

SENATE*Friday, June 27, 2025*

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]**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.

TO: MR. DANIEL RASHEED

WHEREAS Senator the Honourable Ravi Ratiram is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago;

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, do hereby appoint you, DANIEL RASHEED to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 27th June, 2025 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said Senator the Honourable Ravi Ratiram.

UNREVISED

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 17th day of June, 2025.”

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Daniel Rasheed took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTARY APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2025

Bill to supplement the appropriation of the sum, the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Act, 2024 [*The Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance*]; read the first time.

Motion made: That the next stage of the Bill be taken at a later stage of the proceedings. [*Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

Question put and agreed to.

PAPERS LAID

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Princes Town Regional Corporation – Chairman's Fund Account for the financial year ended September 30, 2021. [*The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh)*]
2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Princes Town Regional Corporation– Chairman's Fund Account for the financial year ended September 30, 2022. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

10.10 a.m.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Sen. The Hon. Darryl Allahar): Mr. President, we are very happy to announce that we are ready to reply to all three questions this morning.

Mr. President: Okay. Sen. Dhanpaul.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Bilateral Meetings held in Washington DC

(Inter-American Development Bank and World Bank Group)

1. Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul asked the hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and the Minister in the Ministry of Finance:

With respect to the Minister's recent bilateral meetings with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank Group held in Washington DC, can the Minister provide the following information:

- (i) the purpose of these meetings;
- (ii) the names and designations of the individuals with whom bilateral meetings were held; and
- (iii) the names and designations of the individuals who accompanied the Minister to Washington DC?

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Mr. President, part (i) of the question, the visit was as a request of the Prime Minister, primarily to reset Trinidad and Tobago's development agenda and strengthen the relationship with the World Bank Group and the Inter-American Development Bank. The World Bank expressed concerns with the country's operations and sought clarification on procedures for State engagements.

The purpose of the visit was to reengage key multi-lateral development partners—the World Bank Group and the Inter-American Development Bank Group—with a view to advise them of the new strategic direction for economic transformation. The discussions were centred on presenting the Government's economic reset agenda which aims to reposition the Government as an enabler and regulator and crowd-in private sector investment for the development of non-energy revenue generation activities.

Both institutions responded positively to the expressed policy direction and indicated strong interest in supporting this transformation. Our international partners expressed strong—sorry. While rebuilding trust will continue to require sustained effort, our partners recognized the new trajectory and momentum to drive meaningful progress. It is particularly encouraging that this renewed engagement has occurred early in our term and in the term of this Government setting a promising tone for closer collaboration moving forward.

Mr. President, part (ii) of the question, the following persons from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank attended the bilateral meetings in Washington DC:

From the World Bank:

- Ayat Soliman- Director, Strategy and Operations, Office of the Regional Vice President for Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Carolina Saizar Renart-Special Assistant to Vice President, Office of the Regional Vice President for Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Ana Elisa Luna Barros-Manager, External Affairs Unit, External and Corporate Relations.
- Oscar Calvo-Gonzales-Regional Practice Manager, Latin America and the Caribbean.

- Alberto Leyton - Practice Manager and Lead Public Sector Specialist, IBRD.
- Lilia Burunciuc-Division Director, Caribbean Countries Country Management Unit, IBRD.
- Priyani Malik-Senior Country Officer, Caribbean Countries Country Management Unit, IBRD.
- Elizabeth Ann Marcano-Director, Hub for Central America and the Caribbean, IFC.
- Ronke-Amoni Ogunsulire-Country Manager, Latin America and the Caribbean Office-IFC.
- Bexi Jimenez Mota-Senior Business Development Officer, LAC Region – MIGA.
- Marcos Chiliatto - Executive Director for Brazil.

IDB:

- Ilan Goldfajn, IDB Group President.
- James Scriven, CEO, IDB Invest.
- Aria Hofman, Irene, General Manager, IDB Lab.
- Anabel González, Vice President of Countries.
- Anton Edmunds, General Manager, Caribbean Country Department.
- Darryl White, Managing Director, IDB Invest.
- Anderson Caputo, Division Chief Connectivity, Markets & Finance.
- Daniel Fonseca, Sector Principal Specialist - Financial Markets.

Mr. President, as for part (iii) of the question, the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development was not accompanied by a delegation from Trinidad and Tobago. However, the Dr. Alvin Hilaire, Governor of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago did participate in the meetings virtually. Additionally, the following the persons did join the meetings:

The World Bank:

- Mr. Delvin Cox, Advisor to the Executive Director for Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Panama, Philippines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.

IDB:

- Navita Anganu, Executive Director for the Caribbean Constituency.
- Omatee Geawan-Ramdass, Councilor and Representative for Trinidad and Tobago.
- Julian Belgrave, IDB Country Representative for Trinidad and Tobago.

Thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Yes, Sen. Dhanpaul.

Sen. Dhanpaul: Thank you, Mr. President. The Minister has been quoted in the newspaper as saying that he plans to raise \$2 billion to \$5 billion.

Sen. Roberts: Is there a question?

Sen. Dhanpaul: Two to \$5 billion—

Mr. President: Ask a question.

Sen. Dhanpaul: The question becomes: Is there a sovereign component to this borrowing?

Mr. President: Hon. Minister.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, no.

Mr. President: Any further supplementary, Sen. Dhanpaul? Can we go to the next question, Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul. Next question.

Sen. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, I find I am being disturbed next to him, unprovoked.

Hon. Senators: *[Interruption]*

Mr. President: Please, please, please, let us calm down.

**Development Bank and Caribbean (CAF)
(Minister's Relationship with)**

2. **Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul** asked the hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and the Minister in the Ministry of Finance:
Can the Minister explain the nature of his relationship, if any, with the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF) prior to becoming a Minister of Government?

Mr. President: The hon. Minister.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Mr. President: Please let us calm ourselves. It is too early.

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Thank you, Mr. President. The Government of Barbados retained my services to do all their work in relation to the Latin American Development Bank. I was an independent consultant who was contracted by the Government of Barbados to work on all their CAF projects. CAF paid for my consultancy via the Government of Barbados.

Upon successful completion of that consultancy, my services were contracted to assist Trinidad and Tobago in becoming a full member of CAF. I also had a short-term consultancy to structure a policy-based loan and loan options. This consultancy was terminated when the Government of Trinidad and Tobago requested that I represent the country at the Board of Directors Meeting.

I wish to place on record that with the approval of the then Government, I represented Trinidad and Tobago as part of the delegation to the 158th Board of Directors Meeting of the Corporación Andina de Fomento which was held in Bogota, Columbia on December 12 and 13, 2016. This was the first directors'

meeting after Trinidad and Tobago attained full membership in that institution.

Mr. President: Yes, Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul.

Sen. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, could the hon. Minister state what was his role in Trinidad and Tobago gaining full membership in CAF?

Mr. President: The hon. Minister.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, because that was in 2016 and my memory would be a little bit hazy, I would prefer to provide a better scripted answer at the appropriate time, if he could submit a second question.

Mr. President: Okay. Senator? Alright. Let us go on to the next question. Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul.

Budgetary Support

(Details of)

3. Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul asked the hon. Minister of Finance and Minister in the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development:

Could the Minister state:

- (i) how much money, if any, the Government borrowed in May 2025, both domestic and external, for budgetary support; and
- (ii) the status of the overdraft at the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago on the date on which he assumed office?

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Thank you, Mr. President. The purpose of part (i) of the question—sorry. The response to part (i) of the question is that for the month of May 2025, the Government issued a bond in the aggregate amount of TT \$2 billion on the domestic capital market to provide budgetary support for fiscal year 2024/2025.

There were no external borrowings for this period.

10.20 a.m.

Mr. President, regarding part (ii) of the question, it will be relevant to recall that the basis for the calculation of the overdraft utilization is derived from requirements of the Central Bank Act and is monitored based on established procedures between the Treasury, the Ministry of Finance, and the Central Bank. This includes the daily reporting issue by the Central Bank.

Mr. President, advances to the Government are made by the Central Bank, subject to Section 46 of the Central Bank Act. Under Section 46(2), the maximum advances allowed shall not exceed 20 per cent of the estimates of annual revenue as per the parliamentary budget approved. For example, the maximum advances for fiscal year 2024, 2025 are \$10,844,800,000. This represents 20 per cent of the estimated annual revenue of \$54,224,000,000. Mr. President, one of these 20 per cent limits is established at the start of the fiscal year, the net advances are calculated as a percentage of this maximum.

Mr. President, so far, for each month of calendar year 2025, the average Government net overdraft balance and the corresponding average balance, as a percentage of the maximum advances, were as follows: In January 2025, \$4,425,172,151, representing 40.8 per cent. February 2025, \$6,195,802,788, representing 54.1 per cent. March 2025, \$7,862,125,314, representing 72.5 per cent. April 2025, \$7,590,473,316, representing 70 per cent. In May 2025, \$8,639,445,932, representing 79.7 per cent. And, in June 2025, up to June 17, when this answer was prepared, \$8,667,891,265, representing 79.9 per cent.

Mr. President, as the substantive Minister of Finance stated in the other place when he presented the mid-year budget review on June 18, the former Minister of Finance had deliberately underfunded critical expenditure. Mr. President, the former Government recognized that their revenue target was going

to be substantially less than budgeted, so they simply stopped meeting the obligations.

Mr. President, I once again emphasize, on behalf of the Ministry of Finance, that this was a deliberate action by the then Minister of Finance as a statistical “conmanship”; kicking the can down the road, so that the new Government coming in had to find ways and moneys to pay.

Mr. President, this practice of underestimating expenditure gives a false narrative. The result has been an accumulation of hundreds of millions in arrears that this Government must now settle in addition to funding its own current fiscal obligations. Mr. President, given the former administration’s financial mismanagement, and the degenerative state of the nation’s finances, the overdraft will be continually challenged.

Mr. President, when we were appointed on Saturday, May 3rd 2025, and officially assumed duties on Monday, May 5th, 2025, the Government’s net overdraft opening balance, as at the morning of May 5th, 2025, was TT \$8,257.4 million or 76.1 per cent of the maximum advances. By the close of business that same day, Mr. President, the balance stood at \$8,112.2 million or 74.8 per cent of maximum advances. Thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul.

Sen. Dhanpaul: Thank you, Mr. President. Will the Minister be able to state what was the balance on the Development Loans Act after borrowing TT\$2 billion?

Mr. President: What? Am—just repeat that question again.

Sen. Dhanpaul: Thank you, again, Mr. President. Would the Minister be able to say, or state, what would be the balance or the headroom on the Development Loans Act following boring that took place in May?

Mr. President: If the Minister wishes to answer that, then he can do that—

Sen. Allahar: Mr. President, point of order, Standing Order 27(9)—

Mr. President: Yeah, it is not connected to the question and the answer given thus far. So, any further questions?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Any further questions?

Sen. Dhanpaul: Not quite.

Mr. President: Okay, let us go on, please.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Could we have some peace and calm?

**TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO REVENUE AUTHORITY (REPEAL) BILL,
2025**

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [June 23, 2025] that the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, the debate on the second reading of the following Bill, which was in progress when the Senate adjourned on Monday, June 23rd, 2025, will be resumed.

Hon. Senators, before I invite the next Senator to contribute to this debate, I wish to remind the Members of this Senate of the provisions of Standing Order 68(1)(b), and I quote.

“Amendments must be in writing and handed to the Clerk for circulation.” Accordingly, I advise all Senators and remind returning Members, in particular, that it is your responsibility to ensure any proposed amendments to the Bill are submitted to the clerk at the earliest opportunity to facilitate timely circulation. Let me be clear, I do not expect a recurrence of the unfortunate circumstance and remarks that occurred during the last Sitting of this honourable Senate

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: I will now call on Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul to take the Floor.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul: Thank you, Mr. President. This is my first official contribution in this honourable House.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Firstly, I would like to congratulate you on your selection as President of the Senate, and also, on your recent acting appointment as President of the Republic. I look forward to observing you and learning from you and from your vast experience as you navigate and take us through the complex issues of the Senate. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul:—for giving me this opportunity to continue to serve my country. Mr. President, as you are aware, an effective Opposition is critical in a strong democracy. And, the last time I checked, Mr. President, I am not being paid by PNM taxpayers or UNC taxpayers. I am being paid to be an effective Opposition Member by the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

10.30 a.m.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, I have been involved in dealing with some version of the TTRA since 2002. Since the Deane Committee was established, headed by the late Gordon Deane, to establish an institutional framework for revenue collection in Trinidad and Tobago. That Deane Committee—and before I say that, Mr. President, for me personally, this whole TTRA exercise, and I am

sure I can speak for a lot of my former colleagues in the Ministry of Finance. This TTRA exercise has been an exercise in absolute frustration. It has been a case of, yes TTRA, no TTRA, yes TTRA, no TTRA. It has been a case of he said, she said, over and over, as administrations change. Just to let you know, Mr. President, I have worked with every single Minister of Finance since 1991, so I am accustomed to changes in administration and changes in policies. But it has been a frustrating exercise.

Mr. President, the Deane Committee, having reviewed the issue, outlined 13 deficiencies in revenue collection in Trinidad and Tobago. And I want to put them on record because I honestly feel this would probably be the last instance where we would be debating anything in this country on the TTRA. The committee identified the following deficiencies:

- “Deficient human resource management processes
- Inadequate management capability, accountability and training
- Inadequate staff development, training and accountability
- Lack of control over and accountability for Budgetary Allocations
- Inadequate employee compensation packages
- High incidence of corruption and corrupt practices
- Inefficient systems for internal investigation and enforcement
- Inadequate information exchange and co-ordination between the administration and of various taxes levied
- Poor customer relations
- Anti-business rules and regulations
- Lack of appropriate information technology systems

- Poor physical infrastructure and accommodation”—and this was 2002, long before they moved into their new accommodation. And 13th—
- “Deficiencies in the legislative framework.

The Committee also concluded that the revenue authority model”—of revenue collection management—“provided an excellent framework to tackle these deficiencies.”

Again, I repeat, Mr. President, this is in 2002. In 2007, the then Cabinet agreed to seek technical assistance from the International Monetary Fund. The consultants produced an action plan and potential outputs for the TTRA. The consultants were Maureen Kidd and William Crandall, and they also provided a report in 2007. And they said:

There remained constraints to revenue collection progress, primarily related to the administrative systems and rules imposed by the public service, which have not been specifically designed to meet the specific operational needs of tax and customs administration. For the—and this is very critical, Mr. President—revenue department of Trinidad and Tobago to achieve their full potential, major administrative change is required and this change will come through the establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: So, we fast forward to 2009—

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, I am trying to drive home my point. Unlike some of my friends, I could drive.

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

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: A year in which the alarm bells started to ring.

Sen. Baig: Mr. President, I stand on Standing Order 46(6). He cannot make that statement. He should withdraw.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Overruled. Please, continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Fast forward to 2009, a year in which the alarm bells started to ring very loudly at the Ministry of Finance. Because 2009 was the first year in several years that Trinidad and Tobago recorded a deficit in its fiscal accounts. And I will speak more about that in the debate on the midyear review, Mr. President. Given this unexpected deficit, this fiscal deficit, there was an urgency, a certain heightened urgency in the Ministry of Finance towards the creation of the TTRA. Mr. President, several commentators have expressed the view that the creation of the TTRA was anti-worker or even anti-PSA, and I have my comrade here, now Minister Baptiste. But leading the charge for the Government at the time, as a Permanent Secretary, there was no way I would say that it was anti-worker or anti-PSA. For one, I myself was a public servant. All these people in Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue were my colleagues. I knew several of them, if not all of them.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Mr. President: Please, please, please.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: And it definitely was not anti-PSA because at some point in time, I was a member of the PSA. It was all about, Mr. President, it was all about revenue collection while looking after the welfare—and I say this with no apology—of my colleagues. Mr. President, let me expand a bit on this anti-worker notion. In April 2010 Cabinet agreed to appoint a team to hold discussions with

the PSA in an attempt to formulate an MOU which would form the basis of a settlement for the staffing, modalities of the TTRA. And with your leave, Mr. President, I would like to quote from the MOU, and I state in advance that the MOU was not signed either by the PSA or by the Government.

Members of the—who held the discussions—Committee: Mr. Watson Duke, President; Mrs. Rosanna Robinson, first Vice-President; Mr. Christopher Joefield, second Vice-President; and my friend, comrade, Leroy Baptiste, now Minister of Labour. And I am glad he is here because he could immediately fact-check me. On the government side, Vishnu Dhanpaul, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance, Mr. Nestor Lambert, Director of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Management Company—the management company set up to implement the TTRA—Mr. Clarice Wells, Chief Executive Officer of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Management Company, a former Chief Personnel Officer. Here are some issues identified in the MOU. Firstly:

In the spirit of good industrial relations practice, the PSA and GORTT shall engage in open, meaningful discussions on transition issues relating to the design of the TTRA, its organizational structure and job descriptions.

There will be no transfer of employees of the IRD and the Customs and Excise

to the TTRA. Upon request, employees shall be transferred to other Ministries or departments in accordance with public service regulations. Existing employees of the IRD and Customs shall have the first priority for employment in the TTRA after consideration of their qualifications,

experience, training and aptitude. Where existing employees of the Inland Revenue Division and Customs and Excise Division are not successful in

obtaining employment in the TTRA, they shall have the option to:

1. Apply for transfer to other Ministries, departments in accordance with the public service regulations.

10.40 a.m.

2. Maintain their substantive post in the public service or be transferred to an equivalent post in the public service.
3. Apply for benefits under the Voluntary Separation of Employment Programme.

Let me tell you a bit about that, Mr. President. When calculated, that VSEP for many employees of the Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue Division, especially ones with long careers and over 30 years of service, the calculations were the seven figures. Several more were in the six figures. And guess what, Mr. President? They were going to get back their jobs, because you cannot hire a Customs and Excise Officer I, II, III from off the street. Similarly, you cannot hire a field auditor from off the street. You cannot hire an assessor from off the street. These are specialist positions. So they were going to get seven and six figures in VSEP as well as get back their jobs. It was a win-win situation.

So, this notion of anti-worker absolutely did not apply. Continuing on the MOU:

4. Pending determination of the application for recognition, the PSA reserves the right to represent an individual TTRA employee in respect of his or her rights, disputes and grievances where he or she is a financial member of the PSA.
5. The PSA and the Government shall discuss matters relating to the VSEP, but it is understood that the negotiations of the terms of the

VSEP are to be held between the PSA and the Chief Personnel Officer.

As a former Permanent Secretary, if I am to be honest with myself, I would say, Mr. President, that this was our best opportunity at that time to establish the TTRA. However, Mr. President, as you are aware, the TTRA Bill at that time, 2010—April 2010, was defeated in the Senate and the Prime Minister at the time, Mr. Patrick Manning, called the election date.

Sen. Roberts: And lost.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: The rest is history. In September—well, obviously, Mr. President, without say, the PNM lost the election. In September 2015, the PNM returned to Government and in 2017, the Minister of Finance at the time approached the IMF again for technical assistance. The IMF produced a document called the “Tax Administration Diagnostic Assessment Tool”, called the TADAT. And this is the IMF, the International Monetary Fund, presenting a document based on free technical advice to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago; “free”.

But one thing, before I go into the TADAT, I want to point out to you, Mr. President, that all this while, from 2009 to the TADAT of 2017, the country was experiencing consecutive years of fiscal deficit; consecutive years of fiscal deficit. TADAT identified strengths and weaknesses in the revenue collection of Trinidad and Tobago. And I have to put them on *Hansard*, Mr. President.

Strengths: A relatively good tax administration ICT platform, GenTax; automated cross-matching of information from a wide range of third-party sources; efficient arrangement for collecting taxes, such as withholding at source and advance payment for income taxes; a graduated mechanism of administrative and judicial review is in place; significant contribution to the tax revenue forecasting

and estimation process, and regular monitoring of revenue performance.

Weaknesses: The integrity of the taxpayer registration database is low; on-time filing and payment rates cannot be established with certainty; compliance risk management practice is underdeveloped; decentralized risk-based audit case selection process that allows rollover of cases from previous years and places other taxpayers under permanent audit control; limited use of electronic services for filing and payment; limited use of non-audit initiatives to promote voluntary compliance; delays in processing taxpayers' accounting transactions, resulting in inaccurate taxpayer accounts, a common complaint; lack of impact assessment of compliance management interventions; a deficient VAT refund process and related funding; a weak revenue accounting environment; shortage of technical staff; an internal audit function that does not provide oversight of all key operations, including the tax register and GenTax—GenTax is the operating software; external assurance capacity undermined by confidentiality provisions.

They also identified something in that report called the “tax gap”. The tax gap, Mr. President, is essentially the potential tax that can be collected, less the tax actually collected. And they identified a tax gap of \$10 billion out there in the system in Trinidad and Tobago.

But they also assessed the Board of Inland Revenue under 23 indicators, and I would not go through them but they were graded from A to D. The Board of Inland Revenue received 15 Ds, five Cs, one B, and two As. And let me just tell you what would be one of the As. Existence of an independent, workable and graduated dispute resolution process. How much time do I have again, Mr. President?

Mr. President: You have until 11.08.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, 11.08, thank you. Fast forward again, Mr. President, in 2009, the Government approached the IMF again for technical assistance in setting up the TTRA. The IMF produced a report called the “Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Administration Gap Analysis Programme”, the value-added tax gap. The IMF’s Fiscal Affairs Department estimated the VAT gap as fluctuating at 5 per cent of GDP. In that year, 2019, the GDP was estimated at about \$158 billion. So roughly around \$8 billion was the tax gap at that time. Karl Theodore also did a study—and he was a little more liberal, for want of a better word—and he estimated the tax gap and the VAT gap to be \$20 billion.

Mr. President, I left the Ministry of Finance in December 2020, almost five years now. And in those five years, several court cases, litigation, whatever, took place with the Revenue Authority. It ended up at the Privy Council.

The Privy Council...

—I am quoting from the summary of the Privy Council’s ruling.

The Privy Council, in its ruling—Privy Council Appeal No. 0051 of 2024, *Terrisa Dhoray v the Attorney General* and the TTRA—affirmed the constitutionality of the TTRA, acknowledging that the enforcement provisions did not grant the Finance Minister or the TTRA Board undue power over public officers. The Privy Council’s ruling affirmed the constitutionality of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, stating that it does not violate the Constitution’s mandate regarding taxation and the proper handling of collected funds.

Further, the court addressed and dismissed a challenge positing that the Act undermined the authority of the Public Service Commission over public

officers and permitted non-public officers to conduct governmental functions. However, all such claims were dismissed.

10.50 a.m.

The Privy Council clarified that the Constitution does not require tax assessment and collection to be exclusively performed by government employees. Instead, it supported the TTRA's establishment as a body corporate charged with these responsibilities, noting that its independence, and implementation of safeguards against political interference aligned with constitutional practices. But there are two things I want to mention that could have impacted the TTRA which were peripheral—one major one—and the BIR has not recovered since, and I am glad the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development is here.

In 2014, Mr. President, in negotiations for a wage increase with the Chief Personnel Officer, the then President of PSA—I am not sure, I apologize in advance to the Minister of Labour Small and Micro Enterprise Development if he was not around, I cannot recall, but I knew he was within the inner circle of the President of the PSA—took all the members of staff out of the Board of Inland Revenue under the premise that it was an OSHA issue. They did something similar with the Treasury. Mr. President, the workers of the Board of Inland Revenue and the Treasury did not get back into the building for six months, and the impact that had on revenue collection, and the impact that had on the staff psyche, the BIR, and I dare say the Treasury, they have not recovered since.

So, that was all part of the buildup to what transpired, and just to let you know, it was 14 percent at that time, we negotiated with the Chief Personnel Officer, and I remember myself, and the Permanent Secretary, the Minister Howai, now Governor Howai, and we sat down, Minister. Howai, and myself, and we

worked out how that 14 percent could have been paid, how the back pay would have been paid, and what would be the annual increase in expenditure, and the 14 percent, and you can correct me if I am wrong here Minister, the 14 percent was approved, and the workers went back to work. It had nothing to do with OSHA at the time. As I said, Mr. President, the BIR never recovered. To this day, they never recovered.

So, I would look to put in my world, Mr. President—in looking at the future, I would like to put a challenge to the Minister of Finance. In my world, we use something called a baseline scenario where I would use revenue collection for 2025, as the baseline. The Minister can use the entire revenue collection for 2025, and keep that as his baseline. Implement—because I want to see the Minister do well because I am a fiercely patriotic man, if he does well, the country does well—all the structural changes at the BIR, and customs over the next two fiscal years, and at the end of fiscal year 2027, in which a fully operationalized revenue authority would have collected or closed the VAT gap by \$10 billion or collected an additional \$10 billion, I would like to see, and I really hope it transpires, at the end of 2027, Mr. President, that everything the hon. Minister of Finance has implemented comes to fruition, and he is able to close that gap.

If he is able to close that gap without the Revenue Authority, Mr. President, I will personally seek your leave to come back here, and apologize profusely to the hon. Minister of Finance in the year 2027, at the end of the fiscal year. If he closes that gap—because let me tell you something, Mr. President, he could hire 200 people, 300 people, 2000 people in the BIR, and customs, but they could identify all the tax evaders that they could find, but there is something that they cannot get past, when that list reaches the hierarchy of the BIR—I would leave it at that.

Hon. Senator: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]—

Mr. Roberts: If you have information share it.

Hon. Senator: Nobody asked you—

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, through you, I would say more in the mid-year review.

Hon. Senator: Yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: But you see the TTRA, Mr. President, should be bipartisan. This has nothing to do with PNM, and UNC, as I said, since 1991, I have seen them all, and this is about the country. Okay? We could end up paying an expensive price for cheap political games.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: The Minister of Finance kept going on, “Why did the Government continue the TTRA?” “Why did the Government continue with the TTRA?” Simple, as he said, the PNM Government at the time had a manifesto also, they won on a manifesto. Promises made, promises kept. Similarly, as the Minister of Finance kept saying, “Promises made, promises kept.” They made a promise to the electorate that they had to keep. Simple as that.

So, Mr. President, thank you very much for the opportunity, and I will expand if you allow me in the mid-year review. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Yes—yes, can we have some peace? On behalf of the Senate may I extend heartfelt congratulations to Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul on his maiden contribution?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: And now to move to Sen. Anthony Vieira.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Anthony Vieira SC: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, as you know, I am a student of philosophy and history. It is important to consider history because without history there is no context.

So, today I would share the parable of the “Zhou Dynasty Bronze Tripods”. A tale of clinging to outdated institutions for the sake of tradition even as the world around collapses. During the warring period of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, the imperial house had lost much of its power. Real authority had shifted to regional warlords, and mandarins, yet the Zhou Dynasty still clung to their symbols of their fading legitimacy, most famously the Nine Bronze Tripods. These massive vessels have been cast centuries older, and are set to embody the mandate of heaven. Possession of the tripods symbolized the right to govern under heaven, but by the late Zhou period, the dynasty was crumbling. Corruption was rife, people were starving, and the empire was fractured. Ministers pleaded with the court, “Please modernize. Let us modernize the military, reform taxes, and strengthen regional administration”. But the emperor and his loyalists refused.” Instead of fixing the failing empire, they expended energy defending the symbolic tripods. Ultimately, the tripods were lost, we do not know, whether they were swallowed by floodwaters or taken by invaders, but with them, the last shred of the Zhou authority vanished.

The refusal to let go of outdated symbols and institutions hastened the dynasty's collapse.

11.00 a.m.

So this parable teaches that systems built for another time, no matter how revered, cannot substitute for legitimacy, performance, or adaptation. Insisting on preserving an ineffective institution, whether out of nostalgia, fear of change, or symbolic pride, can cripple a society, especially when better alternatives exist. Like the Zhou Court, clinging to those tripods, defending the BIR, not for its effectiveness, but for sentiment or out of political alignment, risks deepening dysfunction. The Revenue Authority proposal, though imperfect, represents needed reform.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: And as in the parable, I fear that failure to act boldly and to modernize invites eventual collapse or irrelevance. It is no secret, as we have heard from Sen. Dhanpaul, that the Board of Inland Revenue has long been an underperforming institution. And, that is supported by a body of credible commentary and institutional evidence over the last two decades.

Poor systems, outdated legal infrastructure, and human resource inefficiencies have all been repeatedly identified as structural deficiencies within the BIR. Evidence of BIR underperformance includes, as we have heard, outdated operational systems. The BIR still relies in part on manual paper-based processing, which is inefficient and prone to delays and error. The BIR's IT infrastructure is fragmented and outdated, limiting its ability to detect tax evasion or automatic key processes. And, there are assessments, as we have heard, conducted by the IMF in 2021, by the World Bank, and PEFA assessments.

Mr. President: Listen, I would like to hear Sen. Vieira, but there is a running commentary that is taking place that is prohibiting me from properly listening. Those who would like to carry on conversations, you are free to take up to five minutes, go behind the chair, and discuss. But, allow the Senator to make his contribution in silence. Continue, Senator.

Sen. A. Vieira SC: Thank you, Mr. President. There was a weak legislative framework. The existing Inland Revenue legislation is pre-digital. It predates modern tax administration standards, making it hard to enforce compliance or to track high-value transactions in real time. The absence of a unified tax code and gaps in transfer pricing, anti-avoidance measures, and real-time filing mechanisms are recurrent issues. We have heard about the human resource challenges. There is no modern HR framework for performance evaluation or promotion based on merit. The BIR is constrained by public service regulations that limit its ability to recruit and to retain highly-specialized tax personnel or forensic auditors.

On the other hand, the Revenue Authority, as proposed in the now-about-to-be-repealed 2021 legislation, as we have heard from Sen. Dhanpaul, sought to replace the BIR and Customs Division with a semi-autonomous, professionally-managed authority. It sought to introduce modern governance, HR, and IT systems. It sought to improve taxpayer services and compliance enforcement. It sought to ensure more agile recruitment and accountability.

The Revenue Authority offered significant institutional advantages, including the fact that it was based on models from Barbados, Jamaica, and Guyana, a semi-autonomous authority that would be nimbler and better equipped to modernize tax enforcement. The Revenue Authority would no longer be tied to general public service constraints. It could offer market-competitive compensation

and it could apply strategic planning.

Now, I accept that in terms of getting buy-in, establishing the Revenue Authority could have been better handled. It might have been clumsy. And there is some merit in the political objections and criticisms which have been levelled. I accept that while the creation of the Revenue Authority was a step in the right direction from a governance and efficiency standpoint, concerns expressed about political control, especially regarding the appointment of the board and the director general, they should have been taken seriously. Loss of job security for existing BIR and Customs employees under the transition mechanism, they could have—should have been better handled. The lack of independent oversight mechanisms in the original Bill could have, should have been addressed. But I do not accept, as has been suggested in some quarters, that the Revenue Authority was a weapon to be used against citizens. That conclusion is not supported by any evidence, no matter how you present it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: Nor do I accept the claim that the Revenue Authority legislation contained dangerous provisions allowing for private tax data to be misused. The TTRA Act provided for a new governance structure, replacing the BIR and Customs and Excise with a semi-autonomous authority. That much is true, but the legislation also retained legal obligations related to data privacy under the Data Protection Act, the Income Tax Act, including criminal penalties for unauthorized disclosure.

Moreover, there is no express provision in the TTRA Act allowing for political targeting or unlawful data disclosure. Such acts would still be unlawful under the existing law. As far as I can tell, many of the claims that have been

made against the Revenue Authority are not just factually incorrect, they are also unfair. Accusations of data weaponization are serious. The example that has been cited by certain detractors about alleged leaked tax data of a prominent businessman, that is anecdotal without any clear evidence linking it to the TTRA structure or governance.

And what is evidence? Evidence refers to a body of information that supports a given position. Evidence is used to prove or disprove a belief or to decide whether a judgment or opinion. I have seen no evidence of systematic or any abuse. I have not seen it, it has not been presented.

So therefore, while concerns about potential misuse might justify stricter safeguards, the suggestion that the Act itself authorizes such conduct is overstated. The TTRA legislation was not designed to attack persons, but to improve revenue administration. A side-by-side comparison between the BIR and the Revenue Authority with reforms should make clear why the Revenue Authority is preferable.

In terms of the respective legal frameworks, the BIR is outdated, while the TTRA, as proposed, is modernized and OECD aligned. In terms of HR flexibility, the BIR is constrained by the Public Service Commission, while the TTRA, as proposed, is agile and merit-based.

11.10 a.m.

In terms of technology the BIR is paper based and inefficient, while the TTRA, as proposed, is designed for digitization. In terms of enforcement, the BIR is weak, while the TTRA as proposed is potentially stronger. In terms of autonomy, the BIR is politically embedded, while the TTRA as proposed is semi-autonomous.

This comparison makes clear that the intended purpose of the Revenue Authority, as outlined in the explanatory note of that Bill and the supporting parliamentary debates, was to increase tax compliance, enhance operational independence and technical capacity, to modernize revenue administration, to reduce political interference in the day to day tax administration. In fact, international best practices according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, according to the IMF, according to the Inter-American Development Bank, they recommend semi-autonomous revenue authorities so that you can separate policy from administration. You can improve efficiency, you can reduce corruption and discretion, you can improve audit and risk based compliance functions.

The design of the TTRA legislation was consistent with these aims, and while any system can be misused, the Act itself was not a tool for political targeting. So on balance, the TTRA legislation sought to bring order and efficiency, not to attack citizens.

So for these reasons and in these circumstances, I respectfully submit that repealing the TTRA Act is a step in the wrong direction. When weighed using appropriate policy evaluation criteria, the scale overwhelmingly tips in favour of retaining the Revenue Authority.

Now, I disagree with this legislation, not just on the details, but fundamentally. There are many arguments against repeal and I would summarize the main ones as follows:

The Revenue Authority aimed to correct long standing issues in revenue collection, including outdated systems and weak enforcement. Repeal may be seen at worst as politically motivated and at best as regressive, returning control to a

structure long criticized for inefficiency. The proposed alternative, that is to say, enhancing the BIR with new governance rules mirrors key TTRA elements but without the operational independence or a modern legal framework. All in all, while today's repeal may solve some stakeholder concerns, I fear we risk abandoning reform rather than fixing its execution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: The Government has produced no compelling reason to say why I should agree with them. With all respect to the mover of the Bill, the hon. Dr. Swaratsingh, he did not make out a cogent, compelling or persuasive case, he spoke with passion—there was a lot of fire but very little illumination. It might have been better, perhaps, if this debate had been framed around outcomes rather than institutions. It might have been better perhaps if the goal, instead of overstating the flaws in the TTRA legislation, had been geared towards effective revenue mobilization, taxpayer fairness and fiscal sustainability. As far as I am concerned, it would have been far more progressive to retain and amend the TTRA legislation.

We could have looked to strengthen the data safeguards, to improve the board appointment processes, for example, via an independent selection panel and we could also have looked to ensure parliamentary oversight of the Revenue Authority. So all in all, I would summarize as follows:

While it may resonate politically with some, it seems to me that the flaws in the TTRA legislation have been overstated. There is a lack of substantive evidence—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC:—that the Act enabled weaponization, as has been alleged in certain quarters. The TTRA was intended as a reform mechanism aligned with regional and global best practice not as a political weapon. We should avoid idealizing the Board of Inland Revenue, its track record shows systemic failure to meet contemporary standards and I do not think tinkering will help. Tinkering will not suffice. Repealing the TTRA legislation outright, as we are doing today, I see that as a retrograde step, especially if it delays meaningful revenue reform. A more balanced approach might have been to revise and strengthen the TTRA framework rather than to just discard it.

We are at a crossroads, not just about whether to repeal the Revenue Authority Act but about how we as a nation debate and decide on issues that really matter. And to those of you who may say that if you question the repeal you must be anti-government, or you are a supporter of the previous administration, let me say this plainly, that kind of thinking misses the mark. This is about what is in the best interest of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: We are talking about how our country collects the taxes that will fund our schools, our hospitals, build our roads. We are talking about systems that will ensure fairness, transparency and accountability in the way revenue is managed. Should those questions not matter, regardless of who is in power? To reduce this debate to partisan finger-pointing is to sell the national interest short.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: It is to say that governance must be about loyalty, not logic but the truth is good governance transcends politics. Let us focus on what matters. Let us not disregard a long list of historical facts, let us ask the right questions.

How do we safeguard your private information? How do we make tax collection more efficient and fair? How do we build institutions that will serve all citizens, not just those aligned with the Government of the day? That is why some of us are saying do not throw out the entire Bill, fix it, fix it. Reform what needs to be reformed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: Strengthen oversight, tighten privacy protection, appoint boards transparently but do not abandon over a decade of work on modernizing our tax system just to score political points.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: This is about building a better Trinidad and Tobago and let us raise the level of debate. Let us do what is right, not just for party but for the people. In the event, I see no compelling reason to repeal the Revenue Authority, to my way of thinking, this is a catastrophic case of misplaced priorities.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

11.20 a.m.

Mr. President: Thank you. Sen. Lalite-Etienne, please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Alicia Lalite-Etienne: Mr. President, Members of the Senate, staff, viewing audience, visitors and media. Today, I stand here because I would like to say that I thank Her Excellency Christine Kangaloo for affording me the opportunity to represent our people. And today, we are focusing on something that is extremely

serious. It affects, not just us here in the Senate, it does not affect the people on the street alone, it affects even our future, our children—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne:—and we have to be conscious of how we think, and we have to think clearly, and we have to do our research be based on factual information. A country cannot run effectively on inefficient tax systems.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: No way could a government in power deliver promises on an inefficient tax collection system. So if we all—and if the government has to—with development, with delivering of promises, we have to have an effective tax collection system. And being fair to everyone throughout decades, I will give acknowledgment to all governments who came in power from different parties and who—Opposition, then into power, then into Opposition, then into power. We even had a coalition system that tried to solve these problems of our revenue system and yet still, there were problems and failure.

So, over the years, we have seen the results of what is happening. And if we do not look at it in a constructive way, what is going to be happening is that the billions of dollars that are not collected, what is going to happen is that we are going to be borrowing more to fill that gap. Each citizen in Trinidad, we have rights and we have to be able to pay our taxes, and we must have an efficient system for proper recording and collecting of taxes, because it is a ripple effect.

So, yes, different governments come and go and have tried—and the revenue system, it is an outdated system. And we as a country, we would like to claim that we are progressive, we are going forward, not regressive. Regressive means that you are going back. You are going back to either your former position, and your

former position—obviously, if you were going forward at the beginning and you are going backward now, that means that you are regressing.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: And we have to be a progressive society. Trinidad and Tobago have to be always considered as a leader. We have to take the first advantage, be a first mover within the hemisphere.

So we have to look at things—now repealing this Bill, over the years, we have looked through the legalized, the politicalized, but we have to also look at the logical business aspect of it. And the common man on the street will say, “I cannot understand these debates because I am hearing these big technical terms, and you see me? It is not important.” It is important. And I stand here today because we have to think about all of us. It is a collective effort. It is not about the Government, it is not about who is in Opposition, it is not about who have instrumented, under their governance, the TTRA. We have to think about our future, our children.

As the previous Senator commented, it is the future, schools, our advancement. We have to think about that, and when we make a decision, we have to think about all the aspects of it. The IMF report with the tax administration tool. This tool, you see the results, you see the rating, you see what is happening. Then, in 2019, they did a study on the tax gap, and for people who—everyone in here will assume that everybody knows the tax gap. For the listening audience and for the man on the street, that tax gap is what supposed to be collected and what is actually collected. And when you watch at the 5 per cent pertaining to the GDP, you see we are losing billions of dollars, and what is causing it? An inefficient system.

The Oxford studies showed that we have a highly inefficient revenue system. We have to go forward. So if we look at all these reports, all these assessments that have been made, we know that something has to be done, and something was done. The whole global arena that is happening now, the forces compel us in the global arena to change. You have to accept change. Sometimes people feel comforted in their routine. However, change is painful. However, you have 100 per cent of success and we have to keep abreast with the global changes and keep with the times. As the saying goes, “You cannot take new minds and put into old bottles.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: You cannot say, “All right, you will repeal the Bill.” Okay? You are repealing the Bill to go back and to take fresh ideas to try and put in a system that has failed us for decades, and many different governments that have tried, could not fix the problem.

The TTRA is here—there was a strategic plan from 2023 to 2025. We are now in 2025, review that. For example, in business, you have what is called the four key functions of management. This is not just for a business, it is not just for the private sector, it applies to the Government as well. And those four function key functions of management are: You have planning where you set your strategic goals. You have organizing: You delegate your various tasks to different sections, duties, what has to be done—everybody knows what has to be done. Then you have leadership, which is empowering and motivating and overseeing. And then you have the fourth function, which is controlling. And the reason why I stress on the fourth function is that out of this strategic plan, the results from the strategic plan, give it a chance, whereby you could implement the controlling aspect—all

right there were problems, there were glitches. Nothing comes out perfect in the first instant. However, you have a chance to correct the glitches.

11.30 a.m.

You have chance whereby you could now take those recommendations and you could correct it. I have been hearing, I have been researching, and I have been seeing so much of what is one of the main sources of the problem in the TTRA, and they are talking about staffing and HR, and training, and what is the common denominator? Everyone here has an answer, the Service Commission. Everybody points back to the Service Commission.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: There are many inefficiencies in the Service Commission. There are delays in staffing as regard to training, and compensation. So blaming the TTRA for all its inefficiencies, it is incorrect, because if the TTRA—if the Service Commission has their obligations and they are not fulfilling it in a timely manner and they are inefficient, you will have a ripple effect.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: That is just logic.

