

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Saturday, October 25, 2025

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2026) BILL, 2025



[Second Day]

The Standing Finance Committee of the whole House resumed its deliberations on the Bill and Estimates.

[Chairman: Mr. Singh]

10.00 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Good morning, everyone. This meeting of the Standing Finance Committee will resume now and we move straight away to Head 86: Ministry of Culture and Community Development.

Head 86: Ministry of Culture and Community Development, \$436,362,700.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of Culture and Community Development to make a brief opening statement for a maximum of five minutes.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. Benjamin: Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to appear before this distinguished Standing Finance Committee as we examine the Estimates of Expenditure for Head 86: The Ministry of Culture and Community Development, established under the visionary leadership of our Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar. This Ministry represents a bold realignment of priorities, consolidating functions from the former Ministries of Sport and Community Development, and Tourism, Culture and the Arts. Our mandate is clear and transformative, to harness the power of culture and communities as drivers of economic diversification, social cohesion and national identity.

We are tasked with fostering inclusive growth, where every citizen from Matelot to Moruga, Crown Point to Charlotteville can contribute and benefit from our shared

UNREVISED

progress. This mandate aligns seamlessly with the Government's overarching vision for a striving Trinidad and Tobago. As such, we will be putting people first by empowering communities through sustainable development initiatives, and build resilience and opportunity. We will be delivering good governance by ensuring our policies are transparent and impactful. We will be building globally competitive businesses by positioning our creative industries as engines for economic growth.

As gazetted, the Ministry is responsible for culture, encompassing Carnival, creative arts, cultural products and centres, cultural organizations, national days and festivals, steelpan and tassa. In the community development portfolio, we oversee adult education literacy, Best Village, community action for revival and empowerment, community centres, civic centers, community development policy, monitoring community education skills and training programmes, community mediation, and entrepreneurship at the community level.

Additional responsibilities include management of issues related to the First Peoples' museum, regional complexes, and transformation and development centres. With oversight over the performing entities, cultural spaces and national association of village community councils, village councils, through these divisions and organs in the Ministry, we are poised to build a Trinidad and Tobago, where culture binds us, communities strive and every citizen flourishes.

Our key focus this fiscal includes protection of our cultural products through intellectual property rights to prevent exploitation and generate licences, revenues for artistes and reinvestment, honouring our icons to preserving the history and setting the stage for future generations, revitalization of community centres and

adult education programmes, raising awareness and accessibility of mediation programmes so communities can better utilize these services, strengthen cohesion and resolve disputes peacefully.

Mr. Chairman, though we are here to discuss allocations, it is, however, that this Ministry will be judged by what it accomplishes in this fiscal 2026. Mr. Chairman, this is an investment in our people's creative and resilience, yielding lasting prosperity and pride. We stand ready to answer every query, provide every detail and demonstrate how the efficient use of this allocation will yield dividends in social harmony, economic vitality and cultural pride. I look forward to a productive session.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That Head 86 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$436,362,700 for Head 86: Ministry of Culture and Community Development is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure, the Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly* and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. These Items are to be found between pages 532 and 534 of the relevant volume. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Member for St. Ann's East.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. With regard to line Item 14, could the Minister elucidate what are the Cabinet-appointed committees that

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

are paid under this line Item?

Hon. Benjamin: Could you repeat, Member? Sorry.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: With regard to line Item 14.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, it is the intention of the Ministry to establish Cabinet-appointed committees to provide clear policy direction. There are no committees at this time.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: No committees at this time, but you have put aside \$150,000 as a contingency?

Hon. Benjamin: As I said, it is intent. Once going through the fiscal, if the need arises, it is a fiscal procedure that was done, so that we would have the spend.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Okay. If I may go to line Item 01, can the Minister say how many persons are paid under this line Item?

Hon. Benjamin: One second, Member. At this present time, 266.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Do you have vacant posts?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, Member, 119.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Is there any intention to fill these vacant posts?

Hon. Benjamin: This is through Service Commissions. So once—as you know, it is a procedure. We have reached out to them, so we do await the assignment of the relevant personnel.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: The funds that are allocated at this time, are they sufficient to pay the staff that are in post? Is there any that is targeted towards hiring the new staff?

Hon. Benjamin: The current allocation is sufficient and should we get new personnel, of course, we have the relevant allocation or funding within our existing

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

allocation.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, there is no contingency put in place to hire new staff in this line Item?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, I would have answered.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Well, the answer is, no. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. To the Minister, same line Item, 001/01. The Minister did say there is intent to hire new staff. But looking at the corresponding Item from previous years, we see what seems to be a \$2 million decrease in this particular Item. Does the Minister think the current allocation is enough to even handle the current staff allocation?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, as you would appreciate, this is relatively a new Ministry and also, we did have some arrears due to the SRC being paid through this line Item, and this line Item deals with established staff. So, even though we may have the intent to hire, we still have to wait on Service Commissions. That usually takes time. So, the allocation is sufficient.

Mr. Des Vignes: But no contingencies as was highlighted?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, the allocation is sufficient.

Mr. Des Vignes: No, that was not what the statement was. I was just asking about the contingency, just reiterating what you said earlier.

So going to Item 14, can the Minister state the intent of these committees?

Hon. Benjamin: Asked and answered, Member.

Mr. Des Vignes: When my colleague from St. Ann's East asked, you said there were intentions for committees but you did not say what was the intention of these

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
 Bill, 2025
 Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
 Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

committees.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, asked and answered.

Mr. Des Vignes: No problem. Thank you, Minister.

10.10a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I applaud the fact that you would, of course had members of staff who would be paid under 01/001/01, that would have come from the previous Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, and, of course the previous Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts. Can you tell me if your allocation also covers the increases that would have occurred as a result of the SRC Report?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, Member.

Mr. de Nobriga: They do? So, you have accounted for those increased salaries in this year's allocation?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, Member.

Mr. de Nobriga: Can you give me, if you do have it now, I can get it in writing. Can you give me the positions, and the total value of that increase?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, Member. I will provide in writing.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: Culture Division. Port of Spain North.

Mr. Young SC: Thank very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, you are now in charge of Culture and Community Development, your Ministry, culture of course has a very important role to play in the fabric of Trinidad and Tobago, and something that requires a lot of funding, because a lot of the bodies that put on cultural events,

take for example, Carnival, take for example, the recently concluded Divali Nagar incident.

Member for Oropouche East, you are next, so you will have your turn to say, what line Item do not worry. I am waiting for you. So, in my five minutes, I am setting the—you see the Member never practiced in court—the Chairman there, knows that you have set the foundation for you question. So, I am looking in particular, at the type of work that needs to be done, to make sure that your events are successful, and in particular, you are going to count on your staff under the culture division, to ensure that they are successful.

One of the largest items of diversification in Trinidad and Tobago, potential, is a carnival event, and the build up to Carnival. In particular, as you may be aware, those events are never really within hours, there is a lot of work that has to take place, after hours, et cetera, and overtime. I am looking at line Item 03/02: Overtime for monthly paid officers. Just using those two events of Carnival, and say, the celebration of Divali, are you satisfied that \$10,000 is going to be sufficient for a whole fiscal for overtime for monthly paid staff in this division?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, I appreciate your build up to this question, but that does not apply under this line Item. As you know, there is an entire institution with regard to Carnival, which is NCC. So, when we reach that institution, you can ask that.

