debt to those coming after you. The area that I worry most about in the budget is job creation. We simply are not doing well enough as a country and as an economy in creating jobs.

In last year's budget—and I stand to be corrected, we discussed and ultimately what was approved was an increase in the minimum wage from \$17.50 to \$20.50. This year there was a small minimum wage increase for government employees. At the time last year—and again I stand to be corrected—I believe the statement was made that that would cover about 191,000 persons of those who were working. We have a working population of about 630,000 persons of the 1.4 million people. That 191,000 persons of the total working population is about 31 per cent. An economy cannot be viewed at with pride if 31 per cent of the economy, of the people working in that economy—as glad as I am that they are at least getting a minimum wage—the economy cannot move if a third of your economy is at minimum wage. The clarion call to move the jobs is massive.

I have worked extensively in the tertiary education sector and one of the things that is very clear is that if a student graduates and within three years cannot find a role for which they were trained, whether it is a lawyer, an engineer, a doctor, or in business, you lose the skill. It is almost as though you start back to the beginning, the loss is that great. And we are having too many students not able to find their way, so they and their families expend an enormous amount of resources, and hope, and trust, they have followed the rules, what we have asked them to do and they are bouncing their heads.

Earlier this week I had a wonderful opportunity to attend an awards ceremony, it was put on by the UWI Faculty of Social Sciences recognizing their graduates, first-class honours, and students who have done well. And it was joyous to look at these students, many of whom will be graduating shortly, they are like bright shining new pennies. They are the ones that we are accountable to, and when they graduate and they apply, they expect that they will get through in some reasonable way, and not have to continually bounce their head.

In terms of innovations that I would like to see or propose for consideration by the Ministry, we need to move the economic needle. It is simply not moving fast enough. And that will require a level of engagement in stakeholders, of ease of doing business beyond good work that has been done, but more needs to be done.

I am concerned when the budget does not speak to—and I really would like to see a category for [*Inaudible*] the internals. It is all well and good to new build, but how do we preserve that which we have inherited so

that it continues to work and work well? And most of all when I look across the country, the last census of business establishments done—I believe it was 2018, estimates, and I am rounding up here, about 30,000 businesses in the country. Of those 30,000 businesses probably about 85 per cent of them have 10 or less employees. So they are basically “mom and pop stores”, they are self-employed, that is great. But the businesses that are larger, that have a level of complexity and an opportunity to grow, probably are about 3,000/4,000. They need to be engaged because the jobs that are going to be created will be there, the wealth to be created will be there, and the foreign exchange earnings to be made will come from there.

And in that context, I think it would be very useful at some point to talk about and bring clarity to the responsibility of moving diversification along. It cannot simply be laid at the feet of a government, any government. There is leadership that is required, but well beyond that, it is now a national urgency. For consideration of the Ministry of Finance, in terms of moving the budget from good to great, I was looking at how one would evaluate this budget. In the areas of green, of things that I think are reasonably well. Let me define green: green does not mean perfect, green means it is a good solid building block, we could improve on it, but it is something we can work on and use to build for the future.

I think the budget is comprehensive, I think there is detail in it that is very, very worthwhile if one has the patience to go through the supporting documents. And I think by and large, the communication and transparency around it as testimony of what is being done in this House and in our sister House, I think speaks to that. In terms of red, it is not always clear to me.

When I look at the budget I expect to see the numbers reflect a strategic alignment. Sometimes it is there and sometimes it is not sufficiently clear. And that worries me because it is easy to lose your way, particularly in something as complex as this. I worry about flexibility and responsiveness, we live in uncertain times.

When I chat with people who are in state agencies, they need to move far more rapidly than the strictures necessary, useful, but somehow we have to rethink that. Because their decision-making cannot be held for three months and six months, they will lose the opportunity. And then they are criticized for not responding. And most of all, I really would wish to see a performance matrix in the budget or as an adjunct to it. It is one thing to focus on activity, that is a first-level requirement, but I really would like to see something in the budget that reflects outcomes and results. Because with the innovations I am looking at, what would be the yellow to go forward, would be, you get money if you can demonstrate that the money given to you in previous years was wisely and well used. Understand how you dealt with risks and the fallout from that, because that is something we live with.

And I really would want to see a much greater use of technology. It is useful to have the budget in paper form, it is a little bit hard if you want to surf it. And in an age where a watchword of the age is 'AI', the ability to find what you need quickly, it needs to be structured in a very different way. And with that, continuous improvement because sometimes I get a sense of stasis rather than moving forward. So in focusing on strengthening the future, there is much good that we have, and there is much strength. So, let me bring my remarks to a conclusion. What would I want to see in the

budget for next year? The first thing is, what I am looking for—and when I sit as a director in companies, this is often a discussion we have with the management, particularly the CFO—the Chief Financial Officer.

3.40 p.m.

It might be useful, at some point, to consider whether an independent budget assessment office might be useful to the country. Other countries have experimented with it, and a non-partisan, technically competent authority who can speak to budgets could be very useful in the decision-making and in debates and deliberations such as this. That is number one.

Number two, there needs to be a clarity on the connections between competitiveness, productivity and innovation. It is not enough to simply support programmes that are there. Yes, it is useful. But if we are to be competitive, it is going to be built on improving productivity, and productivity itself driven by innovation. And there is an enormous amount of innovation across the country, but it is often camouflaged, hidden, not well recognized.

There is a need for a much greater sense of urgency in shifting the focus, so that all the other actors in the economy understand what they need to play to move this thing forward, and this is not to dictate to them as much as an invitation to move the thing forward. And their future success will certainly depend on their being able to do that.

The challenge of a government, any government, is balancing change and predictability. People do not like to let go what they have. I am often told as a consultant that people do not like change. And a classic retort to

that is, so if you won the lotto, you will give it back, right, because you really do not want change? And people react and say, “Huh? What? No, no, no.” “So what is it about change that you do not like?” And often what comes back is the uncertainty. All change carries uncertainty.

Surrounding us—and we continually talk ourselves down—are many problems. It is a lot easier to deal with those problems if you have a sense of progress, if you have a sense of things can be better, and you are seeing some degree of movement. That is what a great budget does. Because a great budget is an expression of a leadership, and it is an expression of a form of planning, and most of all, it is an expression of a mindset and a confidence in oneself.

So moving forward, I would really like to see a focus on effectiveness rather than simply allocation. Do not get me wrong. Where we are is a very good starting point, and my challenge is to ask: And what can we do that is better? The budget, beyond the arithmetic, does a great service to the country, because what it does is that it sets a context for the country and it has the capacity to move from good to great.

Let me end by speaking of the zeitgeist of Trinidad and Tobago, as my research is suggesting. And let me do it in the context of the season of lights that we are about to experience. The first, obviously, being Divali at the end of this month, and then with Christmas. We can use many metrics to track a society and an economy. One that colleagues and I have found very useful is how much Christmas tree lights and how many Divali lights are we likely to see this year. If you see more lights this year than last year, it says something about how people are reading their environment. I know it

sounds a little bit subjective, and it is, but it does not make it any less real. I have had people saying, “I eh putting up no lights, I cyah be bothered,” versus, “Yeah boy, we really lighting up.” That sense, that spirit is very, very important. It is critical to our moving forward. And a budget, a simple budget, such as in this debate, sets the stage for that and for the actions that are followed.

So that I am looking with much anticipation with, will there be more lights this year than last year? And if so, that tells me something about how our people are seeing themselves, and what this budget is projecting for 2024, what that would be like. Mr. President, thank you very much.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Avinash Singh): Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, Members of Parliament and fellow citizens, I rise today in this esteemed Chamber to contribute on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024, which is also called our 2025 budget. In particular, I will be talking briefly on the agricultural sector of Trinidad and Tobago, and I am going to stick to the theme: Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity.