So now I come back to the controlling function. So if now you have information regarding the outcome of the strategic plan, why not try and implement those findings, instead of retracting a failed system? How are we going to go forward? I will give a couple of examples. You want to retract and you want to repeal the TTRA, I am giving just a couple of examples. I came through the Common Entrance exam system, however, the Common Entrance exam system failed us. It did not fail us, sorry, I will take that back, it was phased out because of our economy and how globalization affected us.

In order for us to keep up with an efficient and effective educational system for our children, we came up with SEA. Now, SEA is not perfect. Would the Minister of Education dissolve SEA and go back to Common Entrance? That is the logic we are looking at through a business perspective.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: I will take it from a company perspective. TSTT did massive re-engineering, because their systems, they were being left behind, and in order for you to succeed in an industry or in an environment in which you operate, you have to adapt, you have to adjust, you have to change, you have to re-engineer, and you have to take certain steps.

So TSTT realized in the utility industry what was happening, so they went through a massive re-engineering process. To date, there have been glitches still in their modernization model that they have accepted. Would TSTT scrap their modern model they have now and go back to the one that they had previously? In the business perspective, if you look through the business aspect and the lens of business, you never regress. In spite of challenges that you would face, you never regress. You never take new ideas and place it into outdated systems, it will not work. It cannot work, even though you try.

Instead of going back—because you know what is going to happen? If this Bill is repealed and the TTRA has become invisible—it is no longer, it will just be a word—systems have to go through again, so you are going through the same steps of independent analysis, the IMF, different agencies to step in again, and they are going to come up with the same results, the same ratings, because it is a failed system. What is going to happen, they are going to take new ideas, modern ideas and try to adapt the collection of taxes, the Board of Inland Revenue and excise

with these new systems. However, there comes a time when you try different strategies.

In any business, there are different strategies, you would try to adapt. There are times when you have to come to a conclusion, there must be massive changes. The TTRA, it is not to say that the TTRA is completely abolishing the Board of Inland Revenue and excise division. It is not to say that they are taking on all powers and leaving out the Service Commission, so why not give it a chance? Why not take the results that will be given from the strategic plan, because that is what is done in business, you start a model, you start a new goal, and you monitor it, and through that monitoring process you have the controlling aspect after whereby you will take the findings that you will get and you would refine to make that model better.

This model has been implemented in other systems around the world, in other countries around the world, and up to date, through my research, I have not seen it failed. So why are we so scared to step out of our comfort zone and modernize. We are talking about modernization in one aspect and yet still we are pulling back in another aspect. When we are modernizing, when we are progressing, you have to progress. You cannot hold progressing and regressing at the same time. You either want one or the other. At the end of the day, the decisions that we make, we have to remember we are making it in the best interest of our people.

At the polls when the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago vote, they vote because they want change, they want help, they want development, and what we have to do, whoever is placed in power and whoever has to make decisions, at that end of the day we have to remember that these are the people that put you there,

and these are the people who are depending on you to help with development with changes, positive changes. These are the people who are looking, whereby promises will be fulfilled. If you have a tax collection agency that is inefficient for decades, we are losing billions of dollars—and now there is a new idea. The idea has not even been an idea, it has been implemented, why not work with it, refine it, and continue on the progressive line?

We have to think ahead and we have to always remember that we have to think about the people and we have to think about the decisions we would make that would affect, not the people alone, but it is us. It is all of us are going to be affected by this. As citizens, all citizens have to be responsible and know that a country cannot run on an inefficient, ineffective revenue system.

So if you want your government to produce, to develop, to hold to the promises, you now have an obligation to pay your taxes, and the only way that could happen, and the only proper recording of taxes, whereby you will be able to at least fill that tax gap where billions of dollars—you are not collecting—could go to funding these projects and programmes, as was said. So, my suggestion is, do not repeal. No matter what government was in power while this TTRA was established, it is not about that.

11.40 a.m.

It is about having an efficient and effective tax collection system for the country, which will have a ripple effect which is going to benefit all. It is going to benefit even every individual out of the approximately 1.3 million persons in Trinidad and Tobago. It is going to have a positive effect. So, my suggestion is, refine it. It has its glitches. You have a common denominator, the Service Commission. Has anyone ever thought of ideas to help the Service Commission be

more effective? If we keep bagging on the Service Commission for decades, and we are realizing it is causing a serious negative ripple effect, then what about ideas to help it to be more effective? So, my suggestion is to not to repeal the TTRA, and give it a chance. Take the information, take the results from the strategic plan, and refine it. Fill the cracks, and let us go forward and let us be progressive. Let us now advance. Let us not regress.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: But let us go forward, and let us advance. We have to brace for change. Every person in this world has to brace for change. Sometimes you do not even want it. Some people might be against AI, but we have no other choice. You have to brace for change, and you have to take the positives out of it. So, from a business perspective, instead of going to spend more money on a failed system over decades, spend it on the system and invest more into the TTRA to make it more effective. That is my contribution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, allow me to join in warmly congratulating our Senator, Sen. Alicia Pauline Lalite-Etienne, on her maiden contribution here in the Parliament.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: I now recognize the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development (Sen. The Hon. Leroy Baptiste): Mr. President, allow me to extend a heartfelt congratulations to you on your elevation to the position of President of the Senate.

And, Mr. President, let me also take this opportunity to recognize and congratulate the hon. Prime Minister Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC for, not being the first, but the second time around as a female Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Mr. President, I sat here, kind of amazed. I am just amazed at what I had to listen to this morning. For a moment—you know, sometimes I believe that there is something called “BIR and Customs” that descended from heaven, and it is just taking advantage of all of us, and we have to find some way around it. You know, some persons talk about the need to treat with change, and the whole issue of accepting change. The change I would like persons to accept, that change, took place on April 28th, 2025.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: And that change is what we are here to discuss, a change in policy; the BIR. I listened to Sen. Dhanpaul. He made reference to Dean’s Diagnostic Report, and he also made reference to the TADAT Report, and all these things list a number of issues that affect the BIR and Customs and Excise. We got that. I think he also mentioned that he was almost in charge throughout that whole time that all these problems existed. I think the question is, what have we done about it? Yes, you have a situation, BIR and Customs. It appears a previous administration appeared not to learn a lesson. Because, Sen. Dhanpaul mentioned that, it is in 2010, this whole situation was alive and well in terms of the TTRA. He also mentioned there was an election. You know what happened after this same TTRA? An election. That administration lost the election in 2010.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: They were rejected.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Why? Because the people rejected that policy—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—as it relates to treating with the issues mentioned with BIR and Customs and Excise. It is clear. But, according to the old people, “like stick break in dey ears”.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: They chose to ignore the people, and again came back with TTRA. And again—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—they would have lost the election.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: *Vox populi, vox Dei.*

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: The voice of the people is the voice of God. You “cah” ignore that, this is a democracy. That is what we live in. It is a democracy. And I want to say more than that, when we try to hold out that we have issues with BIR and Customs, again, like it is some kind of super creature that we all have to look up in fear of, all the reports deal with basic simple issues and the issues are caused, deliberately, in many instances by the political administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Mr. President, they talked about understaffing. They talked about under-resourcing. A deliberate ill treatment of the staff of the BIR and Customs by that then administration. There is a true dynasty; it was the PNM. And yes, they got rid of the PNM. People did remove that dynasty, and not in small measure. Come let us learn something. It is a three-fifth majority that this

side has because of the people taking a decision—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

11.50 a.m.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Mr. President, I want to remind, if you want to understand why we are where we are—that in terms of self-governance, it is 69 years we are at this. Since 1956, we have this thing called self-governance. Of the 69 years, the People’s National Movement had stewardship of this country for 53 of the 69 years, do not behave like we do not know why things are happening and what is wrong. And when they have issues in the context of this country whatever institution, 53 of those years as contrasted with the UNC, 11. Only 11 years. NAR, five. They have 53 years and certainly they are listing problems with institutions and behaving like it came from heaven.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Let me focus. You know, I almost want to deal with this “anti-worker” and “anti-PSA” bit and I know that Sen. Dhanpaul is making reference of an MOU, but then he has a disclaimer, it was not signed. My God. How is that it an MOU if it was not signed? Of what value is something that was not signed? You could bring it here? It means that no one agreed. That is a piece of paper that he was reading from. And it is unfortunate that they will use that to try to influence people. We are in an unfortunate place.

Mr. President, today I stand in strong support of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority (Repeal Bill), 2025.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: My contribution to this debate rests on principle, policy, and evidence, but above all, it rests on the will of the people. A sovereign

voice that echoed resoundingly on April 28th of this year. The matter before us is not just one of repealing the legislative artefact. It is a question of how we govern, how we treat workers, of how we balance efficiency with equity. It is about the soul of our public service and the future of fair, transparent tax administration in our nation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Mr. President, I want to say, it is not only 53 years that they ran this place, you know. They had stewardship for over 53 years, and you know what we had? They had stewardship over two oil booms, we must never forget that. From 1972 to 1983, oil boom. They had a saying, “Money was no problem”. That is what this country had, and then we had an oil boom in 1999 to 2008. Money flowed, billions of dollars, and they come here unashamedly and speak about defects in our public institutions. And what is worse than that is where they frame this argument as though it is one about revenue. That is how they frame it, you know. It is about some \$10 billion out there that we are trying to get our hands on, and the silver bullet to that money is TTRA.

Mr. President, without a vision, a people perish. We are here today because of the visionless PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: This crisis that has been manufactured based on some hypothetical \$10 billion that hangs out there to be collected. Hypothetical \$10 billion. It is premised upon a false equivalence that they have, TTRA equals more revenue, that we will be able to collect more. TTRA equals the collection of more revenue. And they have everyone taking that as a given. Mr. President, that is not so. Mr. President, that is not so. That does not exist. And I am not saying so

because I feel like saying so. Mr. President, there are many studies done on semi-autonomous revenue authorities. I want to make reference to just three. You know, if you want to find out something, you have to go to the experts and these are experts brought by the last administration. All of these experts were brought by the last administration, and they are all quite acquainted with them. One called, Kidd and Crandall. You know about Kidd and Crandall? They know about them.

Hon. Senator: It was signed?

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Signed? In 2009, they had them here, they brought them here and Kidd and Crandall, let me tell you what they said. I am quoting: That they found no consistent evidence that the creation of a revenue authority leads to increased revenue performance. They said that: Improvement stemmed from unrelated reform or short term gains that later eroded.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: But Kidd and Crandall went further, they said that:

“There is no objective analysis”—“showing that countries with RAs...”
 —outperform countries without them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: That is what the expert says. So this money, there is absolutely no correlation between a revenue authority and the collection of more revenue. But let us look at another one, Royal Dome of 2017, their report, hear what this next internationally recognized expert—he reviewed and found that such authorities frequently suffer from mission drift—that is, revenue authorities—rising administrative cost, weak public oversight and further found no evidence that such bodies systematically improve tax revenue or fiscal capacity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: But just maybe another one. Let us look at another. Not one in 2017, not one in 2009, but one in 2023. This is one that was commissioned in 2023 by the PNM Government. This person was used as part of their affidavit in the *Terrisa Dhoray v the Attorney General*. I am talking about, that is just the other day.

12.00 p.m.

And this expert is Prof. Mick Moore that was utilized by them. And he did a report, comrades—I use the word “comrades” because of force of habit.

Sen. Alexander: Make it happen.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: You may feel uncomfortable, but my colleagues, Senators.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Alexander: We are your comrades.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: I could call you a comrade, Sen. Mc Nish, [*Laughter*] but here is the difficulty I have. So this paper was done by this professional. This international expert, hired by the People’s National Movement, did a report, and the report is addressed to the Permanent Secretary Minister of Finance. The report is dated 17th of February, 2023. Let me read from this report what the man said, this professor said.

Hon. Senator: Who was the PS?

Sen. Alexander: Who it was? Who it was?

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: I see it is addressed to one Nadira Lyder. And in the summary, the professor told the Government of Trinidad and Tobago that—the then Government of Trinidad and Tobago:

If we look at the evidence on the sum of recent experiences found around the globe, the creation of semi-autonomous revenue authorities taking a loan on average has not led to increases in government revenue.

Sen. Alexander: End the debate right there.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: What is all this about? What is all this about?—as though there is something they have stumbled on to. But moreover, this same professor, Mr. President—hear his words in a paper done after theirs, in 2023 also, a regional paper done by the same Prof. Mick Moore, his summary, and I quote:

The success of tax administration lies less in autonomy than in the integrity, investment and the internal modernization of core civil institutions.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: That is their expert. What is this about TTRA and billions of dollars? That equivalence is false. It simply does not exist and therefore, we are down to one thing, you know, a TADAT report and/or a Dean's report that lists inefficiencies the public service. How then do you treat with it?

Mr. President, I want to be clear. Taxation is not merely an accounting function. It is a profound expression of public policy. It reflects our collective agreement on how resources are to be raised, allocated, on who pays, who administers and who decides. The UNC, in seeking a mandate during elections, articulated a clear policy that tax administration must be pursued within the public service, not in opposition to it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: “And it did not make no secret.” It says:

And therefore, the TTRA Act must be repealed.

That is what was the clear policy decision of this Government as the way to treat with those issues as identified, as the expert agreed that you fix your civil institution.

Hon. Senator: We agreed with the expert.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Their expert. Mr. President, you know what? The electorate endorsed our decision.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: Overwhelmingly.

Hon. Senator: The will of the people.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Overwhelmingly. The repeal of the TTRA Act is therefore not only a legislative decision, it is a democratic imperative.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: It is a mandate by the people and of the people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: That is democracy.

Sen. Alexander: “PNM doh like dat. Dey doh like democracy”.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Mr. President, even if that “ain’t” good enough to clearly be of the clear understanding that there is no relationship between the TTRA and more revenue, just get rid of that. That is a falsehood. Go—just put—Google any amount of tax experts, not one will support that as a position. It simply does not exist. But you know, even if you are—somehow you want more reasons for supporting this Government that has adopted this policy and would have taken the position that whereas the last administration engaged in, “dey ain’t” want to fix it, they refused to fix it, may have engaged in the deliberate—

Hon. Senator: Sabotage.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—the sabotaging of the BIR and Customs and Excise Division—and I will get into that a little later. Even if that—you know, what is the one thing we should never forget? Because by definition, they say that is madness; to do the same over and over and expect a different result.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: That is the PNM.

Sen. Alexander: That is the PNM.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Mr. President, we in this country are no strangers to allure of a statutory authority model, but neither are we strangers to its consequences. Again, it is, by definition, madness, to do the same thing and expect different results. Let us reflect on—we have heard this over and over again. “Allyuh” remember something called the RHAs? The regional health authorities? You know that those things were born out—

Hon. Senator: Semi-autonomous.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—of the public service? Somebody some time ago, 1994 to be exact, 31 years ago, somebody said, “Ay, we could fix health in this country. The problem is the public service.” And hear what they did. They said, “Okay. We go restructure and we go create something; something new,” and they ended up with what? A regional health authority. Regional health authorities all over; 31 years. Would anyone of us say that that worked? It was the exact complaint about the public service, public service, public service, and they created these new structures. You know the only thing that they succeeded in doing?

Sen. Alexander: Making a mess.

Hon. Senator: Transferring the problem.

Hon. Senator: Oversight.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: They tried to get rid of trade unions in the environment and promote contract work, moving from decent work to indecent work, from permanent jobs to contract jobs. That is what they succeeded in doing.

Sen. Alexander: That was the plan.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: And after 31 years, Mr. President—

Sen. Alexander: Delivered nothing.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—the regional health—which one of us—I mean—

12:10 p.m.

I recall Sen. John-Bates would have pointed out that she got a good experience in our health care and she is right. That deserves coming to the Parliament and making a boast because that is so infrequent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: It is not the norm.

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: It is worthy of mentioning here. But that is not the truth for the average person. You would only go to the public health institution—31 years after. You will only go to the public health institution if you must, you have to, because if you could afford to go the St Clair or St. Augustine Private Hospital, you would go. And those on the other side might even decide to go elsewhere, another country in furtherance of their health challenges rather than stay here.

Hon. Senator: Rowley and company.

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: Why would we therefore hold out that that kind of dismantling of the civil service and putting under these authorities is the best thing since slice bread. You have the NHA—

Hon. Senator: What evidence that it worked?

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste:—turn HDC and now they further want to restructure HDC. They are restructuring the restructured.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: We have any improvement in treating with the housing crisis? Because we what—we move from the public service to—you could go to Tourism Development Corporation, that is a big deal. At one point in time to take it out of the public service and put it in and, then they shut it down, they had to come with a next restructured version.

Sen. Alexander: Caroni.

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: Mr. President, that approach to improving the level of service by engaging in vilifying public officers—

Sen. Alexander: Has failed every time.

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste:—and restructuring into these—Listen you had TTRA. If you fail to invest in the human resources; you fail to invest in the technology, you fail invest in training and development, guess what would happen in TTRA? Just what happened in the RHA. Just what happened in the HDC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: Because those are not the real problem. It is just the failure to invest.

Sen. Alexander: Let them know the theft that is taking place now.

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: So that, Mr. President—

Mr. President: You have 10 more minutes.

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste:—the inescapable conclusion is that we cannot repeat the mistakes of the past and not understand. We cannot do things the same way and expect different results. And if you fail to heed the mistakes of the past, you

are doomed to repeat them. We must therefore, repeal the TTRA Act, as promised.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: But worse than that, Mr. President, is that how this action of the previous Government and this TTRA, how it affected the workers.

Long before the Act was passed, the PNM employed the deliberate strategy to render BIR and Custom Excise Division inefficient and ineffective by under-resourcing them, understaffing, and underpaying the workers. This was followed by the deliberate strategies of paying the professionals within those divisions as impediment to progress. Public servants were described as inefficient, corrupt, and outdated. What signal does this send? That those who uphold our fiscal laws are unworthy of investment, that professionalism can be undermined for political expedience. Rather than empower them with better tools, we blame them or, they blame them for systemic rot. Rather than address capacity gaps outlined in the 2017 TADAT Report, they scapegoated the very individuals best placed to implement reforms. These were not, Mr. President, faceless bureaucrats, they were career officers.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: Fathers, mothers—

Sen. Alexander: Mash up families.

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste:—citizens who have faithfully served. Their loyalty should have been recognized not ridiculed. They too are taxpayers. As taxpayers they are shareholders of our country and deserve respect and regard as shareholders.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: But, Mr. President, that was how to treat with them

before the Act but after the Act was even worse. In the aftermath of the Act's passage, what followed was not a smooth implementation guided by fairness or transparency, but rather a troubled pattern of administrative malpractice under section 18 of Act.

We witnessed the PNM's deployment of coercive tactics designed to pressure employees into accepting transition terms they scarcely understood. Instead of engaging these workers with clarity and respect, the process was marred by opaque conditions and intimidations, information, basic fundamental information, was withheld or delayed. Employers were not provided with full disclosure of their rights, terms, and protections. Critical details that should have been accessible were kept out of reach, leaving those affected to navigate uncertainty without the benefit of proper counsel, or representation. Mr. President, even when former requests were made by the PSA. The response was resistance, deflection or silence. This is not merely an oversight, it is affront to good governance and industrial justices.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Alexander: Deliberate, deliberate.

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: We cannot in good conscious normalize such treatment of our public servants. This Government has a duty to uphold not just the letter of administrative procedure, but its spirit anchored in fairness, clarity, and respect for people who keep our institutions running.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: Therefore, this TTRA Act must be repealed.

Hon. Senator: Rubbish.

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: Must be repealed.

Hon. Senator: Absolutely.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon L. Baptiste: This TTRA Act also, Mr. President, runs afoul of the preamble of our Constitution, which calls on the people of Trinidad and Tobago to respect the principles of:—

“...social justice, and that labour should not be exploited or forced by economic necessity to operate in inhumane conditions and that there should be opportunity for advancement on the basis of merit, ability and integrity...”

Mr. President, with your leave, employees wrote—we are talking about the Act in terms of section—that section of the Act would have been proclaimed on 24th of April, 2023, with it becoming enforced from the 1st of May, 2023. The representative of the workers, the workers came to the union asking—we have all these options, and the options were as follows, for those who may not know and I will do it quickly.

To volunteer, or voluntary retirement, you could volunteer from the service; or you could transfer to the Authority on no less favourable terms and condition enjoyed by him in the public service; or you could transfer to the Enforcement Division on no less favourable terms; or you could transfer to the public service in an office commensurate with the office held by him in the public service providing that what is available.

12.20 p.m.

And hear what the workers came and said to the union, you know, “What is the best? What am I being offered? Am I to what, tick? I doh know what the best is. What yuh mean by no less favourable?”

Hon. Senator: I “doh” know what that means.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: I “doh” know what that means. You know when the union wrote the management and asked for an explanation, we got absolutely nothing. The CPO would have said to the union, and I am speaking intimately about what transpired, that he has to get some information from his Minister of Finance.

Mr. President, workers on their own filed Freedom of Information Act requests and this is in 20—one year after. Look at the simple information that was asked by these workers who were asked to make a decision that could alter their lives and their livelihoods. They wrote the Ministry of Finance and asked about, one—

Mr. President: You have two more minutes, Minister.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—an organizational structure, whether it existed. They asked about the officers, and the salary ranges. And, let me just cut to the chase, you know what the Ministry of Finance wrote said to them? “That there is no such document that represent an organizational structure for TTRA”. And they also would have said, for salary ranges, or any such information. They wrote the TTRA directly and the same thing was forthcoming. And, these workers were then being told, they must make a decision just like that, without any information. No one of us that has the basic rule in life, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, could say that you could sanction that. We cannot sanction that how we treat our public officers or how we treat our citizens.

So that, Mr. President, this situation is a very unfortunate situation that we have had to deal with, needless to mention that the approach by the Government violated ILO Conventions 87 and 98, which speak to the right to organize, and the

right to collective bargaining. But when you have a situation where you are moving persons from where they have that right and putting them in a situation that removes that right from them we are going in the wrong direction. We are members of the ILO, we have signed up and committed to promoting the conventions. And we ratified those conventions and yet you have a government going back.

Mr. President: Your time is up, but I will give you a few seconds to wrap up.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: So, Mr. President, let me thank you and thank the Senate—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—and I close by simply saying the TTRA on its own does not equate to an increase in tax revenue. The repeal of the TTRA Act is not a rejection of reform, it is a recommitment to reform done right.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Reform that includes, not excludes; reform that respects history but dares to improve upon it; reform that empowers our public institutions---

Mr. President: Yes, yes.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—or replaces them with fragile imitation. I thank you.

Mr. President: Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: May I extend on behalf of the Senate my congratulations to the hon. Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development on his maiden contribution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: I now recognize Sen. Melanie—Let me make sure I have the correct name.

Sen. Roberts-Radgman: Roberts-Radgman.

Mr. President: Right. Melanie Roberts—

Sen. Roberts-Radgman: Radgman, Radgman.

Mr. President: Radgman.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Melanie Roberts-Radgman: Mr. President, let me take a moment first to extend heartfelt congratulations to you on your election as President of the Senate. Since my childhood days my mother would make us sit and watch the news and yours is a face and a name I was always familiar with. So it is definitely an honour to sit here and have us be joint participants with you presiding in such an esteemed undertaking. I also have to extend gratitude to the esteemed Leader of the Opposition—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—for the trust that she has placed in me in giving me this responsibility. It is definitely not one that I take lightly at all. Indeed there are very few greater honours than the opportunity to stand here with my colleagues and debate on matters that affect the way that we live and operate here in Trinidad and Tobago. But while I am indeed honoured, and while I feel grateful to be here I do have a gnawing concern, Mr. President. A concern that bipartisanship, self-interest, the interference of a few political factions, and some sort of odd need to score cheap political points have led us here, here where we see the need to debate and to move as far as to repeal such a sound piece of legislation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: A piece of legislation and an authority that we have heard from time and time again, from even our colleagues on the Independent Bench, has the means of revolutionizing the way that we collect revenue, tax revenue, here in Trinidad and Tobago. Before I get into it, I feel compelled to remind each and every single one of us sitting here that we have a professional and personal responsibility to every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. And regardless of their ability to analyze or to understand certain socio-economic issues, the onus is on each and every one of us to be clear, and to be very truthful in how we explain the issues, how we represent things—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

We cannot make reckless decisions to create some sort of illusion that we are helping people, that we are helping workers, when the decisions that we are making are having the exact effect.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Mr. President, there is a very thin line between being harmful and helpful and we really need to be careful on what side of that line we find ourselves, or as Sen. Lalite-Etienne had put it very succinctly when she said, we all have a collective responsibility.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: A collective responsibility to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, Mr. President, our friends opposite would want to make the population or make us here in this esteemed Senate believe that the Revenue Authority Act was passed on a whim, that somehow the PNM-led Government back then just

took a fly-by-night decision without any sort of assessment of the impact that it would have on our country. Now, while that might be the modus operandi of those sitting opposite, I can guarantee you that on this side we are guided by data, by research, by case studies and by reliable projections.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Sen. Dhanpaul would have gone to great lengths to take us through more than 20 years of planning, consultation, legislative efforts, public consultation—I already said that—and public debate, that would have gotten us to this place where we would have passed the Revenue Authority Act. And he would have gone into great detail to explain to us some of the deficiencies that would have been identified in the BIR model that would have led us to want to take some sort of corrective action. I want to get into just two of these deficiencies for a bit.

One of these deficiencies lies in the legislative framework and the other one has to deal with anti-business rules and regulations. Now, here is the thing. We cannot speak about private sector development, we cannot speak about economic diversification, we cannot speak about growing our economy without first addressing the legislative framework under which our local businesses, as well as our international but locally invested businesses, operate. And, just to expand on that a bit, I want to take us through the importance of having the right kind of legislative framework and the importance of having an investor and business friendly sort of tax regime, what that does for us. The first thing that it does is that it attracts investment into non-traditional sectors.

12.30 p.m.

Now, we know that we need a serious boost in certain emerging sectors.

When we start talking about agro processing, ICT and even renewable energy, we know that we want to see some sort of movement in those sectors, but this cannot be done without creating the sort of tax incentives that will encourage investors, will encourage businesses to even want to go into these types of sectors. We also have to take into consideration our SMEs, our entrepreneurs, even our street vendors.

Now, these are the categories of businesses that tend to innovate the most, they are larger risk-takers but in order for them to take that kind of risk, we need to have a modern and innovative sort of tax regime that supports them wanting to innovate. Without the kind of infrastructure that supports that kind of innovation, what we see happening is that our SMEs, our entrepreneurs, our street vendors, they continue to function as part of the informal economy and I will get to a point on the informal economy a little bit later down.

The other thing we need to take into account is the fact that we need to move towards sector specific development here in Trinidad and Tobago, and this is where I will help the Government out a little bit. The Government can identify certain priority sectors. The sectors that they want to see experience a boom, but in order to push those priority sectors, you need to have the certain kind of tax reforms, you need to create the legislative framework that allows for these sectors to be given the kind of priority they need for them to expand here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, let me just tie back all that I have just said into the whole deficiency around anti-business rules and regulations and let us tie that to one of the key functions of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority and this function is outlined in section 6(1)(g) of the Act. And that function is to advise the

Government on matters related to taxation. Section 14(1)(c) and (d) then goes on to give the Director General responsibility for:

“advising the Minister, on his own initiative or at the request of the Minister, on revenue implications, tax administration and aspects of policy changes relating to all taxes referred to in the Schedule,”—as well as—“any matter that could affect public policy or public finances and any other matter that the

Minister considers could improve the effectiveness or efficiency of the administration or enforcement of revenue laws;”

And then (d) goes on to talk about:

“collecting and processing statistics...to provide forecasts of tax receipts, studying the revenue laws and proposing to the Minister, such amendments as it considers appropriate thereto, so as to improve the administration of, and compliance with, such laws.”

Now, Mr. President, the Act then goes on to sort of set out in 13(2) the qualifications and experience that is required to carry out the function and then 13(3) sets out the disqualifications criteria. Very well thought out, so we do not necessarily need to get into it. But what this means is that through the TTRA, the Minister of Finance can avail himself of expert advice and guidance in the types of reforms that are needed to develop a more business and investor friendly framework within Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, this is one of our first real steps towards economic diversification. We need to understand how all these things are connected. First, through the Revenue Authority, the Minister looks at our task regime, it looks at the reforms that are

required, and then the Minister is able to avail himself of expert specialist advice and then that plays into reforming our tax policy, which then provides the result of a boost in the sectors that the Government identifies as being priority sectors. Just a bit more on the advisory function and how important it is to addressing our current anti-business rules and regulations.

Now, any environment that is hostile or inconvenient to business and investments create a series of impacts and there is one that is particularly relevant to the matter at hand and I would have mentioned it before, and that is informal economy expansion. Now, in environments with out-dated, antiquated, inefficient and inconvenient tax assessment and collection frameworks, small businesses tend to function informally in order to evade taxes. If they do not have to pay, they are glad to not pay. Naturally, tax revenues are reduced and guess where the country's tax burden lays? Squarely at the feet of the public servants. Squarely at the feet of the workers that Sen. the hon. Baptiste would have said that they are here to protect. So we do not address the issues that we have. We do not address the leakages and then we leave these poor workers to carry the entire tax burden in order to generate revenue to then support all of government administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: And here is the thing, it is ironic right, because these are the same workers that the Government would leave us to think, and the Government will want us to think that they are supporting and that they have their best interest at heart. As a matter of fact, this is what they campaigned on, right. But then you have the opportunity to spread the burden around and you leave these poor people to carry everything by themselves.

Now, let us get into some figures because the figures do not lie. Everybody

has an opinion on something but figures are figures, right. World economic reports have estimated that our informal economy, meaning that grouping of entrepreneurs, businesses, street vendors, who are not paying taxes, they comprise anywhere between 25 to 32 per cent of our annual GDP. And actually, the Caribbean Development Bank had placed this percentage at around 36 per cent during the period 1999 to 2007, so some time ago.

The thing is that we have seen an expansion, a significant increase in the number of small businesses, micro businesses, street vendors and entrepreneurs that operate across Trinidad and Tobago. If this is the case, Mr. President, the Government is then called upon to explain to the taxpaying citizens of Trinidad and Tobago why it is so intent on permitting tax collection underperformance for some sectors of society while burdening others with monthly contributions towards the cost of public administration.

Mr. President, as my friend over there, Sen. the hon. Baptiste would have said, they have won, they are in office and they are in office because people believed them when they said, “when UNC wins, everybody wins”. But how can one win when some are made to carry the weight, while others are living tax free?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: That does not sound like an “everybody” scenario for me. If everybody is supposed to win, both the benefit and the burden of tax collection and tax administration needs to fall squarely on the shoulders of all of us, not just some of us.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: And with that being said, I want to reiterate my opening caution, scoring cheap political points should never come at the expense

of the collective public interest. The Government needs to move away from this practice of destroying something good just because it came from the People's National Movement, because if that is the case, you are going to have plenty to destroy, because plenty things come from the PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: And the hard part about it is that the people who really stand to lose are the people who elected the Government to serve them.

In front of us is a very solid piece of legislation. Sen. Vieira pointed out a few areas for improvement. Sen. the hon. Baptiste also pointed out some areas where he sees we need some improvements in order to protect our workers a bit more. They are in government now. This is the perfect opportunity to take a closer look at it, analyse it, amend it if you need to amend it, but to decide that you are going to throw out the baby with the bath water, it just seems like it is vindictive, it is petty, it is unreasonable and it is highly irresponsible.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: The benefits have been sufficiently ventilated. So here is my advice, settle down, right Senator Roberts, settle down, implement it, engage whatever technical expertise you might need to get, if there are any gaps in understanding or any gaps in comprehension on your side. But get the work done. We need to accept that a good thing does not become a bad thing just because somebody else from another team created it. Now, my friends on the other side, when they were in Opposition, they had their concerns. Not sure if there was any real merit in any of those concerns but nonetheless.

12.40 p.m.

They would have gone all the way up to different judicial forums, all the way up to

the Privy Council, and they were laid to rest on each and every single occasion. And up to—he is not in here. But up on Monday, I listened closely to Sen. The Hon. Swaratsingh and he came up with the same old argument about the erosion of the principles of separation of powers and the checks and balances, you know, the same only argument. It has been beaten and it has been ventilated and very skillfully disposed of.

Now that the Privy Council has handed down its ruling, you would think that the next logical step would be to continue the very incredible work of this administration and—well, the previous administration, sorry—prepare the Authority to—

Hon. Senator: Cross the Floor.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: [*Laughter*]—and prepare the opportunity to assume—that and God's face, you will never see.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—prepare the Authority to assume its scope of authority under section 6.1 of the Act. Mr. President, unfortunately anything is to be expected of this Government and here we are. Irony when UNC wins, eh.

Now, let me bring this a little bit closer home, Mr. President. I am Tobagonian, so this touches a little bit closer to us here in Tobago and I will tell you why. Tobagonians are very traditional people. For the most part, we are employed in very traditional sectors. We are either in the THA, or we are in tourism and hospitality, or food and beverage but we are very traditional in the areas that we get into. What that means is that we pay our taxes, we are taxpaying citizens on that island, we are part of the very formal economy, we do not get to tax evade. Obviously, we are expecting everybody to do the same. We are

expecting that the burden would be shared around.

So the thing is now that this Government has decided to forego valuable tax revenue, “we kinda wanna” know over on the other island, where is the money coming from for public administration because drunk or sober, we are expecting significant increases in our allocation come October, eh. Remember the thing is, certain promises were made and we expect those promises to be kept.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: And let me go a little bit further to understand why we are so dependent on these promises being kept. A few months ago, it was this very Government, they were then in Opposition, who fought tooth and nail against the Tobago autonomy Bill.

Now, let me tell you what that Bill would have done. It would have not only increased our budgetary allocation, you know, that is nice, but it would have also given us the kind of administrative and legislative control that we needed to be able to take our little steps in Tobago to diversify our local economy. This Government, then Opposition, blatantly deprived Tobagonians of the kind of fiscal advancements that we needed to be able to become more self-sufficient on our island.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: As a result of that, Mr. President, this Government also has to take full responsibility for any dependency that results from their actions a few months ago.

Sen. Al-Rawi: True.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: And part of their responsibility is being very forthcoming with us about what this action, this attempted repeal of the Act means

for us and our ability to get a fair allocation in Tobago. And let me just place this on the record. On Monday, the Secretary of Finance for the Tobago House of Assembly requested \$3.71 billion for fiscal 2026. We have a lot of plans for that money over there and we are looking forward to receiving every last cent.

Since the Government does not want tax revenue, clearly it has some other means of funding public expenditure, whatever those means, we are expecting our allocation. Actually this morning, I woke up to a newspaper article from our Chief Secretary saying that even the mid-year appropriations, the supplementary appropriations were woefully insufficient, but later in the day for that.

Now, Mr. President, allow me to also touch on another point that I heard my friends on the other side mentioning not so accurately, so let me flesh it out a little bit more. The idea of a revenue authority is not a novel one. In fact, you know it is a pity that Sen. The Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh is not here because I keep quoting him but on Monday, in his presentation, he is so familiar with Barbados, he kept referencing Barbados. So I needed to take a look at the Barbados Revenue Authority and I have heard many blanket statements about, oh, revenue authorities do not work and some persons said this and some persons said that but again, I want to look at the figures.

Now, in 2018, tax arrears in Barbados was reported at BBD \$1.2 billion. By the year 2023, tax arrears reduced to just about BBD \$247 million; significant reduction. Mid-year collections for fiscal 2024/2025 was BBD \$1.87 billion for the people of Barbados. Now, this mid-year collection actually exceeded estimates by 12.5 per cent. Now, let me break that down. What that means is that how much ever money Barbados expected to collect from tax revenue, they exceeded their own expectation, whatever they were estimating, by a whole 12.5 per cent.

Imagine how great it must feel to have more money to spend than you even envisaged. Barbados has the Barbados Revenue Authority.

Now, let us also look at Jamaica. Jamaica revenue authority is called the Tax Administration of Jamaica. The TAJ was launched around 2016 and the results, they have also experienced significant growth in their revenue collection. In fact, just like Barbados, the TAJ often exceeds their own tax collection targets. Again, imagine having more money to run your country than you even expected or you needed. Even the UNDP has chimed in to indicate that Jamaica's tax reform via their revenue authority—note tax reform via a revenue authority is what contributed to them having a tax-to-GDP ratio that is above the regional average at this point.

Now, let me bring it a little bit closer to home right here in our backyard, rich and famous Guyana. Guyana also has a revenue authority and I have heard loose comments about the ineffectiveness but again, I have figures here. Now, between the period 2016 to 2019, the Guyana Revenue Authority experienced 166 per cent increase in its annual tax collections. In the year 2023, they surpassed their tax revenue collection target by GY \$30 billion. Again, Mr. President, we are seeing that all these jurisdictions, just up and down the waters from us, they are using their revenue authorities in a way that creates significant benefits for them.

Sen. Al-Rawi: Evidence.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: The evidence is there. So, if it is that our friends on the other side insist that the revenue authorities do not work and they do not improve tax collection efficiency, what do we attribute those figures to? Because I heard Sen. The Hon. Baptiste, he indicated that it can be attributed to other things

but he failed to explain what those other things are. He spent his time repeating a union meeting, but that is all right, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: I have said it before and I will say it again, the TTRA Act was not a fly-by-night piece of legislation. Why are we destroying it?

Now, the examples I have given here, by no means I am saying that their revenue authorities are perfect. I mean, what system is? It takes continuous refining. Just as society evolves, the needs of the people evolve, technology evolves, so naturally, your authorities, your systems, they will continuously evolve. So they are not perfect but they work. All three of our Caribbean neighbours have seen significant increases in the tax revenue they collect.

Now, at a time like this where the energy sector is in such limbo, why are we leaving money on the table? Mr. President, the United States has the IRS, the UK has the HMRC, Guyana has GRA, Jamaica has TAJ, Barbados has BRA, Trinidad and Tobago has TTRA, and as I said, Sen. Dhanpaul would have taken us through several reports highlighting the excessive tax gap that we face right now. Sen. Vieira, also not here, would have cautioned that a failure to modernize invites collapse. It is really sad, indeed, Mr. President, to see what the TTRA might become at this stage in the name of political folly. It is pure folly and condoning irresponsibility.

Now, Mr. President, now that I have mentioned irresponsibility, there is one other thing that I realize that I need to address. Sen. The Hon. Swaratsingh—oh, there he is.

12.50 p.m.

Sen. Swaratsingh would have mentioned that the Government intends to

resource and rebuild the BIR. And, you know, he would have said that to date, the Government has employed 97 new persons on short-term contracts, and it sounds good on the face of it. But, here is my caution, let us not take the political hiring of our friends, family, and party fanatics, and cloak it under the guise of resourcing the public service. People have already begun to see that for what it is, eh. And, in any case, on strategically hiring new workers on short-term to work inside a broken system, is the perfect example of what Sen. Etienne would have said to us, “You are pouring new wine into old skins.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: “It done spoil.” Or I can even reiterate what Sen. the Hon. Baptiste would have said to us, you are repeating the same thing over and over. All you are doing is madness. Now, before I close, Mr. President, I want to remind us all of something that was said back in 2021, when we were having these debates, when the Bill was first introduced. And it was our own Prime Minister, who was then the Leader of the Opposition, who quoted from a paper published by the Cambridge University Press on January 12th, 2018. And it was authored by one, Barrington. Now, I am quoting her, not the paper. I am just quoting the hon. Prime Minister. And she said:

“Of all the activities that the state takes up, collecting taxes is perhaps the most critical. Without extracting the revenue from society, a state cannot function, and cannot do what it sets out to do. Taxation is a sine quo non of the contemporary state and the social contract.”

And I will end the quote right here.

Well, Mr. President, if one is to agree with this position as endorsed by our own Prime Minister, then it is with great extreme concern that I note that this

Government, having just made about two months in office, is now in breach of contract with the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: And this breach would have been brought about by the Government's decision to repeal the TTRA Act without offering any feasible alternative to efficient tax collection. Undeniably, this Government is demonstrating to us its intent to abandon one of its most critical activities. But make no mistakes, this level of reckless abandon and deception will not be allowed to pass unchecked by this Opposition. In fact, I have a little clip here of the little "minifesto" that was published in the *Sunday Express* on March 30th 2025. And, at Item 03 of this "minifesto", it says:

The UNC is committed to amending the Trinidad and Tobago revenue authority legislation for PSA union successorship to ensure the representation of TTRA workers...

Committed to amend, not repeal.

The date of this is March 30th 2025, and this was published in the *Sunday Express* newspaper.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: They spoke about—they campaigned on certain things, and they got—what do they call it—a mandate from the people—

Hon. Senator: "Vox populi."

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Yeah, "vox populi." But, I mean, what you told people was that you were going to amend the TTRA. That is what they expected.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: I do not think that the people who elected this

Government expected us to be coming here, especially so early in the term, to repeal this entire piece of legislation. You see, the thing is this, eh, the Government may fool some of the people some of the time, but they cannot fool all of the people all of the time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Mr. President, I thank you for your time.

Mr. President: Okay. Senators join me in congratulating Sen. Melanie Roberts-Radgman on her maiden contribution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: I think this is a good time for us to perhaps take a break for lunch, and we can come back at around—now it is 12.55 p.m.—we can come back at around, I would say 20 minutes to 2. So, let us come back here at 1.45p.m. We can come back at 1.45p.m., okay? So, let us suspend until 1.45 p.m. okay?