Mr. Young SC: I am not focused on NCC, I am focused on your Ministry, and the use of your staff at the Ministry. Hold on, because it not only NCC that is responsible, the Ministry has a role to play. The Ministry's staff will go out, the

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Ministry's staff will supervise, and the Ministry's staff will look at auditing certain items that are being paid. It is the Ministry's staff it will be depending on, not the NCC. The NCC is a body with specific duties, and then this line Item is there for the payment of overtime for Ministry staff in the Culture Division. When we get to NCC, believe you me, we will deal with it. Are you satisfied that \$10,000 is sufficient for overtime for a whole fiscal? That is less than \$1,000 a month, in a 12-month period. Answer that one first please.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, I am satisfied, and this, actually, I want to thank the Minister of Finance, he gave me 8,000 more than you would have aligned to the last fiscal.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: So, apparently he is appreciative of the work that is done. But as I said, there is an institution that deals with our Carnival product. I will give way to the Minister of Finance—

Mr. Young SC: I am not focusing only on Carnival, but let me ask this question now in relation to 002/01—

Mr. Tancoo: Mr. Chair. Procedural ruling please.

Mr. Chairman: I think—

Mr. Tancoo: Mr. Chair, it has now become a habit of Members opposite to interrupt Ministers when they are providing an answer, and to interrupt the provision of the answer. I think that is unfair and inappropriate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Tancoo: I would appreciate if Members opposite, will allow the Ministers to complete their answer before they ask another question. Thank you.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Young SC: I have no issue with that whatsoever.

Mr. Chairman: I think that is fair.

Mr. Young SC: Just as we should not be interrupted nor should we be interrupted with side-bar conversation when we are using whatever amount of our five minutes to ask our question, so let us—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: So, let us proceed.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. So, 002, the culture division of your Ministry. Under 01: Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance, \$3.4 million. How many members of staff are on the establishment under the Culture Division? Let us start with that.

Hon. Benjamin: One second, Member. We have 35 established positions.

Mr. Young SC: How many are vacant?

Hon. Benjamin: Seven.

Mr. Young SC: Out of those 35 positions, how many are currently being advertised on EmployTT?

Hon. Benjamin: None.

Mr. Young SC: None. Are you sure about that?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. No further questions on this line Item. Sorry, 533 just looking at it, on 533. 002 is the same culture division under 01? Yes. So, I had another question there which is at line Item 29. How many daily-rated workers do you have in the culture division?

Hon. Benjamin: Two.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Young SC: Two daily-rated workers? And you think the sum of \$3,000 for overtime, for two daily-rated workers, for a whole year, is sufficient?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes. Last fiscal we had a 1,000. So again, I am appreciative that we have 3,000 this fiscal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: You will appreciate of course, there has been the acceptance of an SRC report since the last fiscal, which has increased the amounts paid to these persons? Correct?

Hon. Benjamin: As I said, we have two, and the funding given is sufficient.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. So, but I am asking a specific question. You accept that there has been an increase under the SRC recommendations? Correct

Hon. Benjamin: Asked, and answered. Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant. No. Okay. Item 003: Community Development Division. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. To the Minister, Item 01: Salaries and Cost of living Allowance. Well, we see there is an increase in this particular area. I wanted to know does this include staff that would be working on the MPower programme where hundreds of young men that came from various communities, and situations where they experience trials, and tribulations. As well as, the MPower Her programme, which did the same for young women from various communities that were facing particular struggles, and help them get on a very positive part?

Hon. Benjamin: No, these are established positions.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Des Vignes: These are established positions? So, none of these positions are working on these particular programmes?

Hon. Benjamin: No.

Mr. Des Vignes: Can the Minister advise, if these programmes are continuing under her remit?

Hon. Benjamin: When you find the relevant line Item, you could pose that question there.

Mr. Des Vignes: Well it is under Community Development. So, these projects were—

Hon. Benjamin: It is line Item. This is the fifth day of this exercise, by now the member should know the procedure.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

10.20 a.m.

Mr. Des Vignes: So it is actually that exact same line Item, Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Des Vignes: It is actually that same line Item, Minister because Ministry staff worked on these projects in the past, so will they be continuing?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Des Vignes: Probably the Minister does not know what is happening in her own Ministry.

Hon. Benjamin: This is the fifth day, and by now we are beyond soundbites. We are down to the people's business. Let us get this done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Des Vignes: To the Minister, we do not crave soundbites; we crave answers

for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is all we are asking.

Hon. Benjamin: And to the Member, I am here to do the people's business. Let us continue.

Mr. Des Vignes: So do it, answer the question.

Hon. Benjamin: I did. It is not the relevant line Item.

Mr. Chairman: I do not think we—

Mr. Des Vignes: No further questions for the Minister, Chair. You do not need to do that. Thank you very much, Chair, for your understanding. Minister, hopefully, you can answer further questions.

Hon. Benjamin: Off course, will do.

Mr. Chairman: Item 004: Best Village. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Hon. Minister, just bear with me one minute.

Mr. Chairman: It is at page 534.

Ms. Beckles: Yes. I really want to go to Goods and Services. So I will wait until—see if anybody else has, and then I will go to 02.

Hon. Benjamin: I did not get the question, sorry.

Ms. Beckles: No. I was saying I am really under Goods and Services, so I do not know if there is any before.

Hon. Benjamin: Okay, sorry.

Ms. Beckles: If nobody else asks when you go to Goods and Services, then I will ask my question.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Okay. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Mr. Chairman, hon. Minister, as it relates to 08, could you tell us

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

what building this is please? Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage.

Hon. Benjamin: One second, Member.

Ms. Beckles: Sure.

Hon. Benjamin: Currently, Member, as advised by the Permanent Secretary, rent is Carapo House, JOBCO Building, and Nicholas Towers. And, we do have staff in Tower C.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Thank you very much, hon. Minister. Hon. Minister, as it relates to Item 16: Contract Employment, could you indicate, as it relates to that Item, how many members of staff—how many positions and whether there are any vacancies? And any bodies in any of the positions, please?

Hon. Benjamin: Sure, Member. Could you give me one second? Total contract staff is 302, vacancies 102.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you, hon. Minister. Are you going to be advertising for those outstanding positions?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Ms. Beckles: On EmployTT as well?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you very much. Hon. Minister, could you provide in writing the list of those outstanding positions as soon as possible?

Hon. Benjamin: Sure.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you. Hon. Minister, can I now go to Item 22: Short-term Employment? Could you indicate how many positions would be available for that particular Item?

Hon. Benjamin: Currently, we do have 25 persons employed, but these persons

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

would be given an opportunity to move into the recent hiring that is ongoing with regard to the Ministry.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, so those 25 more or less would take up that million dollars, basically?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Ms. Beckles: So that is the full complement as it relates to how many positions for your Short-term Employment?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, in regard to your response to the Leader of the Opposition that you have about 22 vacancies or 22 positions for Short-term Employment, or 22 persons, 25 persons employed?

Hon. Benjamin: Twenty five, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Twenty five persons. Those 25 persons, are they—or positions, short-term positions, are they positions that have been approved under contract positions that eventually came to an end and is yet to be renewed?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes. Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. Where have you reached then as a Ministry in getting the approval of the PMCD to have those positions renewed?

Hon. Benjamin: I am being advised by the Permanent Secretary it has been submitted and we are awaiting approval.