But before I go into my contribution, Mr. President, I want to take the opportunity to thank you for your leadership in this Chamber over the years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: I say this on the backdrop of your record being

the youngest in the Chair. I am also going to say that having been appointed in 2013 myself, a couple of weeks after my 25th birthday, by the hon. Leader of the Opposition then, our esteemed Prime Minister now, I have shared that record. In fact, I always joked about it, and I tell all new Members—and I am speaking in particular to the points raised by my senatorial colleague and sister, Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal, Sen. Vyash Nandlal, Sen. Ancil Dennis, all of the Members of the new incarnation of the leadership of the PNM in this Chamber. I am saying this to say that my record here, Mr. President, having debated 39 Bills, 17 Motions, served on eight committees, this is my 11th budget contribution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—and I say this because, having served in the 10th, 11th, and now 12th Republican Parliament, I sometimes call myself “senior of the juniors”, Mr. President. I want to say that I want to owe this contribution to one person, and that one person—today, I have had a little bit of difficulty in placing someone in this Chamber in first place in my interaction in this House. And I am saying this, Mr. President, because when I looked and reflected on my contribution here, two people jumped out, in terms of their humility, their action, their contributions, and the way they have governed. It is none other than the former Minister of Agriculture during the period 1991 to 1995, and the current Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. The Hon. Haji Kazim Hosein.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: And for those of you all who are probably flipping through Google to find out who was the Prime Minister in 1991 to

1995, it is none other than the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. I am saying this because both gentlemen, both the current Prime Minister and the current Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, I refer to both of them having fought for first place as the best Minister of Agriculture this country has ever seen; both of them.

Having served together and alongside Sen. Hosein, it brought a sense of humility, it brought a sense of passion, it brought a sense of grassroots to the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries. When I heard Sen. Roberts talk today, and Sen. Lyder and Sen. Nakhid about this elitist, that we so-called represent—Mr. President, I am a farmer by profession, and if you do not know what that means, my hands are almost always dirty in soil, as a farmer toiling in this country to produce food to feed this nation. I do not see my profession, my career, my path as an elitist. But the People's National Movement gave me and so many young people the opportunity, that I could represent my people from Felicity, Chaguanas, right here in this Chamber.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

3.50 p.m.

I can represent a rural community, and a rural fishing community. And, Mr. President, with your experience, and your background in the fishing sector, you know that we are no elitists, and I do not—I take great offense when Members of the current Opposition speak like that in this Chamber. Again, as a registered farmer, I have trouble sometimes every year when I file with the Integrity Commission but I want to say it here, I told, and I will continue to tell the Integrity Commission, I was a farmer, I

am a farmer, and I will continue to be a farmer, as long as I live.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: That, Mr. President, is the pecuniary interest that I always declare, because if anything happens in the agricultural sector all farmers, whether you are PNM, UNC, whatever, Independents, you stand to benefit. In the few minutes I am going to take, Mr. President, I am going to identify to you some of these things which was very instrumental, and with the leadership of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Affairs, we as a Government, we have done it the right way, and we are getting it done.

Mr. President, I also took notes, and I know Sen. Hislop, a brilliant, brilliant, brilliant, debater spent a few minutes, and spent a few seconds referring to it. But I want to put my opinion, because I am entitled to, put my opinion on an incident in the Chamber. As I have said, entering my 13th year in this House, persons could go back when I served as an Opposition Senator here. We, as a PNM group, never abused the Standing Orders of this House.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President, we never tried to rewrite the Constitution of what the Opposition complement should be, six. And, I know sometimes you genuinely will fall sick, as I have in the past when I got my bee stings in 2018. I had to stay out from this Chamber for about a week and something. But it is almost predictable, because yesterday I jokingly told one of my colleagues on the other side, “I bet you, not that I gamble, I bet you somebody is going to get sick, and we are going to see an eighth Senator here”, so said so done. But I am not going to go into any details, Mr.

President, I am here simply saying, that as a Member of this House it is quite fascinating of the lengths that the UNC will go to try to degrade our Constitution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, I want to take the opportunity to thank all the hard working—I know my colleague the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries would have spent some time, both here and in the other place. And I really want to say for those who were paying attention, when I listened to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, who spoke here from his heart was one of the best contributions I have been privy to.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Congratulations, Minister Kazim Hosein. Mr. President, our nation stands at a critical juncture where the challenges we face, most of the Independent Senators referred to it, climate change, food security, and rural development are matched with our unwavering determination to build a resilient, prosperous future through agriculture. This budget reflects the steadfast commitment to addressing these challenges, and resolutely forging new parts to prosperity for all for all our citizens, and I say this in the context of, I have seen the hon. Minister of Finance work tirelessly, work assiduously in this country for the last 10 years to ensure that we do not end up bankrupt. I have seen the Minister of Finance do everything possible to ensure that this economy is on a footing that we can be proud of. And, today, Mr. President, I want to say, I want to congratulate the Minister of Finance—

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh (cont'd)

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—for steering the economy of Trinidad and Tobago in a way that he will go down in history as the best Minister of Finance this nation has ever seen.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Aably supported by the Minister of Planning and Development, aably supported by the entire Cabinet of the Republic, all Ministers, and I say this, Mr. President, because for fiscal year 2025, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, we have been allocated \$725,570,800 under the Consolidated Fund, and \$65 million under the IDF. This investment, Mr. President, will enable us to continue transforming the agriculture sector into a thriving pillar of our economy ensuring food security, sustainability, and opportunities for all. Again, as I said, I really want to take the opportunity to thank all of the public servants that are attached to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, all of the staff members who have supported Minister Hosein, and myself in really driving Government policy to reach where we have.

Mr. President, I am going to turn to just about three or four points, and I will conclude. I want to turn to farmer registration. Minister Hosein spoke briefly on it, and I will like to just go into details. Within his first few weeks in office, Mr. President, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries led a revolution at the Ministry in his interactions between staff and stakeholders at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. He ensures that the motto, “putting people first”, is not just a slogan on the wall where he sits but reaches down to every aspect of governance, and

management within the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Mr. President, when this Government took office in 2015, the total registered farmers in Trinidad was recorded at 28,570 for both our regional administration, north and south offices. Mr. President, the last time I checked which was a few days ago, that number stands at 34,020. Mr. President, during our time in office over 5,400 new farmers came and registered. What does that mean?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Of course, some will argue the numbers may include natural reduction due to deaths, and what not, but the reality, Mr. President, is that the majority of the members, and this is the statistics, and data from the Ministry's database that in our time it showed positive growth where the agricultural sector is concerned, which led to more than 5,000 new agricultural entrepreneurs under the tenure of this Administration. This, Mr. President, tells a story of the agricultural activity within the industry and as my dear colleague, the Minister of Trade and Industry, always says, "It is the confidence of the stakeholders they continue to repose on this Administration."

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, one more farmer this year is a win for this county when you look at the ageing farming population. I am happy to report that within those new farmers we have quite a few. We have many vibrant, and innovative people taking advantage of the services, and goods offered by the State.

Mr. President, when you look at the Agricultural Incentive

Programme. One, in listening to the Opposition will think that the Government is not doing enough, the Government is not doing much for our farmers but the numbers, the data, and where cash goes paints a totally different story. Our Government's commitment to supporting farmers has been steadfast. From 2016 to 2024, we have provided \$153,459,061.69 in incentives, and subsidies benefiting 24,290 farmers in this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: And, Mr. President, I know you are quite familiar with the list having served in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries but these funds have been instrumental in helping farmers acquire essential inputs such as vehicles for agriculture; water irrigation; land preparation; soil conservation; soil amelioration; protected agricultural systems; integrated pest management; livestock; waste management; apiculture; marine fisheries; aquaculture; post-harvest operations and marketing; youth in agriculture; security and agro-processing machinery, and equipment.

4.00 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, we are not immune to natural disasters and climate change is real. And what have we as a Government done? We have continued to offer relief in the Flood and Natural Disaster Assistance Programme of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. As we face increasing climate variability, our support to farmers impacted by natural disasters remains strong, and during the period of flooding, the Government stepped in to assist our registered farmers who suffered losses. And just for the numbers, since 2016 to 2024, we have distributed over \$51 million in flood relief cheques to our farmers.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh (cont'd)

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, it sounds simple. Could you imagine a farmer planting a crop, being devastated by a hurricane or a natural disaster, and then being able to come to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, where Minister Hosein always reads the riot act, treat the people good? That is what we as a Government have done.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Mitchell: Compassionate Government.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: We have initiated at all our county offices that opportunity for farmers to come forward and make their claims, and we have contributed in cash. That is what this payment represents, actual cash payments, and I am saying cash because it is a cheque. Minister of Digital Transformation.