12.55 p.m.: *Sitting suspended*

1.45 p.m.: *Sitting resumed*

Mr. President: Sen. Francis Lewis.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Francis Lewis: Good afternoon, Mr. President. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak on this seemingly simple Bill of just three clauses. What we are asked to consider and decide, not just on the repeal of the TTRA, but between, what has been presented as two alternative mechanisms for tax administration and collection. The debates have been robust and vigorous, not just today, but over many years.

At the heart of this are two quite different outlooks and philosophies. However, they both share a common goal: How to improve the nation's tax

administration collection. Both systems have compelling and alluring features. And each has drawbacks inherent in the structure and operations of the mechanism. It is seldom that a choice is as stark and as binary as this.

Now, I am new to this House, as many of us are in the Senate, and, in fact, across the Parliament. And colleagues, I want to share with you that, very frankly, I have been troubled and tense thinking about the consequences of making a wrong choice. Later today, a vote will be required of us. Permit me to share with you my immediate reflections on the issues, and I am as yet undecided. I have reservations, which I would hope, through the course of this debate, can be addressed. So, with the debate and the guidance of the discussion yet to come, I look forward to listening.

There are four considerations I have. The first is that our choice needs to hinge on what will best serve the greater collective good for our Republic for generations to come. The choice is momentous, and the decision will have an enduring effect over decades, if not generations. Our BIR started life in 1942 as the Inland Revenue Department. It was reorganized in 1966, establishing the Board of Commissioners, commonly referred to today as the Board of Inland Revenue; that was 81 years ago.

Our Custom and Excise Division started life earlier than that in 1939, with a law, then passed, giving legal foundation to its establishment; that is 84 years ago. Our VAT administration is more recent, but even that was introduced in January of 1990, some 35 years ago. For the institutions that have become the BIR and Customs and Excise, both came into being before all Members of this House were born. The fundamental structures were designed for a very different economic time with a little tinkering over the years.

I think we all recognize how much and how radically the country and the world have changed over the intervening generations. So, the fundamental structures and systems used for tax administration and collection have evolved quite significantly in a range of other countries, less so in our own. It is our task to consider what change is required. And perhaps, one of the roles of the Independent Bench is to nurture and help bring light to this.

Now, good people can differ in means but agree on worthy ends. The nation's tax system needs to be trustworthy, and it needs to be reliable. It is the pipeline, as others have pointed out, that generates the financial flows on which the lifeblood of the country depends. And budget debates, such as we would soon have, to consider the appropriations, are pointless if we cannot pay for the appropriations. So that was the first consideration.

The second is a government elected as resoundingly as this one has, has earned the right to govern. It carries with it a responsibility to listen, to engage, to explain, to allow itself to be persuaded where appropriate, and to act in good faith. Even a resounding victory is not a blank cheque. It is a call to lead with restraint as much as to serve with integrity.

A democratic mandate is not a crown, it is a compass. It points us in the direction people have chosen, but that journey must be made together. It is a conditional trust with the expectation of accountability, transparency, and care. It is about doing right, especially when that may sometimes not be easy, when the cameras are off, and when power and promise whispers otherwise.

My third consideration is our choice on what is complex nuanced legislation. The decisions we make—this is not a litmus test. Disagreement is not defiance. When we reduce a legislative deliberation such as this to us versus them, for or

against, with us or against us, we do a massive disservice to the complexity of the issues—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Lewis:—and the governance, and to the people we serve. Key tax mechanisms legislation requires careful judgment, not binary thinking. It deserves a space for nuance, for innovative considerations, and for genuine deliberations. Parliament is not, or ought not, to be a battleground of absolutes, but formed of reasoned applications of convictions—[*technical difficulty*]*—*Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry. Forgive me, Mr. President, my screen just dissolved. Sorry about that.

One of the great powers of any Parliament is a power to repeal, that is to undo what a previous Parliament has done. It is a legal right. It is a constitutional mechanism, and sometimes, a necessary recourse. But, while a repeal may be lawful, we always have to ask, is it wise? Is it principled? Is it just? Is it effective? Democracy and good governance cannot thrive in a policy of erasure. I am sure we do not want to here to be governed by a policy of reversal. Our nation's laws, especially laws as complex as this, on which people rely, must not become a revolving door, spinning with each change of administration. That undermines continuity, stability, and ultimately, people's confidence in this very institution.

Therefore, I submit that any move to repeal a significant law is not whether it passes the legal test; it certainly must do that. But it must pass a higher test. It is not just can it be overturned, but should we. Are we acting for good of the country? Is this the best that we can do? And, I would ask that we hold ourselves to that higher standard, that what we “unbuild” must be done with the same care,

consultation, and conviction with which we build.

We are not legislators just of the present, but we are stewards of the nation's legal memory. What we choose to undo says as much about us in this 13th Parliament as what we choose to do. So, Mr. President, those are the considerations, as I was weighing the issues in this Bill, but enough rumination. On to the substantive issues before us. The Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, No. 17 of 2021, was approved by the House of Representatives, the Senate, and partially assented to in December 2021. The TTRA—and that partial assent was to allow the TTRA Board of Management to be appointed, and to start the recruitment of staff. But, you cannot—chicken and egg—start operationalizing until you have the people and structure put in place. So that is what the initial partial offer authorization was to do.

To date, the TTRA has cost us, and this is—and just interesting what was the cost? The total cost of early setup and early operations were about \$12 million, \$13 million. I do not know the cost of earlier feasibility studies, the use of expert consultants, and otherwise. The recurring operational cost are about, I am told, about \$12million a year or \$1 million a month. If correct, this costs us about \$36 million in operational costs to date, from the time we set up to the present. By the way, the TTRA owes about \$3.6million to people who have done work for us, and by us, I am talking the collective us, and are waiting to be paid.

So the total estimated cost of the TTRA, as best as I can determine, and very subject to correction, is about TT\$50million, not a small amount of money. I do not have, and I could not get, the cost of running the Board of Inland Revenue, the cost of running Customs and Excise, the VAT Administration, et cetera. Because, if I wanted to get a picture of the whole, I would need to understand that all I have

is the TTRA. And, when I think about it, a million dollars a month is a quarter million dollars a week, and it is \$50,000 a day. By end of today, we would have spent, or the TTRA would have spent, while we are making a decision, that amount of money. I agree that the Government is right to treat this matter with urgency, with running with a cost of \$50,000 a day.

Now, if I look at the TTRA (Repeal) Bill, it is five pages; three clauses. The Act it aims to repeal is 265 pages long. And that page count suggested to me a very rough proxy to the complexity and the nuance of what this Bill is seeking to do. And I do not think you could consider this Bill without looking at the parent legislation. I did it in a very cursory way. There are those who are far more accomplished than me in going through that parent legislation in detail. But the undoing of it will tell a story of us, and we treat with complexity. Any government needs, as many have said, a sustained and sustainable source of financing for its operations, its social programmes, for the investments that it hopes to make for the future.

We are told that the need for the TTRA is driven by the need to address the deficiencies in current systems stemming from limitations within the public sector, long-standing deficiencies that have been identified and documented in feasibility and performance reports over an extensive period of the time dating back, as I understand it, up to 2022, and in some cases a little bit earlier. These have been, I think, reasonably well ventilated.

The task of the country's tax administration system—because anything you design—if I say that this is a mechanism, put aside whether it is the TTRA, whether it is the Board of Inland Revenue, whatever mechanism, it has a job of work to do. What is the job of work? The country's total tax revenue fluctuates at

about 28 to 30 per cent of GDP, according to the World Bank, per year. The annual tax revenue is about \$45 billion to \$48 billion, and roughly, we fall short of that by about \$10 billion to \$15 billion, that is the tax gap that so many people have spoken about. That tax gap represents—and if you think of the appropriation Bill that is before us—gosh it would be nice to be able to fill that gap in the appropriation. Because a question I am sure will come is: Yes, we understand why the money has to be spent or where it has to be spent, but where is it coming from? The debt-to-GDP ratio of the country right now, I am told, is about 62 per cent. It is projected to increase to 65 by 2026, and 68 per cent by 2027. As that goes up, it is going to affect interest rates. So, everybody across the country who borrows, who has a loan, will be seeing an impact if those tax rates go up.

The financial mid-year update shows national financing worsening significantly, compared to original budget projections, with a deficit of about 9 to \$10 billion versus about \$5.5 billion that was originally planned. If the GDP continues at \$140 billion, this is just a deficit of about 6.5. And, we are in a world—I will just use a term from my area of activity, it is called VUCA, which is an acronym for volatile, ambiguous, complex, and uncertain. That degree of complexity has increased.

2.00 p.m.

So when we talk about projections, that itself has to be stress-tested. Again, will debt be realized? So it is into this milieu that we are faced and the question that I am asked, as I am sure many of us are asked outside is twofold. How do we, as a country and as a Parliament pay for this? And followed often by, and “wey you go in an do bout it?”

There has been a lot of discussion around what a tax administration and

collection system needs to do. It needs to be seamless. But taxes are collected in response to a society's need for healthcare, roads, schools, for other social benefits. It needs to work for the good of citizens, collecting taxes that they have agreed to in a fair, efficient manner. The system itself needs to encourage compliance.

In interviewing people in preparation for this, I have come across over and over again, cases, particularly of smaller businesses that do not have a large amount of staff to devote to compliance and accounting of how hard it is to pay taxes. "One fella say, I want to pay inno but why you making it so hard? O gosh, make the ting easy nah." And his language was a little more vigorous, I have sanitized it a little bit. How do we encourage voluntary compliance? And colleagues have noted, if some pay and others do not, those that pay start to feel, why am I being taken advantage of? And that is not right, it is not fair. In researching this aspect of what to do, I came across two quotations, one is:

The taxes we pay are a subscription fee for belonging to civil society. And the second, which was attributed to US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes:

"Taxes are what we pay for a civilized society."

So if we are debating a system people will naturally have preferences about how to do it. What I think we could agree on is, it has to work, and to get it to work really matters to all of the things that we say we want to do. That led me to look at tax systems around the world.

In about 200 countries and jurisdictions there are about a third, about 70, that are using RAs. What is interesting, now—that statistic is a 2010 World Bank statistic. I "doh" have a more current statistic. I am sure it exists. I just could not find it in time. The trend is that countries are moving towards a revenue authority.

Put aside the title because the title carries a baggage that is political, emotional, and otherwise. It is about the decentralization of information and it is about streamlining the system, and if you think of it as a system, countries are moving towards that. What the data seems to suggest is that with the increase in that, that revenue authorities are in fact performing. The performance can be variable across countries, but overall, the research—and I do admit that others may have a much deeper research base than me, but the research I am seeing suggests that they are working and they are working better than the traditional legacy systems that they replaced.

The idea of Customs and Board of Inland Revenue and VAT and other miscellaneous authorities talking to each other, sharing a joint base, of taxpayers being identified as a single entity but not as separate, matters. The critical success factors are—countries, for it to work, whatever structure “yuh” put in it needs a level of autonomy. That was not designed in the old system, that dates all the way back. Yes, you might have oversight, but the system itself needs to have far more autonomy than the present systems, and far more flexibility, because it is dealing with a far more dynamic world than the original systems that were designed. And, they are continually playing catch up. When I talked to professionals in this field, some retired, some operating them, they struggle to catch up, and that is a big issue. We are putting people to do the work and then we are hobbling them.

The need for greater speed and flexibility and the need to understand that different tax pools, large business/small business, individual taxpayers, corporate taxpayers. Whether you put up property tax or some other forms of specialist tax, they each have very different requirements, and when you break it apart and you silo it, it works against efficiency. It is not a muscle. Some countries continue to

work with their separate systems, but the cost is higher, it is more difficult. The tendency seems to be towards some form of greater coordination. Whether that coordination requires the legislative setup of a revenue authority, I am putting that to the side. It is how do you achieve that kind of coordination so that agencies can talk to each other?

One of the comments made when I was interviewing people on this, is how stark the difference is in culture, outlook, support, and the way various tax agencies deal with the public. Presumably, there is a need for some common way of dealing with the public. But yes, it is interesting that when we look at tax collection administration systems, “it eh not only a platform”, it is the pillar to support what does a modernization programme look like, and at the heart of that is a political commitment to do the utmost for establishing and sustaining a professional, effective revenue administration. So when I hear the comments in this House, and in other places, I think some of them can be unfortunate because others listening to that take it at face value, and that does not help the case that we need to make to the population.

A number of countries, some of which are easy to recognize, some have walked the road of centralized tax systems, whether called revenue authorities or otherwise. The earliest, interestingly, Mr. President, was Saudi Arabia, 1954 [*Senator Laughs*]. They centralised long before it was something that was done and they had their own reasons for doing it, so said the source that I read. But some very, very recent ones, recent as in the 1990s. Uganda, 1991; Singapore, 1992; Zambia 1993; Kenya, 1995; Tanzania, 1995; Canada, 1999. The point is, different countries at different levels of economic development have made certain choices and a number of them have chosen the route of modernizing through

centralising the systems so that they can coordinate better. Moving forward, Guyana in 2000, Lesotho in 2001; Botswana 2003; Mauritius, 2004; Barbados 2014; Jamaica in 2014.

This is a trend, is what the data suggests. Does it work absolutely wonderfully? Probably not. Is it an improvement over what was there before, probably? Have they faced some of the issues that we have faced? Public sector issues, how do we deal with the separation of power? How do you deal with the legislative power for Customs? We are not the first; we can find ways to deal with it.

I was quickly drawn to the Jamaican example where they set up and passed their law in May of 2011, but did not set up the TAJ to become a semi-autonomous agency until 2014. They felt it needed that amount of time to make the transition, and I think Trinidad to some degree was following that model. The problem of what you want to do with the organization is that you can have tax authorities, administrations in the same Ministry as we do. But they need a mechanism to exchange information, to carry out joint investigations, and to treat taxpayers as a single, not multiple entities. And as they develop their own cultural processes and practices often they become rigid and calcified. That is not an objection against siloed authorities, but it is a significant consideration that the revenue authorities seek to address.

If a broad, robust tax base and a well-functioning revenue administration are of critical importance, it is absolutely needed for fiscal discipline and for the policy that flows from it. It has to be efficient. The candle cannot cost more than the funeral. So it cannot be expensive, and that apparently is—One of our current agencies is costing way more, I am told, than the amount it is taking in terms of

efficiency. That needs to be fixed. The issue is, keeping the status quo, from all that I have heard, suggests that it would be very detrimental to the country. And I want to propose for the consideration by the sponsors of the Bill that perhaps some other options, alternatives for performance improvement, may be worthy of some consideration.

And, the options and alternatives could range across a very broad spectrum. But what it says here, it has got to have autonomy, it has to have flexibility, and to a degree that is not there now, not impossible, but is not there now we need to streamline the authority to make its management decisions, which is everything from hiring to promotions, to discipline, and how to do that in a way that is acceptable to all of the—not just Constitution, but the mores that we have come to accept, but how do we cause it to work.

Here is an option for consideration, this is an interim step, maybe, and I would ask—“doh” laugh at me too hard. We have over how many decades as a Ministry of Finance, right? The Ministry of Finance is the Ministry that allocates, we know it from the budgets into which reports the various revenue authorities. If we say that specialisation is important, more especially, if we say focus is important, what would it be like if we had—I am not going to a revenue authority, yet, that is a decision that will be made by somebody else down to road. What if we had a Ministry of revenue? Or as I am sure Trinidadians will eventually end up calling it, “De Ministry ah money”, where it can focus on how do you strengthen that and not have its attention split across multiple requirements and initiatives and programmes because most of the effort is spent on how do we spend it.

When I look at the budget books that are given to us, and I measured it, it comes up to about 18 inches, with all the details. The amount of effort spent on

revenue is a fraction of the amount of money spent on allocations, necessarily so because you want to make sure you spend the public money well. But collecting the money is a problem. If you disagree that the tax gap is \$10 million, they say it is \$5, and others say it is \$15, there is a gap, and it can be solved. Does it need a revenue authority? Maybe, maybe not, but how do we get it better? A revenue Ministry would create a singular focus on revenue administration. Might that be something we wish to consider as we evolve the system from what it is now to what we would want it to work? When we talk about how things happen and what our various arms of Government do, we more often speak to the things that do not work well, and we do not talk about the things that, in fact, have worked well.

I want to offer three examples, Mr. President, and those examples—and let me stress, none of them are perfect, but they all are a significant improvement over what was there before, and two of them I have a very personal experience with. The first was the Licensing Office. I remember going to renew my driver's licence, would take—I would put aside a half day, because that is the amount of time it took as you moved from station to station, window to window. They changed the system. I am not even sure who the “they” are but it is Trinidadians that changed the system, right. The division of transportation, the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure. I was gobsmacked, flabbergasted when I went to renew my licence, and I was in and out in 22 minutes. I timed it.

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: You are welcome.

Sen. F. Lewis: [*Senator laughs*] The point is, it was just so startling. I had not expected that. So when you say, “yuh cyah do it.” Well, there they did it. Is it perfect? No. Could it be improved? I am sure it can.

I remember going for a passport, the new passport. The application for the

interview process, I was given a date 18 months in advance, then subsequently I went for an interview and it was one month in advance. Something happened. That was very, very good. Again, is it perfect? No. But 18 months to one month, “Oh gosh man,” move on.

This one I do not have personal experience with, but I have worked in business and there are people who tell me that it works far better than the previous system, Customs. Implementing the ASYCUDA system. So, of documentation, how it flows, and the speed with which shipments can be cleared. Again, why do I cite these, and I hope I am correct. It is that in small ways—now, they are not as complex as the entire tax collection system, but in small ways, they demonstrate us working at our best and making it happen. How did they do it? I do not know the internal workings of it, except to say I could see the output.

Okay. So the last thing I want to say, Mr. President, is what would be the requirements for support and here it is very, very personal. Disruptions are going to come whether we stay with the TTRA or whether we repeal it. Dat going an happen.” If this is to happen and because disruptions are inherent in any change, especially in the case of the dissolution of TTRA, the reverting or upgrading or whatever verb you want to use of the Board of Inland Revenue, VAT, and Customs, how are we going to deal with that? I felt very uncomfortable. I am very uncomfortable when I am faced with a choice as stark as keep or repeal. Vote yes or no? And I have not heard what it would take to upgrade and what the change management programme would look like to upgrade the Board of Inland Revenue and Customs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Lewis: I have sat on boards of directors. If a manager came with this and

did not present how you are going to do it, I would say, you have some more homework to do, boss. Time is of the essence. How long will it take? What is the schedule and milestones for improvement? And I am not looking for a detailed plan. I am looking for a high-level plan. Something that somebody put themselves on the line to say broadly, this is how we are going to do it, and this is what the cost is, and that is the way in which it would be structured and staggered. Given the various tax pools which are critical to the country, what changes are needed for both? That is not just simply, stay with the old; go with the new. That is far more nuanced than that. And ultimately, how do we nurture and build and reinforce a management and a staff to get this done, and we have done it before in other smaller areas. This one is monumental. This one is big. But “dat doh mean dat it cyah be done and dat we cyah do it. “

I just want to speak a little bit to change management since it is an area of my professional practice. Sorry, Mr. President, may I just ask how much time I have? I do not want to over—

Mr. President: You finish at 2.25 p.m.

Sen. F. Lewis: 2.25 p.m. Thank you. I will keep this story very short. I was retained by a large regional bank to handle the combination, the merger, not the acquisition of two banks across the region. One Bank had been in the region since 1834, the other one since 1910. Yes, the cultures that each had, they just did not talk to each other. They saw each other as rivals.

2.20 p.m.

So, we did the combinations. We were putting in a common IT system, and in one country on the high street, we needed to—we had two branches. One branch—these are the main branches in that country. One branch had 4,000

customers. The next branch had, I think, 5,000 customers. For this to work, we needed one branch, not two. The costs were excessive at two. The architects looked at it and said, “Look, in the larger branch, there were about nine or 10 tele positions. By vetting the branch and reconfiguring it, we can get to 18 tele positions.” So, they said, “Okay. It sounds good.” And we were prepared to spend the money. It took about four months to do, and this is working 24 hours a day, eh. This was, “yuh tun blood tuh stone”. You are working through nights and weekends to get that conversion to happen.

Now, those 9,000 customers were assigned to the other branch that had 10 or eight tele positions and simply was not structured to deal with it. The comments, the criticisms we got deservedly from dissatisfied customers were legion, but it was the price that we had to pay. And we explained, we took out ads, we did all of the communication, but people were still vex because they expected a branch to work.

Now, when the new branch opened and things ran smoothly, everybody said, starting with the customers, “How wonderful.” So when I hear about words like “starving an organization” and “stifling it”, I do not know if that happened or did not happen. I cannot speak to that. But I do know in change management programmes, it is like renovating a house. It is all nice to have a new house built, but have you ever tried to live in a house being renovated and you are struggling with where to put resources? How to do it? I think we should not be unkind to change managers who deal with the technical, but also the human aspect of it.

So, in conclusion, there are significant implications of not getting our tax collections right. We will soon be discussing a mid-year review of the budget, and behind that is, how confident can this Parliament be that the tax system will

generate the funding needed? One must wonder, is the TTRA beyond redemption? Stripping away tax administrations systems to its fundamentals, what can be kept? Anything at all? Perhaps not. I do not know. There are others who are far more technically competent than me. But I am very cautious with throwing the baby out with the bath water, and this is something that has been shaped over many years. Is a blended approach possible? Can anything be salvaged? How do we get, ultimately, the tax systems to work better? And as the various parties talk, is there any room for zones of agreement where a negotiation is possible to optimize?

It is not the task of this Parliament to construct a tax system. It falls to us to vote on and choose between the two options given: To support the decentralization of tax administration and the promise it holds, or do we go, and I am going to use the word “back”—and some may find it unfair—to go back to legacy siloed systems, which have served long, but have recognized inefficiencies?—the decision of which of these two systems or what hybrid would best serve the country. And my question is: Is there a third route? Is there room for a suspension of this Bill to give perhaps—again, I am new, Mr. President, so I may be calling the wrong term—to give a joint select committee a chance to do a review and find a way to take the best of both?

The message I would like to send is that I am hearing that people are here to help. Everybody wants the same end objective, what we think is good for the country. And it is in that invitation that there is goodwill, and a new Government perhaps could use that goodwill to get to the end objective that everybody says that they want. So, Mr. President, through you, to my colleagues, thank you very much for sharing these thoughts.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Teemal.

Sen. Deoroop Teemal: Mr. President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute on the matter before this Senate. Mr. President, the TTRA is an attempt by the previous Government, we have heard, to meet ineffective tax evasion challenges, to address lack of tax compliance and corrupt taxation practices—I think so far in this debate, I have not heard the word “corrupt”, so I am inserting it here—corrupt taxation practices in the current tax administration system that fall under the purview of the Board of Inland Revenue and the Customs and Excise Division. I think with the emphasis we are hearing about the BIR, but we need to bear in mind also, you know, that we should not forget the Customs and Excise Division.

Now, the previous Minister of Finance, in piloting the Bill on September 14, 2021, had reported to this Senate that:

In 2017, the Inland Revenue Division was assessed by the IMF using the...TADAT.”— system, which we have heard about.

And he said that the:

“...tool allowed us to obtain an independent assessment which utilized a scientific approach on the performance of the current tax administration system.”

Then he went on to talk about—I think also Sen. Dhanpaul would have indicated about the 28 high-level indicators of TADAT, and Trinidad and Tobago received two A ratings, one B rating, seven C ratings and 18 D ratings, and I might state that the A rating is the highest of A, B, C and D. And the report also indicated a number of strengths to build on. The several weaknesses which were identified were 13, and I think Sen. Dhanpaul did outline some of those weaknesses, so I will

not repeat, but they were in key priority areas. And the thinking was:

“...if improved can achieve maximum impact on revenues...”—and allow the opportunity to identify—“...solutions for prioritized areas. Implementation of the agreed...solutions is...”

—this is what the then Minister of Finance had reported:

“...ongoing,”—he said—“but continues to be humbugged and constrained by lack of human resources, which is a matter for the independent constitutionally...Public Service Commission.”

—which we are all aware of. And there were actually:

“...hundreds of vacancies in these divisions”—both Customs and Excise and the Board of Inland Revenue—“caused by the inaction of the Public Service Commission.”—according to him.

Now, he also reported that:

“In 2019, the IMF had conducted a...VAT gap study.”

And:

“The results indicated that there...”—was—“...a VAT gap of around 5 per cent of GDP...which has two components, a compliance gap and a policy gap.”

And:

“The policy gap would flow from decisions of successive governments with respect to exemptions, zero-rating, tax waivers, et cetera.

The compliance gap...”—was—“...a problem because...”—there was—“...control over the policy gap;”—and whereas—“we can adjust policy with respect to tax waivers, zero ratings, et cetera, but in terms of compliance...the difference between the potential value added tax to be

collected, the VAT that could have been collected if all taxpayers complied, and the net VAT accrued, appeared to be well above average for an emerging market economy.”—such as the one in Trinidad and Tobago.

“In fact, the estimate of the compliance gap is somewhere between 2 of 3 per cent, which is in the order of 3 to \$5 billion. So...what the experts determined, that the compliance gap in Trinidad and Tobago, just on VAT alone, could be as much as \$5 billion per annum.”

And I think during the course of the debate thus far, when we add that to the other hemorrhaging, the tax leakage that is taking place, it could be as much as one of the figures called, \$10 billion per annum.

Now, roughly, this was the rationale presented by the previous Government for the establishment of the semi-autonomous TTRA, but the question still remains: Whether instead of the establishment of a TTRA, a reform of internal processes, internal systems and procedures at reducing tax administration deficiencies, if properly identified and implemented, could prevent significant amounts of a tax leakage, and there would be no need to go as far as to remove the tax function from the public service and establish a semi-autonomous revenue authority to solve the problems identified.

Now, at that time, I had also heard from other Senators during that debate that the revenue model being used in several countries, including Guyana, Jamaica and Barbados had been implemented successfully. And then in this debate as well, we are hearing frequent references to other countries. In some cases, we are saying that it has not succeeded and in some cases, we are seeing there has been success.

Now, in such a situation, you know, how beneficial it is if we use this, you know, as a fulcrum for debate, in terms of trying to arrive at enlightenment so that

inform us to make a decision here today, because I still believe that the jury is out on this matter. I am really no champion of the one-size-fits-all approach to our country's problems, particularly in the case of complex policy implementation.

Another country trying a model does not guarantee that you approve that model and apply it to your own country. Now, I am saying that because, yes, of course, we are not just transferring, for black and white, a model from other countries to Trinidad and Tobago, to the TTRA. There would be some differences, it is known. But the principle, in terms of the transfer, I mean, there are many challenges with it. In terms of our local conditions that are unique to Trinidad and Tobago, unique to our culture, how we go about our business, the problems that we are facing need not be similar, although there will be some commonalities, I am not debating that. But there be enough unique differences that may cause us to think that we need to be careful about, you know, transferring models that are being used throughout the world. You know, we have, in Trinidad, a distinct ability to make the news for the wrong reasons and we stand out a lot sometimes with our unique characteristics.

Now, against that backdrop, I just thought I would mention briefly, in terms of what transpired during that debate in 20—when the Bill was presented previously. So, I have been listening carefully to the contributions, particularly from on the side of the Government, as to determine whether without a TTRA, how the Government would address the modernization and enhance the effectiveness, integrity and efficiency of revenue administration within the existing public sector structures.

Now, unfortunately, in the contributions thus far, I still think there is a lot that could be answered or a lot that could be proffered by the Government, and

probably in the contributions to come, more would be offered. Because the hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, in piloting the Bill, would have focused on the question of the morale of the public servants and I think he would have mentioned one other factor, upgrading a certain piece software. But beyond that, I did not really grasp anything much more being proffered by the Government at this time.

Then the hon. the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, you know, a lot of focus was placed on labour, not surprisingly. But when he mentioned—I mean, all good points regarding labour and the need to treat workers right, ensure the rights of workers and all those things. I fully subscribe to all those things. Then he went on to say that the Government has the mandate of the majority, which is true, but a question of whether that mandate should be an open door for the direction that we take in this Senate or this Parliament, because then in such a situation, why are we here? What is the purpose of this Parliament? What is the oversight function of the Parliament—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Teemal:—and the need to have checks and balances to ensure that good governance and accountability and transparency prevails?

Now, I am sure the hon. Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development would not have probably intended it in that way. But at the same time, we need to recognize that an overwhelming mandate does not automatically guarantee the Government passage of legislation. We have a duty in this House in this Senate to raise and to put forward our views, where it would differ, or even in support of the Government when they come with legislation. But thus far, it seems as though the entire focus has been mainly on labour as the key issue for the

repealing of this TTRA Act.

Now, at certain times during the debate as well, I had to wonder if the deficiencies identified for the Board of Inland Revenue and the Customs and Excise were actually accepted by the present Government. Because at some time, I was thinking that maybe the institutions, you know, like the TADAT and the IMF and all the other studies that were done, that there is no consensus on the problems plaguing the Board of Inland Revenue and the Customs and Excise Division, and it is simply a matter of if we treat workers right and we upgrade some software, then the problem is solved. I wish it would be as simple as that. I really wish it would be as simple as that, because some Senators have mentioned it but I would just like to probably put it in my perspective, in terms of some of the major deficiencies regarding the Board of Inland Revenue and the Customs and Excise Division, not only based on a TADAT report, but other assessments concerning done by other parties.

Just for the record, in terms of the Board of Inland Revenue, unreliable taxpayer registration database, leading to inefficient taxpayer management; significant delays of accounting and processing accounting transactions; refund verification and VAT payments; ineffective audit mechanisms, largely due to missing audit oversight; lack of segregation of duties and poor reconciliation processes; weak compliance risk management through poor methodologies for compliance risks, hindering ability to identify and act upon evasion or abuse.

2.40 p.m.

Additional weakness include insufficient audit staffing, underdeveloped codes of conduct and fragmented exemption tracking systems. Then corruption and integrity findings, diagnostics point to, systemic corruption. Current processors

enable bribe solicitation, classification abuses with minimal accountability, and there is a culture lacking integrity, stable leadership, and performance-based promotions. Tax exemptions and concessions were poorly recorded and overseen, opening up further abuse, and lack of transparency between the internal revenue division and the Minister of Finance.

And I cannot but note, the tremendous negative impact that has had on the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago. The Customs and Excise Division, complexity and insufficient procedures. Tax and excise systems are still overly complex, cumbersome, and inadequately backed by enforcement or audit mechanisms. Continued issues include, inconsistent valuation. I think we are familiar with that one. Cumbersome clearance procedures, and lack of full digitization of data entry leading to delays and loss of revenue.

Talk to our businessmen, talk to people who import things into this country and who export, and how much money is lost through these delays. Not only a businessman, but how much money have to be paid in bribes to circumvent the system. Revenue leakage and undervaluation, the reporting of documents with flat import duty. Collections despite rising in, flat duty collections despite rising import volumes, suggesting significant valuation suppression, exemptions for avoidance or fraud at customs. And again, within the Customs and Excise Division of corruption and a bribe culture. Collusion, discretionary misuse of—

[Devise goes off]

Mr. President: Hon. Member just a minute. Hon. Members this is about the third time in the last few hours, I have heard cell phones, mobile phones, ringing. May I appeal to Members to please put your phones, your mobile phones on silence please? It is becoming a practice, a literal habit. I do not want to start asking

Members to exit the Chamber for breaching the rules. Sen. Teemal, continue.

Sen. D. Teemal: Thank you, Mr. President. Yes, collusion, discretionary misuse in classification and tax rate setting, precipitating widespread corruptions and bribes, and the risk is compounded by poor accountability, mechanisms, and management instability. Then lack of digitalization and oversight tools. Now, despite the partial, partly digital customs clearance, the ASYCUDA software excise operations remains largely manual fostering opportunities for manipulation, and the Internal Revenue Division internally developed system, [*Inaudible*] suffers from delays and technical limitations undermining risk management.

Now, Mr. President, those are just some of the specific issues, but then you have broader institutional weakness, and some of which has been mentioned. Leadership instability, the heads of the Board of Inland Revenue in particular, they typically serve just one year, because of the process. Reducing ability to implement any type of continuity and multi-year reforms, and promotion is based on seniority rather than skills. Poor public trust and resistance to modernization, inefficiency, outdated systems, integrity issues, demotivated staff, eroding taxpayer confidence, and insufficient external audits. Actually, the Auditor General lacks full BIR access.

Now, in both the BIR and Customs Excise Division it has been discovered that there is a severe challenge with human resource management, and lack of discipline and corruption amongst person who are employed by these institutions, and these problems have been festering. Not just with the previous regime, they have been festering for decades, and these issues need to be addressed. Which is why I mentioned in the contributions thus far, I am not seeing the spread, if we are repealing TTRA. I am not seeing the spread that really says, well first to happen

what is the extent of the problem that we are dealing with, and to have consensus on that. And then secondly, to say at least this is how we intend to tackle it. Not in the details as Sen. Lewis mentioned, but at least to provide an initial macro framework to say well, “yes we are going to address these.”

Because we are dealing with certain key issues, and one of which is the Public Service Commission. Now, we get the impression that the hiring and firing of public servants lies with the Government. It is the Public Service Commission’s role and function, and seeing that a dysfunctional Public Service Commission, and I am not making statement in a vacuum, it is based on decades of assessments of our service commissions. A dysfunctional service commission, how are going to bring about reform by keeping the tax revenue administration within the public service, without addressing the challenges faced by the Public Service Commission?

Let me rephrase that. I have not heard thus far, as a key point for the success of a non-TTRA, how the Government intends to approach that, and I felt that should be relevant to this debate. Which is why I am looking forward to the contribution from our hon. Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence. Because the reform that is intended without the TTRA, have far reaching implications, and drilling down into the depths of the problems affecting the public service, including the Public Service Commission. And it has been—you always hear from the service commissions in this country, no matter which Government is in power, over the years, that they are under resourced, they are underfunded, that has been—are we going to deal with that, in order to have an effective Public Service Commission that ties in with what is be proposed here?

Mr. President, I voted against this Bill when it was presented in 2021. In

fact, I was one of the seven persons who voted against the Bill. Because I felt at that time, that in attempting to work around the requirements for a three-fifths majority, to pass the original Bill prior to 2021, and the Government came with a truncated version of a TTRA. In fact, they came with what I refer to as a “hybrid model” of a TTRA, which to me offered fragmented reform. I was of the opinion at that time that maybe we were jumping from the frying pan into the fire, with that “hybrid model,” because the reform would have been fragmented.

Because at that time one of my main concerns that we would have had primary legislative responsibility for the enforcement of revenue laws, I was not sure based on the Bill. Would it have been the Director General in accordance with that Act, or the Deputy Director General of Enforcement? Because the Deputy General Director - Enforcement was being left under the Public Service Commission, was being kept within the public service, and the Director General was coming under the TTRA, under the guidance and direction of the Minister. So at that time to me, it was making a difficult job even more difficult, and without any guarantees or limiting the opportunities for success.

Now, I understand that this hybrid model would have been probably used in other countries as well. But, then I go back to what I said earlier about adaptation to Trinidad, and our unique circumstances which includes the relationships between the trade unions, between Government, the functioning of our Public Service Commission, and all those factors if we are taking into consideration, that does not necessarily mean the successes in another country would happen here.

Now clause 14 (5)(c) of the Act that we are looking to repeal it states that:

“...the Deputy Director General - Enforcement is subject to the general directions of the Board...—as—“communicated...—by—“the Director

General.”—

—and clause 14 (5) (d):

“...the Deputy Director General - Enforcement is subject to the general policy directions of the Minister which shall be communicated to him through the Director General.”

Now, at that time, my thought was, would this not create a management conundrum, where directions are issued by one party to another but the party in question is accountable to another entity, in this case the Public Service Commission. And whether or not this would have created the same administrative, and management nightmare that stifled the effective functioning of the public service. The question was whether measures—if the deputy Director General - Enforcement refuses to follow the directions of the Board. Because remember, he is under the Public Service Commission he is under no obligation to follow the instruction of the Board. And if you refuses to follow the directions of the Board—and then you have to go through a whole lengthy, tedious process to remove or transfer or discipline, the Deputy General Director of Enforcement through the Public Service Commission, well then we know where that going, nowhere. And then we are back in the same situation that we are trying to avoiding by forming the authority.

So, Mr. President, that was the basis really on my voting against the Bill in 2021. So, here I am still in dilemma, because, yes, we are seeking to repeal the Bill, and one would think automatically I would support this piece of legislation, automatically. But then based on what I have said before, I am still in a dilemma waiting, because as I said from the contributions of the Government thus far, it seems as though it is a labour problem, and it is upgrading software. If we are to

take into cognizance, all of the studies done before, and all of the assessments done before, including the view of the respective trade union as well, I do not think it is simple as that. And I would have really liked to hear, and the debate is not finished. I am sure I would probably hear that at least a proposal for a macro framework, not much detail, or at least a roadmap in which at least three things are looked at.

One, to amend relevant tax legislation to give the institution more flexibility, tools and incentives to function efficiently and transparently. I have not heard anything about proposed changes to the Income Tax Act or proposed changes to related laws that are going to help us without a TTRA. Seek to develop a strategic framework aimed at improving compliance, transparency, and fairness in the tax system designed and implemented with multi-stakeholder input. And then the third one, modernized the tax administration system using cutting edge digital tools, and AI assisted methods.

And I cannot over emphasize AI assisted methods. Because through the use of AI, we have seen it recently in the US with their DOGE and a couple of guys with AI were able to identify abuses, and accesses, and all forms of twisting, and corruption. And the utilization of AI in terms of tax compliance, particularly in terms of tax compliance, and being set up with modern digitization tools to tighten up on that, and eliminating or reducing. I should not say eliminating because we cannot do it a 100 per cent, but reducing dependency on manual processes and increasing accuracy, and audit capability. Mr. President, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Thank you. Sen. de la Bastide SC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Michael de la Bastide SC: Mr. President, I must thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today. Mr. President, this is my maiden contribution in this House of the Parliament, and therefore, I think it is appropriate for me to add my congratulations to your election as President, and to all of the Senators here on their appointments. I would also like to thank Her Excellency the President Christine Carla Kangaloo ORTT, in placing her trust in me by appointing me as Independent Senator.

Mr. President, before I begin my contribution, I should declare that I was one of the junior counsels in the *Terrisa Dhoray v The Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago* matter, which considered—that is in the High Court, the Court of Appeal, and the Privy Council—the constitutionality of the TTRA Act. We were focused on the constitutionality of the Act primarily, well, entirely, but in putting forward the case of the Attorney General we did put forward evidence that dealt with the merits of the Act and the purposes, so that is my full disclosure.

Mr. President, the Members of the Government Bench and the Opposition Bench, they have come here with understandably fixed views on this repeal Bill. I say understandably because no doubt, when the Opposition was in Government, they would have piloted and passed this Bill, the Act, sorry. They would have done that after giving serious consideration, I assume, to doing so. And therefore, one cannot really expect that they would come here today and just step done and say we made an error.

3.00 p.m.

Because they would have given thought to it before, and similarly the Government now would have given consideration as to whether the Act should be amended or repealed before coming here today.

So both sides have a very fixed view, and it would be difficult for them to perhaps come here with an open mind in terms of listening to the arguments on the other side and saying, well, we will change. I do not criticize either side for that position because, as I said, they would have given a lot of thought to their position before. But, on the Independent Bench, perhaps, Mr. President, we have the luxury, if you like, of having a slightly more open mind to what the Government Bench and what the Opposition Bench have to say, because we have not taken any position publicly.

No doubt we would have done our research, and we may have formed provisional views on the Bill. And, some might say, my involvement in the Theresa Dory matter, that may have given me some sort of prior view of the matter. But, I try to come here today, and this would be my approach in the future, with a mind that is informed by my research, but also a mind that is open to hearing what the Government Bench has to say and what the Opposition Bench has to say. Many of these matters, I would not have the expertise, I would have done my research, but I am sure the Government Bench and the Opposition Bench would have a lot of useful things to say. So like Sen. Teemal, although I have a view on the Bill now and I have heard what has been said, the contributions, I am still open to receiving points from both sides.

Mr. President, in determining how I should—that I should support the Bill or not I took the approach, which is perhaps the lawyer’s approach, of first identifying what is the purpose of the TTRA Act, what are the problems it tries to address, what is the, as the lawyers say, mischief that it seeks to cure. And clearly, in a broad sense, the purpose is to improve the system of tax administration, the administration of tax laws. And, no doubt, a more specific purpose was to increase

tax revenues by collecting taxes that were due to be paid but were not being paid. In other words, as we have heard today, closing the tax gap. But, I suspect another purpose, or perhaps what should be a purpose anyway, is not just about closing the tax gap and raising revenue, but also there are other aspects, and I think this may have been referred to by my colleagues, of the tax administration system that would need to be addressed. The ease with which taxes can be paid, public accountability of those who administered the taxes, the management of the system, how efficient the system is, is it costly to collect the taxes, is it costing too much to collect the taxes, can the cost be reduced? So those are also problems that the Act, or whatever system we have, should be addressing.