Mr. Gonzales: So you are awaiting approval? And once approval is obtained, well, I guess from the PMCD, you go to Cabinet to get the final ratification. At

that point in time, then the Ministry is going to decide how to proceed in terms of advertising the positions internally or externally.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Am I correct?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: All right. So therefore, it is not right to say that these positions are currently being advertised through your employment drive?

Hon. Benjamin: The vacancies in regard to the Contract Employment?

Mr. Gonzales: Short-term Employment.

Hon. Benjamin: Not short term. We cannot advertise short term.

Mr. Gonzales: No, no, no. You indicated a short while ago that those persons who have been employed under short-term arrangement, that you are currently looking at your recruitment drive to have those persons fill permanent positions or contract positions. That is what you said—

Hon. Benjamin: Those with life.

Mr. Gonzales:—in response to the Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. Benjamin: Those with life. I would have met persons on month-to-month arrangement that were not offered back contracts, but I did not sign contracts. Everything has to go through the HR process. So once advertised, and if there is life in the contract, they could so apply, as I was advised by the Permanent Secretary.

Mr. Gonzales: So the response to the Leader of the Opposition, your response, was in relation to persons employed on a month-to-month arrangement?

Hon. Benjamin: It is short-term. Is it not?

Mr. Gonzales: What is that?

Hon. Benjamin: Month-to-month is short-term. Is it not short-term?

Mr. Gonzales: Yes, and that is what I am saying. So, you have indicated, Minister, and I just want to move on quickly. I do not want to belabour the point.

Hon. Benjamin: Sure.

Mr. Gonzales: I just want to be very clear in what you have just indicated to the Leader of the Opposition. You indicated that persons who have been employed, 20-something odd persons who have been employed under Short-term Employment, in relation, those persons would have occupied contractual positions before, which eventually came to an end. Am I correct?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: And now, you have also indicated that the Ministry is now working with the PMCD to have those positions renewed—

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales:—go through the normal process to Cabinet.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: And then, once you get final ratification of the Cabinet, those positions would be eventually advertised internally or externally, so that those persons who might be employed will have another shot at being employed under contractual positions.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: So therefore, it is not right to say that at this point in time you are looking to fill those vacancies via your recruitment process.

Hon. Benjamin: All right. So Member, as you said, not to belabour this position.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Not each of those are similar. Some are unique. Some of them do have life. Okay? If you want it in writing, I could provide. So do not belabour this issue.

Mr. Gonzales: Well, Minister, alright, you can provide information in writing. But, if some of these positions do have life under contractual arrangement, then those persons cannot be regarded as being employed under short-term arrangement. But we will move on in the interest of time, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: St. Ann's East.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you kindly. I just wanted to know how many positions, how many of the vacant positions under Contract Employment, line Item 16, are being advertised at this time?

Hon. Benjamin: All.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: All the vacant positions. So the 2 million that is allocated here, would it be sufficient to pay any of the new employees?

Hon. Benjamin: Currently, the allocation is sufficient and as indicated extensively throughout this entire exercise, the Ministry of Finance does have the funds with regard to the employment. Once more funding is needed, we would apply.

Mr. Gonzales: And the persons who are in line Item 22 that are in positions being paid under Short-term now, but are in contract positions that are being offered these positions, when they move into Contract Employment Under line Item 16, will there be funds under there to pay them?

10.30 a.m.

Hon. Benjamin: It is the same allocation and, yes, it will be sufficient, Member.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, the funds under 16 can pay for persons who are not being

paid under there now?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, once additional funding is needed, we can vire into—this is a budgeting exercise and I know the same thing would have been explained at length throughout this entire exercise. If funding is needed, we can vire, we can so request from the Ministry.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, has it been under-allocated? Line Item 16?

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, could I say asked and answered, please?

Mr. Chairman: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: What you can say is “not answered”, but that is okay.

Mr. Chairman: Alright, alright. Let us not editorialize. Let us get on with it. Shall we? Item 003: Community Development. Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: [*Inaudible*—you are on pages 536 and 537, yes?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are.

Mr. Scotland SC: Hon. Minister, could you tell us under Community Development, if Item 02/003/16: Contract Employment, do any persons or bodies related to the EmpowHer or the MPowerTT programme fall within this category of contract persons who would be hired under Contract Employment, under this heading?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, could you repeat which line Item you are looking at?

Mr. Scotland SC: I am on page 537, 003: Contract Employment.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Scotland SC: Does that Contract Employment embrace or embody any persons who would be hired to perform the EmpowHer or MPowerTT programme?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, no. This line Item does not treat with those—

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Benjamin: Okay. Can I go to 22: Short-term Employment? Does any person, any body, who would be performing duties under EmpowHer or MPowerTT fall under this Short-term Employment with the \$2.4 million allocation?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Scotland SC: So persons doing MPowerTT—you are telling the Parliament—will fall under there? The persons hired under this heading: Short-term Employment?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Scotland SC: Thank you, Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: St. Ann's East.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, I just want to draw the Minister's attention to two things before I ask my question. Under 003, 16: Contract Employment, is 900,000, while Short-term Employment is \$2,400,000. What is the reason that Short-term Employment is so high in this particular area?

Hon. Benjamin: This treats with the regional complexes. And we would have met these persons in these positions. It is something the Ministry has to treat with, but it is not an exercise where we wanted to let go of the warm bodies that we met in the positions. So I did have conversations, and we will treat with it as we go forward, but we did not, as you like to say, fire anyone in the positions.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I do not know that I like to say, "fire", Minister. I am not sure that is one of my favourite words at all. It might be somebody else's favourite

word, but not mine. Now, what are the positions that under Short-term in this particular line Item?

Hon. Benjamin: Could you specify? Sub-Item 22, right?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Sub-Item 22: Short-term Employment.

Hon. Benjamin: One second please, Member.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Is it an extensive list? Because I would like to know positions and salaries.

Hon. Benjamin: I could provide that for the Member because, as I said—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I will take it in writing.

Hon. Benjamin:—I met these persons there, so I can provide it to the Member.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Whether you met them or not, I would like to see what would take \$2.4 million in Short-term Employment when your Contract Employment is much less than that.

Hon. Benjamin: As I said, I met these persons in these positions, so I will gladly provide it in writing to the Member.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Minister, all I am asking right now is for your assurance—

Hon. Benjamin: I have met these persons—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly:—that as Minister for the past six months, you will provide the persons that are being paid under Short-term Employment in this line Item. Can I have that insurance?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, I will gladly provide that in writing. I met these persons.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: That is very, very good. Thank you very much.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I am quite concerned about the response to my colleague from St. Ann's East by the Minister. The response that I heard on the line Item is, "I met those persons there". Is that indicative of an intention to fire persons that you met there? Is that that what you are telling the population!

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, I do not appreciate—

Mr. Chairman: No, Port of Spain North—

Mr. Young SC: That you met persons there so you want to get rid of them?

Hon. Benjamin:—the Member putting words in my mouth.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: I am asking a question!

Mr. Chairman: No, no, no. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Hon. Benjamin: That is your—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: No.

Mr. Young SC: The question is, do you intend—

Mr. Chairman: No.

Mr. Young SC:—to fire the short term persons you found there?

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North/ St. Ann's West, that is not an appropriate question.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: No, it does not arise.