Sen. Bacchus: Mmm.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: It is a cheque you go simply and cash, and you have cash in the tune of \$51 million. Mr. President, it does not stop there. Our Agricultural Finance Support Programme, we recognize the importance of access to finance in the agricultural development. To date—in fact, when Minister Hosein spoke yesterday, he quoted a figure, and I wanted to add to that today because he did say that we have a batch of cheques at the Ministry. It has been there a couple of weeks, Minister, and when I tallied all of the figures, Mr. President, you would be shocked to know that this Government, who the Opposition says and always tries to paint the picture that we are not helping the farmers, Mr. President, we have approved 436 entities, including farmers, small businesses and institutions involved in

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh (cont'd)

agricultural production and agro-processing under the stimulus package.

Mr. President, \$41.3 million, again—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—which is going to all of these entities. What does this do, Mr. President? You could imagine a family—in fact, there was one cheque distribution in San Fernando, and I immediately spoke to Minister Hosein. I said, “Minister, look at that gentleman on stage.” A guy was on stage collecting his cheque, and the individual broke down into tears because he said to me, “Minister, please relay this message to the Minister of Agriculture. I have never seen a cheque of \$100,000 in my life.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Broke down into tears because this Government, this PNM Administration—If we did not care for the farmers, Mr. President, I “doh” know what that is. We made all of those cheques available to these farmers via a process of vetting, and that did not just touch that individual farmer. These grants, Mr. President, touches communities, touches constituencies, touches rural villages, touches the heart of our food production. I dare say, Mr. President, on behalf of all of the farmers, thank you to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Thank you to the Minister of Finance, because this funding is housed by the Minister of Finance, and he makes it available to the farmers of this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, this initiative is empowering our entrepreneurs and farmers to expand the operation, adopt new technologies, and increase productivity. Mr. President, through the Agricultural

Development Bank, during the period 2017 to 2024, and listen to this figure, Mr. President, over \$800 million, Mr. President, over \$800 million have been disbursed to assist farmers in obtaining assets and improve their financial status. Through the ADB, and obviously most persons will know, through the low-interest loans that we offer, 3 to 5 per cent, \$800 million-plus have been made available to our farming population.

Forestry incentives in the tune of \$320,000 for all private landowners who want to go into reforestation, who want to plant certain forestry, hardwood and softwood species. They have been able to benefit. Our fisheries support, Mr. President, your area of expertise, our support for the fishing community remains strong as we recognize the critical role of fisheries in food security. And, over the last five years, we have provided over \$625,000 in incentives and rebates to the fishermen, enabling them to modernize their operation.

Mr. President, when we talk about rice, the rice sector continues to be an essential component of our agricultural landscape. The State plays a significant role in ensuring the sector's viability through critical subsidies, guaranteed price and a commitment to purchase all locally produced rice. And, Mr. President, over the last five years, we have provided over \$5 million in payments, direct again cash, to the rice farmers, and \$21.6 million in management fees to NFM, which for the first time, thanks to Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon, our Minister of Trade and Industry—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—Mr. President, who will be giving our rice farmers contracts, black and white documents, paper, in which they can take

to the bank and get funding to get all of the assets that they wish to invest more into the rice industry, Mr. President. This ensures a stable market for rice farmers and reinforces our commitment to food security. I wish to acknowledge this collaboration between the Minister of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. I also want to acknowledge a gentleman by the name of Mr. Nigel Grimes, who continues to work with the rice farmers directly throughout the country, and again, under the leadership of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, things are happening in the agricultural sector where a staple, rice, is concerned.

Mr. President, we recognize agro-processing. The Minister of Trade, yes, the Minister of Trade and Industry is here, and I want to say what I am about to say. Agro-processing holds immense potential for economic diversification and export growth. I want to say, through continued support for small businesses and institutions engaged in agro-processing, we aim to enhance value-added production in areas such as food packaging, preservation and innovation through NAMDEVCO. This will not only create jobs, but open new markets for local products as well as boosting exports in terms of opportunities for our stakeholders. Mr. President, I invite all Members to pay a visit to the Moruga agro-processing facility. I was there a few days ago down in Moruga and I want to commend the Minister of Trade and Industry for this visionary facility. Why?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, unlike what the Opposition would have you think that nothing is going on in Moruga.

Sen. Lyder: Nobody lives there.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. President, having been there a few days ago, a substantial number of operations are actively taking place there. Manufacturing of chocolate products, commercial levels, seasoning and condiments are being produced by one of the operators, alternative wheat flour, sweet potato and cassava fries, and so much more products are being produced right there in Moruga, a seat that we intend to take from the Opposition.

Mr. President, conversations are taking place with the pineapple producers as we speak to ensure that that facility is able to increase productivity where pineapple is concerned. Mr. President, to secure the future of agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago, we must inspire a new generation of farmers and entrepreneurs, and our budget prioritizes the creation of youth-focused programmes that offer training, mentorship and financial support by making agriculture a very attractive and viable career option. We are sowing the seeds for sustainable agricultural growth.

Turning to climate-resilient agriculture. Mr. President, given the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related events, building resilience in our agricultural system—

4.10 p.m.

Sen. Hosein: Standing Order, 51(1)(e). I am not hearing my colleague.

Sen. Mitchell: “Ahhh.”

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

Mr. President: Alright. If the level was not too high before, it then became too high. Again, just temper. Minister, continue.

Sen. A. Singh: Thank you very much, Mr. President, for the protection and my very abled and very supportive Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Singh: Mr. President, I have about two minutes again. I want to say that in terms of the climate-smart agricultural practices—this is a conversation I have had with a few of our Independent Senators and it is something that we recognize; we need to change the way we do agriculture in this country. That is why the Agro-Incentive Grant funding is directly utilized for all farmers and all entities wanting to expand their operation, put in protected agricultural models, greenhouse, shade house, drip irrigation, LED technology, container farming, and the whole plethora of new agricultural models.

I am sure a lot of persons, Mr. President, know fully about that story about planting the red bean in the napkin when we did Science in primary school. I am not sure if the Opposition really pursued the entire course of agriculture. That project probably did not bear fruit for Members of the Opposition. But I am saying this to say that we understand climate-smart models. We understand the need for technology and Mr. President, we are doing everything in our authority to deal with that. Before I close, I want to just respond to two things that some of the Senators on the Independent Bench referred to, the food import bill. Mr. President, we always talk about the food import bill and we reflect on the numbers. From the CSO figures, I just want to quote our 2015 quantity of food in certain commodities, mainly our staples: Beverages, 53 million kilograms; meat and meat products, 52

million kilograms—and this is in 2015; fruits and vegetables, 140 million kilograms; and dairy products, 39 million kilograms.

Fast forward to 2023, it dropped by 41 per cent in beverages. It reduced by 21 per cent in meat and meat products. It reduced by 7 per cent in fruits and vegetables and 6 per cent in dairy. What I am trying to put is the point—when you talk about the food import bill, Mr. President, the cost of food internationally is significantly higher, whereas, we are importing less quantities of food, it is a serious concern because we are price takers. We do not control the shipping lines. We do not control the freight costs. We do not control stocks and the grains that are traded on the stock exchange. All of these commodities are directly implicated with all of these conditions.

Mr. President, in closing, I want to say that within this year's allocation, I think we are very confident that the agricultural sector will continue to grow and become a cornerstone of our economy because we have the right people in the right places. Together, we remain steadfast and resolute in our mission to secure a brighter, more prosperous future for all of Trinidad and Tobago. I want to say, when we were in opposition, we supported the budget in 2010. I want to see the votes of the Opposition here today, of the—

Sen. Roberts: No.

Sen. A. Singh:—budget because what they are going to send a message to the population is that they are not in support of approving the budget to pay workers, public servants, employees or do any projects of this country.

Sen. Lyder: That is a lie.

Sen. A. Singh: That is the vote I want, Mr. President, for the population to

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh (cont'd)

see because when we were in Opposition, led by the Opposition Leader, Dr. Keith Rowley, the entire Opposition supported the budget—

Sen. Roberts: Because the budget made sense.