Now, I connected one of the problems that closing the tax gap can do. It will raise revenues, but it will assist in reining in what, I think by all accounts, has been a burgeoning fiscal debt. I think my research has told me that. I believe since 2009 to present, we have been—governments, PNM or UNC, had been running a budget deficit, except for maybe the year 2022, when I think it was almost balanced. But now, we have, I think, an almost high adjusted general government debt of \$142 billion. And, that size debt I think, while I am no economist, has to be a serious concern, and, as one of my colleagues said, in the next few years it is projected to increase.

One of the reasons why that is such a serious concern is that it affects our international credit rating, which affects the cost of borrowing and the access to foreign credit. And, the fact that we are borrowing so much, we have to be very concerned about the cost. The two international credit rating agencies, as we know, are Standard & Poor's and Moody's. Now with Standard & Poor's, we have a BBB (Stable). I think they called it credit rating and we may want to maintain

that or improve it. But, in July 2022, I note that Standard & Poor's did a report and with your leave I would just quote a brief extract, in which they warned that:

“We could lower the ratings over the next two years if GDP per capita fails to recover to the degree that we anticipate and the pace of fiscal consolidation is materially slower than expected...”

So, it is a serious concern, and the fact that being able to close the tax gap can create significant revenue to be applied to those deficits and the fiscal debt is something that we need to focus on in my view. Of course, there are two ways. I do not need to spend too much on this, but there are two ways of reducing the Government debt. Cutting expenditure, which is economically very painful, cutting government expenditure. So we want to stay away from that. The other way is to increase revenue. We are an oil and gas economy heavily. Those revenues are dictated by international prices, we have no control over them. But we do have control over our system of tax administration, and potentially closing the tax gap, raising revenues improving the taxation system.

Now, I am not sure whether the Government Bench—I heard the Opposition Bench they mentioned the \$5billion tax gap. I believe in, as my friend, I believe as it was stated, there was a study done by the IMF in 2019. They undertook an exercise to measure the VAT tax gap and the compliance part of that. I think they measured 2 per cent of GDP. But I think, by all accounts, there is a potentially substantial amount of money to be collected that we are not doing right now. And the Government's view, or the last Government's view was that the TTRA would be, and the Act would be, instrumental in closing that gap. And, I believe that, well, the Government of today, they seem to think that the system that is here now can be improved to do that.

So as a Senator doing my research, I went to look at what the experts say, at what the experts that the various governments over the last 20 years would have said, what is their view, what did they advised the government to do. And, Sen. Dhanpaul has mentioned a few of them already: The Dean Committee, and I think, the TADAT assessment, and I believe he may have referred to another IMF assessment. And, they all identified that the Inland Revenue Division and the Customs and Excise Division have serious problems and he has listed them out. They all suggest that the revenue authority will—establishing a revenue authority and moving the administration of the tax laws from the civil service, public service to such an authority would be part of the solution, at least to improving the administration of tax laws.

I would like to just, perhaps, for the record, add one or two of the reports that I considered as well that were not mentioned, with your leave, Sir, Mr. President. Now, in that regard I go to a report, a mission that was sent by the Fiscal Affairs Department of the IMF that visited Trinidad in 2013. The purpose of the mission was to:

Evaluate the effectiveness and abilities of the Inland Revenue Division and the Customs Excise Division to achieve an appropriately high level of taxpayer compliance.

That was the purpose. I would just read. They came, they did the visit and they issued a report. And I would just quote with your leave, Mr. President, an extract from the report which, let me quote it first. They said:

The civil service system in Trinidad and Tobago has long been recognized for its deficiencies and rigidities. These are seen as impeding the provision of quality services to citizens and their ability of government

agencies to modernize. Over the years several reviews of this civil service have come to similar conclusions, the last being at a 2011 Green Paper commissioned by the Ministry of Public Administration. However little substantive action had been taken to address these issues.

And then it goes on.

Being bound by the civil service system, the Customs and Excise Division and the Inland Revenue Division face many serious HR and workforce challenges. While other government agencies are similarly encumbered by this system, a clear distinction is that the revenue collection capabilities of the tax and customs administrations are being compromised by being unable to adequately respond to threats and development of a changing world. The outcome may go beyond a poor standard of service to citizens, causing an inability to effectively enforce the revenue laws and ensure taxpayer compliance, with a risk of lower revenue and a widening rather than a narrowing fiscal deficit.

And the report went on to state that:

There was reason for optimism as greater expectations were on a revenue authority initiative to overcome the challenges.

Mr. President, there was another visit in 2016 by a Mission from the Fiscal Affairs Department of the IMF, and this was to provide technical assistance to the government. And, in their report with respect to that visit, the mission stated that the:

Inland Revenue Division and the Customs and Excise Division continued to be plagued by profound and long-standing human resource problems, which arose from the civil service rigidities that had become worse and which were

preventing tax revenue administration reforms.

The report described as key challenges, flawed organization structure, high vacancy rates and limited performance management. And, it went on to describe as a welcomed development, the announcement by the authorities to set up a revenue authority to address long standing issues.

And then most recently, Mr. President, in 2019, the same Fiscal Affairs Department of the IMF sent another mission, this time to Trinidad, to identify priority areas in which to improve tax administration. And, they did another report and in that report they state that:

An effective tax administration was pivotal to achieving sustainable social and economic development.

...that reform had commenced to address some of the Inland Revenue Division deficiencies, but that an immediate targeted response is required to lay the foundation for more comprehensive reforms under a revenue authority.

So, Mr. President, these were the reports, as well as the reports that Sen. Dhanpaul and Sen. Teemal have. These were the reports that I was confronted with. And, all of them indicate that the problem with the Inland Revenue Division and the Customs Excise Division is a systemic problem. The problem of being under resourced in terms of money or lack of a particular government action or government deliberately depriving these bodies of resources that did not come up in the reports. What they were saying is that the system, the public service system is the problem and it needs to be changed and these are experts that studied our country, our circumstances. It was not a one solution fits all approach, but they came down in favour of taking the administration of the tax laws out of the public

service and putting it in to, basically a semi-autonomous revenue authority.

Now, I have listened to the contributions so far from the Government Bench, the contributors from the Government, and I heard that the problem really is that the last government underfunded staff, the Inland Revenue Division and the Custom Excise Division of resources, and they did so deliberately. I do not know if that is so or not. But what I do know is, these experts from 2002 and 2019, they are not saying that is the problem, and they are not saying that the problem started in 2015 or 2020, when a certain administration was in power. They are saying the problem started as far back as 2002 and probably before that.

So, perhaps I do not know, I am not saying it is so, but the last government maybe they, assuming they did deprive those two divisions of funds, throwing money at these problems is not going to fix—according to these reports, it is not going to fix the problem. It is a matter of changing the system. What I have not seen is any reports or any studies or any analysis which says, “Hey, the public service can do this, this is how the public service needs to be changed.” And, I think this alludes to the point that a number of Senators on the Independent Bench have made, which is, we have not seen from the Government any solution, any real substantive solution, anything that analyzes well, this is the structural way of the public service, these are the problems and this is how we are going to fix it.

And, being someone who is trying to keep an open and independent mind I do not see how I can vote in favour of keeping the system where it is, keeping the administration of the tax laws with the Inland Revenue and the Customs Excise Division in the public service as opposed to the Revenue Authority when there is anything there to support it, no serious case has been made. Now, I agree that there are—that the Act needs to be improved because the Act attempts to take what

they called the enforcement function of the TTRA and keep it within the public service.

3.20 p.m.

Now I think anybody reading the Act, or any lawyer, whether you are involved in the proceedings that I was involved in or not, can see, can discern an intention that the purpose of doing that was not to run afoul of what was perceived to be the constitutional rules if you like. They did not want the Act to be held, to be unconstitutional and they felt that if they were too keep enforcement—put the enforcement provisions, which are coercive powers, in the hands of a body that is not within the public service, then that may run fowl of constitutional principles. And I agree that the provisions by which they attempted to do that were not happily framed. Its vague, it needs to be tidied up if that is the way you are going to go.

You know, when I say if that is the way you are going to go, I mean if it is that you want to keep that coercive aspect of tax administration in the public service, then those provisions need to be tidied up. And I think the Privy Council, in their decision, although they held the Act to be constitutional, they did address that issue about those provisions being—I think they alluded to the fact that they were circular and that they could give rise to a potential litigation.

But interestingly, whereas I think it was felt that putting the enforcement powers in the hand of a non-public service body would be unconstitutional—and that was certainly the view of the Court of Appeal in these proceedings. The Court of Appeal held that, basically, those coercive powers were powers that would not—that you could not devolve to a non-public service entity, and that was the line. Non-coercive powers, you can devolve them, you can send them over to a

body like the TTRA. Coercive powers, no, they have to stay with the public service.

But the Privy Council rejected that position. What the Privy Council said was that once the entity to which you are handing over those powers to is independent enough from the Government, then that would be the criteria, and they held the TTRA to be sufficiently independent. So I just say that. So I am not saying that to the extent that—the Government made the point that, you know, that those provisions were not happily framed and they are vague, but those are things that can be amended and tidied up.

A lot of the points I was going to make, Mr. President, have been covered by those who would have gone before me and that is always one—when you contribute later, I suppose that is something that you have to expect, but when you contribute later, you have the advantage also of hearing the other side and being able to respond to their views.

Now—and while I am at it, the hon. Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, he mentioned—he made a point about how the public servants were notified of—they got late notification of the enforcement of section 18, that they were expected to make a choice without sufficient information. And I do not want to say anything more than, I think there is a case—he makes a case that has to be answered. From what I think, it deserves an answer. On the face of it, it sounds like a valid complaint, maybe there is another side, but it needs to be answered. But that does not change the fact that—my central point, which is that the system, from all accounts, is defective and we need to move to a new system.

Another argument I heard from the Government was that, “Well, we won the election and the voice of the people is the voice of God,” and therefore, that is it.

You do not question the people on anything that we may have put forward in our manifesto, “minifesto”. Now, as Sen. Teemal has said, “That cannot be so otherwise, what are we doing here?” And I do not know where—I must have an origin, I do not know who came up with the saying that “The voice of the people is the voice of God.” I strongly disagree with that.

If you believe in a God, I thought it would be heresy to say—and you believe in all that a God entails, it would be heresy to say that the voice of the people is the voice of God, or the voice of God is the voice of people or whatever. The voice of people have done—have made some terrible decision in history. Majorities have done—Hitler came through the democratic process. So I do not know if that is an answer. And then, in 2020, I guessed the PNM would have won. They were, I believe—I could be wrong, the Opposition would let me know. They had already started the initiative of a TTRA. So, they won the election. Is that the voice of God? UNC came, they won the election. Did God change his mind?

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. M. de La Bastide SC: If you believe in God, that does not seem to—anyway, I will move on, Sir.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. de La Bastide SC: I do not mean—I just thought I would mention that I because I keep hearing this, “The voice of people is voice of the God,” or vice versa.

Now, the other argument I heard was, “Well, PNM in power for 53 years, and the UNC in power only for 11 years,” and maybe on that basis alone, the PNM is to blame for a lot of things because they were here longer than the other side. But whoever is to blame for the deficiencies of the tax administration—

Hon. Senators: PNM.

Sen. M. de La Bastide SC:—whoever is to blame, that is not the point. The point is, how do we cure it? And if the Government puts forward a plan—sorry, if I am going over you will let me know, I am new to this. If the Government puts forward amendments/reforms to the public service, and credible reforms, then that would be probably the better way to go, than have all this legislation and a new system and that disruption. But again, we have not heard anything.

I do not think the TTRA is a silver bullet. It provides an opportunity for the Government, for the State to bring in reforms to the public service, where the tax administration is concerned. One other thing, the hon. Minister of Labour, he quoted a report, from a report done by Prof. Mick Moore, and I think that the quote was correct but when you read—Prof. Moore did two reports, and it is true that they were used by the Government, by the State, in those proceedings. But let me—I think just to focus on that quote may not give a correct picture of what Prof. Moore was saying. The quote was that:

There was no statistical evidence that an average establishment of semi-autonomous revenue authorities has led to larger increases in total government revenue than in countries that did not establish semi-autonomous revenue authorities.

3.30 p.m.

That was a report in response—Prof. Moore had done an earlier report. Now, the interesting word there, he says “on average” and when you read his previous report, what he says is—and I will go to it with your leave, Mr. President, he says that there are countries that have done very well using, in terms of revenue collection, the revenue authority system and one was, he gave two examples,

Rwanda and South Africa. If I could go to the first report. In that report, he does list a number of advantages and benefits of the revenue authority system and I will just quote. He said—this is the first report:

I list below the actual and potential benefits of creating a new SARA, starting with those that I believe on an impressionistic basis, are likely to be the most important and useful in countries broadly similar to Trinidad and Tobago.

I am not going to read the whole thing.

- A. Freeing the tax administration from standard public service rules makes it possible for managers to make more effective decisions about organizational structures and procedures, recruitment and promotion of staff with appropriate skilled staff training and procurement notably of IT systems.
- B. The degree of actual accountability of tax administration to its main stakeholders is likely to increase.
- C. The very act of reorganizing tax administration can make it possible to reform and modernize practices and procedures that in normal circumstances become stuck in the past.
- D. Integrating the two separate tax collecting units provides opportunities for efficiencies through sharing a range of resources, including IT systems, a range of back office functions and specialist staff who may be needed only in small numbers.
- E. That integration also increases the likelihood of improved tax coverage and higher tax compliance.
- F. Partial autonomy from direct ministerial control—

Mr. President: Sen. De la Bastide you have four more minutes' time.

Sen. M. de la Bastide SC: Thank you, Mr. President. He then says with respect to the Rwanda and South Africa revenue authority,

Two SARA special interests, above all exhibited very considerable improvements in both revenue collection and various process indicators over sustained periods of time. The South African Revenue Service for about two decades after majority rule 1994 and the Rwanda authority since its creation in 1998.

And what he goes on to say because I will need to windup is that those— what explains perhaps the failure of the revenue authority system to be an improvement on what he calls the within-Ministry system is in order for the SARA, the revenue authorities to work, they need political support, they need the backing of the politicians and that is not always there. It was there in South Africa for 20 years, then they did not get that support. The performance decreased, then they got the support and then it improved.

So when you read the whole report, the statement that the Minister made seems to suggest that it does not work. But what he is saying, Prof. Moore is saying that it does not work all the time and for it to work is merely an opportunity for it to improve. It is like a tool, if you do not use the tool correctly, it is not going to work. Before my time runs out, I will just end with what he says:

The policy conclusions of this report for a country like Trinidad and Tobago are that the weight of evidence suggests that SARA on average superior to the existing tax administration arrangements on a range of criteria.

B. The benefits of the creation of a SARA are likely to be significantly

larger if the Ministry of Finance simultaneously takes advantage of the opportunity to modernize administration processes as well as changing the organizational framework.

- C. The success of a SARA or any other form of tax administration is significantly dependent on the provision of consistent and constructive political support for fair and efficient tax raising from the Government, especially the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. de la Bastide SC:

- D. There is always a risk that this consistent and constructive political support can cross the line into undesirable and elicit interference into operational matters. The creation of a SARA Board to intermediate between the SARA management and the Minister of Finance is the standard arrangement to reduce risk.

So it is a tool and if the tool is not used correctly, it will not have the benefits.

So at this point, Mr. President, in the absence of any substantive case put forward for the tax administration remaining within the Ministry, like Sen. Teemal, I am open but my provisional view is to vote against the Bill. I hope to hear more from the Government so I can be better informed of what they think, what their substantive plan is. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Thank you. May I on behalf of the Senate, sincerely extend warmest congratulations to Sen. de la Bastide SC on his maiden contribution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: The hon. Minister in the Ministry of Housing, Sen. Phillip Alexander.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Hon. Minister in the Ministry of Housing (Sen. The Hon. Phillip Alexander): Mr. President, let me first of all thank you for this opportunity and congratulate you, in my maiden speech, on your appointment as President of this august House. You are demonstrating the type of Presiding Officer that we have been waiting for, for the past 10 years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: I would like to also congratulate our dear and esteemed leader, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, SC, on winning the election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: To the hundreds of thousands of people watching, she is responsible for this and me being here and I thank her for that. Mr. President, I want to get rid of some of the stuff that was just said before I say what I came to say. Sen. de la Bastide said he heard no plan to reform the BIR and that he might be inclined to support it if he did. But this Bill is to repeal the TTRA.

We have not yet gotten to that part yet, but we want this dealt with as the obstacle because the same Deane report, the 13 items that created this mischief, all of them if they were addressed with the same effort, Mr. President, that has been put into trying to create a revenue authority since 2002, if that same amount of effort was put into deficient human resource management processes; inadequate management capability, accountability and training; inadequate staff development and oversight mechanisms—these are not big problems. Weak budgetary controls and

accountability structures, non-competitive compensation packages—again these are simple things to fix. High incidents of corruption—I do not see how a TTRA changes that in a country that has a culture of corruption and why, if it could be addressed in a new body, it could not just have been addressed in the one that already had safeguards in place.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Ineffective enforcement—this is from Mr. Deane, their Mr. Deane—and investigation systems. That is not a difficult thing to fix. It is a system. We are creating a whole new authority when all we had to do was fix a system. Poor coordination between tax departments, phones, paper and pen, what are we talking about? Anti-business tax procedures, that sound like policy to me and policy is what we do here and what the other place does. So if these are the problems, weak customer service, obsolete IT systems. I have learned that the Gen-Tax system that the Board of Inland Revenue operates is eight upgrades behind. Why was that not addressed before we went frolicking looking for a new tool?

Sen de la Bastide said a tool incorrectly used does not give you the results that you want. We did not use the Board of Inland Revenue correctly. That is what Mr. Deane was saying before we went off on the idea of getting a new authority. This here is a document quoting a contract for a private organization called Ernst & Young. And Ernst & Young was given responsibility for a lot of what the Board of Inland Revenue does now. And Mr. President, every time we raise the issue about weaponizing confidential information, we are told that there are safeguards in place. I do not know how that could be so when in the scope of work from Ernst & Young they said:

“As part of this engagement, EY will not provide recommendations or advice with respect to the following, (i) individual taxpayers or any targeted group of taxpayers...”

I do not understand what a targeted group of taxpayers are for a revenue authority. We on this side believe that the TTRA would have allowed PNM Ministers to circumvent to public service safeguards and given them the power to go directly after their enemies, after political enemies.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Mr. Speaker, I have seen myself, being in politics, deal with organizations, victimization just because I had a political voice. I remembered when the People’s Partnership Government came out of office in 2015, we had a project that we were doing with the Ministry of National Security to provide Trinidad and Tobago with rapid response communications in case of an emergency. It was new technology then. Mr. Speaker, 2015, seems like just a little time ago, but for cellphone technology and other things like that, it might as well have been 100 years.

We were working on this with the telephone telecommunication providers because at the time, there was a lot of mischief with rumors and people would run out of Port of Spain because they heard this one taking over and that one taking over. There was no way to communicate and we had put that in place and it was ready to launch when the governments changed. And I remembered a then Minister of Communication, a fella by the name of Maxie Cuffie, who was my Editor in the T&T Mirror. He knew how independent I was and he knew—he knew me. But he told me that that project could not go forward because I ran as an independent in Diego Martin West against whom he referred to as the boss. So

Trinidad lost out on that because it took years before anybody came close to replicating what we have done then; because of political victimization.

Another time I was sitting in my office and a bunch of police officers came and they said to me, “Mr. Alexander, do not be concerned, we are just doing this because we have been given a list of politically exposed persons who might have done business with a particular company” and that frightened me. Because the only business I ever did with that company was they made a donation to an election that we were fighting 10 years before, independent of everybody else. And those officers seem to want to say to me this is politics and I am thinking to myself, how does the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service get itself involved in politics? How do officers of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service get weaponized against political enemies? How? That is Trinidad and Tobago.

I remembered listening to a former Member of the Government Prakash Ramadhar, talk about how he had to run to Sadiq Baksh’s house because Sadiq was not in the country and that certain persons they believed to be police officers were somehow involved in the placing of missiles and cocaine in Sadiq Baksh’s water tanks and they were going to say that Sadiq Baksh—and he and his good police had to get to Sadiq Baksh’s house before the bad police. This is Trinidad. Up until now, I do not know of anyone who has ever claimed that the Board of Inland Revenue has been using their tax information against them. “But I doh want to be living in ah Trinidad where ah PNM could be controlling the tax authority of Trinidad and Tobago.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Because all the safeguards in the world would not protect me from the director of Ernst & Young at the time, who was literally in bed

with the man who became Prime Minister for a day. This is Maria Daniel, who was the Director of Ernst & Young that got this contract from the PNM who was in a serious relationship with a former wannabe Prime Minister—that is too close for comfort. We have to face the reality of what were we are dealing with here.

We faced a PNM that established a second tax on private residential properties without acknowledging that the stamp duty that Trinidadians pay is already a property tax. So they tried to tax us twice and force old people in the sun and the rain to line up and pay that property tax or get fined. That is using tax against the people. That was a Government that took control of the allocation of foreign exchange. The incoming Central Bank Governor says more foreign exchange transparency. That means there is no foreign exchange transparency now and other people are benefiting from the lack of transparency because the Government of the day wanted that. They wanted to control who got foreign exchange and whose business survives. That is the reality of what we all live for 10 years. A government that created monopolies.

One organization in Trinidad controls all pharmaceutical imports in this country. That is a dangerous development. That should never have been allowed to take place. That should not have been allowed to take place now and we as a Government should pay attention to that. I had to fight a group of people that was living around a park—

Sen. Browne: Mr. President, Standing Order 46 (1), none of this is related to the Revenue Authority.

3.50 p.m.

Mr. President: Minister, I would ask you to just bring that TTRA matter, which is broad, and connect those dots. Thanks.

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Mr. President, I thank you very much but I do not know what the Senator is having a problem with there. But, we went through COVID. Trinidad and Tobago went through COVID and while some people could not bury or burn their dead or visit their mother on Mother's Day, other people had weddings in St. Clair.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Point of order, Mr. President.

Hon. Senator: 46(1).

Sen. Dr. Browne: Once again, Standing Order 46(1). I do not think this Senator has responded to your admonition.

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Mr. President, my relevance—

Mr. President: All right. All I am asking is that—We are dealing with the TTRA, I understand the points that you are making, however, link those points to the broad subject matter that is before us, please.

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Thank you. Mr. President, the point that I was trying to make is that heading to a semi-autonomous revenue authority could put the people of Trinidad and Tobago in danger.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: We have a report. We have a comment in the report from the same Prof. Mick Moore that everybody is quoting and he said:

It is very hard to assess the actual influence of semi-autonomous revenue authority boards.

I am just reading through you.

It seems reasonable to assume that Ministers almost have the capacity to override them if they committed to a particular outcome...

That is, weddings in St. Clair.

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander (cont'd)

But otherwise often find it convenient to give a semi-autonomous revenue authority management responsibility for many complex, technical and organizational issues. The early enthusiasts intended that semi-autonomous revenue authorities would not be funded by an annual legislative appropriation, but by a revenue source independent of Government, ideally a fixed percentage of tax collection. This arrangement is not common and raises practical problems.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Mr. President, I also want to deal with when— I was taking notes when Sen. Dhanpaul was speaking, and he said he is having difficulty trusting the hierarchy in the BIR. But you must trust the hierarchy in the Revenue Authority? What is the difference? Mr. President, it is our position on this side that the Board of Inland Revenue, as structured, provides sufficient safeguards as long as it remains under the public service, separate from the controls of the Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: We have gone around in circles to have that conversation. The Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, when she says the voice of the people is the voice of God, she is quoting that the power of a democracy rests with the people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: We cannot get away from that. My colleague has shown them that on both occasions that they forced this Revenue Authority on the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the people of Trinidad and Tobago fired them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: We are living up to the promises made on the campaign trail, and I want to say to you also that while things were happening in a very fluid fashion, you would remember, during this fast election—we were not expecting it so short—decisions were made, we were managing communications. But I remember when the Prime Minister herself announced—this is a political correspondence quote:

The UNC had, during the campaign for the April 28th general election, made security and legislative reform, including the repeal of the Revenue Authority Act, a priority.

So we would all be able to quote that you might have taken a position today, that you correct it tomorrow after investigation. More information, more people coming on board, and we are looking at it from the position of what the public wants. Because, that is what guided the election in April 28th, 2025, that we were very focused on listening to the people. And, the people have said repeatedly that they do not want government control of their revenue authority.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: So to come back and tell them that it works in Rwanda and South Africa is missing the point. This is Trinidad and Tobago and the people of Trinidad and Tobago have lived with a lot of these issues that we raised earlier and we have this information—I am sorry for the mess, it is a first time for me and I am new, before they have to tell me.

Hon. Senator: Not everybody has common sense.

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: At the end of the day.

Hon. Senator: No more than some others.

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Thank you for that. But going along this

investigation, just more and more information kept coming to us. Generally, a revenue authority is any tax administration, entity, that enjoys some measure of autonomy from the public service. It seems to us on this side that one of the major takeaways from the Board of Inland Revenue, to deliver a revenue authority, was to break labour contracts so that the Government could hire and fire who they pleased. When you could hire and fire whom you please. You could get them to do what you want, and that is how it works in this system.

Sen. Dhanpaul: *[Interruption]*

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Mr. President, we have another Bill coming up later that I will answer that in, because we have some information that I am sure he does not know we have. But the reality that faces us—

Sen. Dhanpaul: *[Interruption]*

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Well we have it. The reality that faces us as a nation, and I do not want to it be too long here, I want to be able to stand up and say to all of us here, the Opposition Bench, the Independent Bench, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, are taking their governance very seriously now. They are making their voices heard. They are either standing up and voting or standing down and not voting. We have seen an abandonment of the other side by their supporters, telling them that they do not agree with what they are doing. This time, all of us, every one of us, all of the people that we deal with on a daily basis, we are responsible to them. Sen. Lalite-Etienne said that. She said we have a collective responsibility; I could not agree more. We have a collective responsibility to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and that responsibility is to make sure that we continue to maintain safeguards that protect and deliver to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I watched a Joint Select Committee of a previous Parliament. The Comptroller of Customs and Excise Division was trying to explain to the then Government that the reason they could not secure the nation, that the reason 50 per cent of the container traffic coming into Trinidad or coming off the ports were unexamined was because they were unfunded and understaffed. He told them the revenue authority could solve that problem. You need to employ people and pay them to do the job.

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: And scanners that work.

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: And scanners that work.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: There is a lot of mischief at work here in these conversations, but we are certain that the solution—

[*Technical device goes off*]

Mr. President: The person whose device—could you leave the Chamber and come back in the next 10 minutes please. Yes, continue, please.

Sen. The Hon. P. Alexander: Mr. President, I will not take up too much more time, I think the point is made. We are very interested in delivering to the people of Trinidad and Tobago the kind of representation they were starved of for the last 10 years. They want a government that listens, that is responsive, that makes the quality of their lives a priority. We believe that paying attention, upgrading, reforming, staffing and funding the Board of Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise Division is what is required to take care of everything that we need to take care of where fund-raising and revenue generation is concerned.

Another issue that missed the other side that was not brought into this conversation—we keep hearing it passed over—revenue generation. We are an

oil-and-gas country. Like that is all we could ever be. No one spoke of diversifying the economy as a way to get us to a revenue generation that would increase past the problems that we have. The \$20 billion shortfall that we were told we are going to experience, this Government is very much focused on taking care of business from the point of view. So we will move forward with a proper diversified economy, with a country where the Board of Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise Division are properly funded and properly staffed to do the job that they were set up to do, so that the people could go about their own business safely and with confidence.

With those few words, I thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Allow me to extend congratulations to Sen. The Hon. Phillip Alexander, Minister in the Ministry of Housing, on his maiden contribution, please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: I recognize Sen. Al-Rawi—or, I now recognize Sen. Dr. Amery Browne.

Sen. Dr. Amery Browne: Thank you very much, Mr. President, for recognizing me. It is now 4.00 p.m. and it is my privilege and honour to join this significant and important debate in the Upper House of Parliament. We have had a number of contributions in this debate thus far, on what is a very short but very important Bill which seeks to repeal the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act and really turn back the clock on a significant volume of work that has already taken place.

Mr. President, I have listened very closely to some very enlightening and well-composed contributions from Senators. I will give a few examples: Sen.

Vieira, Sen. de la Bastide, Sen. Lewis, and Sen. Roberts-Radgman who gave her maiden contribution, among others. And, of course, the subject matter expert who happens to be sitting within the Bench of the People's National Movement Opposition, Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul, who really gave us a lecture and set a very robust framework for our examination of what is before us today. So all of them are highly educated and gave very rational contributions. And then, the speaker—well, Mr. President, in violation of the Standing Order that we should not speak and immediately leave the Chamber, of course, the speaker who just contributed has left the Chamber at this time.

Mr. President, I tried to listen closely to what was a very rambling and political contribution by the Member. Largely irrelevant, but we decided not to unduly disturb because it was the Senator's maiden contribution. Mr. President, it is clear that that Member has absolutely no experience in the public service of Trinidad and Tobago. Sorry?

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: *[Interruption]*

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Well, I am not going to refer to his education level. Absolutely no experience with the public service of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, but one of the points—and I really thought he was going to make a substantive point. I thought the Member was going to make a substantive point in referring to the contribution of Independent Senator de la Bastide who took his time to ask—He gave his own perspective, and he took his time to request of the Government some additional details in whoever would contribute next that would support some evolution in the thinking that a foundation has not properly been laid for the repeal of this Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act. That is what I heard Sen. de la Bastide taking the pains to request, which is not always a

feature of these debates.

So we gave the Government some insight into what it would take to persuade—he is not speaking on behalf of his Bench—but to persuade him in his independent mind to maybe consider more favourable what was being offered on the Government's side. So Sen. de las Bastide requested some details, take us into your confidence, some details of how the Government proposes to reform revenue collection in Trinidad and Tobago. And do you know what the Minister in the Ministry of Housing's response was to that, Mr. President? He quoted the request from Sen. de la Bastide, and this is what he said. "We have not gotten to that yet".

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: That is for later.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: "That is for later." Mr. President, now if that is the best response, the substantive response from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in a debate in which they require some support to achieve a desired outcome, then we must be very disappointed in how the Government has prepared to come to this Senate on this matter. We must be very disappointed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: So it is my hope in adding to this voice, not trying to ridicule or insult anyone, but to encourage the Government, whomever may subsequently speak on this matter, to respond with more rigour and robustness to that line of request. I do not think Sen. de la Bastide was on his own in listening to what has transpired and concluding that the Government needs to fortify their case more substantially. I do not think he was on his own in that regard.

4.10 p.m.

And we heard references to Rwanda and South Africa in what seemed to be a disparaging manner. But it is unfortunate that you would have an entire Bench, as

it were, asking for a strategy from the UNC Government, and there is response, basically, would be to indicate, “We have no such strategy. All we have come to do is repeal the TTRA.” Mr. President, we cannot be satisfied with that as an Upper Chamber in the Parliament of this country.

Mr. President, if you speak to any responsible businessperson in this society, they would tell you—well, they could tell you a lot of things—but they will tell you two things, and I have spoken to a number of them: One, for a serious businessman or businesswoman who wants to contribute their fair share to the revenues of Trinidad and Tobago via corporate taxation, the system as it currently stands is outdated, it is archaic and it is a nightmare to navigate.

The other thing they would tell you is that if you are not so minded, and if you are part of those who wish to not pay your fair share and avoid your corporate taxation responsibility, that same old, archaic system and weak framework of enforcement is a dream come true for you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: So, in all of that political exchange—some Members on the other side, not all, are in the practice of railing and ranting against the one per cent. I put it to you to, Mr. President, and I put to this Chamber, the measure this Government is bringing to this Senate today and the lack of rigour in which they have approached this debate, the absence of a strategy to really improve the Board of Inland Revenue and the Customs and Excise Division, they have presented no action plan, strategy or time frame today, plays completely into the hands of those, whether it is 1 per cent, 2 per cent, 3 per cent, 4 per cent, who are not serious about contributing their fair share to this economy. And the irony of it is, Mr. President—and Sen. Melanie Roberts-Radgman touched on it before—the very

same workers that our Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development speaks so passionately and eloquently about, are the same ones who are being cheated and denied the revenue support that they require, that we all require, for a properly functioning society.

So, in attempting to make a case for a few workers, what he and colleagues are, in fact, doing is dismantling a future for all workers and all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: That is irony in what has been presented today. And I listened very closely to Sen. Dhanpaul, who started our response on this Bench, a subject matter expert, uncontested by any of the subsequent speakers during the debate, who gave us an extensive history of this matter, which included significant consultation with all and sundry, all stakeholders and members of the national community, and he gave a comprehensive history as well of revenue administration in Trinidad and Tobago. And the basic summary, Mr. President, of that contribution is that we are way behind. We have been way behind for a significant period of time.

The other phrase that this fairly new Government likes to throw around is diversification; diversification. But, Mr. President, one of our former Ministers of Finance, who is now the Member for Diego Martin North/East in the other place, has reminded us that, practically, a government, the Treasury, really has two main sources of revenue. You could jump high. You could jump low. You could dance. You could sit down. You could stand up. One is the royalties from the petrochemical sector, and two, is taxation.

So, in the best-case scenario—and we wish, stridently, for the best-case

scenario—diversification unfolding further than maybe it has unfolded in the past; thriving new businesses, whether it is in artificial intelligence, technologies; and getting our young people more and more invested, fine. But at the end of the day, even if we are unable to achieve success along those avenues, if we are unable—as this Government seems unable to even contemplate—to modernize, and update, and make more rigorous and effective and efficient our revenue collection modalities, it would all be in vein because the same workers and the same ordinary people of Trinidad and Tobago will not benefit the way they should be benefiting.

And I have listened to the speakers on the Upper Bench, they have all been requesting of the Government an action plan, a schedule. Do not leave it for surmise, or speculation, or assumption. Just throwing a few phrases into every contribution, as the Minister in the Ministry of Planning and Economy, et cetera, close enough.

Mr. President: Minister of—

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Minister of—

Mr. President:—Planning—

Sen. Dr. A. Browne:—Planning and Economic Development—

Mr. President:—Economic Affairs—

Sen. Dr. A. Browne:—Economic Affairs—

Mr. President:—and Development—

Sen. Dr. A. Browne:—and Development, thank you, Mr. President. The Minister of that Ministry and that important sector, as he did, and others on that side did, just throwing a few phrases into your contribution does not a plan make. Just throwing phrases, such as beefing-up Inland Revenue, does not a plan make. Just throwing phrases such as, protecting data privacy, without building an argument or

building a case does not a persuasive presentation make.

So, I would have to say, if were to give a diagnosis thus far, the Government's case has fallen way short of what is acceptable, persuasive or appropriate—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne:—to even contemplate support for the dramatic and drastic measures that they have brought before this Senate today. And I look across at my most honourable colleague and the Attorney General, and I would have thought, at this stage in the debate, they might have become a bit concerned. They should be a bit concerned. So this is almost me giving some free advice across the Floor. Given the contributions thus far, Mr. President, and those with experience—I am going bring you into the debate—but those with experience would recognize, Mr. President, that we are heading for an impasse on a matter like this. And it would require—

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: Standing up and being counted.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Exactly. It would require, not just standing up and being counted, because we have got an example of that, just stand up. It would require—

Hon. Senator: I would take your advice.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: I am speaking through the President. It would require something more substantive, persuasive and of substance than has been offered thus far.

Mr. President, I can go through contribution after contribution, but let me start with Independent Sen. Vieira, who tabulated for us, verbally—painted a verbal picture of what exists now and what is envisioned for the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. And he gave what, from my interpretation, was a

scoreboard with respect to various attributes.

One, the BIR being an outdated model taking us back, ironically, to the colonial era; independence and pre-independence era. Again, I have to say, I felt a sense of irony that you have a trade unionist, maybe more than one, but one who is famous, standing here in the Senate today vigorously defending a colonial era model.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: And offering that to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. There must be some irony in that. So outdated versus modern. Response from the Government on that attribute, no response offered thus far. Fossilized and inflexible versus agile and responsive. I awaited a response on that attribute from the Government, something to persuade us otherwise, no response.

Paper-based—and very inefficient, admittedly inefficient, as established by Sen. Dhanpaul with crystal clarity—versus modern use of IT infrastructure, no response or persuasion from the Government.

Weak on enforcement, obviously, given our fiscal position, versus strong on enforcement, a particular focus on enforcement, no response from the Government. Non-autonomous versus better autonomy, and at least semiautonomous, no response or persuasion from the Government side.

So, Mr. President, we either have to assume that the Government really does not have the ammunition to persuade on this matter, or they are holding it for the very end of this exchange, which is a debate in this Senate today.

Mr. President, the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development stood after a series of strong contributions, appealing that we should listen to the Government's perspective. Sen. Alicia Lalite-Ettienne gave a historic

contribution here today, speaking off the cuff comfortably, speaking, also, on behalf of the ordinary citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who are concerned about the future of our economy. And I want to commend that particular contribution for those who might have trouble reading through and deciphering some of the heavy and substantive parliamentary language that would be deployed sometimes to really make good sense of what really is before us here today.

The only point that I was able to discern from the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development that might persuade some listeners is this: The UNC won the elections and we have a mandate to repeal the TTRA. That is the only point that could persuade some listeners. But, Mr. President, unfortunately, those listeners who could be persuaded by that and that alone should not be considered the right-thinking citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. That cannot persuade a rational, right-thinking thinking—and it was Sen. Lewis who said an election victory is not a blank cheque. An election victory is not a blank cheque.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Because in that case, we do not need a Lower House, we do not need an Upper House. All we need, Mr. President, is an autocratic government that has the power to simply implement any and everything that they want.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: The framers of our Constitution, and the father of our nation had a more enlightened view. And the test in this Chamber, you would have to persuade for a simple majority. You would have to persuade at least one Member on the other side of this aisle, Mr. President, on any matter that you wish to succeed with in this Senate.

So, if you are to go with the view that the Government has a blank cheque

and any policy that they conceive, because they won an election, they can implement unfettered for five years, that is a rejection of our parliamentary system in and of itself. So, I would want to say to the Leader of Government Business and any other Member who was engaging in crosstalk a short while ago that “vox populi, vox Dei” does not apply to the automatic approval of government policy and government Bills in this Red House. You have to come better than that, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: You must come better than that. And I heard—so that was the semi-persuasive part. Then it went to weak, weak points, even reaching back in the health sector to say that what preceded the regional health authorities was better than what we have now. It appeared to me that that was the case that the Minister was making, which is a complete disconnect from the reality that many of us who have worked in the public health system would have lived and experienced.

So, while the health service—and I am responding to the point that the Minister made. While the system is miles from perfect, today, I can say that there have been significant improvements.

Hon. Senator: Such as?

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Significant improvements. If only—

Hon. Senator: Such as?

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, I am going to request that Members who had the opportunity to contribute and did not disturb the scorers should be quiet at this time.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you for your guidance, Mr. President. So, with respect, even with the ability to recruit modern, trained registrars, consultants, house officers, pharmacists and other disciplines in a modern framework of a human resource engagement, what we currently have is light years better than what we left behind.

So, if anyone were to come to this Senate to make a case for the colonial model of governance, and that we should remain fettered to those systems, that is completely out of place within the CARICOM context and completely out of place with the future requirements of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Maybe the next speaker would make a case to go back to BWIA from Caribbean Airlines or retract from any of the advancements. It is almost like—

Hon. Senator: Lyle and Tate.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne:—Lyle and Tate. It is an anti-progress case that the Government has placed here before us today. And I do not understand how they can—we have modern vessels serving the inter-island sea bridge. Would they want to back to the *Gelting* and the *Teisten*? Because that is the metaphor. That is the parallel that their lack of logic is taking them—that is the direction they are taking them down today, Mr. President.

4.30 p.m.

You have to make a proper case. Bad talking the previous administration does not a proper case make. Simply bad talking the Government that was removed from office, does not a persuasive case make and the Government needs to be reminded that they are not just speaking to an Opposition Bench, there are other voters in this parliamentary system that require persuasion. And therefore, simply a highly polarized political party-type repartee does not usually do the job

in the Senate. So, I do not know if you would file it under free advice, but I will file it under a warning because we already had the debate on the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill, 2025, which did not go well for the Government. And here we find ourselves with another heavy piece of legislation with serious implications and I do not think this Government is taking it sufficiently seriously. I do not think they are taking it with sufficient seriousness.

So, Mr. President, there is a solution available to the Government, so this is a suggestion. There is the option of suspending progress on this particular Bill. There is the option, going back and doing some more homework, coming with the action plan, a schedule and a substantive strategy as has been requested by a range of Speakers here and to return with more substantive case that may actually have a chance of succeeding the basic constitutional test that has been built in to this Senate. Failure to do so could result in, well, maybe success for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the delay of a measure that we consider to be potentially disastrous. But we have always said, we want the Government to succeed, we want that Government to do well because when they do well, Trinidad and Tobago does well.

It is my respectful view that their approach in this matter does not take us in the right direction and that is consistent with a number of the other Speakers who have contributed thus far.

Throwing money at the problem, Mr. President, throwing money at the Board of Inland Revenue, obviously, obviously will not make a difference. If that were the case, then all of these decades of inefficiency would not be confronted today, so therefore, you must have a more sophisticated approach than that. And that really is the test that has been put to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago

today, and I do not believe—thus far, the jury might still be out—that it is a test that they have passed, thus far.