Hon. Member: Who is he speaking to like that?

Mr. Chairman: Not appropriate.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

Mr. Tancoo: Why is he shouting?

Mr. Chairman: Not appropriate.

Mr. Young SC: Unfortunately, I have to shout because your colleagues on this side are “rah rah rahing”.

Mr. Chairman: All right, okay.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Let us tone it down a bit, shall we? Everyone, let us tone it down a bit. Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: A follow-up to my question that I asked under the Item 003/22, could the hon. Minister provide us in writing the list of persons who will be hired under this heading for the EmpowHer and MPowerTT programme? I do not need it today, but I need it in writing, please. Can I request that through you, Mr. Chairman, under this Head Item as a follow-up question?

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, what I can tell the Member, as the unit was left, so the unit still exists and that is the—

Mr. Scotland SC: Chairman—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: I think the inquiry is whether the Ministry will be willing to provide it in writing.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Is it that you want the names of the persons?

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes, who would be continuing under the MPowerTT programme under this heading.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes, continuing.

Mr. Chairman: I think you—can I just hazard a suggestion?

Hon. Benjamin: Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Because you are seeking an assurance, I want it to be circumscribed properly so that there is no allegation in the future that the assurance was not complied with. Okay, so, is it that you want who will be staying on or who are currently in?

Mr. Scotland SC: No, no, no, who will be staying on under this Item 22?

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, I cannot provide that information because this unit has been existing in Short-term for more than five years, and it is the intent of Ministry to take a note to Cabinet to formalize the unit and then get the relevant approval with regard to the salaries.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: So I cannot give that assurance and that is fair.

Mr. Chairman: And that is why I asked it.

Hon. Benjamin: So if they are asking me to keep persons on short-term, that is not the exercise of this Government.

Mr. Scotland SC: Chairman, I have never asked that. She is obfuscating my question.

Mr. Chairman: No, no, no, no, no, no. Let us get it clear. You see, the intention of an assurance is a Parliamentary accountability issue.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: So that is I wanted the assurance to be properly circumscribed so there can be no allegation. If the Minister provides the information that she has not complied with—

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Scotland SC: Agreed.

Mr. Chairman:—the assurance. And that is why I think the question or the request should be more narrowly circumscribed.

Mr. Scotland SC: Well, I have circumscribed.

Mr. Chairman: It cannot be—

Mr. Scotland SC: It is not open-ended Chairman. It is very narrow.

Mr. Chairman: Nah, I think it is too open ended. I think you need to narrow it and perhaps the Minister may give an assurance as to the—I think what is more capable of being complied with is the list of persons today in the programme as we speak or something like that.

Mr. Scotland SC: The list of persons today who continue under employment in the programme. That is fine with me. If I get that Chairman, I am cool.

Hon. Benjamin: That word “continue”? No.

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Mr. Chairman: And that is the problem.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Who are in it today.

Mr. Chairman: Today. That is fine.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Well, right. That is fine.

Mr. Scotland SC: So if from Monday these are the persons working under MPowerTT—Monday.

Mr. Chairman: Right, I do not see an issue with that.

Mr. Scotland SC: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Chairman: If you frame it that way, I do not see an issue with it.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes, of course. She is shutting down the programme. Yes, thank you.

Mr. Young SC: [*Inaudible*]*—East Port of Spain—*[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Suffer. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Scotland SC: It is an allegation.

10.40 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin North East.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Page 537, Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 003: Community Development Division; Sub-Item 22: Short-term Employment. I have heard the Minister say several different things in response to other questions. Some of the things said were, the Minister said, “I met these people there,” then, “I do not intend to send people home,” then, “There are warm bodies place,” and then, a sort of an argument over whether people will be continued or not.

Hon. Benjamin: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Imbert: I still “eh” cross a minute yet. Now, short-term employment, by definition, cannot exceed a term of more than six months. The Minister took office on, I think, the 1st of May. So for the last person that the Minister would have met there, the employment of that last person would expire in six days

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: Chairman, what is going on? Is the Minister listening?

Mr. Chairman: Well, I am sure the Minister is capable of multitasking.

Mr. Imbert: The last person that you, Minister, would have met there, as you said, their short-term employment contract would expire in six days. There would have been others who would have been on short-term that would have expired in May, in June, in July, in August, September and in October. And every single person who was on short-term, their contract would have expired by the end of this month.

Are you saying that every single person that you met there, whose contract expired in May, June, July, August, and will expire in October, you are going to keep them?

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, that question from the Member for a unit that has not been formalized and existed since 2021, yes, these persons and the contracts, some did warrant being renewed. I did the honourable thing, something unknown to that side, I did not fire persons.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: What I said—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Chairman, I do not know if honourable—unknown to this side means that this side is dishonourable?

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: They fired 40,000 CEPEP, URP and the reforestation workers.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: That is very pejorative, Chairman. Chairman, I am on a point of order, 48(6).

Hon. Benjamin: Since 2021, this unit has formalized. These persons existed in a short-term—

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Chairman, point of order, 48(6). the Member said that we are dishonourable on this side.

Mr. Chairman: Let us stop shouting at each other.

Mr. Padarath: But, Chairman, we have endured five days—

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Have you?

Mr. Padarath:—endured five days and nothing has changed. Some course of action has to be taken.

Mr. Scotland SC: Stop calling people “hooligans”.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, I am still on my questions, you know, while all of this is going.

Mr. Chairman: Can we move along without the exchange of vitriol, and the hurling of vitriol at each other.

Mr. Imbert: I have not been able to move.

Mr. Chairman: Right.

Mr. Imbert: I asked a simple question.

Mr. Chairman: All right. I think the Minister has answered the question sufficiently.

Mr. Imbert: No, Sir. I asked if any of the contracts that expired over the last five and a half months—because they must have, because short-term, maximum term is six months. So, those that expired in May, June, July, August, September, and will expire in October, have you kept all of them?

Mr. Tancoo: Chair, that question—

Hon. Benjamin: It did not make *Newsauce*, so, yes.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

Mr. Tancoo:—had been asked and answered.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Yes? You kept all of them? So, nobody. All right. All right.

Mr. Chairman: All right, let us move on.

Hon. Benjamin: Once it did not make *Newsauce*, they are still employed. So, yes.

Mr. Chairman: All right.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, is the Minister saying that they are different—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: You are allowing this, you know, you are allowing this. And then you want to tell me, I should not raise my voice? I cannot—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Benjamin: Mr. Chair, if I had the \$3.3 million that was paid to *Newsauce*, I could have hired more, and I would have.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: No, come on—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: Minister, Minister. All right. Let us—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: You are allowing this?

Mr. Chairman: Let us get some order on that. Minister, I am going to ask you, respectfully, to withdraw that. I do not think it is necessary, and it changes the complexion of how we are proceeding this morning.

Hon. Benjamin: I withdraw.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Mr. Imbert: Based on the answer from the Minister, I have a supplemental. That means there are certain categories of persons? Because you said, once they did not do this, they were kept on, and that implies that if they did do this, they were not kept on. So, did you keep everybody?

Mr. Chairman: The Minister has answered the question.

Hon. Member: Three times.

Hon. Member: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, yes.

Mr. Imbert: And then she qualified it after.

Mr. Chairman: No, it was not a qualification. It was a somewhat facetious qualification, come on.

Mr. Imbert: Oh, I see it was a facetious qualification.