Sen. A. Singh:—of the then government. I want to close on a lighter note, Mr. President. I want to wish all of Trinidad and Tobago a Shubh Divali. May Mother Lakshmi continue to shower all of us with blessings of a healthy and prosperous life, light over darkness, intelligence over ignorance and good over evil. Mr. President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Mr. President. It has been 23 days since I delivered the 2025 Budget Statement. It has been a gruelling 23 days, but I considered it my responsibility to be present throughout. Before I get into my winding up of this debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024, I would like to draw your attention, Mr. President, and hon. Members, to section 40 of the Constitution, which reads as follows:

“The Senate shall consist of thirty-one members...who shall be appointed by the President in accordance with this section”

And (2) states:

“Of the thirty-one Senators—

sixteen shall be appointed by the President acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister;

- (a) six shall be appointed by the President acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition and;
- (b) nine shall be appointed by the President in his discretion...”

—from outstanding persons who represent various sectors from economic, social, community organizations or other major fields of endeavour. It has become fashionable and a habit of the Opposition, UNC, for some of their Members to pretend to be ill or to mysteriously become ill and cause a 7th or 8th—I was told it even went up to nine one time—Members of the Opposition Bench in this Senate. It is a complete travesty in my opinion. It is a violation of the Constitution. The Opposition has six Members in here, not nine, and as a consequence, I do not intend to recognize the contributions of the two persons, who in my view, are here under false pretences.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So let me move on now to—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Not that they were worthy anyway.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes. Not that there was any substance, but I do not recognize them as Opposition Senators.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr President, I do not know what they are screaming about. I seek your protection.

Mr. President: That is not an invitation to respond. It is just an invitation to allow the Chamber to drop to silence. Thank you. Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. I would like to read from the *Hansard*, and this is the *Hansard* of Sen. Mark:

“...in our journey towards a better and brighter tomorrow, I want to

say history would not be kind to this outgoing PNM Government...”

Again:

“...as the alternative government, the UNC stands ready...”—to take over the Government of this country. We are ready—“...and willing to continue the struggle to promote the genuine aspirations and dreams of the people...”

The first quote was from Sen. Mark’s 2019 contribution—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—and the second quote was Sen. Mark’s 2020 contribution. It is really sad when one lives—as I heard somebody say—in a bubble, a little fantasy world of their own. I am fed up hearing “You are the outgoing government”, “Call election now”, and “We will be there next year”. I am fed up of it, Mr. President.

Sen. Lyder: Mr. President, 46(1). We are debating the—

Sen. Roberts. Sit, sit. “Two ah we cyah stand here”.

Sen. Lyder:—Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024.

Sen. Roberts. Yeah—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. Lyder: I think my colleague was stopped for that—

Sen. Roberts. Yeah.

Sen. Lyder:—and I think you should rule accordingly, Mr. President. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Continue.

4.20 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you so much. As I said, those remarks from Sen. Mark were from 2019 and 2020.

Sen. Nakhid: “One day de public go geh fed up ah allyuh. Doh worry, dey fed up ah allyuh”.

Sen. Mark: “Yeah, we go geh through”.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, what is also tedious is, “Call elections now.” Well, that happened in 2020, and we won.

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

Hon. C. Imbert: So it is not a problem. It is not a problem.

So let me move on now to—I want to refer—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, if those six people are going to scream and shout at me, it is going to be very difficult; those six hon. Senators. I am asking for your protection.

Mr. President: Okay. So over the last three days, all Members present in this Chamber have had the opportunity to speak and they have had their say. In the course of such a debate, crips, barbs, talk, picong, whatever you want to call it, have been thrown on all sides, and I can assure you that during all of it, the Minister of Finance remained silent.

Hon. Senators: “Oh good!”

Mr. President: Therefore, I am going to ask that there be silence in this Chamber when the Minister of Finance is wrapping up this lengthy budget process. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, I know that such is the behaviour of the Opposition UNC, that your admonition will last about five seconds and they will start to yell and scream again. But I want to refer this Senate to the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives, and this particular Standing Order—this is just for illustration purposes—Standing Order 81 of the House of Representatives on the “Presentation and Second Reading of the Appropriation Bill”. The important subsection, or the part of that Standing Order is as follows—this is 81(6), and this is about the debate on the Appropriation Bill, and it indicates that:

“The debate, when resumed...”—this is after the Minister of Finance has made his presentation and then the Leader of the Opposition resumes—“...shall be confined to the financial and economic state of Trinidad and Tobago and the general principles of Government policy and administration as indicated by the Appropriation Bill and the Estimates.”

Now, there is no such Standing Order in the Senate, so I commend hon. Senators to take a look at 81(6) in the House of Representatives, so that when we come to debate the Appropriation Bill, we will not be treated to flights of fantasy, irrelevancies, absurdities and all sorts of things that have no bearing whatsoever on the Appropriation Bill, the economy and the financial management of Trinidad and Tobago.

That being said, it is a pity that the last Independent Senator spoke last. I do not have time to prepare to respond in any significant way, because the hon. Senator just spoke. But I want to thank Sen. Lewis for his

contribution, quite insightful, and it goes to the core of this Standing Order, that it should speak about the financial and economic state of Trinidad and Tobago.

I noticed a general trend on the part of the Independent Bench—because really, there is absolutely nothing—I have gone through every contribution by the Opposition Bench, and there is absolutely nothing to respond to; absolutely nothing; nothing, nothing at all. So I will not respond to anything said by the Opposition Bench. But let me go now to the approach adopted by the Independent Bench, and I noticed that the Independent Bench took the opportunity not to speak too much about the Bill. They delved into some of the fiscal measures, but they used the opportunity to talk about things, in a general sense, about the state of Trinidad and Tobago, the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, the governance of Trinidad and Tobago, and so on.

So let me put that all in context. And the first Independent Senator that I would like to respond to is the hon. Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy, who took the opportunity to really talk about things related to Tobago and, in fact, things that would really be more appropriate for the debate when it occurs on the Tobago autonomy Bills. And I am not objecting, I am just saying that the contribution of Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy was very Tobago-oriented and really spoke about things related to Tobago.

Some of my researchers found difficulty in responding, because some of the information requested by Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy really has to come from the House of Assembly, and they did reach out to them. They reached out to the Tobago Tourism Agency and so on, and to people in the House of

Assembly, and they were very guarded in terms of providing information. In fact, they declined to provide some of the answers that Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy sought, in terms of tourism arrivals to Tobago and that sort of thing. That is just unfortunate, because, really, we were trying to gather information, so I could respond and talk about the decline or increase in arrivals in Tobago.

But Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy said something that I thought I needed to look at, that a comment was made that Tobago has never got its full allocation. That is incorrect. It did get its full allocation in this year, 2024. And in addition, Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy indicated that essentially, Tobago needs more than it is getting, and that Tobago needs to compete, or to keep apace with other islands in the Caribbean that also depend on tourism. So that got me to thinking and I decided to take a look at islands in the Caribbean that depend on tourism, and I picked out three: Grenada, St. Lucia and Barbados. And I would think, in terms of tourist visitor arrivals, that these three countries, among others, are direct competitors of Tobago, in terms of its tourism product.

So I looked at the budget of Grenada and I converted it to Trinidad and Tobago dollars. So the 2024 budget of Grenada is TT \$4.15 billion. Grenada's population has 117,000 people. That is its population, 117,000. So that the amount spent per citizen of Grenada, or resident of Grenada, was \$35,470. So that is Grenada. That is 2024 figures, eh.

I then took a look at St. Lucia. St. Lucia's 2024 budget is the equivalent of TT \$4.75 billion. St. Lucia's population is 179,000 and

therefore, the expenditure by the Government of St. Lucia, or the country per resident, is TT \$25,000. It is less than Grenada.

I then went to Barbados, and I would have assumed, without even looking at the figures, that Barbados would be the highest of the three islands that I was looking at. So Barbados's budget, in 2024, is a little over TT \$11 billion, with a population of 282,000 people. Barbados's spend per resident is TT \$40,370 per person.

So I came to Tobago, because I think we need to be data driven and we need to deal with facts. Trinidad and Tobago's expenditure in Tobago, when you take the direct subvention to the House of Assembly of \$2.6 billion and then the other \$600-odd million spent by other agencies in Tobago, central government, you get \$3.2 billion, and assuming a population in Tobago of about 63,000 people, you get TT \$50,793 per resident. So in Trinidad and Tobago, the residents of Tobago get the highest spend of these four tourism-dependent islands.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So I just put those facts on the table. Because how it is that other tourist-dependent territories are doing well—Barbados, St. Lucia, Grenada—in terms of the tourism product, but they get less than Tobago, Tobago is getting more? In the case of St. Lucia, Tobago is getting twice as much per resident as St. Lucia per resident. Okay? So I just wanted to put those things on the table.