So, Mr. President, I just want very briefly to go through section 6(1) of existing Act, which has sub-salient points:

- (1) It treats with: “the assessment and collection of taxes under the revenue laws;”
- (2) It treats with: “the administration of the revenue laws;”
- (3) It treats with: “the enforcement of...”—those—“...revenue laws;”
- (4) And I do not think we have stressed on that sufficiently: “the enforcement of border control measures subject to any other written law;”
- (5) “...the provision of revenue collection services to any statutory or other body...”—for the collection of—“...public monies; and
- (6) the facilitation of legitimate trade.”

And number 7, advising the Government on matters related to taxation.

The Government would have to indicate where those modalities, facilities and areas of strength would come from if this TTRA is repealed all altogether, if they reset the clock and take us back to that old colonial model. Reversing considerable expenditure that has already occurred, reversing considerable implementation work that was already undertaken, and confronting us with the same dilemma that we considered way back in 2002 and even before that. How do you modernize a revenue administration and collection framework that has been extremely resistant to change? We were listening. We got no answer except for the few items—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: [*Senator laughs*] —of rhetoric. So, Mr. President, the debate is not over. I just wanted to intervene, and I would not call it free advice. But to clarify the stakes to the Government in a debate of this nature, because I got the impression that those stakes were not sufficiently clear at this stage. And whether it is a citizen in Tobago listening to these exchanges, citizens located in Trinidad, members of our diaspora abroad, even within the Caribbean community, many of whom are quite familiar with a more modern and efficient system and who look at us and what we are discussing now with some degree of anxiety to hinge it all on an election promise, which has been cast in doubt based on one Senator's contribution on this Bench, based on the "minifesto" there is room for adjustment, in course, by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago at this stage.

I would recommend that this repeal not be put to a vote unless a clear action plan for an alternative route to improve revenue collection is presented to each and every Senator in fairness to our role, individual and as a Bench under the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and in respect to the basic test that every item of legislation must pass before being approved by a Senate under our current system. In the absence of that, it is difficult, Mr. President, to contemplate any Member of this Bench giving support to this measure and in listening even to the Independent voices that are present, it is difficult to contemplate that such support might be forthcoming at all. Mr. President, with these few words, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Courtney Mc Nish, I think you are next. Sen. Mc Nish.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Courtney Mc Nish: Thank you very much, Mr. President, for recognizing me. I think it is in order that I do, as it is my maiden contribution, offer to you, Mr. President, my own congratulations for your election to the position of President of this Upper House.

I have two declarations to make, Mr. President, before I make by contribution. In my business, disclosure or declaration cures conflict. I know very well Senators who sit in the Government Bench. I know very well beforehand Senators that sit in the Opposition Bench. That is not a conflict for me and therefore how I cast my vote has nothing to do with who I know, who I am aligned it, it has to do with my own conscience as an Independent Senator.

My second declaration is that sometime in the second half of last year, my firm, Human Resource Management Company Limited, along with three other specialist recruitment companies, were engaged by the TTRA to assist the TTRA in filling critical vacancies in order to operationalize its movements. So I was involved as the Managing Director of my company in pursuing the offering of those services to this organization and I think it is necessary that I declare this before the Senate.

This debate is almost running on fumes, Mr. President, and to say I am disappointed may be an understatement. I think I feel a little disrespected too. The Government has come to ask me to just say yes to repeal a piece of legislation without providing me, I am saying me, not the Bench, me, about what is their thought behind it. Why is it necessary to repeal it? What am I going to be doing to replace

it, if at all? But I should just say, yes, I agree to repeal it? That makes no sense to me. It makes absolutely no sense to me. What makes no sense to me also,

Mr. President, is why would a Government Minister or a Senator on the Government side throw to the face of an Independent Senator a mandate that he has received or the party has received from the elections? What consideration is that for an Independent Senator? That is not, as I understand it, why there is an Independent Bench. I understand the Independent Bench's role is to apply conscience and to give consideration to measures before this House; to say yay or nay to them in the strict advancement of the development of the country, in the interest of the country. So I do not have a political interest, and if this Bill is to be considered, then as I told my colleague, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, smells like a duck and tastes like a duck, it is a duck."

So since the Government side has not come with any substantive reasons in my view, then this Bill in my view is simply to satisfy an election campaign promise, and I find that disrespectful. I listened to the comments and the arguments and it is running on fumes. I was not here at the Senate on Monday, so I went to YouTube to hear what Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh said when he moved the Bill. He raised several points and the first one I picked up was that the TTRA Act:

"...eroded the constitutional doctrine of the separation of powers."

I went to where I thought I could have gotten the information, I was not here. If this was not said, then I stand corrected. I find this strange, Mr. President, as this matter went through the High Court, the Appeal Court, it reached the Privy Council, and we know what the ruling of the Privy Council was in September last year. It was not unconstitutional. It did not abridge the separation of powers and the constitutional rights of the public servants were not breached. Again, I am reading from what was in the public domain, as published as the words and

justifications by the Minister. He said that the TTRA forced a split and that it created a dual system over roles, terms and conditions. But that is not strange. That is not strange.

I have worked in manufacturing for years and when a company commissions a new piece of equipment, it does not cut one off and start one. They run parallel systems for a while to ease transition so all systems also can be debugged before they move over to the new system. So to me, if a dual system is created it is one that is based purely on time and it is temporary and it is transitional. I have also read the strategic plan—

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, 42(9).

Mr. President: 49, what you said?

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: 42(9).

Mr. President: 42(9), yeah. We will do that after the contribution of the Senator.

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: I just want to clarify something.

Mr. President: Yeah. When he is through. Continue please.

Sen. C. Mc Nish: Thank you very much, Mr. President. This strategic plan, Mr. President, my research has suggested or indicated that it was completed sometime in late 2022 and it was brought before the Parliament in February 2023. So it was approved by Parliament, it was considered by both Houses. And therefore, it was well known and established that the plan looked at all the intended deficiencies, systems, and challenges that will be faced—

Mr. President: Just a point of clarification. The strategic plan was just simply tabled. It was not debated. It was not discussed. So, it was just tabled. So it was never considered by the Senate.

4.50 p.m.

Sen. C. Mc Nish: Thank you for edification, Mr. President. But if it was tabled, Mr. President, then it can be correctly assumed that Members had sight of it, at least. Correct? Right. Thank you very much, Sir.

So if the plan was indeed read, as I think it was, the obligation of Members to have read the plan, they would have understood, Mr. President, the layout of the plan, what it looked at, what it intended to achieve and what timeline. It was not like instant coffee. It is a process. It is a process, a dual process at times so that transition can be as seamless as possible. That is how these things are done. That is the way I know they are done. So therefore, to indicate that there was a split system, is superfluous. It does not make sense, that is what. It is. It is a dual system until such time as the transition process is completed. And, as I have read, Mr. President, these transition periods last 10 years.

We have had similar transitions in this country before. The Minister of Labour spoke about the regional health authority. I am of the age where I clearly remember 1994, 1995. PSA was really against the creation of these regional health authorities. There were protests. People would lose their service in the public service. As a young industrial relations professional at that point in time, I myself was confused, but I recognized what the objective was. The objective was to decentralize the dispensation of health services in the country in a manner that was intended to be more efficient. That was the objective. And, if that objective is bad or wrong, then I do not know where we will be going. The PSA's objection to it, and I understood that also, people's service, their security of tenure, these are about nurses, ward maids, et cetera, et cetera. Today 31, 32 years afterwards, the regional health authorities are well established institutions. I have had cause to use them, and I can compare before 1994, '95, and today, the transition period between

the two systems was not yesterday, it was about 15 years. That is how these systems operate, Mr. President.

I also considered the point raised by the hon. Minister where he said, or has been reported to have said, that it has not been proven that putting revenue collection outside of the public service has led to an increase in revenues. And, I know he said that because this is also being said by other representatives on the Government side, and I agree with it. I agree it is not proven, but that is not the question, is it? Is it not the question, will this be a better system than the one that we have now? That, to me, is the question, and we have had success right on our doorsteps. Our neighbour Barbados. Let me just track a bit.

Some people speak about the tax gap. I do not speak about the tax gap. I speak about tax to GDP ratio. That is how the IMF, the World Bank, that is how everybody measures it. The tax gap could be numbers. The tax to GDP ratio is simple; what percentage of tax you collect against your gross domestic product. Between Barbados' introduction, implementation and commencement of their revenue authority to today, they have had a 7 per cent increase in their tax to GDP ratio. That is a fact. It is a fact.

Jamaica. Jamaica implemented it in 2011. So, let us look at the year before 2011, 2010. From 2010 to now, 15 years, they have seen an average increase in their tax to GDP ratio from 24.9 per cent to 29.3 per cent. The opposite however applies to Guyana. So it works in some places and it does not work in others. It is not a prescriptive smoking gun that guarantees success. It is our commitment to the process as a people and an agency that will secure the success.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. C. Mc Nish: In that statement, Mr. President, the Minister claimed that in a

2010 the IMF working paper spoke to the risks of introducing semi-autonomous revenue authorities, and that they seem not to work if we cannot fix the failing system of the legacy arrangement. That makes sense. That makes sense. But we are in 2025 and this is a 2010 report. Their reports are much later. There are 2024 reports. In the 2024, IMF Article IV report on Trinidad and Tobago that is an IMF country report 24150. The IMF—this is last year's report—praised the TTRA's implementation and projected improvements in domestic revenue mobilization; praised. It stated, and I quote:

“The authorities have made substantial progress in improving tax administration and compliance. The Ministry of Finance is in the process of staffing and operationalizing the revenue authority which will improve domestic revenue mobilization.”

This is last year. That is the IMF. So, I would say, Mr. Minister, far from unproven, the Revenue Authority is recognized by the IMF as a legitimate and impactful reform. It is a reform intended to address inefficiencies in the current system, inefficiencies which will be difficult to overcome if you continue to use the traditional legacy civil service structure.

There are several reports, Mr. President, several reports that speak to and they have been quoted here, many of them have been quoted here, that speak to the fact that this system of reform is progressive and transitional, and it does not present any country with a prescriptive one-shot record fix all. It does not provide that.

The Minister also spoke about the TTRA creating more problems than it solved. To me, this implied that the TTRA was problematic. He said that it decimated staff and the morale at the BIR. I do not know where he got that

information from. Was there an employee survey conducted that went to question what had happened with morale? What is happening with enthusiasm? I am unaware. But what I am sure is how the Act is framed. To me, it secures the employment, the permanent employment, of all the public officers working at both Customs and Excise, as well as the Board of Inland Revenue. The model to secure the employment of these individuals is not new. It happened with the RHAs.

But I also agree with the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development that the risk it runs is, as the whole system progresses, people will start moving from permanent, full-time to what you have a set of contractual, short-term or fixed-term term. That is something we have to fix now in this country. I am absolutely against that. We do not have to wait and treat with the issues of our Revenue Authority to fix what I consider to be undesirable employment practices.

The Minister also stated that the Revenue Authority of Barbados particularly faced a problem integrating—particularly Customs about our revenue. There are some systems, Mr. President, where the integration or operating the system outside of the public service has only been related to the Inland Revenue side of revenue collection, leaving the enforcement side separate and attached directly to the public service. That has been a model that has been used. It is not a model that this Act followed, but it is something that if this Government really wishes to move away from the legacy system, that it could consider, if it sees it in the interest of the country, instead of repealing to amend the provisions of the current legislation.

I think the Minister mischaracterized the experience of Barbados. He did. He did. You were talking about a 10-year experience. In 2023, the IMF had a full report particularly concentrating on technical assistance. It spells out that this

assistance being used by the Barbados Revenue Authority, particularly towards its large taxpayer unit. It is used to enhance audit functions, to modernize IT and refund processes, to reduce tax arrears, all but boosting the integrated back-office systems. The Inter-American Development Bank is also funding US \$200,000 for technical cooperation with the Barbados Revenue Authority to strengthen governance and its digital capability. This is how you get compliance. Compliance is not by coercion. You “doh” jail people or fine people. Compliance is normally voluntary and is supported by the ease of doing business. And, the ease of doing business cannot be achieved without it being a completely digital environment.

I smile when I looked at this statement the Minister made, talking about IT neglect. But I agree with him. The GenTax system currently used by the Board of Inland Revenue is not eight modules behind. It is 11. It is older than my father who died years ago. Several of its modules have never been commissioned. Who do we blame for that? Who do we blame for that? There was no will. There was no will by the PNM administration to fix that. Will the current administration fix it?

Hon. Senator: *[Interruption]*

Sen. C. Mc Nish: What? Would you spend the money upgrading? Well, then why do you not come and tell us this? Why you do not come and tell us this?

Sen. Swaratsingh: I will say it again. I will say it again.

Sen. C. Mc Nish: Okay. Thanks. Will you modernize it? I “aint” finish.

Sen. Swaratsingh: Yes.

Sen. C. Mc Nish: There are other systems available. The strategic plan spoke to that. The strategic plan that Members here would have, could have and is available to be read spoke to making the assessment with respect to both GenTax and

ASYCUDA, recognizing the system is probably just as good as being manual. So, yes, there has been neglect of the IT system, but it is certainly the plan written or just laid in Parliament that it is known that the system was outmoded and outdated. And the plan, as I read in the strategic plan, is to make the assessment, get the equipment, get the upgraded modules and train the people. That is how we implement it.

Now implementing a new system could take 10 years, five years, six years. It is not a silver bullet. It is a process, Mr. President. It is a process. What is good about this? We can get funding for this? This could be free to the tax paying nation. If we are committed seriously to making tax administration and tax collection efficient, then we cannot help but seek to explore these opportunities. We cannot achieve any improvement in the ease of doing business, efficiency in tax collection, increase rates of tax to GDP without seriously modernizing the digital systems available both at the Inland Revenue and at Customs and Excise.

5.10 p.m.

Mr. President, this is fumes and if the Government was serious about getting support from me to repeal this, they cannot come and ask me to do it without a plan. What is the plan you are going to use? What are the strategies? What are you going to put in place? If you are going to keep the legacy BIR up, that is fine, it is your choice, but they need to be improved. How are you going to improve it? I would suggest that you come back with a plan and I will support you. You come back with a plan to state how you are going achieve this and I can consider—I will consider supporting you in repealing the Act. But to ask me to throw out the baby out with the bathwater just so, with nothing, I think it is a little disrespectful. I really think so, Mr. President.

I am not here to worship anybody's election mandate, sorry. I am not a politician. I am a patriot. So I really shrug off any issues of politics. I am prepared to do what is the best I see for the nation. I will vote for anything that I view is developmental for the nation. So it even includes, Mr. President, repealing this Act, but I need more. I need to see what this Government intends to replace it with, how they intend to prove, what are the systems they want to put in place. I take my rest, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: I would like to congratulate Sen. Courtney Mc Nish on his maiden contribution in this debate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: I will now call on Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh to—

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: No, “ent” you wanted to invoke 42(9)?

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, please. Thank you.

Mr. President: Two minutes. Just clarify.

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, I could always do it in my wrap-up as well. I can do it in my wrap-up, or do you want me to do it now?

Mr. President: No, I am asking you, if you want to clarify now, you can do it now or if you want do it—

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: I will do it in the wrap-up, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Okay.

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you.

Mr. President: Okay, well, I will now call on the other speaker. Is it—

Hon. Senator: Sen. Murray.

Mr. President: Oh, Sen. Dr. Desirée Murray. Sen. Murray.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Desirée Murray: Thank you, Mr. President. I have taken the time to read Act No. 17 of 2021, and after reviewing it carefully, I want to be sure that the decision to repeal the Act is based on sound information, clear reasoning and what is in the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I want to be sure that it is for the public good.

So, I listened closely to the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development as he moved the Bill, and also to Sen. Dhanpaul, and one point stood out to me. They both confirmed something that should be of concern to every taxpaying citizen of this country, and every law-abiding citizen of this country. That while many of us pay our taxes faithfully, there are many tax evaders and billions of dollars in revenue are lost as a result. That money could be used to fund roads, schools, health care and social services for the vulnerable in society.

I am not a chartered accountant. I am not a legal expert. I am not an economist. I am not a human resource person. My profession is medicine but I understand that losing billions of dollars in revenue, whether you refer to it as a tax gap or a tax-to-GDP ratio, that is a big problem. I get that. So, sometimes these complex issues are best broken down into an analogy that everybody can understand. Sen. Lalite-Etienne and Sen. Lewis gave examples, and I want to add to that.

So, let me turn to an everyday issue. Picture this. A family of five inherits an old family home from their deceased father. So, they have a limited amount of money to update or improve the family home. There are five children and they do the responsible thing. They get two quotes from two contractors, but here is the issue. One contractor says, “You can renovate it.” The other contractor says, “Demolish and rebuild.” So there are five children and they hold a family

discussion and a vote, and the vote at that time is in favour of demolish and rebuild. So they proceed to demolish, but halfway through the demolition, some change their mind and now they decide that we want to renovate, even though previously they had decided they would demolish.

So, the dilemma is the demolition has already started, even though there is now a change of heart. So, large parts of old structure have already been dismantled. Whether one agrees or not how we got to this point, the fact is this is where we are today. So, again, the family has a difficult choice to make. The options are, continue to rebuild because we have already dismantled, or occupy, or reoccupy the partially demolished building and restore it. Those are the options.

So, hon. Members, let us stop talking about houses, because I do not want to invoke any Standing Orders, and let us talk about the administration of the tax system and the Bill the repeal the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority.

We have already heard from almost every speaker before me about the state of the Inland Revenue Division and the Customs and Excise Division. I think most people are in agreement. This is not partisan issue, this is a practical issue in my mind. I am a scientist. So the TTRA was introduced as a structural rebuild to modernize revenue collection, improve efficiency, reduce interference and future-proof the tax system. It has not been fully operationalized but the fact that is that it has already been introduced. We cannot change that fact, so let us move on. Perhaps, the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise's reference to us as "comrades" evokes the phrase, "Forward ever, backward never," which is often attributed to Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister and the first President of Ghana.

The way we manage public revenue affects every citizen, our health,

education, social support for the vulnerable and the future of our children. Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Zola Phillips

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Zola Phillips: Mr. President, I take this opportunity to congratulate you on your election to the position of President of the Senate. May God continue to bless and guide you as you serve.

Mr. President, hon. Senators, listening public. I am honoured to contribute to this vital debate on the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority (Repeal) Bill, 2025. I express sincere gratitude to Her Excellency the President of Trinidad and Tobago Christine Carla Kangaloo, ORTT, for affording me the privilege of speaking in this esteemed Chamber.

This is no routine legislative exercise. What we deliberate today strikes at the core of how our nation collects, manages and safeguards public revenue. It builds directly on constitutional oversight, the creditability of our institutions and perhaps, most importantly, the trust reposed in us by the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This moment resonates far beyond this Chamber. It speaks to the next generation, young citizens across this country, from our university lecture halls to communities grappling with economic hardship.

I take a moment to recognize or acknowledge all higher education students, including my past and present criminology and criminal justice students at the University of the Southern Caribbean who are following this process closely. You are not mere observers, you are the inheritors of the decisions we make today. Mr. President, in my contribution, I will seek to make four brief points.

My first point addresses the purpose and impact of the repeal. Mr. President, the stated rationale of this Bill is clear. The Government has cited concerns over specialist reports, which highlight constitutional validity, threats to the independence of the Public Service Commission and insufficient transition of staff. They argue that the creation of the TTRA undermined the traditional safeguards that regulate the public service and exposed workers to uncertainty, limited recourse and excessive discretion under contract employment.

Point two: What we risk losing. As we weigh the merits of repeal, we must also weigh the cost of reversal. In a country where our deficit this year has already surpassed \$4billion, we must ask ourselves, can we afford to go backward without a comprehensive plan forward? The TTRA, whatever its flaws, was designed to bring modern systems, data integration and professional enforcement mechanisms to our tax and customs operations. Repeal, if done in isolation, risks returning us to our system where revenue leakage, evasion and administration inefficiency prevail.

Point three: Why this debate matters to students and citizens. Mr. President, allow me to frame the significance of this moment beyond these walls. For the students, USC, UWI, UTT, COSTAATT, et cetera, and for the general public, this is a living case study in public sector reform. Students of law, criminology, economics, political science and governance are seeing in real time how constitutional frameworks, institutional designs and political accountability intersect.

This debate affects national revenue, and by extension, education budgets, research funding and graduate job prospects. It is about tax fairness and public trust. Young citizens want a system where compliance is rewarded, and evasion,

especially by the powerful, is not tolerated. It is a lesson in constitutional checks and balances. The courts have upheld the legality of the TTRA model, demonstrating that reform and legality can coexist. This debate is a test of public engagement. It is a moment for citizens to witness that reform is not an elite exercise, it is national work.

My final point: Pathways forward. We must ask, is there is way to balance constitutional fidelity, labour rights and the efficiency the TTRA aimed to deliver? There is, in my opinion. We have two clear pathways. Option one, reconstitute a reformed Revenue Authority that includes stronger worker protections, statutory independence and public transparency. As my colleagues all shared, Barbados and Guyana show that it is possible.

Option two, strengthen the BIR and Customs directly. This requires urgent reforms, investment in modern auditing tools, targeted recruitment and retention strategies, digitization of tax and customs records, integration of systems across agencies. In either case, we must publish a clear roadmap and implement measurable outcomes that restore performance and public confidence.

As I conclude, Mr. President, I do not view the repeal as inherently wrong or right. I view it as incomplete. Repealing the TTRA without a replacement plan, without immediate and tangible institutional upgrades, risks doing more harm than good. Let us take this opportunity not to walk backward into the past, but to walk forward into reform, guided by evidence, inclusive dialogue and a deep sense of fiscal responsibility. If we want to restore trust in governance, especially among the educated youth, we must prove that Parliament is a place, not just of politics but of purpose. Let this repeal be the start of reform, not the end of ambition. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Thank you. I think it is a good time for us to take a tea break and I will like to propose that we return at around quarter past six, at which time we will continue this debate. This Sitting is now suspended until 6.15 p.m.

5.27 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

6.15 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. President: The hon. Attorney General.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Attorney General (Sen. The Hon. John Jeremie SC): Mr. President, it has been some time since I have last spoken in the Senate, but I cannot say that this is my first time. Mr. President, I rise to support my colleagues on this side in this debate this afternoon on the repeal of the Revenue Authority Bill. Now, the Bill once passed would repeal the TTRA Act of 2021, on the date fixed by the President by proclamation for it to come into effect. The hon. Prime Minister stated in the Lower House that Cabinet will advise the President on the date of proclamation.

Now in the other place, the Minister of Finance indicated that the TTRA, and this is just to give Members an appreciation of where we are this evening. The TTRA, that is the Revenue Authority, is now in the process of being wound up as there are many matters still to be dealt with, including the passing of secured tax information on private citizens from the Revenue Authority back to the Board of Inland Revenue. So it is not until those matters have been properly addressed that the Bill will come into—well the Act when we pass it, is legislation, but would only come into effect on the day that it is fixed by proclamation for that.

Now, the history of the Bill is interesting. In the TTRA Act the Minister of

Finance in 2023, in respect of the TTRA Act on February 24th of 2023, said in the other place that:

“The decision to establish the TTRA was driven by the need to address the deficiencies in the current system, stemming from the limitation within the public service.”

Now it is in that speech that he went on to say that:

“...with an estimated...domestic tax gap of up to \$10 billion. The Government, through the”—revenue authority—“is actively seeking to address...fiscal vulnerability...close the tax gap by improving the”—tax—“efficiency and efficacy of the country’s revenue collection.”

Now, of course, increased revenue for the State and enhanced efficiencies as the Minister put it, those appeared to be the primary grounds for creating the TTRA. And one would have no difficulty with saying that those are legitimate as basis for legislature. But the problem is that legislation does not in and of itself create ideal states. And the Revenue Authority, in particular, if you look at the legislation that the State itself, sorry, if you look at the affidavit that the State itself put in to defend this legislation, the State was forced to concede a number of things. And importantly among of those things is one of the matters that is stated here, that there is a need for enhanced deficiencies and increased revenue from the TTRA.

Now, much has been made of the affidavit of Svetlana Dass, which put in the expert report of Prof. Moore. I would not repeat any of the concessions and there were significant concessions which were made by Prof. Moore in those proceedings, the Dhoray proceedings in the Privy Council. But, just for the record, Prof. Moore in the Dhoray matter, and this is on the State’s evidence, Prof. Moore

stated that the creation of a revenue authority does not in and of itself, and it has been repeated here ad nauseam this afternoon, it does not ensure that there would be increased revenue streams. And if that is so, Mr. President, one has to ask the question, well, why are we doing this. Why are we creating a revenue authority? With respect, that is the question that the Government did not address.

The Government in respect to the TTRA never addressed the question, why are we creating a revenue authority if we conceive the point that it is not going to result necessarily in an increased revenue stream. Mr. President, that is a fundamental problem. It is a problem of identity. If you do not know why you are legislating, invariably the legislation does not succeed. That sort of ambivalence and disquiet in the mind of legislators usually undermines the legislation that is produced. And with respect to the Revenue Authority, that is precisely what took place.

Now, if you look at—I said, I was at pains to tell the House this afternoon where exactly we are in respect of the Revenue Authority. It is not functional, it is being wound up, it is not doing work at this time. So the question this evening is, what do we do going forward? It is not a question, the question that is before us is not, what is an ideal State? If you look at where we are now, this is an experiment which has failed. Workers, the human resources, which are necessary to run any bureaucracy, they have not embraced the Revenue Authority. Very few persons have actually moved to the Authority. So that we are really giving the quietus to an experiment that has not succeeded.

Now, it is important to say that at the outset, because a number of the contributions, particularly from the Independent Bench, in my respectful view, failed to appreciate that what we are doing this afternoon is a question of—we are

answering a question, a fundamental question of direction. Where do we go based on the fact that as of today, Friday, the last Friday in June, 2025, the Revenue Authority has failed? Where do we go? And the Government respectfully looking at its own position, looking at what has been the experience of the Revenue Authority, looking at the options which are there in the Board of Inland Revenue right now and making an executive decision is saying we are going to fix the Board of Inland Revenue. That is a legitimate executive decision for us to say we are going fix the Board of Inland Revenue, the only institution that has worked in this country, that is a fact. The TTRA has not worked, it is there, but it has not worked, we are going to fix the Board of Inland Revenue, that is our choice, and in doing that, it is necessary for us to move resources from the TTRA back to the Board of Inland Revenue and to put the TTRA back to sleep. And that is the purpose of the Bill this afternoon.

Now, some contributions have also spoken, one or two from the Independent Bench, of the decision of the Privy Council in Dhoray. Now, it is important for us to understand, to appreciate that the Privy Council is not writing a revenue law for us. That is our job. We are the ones who write a revenue law. There is a challenge to the law, you go to court. What the Privy Council did was to say, listen, this law does not fail on these constitutional grounds, that is all they said. And the lawyers in the back, in particular—the lawyers in the back—will appreciate that. They said if one is to be honest that we have some misgivings about this institution but that those misgivings are perhaps for another day. And that is the responsible thing to do. Their job is not to come here and make a revenue law for us, they are not endorsing this revenue law and it would be dishonest for any person in this Senate to say that that is what they did in the

Dhoray case. That is intellectually dishonest.

In Dhoray, the Privy Council says the legislation does not fail for these reasons, that is it. Now, if we as legislators and the fact is—I mean I am not sure why Members were so upset about my colleague saying we have won an election, we have.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: It is our job to govern, that is our job and governance require us to look, and me in particular, to look at what we have done before and to make an assessment, a recommendation to my colleagues as to the way forward. And I am sorry, the Privy Council does not ever tell us and it does not get to tell us how to legislate. Never does. So, we made a legislative choice and the choice is reflected in the legislation that is before us this afternoon. As I have said that legislation contain just a few clauses, and all that it says apart from the title to the Bill, the operative part says, the Revenue Authority is no more. We put it to death. That is what we do. We put it to death in this piece of legislation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Vieira SC: Thank you hon. AG. Sorry to interrupt you, but may I just ask a question. Couple of Senators on this side have suggested that we would really like to hear more about Government's plans and so the question is, whether there is a possibility that we could either send this to a joint select committee, interview all the stakeholders, take the evidence and say that what the Government doing is the wiser, better choice or suspend and come back with that data and information. Would Government be open to either of those suggestions?

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: Mr. President, I think that we on this side are anxious to get on with it. Now we appreciate the fact that sometimes governance

require us to move slower rather than faster. But this afternoon is not one of those times we feel.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: We have an important task before us. There is a huge budget deficit this year. The goals that the Minister of Finance set in the debate in the other place, the then Minister of Finance, of increased revenue from taxation. That is something that we think is an urgent necessity and the concession that he have made, or that the State made on that case is one that we do not think that we can make today. So that we do not think that—I am not going back to the affidavit, I am not going back to the expert evidence, but if there expert on the revenue authority says, this is not even probable that this would result in increased revenues. If their experts said that in that case and I think the affidavit was filed, if my memory serves me correctly, on the 28 of February?

Hon. Senators: 2023.

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: 2023. If their expert said that in 2023, we take their expert at his word that this is not even likely to result in an enhanced revenue. As Government we want something now that is going to carry us to a position where we can enhance our revenue. We have a \$9 billion hole in our budget from the last year. Eleven-twelfths of that, 90 per cent of that, is at the feet of my colleagues and friends, most of them are, on that side of the aisle. That is where we are. We have a decision to take and it is urgent, we have been entrusted with a responsibility to govern, we are not afraid to take up that responsibility and to make the best of our difficult circumstances.

And for us that means this afternoon that we entrust what we conceive to be a core governmental function. We entrust that function to the only institution that

has carried out that function in Trinidad and Tobago, has done so, I say with some mixed success, but even in that by us conceding that they have had mixed success we recognized that there is an urgent need as well for us to improve the activities at the Board of Inland Revenue. My colleague with responsibility for finance, planning and the Board of Inland Revenue I am sure he will make some of those points a little later.

The Cabinet has taken a number of decisions with respect to how we go forward with the Board of Inland Revenue. Most of those decisions do not require legislative fix. They are transfers, administrative acts and so on, and they require a commitment, a governmental commitment and we are prepared to make that commitment. Now, it is not my job this afternoon to repeat any of the arguments made by my colleagues, and my friend in the Ministry of Finance is better able to make the arguments for the Board of Inland Revenue. I am the Government's lawyer. I look at legislative options, I look at case law, I see what judges have to say about cases and I mean, it confounds me that 65 years almost, after independence, people are still looking to the Privy Council as if they are some deity in somewhere. So that just because the Privy Council has looked, and that is exactly what they have done, they have glimpsed at the legislation.

6.35 p.m.

And they themselves have said, this is not the time, the place, the argument, for us in this place. We automatically say, well, that is good law. It is not. And, they themselves have said, listen, we have some concerns, but we did not write the law. You all are an independent State. It is the business of the Executive and the Legislature to enact law. If somebody feels aggrieved, or they wish to challenge the law, then they do so. And, the Privy Council answers the challenge in a

measured way, recognizing that this is—governance in Trinidad and Tobago is for us, not for them. [*Mobile device goes off*]

Mr. President: Can somebody switch off that phone? Please, I have said it over and over. Continue hon. Attorney General.

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: Now, there are a couple of heads that the debate has sort of coalesced around in this place. So, revenue and enhanced revenue collection is one, human resources, IT systems, and the question of independent institutions; those are three other heads.

Now, for the very reasons I say that we have concluded that the TTRA is not the fix to our revenue problem, and the reason for that is the evidence which was put in by their experts in a challenge to the TTRA legislation. Remember, they are defending the legislation. And, even in defending the legislation, they make the concession, listen, this legislation is not going to necessarily result in an increased revenue take. We see that that is a fatal concession, and on that basis alone, you move away from the TTRA. But, there are other reasons.

The Minister of Labour has said that with respect to human resources, he has told us what his experience was or is with respect to the TTRA and the human resources, which we all recognize is an issue for tax collection. And the fact is that workers did not move or gravitate towards the TTRA. And on that basis as well, this experiment has failed.

Now, the independent institutions, well, that is a head—if I was Attorney General and looking at the case from the Privy Council, I would be concerned about that. Because they never say more than they are absolutely required to say, and for them to flag that this is an issue would have given me serious cause for pause. I have done this job before, several—well, a couple of times, with mixed

success, and I would have been concerned about that. And, it is my job now to say to my colleagues, for the same reason that the TTRA has failed with respect to revenue authority, human resources, that this is a concern, and if you cannot address it, then maybe you might wish to take a different tack.

So my colleagues have come. The Minister of Finance has come with a policy which says that he is going back to the Board of Inland Revenue, and he is going to properly resource it. He is going to give it IT solutions, which are consistent both with the public service strictures and which feed off of the new technology that we have. And he is going to, well, of course, the Board of Inland Revenue was always constitutionally crucial.

So, Mr. Speaker, the Bill is an extremely short Bill. It is just a few clauses long, but it is a necessary first step to get us to a place where we will achieve the objective that Mr. Moore, in the affidavit that we have all read, we have all spoken about.

6.40 p.m.

And the reason that we have all read the affidavit is because that paragraph is startling and I do not agree with my friend, Sen. de La Bastide, who qualifies the effect of the statement of Mr. Moore, because there are several other clauses, both before and after that statement, which say, well, this is a serious issue.

So, Mr. President, we on this side are urging our colleagues, even in the Opposition now for the second time, after they have attempted to enact this legislation, we are asking our colleagues in the Opposition to support us. We are asking the Independent Bench to support us as we move towards a different future, and I say that with the greatest respect and greatest deference to Sen. Mc Nish. We seek to move from an experiment, which has clearly failed. We will not put more

resources into that failed experiment. We choose the institution that has done the work. With those words, Mr. President, I take my seat.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Faris Al-Rawi.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Faris Al-Rawi SC: Thank you, Mr. President. I thank the hon. Attorney General for providing some elucidation, some of which was requested by us and for, in effect, summarizing what I understand the Government's position to be. I understood the hon. Attorney General's position to be that the TTRA, as of Friday today, has failed, that there was a TTRA HR failure in particular, and that the Privy Council's reflections in the Dhoray case did not speak to the functionality of the TTRA, it merely addressed the constitutional challenge brought to it. The hon. Attorney General is correct in that regard, but I have a caveat to that, which I will address in a short while.

What I do know, Mr. President, is that 15 years, four months and six days ago, on the 19th of February, 2010, two honourable gentlemen stood in the House of Representatives, one the Member for St Joseph, now Sen. The Hon. Kennedy Swaratsingh, and other honourable gentleman, now present Attorney General, then Attorney General, both debating the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Bill of 2010—

Hon. Senator: What?

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—both in glowing endorsement of that legislation.

Hon. Senator: What?

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: That legislation, in fact, had I have it with me—

Hon. Senator: What?

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—an interesting provision—

Sen. Jeremie SC: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Pardon?

Sen. Jeremie SC: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Do you wish to make a comment? No? Okay. In 2010, the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Bill was brought and passed in the House, it lapsed in the Senate. It required a three-fifths majority and then Attorney General, the hon. John Jeremie SC, provided a very good explanation as to why the law was bona fide, legitimate aim required, in line with 40 to 50 countries that had gone to a modern approach of revenue authorities, why it was necessary to equip that revenue authority with the ability to treat with what was then considered a failed Board of Inland Revenue—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—as well as a failed Customs and Excise Division. It is true that 15 years, four months and six days have gone by but let us start to the relevance of this Bill. This Bill seeks to repeal Act. No. 17 of 2021, but there is a history. This Bill seeks to repeal an Act of 2021, which has a Schedule incorporating 70 revenue collection and customs laws, and has 43 clauses in length, now Act of Parliament, so sections.

What is very important is that the TTRA Act as proclaimed— and there was a proclamation in effect, which I think is relevant because we are being asked to cancel something which has been brought to life. We are told by the hon. Attorney General that the law has failed, but it has failed in the circumstances offered of human resources, and there is the intention that the human resources will be

addressed by hiring but we hear nothing about how we are going to get past the Public Service Commission, which has been the cause of the failure—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—for decades at this point, the under-resourcing of the Authority. But when we proclaimed this law by Legal Notice No. 60, No. 5 of 2022, Her Excellency under hand, 14th day of March 2022, brought 32 sections to life and the Schedule. It is important to note that we are being asked to put people out of employment again, all of the people hired under the Revenue Authority. We are being asked to cancel positions but we are not told that there is nothing stopping the reflection point that Sen. Vieira asked us to consider; nothing. Why? Because the Act itself, notably, we did not proclaim section 40 of the Act. There was a partial proclamation. Section 40 of the Act is the important one, which says that section 3 of the Income Tax Act is repealed. What does that mean? You get rid of the commissioners. So, all the commissioners of the Board of Inland Revenue are in effect. I confess that I designed this law, Act No. 17 of 2021, and that law came about, as per the reflections of Sen. Teemal, because we could not achieve a constitutional majority to pass an entire Revenue Authority Act with the three-fifths majority that we wished, which caused us to adopt the Kenyan hybrid model, where we kept the Board of Inland Revenue in place. We kept the Customs and Excise Division in place. We put a supra body called the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority atop them. We kept the Enforcement Division in the Board of Inland Revenue. We kept the enforcement in the Customs and Excise authority, but we allowed the Revenue Authority, in this hybrid structure, which has come to life, to deal with a very large mischief, which is the employee quotient of the

Board of Inland Revenue that has caused us no end of troubles, but there was a mission creep in getting there.

So let us pause for a moment and look, we are here to repeal this entire Act. There was a direction by which we came there. Sen. Dhanpaul took us through some of the history. Let us go a little bit quickly. So we know that my learned friend, the hon. Attorney General, was part of the Government that passed the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act in the House in 2010. It lapsed in the Senate in 2010, when an election was called. We know that for an entire five years and three months, the UNC did nothing in its first incarnation in government to improve the Revenue Authority and the management of this country. We were blacklisted by CFATF. We joined the Global Forum. We failed in the Global Forum positions. We entered into a chasm.

When we go to 2016 and 2017, the mission to commence the Revenue Authority came about. But, Mr. President, what is amazing is that we have not reflected upon the fact that this Revenue Authority actually articulates and works with 32 specific laws; 32 specific laws: The Income Tax Act—and I will name a few—the insurance amendments, in part; the Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters Act, another one; the Non-Profit Organisations Act; the Public Procurement Act, in part; the Tax Information Exchange Agreements (United States of America) Act, and those globally; the Base Erosion and Profit Shifting Inclusive framework.

We went through 32 laws apart from the Schedule. But what took so long for that bold statement to stand that the Revenue Authority failed? The Government has, unfortunately, left out the fact that we had a very serious position in trying to amend the Income Tax Act. We had the Income Tax Act amendments

in 2017, 2018, 2019. We could not pass them until 2018, but then we had to pause because we had the Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters Bill, which took us 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022. It was only assented in 2024. Why? Because the UNC, in Opposition, refused to give the three-fifths majority required, parked it in a joint select committee for years, so that Trinidad and Tobago remained in blacklisting. Trinidad and Tobago could not get out of difficulties in advancing the Revenue Authority mission, which is to improve the tax collection. And what was the consequence of that? Blacklisting by the European Union, blacklisting by the Global Forum, grey listing by the Financial Action Task Force until we came out in the Fourth Round Mutual Evaluation.

So the history of that and the fact standing behind the very clear statement of the hon. Attorney General that the Revenue Authority has failed as of Friday today, it is a very bold statement. That is like saying, “I gave you ah car but I eh giving yuh no gas for de engine.” You have a nice new car but no gas, because the fact is that there was a withholding of all reasonable consent required to make this Revenue Authority work.

So today—and I commend the hon. Attorney General for the tone and measure that he took in putting his positions forward—we are being invited to support. And do not worry, we will just get around to dismantling this thing, which has failed. We are not told what the cost is. We are not told what is going to happen with the people when they move back. We are not told what happens and what the cost to the taxpayers looks like for the people who have been hired. Sen. Lewis raised the cost of \$50,000 a day. I wonder what the cost of the Board of Inland Revenue is. But nowhere inside of the TTRA Act, as it stands now, was

there ever an intention to end the Board of Inland Revenue. It must continue to exist.

So in this model of the TTRA, the Board of Inland Revenue is one of the basis that it stands on. The other one is the Customs and Excise Division. They are never going to be abolished. They are never going to be removed. Instead, the mischief of their employment, the fact that you cannot get people properly paid, as Sen. Mc Nish must know, that is one of the main reasons attracting professional conduct in this country. That is solved by the TTRA, because the TTRA says that you can hire employees, you can deal with their salaries in a different way.

Look at it. The Government has fired 10 people at WASA, but in the management structure, they have hired a CEO for \$100,000 a month; \$100,000 a month. That is more than any Minister of Government earns. So in the discretion of contract, it is okay for the CEO of WASA, under this Government, to earn \$100,000 a month but it is not okay in this Bill—

Sen. Allahar: Mr. President, Standing Order 46(1).

Mr. President: Yeah, just link your question.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you. I am dealing with the Bill. Perhaps I welcome my learned friend back from slumber, but I am talking to the Bill itself and in dealing with the Act.

Hon. Senators: *[Interruption]*

Mr. President: Just take your seat. Listen, you cannot tell somebody about slumber and I noticed a practice developing with the Speaker, inconsistent with Standing Order 51(h). You do not turn your back to the Speaker, to the Presiding Officer when you are speaking, and I noticed there is a practice that has now seeped into your contribution. So, could you face me? I mean, might not be a nice

fella, but look at me, “nah”, rather than turn your back towards me. Okay? I just ask you to do that, consistent with the Standing Orders. Continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Thank you so much for your guidance, Mr. President. I learned my trade in part from somebody who used to sit right here on my right, but sits elsewhere now.