Mr. Chairman: No, come on.

Mr. Imbert: Oh, I see. All right, all right.

Mr. Chairman: Come on. Stop nitpicking. Let us move on.

Mr. Imbert: I am not nitpicking.

Mr. Chairman: Next question.

Mr. Imbert: This is serious business.

Mr. Chairman: No.

Mr. Imbert: It is not serious business?

Mr. Chairman: This is a serious business. The question is not a serious question.

Mr. Imbert: You are saying that my question, whether she fired people, is not a serious question?

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
 Bill, 2025
 Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
 Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Chairman: No, I am not saying that. I am saying that your continuous—

Mr. Imbert: “Waaaay”.

Mr. Chairman:—and unjustified repetition of the question is not warranted.

Mr. Imbert: All right.

Mr. Chairman: That is all I am saying.

Mr. Imbert: Very well.

Mr. Chairman: So, let us move on. Next question, Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Chair, permit me to say, as one of the newer parliamentarians, I was corrected yesterday on a point of order, and I stepped forward and I said sorry and I apologized. On the point of order, 48(6), the Minister, a short while ago, said that the Members on this side do not know about doing the honourable thing. Chair, to you, I respectfully ask that the Minister apologize to the Members on this side for that.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, I said I did the honourable thing. I did not say otherwise.

Mr. Des Vignes: No. Chair, she added to that by saying that those on the other side do not know how to, and that is highly offensive, especially as a new Member of Parliament. It is highly offensive, Chair, and it should be apologized for.

Hon. Benjamin: If we could carry on with this exercise. This is not a tit for tat.

Mr. Chairman: We are not going to finish, you know.

Hon. Benjamin: This is the business of the people, and we are here to—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: The Member is not the Chairman of this Committee and therefore, a point of order was—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Chairman: Minister and—[*Inaudible*] I am speaking everyone. Okay.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Imbert: You heard that? I am sure you heard it.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Let us move on. All right. Can I have another question? Otherwise, I intend to move to the next Item. I am not going to be drawn into that this morning. Next question. Unless we have a next question, I am moving to the next Item. Item 004: Best Village. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Item 02—

Ms. Beckles: Page 538.

Mr. Imbert: No, it is all right. The Minister wants to know the line Item, I heard that just now. Item 02/004/16. Any of the persons whose short-term contracts expired from May 1st to today, have any of those people—have their contracts not been renewed? In Item 16. Because they must have expired between May and today, many of them. Have all been renewed, or some not renewed?

Hon. Benjamin: Under this line Item, I am being advised by my Permanent Secretary that none have expired.

Mr. Imbert: That is impossible. Short-term contracts run for six months.

Hon. Benjamin: They have all been renewed. Is it Contract? 16?

Mr. Imbert: That is impossible, Mr. Chairman.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Benjamin: You said 16; 16 is contract.

Mr. Chairman: Item 16 is Contract Employment. Item 22—

Hon. Benjamin: It is not Short-term.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

Mr. Imbert: Item 22.

Mr. Tancoo: It is very unfortunate, Chair—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, 22.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Right. So, you may redirect your question—

Mr. Imbert: Under Item 22: Short-term Employment, any of the persons who were there, that you met there, on May 1st, and their contracts expired over the last five and a half months, were they all renewed, or were some of them not renewed?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, yes, all were renewed, because when we took office, we had programmes going on. All the contracts were renewed.

Mr. Imbert: All short-term employment contracts?

Hon. Benjamin: All short-term, to execute the business of the people, were renewed.

Mr. Imbert: Every single one?

Hon. Benjamin: Every single one.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: That cannot be true. You fired 200 of them.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. The Minister has given the answer.

Mr. Imbert: It cannot be true.

Hon. Benjamin: It is shocking that this Government did that.

Mr. Chairman: It does not make sense hurling a contradictory response.

Mr. Imbert: Why not?

Mr. Chairman: It does not take the point any further. The evidence is the answer of the Minister, not the contradictory response being hurled across the aisle.

10.50 am

Mr. Chairman: Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Minister, having regard to the fact that they were all renewed, can I ask you to provide me in writing, within a reasonable time, the positions and the names of persons whose contracts have been renewed. Thank you very much.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, Member.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Chairman, I just want to add—

Mr. Chairman: St. Ann's East.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Sorry, just want to add to that, seeing that it is the same undertaking. I would like to add to that the date of their initial hiring please.

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, I do not know if the Member opposite thinks this exercise would bar the Ministry from formalizing some of these arrangement and if they get a certain name on a paper means that concretes the person's in the position. If that is the exercise being conducted—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Chairman, I just ask for an undertaking. Could I get the assurance that, that would be provided?

Mr. Chairman: Minister—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly:—that is all. The editorializing, Chair. The editorializing.

Hon. Benjamin: Minister—

Mr. Chairman: I do not think that could possibly be the intensions, so if you are able—

Hon. Benjamin: I think that is the intention.

Mr. Chairman: Well, if you are able to give the assurance, can I ask if you are willing too?

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Hon. Benjamin: I am not.

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Chairman. The Minister has the discretion to say that she will not provide the information in writing that is asked for?

Mr. Chairman: Yes. I do not have the power to compel an assurance.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So the country is to understand that the Opposition is asking the Minister to provide the names of persons under short-term when they were first hired and their salaries that are associated with that and the Minister is refusing to provide that.

Mr. Chairman: No, no, no. If the Minister has given the assurance, you will provide the names and the salaries, what she is not given, is an assurance as to the initial date of hiring. That is the only thing that cause outside of the assurance.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: “Orr”. So, that important detail which will show—

Mr. Chairman: Well—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly:—that what the Minister is saying is not true, that in fact she did—

Mr. Chairman: No, no, no—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly:—fire short-term people. That is to be taken out?

Mr. Chairman: She paying an appropriate [*Inaudible*]—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Okay, Mr. Chairman, I understand now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Tancoo: No, no. no—48(6)—

Hon. Benjamin: Mr. Chair—

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I understand now.

Mr. Tancoo: 48(6)—

Hon. Benjamin: Mr. Chairman, I am—

Mr. Tancoo: Standing Order 48(6)—

Hon. Benjamin: Mr. Chairman, I do not think that this exercise is being conducted fair at my disposition.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: She is now inferring on the Chairman. “Wow”.

Hon. Benjamin: Words are being put in my mouth.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: She is casting aspersions on the Chairman.

Hon. Benjamin: I gave an answer—

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Hon. Benjamin:—and the Member—if a question—

Mr. Chairman: The narrow—

Hon. Benjamin:—is being asked of me and I am providing an answer, how could the Member say it is untrue.

Mr. Chairman: And that is what I wanted to [*Inaudible*] up on.

Hon. Benjamin: So it does not make sense I give an answer, if the Member already knows the answer.

Mr. Chairman: Minister, can you allow me to speak?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: It is regrettable and unfortunate that the Member will accuse the Minister of mendacity. I do not want to repeat the word untruthfulness, but you cannot—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman:—no untruthfulness is not allowed. Nowhere—I am not going to argue with you on this, but untruthful. An accusation of untruthfulness is a very serious allegation to make against a sitting Parliamentarian. Alright.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: No the Minister never said dishonorable. Let us be clear what is happening here. The Minister gave an assurance that she will provide a very narrow item of information, what you then sought to do is widen the scope of it—the Minister said, “I am not prepared to do that”. She is prepared to give the assurance in the terms dictated by the Leader of the Opposition, which is entirely within her purview.