4.30 p.m.

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

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, could you stop Sen. Roberts from shouting at me. It is so irritating. I beg your protection.

Mr. President: Continue, Minister. Continue. Sen. Roberts.

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

Mr. President: Continue, Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: And he is also imputing improper motives and using offensive language.

Sen. Roberts: “Yeah”. “Huh”. Look who is talking. The whole country hearing “allyuh”

Mr. President: Continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: That is just typical UNC behaviour. So, let me go now to some of the other Independent Senators. Sen. Richards asked an interesting question, and I sought a response from the Minister of Education. And the question asked was, along these lines. How a student without Internet access—excuse me—or electronic devices going to be able to access e-books, and is the Ministry of Education going to provide more devices to address this issue? I summarized Sen. Dr. Richards question, in that way. He said many other things, but that is the one that struck me.

The Minister of Education indicated to me, that the Ministry of Education has distributed a total of over 70,000 devices, laptops and so on, since 2020, since the COVID-19 period, when students were forced to do learning at home. Another 5,400 are going to be procured and distributed this year. And the policy is, that all students who are eligible for the e-books will have access to devices if they do not already have. So, it is the intention of the Ministry to make their best effort that every single student who cannot

afford to procure an e-book or their parents cannot afford it—sorry a laptop device, will get one from the Ministry of Education. So, that is the policy. Okay. We will see how it is goes.

In terms of access to Internet, of course, poor and under-privileged students are going to be challenged. So what the Minister told me, is that students will be able to download the e-books at school. They will get access to the Internet there, and then they will have offline access to the material. Okay. I then went on to ask my own questions. Would regular hard copybooks be available, or are these being phased out? And I was told that the hard copybooks—at the full operationalization of this programme in the future, the hard copybooks would no longer be mandatory. The students will have access to the e-books.

Now, it is clear that, this is a work in progress and it will require quite a bit of fine tuning. And I am very thankful to Sen. Dr. Richards, for raising this issue, so that I could pose these questions, and many more, but I do not have all the time. But the Minister got the gist of it. So, that as they go to roll out this programme in mid-2025, which is when the programme is going to be rolled out, issues such as access to under-privileged children to devices, to Internet—and even electricity for that matter, access to e-books and so on, and if these things are not available, access to hard copybooks will be looked at, fully considered, so that no child will be left behind. So, I am thanking Sen. Dr. Richards for his intervention.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: With respect to Sen. Sunity Maharaj, I made a joke with the Senator the other day, that I will make it my life's work that by the end

of this Parliamentary session, she will say something good about the Government.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And I was immediately rebuked, and told that she complimented the Government yesterday. So I went and I looked for the compliment.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: You did?

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So, I went to look for the compliment. And the compliment was the Government's decision to increase minimum wage for government employees. But that was met with [*Minister laughs*]—a rebuke, that private sector employees were excluded. And that got me thinking. We looked at this very, very carefully. We felt that having increased the minimum wage by 17 per cent last year—it is quite a big number, “eh”. In global terms it may not be much. You are going from \$17.50 to \$20.50.

And I took the point from Sen. Lewis, and I actually did a quick Google search and discovered that in the UK, just 5 per cent of workers get the minimum wage. In US it is less than 2 per cent. Okay. So, there is something in that number that 30 per cent of people in Trinidad and Tobago get a minimum wage. But it is not an exact science, because you have to look at the cost of living and you have to look at what the minimum wage actually is, in the context of the affordability of goods and services in the different countries.

So, even though in the US, 1 per cent or 2 per cent of persons get the minimum wage. What is the cost of living in the US, and what is the percentage of persons getting just a little bit more than the minimum wage in the US? Okay. But I take the point. And I myself, if I thought it would have had an overall positive effect, would have recommended to the Cabinet that we increase the minimum wage, again. And I particularly aggrieved about MTS workers, because many or the majority of MTS workers they get the minimum wage. And that is why I felt—being aware of that, because as an elected MP, for a long time, I am aware that many of my constituents work at MTS, and I am not happy at the amount that they are paid. Because they are paid at the minimum wage. And this is why we decided we would at least help that group of workers, CEPEP workers, URP workers, people working in reforestation and so.

But, I take the point. And there are countries in the world with the minimum wage is extremely high. There are some countries where the minimum wage is €2,500 a month, TT \$20,000 per month that is the minimum wage in Luxembourg for example. So that, as a country I think we need to progress in terms of progressively increasing the minimum wage. I accept that. And perhaps in the future, as things improve, that is something that we should aspire to.

In terms of other contributions—as I said, Senators took the liberty to adopt a very holistic approach to this debate, because it is a debate on the Appropriation Bill, which has three clauses and a Schedule. And what Senators did, was referred to the debate in the other place, referred to the budget statement, which was not presented in this place, and so on, and there

is nothing wrong in that. Because, I looked at what is done in the UK. And in the UK in a budget debate—it is a general debate even though estimates are presented, even though MPs in the UK are required to vote, and they actually do it a different way. They actually go through sectors and complete a Vote on a particular sector like health or education and then move on to the next one, and debated in stages over a period of 10 days. That is what they do in the United Kingdom, in the Parliament, the House of Commons that we get our Westminster system from. But there are allowed to debate general principles. So there is nothing wrong in a debate of this nature, which is on just a very simple Bill, in looking at general principles.

So, Independent Senators, took the opportunity to take a very broad look at the economy and the country as a whole, and some of the things were simply—you know, questions of opinion like, Sen. Thompson-Ahye said—well actually quoted John F. Kennedy, and asked the question, is this budget a reflection of our need? Well, that is a very academic intellectual question, because what we are really doing here today is we are debating numbers in a Bill.

4.40 p.m.

If I go to the Bill itself, you look at it and you look at the Schedule, and by way of example, we are debating the appropriation of \$143 million for the Elections and Boundaries Commission. We are debating the appropriation of \$2.3 billion—not to be confused from the police—for the Ministry of National Security. We are debating \$6.7 million, an appropriation of \$6.7 million, to the Ministry of Health. So it is really just about numbers. But the questions posed by Independent Senators were

really of a much deeper nature as to whether are we doing the right thing, does this budget really address the needs of the country, and so on.

Some Senators took the opportunity, like Sen. Maharaj, to go into the esoteric and the academic and say, you know, what should a budget contain, what should a budget be all about and what should it be seeking to achieve, and all that sort of thing. I really am a bit constrained to respond to some of the points made. Like Sen. Dillon-Remy said, “Who are we becoming as a people and as leaders and a country?” I could answer, but then I would be straying away from this. Okay? Then, for example, “Has poor planning been the root cause for the delay in the mobilization of the Roxborough Hospital?” That is not me. That is the THA, the House of Assembly, the Opposition in Tobago. So I cannot answer that question, for example.

So that while I am very happy that hon. Members, you know, felt it was appropriate to deal with things, such as Sen. Maharaj spoke about the budget’s reliance on foreign exchange, and then said that, “Whereas taxes and royalties are crucial, there are budget items that consume foreign exchange”. That is not entirely correct “eh”. What consumes foreign exchange in Trinidad and Tobago is consumerism. You have heard people speak about this, for example, the importation of motor cars. It is one of the largest consumers of foreign exchange in the country. That is not a budget item per se. That is a symptom of the country’s desire for car ownership. Okay?

So, there are some things here that I just cannot answer because they are far away from the Appropriation Bill. But let me just go to the budget statement itself and see if I can reiterate what this Government is about,

because what we have sought to do in 2025 is, as I said before in my opening address, we have sought to announce some things that the Government plans to do in 2025. We plan to divest the Magdalena hotel. We do not believe the Government should continue to be directly involved in the management and control of that hotel. We plan to continue towards the vision. As one of my Tobago colleagues—

Hon. Senator: Which one?

Hon. Senator: Both of them.

Hon. C. Imbert: Sen. Dennis and Sen. Hislop made the point, and Sen. Hislop made the point today about the benefits that would come to Tobago, as did Sen. Dennis, for an internationally branded resort hotel in Tobago.