Mr. President, in dealing with the law before us, the repeal of the entire Act, all of the Revenue Authority Act is therefore relevant, and that is what I am speaking to. I do not know where the Leader of Government Business did not make that connection but perhaps I will make it a little bit cleaner for him to follow.

So, in treating with the human resources aspect at the Board of Inland Revenue and in making the point that it is never going to be a position where we achieve the good purpose of getting correct employees in HR at the Board of Inland Revenue if we fail to pay them. Right now at the public service, we have a range 54, a range 42, there are multiple ranges. None of them can climb past the salary of a Minister of Government. And if a Minister of Government is earning \$60,000 a month, but the WASA CEO, under this Government, is earning \$100,000 a month—not that I have a complaint with that. I think that is laudable. I am saying, how are you going to attract the quality of care in the Board of Inland Revenue as the vehicle to take us through the reform, which it is posited that the TTRA cannot make, if you cannot raise the salary?

So when the hon. Attorney General says that the Revenue Authority has failed as of Friday today because of HR issues, how are we going to make it better, in going back to the colonial model, and to watch labour representatives now in

government support a colonial law, which is contrary to raising the salaries of the very public service or employees that we treat with in the Revenue Authority Act itself, it does not make any sense at all. It is easily disproved by a mere inspection of the public service from the Constitution, be it section 3 of the Constitution, or be it the public service law, or be it the regulations. It does not make sense.

There is absolutely no rush to repeal this Act. The Board of Inland Revenue, as long as we have not proclaimed section 40 of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, which we have not, the Board of Inland Revenue is completely in situ with its commissioners.

But, Mr. President, section 3 of the Board of Inland Revenue Act says that there should be commissioners. It is referred to in section 40 of the Revenue Authority Act. But, Mr. President, the Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue is appointed by the Cabinet. I heard hon. Members opposite say they will not trust any kind of management of data by a government-appointed person. Mr. President, I am actually informed right now that Members of the Opposition's financial information, tax information, is being directed by the Government to be disclosed by the Board of Inland Revenue as we speak.

The Ministry of Finance and the Attorney General's Office are pushing to disclose Opposition Members' tax information. That will come about in due course. If the allegations are untrue, great, but that is what I have been informed. So, Mr. President—

Hon. Senators: *[Interruption]*

Mr. President: You are raising very serious issues surrounding the conduct. You moved from government and then you went to the naming the Attorney General. That is totally inconsistent with our Standing Orders. You are imputing improper

motives and you are raising the conduct of a sitting Member who is the Attorney General.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: I can clarify it.

Mr. President: No, I do not want you to clarify it. I want you to withdraw it and do not go down that path, please.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: May I?

Mr. President: No.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Sure.

Mr. President: I ask you to withdraw your—

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: No, when I am standing, you sit. You sit while I am standing. I am very cooperative. Do not press me. Do not press me. Kindly withdraw your statements where you imputed in proper motives to the Attorney General, as well as you raised the issue of the conduct of the Attorney General. You know if you want to do that, bring a substantive Motion to that effect.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Mr. President, in so far as your ruling has been made, I withdraw unreservedly any imputation of improper conduct of the hon. Attorney General. I made, none for the record. I would never make that imputation of the hon. Attorney General.

7.00 p.m.

Mr. President: Listen, you unreservedly withdraw, move on with your contribution. Because you see, you are questioning my ruling and you are challenging me. Do not challenge the Chair. There are consequences when you challenge the Chair.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: You made your point, the Senate has accepted it. Move on. Please.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Mr. President—

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: Mr. President, it may have been that my friend and former student as—

Mr. President: Please, please—I think he is on his legs—the hon. Attorney General, Sen. Al-Rawi, rather. I would ask you to hold your fire, two minutes after the end of his contribution, Attorney General, you will have the Floor, but, right now the hon. Faris Al-Rawi, is on his legs. He has my permission to speak. Take note. I accept 42(9); but it will come after his contribution. Sen. Al-Rawi, continue please.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—and for the record I unreservedly withdraw any inference whatsoever that there is any remark to the hon. Attorney General. That is certainly not what I intend or would ever intend. I am informed however, that in relation to section 3 and section 4, there are concerns expressed on the floor as to secrecy provisions by hon. Members made, that they would not—it is in the debate—trust the Revenue Authority, one of the reasons being that they did not trust an appointee of the Minister of Finance, and I am making a parallel in a different way now, in a different point that there are equal allegations—which will come elsewhere in respect of matters of confidentiality. Why? The mischief that I am pointing to, is that under section 3, the Board is appointed. Yes. The Board of Commissioners is appointed by the Public Service Commission, but the President of the Republic of appoints the chairman of the Board, and President means under section 80 of the Constitution the Cabinet of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

So, we are not strictly speaking insulated away from government interference as my friends opposite would like to say. That is not the case. And that is a very serious issue. So, we are not told what the cost of wind-up is. We are not told what the cost of transfer is. We are not told, what the laws are. But the hon. Attorney General made a very serious statement a short while ago. That there are no concerns—if I got it right, I understood what he said as follows. That there are no serious concerns in relation to the constitutionality of the Income Tax Act, for example the Board of Inland Revenue. The Board of Inland Revenue supervises and manages the Income Tax Act. Mr. President, I would invite the hon. Attorney General to consult within the departments that are, there is information about concerns as to the constitutionality of present laws.

There is a very rare risk of a separation of powers argument being founded inside of the existing income tax laws and I do not want to say much more than that, but there are concerns as a result of recent rulings by our courts and from the highest court come down to tell us we need to take another look. The point if you take away from that, you step back. Is that returning to the Board of Inland Revenue's management structure of supervisory control over the Inland Revenue laws, because there is a package of them, does not take us to a better place. We cannot increase the range of salaries in the public service. If you move one, you have to move all. There was a national furor against the increase in Members of Government salary as Ministers.

The rationale for that is unless you move the top, nobody else underneath could move. All the ranges are stuck under the top. So where are we really headed, with this particular argument, that this is where we are supposed to go? We know that the hybrid model provides an escape. The escape is, you keep the Board of Inland

Revenue alive, you keep the Customs and Enforcement Division alive—Customs and Excise—you have the management structures, you are allowed the importation of all the human resources. What the Privy Council did do, in the Dhoray decision is that it spoke directly to the constitutionality of that. And the Privy Council did say that there are adequate safeguards for employees who are not public servants.

The Privy Council did endorse the constitutionality of how that Revenue Authority would function if you give it the life to function. But if we are told on the first seven weeks, we have determine that it is failed, and the reference and evidence to that is an affidavit that nobody, I am sure has read in large part in the population. I have read it. I know it, but I do not assume other people have read the affidavit. An affidavit from February of 2023, in proceedings that do not talk to the functionality of the Revenue Authority, when the Government has failed to tell us in fairness, section 18 of the parent Act was suspended.

It is in the proclamation notice. Section 18, which is in the transfer for provisions from the public service to the Revenue Authority, they were suspended. There was litigation. The suspension was only lifted recently. And if the point is when many people did not pick it up and as of today Friday the Revenue Authority has failed. Mr. President, I dare say that I do not buy that argument. It is a cat-in-bag argument. More so, because it comes from someone who in fact was the author of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority 2010, Bill himself. That is the hon. Attorney General now, aided by Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh, then Member for St. Joseph, himself. Both persons speaking to the validity of arguments today had the exact opposite arguments some time ago. Now one may say in fairness that 15 years, four months and several days ago, but the point is, for five years and three months the UNC was in power, it was trashed. And then for

nearly nine years, in particular in the period 2016 to 2024, there was active opposition to the operationalization of the law. It has not been given a chance. There is a tax deficit. There are allegations of impropriety in many sectors of our society. There is a need for us to deal with the tax gap.

Mr. President, these are very serious issues. What would an equality of votes here today equal to. Let us say 15 Members opposite disagreed with the hon. Members of the Government. In my research in Mays and McGees, it says that the status quo must be preserved. The status quo will be the law as it is not amended. I am not coming to—

Mr. President: You are going into something that is not relevant to this debate and you are trying to guide this meeting. Focus on the subject matter that is before this honourable House. Okay. Please.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Thank you, Mr. President. When a vote on this Bill is taken, we can consider—

Mr. President: Stay away from that issue. Why are you going there? That is not—that is the same issue you are going on—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Anyway, I have ruled. You—I am just asking that you pay attention to the subject matter that is before us. Okay?

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: I will go again. Thank you for your guidance, Mr. President. The Bill before us has to be voted upon and we have choices as Senators, as to whether we support—we had the exhortation from the hon. Attorney General calling upon the Government—is calling upon the Opposition and the Independent Bench to support and therefore on this Bill, when we are invited to support, we have choices to be made. We had a direct question from

Sen. Vieira to the hon. Attorney General, asking whether there could be a pause period, some reflection et cetera. In my research and in my learning on a vote in relation to a Bill—I know that there is a period of pause that can happen. Because if a Bill is defeated, it cannot come back in the exact form for six months, because the rules of parliamentary practice say that if a Bill does not pass, you have to have a reflection period and the majority must be taken. So the majority of this Parliament is being invited to give support for the repeal of the TTRA. A law which has been partially proclaimed. A law which has caused the hiring of many people, contractual employment position. A law in respect to which there has not been a proclamation for the abolition of the commissioners of the Board of Inland Revenue. That is section 40 of the Act. A law which tells us that there is certainly much more information required coming from the hon. Members opposite.

So, what is the alternative, Mr. President? What is before us right now? If we vote to keep the TTRA, as we can, what will the consequence be? The consequence will simple be, the Board of Inland Revenue continues to exist. The Customs and Excise Division continues to exist. The commissioners are undisturbed in their path. The hirings at the Board of Inland Revenue can continue. They always had to. The Enforcement Division was always going to be in the Board of Inland Revenue and in the Customs and Excise Division. Nothing stops the population of those things.

We know that if we look to the base erosion profit sharing mechanism in the Global Forum and other areas, we still have to do all of that work, because they are coming to assess us on the immediate outcomes of efficiency. They are not going to look at technical compliance alone, they want to come and see that we are actually performing. So there is absolutely no risk, if this law does not pass today.

No risk at all. We have no understanding as a Senate what the consequence of our decisions are going to be, cost wise to the taxpayers. None. There is nothing that says that the TTRA as it exists right now, as it is partially proclaimed right now, cannot work exactly in tandem with the structures that exist. It is a hybrid model. It was designed that way. It is the Kenyan model.

We have the constitutionality reflections of the Privy Council. We have the precedent of Jamaica. We have the precedent of Barbados. We have the precedent of Guyana, right here next to us. We know that salaries and emoluments is a huge problem. There is a national discourse on it. We have an easy mechanism to fix that by using the hiring mechanisms in the TTRA. Right now we could do that. Attract better salaries. Attract better positions. Bring a best in class model, where rights are safeguarded as the Privy Council has reflected upon. So why repeal the Act? Why keep it in effect? Those are the questions before us.

To me, most respectfully there has not been a convincing argument, for the repeal of this Act. For me there has been no evidence empirical or otherwise provided. There has been mere reflection to an affidavit sworn some couple years ago for a professor Moore that nobody has seen here today. No evidence, no reflection, just trust me, trust me. Do not worry about it. We do not know what is going to be the fate of the employees. Today, 11,700 CEPEP workers were fired. Eleven thousand, seven hundred CEPEP workers were fired. Five hundred WASA workers. And if you look to the TTRA employees in the abolition of this Act, how many employees are there? How many are going to be on the breadline? Will they join the near 12,000 people dismissed in seven weeks alone? Ten thousand—nearly eleven thousand today, alone. Is that what this Parliament is being asked to do?

Hon. Senator: “Wow.”

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Yes, it is what this Parliament is being asked to do. We are being asked to give the Government a repeal mechanism, no kind of reflection on the employees. No kind of cost to the taxpayer. No kind of assurance on the litigation. No kind of undertaking. Nothing. “Trust meh”. It is a failed experiment and as of Friday today.

Hon. Senator: Black cheque.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Blank cheque. A parliamentary cat-in-bag scenario. Do we just repeal laws because there is a change in the Government? Perhaps. Children’s Life Fund, amendments came, laudable. Do we repeal this law today just because the PNM did it? Because the last government did it? What is the real reason?

Mr. President, I am unconvinced. Respectfully, this is a bikini debate. No evidence. No structures. No attempt to give us assurances as to what the real jeopardy is in supporting the law. I genuinely think that there is time for reflection. I genuinely think we ought not to cause the repeal of this law. I genuinely think that all Senators should consider again. I think the Government has time. There is no jeopardy in arranging this affairs and sharing a dossier. We can easily move. But there is one point I will end on. I have no conscious reflection, because we have not been told on what I know we are being assessed on via the global forum, via the Financial Action Task Force, via the European Union. They are specifically looking at our tax transparency.

The IMF in its studies have specifically told Trinidad and Tobago in their last article for presentation, that we need modern legislation to better support compliance risk management. We need revenue administration to collect. They have specifically also commended to Trinidad and Tobago—I read at page 20 of

the Trinidad and Tobago strengthening institutional arrangement and cooperation's, this is the technical report. Let us go to 2016.

That the administration must have structural improvements, both in the IRD and Customs and Excise Division, that as they stand, there is currently a floor.

The International Monetary Fund in their June 2024, article for consultation is specifically said to Trinidad and Tobago that their concern as to an upsize or downsize—and this is what they said, on the revenue side, they said at this point:

“Mobilizing additional tax revenues, boosting non-revenues is essential given projected decline in energies. This can be achieved by stepping up efforts to operationalize the Revenue Authority and the Gambling Tax.”

This is what the IMF said in their latest article for consultation. We have no reflections coming from the Government. On the fact that international assessments are going on. What happens, if we have poor positions, our ratings fall? What happens if our ratings fall? Your interest rate goes up. If your interest rate goes up, your cost of borrowing goes up. If your cost of borrowing goes up, your debt to GDP ratio goes up. If that goes up, you have less subsidies and transfers that you can give to the citizens. This is not a simple debate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: This requires actual information of the consequences of what we are choosing—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—and there has been no reflection on what the international community says about these things. Our rating agencies, et cetera. Thank you so much, Mr. President.

Mr. President, I think it is materially important that we have much more particulars than given. I believe that every government having received the mandate of the people has the right to produce its policy. I take no issue with the Government having a policy. They are entitled to carry a policy forward. The question is, when one interrogates the policy, what are the consequences? If it is that the hon. Members opposite say that there is something to replace the Revenue Authority, well then so be it.

But at this point, we have absolutely nothing. At least we know our rating agencies are looking into the Revenue Authority. At least we know we have an escape to pay better wages. At least we know that we have a chance, whilst keeping the two very things that we been saying we want to keep. Because nothing in the Revenue Authority Act abolishes the Board of Inland Revenue other than section 40, which is not proclaimed and all that it does, is that it abolishes the Board of Commissioners, not the Board of Inland Revenue itself, in its integral structure. The Board of Commissioners goes.

Keep them. Do not proclaim section 40. But give us a fighting chance. Let our assessors tell us what is going on. Can we hear from the European Union? Can we hear it from the European Commission? Can we hear it from the Global Forum? Can we hear it from the Financial Action Tasks Force? Can we please, Sir have some more information? Not because you like us, but because if we are going to pass law, law must be done on empirical evidence, Mr. President. And I just think that the Government has fallen short of this. I think there is time for them to remedy it. If the policy that they promote can be articulated in better form and if there is merit in it, you will have our support. You will have our support.

At this point, I regret that I cannot support it in the vacuum placed. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

7.20 p.m.

Mr. President: The hon. Minister of Planning—no. Before I introduce and call on you, hon. Attorney General, you have two minutes to deal with that, 42(9).

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

STANDING ORDER 42(9)

The Attorney General (Sen. The Hon. John Jeremie SC): Mr. President, under the Standing Orders, I am given the right, with your leave, to speak under 42(9), if I believe my contribution was misinterpreted. I do have that belief, because there was nothing that was said in the course of my contribution that could have had any bearing on abuse taking place in my office. Now, I know that I have two minutes, I will take one. I just want to give this Senate—I am a Senator—the assurance that nothing is taking place in my office that is contrary to law.

There is nothing that is taking place in my office—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:—that is seeking to do anything with respect to the Board of Inland Revenue, in particular, as far as I am aware. I think I should be aware of everything that is taking place in my office.

And, just on one other point. Unfortunately, when I got into my office—and the country knows me. I say what I mean. Sometimes, you know, different effects; and I think I am a man of some integrity. I was shocked at what I found in my office in terms of the levels of misconduct perpetrated by my predecessors in office. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

**TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO REVENUE AUTHORITY
(REPEAL) BILL, 2025**

Mr. President: The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Mr. President, thank you very much as I stand to wind up the debate. I want to thank all Members for their contribution, especially many of the comments that I will—I mean, there are so many, but I will try to address some of them. But I want to say from the outset to Sen. Al-Rawi, yes, the AG and myself did speak in favour of the Revenue Authority some time ago. Over the last couple of days, I had the pleasure of working with the Clico liquidator, and I had to make a confession that if I knew then what I know now, I may have treated that matter differently.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Similarly, if I knew then what I know now about the Revenue Authority, I too would treat differently.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: You see, in 2010, I had the fortune, after having lost my bid for re-election, Mr. President, I went to live in Barbados, and I was there for 15 years, and I had the fortunate experience of working to help them put together their Revenue Authority there.

I can tell you. In fact, let me say something else, Mr. President. After the AG, the then AG and myself, helped pilot that Bill in 2010, we lost the elections. I do not—and maybe I can speak for my honourable friend, I learned my lesson.

They then put the same Revenue Authority back within their fold again, went back to the electorate and lost again. “Like stick break in dey ears.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Learn the lesson. You know, people say, fool me once—you learn the lesson, but, no. But going back to the very affidavit—I mean, there are many things inside of here, but there is one paragraph that struck me. There is no evidence, no evidence, and I highlighted it here, no evidence. And, I am sure the goodly Senator is very familiar with this; no evidence. Because, you know, in your contribution you said that you did not—Some of the reports, I do not know if you read all, but there is no evidence that the transition from the authorities, from the revenue within Ministries to SARAs on average results in any larger increase in revenue collection as a percentage of GDP over the relatively long term, compared to countries that retain within Ministry arrangements.

I am sure, Senator, you remember this. This is the common finding of the three recent research studies. This is 2023. So when, Sen. Teemal, the hon. Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, because, you know, you all refer sometimes to the studies that they quote, but the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development went through three or four studies, but, no, you did not refer to that. That was not evidence enough. But the goodly Senator, Sen. de la Bastide SC, was part of this, and if you all had caucused, or if you all had studied the affidavit, the Government’s expert that went to the Privy Council, a lot of what we have come to realize—you know, and I “doh” like to match the tone. In fact, I would not try to match the tone of Sen. Al-Rawi, because you know what they said about empty vessels.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But I want to make sure that the research undertaken by the hon. Sen. de la Bastide SC, in preparing to answer the questions that are posed and the experts that they use form a basis of the judgement that you make in coming to support, or lack of, this Bill, or this repeal today.

As I said, that there are so many points, I have to pick and choose which ones I will respond to. But, I want to say a couple of things, because Sen. Teemal is right. For years we have had plenty inefficiencies, not only in the BIR, but across the public service. If anybody claims that only in the BIR there are inefficiencies and deficiencies, then we are creating a fool's errand. The public service continues to struggle with the very things that we talk about in the Service Commission, because in my recollection, and the hon. Attorney General could guide me if I am wrong, in the course of the last 30, 40 years, it is only one Service Commission that was amended, that is the Police Service Commission. The Teaching Service Commission, and the Public Service Commission continue to be a creature of a legislation that is outdated, and, in very many ways, irrelevant. But to change that, my friends, requires our two-thirds majority, a constitutional majority.

I remember reading in the papers—I think I was in the military at the time—the then Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader got together and agreed to amend the Police Service Commission to give the Police Commissioner disciplinary hiring and firing control over the men and women under a certain rank. Permanent Secretaries and other accounting officers do not have that. When Sen. Al-Rawi talks about the structures that allow the Cabinet to appoint a chairperson of the Board of Inland Revenue, those are the structures that all

governments have had. It is not unique to this Government; all governments have had it. They had it for the last 60 years. They had it, but it was okay then. It is now looked on with suspicion now because the UNC is in government. Is that what we are trying to say?

The Leader of Government Business reminded me of an email trail from the Revenue Authority to the Board of Inland Revenue, asking them for all the manuals, all their training manuals. Now, I am sure with his HR background, the goodly Sen. Mc Nish would understand what this means. So I do not know what new things they were trying to—what I can tell you. And, Sen. Phillip asked, “But what is the roadmap? What is your plan? How do you all intend to fix it?” I said in my contribution, and I know the Senator was not there so he may have missed it, that there was a Note before Cabinet, and that Note is asking Cabinet to agree for us to address the deficiencies in the Revenue Authority, because revenue collection, we all know, and we all agree, is of paramount importance. We need to do it, we just disagree.

I reject the premise that Sen. Al-Rawi talked about, that we must have these. “Keep these two systems going. Keep people in abeyance”. It goes against the very practice of human resource management that you so eloquently spoke to, Senator.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, what we are trying to do is to stop this duality and to focus on repealing one so that we can give credence, we can give life, and spend whatever limited resources we have in fixing the one that is working for us.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So let me go back, and this is the accompanying document that went to the Cabinet that talks about the Board of Inland Revenue, transformation, roadmap, implementation, strengthening revenue collection to the Prime Minister, and it was sent on the 20th of June, 2025. The mission was and is to modernize the Board of Inland Revenue into a digitally empowered service-oriented and accountable institution that enhances voluntary tax compliance, strengthens revenue collection, and support the socio-economic development of Trinidad and Tobago.

This roadmap—and, you know, maybe I should ask, Mr. President, and hon. Senators for your forgiveness. I was so incensed by the way people were treated, that maybe I did not spend enough time going into this. Please forgive me if I was not as complete as I should have been, but do not ever think for a minute that this Government does not have a plan—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:—that we have not thought this through, or that we do not understand what we are doing.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But the plan is certainly not to listen to you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: We lament with the people. When, Mr. President—to go back to Sen. Roberts-Radgman’s comment as well about the persons we are hiring. It is not “we” hiring those persons, Senator.

They are being hired by the Service Commission, and they were already shortlisted and interviewed. That interviewing process was stopped by your former administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Senator: Explain to her.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So that is why we could move so quickly. Those 97 people that we sent offer letters for, or offer letters to, those 97 people were already identified, but the process was stopped and now we are able to send offer letters to them, and of the 97 who were shortlisted, 64 have accepted.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: What is the plan, the goodly Sen. Al-Rawi asked. The plan is to fill the 45 tax audit positions that you all “run down” to zero.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The plan is to fill the 35 field tax positions that you all run down to zero.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So when, Senators, you talk about this Bill being piloted in 2021, some of the recruitment was stopped as far back as 2018. So when we come and talk passionately about how people have been treated, Sen. Mc Nish, it is because we have a whole collection, a whole litany of persons who have been trampled upon, who have been abused, and then we ask, “Why have they failed for the last seven years to collect revenue?”

You see, that is why I do not like to get passionate about these things, because, Sen. Murray, it is not a house that was broken down, you know, it is that they left one group to live in squalor and build a mansion for the other one.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Senator: One by one.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I am very disappointed. That is why some words that Sen. Mc Nish stated as if we come here to take—we “ent” come here to take you for granted, Senator, we came here to treat you as partners in the whole governance process.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: We hope that you will share our pain for the people that have been abused, disenfranchised, discourteously dismissed.

The one thing I tell my colleagues, Mr. President—forgive me for my passion—but the one thing I tell my colleagues is that I have worked across the entire Caribbean, and the one thing that I understood from working in the Caribbean is that many of those Caribbean islands do little with plenty, but all the moneys we spend per day, Sen. Al-Rawi would want us to keep spending it to have these two systems going, because we “accustom” doing little with plenty. This Government will have none of that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: This Government will not do like them and squander, because when we come to the—and, you know, I am awaiting, Sen. Dhanpaul, for the appropriation for the mid-year, midterm. I am waiting, because our debt in 60 years is \$70 billion, our debt in 10 years is \$140 billion.

Sen. Roberts: Shame.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So I am awaiting, Sen. Dhanpaul.

You know, when I listen to my colleagues on that side, the advice they want to give us, the advice they want to tell us now, how we could conduct ourselves, what we should do, and we should wait, there is no hurry. “What yuh hurrying for,

wait.” But when they were in Government, busy putting up all—spending all this kind of money on an expert— I mean, and you know what the disingenuousness I am angry about this afternoon as well? I listened to Sen. Al-Rawi talked about the IMF talking about the Revenue Authority in 2024. What else will they come and talk about? That was the Government policy then. What you want them to talk about? If government policy was that they will take the tax process forward with the Revenue Authority, that is what the IMF will review.

I met with the World Bank two weeks ago, they offered to send a team to help strengthen the Board of Inland Revenue, because that is our policy now.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So do not let all that “boistering” fool you. The IMF would focus on what is Government’s—sorry—existing policy. I do not mean to deface the Parliament, my apologies. Mr. President, my humblest apologies. Sorry. But let me continue before I get completely distracted, because I am trying not to use any supporting equipment during my contribution. But the governing pillars that this Government wants to put forward for the Revenue Authority—and the Cabinet Note speaks to it. The Cabinet Note that is before F&GP has to go for the Attorney General, because there is a part in the legislation that has to be looked at as we seek to strengthen the governing process of the Board of Inland Revenue, because we want to mandate that the commissioners meet on a more regular basis. We want to make sure that we link some of what they do to the pillars in which, you know, some of the areas that are deficient and to make sure we strengthen some of those areas.

7.40 p.m.

But because the Cabinet has not yet opined on it and approved it, I am

constrained by how much I can talk about as government policy.

But there are some underlying pillars. One is institutional reform: Strengthening governance, human capital and accountability; systems to ensure high-performing public revenue—sorry.

Mr. President: We have a Procedural Motion that the Leader of Government Business has to make.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Sen. The Hon. Darrell Allahar): Mr. President, in accordance with Standing Order 14(5), I beg to move that the Senate continue to sit until 12:00 midnight.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. President: We shall sit until midnight. Continue, please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO REVENUE AUTHORITY (REPEAL) BILL, 2025

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, thank you. So, I could speak a little slower.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The other governing pillar, and it is Sen. Mc Nish's point, is digital transformation, upgrading legacy systems. The reason why we are seeking to upgrade GenTax is because it will require less training because there is greater familiarity. As you have alluded to, I thought it was about eight, you said it was about 11 iterations behind, but we have already started the procurement process to upgrade GenTax. So, upgrading legacy systems and embracing data intelligence, to go back to Sen. Teemal, with AI. And let me

commend my colleague, the Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence. You see, in this Government, everything we do will have an AI component, thanks to my colleague.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: In fact, in the papers, you would have seen the Minister of Homeland Security meeting with the former head of DEA and the former head of Customs and Border Protection in the US. One of the things that we were asking them to come and look at as well is to see in the Board of Inland Revenue, how we could help strengthen some of our processes there.

We are also hoping to bring to Cabinet shortly, a national payment centre for Trinidad and Tobago, because what we have found is that we need to leapfrog. When I was in that job 15 years ago, I was also in charge of government ICT. So, we believe that networking across governments and making sure that people have access to government's goods and services, using technology, is an important requirement for modernization.

I am sad to say that what I left then is how I found it now. That over the last 15 years, very little has changed. In fact, my colleagues and they, are going to, I mean—anyway, I should not digress, Mr. President. But in those days, I had started that iGovTT. That was my creature. So, you do not have to sell me, Sen. Teemal, on how we should use technology or AI in trying to transform, but we have to get the fundamentals right. We have to get the human resource inside. We have the fix the governance arrangements. We have to strengthen the legislation.

So, I hope I would have at least taken some of your comments and addressed them to your satisfaction. But if you are not convinced by that, let me say this—and I think it was Sen. Lewis who talked about the siloed approach. Siloism is a

creature of bureaucracy that pervades the entire public service. What this Government has done, and you can see it, with how the Prime Minister has structured some of the arrangements—so, for example, the Minister of Finance, myself, and the Minister of Trade, Investment and Tourism form a cluster, and that cluster works across the three Ministries. In fact, there are many areas where Minister Smith and I are collaborating to make sure that we diminish these silos, and it starts with us as Ministers. It starts with us as Government. The Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development and I are collaborating on a number of areas, because we on this side, unlike those who governed previously, understand that we are not here to be served but to serve.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: We are intent on making sure our institutions work, and it starts with us being more collaborative, being more complete and being committed to recognize that we are part of an ecosystem. And how all these parts fit together is significantly important. But I think it is bare, and it is worth saying that we have only just begun.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I hope that in all that we would have demonstrated, that at least we would have addressed some of your concerns. Sen. Phillips said, “That if there is a road map, she would like to see it.” And there is. I would have showed it to you. Sen. Mc Nish talked about, “What is the plan?”—which you missed in my opening contribution, which I may have inadvertently not explained as much as I should have. But I hope that some of it is to your liking. That is why, my dear friends, Senators, when we come and ask for your support, it is not that we take it for granted, and it is not that we do not have answers to the

questions, and it is not that we cannot expound further, it is because we learnt a long time ago, a former boss of ours used to say, “Hurry dog eat raw meat.” We know that we have a lot of work to do. We start by building pillars that create a tapestry of how we intend to move forward and fix it. We know we cannot do it alone. We want your support. In fact, if it is one thing that you will always get from this side, it will be collaboration, explanation and professionalism.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: We do not need to raise our voices, and to bluster and shout.

Hon. Senator: No nuances.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Not only no nuance, but also seek to cast aspersions. Because you know why? It is easy to come and say—easy—that we have unreliable authority. But my dear friends, let us be careful, because “when yuh point one finger, it have four pointing back”.

I am happy that the hon. Prime Minister has seen it fit to repose in me the confidence to build, not just an economic strategy, but to help redesign, re-envision and refashion some of our institutions that are in urgent need. I do not disagree that there are significant things to fix, but let us fix it. Let us fix it. That is what we are trying to do. But we “cyah” fix that, pay for this, support that and have all kinds of wishful things. We are not building monuments.

We understand that in today’s word, and Sen. Al-Rawi alluded to it, where there is reduction in revenue from the energy sector, were we have to build revenue in the non-energy sector, that we cannot take that revenue and disburse it willy-nilly. We need focused, targeted action that is geared toward moving revenue collection to a state of modernization, digitization, competence and

collaboration that is based on pillars of good governance. And unlike others who may have come before us, we have no intent on looking at anybody's data. That is not for me. That is for the DPP. That is for the Integrity Commission. "I doh want tuh know". I do not want anybody's business on my hands because "when my time here up, I go back Barbados in meh short pants and rubber slippers". But it is only those who have cocoa in the sun will look out for rain.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So, my dear friends, Senators, we can agree that the current system needs fixing. We could all agree that we have to be more efficient in revenue collection. We all agree that we need a road map. We all agree that we have to strengthen the core tenets of the Board of Inland Revenue. It was Freudian slip, but with the best of Freudian slips, we all learn, and that is why I am on this side, and not on that side because "I learn meh lesson".

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: You know what they say, "To thine own self be true".

So, we are here to repeal what Sen. Teemal referred to as that "fragmented model". I want to commend my colleagues for the support that they gave me in repealing this Bill. You see, what you interpret, as my colleague said, that we referred to as a campaign promise, that it is something—you know, and you see it in all systems, everywhere. I saw it. This is not my first election. I remembered when we won the election in 2007, the first thing the then Prime Minister did was lay the manifesto in Parliament as government policy. And in the years that followed, he sought to implement that as government policy. And I am only doing this [*Member waves finger*] because that is how he did it. Those who remembered

him, would remember that. When we won on 28 April, 2025, it is this Government, having resoundingly won a mandate, having campaigned on very clear things that we want to do, took that mandate and laid it as government policy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: We are faithful to that policy, because in going around through that—that is what my colleague was referring to. We would have had not just campaign after campaign meeting, we had town hall meetings, we had engagements with people, we had business forums, I spoke at a couple, and we engaged with people time and time again, and we explained to them, based on the research—it is not now that my colleague has this. He had it since the election. It is not us making policy in “ah vaps” or making policy in a vacuum. We make policy based on research. All those reports that you all referred to, we had those reports. And it is those reports that informed the policy that we went to campaign with, that people then came and said, “We will give a you mandate.” And that is why my colleague said, “Vox populi, vox Dei.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But to think that that mandate was not grounded in research, or to think that that mandate was not grounded in consultation, to think that that mandate was not grounded in a well-thought-out policy, Sen. Mc Nish, is a disrespect to us. We are not here to play games with anybody. We are not here to score any political points. We did that in the campaign and we beat them, going and coming.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: According to a former colleague of mine, “That is why they are there and we are here.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: No need to do it again. We do not need to do it again. But please, do not think for one minute that we do not know what we are doing, and do not think for one minute that you can come here and school us. We do not need that schooling.

I have worked in more places and I have worked with more governments than many of us here in this House. But I worked in this Senate. And I will say this, we can find examples up and down the world of where this has worked and where it has failed; all kinds of examples. I am not going to bore with you all of them. What I can say is this, not only was this—because if this was a good plan, and it was made in 2021, by 2025, if we cannot get it up and running, “then something wrong. All de schooling dey want tuh school us”, why could they not get it done? If this was so good, why did they have to go to the Board of Inland Revenue, Senator? Why did they have to go to ask them for all their manuals? The 25 persons who are there, are being absorbed into the Board of Inland Revenue as we wind that up, being brought in, not wasting the resources.

So, you asked if there is a plan. Yes, there is a plan. You asked if we have a road map. Yes, there is a road map. You asked if we are treating to make sure that they are tooled to what lies ahead for them, and yes, that is what we are trying to do. That is why we need to focus on doing that. That is why we need to repeal the Revenue Authority, so we could focus on the Board of Inland Revenue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: That is why we need to spend the money on GenTax and the training that must come as part of it.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Sorry?

Hon. Senator: Sen. Mc Nish said, “Where you get the funding from?”

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Listen, the World Bank wants to fund it. Funding is not the problem. There is funding available. And one of the things that we are going to be doing is strengthening, not just the compliance, but the tax audit. We are going to be putting more people on the field for tax audit. So, all who have cocoa in the sun, look out for rain.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I hope Senators, colleagues, that I would have addressed most of your concerns. But the one thing I want to spend some—

Mr. President: You end at 8.07 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Thank you, Mr. President,

8.00 p.m.

So as I have alluded to my colleagues that there is a note that we are looking to increase board engagements, mandatory meeting schedules, tighter reporting protocols and enhanced oversight mechanism to ensure accountability, better governance in efficiency. There is a detailed roadmap to streamline registration, compliance audit, and collections in development. Focus areas include standardized procedures, better coordination between departments and audits—and with the GenTax systems, which is the core IT backbone, the formal instructions have been given. Procurements will commence and the upgrade will enable real-time taxpayer data access, predictive analytics, e-auditing and automation of returns processing. So we are moving as rapidly as we can, given that this Government is only about two months old.

For the last month, every week I have been having weekly meetings with the

Board at Inland Revenue and working through with them some of the procurement issues, strengthening—working with the Public Service Commissions, to strengthen and to fulfil some of the shortcomings that they have. “So Sen. Murray, we lookin’ to make sure that the old house start to look a lil pretty. We lookin’ to restore it, give it ah lil shine and make sure that people who living in it, lil happier. So that when Christmas time, dey could put up new curtain.”

Mr. President, again, I want to thank my colleagues for their contribution, while as I said there were so many that I could not address all. I hope that those that I have not addressed that they forgive me and I am always open to sharing with them, but I want to also—I want to the end as I said by just reading from the final note I sent to the hon. Prime Minister on this matter:

The hon. Prime Minister's bold decision to intervene at the Board of Inland Revenue, has catalysed a historical institutional reset. The Government's intervention is not only rehabilitative, it is also visionary, building a revenue collection public institution that is digitally empowered, customer-centric, results-oriented, ethically anchored and nationally respected.

Mr. President, I thank you and my colleagues for your attention and I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to

Bill accordingly read a second time

Bill committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

Senate in committee.

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr. President: Those in favour say aye.

Hon Senators: Aye.

Mr. President: Those against say no. I think—

Hon. Senators: No. Division.

The Senate divided: Ayes 10 AYES

Allahar, D.

Jeremie SC, J.

Roberts, A.

Swaratsingh, Dr. K.

Maharaj, S

Alexander, P.

Persad, Prof. P.

Chaitan-Maharaj, Dr. N.

Baig, B.

Charles, K.

Clerk: Mr. Zakour?

Mr. Zakour: Just give me a minute Sir.

Mr. Vieira SC: Chair, Chair.

Clerk: Mr. Zakour?

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Just give me a minute.

Mr. Vieira SC: There are some concerns with some of the younger Members on this Bench, they are not quite sure what they are voting on if you can clarify for them please, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Well, what is happening is that there are three—if you turn to your Bill, there are essentially three clauses in that Bill. So we instead of going one by one, we said we will take it conjointly, and when we take them conjointly, and I put the question, we go on pause. If you have any comment you will like to make on those clauses, we will pause and allow you to make your intervention.

When those interventions are through, we will then put the question and then Sen. Faris Al-Rawi has already called for a division. So that is where the division will come in.

So do you want to raise any question on any of the three clauses that I have put forward thus far and especially for the newer ones? There are three clauses. I assume that each Member, especially the Independent Senators, do have a copy of the Bill that we are dealing with, and you will see that there are essentially three clauses, so we are taking the three clauses conjointly, together, unless you would like to go clause by clause, that is fine as well, but we passed that already. So, we will now resume the division. Okay?

8.10 p.m.

Question put: Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The committee divided: Ayes 18 Noes 6

AYES

Allahar, D.

Jeremie SC, J.

Roberts, A.

Swaratsingh, Dr. K.

Maharaj, S.

Baptiste, L.

Alexander, P.

Persad, Prof. P.

Chaitan-Maharaj, Dr. N.

Baig, B.

Charles, Ms. K.

Zakour, E.

Smith, D.

Nakhid, D.

Rasheed, D.

Murray, Dr. D.

Mc Nish, C.

Phillips, Ms. Z.

NOES

Browne, Dr. A.

Al-Rawi SC, F.

Roberts-Radgman, Mrs. M.

Dhanpaul, V.

Cummings, F.

John-Bates, Mrs. J.

The following Senators abstained: Mr. A. Vieira SC, Mr. D. Teemal, Mr. de La Bastide SC, Mrs. C. Jones-Simmons, Mr. F. Lewis, and Mrs. A. Lalite-Ettienne.

Question agreed to.

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

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

Senate resumed.

Bill reported, without amendments.

Question put: That the Bill be read a third time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen Al-Rawi SC: Division.

Mr. President: You want a division? Okay.

The Senate divided:

Ayes 15

Noes 13

AYES

Allahar, Hon. D.

Jeremie SC, Hon. J.

Roberts, Hon. A.

Swaratsingh, Hon. Dr. K.

Maharaj, Hon. S.

Baptiste, Hon. L.

Alexander, Hon. P.

Persad, Hon. Prof. P.Chaitan-Maharaj, Dr. N.

Baig, B.

Charles, Ms. K.

Zakour, Hon. E.

Smith, Hon. D.

Nakhid, D.

Rasheed, D.

NOES

Browne, Dr. A.

Al-Rawi SC, F.

Roberts-Radgman, Mrs. M.

Dhanpaul, V.

Cummings, F.

John-Bates, Mrs. J.

Vieira SC, A.

de La Bastide SC, M.

Jones-Simmons, C.

Lewis, F.

Murray, Dr. D.

Lalite-Etienne, A.

Mc Nish, C.

The following Senators abstained: Mr. D. Teemal and Ms. Z. Phillips.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTARY APPROPRIATION)

(FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2025

Mr. President: The hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Mr. President, I beg to move that the Bill entitled an Act to supplement the appropriation of the sum, the issue of which was authorized by the appropriation financial year 2025 Act 2024, be now read a second time.

Mr. President, the country is in an economic spiral, debt crisis, and is in urgent need of resuscitation. This Government, led by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, has a transformational plan to restore the economy and to take this nation to a place of growth and prosperity by way of responsible government, fiscal prudence, and forward-thinking policies.

Mr. President, today I wish firstly to provide an update on the state of the economy, briefly, to outline some strategic development plans and priorities, and seek to obtain Senate approval for the proposed amendments for the Appropriation Bill, 2025.

Mr. President, allow me to give some highlights of the performance of the economy. The country over the last decade can be described as one of debt and

economic decline. The Trinidad and Tobago's economy contracted by 20 per cent. In fact, there was very little growth and sustained contraction for the period 2016 to 2021, and from 2021 to 2025. The non-energy sector collapsed by 12 per cent under the previous administration. The manufacturing sector steadily declined, and agricultural output contracted by 50 per cent. Mr. President, negative or flat growth rates were frequent particularly post-2015, where double digits declined in 2020 by -13.5 per cent. As I stated previously, Mr. President, in 2015, our debt stood at \$70 billion. From then till now, our debt now stands at \$140 billion. Debt increased from 2010 to 2015 by an average of 38.5 per cent and from 2016 to 2021 by 74.1 per cent. Actually, the adjusted general government debt increased by 92 per cent since 2015, with borrowing by the PNM Government racking up a debt today of over \$140 billion. External debt more than doubled from US\$2 billion to US \$5.48 billion over the same period. This is an 167 per cent increase. Public finances were not managed effectively by rising debt and prolonged fiscal deficit, which signalled the need for revenue mobilization. Under the previous administration, employment experienced stagnation, with the unemployment rate increasing from 5.4 to 5.6 per cent.