It is also entirely within here purview to decline to give an assurance for the additional item which you sought. I do not have the power to compel the Minister to give any such assurance. I can try my best to enforce the assurance, if it is given in the terms it is given on. If you require that information, there are other avenues available for you to obtain that information, but it is really counterproductive to accuse the Minister of mendacity in those circumstances. Okay. So, let us move on in an orderly manner. Member for Arima. Thank you.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. I propose to call Item 005: Mediation Centers. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Minister, page 538, 02: Goods and Services; 005: Mediation Center; 22: Short-term Employment. Can you tell whether any of the persons that you met there in the Mediation Centre on short-term employment on contracts, whether any of their contracts expired over the last five and a half months.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Hon. Benjamin: Member, let me ask the Permanent Secretary, I want to be accurate in giving this response.

Mr. Imbert: No problem. That is fine. [*Laughter*] Must have expired.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, I am being advised by the Permanent Secretary, the person in charge of keeping the records, that these persons have been reengaged.

Mr. Imbert: I did not ask that.

Hon. Benjamin: What are you asking Member?

Mr. Imbert: I ask you if any of the short-term contracts of employment expired?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, they have been expired.

Mr. Imbert: Okay, and all those that expired were re-hired?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, Member.

Mr. Imbert: Okay, any new persons were hired?

Hon. Benjamin: No, Member.

Mr. Imbert: I see. I see.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Well, I doubt that.

Mr. Tancoo: 48(6). A clear direct response was provided and now a clear direct response was provided by the Minister, but the Member Diego Martin North/East, now is questioning the integrity of the response by the Minister.

Hon. Benjamin: By the Permanent Secretary.

Mr. Chairman: You know we would move along very well if there was a hesitation to over-editorialize and shout across the corridor, when you do not agree with the answer. Alright, Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chair. Minister, under 005, can you give me the number of mediation centres covered under this heading?

Hon. Benjamin: A minute please. Six—seven, sorry. Sorry seven.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, and Minister the staff that populate these seven centres, these staff are hired under line Item 16?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, 16 and the short-term as well.

Mr. de Nobriga: And the short-term as well?

Hon. Benjamin: Which is 22.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you Member. And—so, Member are you comfortable that the \$500,000 that has been allocated to you under 16 and the additional \$100,000 that has been allocated to you under 28 is sufficient to hire and to pay these staff members for the financial year?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, again this is a budgeting exercise and I know you would have asked these questions under different Ministries—once more funding is required, we have an exercise that we could vire into the Vote and as you would have seen my tone throughout this, it is not to fire persons met, but it is to just ensure that the work continues, so I would do what is necessary. If I need more funding we would vire or I would have a conversation with the Minister of Finance.

Mr. de Nobriga: So, Chairman, through you to the Minister. Minister, I want to assure you that this is not a political exercise.

Hon. Benjamin: No. Member, and I did not—

Mr. de Nobriga: Mr. Chairman, I have five minutes—I—

Hon. Benjamin: I apologize, Member.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you.

Hon. Benjamin: I apologize.

Mr. de Nobriga: The reason I am asking you, is simply because I understand the value of these mediation centres and it ties back to what you said in your opening statement. My point is simply that, I just want to know—not asking if you are hiring or firing people. As part of your exercise to bring figures to bear here and to life, is this \$600,000 total enough for the fiscal year? That is the only question I have asked.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, my answer remains, yes, because as you could see my tone and just like what you said, I too value the work that is done, hence the reason I ensured that the persons remain in the positions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.00 a.m.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just one final thing to tie up. Minister, in 2025 the Revised Estimate for these Mediation Centres under Contract Employment was \$756,000, that is now down to \$500,000. I Again, having asked and having gotten the answer from you, I am now assured that should you have to vire—because it seems as if you may have to—you will come back either at mid-year for a new amount or you will vire from within your Ministry.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, rest assured, I had to vire to ensure that they stayed there, and it is an exercise that the commitment is there for all employment.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin West.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. Follow-up question, does the Minister intend to open more mediation centres?

Hon. Benjamin: It is a policy statement and, of course, the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago is something we are treating with. As I said, we value the work that is done by this unit and we will treat with it in time.

Mr. Des Vignes: Alright. So just looking at Item 04 as well. Last year the allocation was \$35,000. It has jumped to \$60,000. Can the Minister explain to us the reason for that jump?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, could you just direct me to which line Item?

Mr. Des Vignes: 04; 005: Mediation Centres; 04: Electricity.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, go ahead. Sorry.

Mr. Des Vignes: There has been a significant increase in that Item, almost double, what is the reason for that increase?

Hon. Benjamin: I am being advised by the Permanent Secretary that it is to treat with some arrears.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister. We are going to Item 08: Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage. Is it that the Ministry intends to rent less offices because previously this Item was \$1.4 million and now it is down to \$500,000?

Hon. Benjamin: One minute, Member. Member, the allocation is sufficient. We do have savings through other rentals. As you appreciate, we are moving staff from one building to the next because we are a new Ministry. So it is sufficient as two of our rentals are earmarked to exit the contract.

Mr. Des Vignes: So these rentals do not actually only include the actual

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mediation Centres, because we are talking about Mediation Centres?

Hon. Benjamin: So, as I said, we do have some savings, the virement, as I said, so we could vire into the Vote. So the allocation is sufficient.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay.

Hon. Benjamin: That was the intent of my answer.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, fair. Minister, in terms of these Mediation Centres, we understand that because it is mediation taking place, security is of utmost importance and I am seeing here a decrease in Security Services. How can the Minister explain this change in this figure?

Hon. Benjamin: One minute, Member, I am just going to the line Item.

Mr. Des Vignes: Sorry, that is 43.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Des Vignes: Humble apologies.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Hon. Minister, in relation to Regional Complexes, 04, are you in a position at this time to say which of the Regional Complexes or is that for all the complexes, the \$10.3 million? 04; Current Transfers and Subsidies, under 005/04, there is a figure of \$10.3 million.

Hon. Benjamin: Which one?

Ms. Beckles: Regional Complexes.

Hon. Benjamin: That is not in Mediation. Member, could you ask the question, there was a little confusion?

Ms. Beckles: Let me just clarify. Mr. Chair, what page are we on?

Mr. Chairman: We are on 538.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So it is the next page, sorry. Sorry about that, my apologies.

Mr. Chairman: Right. So we move now to Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases. For the avoidance of doubt, pages 539 to 540. Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Culture Division; Item 003: Community Development Division; 004: Best Village; 005: Mediation Centres.

Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies. For the avoidance of doubt, pages 540 to 542. Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Hon. Minister, my apologies, this is where I am. Sorry about that. So 04/005, Non-Profit Institutions, and then under 04, there is Regional Complexes. So that is what I was enquiring from you whether that allocation is for all complexes. Do you have any specific complexes in mind?

Hon. Benjamin: One second, Member, I will just get the listing. Regional Complexes?

Ms. Beckles: Yes, please, hon. Minister.

Hon. Benjamin: And the question is, Member, sorry?

Ms. Beckles: Yes. You have an allocation of \$10.3 million, is it that there is any specific request from those complexes? Is that a general figure for every—in other words, how is it—I am just asking, how is that \$10.3 million utilized for the complexes? Because I noticed that you would have, for example—

Hon. Benjamin: These are salaries.