You are talking about thousands of jobs and thousands of well-paying jobs as well. Then you have all the distribution networks that flow from something like an internationally branded hotel in Tobago. You are talking about thousands of people directly employed and then you are talking about many more thousands involved in supplies and services to this internationally branded hotel, and no sensible person should be against that. I fail to understand why anybody would be against a major driver of the tourism economy in Tobago. Why are you against that? It confuses me. Why would anybody be against that?

I have heard the argument that Tobago should remain small, that you should have mom-and-pop tourism, I do not agree with that at all.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Because, if you want to remain small, you will remain small, if that is what you want. That cannot be progress. You look at any

successful tourism destination in the world and they go for high-class, five-star internationally branded hotels. And the airlift, the airlift—listen to what one of my honourable Tobago colleagues pointed out, that Sandals went St. Vincent, and this was Sen. Dennis, and the airlifts that are coming in are American Airlines, British Airways, you know, Virgin Atlantic.

I have seen it myself. I was telling some colleagues yesterday, Panama invested in a small airport expansion 20 years ago. A very rudimentary airport expansion, no big thing. They just built a small terminal building, but they expanded their airport, and it was amazing, the way that has developed Panama City and Panama City airport. If you go to Panama City airport now, it is the hub for air transportation in the whole of Latin America.

I remember going to Australia many years ago, and because Australia is so far you have to stop in Singapore, or some other place, and I remember going to Singapore airport. You try to walk from one end of Singapore's airport to the other, it will take you about three hours. It is so big, because Singapore is the hub for air transportation in that part of Asia. So why would anybody be against an internationally branded hotel? It is small minds that come up with these ideas, small minds, and small minds will always remain small. I am so glad my two Tobago Senators have big minds, and they dream big, and they want big things for Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So—

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: Minister, one question I did ask that I thought that you could answer, was the plan in 1920 for refurbishment of Magdalena that

did not happen and I—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy: In 2021. It is on the cards again now. I did ask that question and that is within your remit to answer. The Apple Group.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yeah. I have sought feedback from the Minister of Trade and Industry because the Magdalena hotel is under the Ministry of Trade and Industry. It is not under the Ministry of Finance. We have already spent a considerable sum on refurbishing and renovating the Magdalena hotel and we have now decided that, from a policy perspective, that we should divest the hotel. Of course, we will continue to do upgrades until we get to the point of divestment.

Hon. Senator: That is it.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay? In terms of the marina, for any of you who have travelled by boat, private boat to Tobago, you will recognize what the problem is, there is no refuelling station in Tobago. There used to be one in Scarborough, donkey years ago, that has fallen into disrepair.

If you go to Tobago by boat, if you are coming from up the islands or you are coming from Trinidad, you cannot refuel your vessel. You have to go aboard and pick up, you know, what they call these jerrycans, a five-gallon thing, and go to the gas station, fill it up, bring it back, go across with a pirogue to your boat, fill up five gallon, go back with a next one, and so on. It is ridiculous. But if you go to Grenada, you go to St. Lucia, or any of these destinations that encourage yachting tourism, you can refuel right at the dock there in the marina, and that is a number one priority of this Government for Tobago. We are not making joke with that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: We are not making joke with that, because that is going to also going to boost tourism in Tobago and also create jobs, high-paying jobs in Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I have also indicted, Mr. President, that the Government has decided that Colonial Life Insurance Company is no longer of strategic importance and therefore we shall be selling our 49 per cent shareholding. In discussion so far with the liquidator, they too would want to divest their 51 per cent. So once that works out, because, of course, the liquidator is entitled to do whatever the liquidator wants to do with his 51 per cent, we will be divesting the whole of Colonial Life. Colonial Life at this time is quite valuable, so we should get some significant revenue to see us through the next couple of years from the sale of Colonial Life, our shares in Colonial Life.

4.50 p.m.

Let me go to the fiscal measures because Sen. Helon said the \$5 million was not enough and I believe it was for digital literacy, was that it? Was that the one, digital literacy? Well, okay, I could take that, through you, Mr. President. Certainly, we are going to get cracking on this digital literacy project and if it requires more money, we will put more money into it. I could understand that. I thought that that was—in fact, as I looked at that Senator's contribution, I thought, you know, so many of the contributions were very interesting, very useful and very important. He spoke about so many different things that—you know—one does not have

Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

the time in a debate of this nature to get into the meat of everything, one simply does not have the time but Mr. Francis gave me the—sorry, it is Sen. Helon Francis. I hope that I—have I gotten his name correct?

Hon. Senator: Helon Francis.

Hon. C. Imbert: Helon Francis?

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Helon?

Hon. C. Imbert: Sen. Helon Francis. He spoke about so many things that it demonstrated to me that he had taken his time to take a look at the budget estimates, to take a look at Government policy and I can assure him and also Sen. Patasar, that I have taken notes of all the contributions made and we will, when we have some time, go through all of them. My friend—I mean for example, Sen. Helon Francis spoke about economic development, social progress, crime and public safety, trade and industry—and did indicate that we are not spending enough on your Ministry by the way—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: It is a facilitation Ministry.

Hon. C. Imbert:—Minister of Trade. It is alright.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: You could give me more? [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I am listening. He said you need more. I heard the Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries telling me that because of the compliments we got from the Minister of Agriculture and the junior Minister of Agriculture, they need more money.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: But, I mean—I would be, once it is possible, so happy to be able to spend more money in line with what Sen. Lewis said, that you need to spend money on the areas that drive economic activity that create

economic activity, that generate revenue, that create jobs, that diversify the economy, that reduce the demand for imported products and so on. Certainly, domestic agriculture is one of them, no two ways about that and trade as well. Despite some of the “ole talk” from the lower Bench on that side, when one looks at the performance in the manufacturing sector over the last several years, it is truly remarkable, Minister of Trade and Industry. “Doh study dem.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: “Doh study dem. Doh study dem at all.”

What we sought to do in this budget is a number of programmes dealing with known problems within our school system, known problems within the adult population in terms of literacy and numeracy, and digital literacy. We also believe that we need to introduce renewable energy to our students and this is the way of the future. I recently saw a state enterprise rebuild one of its sheds where people wait to get a bus, transport or something like that. It had fallen into ruin and they repaired it. I was very impressed to see that they had put a solar panel on the roof and now the light in this bus shelter is powered by solar energy, a simple little thing like that. I saw a state enterprise do that just last month.

We do need to introduce our student population to wind energy and solar energy and more and more—if you go to Barbados for example; the Barbados Government for years has subsidized solar-powered hot water heaters. If you look on virtually every roof in Barbados you will see a solar-powered hot water heater, they subsidize it.

In Trinidad and Tobago, electricity is so cheap because in those

islands the cost of electricity is four and five times what it is in Trinidad and Tobago. So that, the cost of electricity to heat water is so much more in those islands that they have encouraged their citizens to use solar energy to heat hot water for their bathrooms, their kitchens and so on. We do not have that issue in terms of expensive electricity. I mean, 30 per cent of Trinidad and Tobago households consume just a couple hundred dollars a month in terms of electricity. So it is not a big bite in a household budget but that does not matter. What we need to do as citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, we need to encourage everybody to get involved in solar-powered items and also even wind. If you—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—going back—Mr. President, I do not want any commentary from over there.

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

Hon. C. Imbert: No problem but could you please tell them to stop?

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Continue, Minister. You have five more minutes.

Sen. Lyder: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Sen. Lyder, no need to talk after.

Hon. C. Imbert: So, we need to encourage everyone, starting at the schools to get involved in solar energy and wind energy. If you look at sailboats for example, the ones that come here from up the islands, all of them are powered by wind energy, there is a wind turbine on all of them and they use that to power all of their electricity. In this budget, this is one of our budget measures.

We are also trying to encourage people to get involved in agriculture. I have already spoken about our decision to increase the minimum wages for government workers. We felt that we did not want to put the burden on small businesses two years in a row in terms of increasing the minimum wage. It does help the person who is at the minimum wage, of course, but as I said before and I will repeat, if you drive the minimum wage up too high, too fast, you are going to put people out of work because some of these small businesses are marginal businesses and labour is a significant component of their costs but it has to be done.