Net foreign exchange holdings dropped by 50 per cent under the former administration from US\$10.5 billion to US\$5.3 billion to date. Significant increases in crime were almost as a corollary of the reduction in our economic fortunes. Mr. President, while the economic outlook remains significantly challenged, this Government remains steadfast in its pursuit of structural reform, policy innovation to drive inclusive economic growth and long-term resilience.

In response to the vulnerabilities linked to our over-dependence on the energy sector, we are intensifying our efforts to diversify the economy through

investments in key sectors, through institutional transformation and through strategic investment in emerging industries. Key reforms are focused on enhancing fiscal discipline, strengthening public sector efficiency and reinforcing economic governance through the adoption of medium-term fiscal frameworks, prudent debt management and digital tax administration. These measures aim to stabilize the economic environment, promote transparency and ensure equitable growth.

At the same time, this Government is improving the ease of doing business by streamlining the registration, customs and investment processes. In fact, one of our plans and policies as we seek to create the national payment centre of Trinidad and Tobago is also to create electronic KYCs. Through new legislation, a single window platform for trade and investment, support of SME's including financing access, capacity building and digital tools, this Government's intention is to make Trinidad and Tobago and create a business-friendly ecosystem that boosts investor confidence and encourages entrepreneurship. In fact, it is a stated policy of the hon. Prime Minister to focus on non-energy revenue development structures that will seek to put the private sector at the centre of economic activity. Targeted investments in sectors with significant potential serve as an additional reinforcement for the nation's diversification strategy.

Trinidad and Tobago is becoming a regional leader in alternative energies, hydrogen technologies, thanks to the supportive policies such as public-private partnerships and investment incentives. There is soon to be a rollout of the national e-ID system and e-identification, an electronic KYC platform and FinTech innovations, the foundation of a future tech driven industry and economy as a digital economy continues to evolve. Agro-tech, improved land tenure and

enhanced infrastructure for immigration and distribution are all being implemented to revitalize agriculture with the objective of increasing food security and rural employment.

The Government is in the process of establishing new policies to widen the revenue streams outside of the energy sector. Some of these, as we develop them, would be laid in our budget for fiscal 2025/2026. Suffice it to say that Trinidad and Tobago, through this Government, will also foster stronger research and development initiatives to promote development in sectors that have traditionally been ignored, such as tourism and advancements in attracting new investments coming through government-to-government arrangements through use of private sector funding and funding available to us from the World Bank, IFC, and IDB Invest.

In the interim, the development of special economic zones and the expansion into ecotourism and logistics are fostering growth in both the tourism, maritime and other sectors, which has borne institutional reform such as modernization of state-owned enterprises, regulatory agencies and procurement systems are complementary to these endeavours.

8.30 p.m.

The reforms are intended to enhance service delivery and governance. So this Government is also establishing the groundwork for a sustainable future through green and blue economies and economic initiatives. These include the road map to circular economic practices, marine resource development and climate resilience, which are intended to attract green financing and establish Trinidad and Tobago as a leader in environmental innovation.

The development of our nation is contingent upon the quality of our

workforce. So Trinidad and Tobago is generating new opportunities for entrepreneurs and professionals by investing in advanced manufacturing, aviation, fintech, AI and marine engineering. The workforce will be prepared to meet industry demands and contribute to national development through the implementation of specialized training programmes, certification and global partnerships. Already, the Attorney General is vetting two MOUs, one with the Government of Canada and the other with the Government of the United Kingdom. The country will be propelled towards a sustainable and competitive future through international collaboration, bringing best practices and enhancing transfer of technology to develop skills, expertise and innovation.

The Government is steadfast in its dedication to the development of a modern diversified economy that mitigates the nation's historical dependence on oil and gas. Trinidad and Tobago is establishing the foundation, through this Government, for a sustainable long-term economic development by strategically investing in high-potential sectors, such as agriculture, digital technology and the marine sector.

In addition to increasing thousands of new high-quality jobs, these forward-thinking investments are intended to attract increased foreign investment and increased foreign exchange earnings. The objective is unambiguous. It is to elevate Trinidad and Tobago to a global competitive economy that prioritizes stability, encourages innovation and provides opportunities for all. The development of a robust digital aviation and trade ecosystem is essential to this transformation, as it will serve as a focal point for commerce and innovation to the Caribbean region and anchor the country's next chapter of economic growth.

Strategic progress is designed to propel the country's subsequent phase of

economic development by fortifying its status as a regional hub, improving logistics and enhancing connectivity. In practice, this entails the following: The development of contemporary digital infrastructure to facilitate e-commerce, financial services and government efficiency. This will also enhance international travel and cargo movement and the simplification of a trade system to enable faster, more secure and cost-effective cross-border business. Trinidad and Tobago is well positioned to establish an environment that encourages innovation, attracts investment and facilitate access of local businesses to global markets by aligning these sectors. Ultimately, Mr. President, the objective of this strategy is to establish the nation as a critical entry point for commerce and innovation in the Caribbean as a whole.

But, Mr. President, the foundation of national prosperity is the safety and security of every citizen. The Government is placing a renewed emphasis on fostering public trust and confidence in law enforcement by undertaking comprehensive measures. These include the adoption of modern crime-fighting techniques, such as advanced surveillance systems, data-driven policing tools and real-time response mechanisms, which will significantly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness on law enforcement agencies.

The Government's dedication to proactive crime prevention, seen in our commitment as we welcome a new Commissioner of Police, will establish community-based policing initiatives and encourage cooperation between law enforcement and citizens. The Government aims to disrupt the cycle of crime and violence that is affecting an excessive number of families by empowering communities and establishing an environment that fosters growth for young people.

Ultimately, Mr. President, these policies reflect a firm and unwavering commitment to create a nation where every citizen feels secure in their home, workplace and neighbourhood. A safe and stable society is not only essential for individual well-being but also serve as the cornerstone for economic development, foreign investment and social cohesion. As such, national security is being rightfully prioritized as the foundation upon which a prosperous and inclusive Trinidad and Tobago can be built.

In order to solidify Trinidad and Tobago's status as a regional leader in innovation and competitiveness, the Government is implementing policies and encourages technology-based enterprise, research and development. Special innovation zones will be established in close proximity to the university and research facilities to foster the development of dynamic clusters that encourage collaboration between entrepreneurs, industry and academia. The emphasis will be on priority sectors, including renewable energy, biotechnology, fintech and artificial intelligence.

The economic landscape of Trinidad and Tobago is on the brink of a fundamental transformation as a result of the strategic initiative of this Government in renewable energy, technology and other advanced sectors. The country is establishing the groundwork for a more resilient and diversified economy by actively promoting the development of knowledge-based industries and attracting significant foreign direct investment.

Additionally, it is anticipated that this economic diversification would result in a rise in foreign exchange earnings by positioning the country as a regional centre for digital enterprise and innovation. The continued implementation of structural reform, combined with bold policies and strategic public investment,

reflects Trinidad and Tobago's commitment to building resilience and innovation as we seek to diversify and develop the economy. By fostering a more competitive business environment, strengthening institutions and investing in people and technology, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is setting the stage for an inclusive prosperity and long-term national development. As these reforms mature, the country is poised to emerge as a regional model for sustainable growth and economic transformation.

So, Mr. President, the reason we are here today is to seek supplementary appropriation for \$3.14 billion. The Government is obligated to seek an additional \$3,143,983,761 in supplementary funding, not because of an unanticipated emergency, but because the former Government intentionally underbudgeted for critical expenditure, and so we are now rectifying the shortcomings of the previous administration. This is a result of their budget.

Mr. President, I now turn to the fiscal out-turn. The 2025 Budget projected an overall fiscal deficit of \$5.51 billion or 2.91 per cent of GDP. An overall fiscal deficit of \$3.97 billion was projected for the period October 01, 2024 to 31 March, 2025. However, the actual out-turn of revenue and expenditure resulted in the deficit of \$3.44 billion, of which it was lowered by \$526.7 million, lower than projected. But this reduced deficit figure, however, is elusive.

Mr. President, because it was achieved by cutting expenditure, resulting in the accumulation of arrears of millions and hundreds of millions that the current Government must now pay via the supplemental. It is fiscal irresponsibility and fiscal manipulation. The former Government stopped meeting their obligation when they realized that their revenue target was substantially less than their budget, and this is poor malfeasance fiscal management.

Mr. President, in terms of revenue projection for the period October 2024 to March 2025, the revenue collection was projected at \$24.53 billion, instead \$24.9 billion was collected; a shortfall of \$485.5 million, almost half a billion dollars. The data also revealed that the total expenditure was cut by \$1.101 billion for the first six months of fiscal 2025. The total budgeted expenditure for the period October 2024 to March 2025 was \$28.55 billion. However, actual expenditure recorded for the six-month period was \$27.54 billion; \$1.01 billion less than projected. This was passing the buck to the new Government coming in, to have to find the money to pay for things they spent it on. It resulted in the accumulation of over \$1 billion in arrears owed for wages and salaries, loans, repayments, goods and services. I wish to remind this Senate and all citizens that these figures do not take into account further billions owed in VAT, wage settlement and to contractors.

Today, Mr. President, we seek the Parliament's approval to supplement the PNM's 2025 budget in the sum of \$3,143,983,761. This is disaggregated as follows: Recurrent Expenditure, \$2,865,046; Development Programme, \$278,973,000. Those funds are necessary in large part to meet the multiple instances of deliberate underbudgeting of the previous administration.

Mr. President, it should be noted that until this Government presents a full Appropriation Bill at the start of fiscal year 2026, supplementation continues to be provided under the existing or old Heads of Expenditure where appropriate administrative arrangements are being put in place to ensure distribution.

The increase in the expenditure proposed is as follows: Head 01: President, \$1 million; Head 02: Auditor General, \$4.9 million; Head 03: Judiciary, \$50 million; Head 04: Industrial Court, \$0.771 million; Head 05: Parliament, \$26.9

million; Head 06: Service Commissions, \$1.5 million; Head 07: Statutory Authorities Service Commission, \$1.3 million; Head 09: Tax Appeal Board, \$0.27 million; Head 11: Registration, Recognition and Certification Board, \$0.64 million; Head 12: Public Service Appeal Board, \$1.3 million; Head 13: Office of the Prime Minister, \$128 million; Head 15: Tobago House of Assembly, \$32.7 million; Head 22: Ministry of National Security, \$13.9 million to meet the shortfall under the Contract Employment payment for detainees' meals during the state of emergency.

Head 23: Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, \$89.5 million; Head 26: Ministry of Education, \$296.1 million; Head 28: Ministry of Health, \$728.5 million—again, to meet arrears outstanding; Head 30: Ministry of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, \$55.7 million; Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration, \$275.8 million; Head 37: Integrity Commission, \$1.6 million; Head 39: Ministry of Public Utilities, \$489.5 million, and this \$489.5 million is to meet shortfalls in personnel expenditure, goods and services, travelling, contract employment and to supplement TTPost allocation for salaries and other remunerations underbudgeted by the former Government.

Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, \$1.3 billion; Head 42: Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, \$122.1 million—again, arrears, Mr. President; Head 43: Ministry of Works and Transport, \$266.3 million to meet loans, repayments, to meet service costs for NIDCO ferry services and the bonds. The bottom line, Mr. President, is that critical wages, rents and essential services were chronically underbudgeted.

Head 61: Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, \$25 million; Head 64: Tobago and Tobago Police Service, \$119.1 million; Head 75: Equal

Opportunity Tribunal, \$0.358 million; Head 77: Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, \$9.6 million; and Head 85: Ministry of Digital Transformation, \$187 million.

Under the Development Programme, supplementation has been provided for \$278,937,000 and has been provided as follows: Parliament, \$1 million; Ministry of Education, \$159 million for acquisition of laptops to cover the cost of school repairs over the July/August vacation; Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration, \$50 million; Head 43: Ministry of Works and Transport, \$58.9 million; Head 82: Ministry of Digital Transformation, \$10 million.

Mr. President, the 2025 budget was predicted at an average oil price of US \$77.80 per barrel and natural gas price was US \$3.59 per MMBtu. Our estimation for oil and gas price to the end of fiscal year 2025 is US \$66 per barrel and US \$5 per MMBtu for gas. With this and other adjustments, we anticipate a decrease in total revenue of \$556.7 million and an overall result on fiscal deficit for 2025 of \$9.675 billion.

Mr. President, given the state of the economy at present, we are forced to fund this increased deficit principally by borrowing on the local capital market as well as by drawing down on existing multilateral facilities. We have begun the work and will continue to work assiduously to improve revenue mobilization. In particular, the capacity of the Inland Revenue Division to collect revenue is one of our main focus and the necessary expenditure will be provided to ensure the efficiency, effectiveness and completeness at the Board of Inland Revenue Division and that they meet their mandate. Mr. President, this plan is an interim strategy aimed at restoring fiscal stability. It will be followed by a more comprehensive and impactful reform national budget that we will deliver for fiscal

2025/2026.

So, Mr. President, the way forward, congruent with our national strategic development plan, some of which I highlighted previously, we are already implementing the following suite of policy measures and structural reform: The repeal of the TTRA Act; the repeal of property tax; to ensure public safety and justice by establishing significant amount of investments that we earmarked for the national security apparatus; legislation, such as stand your ground policy to combat home invasion; the launch of a feasibility on the opening of the Petrotrin refinery; distribution of laptops to all incoming secondary school students in September 2025; the refurbishment and completion of all long-abandoned schools abandoned by the former Government.

Mr. President, let me just state that 93 schools were left abandoned, 25 schools are in community centres; all abandoned by the former Government.

Hon. Senators: Shame. Shame on them.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The opening of the UWI Debe campus; the establishment of catheterization laboratories to address the rising incidents of cardiovascular diseases; we have already amended the Children's Life Fund Act to extend coverage to children with life limiting conditions and not just life-threatening diseases; the review and elimination of unnecessary state goods and services, including security detail, of which many of them had.

8.50 p.m.

And, Mr. President, we will be doing much, much more. I look forward to a very robust debate. But I look even more, with greater anticipation, to returning to this Senate, in the not-too-distant future, to firmly outline and enunciate our Government's plan to diversify, revitalize, and reenergize our economy. Mr.

President, I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Mr. President: Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul: Thank you, Mr. President, for giving me the opportunity, twice, in one day, to address this hon. Senate. Mr. President, I am new to this, so I am seeking your guidance. I have listened to Minister Swaratsingh since last Monday, for four consecutive times, and it may have added up to more than three hours. Through you, Sir, could we find a way to stop Sen. Swaratsingh from mentioning how many times he lived in Barbados and for how long, ad nauseam? Could we find a way to stop him from telling us how long he has been a priest?

Mr. President: I do not think we can stop the hon. Minister from referencing his stay, or his period of association with the Barbadian people. So, what I would say is that let us forget that for the time being, and you make your contribution in response to the Supplementary Appropriation Bill. So the Floor is now yours.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Thank you, Mr. President, it has been such a distraction. Thank you very much. Mr. President, I have known the substantive Minister of Finance for many years, the substantive Minister of Finance for many years. And I have always viewed him as a very decent citizen, a very, very decent citizen who means well. But, based on the contents of the mid-year-review, the substantive Minister of Finance has a relatively steep learning curve.

Before I address the issues with the mid-year review, the supplementary Bill, let me briefly address a matter which arose during a post-Cabinet press conference, in early May. I believe, it was Thursday 8th of May, if I recall correctly, in which

the hon. Prime Minister outlined the Government's plan to address financial deficits. The document is called "Highlights from Post-Cabinet Media Briefing." And with your leave, I would like to read from it:

"GOVERNMENT'S PLAN TO ADDRESS THE FINANCIAL DEFICITS
 Trinidad and Tobago for the month of May has a cash deficit of over \$4B.

The Government proposes to address the deficit as follows:

- Draw down on the remaining \$2.7B available in the overdraft facility at Central Bank.
- Refinance a minimum of 60% of treasury bills during May.
- Heritage and Stabilisation Fund (HSF) available balance of \$1.76B to be drawn down for the rest of FY 2025.
- Undertake additional borrowing of about \$1B."

Mr. President, the excellent technocrats at the Ministry of Finance would have informed the substantive Minister of Finance that corporation taxes, petroleum profit taxes are collected at the end of a quarter. It is a quarterly collection; for example, March. Royalties are collected by the Ministry of Energy & Energy Industries two weeks after the end of a quarter. So, in this case, in April. PAYE is collected on the 15th of each month, and VAT is collected, or reported, on the 25th of each month.

I cannot blame the substantive Minister of Finance for having this summary in May. It is not his fault. But May is what we call, back in the days of the Ministry of Finance, a dry revenue month. But by using the numbers presented by the hon. Prime Minister, two things can be deduced, and it is right here: One, the country was not cash-strapped. The country had borrowing space. And, as admitted, \$2.7billion left on the overdraft. The country still had headroom on the

Treasury bills because they were refinancing a minimum of 60 per cent of Treasury bills during May.

The country still had \$1.76 billion available from the HSF; this is from a previous withdrawal that was not disbursed. And the country still had the ability, under the Development Loans Act, to borrow \$1 billion. So, the country definitely was not running on fumes, absolutely not. It is unfortunate that it was the month of May because there would have been a minimal amount of revenue collected in the month of May, as I just explained.

So, Mr. President, what the hon. Prime Minister presented on May 8 was a snapshot of a cash flow at a point in time that showed a \$4 billion deficit because, again, I repeat, it was the month of May. And this is very instructive, Mr. President. It was also not an accurate figure or an accurate picture of the true state of the country's finances since it did not factor into the equation two major elephants in the room, and the first one would be how we treat with the overdraft facility at the Central Bank, and how the overdraft facility at the Central Bank stifles economic and fiscal policy in Trinidad and Tobago.

The second being, how we treat with the Exchequer One Account, which, by definition, is supposed to be an asset; this is the Exchequer One Account and the Government cash balances at the Central Bank. The Exchequer One Account, by definition, should be an asset, but the Exchequer One Account now is a liability of \$49 billion, and it did not happen overnight. But I will address both those issues later in my contribution.

Mr. President, let me explain that \$4 billion deficit that was outlined by the hon. Prime Minister. Mr. President, the country has, in government finance statistics, something called mandatory expenditure. Mandatory expenditure, for

the past few years, monthly mandatory expenditure, stands at about an average of \$4.5 billion. What that means, Mr. President, is that before this country earns \$1 in revenue, the technocrats at the Ministry of Finance are aware that on a bad month like May, a dry revenue month, they must find, immediately, without earning \$1, they know they have to find \$4.5 billion. Because let me outline what is involved in mandatory expenditure: Direct charges on the exchequer, pension and gratuities, personnel expenditure, goods and services, current transfers and subsidies, social grants. And here, we are speaking about old age pension, public assistance grants, disability grants, operation of the inter-island ferry, UWI, THA, and components of the *Development Programme*.

So, this \$4.5 billion is an average, all right? Obviously it fluctuates, depending on the month. So, it could go up to as high as \$6 billion, sometimes. I have seen it, but it averages, as I have said, \$4.5 billion. So that makes automatically, quick arithmetic, \$54 billion in expenditure, immediately, as mandatory expenditure, well, for the year.

If your budget is \$60 billion, and your mandatory expenditure is \$54 billion. That leaves very, very little wiggle room for discretionary expenditure, which is what the country runs on, discretionary expenditure. And discretionary expenditure would be things like: Minor equipment purchases, expenditure on statutory boards, and other current transfers and subsidies.

So any Minister of Finance who is trying to close that \$4 billion gap in the face of declining revenues, and from oil and gas, as well as production, will have to close that \$4 billion gap. And no right-thinking Minister of Finance is going to interfere with old age pension, disability grants, the public assistance grant, money for the THA, and personnel expenditure. And this is where I want to point out to

you, Mr. President, that, as you increase salary and wages, there is an annual component, a back pay, and an annual component. And, over the years, as you increase salary and wages, the annual component is added to mandatory expenditure, and that is where the problem comes in.

So while any Minister of Finance would love to run a surplus on the fiscal accounts, he is strangled—or she—by this mandatory expenditure, which over the years, because of different measures, like increasing old age pension—and nothing is wrong with that—and increasing public assistance grant, again, nothing is wrong with that. But they add up over the years. And that is where the problem comes in, Mr. President.

And then you find yourself with a very reduced capital expenditure programme, and you are using your capital expenditure in your fiscal accounts as a residual, which is not good because your capital expenditure is where you drive your investment and your employment creation.

Mr. President, based on what I just outlined, the fact that the country has been recording fiscal deficits since 2009 has created several anomalies in the system. And I tried to find a word to describe this, and the only thing I could come up with, or a phrase to describe this, Mr. President, is bipartisan responsibility, meaning across administrations; UNC, PNM bipartisan responsibility.

For instance in 2010, the fiscal deficit was \$2.8 billion; in 2011, \$2.2 billion; in 2012, \$3.5 billion; in 2013, \$6.5 billion; in 2014, \$4.4 billion; in 2015, \$2.7 billion—all deficits. In 2016—we moving now to a new administration—\$7.9 billion; 2017, \$13.5 billion; 2018, \$5.6 billion; 2019, \$4.0 billion; 2020, \$16.6 billion; 2021, \$12.3 billion; in 2022, \$1.3 billion; a surplus. And the only reason that was a surplus year was because of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. In 2023, \$3.1

billion; in 2024, \$7.1 billion; in 2025, projected, \$5.5 billion, and if added now 9—
I cannot remember the correct figure.

What those consecutive years of deficits did, Mr. President, was create a problem at the Central Bank. Because one of the major ways those deficits were being financed was through the overdraft facility at the Central Bank. And how did it work? The overdraft facility at the Central Bank is legislated at 20 per cent of the Government's budgeted review, not revised, budgeted revenue.

But if you do not pay off all for one particular year, it is a minus in the incoming fiscal year. So you have less, and that is the problem. How do you use that overdraft? In 2010—and this is where I come back to bipartisan responsibility—the use of the overdraft was practically zero. But because we had already started to record fiscal deficits, the Exchequer One Account started to move from an asset to a liability because we were not paying into the Central Bank, but we were withdrawing from the Central Bank.

And just to let you know, Mr. President, the interest rate charged on the overdraft is equivalent to the repo rate. And, because of that, the Central Bank makes a nice profit from the overdraft, but they pay it back into the fiscal accounts through profits from the Central Bank; a line item to the Ministry of Finance.

So, in 2010, the exchequer account was \$11.7 billion, already going into the overdraft, this is May 2010. The new Government comes in, and the overdraft is now 92 per cent. The exchequer account is \$34 billion. The last Government leaves, and the overdraft is at 76 per cent, and the exchequer account is \$49 billion. And let me tell you a bit about that Exchequer One Account, Mr. President, unless a country runs fiscal surpluses and pays down that Exchequer One Account, you have no access to the other accounts in the Government cash balances at the

Central Bank. In other words, all the other accounts are literally mortgaged by that Exchequer One Account.

9.10 p.m.

So, you cannot use the Green Fund. If you use the Green Fund, it impacts the overdraft. You cannot use the Infrastructure Development Fund because it impacts the overdraft. You have to pay off the 49 to get access to any of these accounts. So, the financial situation in the country is that unless we run fiscal surpluses in the next few years, where we can pay down that \$49 billion, we will be in serious fiscal problems. So, people will ask: Why not run a fiscal surplus? Why not do something? It is a good question. Well, in the face of declining international prices and production in Trinidad and Tobago, there is a constant increase in mandatory expenditure, and no new streams of revenue. And now, one less potential stream of revenue without the \$5 billion projected from the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. The only thing that the Government could do, and this is if I had to advise, we must start recording fiscal surpluses to pay down the liability at the Central Bank on the exchequer account.

So, the hon. Minister of Finance—the substantive Minister of Finance—has projected a deficit of \$9.67 billion and he said he is going to fund the increased deficit principally by borrowings on the local capital market as well as by drawing down existing multilateral facilities. That is commendable. I notice he did not mention anything about the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund or even with the overdraft, using the overdraft. But he has a lot of room to manoeuvre because he has room on the Development Loans Act, he has headroom on the External Loans Act, he has headroom on the Treasury Bills Act if he so desires. But I must say that I do not agree with one major thing the Minister said in his contribution on the

economy, that the economy has crashed.

Now, Mr. President, I am an Opposition Senator, and the one thing you would not hear from me is anything about painting Trinidad and Tobago in a negative light.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Because we are not the only people listening. We have bondholders, we have institutions and investors, we have credit rating agencies, we have the International Monetary Fund, and other multilaterals listening. So, you would not get that from me. But I understand the Minister's situation. Every Minister I have ever worked with, that was the narrative. I have heard it so many times; “de economy crash, de Treasury empty.” Standard cliché behaviour. So, let us review some of the independent views. That is not Vishnu Dhanpaul. The independent views on the economy, and I am not going to mention anything about credit rating falling and devaluation, I will let the Minister—that is what he is being paid for, to defend. Trinidad and Tobago Standard and Poor's, one notch above investment grade.

“We expect declining near term hydrocarbon production will drive marginal GDP growth over the next few years, which will challenge the government's fiscal consolidation efforts, resulting in a raising debt burden that is slightly higher than expected last year.

Nevertheless, stable institutions and still-strong external assets offset these risks and support the ratings.”

This is the investment grade.

Standard and Poor's—“...affirmed its rating on the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago...”—that is a BBB- investment grade.

“The stable outlook reflects our expectation that economic, fiscal, and debt metrics will stabilize near current levels over the next two years before improving when major new gas fields come online.”

The outlook:

“The stable outlook reflects...”—Standard and Poor’s—“...Global Ratings’ view that Trinidad and Tobago’s economy will continue to experience low growth, moderate fiscal deficits, and a slowly increasing debt burden over the next two years, while energy exports will support the country’s external balances.”

Again, that is not a version of a country whose economy collapsed. So, this is one downside of the scenario:

“We could lower the ratings over the next two years if GDP per capita fails to rise in line with our forecast. Similarly, failure to take timely corrective steps to ensure long-term balanced economic growth and the sustainability of public finances could erode the country’s capacity to respond to economic or other challenges, resulting in a lower rating that reflects institutional shortcomings. We could also lower the rating if Trinidad and Tobago’s external position materially worsens beyond our base-case scenario.”

That is Standard & Poor’s. Just to let you know, if I remember correctly, Trinidad and Tobago is just one of, I believe, two countries in the Caribbean with investment grade status from Standard & Poor’s. Again, let us go on with Moody’s.

“On December 16, 2024, Moody’s affirmed Trinidad and Tobago rating at Ba2 with a stable outlook.”

Ba2 is one notch below investment grade.

“This affirmation is underpinned by the country’s return to sustained growth, primarily driven by the non-energy sector.

Despite lower-than-projected energy revenues in fiscal year 2024, which have increased the fiscal deficit to 4.8% of GDP...

Moody’s recognizes the government’s fiscal revenue diversification efforts, as evidenced by the operationalization of Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority...in 2025.”

Let us hear the IMF. The IMF article for consultation with Trinidad and Tobago indicates a gradual and sustained economic recovery. The 2024 report highlights a rebound in real GDP, particularly in the non-energy sector, and a projected increase in growth for 2024 supported by both energy and non-energy sectors. The IMF also notes the country’s progress in achieving fiscal discipline and encourages continued structural reforms. Mr. President, these are not local commentators and definitely not in any way saying that the economy crashed, absolutely not.

I would also like to use two local indicators of confidence in the economy. Local indicators—we do not use them very often—showing confidence. One is called credit to the private sector, the source is the Central Bank. This is how much money is lent to the banking system to consumers, businesses, et cetera to purchase products and improve business performance. In 2022, credit to the private sector was \$66 billion. In 2023, \$71 billion, in 2024 \$78 billion, and up to April, just six months into the fiscal year, \$80 billion. A clear indication of confidence in an economy to be doing that level of borrowing by the private sector.

And, this one is not too trivialized. It is called vehicles registered. In quarter two of 2023, 4,794 vehicles; in quarter three, 5,478 vehicles were

registered.

Hon. Senator: Anil was driving all of them?

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: [*Senator laughs*] In quarter four, 5,666 vehicles were registered. In 2024, in quarter one, 5458 vehicles were registered; quarter two, 5,608 vehicles were registered; quarter three, 5,646 vehicles were registered; quarter four, 6,280 vehicles; and just in quarter one of 2025; 5,310. I remember when I was growing up, Mr. President, I could tell the year of a vehicle by the registration, how old the vehicle was. Now, 9,999 vehicles are coming onto the market and coming onto the road network every six months minimum. Who is purchasing these vehicles? People must be showing confidence to have that level of credit to the private sector, must. Confidence in the economy. That is not a crashed economy. Just last week, Mr. President, and this is very telling.

Mr. President: Senator, you have 10 more minutes.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: The Trinidad Generation Unlimited reported in the *Trinidad Express*:

“TGU raises USD525 million”—on the external market.

“For the first time in nearly a decade...TGU has returned to the international bond market, raising US\$525 million to help refinance existing debt and improve its financial footing.”

Mr. President, the issue was three times oversubscribed. Confidence.

International confidence now. These bondholders are not Trinidadians necessarily or Tobagonians, they are international bondholders.

“The state-owned power company priced a new eight-year bond at an interest rate of 7.75%, which investors will receive annually. The money will go towards buying back an older US\$450 million bond that is due in

2027.

Proceeds from the transaction will be used to fund the repurchase of TGU's outstanding US\$450 million of 5.25% senior notes due 2027.”

“Rating agencies S&P and Fitch both gave the new bond BB rating...”

Credit rating agencies never rate a bond that is issued by a state agency at the same level of the sovereign rating. They always have it at least a notch below.

So, just before I close up, Mr. President, I just want to say a few things on the issue about loans taken before the elections. There were some loans that were taken before the elections and I will use as a parallel, September 07, 2015, and then I will come to loans taken by this administration. Because there was this narrative out there that there was this wild spending and wild borrowing by the last administration coming close to the elections.

- A loan agreement dated July 27, 2015, EMBD \$400 million, fully disbursed.
- The Human Capital Development Company, August 6, 2015, \$12 million.
- HDC, \$300 million; August 16, 2015

Remember, elections were in September.

- NIPDEC Pure, \$300 million, July 23, 2015
- NIPDEC Pure, \$400 million, July 09, 2015
- NIPDEC Pure, \$100 million, September 03, 2015.

But I will tell you the difference between the last borrowings of the previous administration, the PNM administration. All the borrowings were approved by the Cabinet in February 2025, long before the election date.

9.25 p.m.

But it was significantly different—and I will call them out, WASA, 250 million; Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation, HDC, 200

million; NIDCO, 250 million; NIPDEC, 250 million; MTS, 250 million; NCC, 200 million; and PSAEL, 200 million. What is significantly different to previous borrowings—and it is nothing new from administrations facing an election. That is nothing new. Administrations, people come to them, contractors come to them all the time and say, “I want my money before the election. I do not know if you lose the election, I do not know if the new government is going to pay me.”

But what was significant in this one, Mr. President, my public service sense kicked in and 95 per cent of the loans taken by the last administration—maybe 90 per cent of the loans taken by the last administration were placed in escrow. What that means—and that is because my public service sense kicked in—and I heard in the other place the Member for Barataria/San Juan calling out, “Dhanpaul giving out loans, and Dhanpaul”—he was talking about PSAEL. April 25th, the day before the weekend of the election, out of the 200 million, \$199,519,275 in escrow, waiting for whoever is the new Minister of Finance; in escrow.

The LSA, 150 million, April 25th, in escrow; 149 million in escrow, waiting for whoever is the next Minister of Finance. The only one that was used to any great extent—and that is because they had to pay off the Carnival bands and all that—was the 200 million for NCC; all the contractors and band leaders and winners and all of that.

So, as I was saying—I want to mention one other. The HDC, 200 million, April 25, 2025, in escrow, \$199 million. So it was no case of electioneering. Okay? Because as I have seen throughout my entire career, every government would do it. But in this case, I can sincerely tell the population, more than 90 per cent of the loans taken before the elections were placed in escrow. And I stand to be fact-checked by the debt department in the Ministry of Finance.

Another thing before I wrap up—just one minute. The Minister of Finance would have also found out from the technocrats at the Ministry of Finance that there is absolutely no \$2.6 billion missing; absolutely none. Do you have any idea how difficult it is, Mr. President, to loot the Central Bank of \$2.6 billion? It is almost physically impossible.

I am not going to ask anything about where is the money coming from. I am not going to take a negative light on this at all. But all I will say, Mr. President, in wrapping up, “we will find the money” is not a financing strategy. I am just putting out a warning. Monetary policy will respond. It will tighten. Interest rates will go up. Mortgage rates will go up. It must respond. The balance of payment will also respond, especially on the trade flows. It must respond. I am not mentioning anything about devaluation, anything about the IMF. But all I am saying is that Vishnu Dhanpaul, Opposition Senator, is not sending any wrong signals on my country. That is not happening. All I could say, Mr. President, thank you very much for the opportunity and have a nice night.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Teemal, please.

Sen. Deeroop Teemal: Mr. President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this matter before this Senate. First of all, let me express my appreciation to the person moving this Bill, the hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development. It is a long one.

On a lighter note, I was trying to put an abbreviation to that but under the Standing Order, it may not stand up, and the abbreviation to that, or the acronym for it, was MOPED. And I do not think it is a charitable and appropriate acronym. So I appreciate the effort of the hon. Minister in outlining the strategic policy approach

of the Government within the time they have had, that shaped this Appropriation Bill and would go into shaping the 2025/2026 budget that will be coming in the next Session.

Mr. President, in the Senate, with regard to money Bills, we are constrained, really. Because with the Order Paper that came with this Bill, there were some explanatory notes, but we have been instructed that we are not to quote from those explanatory notes in the debate. So, in itself, it is a limitation. And if we are just to stick with the broad headings of the respective increases that have been requested, well then, another disadvantage being in the Senate and having to debate a money Bill like this would be, you run the risk of debating in a vacuum. Because we also do not have the benefit of the work of the Standing Finance Committee of the Lower House, where the detailed breakdown and all of those things are made available to Members, and even if it is made available, that we can have the liberty to use that information in what we contribute during the debate.

So, in light of that, I just did a rough check of the proposed increases over the Recurrent Expenditure in the 2024/2025 budget. Because in what came to us, there is no division or breakdown between what comes out of the Consolidated Fund for Recurrent Expenditure and the Development Fund. So just to get a sort of guide, a rough idea, as to the level of increases, I just did some rough calculations. And I note here just a general percentage increase, based on what has been proposed. I will only mention those that cross 10 per cent, which I consider to be, if I am using 10 per cent as the benchmark, for significant increases. But in context, it could be even 5 per cent, depending on the amount of the initial budgetary allocations for some ministries. So I will stick with the 10 per cent for the purposes of my contribution.

The Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, there is a 19 per cent increase over Recurrent Expenditure; Ministry of Health, 11.5 per cent; Ministry of Digital Transformation, 64 per cent; Ministry of Works and Transport, 12.3 per cent; Ministry of Public Utilities, 16.5 per cent; Ministry of Public Administration, 56 per cent; Ministry of Digital Transformation, 68.5 per cent; Ministry of Labour, 13.7 per cent.

Now, in the presentation, the hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development did state directly that the supplemental budgeting necessary, the appropriations necessary, is a result of underbudgeting. But I felt that it would have been informative for the Senate if we were—just a rough approximation, hon. Minister, in terms of whether or not there is an element of increasing budgetary allocations due to policy decisions of the new Government and if we can be given a sort of ratio in that regard. So we can, you know, realistically assess what was underbudgeting omissions and what is being added on due to policy decisions of the incoming Government.

Now, the hon. Minister also mentioned, in the strategic policy approach, about the green economy, blue economy and about sustainability. I agree with it because it is the direction, has been the direction, consistent direction for some time as we seek to align our expenditure and our development goals with the Sustainable Development Goals that, as a country, we have adopted. But in my contribution, I would just like to probably focus on certain aspects of expenditure that we incur every year regarding our infrastructural development.

I have made the point in previous debates about our approach to dealing with our drainage challenges, storm-water drainage I am talking about in this particular case, and what has developed as a culture in Trinidad and Tobago over decades, it

is not now, in that there is what I would—I am not trying to be uncharitable to what has developed over the years. Probably it is out of necessity. I am sure there were valid reasons for it. But it is a culture I refer to as a desilting culture, as an approach to solving the extensive problems we have with drainage and flooding on an annual basis.

Now, desilting, in my view, is not sustainable spending. And if we are to add up—I have not added it up. But if we are to add up over the decades how much money as a country we have spent in desilting and cleaning our river channels and our drains, it would run into billions of dollars. And we are still in a situation because the cycle associated with desilting is relatively short. We desilt something today, maybe the cycle will be a year, two years, maybe three years max. We have to come back and desilt again.

So, in terms of sustainability, whilst it may—do not get me wrong, it is necessary, but we have landed ourselves in a situation, unfortunately, where a substantial chunk of our money is in this desilting. And we all know we could desilt every river in Trinidad on a regular basis, we could clean all the rivers and we are still going to get flood. Desilting and cleaning does not guarantee avoidance of flood because we are dealing with the ravages of climate change and even before that. Desilting and cleaning would only address short-term measures in the context of long-term storms and would cater for one in five-year storms and all of those things.

9.40 p.m.

But when we get into the regions of one-in-15- years, one-in-25-years storms, and for major infrastructure, one-in-50-years storms, the desilting, and cleaning, we are just touching the tip of the iceberg.

Now as I said, there would have been reasons for going that way, but moving forward whilst we acknowledge that we have to keep that desilting, and cleaning, I would really like to see a more integrated approach to our development in this area. Because, if we are to look at the amount of studies that have been done, studies upon studies, and studies, and when you award a contractor, a new consultant, there is a talk in the industry, the first thing that the consultant does is collect all the previous studies, and produce a new study, and walk away with some very attractive consultancy fees. So, this desilting, we have to work towards minimizing on a gradual basis, and making changes to improve the carrying capacity of our channels, storm water channels, by increasing cross-sections, and increasing gradients, and taking what is adopted in a lot of countries, and has been on the drawing board here in Trinidad for a period time, the approaches to integrated planning and management.

In the case of flooding, and drainage, I refer specifically to integrated storm water management planning. Because you see, we are so accustomed to working in silos that we feel that the solution is just with one approach where the whole trend to sustainable development is an integrated approach in which we incorporate the many disciplines that are involved. So, drainage is just not an issue of channels, and rivers. Drainage is an issue of watershed management. It is an issue of river basin management—[*Interruption*]

Mr. President: [*Inaudible*] [*Feedback from mic is heard*] May I suggest—
[*Inaudible*]

Sen. D. Teemal: Thank you, Mr. President. We are talking about watershed management, river basin management, addressing issues of erosion, land degradation, land rehabilitation all within an integrated storm water management

system that also addresses water security. Because the whole issue of storm water, and managing storm water is just not of getting rid of it, but seeing that, how it could be constructively harnessed, and harvested to boost water security.

So, integrated storm water management planning, hon. Minister, as we move forward into a new budget, I am hoping that we can look at these, and I am sure it is on the agenda, but I just thought I would issue a timely reminder to you, on it. The same would apply to our road rehabilitation, and our road networks, and road improvements. Sad to say again, there is another culture that has developed over the decades. We think, or the public to a large extent, and sometimes unfortunately, we give in to quick fixes. There is a culture that to fix a road, you must pave it. Paving a road is not necessarily sustainable spending. We all know, we have seen it, yet still we continue the practice. We pave a road, and sometimes if it lasts for six months, if we are lucky, it goes.

I remember there was a joint select committee, the Land and Physical Joint Select Committee where we had an enquiry into road rehabilitation, and we drilled down, we went into depth by engaging all stakeholders including those who mash up the road, and do not repair it properly. Let me say, WASA, and we have to be really increasing the volume of road rehabilitative works versus road paving. Road paving is the end of it, where you come and you put a nice surface on, for people to speed, and then they clamour. After they clamour for the road to be paved, they clamour for humps to be put on the road. Right? But again, it is an integrated approach, and road rehabilitation cannot exclude roadside drainage. The enquiry unearthed that as a major factor, because in addition to fixing the road, if we do not fix roadside drainage, if we do not integrate drainage with road rehabilitation then we all know what happens, road mash up. So, we have to be

looking at the integrated approach. So, I am reassured that the Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs and Development will be taking those on board.

Also in terms of—our Minister of Transport is here—integrated transportation planning. We cannot look at transportation in a vacuum, it is multifaceted. It depends on users, destinations, and other than just fixing a road, widening a road, putting these miserable little roundabouts in our interchanges, decreasing the capacity. As soon as you come over the interchange there is a bottleneck in a roundabout that only has the capacity—hundreds of cars are coming across an interchange, and at the end of the interchange you have a roundabout with a capacity for just 20. We seem to have gone in that direction with compromising interchanges. These are some of the things in some of the things when I say integrated transportation planning.