Ms. Beckles: Oh, salaries. Okay. Thank you. So let me just ask again, as you indicated, so that as it relates, let us say for example for 05, would that also be for salaries as well? The one after Regional Complexes—

Hon. Benjamin: Contribution to Community Based Organisations?

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Hon. Benjamin: Right. Mr. Chair, this allocation is sufficient. So these are programmes and applications usually are made for these.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Alright. So that—just bear with me—Operational Expenses for Community Facilities. No, sorry, Contribution to Community Based Organisations. Are you saying there are programmes and people would apply to the Ministry?

Hon. Benjamin: Programmes for the community.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So could you give me an idea of what sort of programmes or is it that the communities are free, in other words, to make a request that you want to do X programme? Is that what—

Hon. Benjamin: So these are short-skilled programmes, Community Education Programmes.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So that is what you would normally do like long ago—

Hon. Benjamin: Yes. And they are usually free.

Ms. Beckles:—whether it is probably crochet, or whatever it is.

Hon. Benjamin: All are free. I should not say “usually free”, they are all free.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, fine. So that an NGO can apply to the Ministry under this programme for a particular—

Hon. Benjamin: Under CARE NGOs could apply. So there are different programmes that allow different applications. And, yes, we do partner with NGOs to conduct some exercises as well.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, fine. Can I enquire under 07, which is Mediation Centres, would that be for salaries?

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Hon. Benjamin: No.

Ms. Beckles: Okay.

Hon. Benjamin: These are for the programme. The Mediation Centres, as you would appreciate, they do conduct exercises throughout the course of the year. They have a lot of lecture series and they do programmes as well.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: I think Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, under 04/05, Contribution to Community Based Organisations, \$5.5 million, this is the line Item that is utilized to assist, as the name suggests, various organizations throughout Trinidad, community organizations; for example, one may use it to assist small pan sides in a community, correct?

Hon. Benjamin: No. So this particular one—so, yes, my Director of Com. partnered with some institutions to get some exercises done, but this is mainly the courses that is put on by the Ministry. So you will see we advertise a lot of short courses, this Vote treats with that, and training; any training exercises.

Mr. Young SC: Alright. Well thank you for that clarity. So, for example, when you go into a community and you do courses like hairdressing, assisting with learning to do air conditions, and that type of thing. Okay, thank you. 04/11: Contribution to Cultural Organisations, \$5,094,000, this is the line Item that you would utilize to assist various cultural organizations, for example, small steelbands, correct?

11.10 a.m.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: In light of the fact that NGC terminated the sponsorship to three very important pan sides, Joylanders from Couva, a pan side in Tobago—you are very familiar with it, and aware, by your nodding—are you now in a position to take up that slack, and to assist them?

Hon. Benjamin: I actually have that in my notes written down as one of the intents. But I can tell you that we are looking for different avenues as well.

Mr. Young SC: Different avenues, hopefully to attract private sponsorship and this type of thing. Minister, may I implore upon you the absolute importance of providing support for these small sides throughout the country because, as you may know, they play a very, very important role. It is not only about the provision of learning to play the pan, et cetera. Just in a pan yard, the leadership that you learn, et cetera—

Mr. Chairman: Alright. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: So, there—

Mr. Chairman: You could probably give the gratuitous advice in writing. I want to skip along a little bit.

Mr. Young SC:—I would not—okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. But, Mr. Chair, I have not even used 30 seconds.

Mr. Chairman: I know but—

Mr. Young SC: So, Minister, would you be undertaking to provide the assistance to these pan sides under this line Item?

Hon. Benjamin: So, as I said, conversations are happening, and it is one of the written intents under this line Item.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. And then at 04/12: National Museum and Art

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Gallery, this is the subvention that is provided to the Museum just for the running of the Museum, correct?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. Because we do have serious concerns with respect to what is going on there because I do not see any line Item in the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* for the continuation or the completion of works. Can you tell us what is going to happen?

Hon. Benjamin: So, when we reach that respective line Item. But, the concern goes beyond the building. As you know, the last administration left the artefacts to, I do not want to say ruin, but I am treating with it. Rest assured that we are treating with it.

Mr. Young SC: But there is no line Item to treat with it. So, I was asking, is it going to be done under this?

Hon. Benjamin: I do not want to answer with regard to the construction, because this line Item is to treat with different exercises with regard to the Museum. But, at present, the Museum's construction and the care of the artefacts is presently under review. An audit is being done. And when that exercise is completed, this information would be forthcoming.

Mr. Young SC: So, at that stage you will seek the necessary funding to continue or to do what your audit suggests be done?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes. But my main concern right now is the status of the artefacts, which I have team treating with.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 06: Operational Expenses for Community Facilities. Is this exclusive to community centres?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, could you just repeat. Sorry about that.

Mr. Birchwood: Line Item 06: Operational Expenses for Community Facilities.

Hon. Benjamin: Yeah.

Mr. Birchwood: Is this exclusive to community centres?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Birchwood: And does that entail security and man power to operate the facility?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay. So, every community centre, I want to assume, throughout the country?

Hon. Benjamin: No, Member. That is another exercise that this Government is treating with. Some community centres have been left to ruin. And plus, we have to treat with the councils and what have you. So it is an exercise that we are treating with. But, no.

Mr. Birchwood: No.

Hon. Benjamin: As your colleagues will tell you, no.

Mr. Birchwood: No. Okay. So this is operational costs for the community centres, right? So how—

Hon. Benjamin: Yes. With managers.

Mr. Birchwood: Managers.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay. So, how does one acquire access to a manager for the

community centre?

Hon. Benjamin: Again, Member, it is an exercise that we are treating with. What usually happens is the newly-built community centres, managers were placed in them. But, again, this Government is conducting an audit of the existing centres, and we are trying to treat with it.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Just a follow-up to that question, Minister is there a cost attached to this audit?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, at the moment we are doing it internally.

Mr. Romain: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: “Uh?”

Mr. Chairman: I am advised your hand was up.

Mr. Imbert: Yes. Yes. Thank you very much. Page 458, 04/005/06. Minister, am I correct to interpret what you said—

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Imbert:—that this Item is to pay personnel at community centres? Operational Expenses for Community Facilities: What exactly is that for? I just want a clear understanding.

Hon. Benjamin: I am being advised; security, watchmen, lights, operational expenses. Yes.

Mr. Young SC: All community centres in Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. Imbert: That is for everywhere. Right?

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Hon. Benjamin: No.

Mr. Imbert: Where is it for; some, all?

Hon. Benjamin: Those with managers at present. I just said that, Member.

Mr. Imbert: All of those where you have staff?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Imbert: Right. Okay. Could you then explain why the allocation has been reduced from the Revised Estimate in 2025 by approximately \$1.5million? Do you intend to send people home?

[Minister confers with technocrats]

Mr. Imbert: It is an easy question. It was 6,330,000 in '25. You now have 4,840,000. That is people at the lowest levels.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, as you would appreciate, these are facilities, and I did say that an audit is being done. That exercise also entails making the centres more marketable, putting them at a position where they could make profit, and they would not be dependent on the Ministry for all their bills.

Mr. Imbert: So the reason—

Hon. Benjamin: So, the funding that you see here is sufficient.