I accept what Sen. Lewis is saying. We have to keep systematically increasing the minimum wage to help those at the lowest end of the income strata. We have decided to do it for government workers and we will see what happens in the years to come. Borrowing from my colleague and friend, the Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries, this is not the last budget presentation of the PNM, this is the last budget presentation before the 2025 election but we will be presenting the 2025 budget.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Hon. C. Imbert: We all know what we are doing with public sector wage negotiations. The CPO has already begun the preparations to meet with the public sector unions to make the Government's offer of 5 per cent for the 2020–2022 tenure. We also felt that we should proceed again with another income tax amnesty and a national insurance amnesty, and we also felt that to encourage healthy lifestyles, we should make sporting equipment tax-free. We will be meeting with the various sporting organizations in the country to

get some kind of consensus on what qualifies as sporting equipment.

Mr. President, despite all the “ole talk” and all the screaming from the six Opposition Senators, despite the fact that Sen. Mark says same thing every year; year after year. I could have read the 2018 contribution of Sen. Mark, the 2017, the 2021—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Same thing.

Hon. C. Imbert:—the 2022, the 2023—

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Same thing.

Hon. C. Imbert: In fact, you could bring a tape recording and just press a button and you will hear Sen. Mark.

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

Hon. C. Imbert: It must—I understand what the problem is. I understand. Having contested the Barataria election in 1991 and lost miserably to Linda Baboolal—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Sen. Mark, that is you?

Hon. C. Imbert:—that pain, that bitterness is still there, 34 years later or 33 years later.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I understand Sen. Mark’s pain and his bitterness. I understand it but that is okay. Then, the contributions from the other Members were just a set of screaming, shouting and insults. You do not ever get anything useful out of them—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—no recommendations, nothing positive, nothing to uplift the country, nothing to help people in Trinidad and Tobago, it is just

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shouting, screaming—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Yeah.

Hon. C. Imbert:—insults, accusations, untruths—

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: That is it.

Hon. C. Imbert:—attacks on innocent people, total fabrications; that is all they know.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: That is all they have to offer.

Hon. C. Imbert: That is their playbook.

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. President, what I also find so amusing, having contested and won nine consecutive general elections—

Sen. Sagrarsingh-Sooklal: Ahhh.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: “Ah-yah-yie.”

Hon. C. Imbert:—having been an elected Member of Parliament for 33 years, I know how Sen. Mark feels.

5.00 p.m.

He never won an election in his life, and he never will. So I understand why he feels that way. But—

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: But—

Sen. Mark: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: But I was actually passed something here and this is just—what do they call it? A public announcement?

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Yes.

Hon. C. Imbert: The Attorney General has asked me to announce that on

Friday last, through the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, Trinidad and Tobago arrested the tug, the *Solo Creed* in Angola, which was the abandoned barge off Tobago, that caused so much damage in Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: That is performance, PNM style; performance, PNM style. We tracked down that barge and we arrested it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Performance, PNM style. So it has been my honour and privilege—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It has been my honour and privilege—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Oh, be quiet. Mr. President—

Mr. President: Minister, you have literally seconds to say the magic words, please.

Hon. C. Imbert: It has been my honour and privilege to present this tenth budget, and I look forward to presenting my eleventh budget in 2025. I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Mr. President: Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Mr. President. In accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that a Bill entitled an Act to provide for

the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2025, not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. President: Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Mr. President. I beg to move that this historic Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2025, be now read a third time and passed.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. President: Acting Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Mr. President, thank you. I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

DIVALI GREETINGS

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, as you are aware, Divali 2024 will be celebrated on Thursday, October 31, 2024. I now invite Senators to bring greetings in observance of the occasion. Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Richie Sookhai): Mr. President, it is my great honour to stand here before you, amongst my colleagues, as a proud Hindu, a part of this Government, to

bring Divali greetings to you, the Opposition Members, the Independents, and Trinidad and Tobago at large.

Mr. President, Divali is a time—as a Hindu boy growing up in my household, it was always exciting. From the morning that I get up, basically coming downstairs, you will smell the whole aroma from the parsad being prepared and the fresh sweets and spices from the different eats, what we were going to give, delicacies that we were going to offer to our gods in the afternoon. But more than that, you hear the sweet sound of the music of Divali, that being most prominent, the “Hanuman Chalisa” by the late Anil Bheem, blasting through the house, and then giving that sense that you understand this is Divali morning. And that sense of euphoria would be broken with my mother saying, “Boy, go and bathe and get yourself ready to go and shower.”

So it has many fond memories for me and that is why, when you look at where Divali is and what it means to the Hindu community, while we have many other celebrations, as Hindus—and if you look at Hindu calendar, I swear to God, people would be vegetarian all their lives, but the Hindu community respects Divali the most. They look forward to it, they put their hearts and souls, and they bring their best, and it is celebrated during this time.

It actually starts off at the beginning of a month period with the Ganesh Utsav. During the Ganesh Utsav, in that period—then you have the Ganesh Visarjan of the murti after; “visarjan” meaning they offer it to the water, because it is the element going back to the element. So that clay murti that was created is then offered back to the water. After that, we go

into the period of Navaratri. During the Navaratri, there is the Ramleela plays that start. And you usually this play, Ramleela—and what is the meaning of Ramleela? “Leela” is a story of Shri Ram, but we say in Hinduism, when we when greet people, “Sita Ram” because why? There is no Rama without Sita, and we understand the duality of the male and female importance in Hinduism.

During this period of the Ramleela—I will say my first experience with Ramleela was in the Dow Village Recreation Ground as a five-year-old boy, and I would be amazed as they re-enacted the whole entire play of the *Ramayana*, from what you see happening to Shri Ram in Ayodhya, to when he was banished to the forest for 14 years with his wife and brother and living that ascetic life, that sacrifice that he showed and then the battle into reclaiming his wife. And while everybody looks at Divali as just darkness over light, we must know what is that darkness and what is that light that we need to bring.

You see, Divali means more than just lighting deeyas in the afternoon time or offering—making that offering that you do for one day. Actually, Shri Ram is considered as *maryāda puruṣottama*. In Hinduism, it means the ideal man. Similarly, Mata Sita was considered as the ideal wife mother, daughter-in-law, and Shri Ram, the perfect leader, the perfect husband, and it helps us or gives us a template of how we should live our lives.

In Hinduism, there is something that we believe and we look at, karma. If we look at the Bible, it teaches us:

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

5.10 p.m.

We understand Newton's third law, action and reaction are equal and opposite. The good deeds that you do will come back to you one way or the other. This is the true message of what we understand, light over darkness because when we look at what darkness it could be many things. It could be ego, it could anger, it could be hatred, greed, lust. How do we combat that? How do we speak to each other? How do we understand as human beings? That is why holding one of the highest positions in this land, whether it be the Government, the Opposition or the Independents, we must take away from what Divali teaches us.

While we have so much to be grateful for in this country that I could stand here in my traditional wear, as well as my sister and my brothers, or my guru, I should say also, and my brothers on the opposite side, we also could stand here for many different religious functions—and well my mother. Right? We could stand here on many different religious functions and be represented without any fear or ill-will thrown towards us because we are happy and proud of the multicultural, the multi-ethnic society that we have here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, as a Hindu, and as most Hindus should know, we perform rituals, daily rituals which are the first thing that you do when you get off the bed in the morning and you put your feet on the ground, you are supposed to touch the ground, Dharti Maataa mother earth, you show reverence to Mother Earth. We then watch the sun god, Surya Dev and we offer obligation to Surya Dev. We look at Agni Dev who provides fire, warmth. We offer obligations to Agni Dev. The same thing as for Varuna

Dev and Vayu Dev. Varuna Dev being the water God, water being essential is 70 per cent of the human body, and the same as Vayu because without the air we cannot breathe.

As Hindus we understand the importance of these elements, and that is why as Hindus we should understand that this earth, this mother earth needs to be cherished. As a people, as a country we should cherish our land for the good or bad of it. This is our country, we are all Trinbagonians here. We are all people, one country, one nation. Being a Hindu is not about wearing a rakhi. Being a Hindu is understanding how you treat people and understanding your duty because all of us are put here for a duty, and that duty we must perform to the best of our ability.

Mr. President, I take this opportunity to offer Shubh Divali to you and your family. To all my colleagues on the Government Bench, Shubh Divali. From the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, to the Members of Independent Bench, Shubh Divali. To the Members of the Opposition Bench and the Opposition leader, Shubh Divali. To our great Prime Minister, Shubh Divali. Thank you. To Trinidad and Tobago, Shubh Divali. Thank you. Sita Raam.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Roberts.