We have been talking for years about the soft side of the transportation challenge. Multi-passenger usage, reducing cars with just one single person in it, drivers heading into Port-of-Spain, wherever. Policies to encourage people to pool. There has been talk about a bus transit lane or a commercial vehicle lane in some of our major roadways that would encourage the commercial use during the night. Not use it up, and clog up roadways during the day, but incentives to use certain carriageways during the night. These are some of the things I am suggesting that we bring back on the burner just for consideration, because it has been around for a while, and in my opinion it is worthy of consideration.

Mr. President, I note over the years that I have been here that with every budget, we seem to be increasing allocations, not we seem to be, we are increasing allocations for spending on contract employment, and contract employment has gone from three years to one year. and it seems now that the popular thing is three

months. Now, that signals a problem, and all governments have done is to circumvent a dysfunctional public service commission. In main, because we are in a situation where you need to increase staff, but a public service that cannot hire the amount staff you need, the type of staff you need, the quality of staff you need at the rate that it is needed to keep our institutions viable, productive, and efficient has been a challenge for decades.

The hon. Minister did mention a two-thirds majority, but to me he mentioned it from a point of view that might be unattainable, and I am saying, “Do not let us look at it that way.” This is a new term, is a new Government that is coming in, and I am sure, I am sure, that consideration— if we are looking at measures to make our public service commission, and other service commissions efficient, and it requires constitutional reform, to me it is worth the effort. If the political will, and determination is there it is worth the effort based on the mandate that the Government has been given. So, do not let us write that off. I would really think that it is worth a try putting in it on the agenda, because it is really going to solve a lot of our problems. It is going to solve a lot of our problems.

Mr. President, that is all I have to contribute at this moment. I thank you very much.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

9.55 p.m.: *Senate suspended.*

10.25 p.m. *Senate resumed.*

10.25 p.m.

Mr. President: The Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence (Sen. The Hon. Dominic Smith): Mr. President, I bring greetings to you and congratulations on your magnificent appointment. First of all, I bring greetings as well to all of my hard-working colleagues on this side of the aisle, Mr. President. And Mr. President, let us be clear as we enter this political foray because that is what it is, a foray, the Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, has won, together with the nation and together with all of its people, a resounding victory.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And I know, Mr. President, that Members opposite are still licking their proverbial wounds.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Because after April 28th, many of these goodly gentlemen on the opposite side, from as early as April 27th, they were in the other place. And on April 28th, with the mandate of the people, Mr. President, they now reside in this familiar, familiar place. Shape up and ship out.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: That is what the people of Trinidad and Tobago said to them, “Shape up or ship out.” And indeed, they set sail because the people of Trinidad and Tobago found them wanting.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And so, Mr. President, it gives me great pleasure and it is indeed an honour and a privilege to be here with all of you learned colleagues as we look at what we can say is the supplementary appropriation of 2025.

And so, Mr. President, I rise today, not only with great responsibility as we debate this \$3.14 billion supplementary appropriation, I rise not only, Mr.

President, as the Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, but also, Mr. President, with the voice of a new era in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, the people of Trinidad and Tobago voted for better governance. They voted, Mr. President, for smarter leadership, and they voted, most importantly, Mr. President, for change.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And on this, Mr. President, we use the words of Mahatma Gandhi because we wanted to be the change we wish to see in Trinidad and Tobago. And that we did.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: From the east to the west, from the north to the south, the people of Trinidad and Tobago said, no more, no more, no more shall be the cry.

Hon. Senator: And Tobago.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And not to forget, my sister across the Floor, Tobago, also said, “No, no, no, no, no.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: “Not today.” But, Mr. President, yes, allow me to preach and to educate and to edify you, Sir. What do you say? I am glad I am hearing the gentleman across the Floor because the mayor became a mouse.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: The mayor became a mouse. Right? And I heard that Sando West said, “Dowlath is the best.” Right? And well, for Sen. Browne, he entered the round, but could not be found afterwards. That is what I heard. That is

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what I heard.

Sen. Dr. Murray: All this banter—

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Give a Standing Order.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. Browne: We have a Bill in front of us, the personal references are not necessary in the Senate.

Mr. President: All right. I know you are running up. You are running up, right? “But doh take too long to bowl, right?” So, while you are coming up, let us go.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I am guided. I am guided, Mr. President. You see, the colleagues across the Floor they were sleeping at the wheel, much like they were sleeping this afternoon. For 10 years, Mr. President. And so, when the people rise with a great voice, it often results in a bit of trembling. So, I do understand. I do understand, Mr. President. While colleagues across the Floor feel a little bit intimidated by the power of my voice, Mr. President. But, Mr. President, this is simply not a laughing matter, unfortunately. This is not a laughing matter because we are here to conduct the business of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And, Mr. President, the reason we are here, speaking to this Bill, is for no other reason than mismanagement, Mr. President. A past administration that neglected the people of Trinidad and Tobago. A former Government, Mr. President, that vastly under-budgeted year after year after year. And I would dare say, Mr. President, that many of those under-budgeting activities may have been intentional, Mr. President. And so, like a good steward of this

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nation, this side, the United National Congress, for the next five years into the future, will right the wrongs of the past administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, you know, several comments were made in this debate, and I will get to the goodly Sen. Dhanpaul in a second. Mr. President—you thought you were getting away.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: I know you thought it was late and that we would spare you, but saddle up your boots. I am coming for you just now.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: You see, Mr. President—

Sen. Dhanpaul: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Take it as you like, Sir. Mr. President:

“Next to doing the right thing, the most important thing is to let people know you are doing the right thing.”

And that is a quote, Mr. President, by none other than John D. Rockefeller, because we are here to let the people know that, yes, we are planning for the future. Yes, we are doing the right things, but the former administration wants this Government to accomplish what they should have accomplished in eight weeks, what they could not accomplish in ten years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And I would use the words of the good Senator, Mr. Arthur, “Disrespected, disrespected, are the people that you failed to serve over your tenure.” Disrespected are the mothers and the children of our nation. Disrespected are the vulnerable in our society. Disrespected, disregarded, and that

is why you are sitting where you are sitting today for no other reason than that, colleagues.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And if I am preaching to you tonight, and you feel it in your heart, and you feel it in your soul, feel free to give a testimony.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Feel free to give a testimony. And yes, my colleague in a former incarnation was a priest.

Sen. Dr. Murray: Point of order.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And we are learning.

Sen. Dr. Murray: Point of order, 46(1). I do not understand the relevance, Mr. President, through you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Just repeat your point of order.

Sen. Dr. Murray: Standing Order 46(1), the relevance. We are discussing the Finance Appropriation Bill, 2025.

Mr. President: Yes, I know, I know, I know what we are discussing, Ma'am. I have given you a lot of space and have been flexible, but let us get to the meat of it. Please.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, in these Chambers, as you know, time goes quite slowly. So, I do apologize if I have been taking a bit of time to get to the meat of the matter. But now I come, Mr. President, to the good gentleman across the aisle, the good Sen. Dhanpaul. Yes, you, Sir. And I want to rebut a few of his misguided comments, because I did not want to get into the economics that he has now forced me to have a look at. I want to submit to Sen. Dhanpaul, over,

and over, and over, he mentioned, this happened in May, that happened in May, May this, May that. And I say to you, may you never become a Minister of Finance again.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Because the misrepresentation, Mr. President, you would swear that this economy has done extremely well under the tenure of the People's National Movement. But I want to bring to his attention, Mr. President, what is the stark reality, and what our country faces, and what the good Finance Minister faced upon entering office.

Let me list them for you, and you can take notes. An over-dependence, Sir, on oil and gas. Over-dependence. No plan in 10 years for what you call diversification. None. Senator, we have had an average annual GDP over a decade, an average of approximately 0.2 per cent, far below our regional counterparts; 0.2 per cent, 0.2 per cent. And let me tell you again, how many deficits were part of that submission? How many persons have had the unfortunate circumstance of not being able to access foreign exchange, inequitable foreign exchange? How many businesses went out of business under your tenure? How many people suffered because of the economic inefficiencies and the lack of proper fiscal management by the People's National Movement? And you come here to speak about, may, may, may, may, and what was there and what was not there? What was there for 10 years is what you should consider, Sir. Ten years of failure.

10.40 p.m.

Mr. President, rising inflation—and in particular, the gentleman across the room, they know that there has been rising food inflation. And who does food inflation affect? Mr. President, the most vulnerable in our societies; the most vulnerable.

Mr. President, did you know that health inflation also increased aggressively over the last 10 years? It means that persons could not afford basic pharmaceuticals under the past administration. And so, I find it convenient, Mr. President, that the goodly Senator would stand with such umbrage and dictate to this Government about fiscal prudence and fiscal responsibility, and macroeconomic policy and microeconomic activity in Trinidad and Tobago, when investors have been leaving our shores, when foreign direct investment has said, “Trinidad is not a good place to invest,” where crime has been rampant. Sen. Dhanpaul, do you invest your money where there is spiralling crime?

Sen. Dhanpaul: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: I rest my case, Mr. President. Asked and answered, as they say.

So, Mr. President, many points have been made by the Senator, the hon. Senator, and I will not get into any more details. I will leave it as that. I will leave it right there, right? I will leave it right there.

Mr. President, so, we have a situation now where we are embarking upon an appropriation, and let us think critically because this appropriation is not an appropriation of the Government really. It is an appropriation of the former Government, a signal of mismanagement, of underbudgeting, a disgrace, Mr. President. And so, when I look across to the other side, Mr. President, I often wonder, what is there to smile about? What is there to laugh about? Show me the fruits of your labour. We are speaking about tax reform and revenue. Show me

the fruits of your labour. We are speaking about supplementations in areas of need. Show me the fruits. We are speaking about 49 million that needs to be erased from the exchequer account. Why did you not do it? Where were you? Where were you? Where were you? And that should be the headline in the newspaper, Mr. President.

Where was this Government, this former Government, with all of these suggestions, all of these platitudes, for the last 10 years? They were in hiding, Mr. President, maybe under a rock or maybe under a fancy mansion, we do not know. But what we have inherited, Mr. President, is a deficit of trust. What we have inherited is a society tethering on the edge. What we have inherited is a temperature increase in our nation's population because they were fed up. They were fed up of a lack of governance. They were fed up of a lack of support.

And so, Mr. President, I want to treat with some of the areas under the Heads as it relates to the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence. And I want to tell the public servants in Trinidad and Tobago that we are working with them—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith:—and we are working for them, and together we can transform the public service. We can transform, Mr. President, and we will use the available technology, we will use artificial intelligence and we will reform all aspects of public services to the redound of the benefits of the citizens that need it most. So I heard chatter about how.

Mr. President, very recently, we met, myself and the good Minister in the other place, Homeland Security, and we spoke about a way in which we can digitize, first of all, an easy task, entry and exit from Trinidad and Tobago, a

physical form that many persons have had to use for a number of years, even the gentlemen across the floor when they came from London and Sweden and Switzerland and all of these wonderful places that most of the population of Trinidad will never get to see.

Mr. President, we plan to digitize—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith:—entry and exit. Far too long the people of Trinidad and Tobago have suffered. Mr. President, this is a simple application, and when I had the meeting with the relevant authorities, I wondered, why did this take so long? Why did the ideation take so long? Was it a lack of finances? And then, when I looked at the amount of money that the former Government spent, \$600 billion in 10 years. I will say it for the persons in the gallery, \$600 billion—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith:—and it is a comedy fest. It is a comedy fest, Mr. President. But I will tell you who was laughing after April 28th. We were laughing because the licking that they get, I hope that was funny, too.

Sen. Dr. Murray: Point of order, point of order, point of order, Mr. President, please, 46(1).

Mr. President: Yes.

Sen. Dr. Murray: Thank you.

Mr. President: Yeah. I do not think that at this stage and this time, there is need for us to get into these things. You are going good, in terms of that area you were focusing on, if you could develop that area, that would be good.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, thank you, I am so guided, Mr. President. There is a lot of crosstalk happening, and it is initiating from my

colleagues on the aisle. So that is one of the reasons, Sen. Dr. Murray, that you are having this difficulty to hear what I am saying, because there is too much conversation happening there. So, Mr. President, I ask for your protection, I ask for your protection as I continue.

So, Mr. President, I want to speak to the population of Trinidad and Tobago and let them be advised that it was not due to a lack of financial resources that their taps had no water, that their roads were not fixed, that they receive keys for housing but no house, that there was rampant crime in our society with no fixes. It was not because of a lack of resources. Mr. President, you see, who feels it most, knows it, and that is the problem that we have had with the former Government.

They could not empathize with people. Mr. President. They did not understand the common man, so the intention was not there. The motivation, Mr. President, to do the right thing, it was not apparent because in their slumber, they could not find the convenience to do the right thing. And so, this appropriation, though it is not our own, we will use it to the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, under the Head 31 of the Ministry of Public Administration, there is a quantum here of \$325.8 million, and would you believe—and allow me to just find my notes—under Vote—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, I beg your protection from the chatter. I beg your protection, please.

Mr. President: Listen, I know it is late in the evening, people are a bit restless, I should say. Let us conduct ourselves consistent with the Standing Orders.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Thank you, Mr. President. One of the items that this \$300-plus million, Mr. President, was meant to look at, to treat with, was an Item called Rent/Lease–Office Accommodation and Storage. This came up in the SFC, Mr. President, and what we discovered is that this was a sublease agreement from the Waterfront Development Company Limited—the Port of Spain Waterfront Development Company Limited, and it was a result of a bond of almost US \$500 million.

As I dug into this particular Item, Mr. President, what we discovered is that this bond was structured in such a way that it was not represented on our debt-to-GDP, because it was couched in such a way that the Government is paying this exorbitant lease arrangement, government-to-government, so that it would not show up on our debt service. And I said to myself, Mr. President, what other Items has the former Government hid from the population? And it reminds me of a pattern of activity by the former Government, where it is almost as though they do what they wanted, when they wanted and no one must question them.

10.55 p.m.

And it is a pity that I did not have an opportunity to speak in the TTRA Bill, because much like this, Mr. President, there is a lack of transparency when it comes to the former government. Mr. President, I want to speak to another item. Much has been said about the rentals and leasing as it relates to properties, Mr. President, and I will not say much. All I would say, Mr. President, is that this pattern described, comes up again. A lack of urgency, Mr. President. A level of comfortability and complacency that has etched into their behaviour over the last

10 years. And, Mr. President, unchecked, unchecked, this can lead to instances of overreach. And slowly inch by inch, Mr. President, the former government lost its way. And I do not take ownership of that phrase. You must know where it came from. I am sure.

And so, Mr. President, there is a lot of expenditure items that we have uncovered. One particular project, Mr. President, was parcelled nice and neat as an upgrade under the Ministry of Public Administration. I am told, Mr. President, that this project has been running for over 24 years.

Hon. Senator: Months.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Twenty-four years, Mr. President. I am told that over the last administration there was an upgrade and that upgrade, Mr. President, would you believe, would cost the taxpayers over US \$60 million, Mr. President.

Hon. Senator: What. Repeat that again?

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, I want you to juxtapose that against the environment where forex is apparently scarce. And I want to understand what could inspire former Ministers to engage in a process of this size and this quantum, this recklessly, Mr. President, for such a long time. And when we dug further, Mr. President, would you believe that this US \$60-plus million was meant to be spent over a four-year period, to end in 2026. And would you believe, Mr. President, that in addition to that forex bill that the Ministry of Public Administration had begun and initiated with a vendor, would you believe that in addition to that, the people of Trinidad and Tobago were also meant to pay TT \$50 million to operationalize. And I asked myself, how could a former government that is responsible, that is knowledgeable, that is interested in people, would think it logical to engage in such a process. A process clearly that lacked a level of—

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Hon. Senator: Transparency.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith:—transparency. Thank you.

Hon. Senator: Accountability.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: —accountability. Thank you. But, Mr. President, in all seriousness—in all seriousness—you can ask your former colleague, in the Ministry of Public Administration. You can enquire with her if you like. So, Mr. President, what these two items—and I have only listed two. And I tell you, I will not investigate further. All I can say is that an audit is coming. And that audit, independent of me and this Government will reveal all.

Hon. Senators. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: All will be revealed, Mr. President. Not by us, by an independent audit, and then maybe colleagues on the other side will be satisfied, because they were not satisfied enough pillaging the Treasury.

Sen. Dr. Murray: Point of order. Please imputing improper motives, I think.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Yeah, yeah. You were saying that someone—is it an individual in this—[*Crosstalk*] No, no, no. Were you referring to an individual in this Chamber, pillaging the Treasury?

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: No, no, I am just asking.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: No, no, Mr. Speaker. No.

Mr. President: Wait, wait, wait. You see imputing improper motives must be related to a Member. A sitting Member of the Senate.

Hon. Senators. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: If you are not a sitting Member of the Senate, you can speak to that issue, but you take responsibility for what you would have said. So, when you talk about imputing improper motives, it must be either concerning a Member of this Chamber or a Member of the other Chamber—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Other than that, you have absolute freedom of speech in this Senate. Continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, thank you. Mr. President, I must say, in the time that I have spent in this good Senate, I have never once had an Independent Bencher interrupt so many times.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Alright. Please, please, please. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Listen, let us not go there. Any Member, whether you are an Opposition Member, an Independent Member, has a right to evoke Standing Orders. So let us do not get involved in that kind of behaviour. Please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Everyone is entitled, including your good self to raise a point of order. It does not to identify a point of order, with whether you are an Opposition Member, an Independent Member, or a Government Member. So do not go there. Let us conduct ourselves professionally. Please, continue.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Mr. President, thank you. I am indeed guided. I will move on. Mr. President, how much time do I have left?

Mr. President: I think that you just about three minutes to wind up.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: Three minutes?

Mr. President: Yeah.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: That should be sufficient.

Hon. Senator: Talk about the Bill—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: We talk about a lot more as well. So, Mr. President, the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, will indeed collaborate with many other Ministries over the course of this Government's time, and we intend to modernize, to digitize, and to transform the public service. We intend to do so in a strategic manner, Mr. President. We intend to do so in a planned, scheduled approach, Mr. President, and most importantly, we intend to do so, to the benefits of those persons that put us in these chairs and in this Chamber.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*].

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And that one thing, Mr. President, we on this side do not forget. The Government is meant to serve the people and not the other way around. And I would encourage Members across the Floor to contemplate in their private time, maybe investigate, maybe their behaviour over the last ten years, maybe there were improvements that could have been made, and maybe a conscience might develop in that quiet time, and hopefully, Mr. President, the people of Trinidad and Tobago will benefit from such contemplations.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: And so, Mr. President, we are about accountability. We are about delivering results and most importantly, Mr. President, we are here to inspire hope to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, led by a leader, a Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, who indeed inspires hope—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith:—and will continue to inspire Members of the Cabinet.

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Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith:—and we will do the good of the people, Mr. President, in all things.

Mr. President: Okay. Thank you.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith:—and so I thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Yes. Thank you.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: I thank the indulgence at such a late hour of all Members of the Chamber. It is indeed an honour and privilege to be here—

Mr. President: Okay. Alright.

Sen. The Hon. D. Smith: and with those short words—

Mr. President: Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: I now recognize Sen. Janelle John-Bates.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Janelle John-Bates: Mr. President, I thank you for allowing me to make a contribution to this debate. It is now 11.06 p.m., I know we are all—to use the words of Sen. Mc Nish, on fumes.

Sen. Cummings: Oh yes.

Sen. J. John-Bates: So, I intend to just make five or six quick points, I will not belabour them. Okay. Mr. President, the Government has premised this request for supplementation on what they would label as purposeful under budgeting by the PNM. It was said by, I believe it was the hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh, that the Government purposely under budgeted, then was forced or had to achieve its goals by cutting expenditure, that resulted in arrears and therefore we just decided to stop meeting our obligations. That comment was reinforced or underscored by

the last speaker, who again spoke to this supposed mismanagement of our finances by the PNM Government.

Mr. President, my question is simply this. Why was that assertion necessary? Why was it necessary to cast these aspersions as it relates to the requests for supplementation? Mr. President, a request to supplement a budget is not unique to the PNM Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Every year—

Sen. Cummings: Every year. Every year.

Sen. J. John-Bates:—even when this current Government was the Government in its last dispensation, they too made a request for supplementation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: So, there was absolutely no need to frame this request in this way.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Mr. President, it is simply this: A budget is an estimate. It is an estimate of your expected income. It is an estimate of your expenditure. As it relates to the national budget, the estimate of the income is really based on—primarily for us, our energy sector. As it relates to our expenditure, it is based on past or recurring expenses and what you would envision you would want to use to develop the country further. So, it is an estimate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: And, Mr. President, sometimes your estimate may be wrong, because you have unexpected events. A classic example such an event is COVID.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: When the Government made its estimation in 2019 for the 2019/2020 year, it was in nobody's contemplation by the next year, the whole world would be thrown into a pandemic. Therefore, you would have to supplement. I believed it was last year or the year before the Government sought supplementation in Tobago, because of an oil spill. Who can foresee that? So, Mr. President, my short point there, is that a supplementation is not a bad thing. You do not have to try and explain it away by using terms like mismanagement. It is really—it is not necessary.

11.10 p.m.

Hon. Senator: Recurrent expenditure.

Mr. President: Please, please.

Sen. J. John-Bates: Mr. President, my second point is this, the hon. Dr. Swaratsingh would have said there was very little growth in Trinidad and Tobago in 2021 to 2025. Again, he sought to frame it as if we were unique in that regard. Trinidad and Tobago is not unique in that regard. Mr. President, we, like everyone else, all the countries in this world, were faced by geopolitical factors that we had no control over. There are tensions between other countries that affect us. We have supply chain disruptions, and economic slowdown in other major economies. There is basically an elevated global inflation. So that little growth, as he would describe it, again, is not unique to Trinidad. Central bankers and policymakers across this world are facing this very hard task of stabilizing prices without stifling economies.

I would like to say that numbers are what you make of it, and I would like to just read a short excerpt from the KPMG report on—or their commentary on the Trinidad and Tobago 2025 budget as it relates to this little growth. It was indicated

on page 8 that:

“Recent data underscores a steady recovery, with GDP growth reflecting increased economic activity and confidence. For 2024, real GDP growth has improved to 1.9%, marking three consecutive years of positive growth, as our economy saw a growth of 1.3% in 2023, building on a 1.5% increase from 2022. This trend indicates a revival in economic activity, enhanced confidence, and a favourable outlook for our economic environment.”

Mr. President, does that sound like mismanagement to you? It does not sound like that to me. Mr. President, as I said before, that number, or those numbers, that trend in growth is a worldwide trend. Again, I would want to refer to two other reports, KPMG reports. I am reading again some excerpts from the Executive Summary from the World Economic Outlook for October, 2024. It said there that:

“Global growth is expected to remain stable yet underwhelming. At 3.2 percent in 2024 and 2025, the growth projection is virtually unchanged from those in both the July 2024 World Economic Outlook Update and the April 2024 World Economic Outlook.”

In the Executive Summary for April, 2025, it said:

“Following an unprecedented series of shocks in the preceding years, global growth was stable yet underwhelming...”

So, again, Trinidad is not unique as it relates to the level of growth identified.

So I will move on to my third point. As it relates to my third point, actually I will turn to the actual Bill, what we are here to discuss, the supplementary funding of expenditure. Mr. President, as I said before, supplementation is not a bad thing, but supplementation should not be in a vacuum. So I have no problem supporting a request for supplementation, but it is simply this, I have questions.

The Bill does not provide sufficient information for me in certain areas, and I would focus on one of these areas. It is fast becoming one of my favorite areas to talk about, health. So health received the—there was the largest request for supplementation under Head 28, Health. The request was for \$7.75 billion, and, again, it was stated that the request is because of underfunding by the last administration and a lack of fiscal management.

Mr. President, I think in the midst of all the pontification by the last speaker, he mispronounced the word, “prudent”, because the management of the economy by the last administration could only be described as, “prudent”, please, Mr. President. The truth of the matter is, the last administration was very much invested in the health of this country, or healthcare in this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Mr. President, the budgeted amount for healthcare in 2024 was approximately 15 per cent of our revenue. That is an increase from 7 per cent of our revenue in 2002. Again, does that sound like mismanagement? Does that sound like a government who is unconcerned with healthcare? No.

Hon. Senator: Yes.

Sen. J. John-Bates: Mr. President, the last administration spent a significant amount of money on free public healthcare. Again, if we look at what it was budgeted for, healthcare I believe was—I think it was the number one or two—the first or second largest—well, not just the supplement, the amount budgeted for in the last budget. So again, even—

Sen. Cummings: Allocation.

Sen. J. John-Bates: Sorry?

Sen. Cummings: Allocation.

Sen. J. John-Bates: Allocation. Sorry. Thank you for that, allocation. It is now 11.15. That allocation—over the years, the PNM administration has used the allocation for health for a variety of large infrastructural projects, amongst other things. Cancer Centre in south Trinidad; the Augustus Long Hospital was repurposed so that the people of south Trinidad would not have to drive all the way to north Trinidad in order to get critical treatment for cancer.

Then we have the Arima Hospital that was built at a cost of \$200 million less than was budgeted for by the PP administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: We have the Diego Martin Health Centre that was opened in October, 2022. We had the renovation of the old San Fernando Hospital wing, and what I think is the newest one, the new Sangre Grande Hospital.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Mr. President, when I mentioned, in my maiden contribution, about the good healthcare that I received in our public health institutions, it was scoffed at. Imagine that, “me” saying that I got good healthcare was scoffed at. Well, Mr. President, I do not know what they will do when I tell them this other thing though, about the good healthcare that one of my family members received in the new Sangre Grande Hospital.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: I cannot imagine the derision I would receive for that. Because, Mr. President, just this year, one of my family members spent four weeks in the new Sangre Grande Hospital. Mr. President, you know how much it costs for just one day in a private health institution? He spent four weeks there; one week in intensive healthcare—in the healthcare unit, I should say. I am happy to

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report again that he is out of there today.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: I want to thank the last Government for the investment it has made in healthcare.

So, Mr. President, have no problem with supplementing healthcare in this country, but my question is this—

Sen. Cummings: Good druggist Minister.

Sen. J. John-Bates: [*Senator Laughs*] My question is simply this, when I look at what is requested here, we are asking for, under Head 28, \$7.2 billion. That is what I am reading there, all these commas, is \$7.2 billion—\$7.2 billion. So when you are asking me for \$7.2 billion—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Mr. President—

Mr. President: Please—

Sen. J. John-Bates: Mr. President, it is 11.18—

Mr. President: Yeah, please. I am just—

Sen. J. John-Bates: Sorry, please, sorry.

Mr. President: Yeah, please, please. I am getting a lot of humming coming, so, please, allow Sen. John-Bates to speak in silence. Continue.

Sen. J. John-Bates: Sorry, \$7.2 million—sorry, yes, million—\$7.2 million is the request, and the allocation was \$7.5 billion. So we are asking for \$7.2 million, and that is still no small amount. So when you are asking for that amount of money from taxpayers, then you should explain what is it really for.

So I see some in the, you know, under Head 28, there are some figures here and some short explanations. So I am happy to endorse the requests, but I just

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have a few questions about some of them. For example, I see here Short Term Employment, \$2,639,800, and it says, for a cadre of contract officers, and they have listed four titles, Senior Pharmacist, Quality Officer, Food and Drug Officer, and Legal Officer. Now, I just see four titles there, but I would not want to believe that, that is four individuals, because you are asking for \$2.6 million for four individuals for a five-month period. I just think more explanation is needed there.

How many individuals are you actually asking for money for? How many? Are these new workers that you all are now hiring between May and September or is this a continuous employment? I just have—these are the sort of questions when I started to interrogate the requests, I started to ask questions.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Then I see, drugs. To facilitate, they are asking for \$353,701,400, so they are asking this to facilitate payments to NIPDEC for current year and previous years—yes, for current year and previous years, outstanding invoices for pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical items. So, again, my question is just simply, I just wanted to know, how much is actually in arrears and how much is for current needs, new needs? Again, why was this not—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: I am hearing figures being thrown across the aisle, but, you know, it would have just been simpler to put that in the Bill—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates:—instead of shouting it at me now. That is not appropriate, but it is—anyway, I would not go any further.

Then I see under North West Regional Health Authority, \$76.5 million. Right? I am seeing it saying there:

...to facilitate part payment of outstanding payables.

No problem. Then I see:

...for expansion of services in three local health centres for the period June to September.

Again, I am just wondering to myself, because, you know, I already said it before, I actually use my local health centre, right, so I am curious. What are the expanded services? Is there going to be a duplication of services that are being offered by the hospitals? What is this “expansion” we are talking about here? I see the figure of \$3.47 million, and the thing is, I see that figure repeated in the request under Eastern RHA. The same thing, it just says:

...\$3.47 million for expansion of services for three health centres.

—same thing:

North Central RHA, \$3.47 million for expansion for figures...

My question is—I just found it very curious that the three RHAs are saying they want the exact figure for three same—for three health centres for these mythical or mystical expansion. I just find it very curious.

Is it that you all just slap figures in here without consideration of the actual needs of each RHA, or it just happened that each RHA needed \$3.47 million for three health centres in each region? I am just asking questions. Again, if the answer could have been put in here, it would have been easier, instead of the crosstalk that I am hearing now.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Please, please, please.

Sen. J. John-Bates: I am moving on to the other area. The hon. Dr. Kennedy “Swatsingh” would have said—

Hon. Senator: Swaratsingh.

Sen. J. John-Bates: Swaratsingh, I am so sorry. As I said, you know, you were my first Minister, so I apologize for that. So, Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh would have indicated that there is going to be a focus on economic diversification. He spoke about special innovation, AI, Fintech—no, special innovation zone—sorry—AI, Fintech, biochemical industries, development of knowledge-based industries, all that sounding really, really good. I like where we are going, but when I look at the supplementation, I see that you are asking for a mere \$278,937,000 for development in the supplementation. Perhaps, maybe this 8 per cent allocation is so small because, maybe—I do not know, it could be one of two things, that the allocation made by the past administration in the budget was sufficient. That is one example, or maybe the focus for development might come later on, I do not know; not clear. Again, the hon. Dr. Kennedy “Swatsingh” would have indicated that—

Hon. Senator: Swaratsingh.

Sen. J. John-Bates: Swaratsingh. This is not intentionally, I promise you, but it is 11.24 p.m., please, I beg.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Yes, there is no disrespect on my side with that. But he would have indicated that tourism is usual ignored, he described it as an ignored area, and he indicated some things that they would want to do with tourism, but, again, no allocation for tourism in this supplementation. But, again, it is perhaps the allocation that was made in the budget was sufficient. That could just simply be it.

11.25 p.m.

And one other thing that I noticed when I was looking at this Bill, there were a lot of references to a requirement for money for short-term contracts. I saw it under Head 12, that is the Public Service Appeal Board. I saw it there. I saw it in the Head for Health, which is Head 28. I saw it in a couple areas. And it stood out to me because I know that the Government for the last 10 years has been harping on and on that they have a problem with short-term contracts. And when I was looking at this supplementation, in some areas, I could not quite decipher if the request was for new short-term employees, which would go against their stated position for years and years, or maybe, it was employees who were there before. Again, not clear. So my thing is, it is simply this, “when yuh come to ask for taxpayers to give yuh more money, make it clear what it really for”. And with those short words, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Brian Baig.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Brian Baig: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, let me take the opportunity to thank the hon. Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC for seeing and having faith in me—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig:—and appointing me here as a Member of this Bench, a great Bench, I must say. I also, Sir, want to take this time to congratulate you, Sir, on your elevation as Senate President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: I have known you for a very long time, Sir, and you are a man that teaches well. I am happy that you are the best person for that Chair.

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Sen. Baig (cont'd)

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: Congratulations, again, Sir. Let me take this opportunity as well, Mr. President, to thank the Minister of Finance, as well as my colleague, Sen. Swaratsingh, Minister in the Ministry of Finance, for bringing a very good and excellent presentation to this Senate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: Mr. President, on the 28th of April, this country felt a great movement, and that movement was the removal of the People's National Movement—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig:—and seeing the election of the United National Congress and Kamla Persad-Bissessar as Prime Minister of this country for a second time.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: Mr. President, on the 29th, this country felt a breather, people felt easy people, felt a bit light. Because you know why? There was no more People's National Movement in government, Sir; no more.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: People saw that there was now going to be good governance in Trinidad and Tobago. That is what they voted for. And I can tell you that, Sir, because, so far, what we have brought into this Senate, we have had promises made and promises delivered.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: The Children's Life Fund, the TTRA is no more, and more is to come, and more will come with this Government because, Mr. President, when the UNC wins, everybody wins.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: Mr. President, I must say—oh, my pen went flying—I will say to you, you know, I am a cricketer, so I am like Michael Holding, my run-up will take a little long—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. B. Baig:—but you will see, you might hear some bouncers coming and some yorkers will be delivered tonight.

Mr. President, we have an Attorney General in this country, who said—and I want to agree with him—he is going to war, and I will go to war with him. We will go to war with him when we say we are going to fight crime and we are going to fight, especially white-collar crime in this country, Sir. We will make sure of that, Mr. President.

Mr. President, we want to remind this country that in 2010—2015, we built hospitals, we built schools, we built roads, but after that, in 10 years, what was there? There were no roads, there were no hospitals. We built a children's hospital and they refused to open it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: It took a pandemic for them to open it. We must never let them forget that. We built police stations. What did they build? Nothing. Nothing they built. They did not even build hope.

I listened to my good friend, I took some notes, but not much. She said, “Blame COVID for how the economy went.” She said, “Blame geopolitical tension.” Well, I want to remind my good friend that the economy of this country was already crashing before COVID.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: The economy of this country was crashing before the Russia-Ukraine war. She talked about health care, granted she got good health care. She said she got good health care, and I—

Hon. Senator: The Senator.

Sen. B. Baig: Senator, my apologies, the honourable—my good friend. I could talk about health care too.

In 2016, I stayed nine days in Port of Spain General Hospital, you know, and I could tell you that was no holiday for me. There were times that there were no needles, there were no drips, and I had to wonder, “Well, woe is unto me, Lord. Am I coming out of here?” But thankfully, my Lord saw it through and I came out. So, we must understand that the economy in this country before 2025, was already being crashed by none other than the People’s National Movement, and only the PNM is to blame for that.

So, Mr. President, we have to also talk about why as well we have to ask for money, why is it that certain funds are needed. Mr. President, we all heard about some figures. We heard some figures about what was happening on a golf course, Mr. President. We heard about some figures of legal fees, Mr. President. It was damning to hear of some of these legal fees that were being paid. That is why we have no money in this country. Imagine, you have fees being paid, such as \$38 million to a former Attorney General in this country. You have as well, \$29.3 million being paid to one Gilbert Peterson SC, and that is the friend of a former, former Prime Minister. You know, we have to say “former, former” now. Mr. President, if such moneys were not being paid, we would have moneys to maybe put beds in a hospital, we might have had moneys to make sure “ah man could ah get ah needle to chook in he hand”. But you know, Mr. President, with all these

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Sen. Baig (cont'd)

figures, I saw fees being paid, I saw two names that came up that shocked me, and I said, “Wow.” I know these gentlemen very well. I used to be there, you know? I used to be there. But one thing I will tell you, Mr. President, I am one man and I am proud to be a Member of the United National Congress.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: I will never, to keep a job, beg for “ah wuk”, or I will never try to say, “Well, I come to give my service and to hope I could get some form of briefs.” I will never do that. I will never, ever do those things. For those two gentlemen, all I have to say—“ah cyah say de word”, you know, Mr. President, because they say that that such word is unparliamentary, but all I will say to them is that those persons are ungrateful. We know how they reached there and we know what they had to do.

Mr. President, with moneys like this, the figures that were revealed, when people “cyah even get ah food card, people cyah get ah hamper”, people cannot get normal day workings of trying to get sustenance, because moneys were wasted, Mr. President.

Mr. President, imagine, they had to pay over \$1 million in the Jaiwantie Ramdass matter. You know why they had to do that? She had to go to court and she won. Because why? They were trying to hide something. “Wa allyuh had to hide? Let de lady do she job”. Maybe if you had let her do her job, maybe things would not have been so, you know? But because of that, that is why “allyuh” there and that is why we are here.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: Mr. President, just remember too, there was something called the missing file and it cost taxpayers—and I want you to hear this figure, you know,

Mr. President—\$2.3 million, you know? For a missing file matter. And yet, there were damages to be paid, and I want you all to hear this figure, my colleagues, \$20 million worth of damages, all because of—let me tell you why, it was because of recklessness, negligence and gross incompetence coming out of the Office of the Attorney General, Sir. That is why. And that is why as well the people voted against you, with a landslide victory to the UNC. We must never let them forget that. They were busy crashing this economy, Mr. President. They were involved in dealings that could only be deemed as and called corrupt. I supported the Attorney General when he made the statement by saying, “The feeding frenzy is over.” And I am saying that it is time to put it to them and let them know, no more feeding will happen.

Mr. President, could you imagine that you have to hear another figure of—I told you, \$29.3 million, it was for a man by the name of Gilbert Peterson. But what about the Paria divers Mr. President? They got nothing. No moneys to them. They were treated with scant courtesy, even their families. I say, shame upon the PNM and shame upon you all.

Mr. President, I move to our courts and access to justice. Mr. President, as an attorney-at-law, I believe in our justice system and the access to justice. I must commend the Prime Minister for creating the Ministry of Justice.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: As in any modern society, a Ministry of Justice is vital. It is to ensure that the justice system of our country flows smoothly. But you know who did not think of that? The PNM. Because when they came into office, they closed it down, and they shut it down. “Dat is what dey good at doing, yuh know, shutting

down everything. Dey shut down Petrotrin. Dey shut down all kinda thing. Dey like to shut down thing”.

Could you imagine, my friends, we have places in this country, such as Cedros, Point Fortin, Moruga, that do not have a Magistrates’ Court. Those persons have to go far to get justice in this country. They have to go far. But I will tell you, justice delayed is justice denied—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig:—and that is why we are coming to fix that problem. Mr. President, we campaigned on speedier justice, and just as you saw, we were able to bring promises fulfilled. We will fulfil this promise as well. We will do it.

Mr. President, I want to move on as well to education. I am a person that believes in education. I come from a family that says, education is key. That is why I am a practising attorney today. God bless my mother. She made sure I became a well-educated young man. Mr. President, when we were in government before, we built close to 100 schools. Mr. President, when they came into office, so many of those schools, they did not finish them. They left them there to grow vines and bush. I do not know what it is with the PNM that they do not like to open schools. They showed the history with it, with Biche Secondary School, and I am going to tell you of one school that they that did too, in the constituency of St. Joseph. My good friend, Sen. Kennedy Swaratsingh, knows the school. St. Joseph Secondary School was built by our Government and they left it, as I said, with vines and bush and for other persons to occupy.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. President, 46(1), relevance.

Mr. President: Well, I think he is talking about education. And I think that is part of his—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Well, no, no, he is making his—he is—go ahead.

Sen. B. Baig: Thank you, Mr. President. You see, Mr. President, when we start to show them the truth of the kinds of things they did, the type of wickedness that they did—so, Mr. President, that school, St. Joseph Secondary, families came to us and said, they want the school to open, moneys were spent. But you know what they did? They left it alone.

But on April the 28th you know what they said, we will get rid of the PNM in St. Joseph, and we voted in an MP and a Government, a very good working MP by the name of Devesh Maharaj.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: And that school we will make sure that it gets opened back, Mr. President. Mr. President, we must understand that we are a Government of making promises come true.

Mr. President, I will also talk about the fact that moneys have been allocated towards the laptop programmes. Mr. President, “I know dey do not like to hear about laptops yuh kno, because dey ensure dat children doh get laptops”. But we under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, ensure that all children will receive a laptop in this country. All children. All, all, all.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: Because their children deserve it. I believe someone had asked, well, so a man from the West, would their child get? Everybody will get it, because a child is entitled. A child must receive these things, Mr. President, and that is why there is a request for \$76 million. So in case you were wondering if I am talking about the Bill they asked for that, check the Bill “nah man.” Right? So,

Mr. President, we are at this stage because they put this country in this stage. They are the reason why we had to come and make these requests, “is nobody else”. And they must take blame, and they must take ownership for what they did this country in the last 10 years. They must do it. They must take ownership of it.

So Mr. President, I will say again that when the UNC wins, everybody wins. Mr. President, when the UNC wins, the children of this country will win. When the UNC wins public servants will win, Mr. President. As I said all, will win, and they will win with the UNC and Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: Our Prime Minister will ensure the moneys of this country are spent wisely. We did not spend money on Cazabon paintings. We did not spend money willy-nilly. We will spend it properly, because we know when we have the people’s money in our hands, we must spend it properly. That’s why they have us here the country has the faith in us. The country has the trust in us, and they have trusted Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. B. Baig: And that is why we will ensure this country receives great governance. Mr. President, I will close by again by saying to this nation, you are in good hands, because have no fear Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the UNC Government is here, and we will win, and you will win with us, Mr. President. And I say to my good friends, my new friends, our new friends, when they see for a fact as to what the PNM is, I will tell you, the United National Congress under Kamla Persad-Bissessar is open to all of you, and you are welcome to join us, my friends. Mr. President, with these few words. I thank you.

Mr. President: Leader of Government Business.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Sen. The Hon. Darryl Allahar): Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, I am extremely happy to now rise and beg to move that this Senate now adjourn to Monday the 30th of June 2025, at 10.00 a.m.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 11.44 p.m.