Hon. Senator: What?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Anil Roberts: Thank you, Mr. President, and in the spirit of Divali and the contribution from the hon. Minister in Ministry of Works and Transport I must commend him on a brilliant message on Divali. His

greatest contribution to date in the Senate.

As a proud descendant of an East Indian mother and a Tobagonian father it gives me great pleasure to say, Sita Raam, namaste. As a proud dougla. Yes. It is my honour and pleasure, Mr. President, to bring Divali greetings to the Hindu community and indeed all of Trinidad and Tobago on behalf of the Opposition the United National Congress party and my fellow parliamentarians. I join with many governments around the world, who are not only recognizing the Hindu festival lights as a national holiday, but are going beyond and acknowledging the positive and meaningful contributions of the Hindu community in their country's development.

What the Hindu community has brought and continues to bring to Trinidad and Tobago by way of its rich culture, music, dance, food, architecture, art, business, strong family values, hard work and an unrelenting focus on education in society cannot be dimmed, placed in the shadows or sent into exile. What I speak of today and what we are witnesses to in our sad but beloved country is not much different from the story of the Ramayan, the Ramayan as told by Valmiki.

As Lord Rama went into exile in the forest of Dhandaka so too have our values of goodness, fairness, transparency, sense of peace and safety, as Lord Rama was forced to meet the multi-headed Rawan, we too are forced to confront the multiple manifestations of evil and darkness stalking our land. Valmiki reminds us in the Ramayan that before Lord Rama struck his arrow into the core of the evil Rawan and destroyed him, he would take aim and strike directly at the heads of Rawan, but the heads kept growing back. The story of the Ramayan therefore reminds us that we must get to the core

of darkness, lest we face it again and again, in different forms.

The Ramayan also distinctly reminds us that Lord Rama did not stand alone, he had the support of Lord Hanuman and his army. He had the support of brothers and others. Alas, much like the story of the Ramayan, we the people have an epic battle ahead of us, a battle to return our Sita, our Trinidad and Tobago who has been abducted by a few to Ayodhya. No one individual can do it alone, no one party, no one community. We need everyone from old to not so old, from east to west, north to south who believe in fairness and justice to act on truth to become truth bearers. But it was the Mahatma, upon his return to India from South Africa, despite being a beneficiary of British education, who lamented the colonization of the mind that comes when western education and values replace what is indigenous to a people and a country. Values that would have historically allowed them to strive, thrive and become successful.

What would the Mahatma say or do if he lived in Trinidad and Tobago today? Surely, he would have stood up against the many incarnations of social injustice, and would have spoken against those that find economic excuses for such injustices. He would have spoken against policies that allow a select few to continue to flourish while leaving the many burdened by heavy taxation, increasing penalties, loss of land and property, loss of agricultural crops without compensation, inability to afford basic education or put food on the table. He would have spoken against the colonial narrative of intimidation being espoused by dictatorial locals.

Gandhiji would have condemned bullying, the violence and discrimination by those in authority who have actively and passively

engaged in and allowed such negativity and darkness to flourish. He would have brought attention to the growing homelessness and increasing poor, the closure of indigenous businesses and the destruction of our once proud energy sector coming and emanating from the earth. I have no doubt that the man in the white dhoti who ate with his hands would surely have lamented anyone needing to eat doubles with a knife and fork to feel cultured. His voice against home-grown colonials and colonists would have resonated loudly for the world to hear. To confront our own multi-headed Rawan in the epic battle that lies before us, we must first replace the neo-colonial standards of greed, grab, discrimination, recusals, destruction and silence with the arrows and values of kindness, sharing, honour, compassion, empathy and support of our elderly, our children, our vulnerable citizens.

5.20 p.m.

And yes, like Lord Rama and Gandhiji, we are called upon to have valour, to be brave. Values, I will say that many in our Hindu community continue to expound today. This Divali, may the blessings of Lakshmi Ma guide and protect each and every one, and bestow on to us the wisdom and courage we need to return Trinidad and Tobago, to the path of positivity, peacefulness, and prosperity for all. Shubh Divali.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Dr. Patasar.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Sharda Patasar: Thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to bring Divali greetings to this Chamber, to the staff of the Parliament, the Hindu community, and national community on behalf of the Independent

Bench. As we take this moment to bring greetings, it is a moment of pause, and I would to take this moment of pause to reflect on what this occasion means. Hinduism along with its textual traditions, which have been written over centuries of debate, as it has a very strong tradition of debate, also has a visual vocabulary that offers ways of thinking and interpreting the world.

The goddess Lakshmi, traditionally worshipped during this time, is one such image—that it is not only an image but the philosophical thought, a living dynamic energy. Lakshmi, derived from the Sanskrit word *Laksh* or goal and aim, is a goddess who takes you to your goals. In her it is contained all the things that are required for us to live a prosperous life as human beings. In last year's greeting, which I also brought, I spoke about *Ashta* Lakshmi, and it seems appropriate as we end a budget debate today, to expand on this, and to say it again. While we see Lakshmi as goddess of wealth and prosperity, we often think of it as material wealth, but wealth is more than this. She is all forms of wealth required for life. The wealth we speak about is creative power, material wealth, spiritual wealth, food, animal husbandry, children, success, patience, and courage. She is associated with preservation and sustenance, a divinity who can very well be an icon for the age in which we live, because her story, her origin story, revolves around that whole idea of climate change, adaptability, sustainability. For Hindus, “sacred” is not only contained in the images of the gods, but in places, in people, in the natural environment, in the element. To meditate on Lakshmi during this period is to meditate on the sacred nature of the whole of creation.

In the act of puja, I was taught that puja prayers, are not only the act

of sitting to pray, but it begins with the first thought of puja, because in Hinduism the imagination marks the puja, which is mental puja, it is the highest form of worship. So it extends from that first thought of puja, to the first flower that is picked, well after the final *aarti* is over.

So the days leading up to Divali—and Sen. Sookhai spoke about Navaratri, Ganesh Utsav. Those days invite us to reflect because fasting requires conscious attention. It is conscious attention to our personal responsibility towards our surroundings, and our fellow beings, for all of life is sacred. Each individual is a part of that whole, and therefore every individual action impacts another life. So with those thoughts and reflections, I wish everyone an auspicious and Shubh Divali. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, as citizens of our diverse and multicultural society, many of us are quite familiar with the origins of the Hindu Festival of Divali, widely recognized for its deep significance. This time honoured Hindu festival symbolizes the victory of light over darkness and the triumph of good over evil, a timeless message that speaks to the human spirit. As the most significant Hindu festival in Trinidad and Tobago, Divali brings with it a vibrant atmosphere. In the days ahead, homes, schools and businesses will come alive with glowing lights, delicious delicacies, and festive music, creating a joyous and celebratory aura, throughout the country.

More than just a religious occasion, Divali stands as a powerful reminder of the harmony that flourishes in our diverse society. It is a time when people from all walks of life come together, not just to participate in the cultural activities, but to embrace the shared values that bind us as a

people. Our nation's unique embrace of cultural and religious diversity sets us apart, allowing us to maintain the spirit of unity, and mutual respect that many other nations struggle to achieve. As Senators, we too carry the responsibility to uphold these values of respect and inclusiveness, despite the differing political views we may represent. It is these shared principles that must continue to guide our work here in this Senate, lighting the way for the future of our beloved country.

In a Senate where moments of robust debate, and impassioned differences, are a natural part of our democratic process, Divali serves as a timely reminder of the importance of seeking common ground, nurturing respect, and pursuing harmony. As we conclude three days of spirited discussion, let us as representatives of the people, recommit to fostering inclusivity, mutual respect, and collective progress. I urge each Senator to embody the true spirit of Divali, not just by celebrating with our Hindu brothers and sisters, but by embracing the values that have enriched our nation, and lifted it as a shining example of our people with diverse beliefs, can coexist amicably.

Hon Senators, I therefore, take this opportunity to wish our Hindu brothers and sisters, and the nation of Trinidad and Tobago, a joyous and peaceful Divali. May the light of this festival inspire us to continue working together in the spirit of unity, and understanding. Shubh Divali.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 5.28 p.m.