Mr. Imbert:—for the \$1.5million cut in allocation, which is about 20 per cent, is what? Are you sending people home? You said it is to pay salaries for people at the lowest end of the spectrum, security guards.

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, I would have given an answer, and that did not entail firing persons. Why—

Mr. Chairman: Yes. I think that has been asked and answered. Let us move on.

Mr. Imbert: It has not been answered. That is for sure.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Chairman: Well—

Mr. Imbert: An answer has been given, but it is not a proper answer.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. I propose to move to 007: Households. Oh. Sorry.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Chairman. With regard to line Item 11: Contribution to Cultural Organisations, could the Minister indicate if there are outstanding approved applications?

Hon. Benjamin: One minute, Member. One Minute. Yes, Member. We do have some outstanding bills.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Could the Minister indicate the quantum? In aggregate.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, 1.2.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Okay, 1.2million. So, therefore, what you really have going forward into this fiscal would be just about 5 million, less the 1.2 you already have in approved applications? Correct?

Hon. Benjamin: Some of these Bills are from 2024. So, I did inherit a lot of bills. But, one thing I am doing is treating. We would have written to the Ministry of Finance, and we would have gotten a commitment to treat with it. But I would have met bills from since 2024.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Well, that is understandable, because it is an ongoing thing. What I would have thought is that, having met them, then the allocation would have been increased more than this to account for what you already had approved, and what you would have to do moving forward. But, if that is not so, that is not so. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 009: Other Transfers. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chairman. So, Item 02: National Days

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

and Festivals. Does the Minister see—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Sorry, Chair. Sorry to interrupt, but did we pass 007: Households?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: When? I just asked a question under 005.

11.20 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: That was my mistake. So, I am going to go to 007: Households. That is my mistake. I jumped ahead. My note misled me.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Chair. I have a question on 01.

Ms. Beckles: Chair, what page are you on, kindly? Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Sorry?

Ms. Beckles: What page are you on? Thank you. Sorry.

Mr. Chairman: Page 541.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you, sure.

Mr. Chairman: My mistake. I apologize. My note misled me.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Could I proceed?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Dr. Gadsby- Dolly: Okay. Item 01: Community Action for Revival and Empowerment. Are there outstanding approved applications under this line Item, Minister?

Hon. Benjamin: One minute, Member. Member, I am being advised that we had some cheques that were approved and we are just pending the distribution, waiting for accounts to do the necessary batching.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Okay. If the cheques were cut already, it means that it does

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

not impact this allocation.

Hon. Benjamin: No.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, this is your full allocation going forward?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 009: Other Transfers. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. Item 01: Export Centres. Now, the previous allocation was \$15.6 million, now it is down to \$9.1 million. Can the Minister explain to us this decrease and where exactly are these export centres?

Hon. Benjamin: Mr. Chair, these programmes will be carefully streamlined to fit within the allocation provided, while still ensuring appropriate service to the country and community is being executed. But should additional resources be needed, of course, we will vire into the respective, and plus we have five export centres. Member, I hope that answers your question.

Mr Des Vignes: Where are the five export centres? Can the Minister just name them?

Hon. Benjamin: These centres are located in Fyzabad, Mausica, but I will provide the five in writing.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Minister. I know the Minister of Finance mentioned, you know, the drive to export culture and so on as well, and really expand. Now, I want to move to Item 02: National Days and Festivals. This Item is allocated \$1million less than last year. Is it that the Ministry intends to cut any of our National Days and Festivals funding?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, no.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Des Vignes: With—

Hon. Benjamin: Member, this is an ongoing exercise and this allocation is sufficient. As you would treat how our fiscal year is allocated, some of the respective festivals fall after. We are in October, so we treat with Christmas. So, it is an ongoing exercise. The allocation is sufficient.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes, but the fiscal year remains the fiscal year. So, for the Minister, I ask, does this \$4 million include our Independence Day celebrations in 2026?

Hon. Benjamin: Member—

Mr. Des Vignes: It is a yes or no question, Minister, with respect.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, the Ministry of Culture and Community Development usually treats with all festivals, but there is spend from different Ministries that are also catered for with regard to independence.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, yes?

Hon. Benjamin: So, you will await the Cabinet announcement.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Item 011: Transfers to State Enterprises. Port of Spain North.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. Sorry, I was at 011—06: Current Transfer to Statutory Boards & Similar Bodies, or that is the next one?

Mr. Chairman: That is the next one.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. Sorry.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Right. So we go now to Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies; Item 004: Statutory Boards. Hon. Members, we shall now move on—

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Young SC: I had my hand—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Young SC: What is that?

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, we shall now move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*. 20 - Queen's Hall; Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration, page 557.

Mr. Young SC: Page 557 or 554, Chair?

Mr. Chairman: Page 557 in this book. [*Chairman points to book*] So, I think you need to switch volumes. Yes, Port of Spain North.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. Minister, there is an overall decrease when it comes to the sum of money, the subvention for the running of Queen's Hall. And in particular, when one looks under 01, you would see significant decreases totalling \$365,900, so \$366,000 for the next fiscal with respect to really the Remuneration to Board Members, Gov't Contribution to Group Health Insurance, Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance, et cetera. Why is there this reduction for Queen's Hall?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, the allocation is sufficient and my answer with regard to it remains the same. If more is needed, we would vire or we—

Mr. Young SC: Vire. Okay. When you look as well—so, you are saying that it is sufficient. It is a very, very tight operation, the running of Queen's Hall, of course, in Port of Spain, in the north of Trinidad. And you are seeing a decrease of \$365,000, so that is over \$30,000 a month being reduced, where they already struggle to make their monthly bills, et cetera, and you are saying that that is

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

sufficient? How did you come up with “that is sufficient”?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, you will remember that these cultural spaces also generate revenue.

Mr. Young SC: Correct. But when you look across the board, you would see that there has been a reduction.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, we also decreased cost with regard to the tent, so we have funding.

Mr. Young SC: Yeah. But tent—you know, do not be misled by your colleagues, right because at the end of the day, it is you who are accounting to the people. The reduction of the cost of a tent that was raised in the budget does not come under Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance. That would come under “other costs”. That is under Goods and Services.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: Member—

Mr. Young SC: So, do not let the Minister of Finance mislead you to—

Hon. Benjamin: Member—

Mr. Young SC:—embarrass you.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, all that being what it is, my answer remains the same. We are not in the business of interfering with permanent or established staff, and once we need funding, it would be vired. It is sufficient for now. This is a budgeting exercise.

Mr. Young SC: I am very aware that is why we are here. Thank you, under 01. When we reach to 02: Goods and Services, I have more questions.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Scotland SC: Thank you. Hon. Minister, under the Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance, the same 01/001/01, could you tell the public whether or not staff who worked at Queen's Hall, particularly the ushers, have their contracts been renewed or have they been sent home?

11.30 a.m.

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, I have sat here for the last hour and half and Members opposite are on some sort of witch-hunt to look for some sort of mass—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin:—firings. That is not happening.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Chair, Mr. Chairman, on a point of order.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, I sat and I listened to the preamble—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: 48(6) on a point of order, Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. Minister, I think the appropriate answer is either—a short answer.

Hon. Benjamin: They are temporary staff and they do not. That does not apply to that.

Mr. Chairman: Right.

Mr. Scotland SC: Chairman, I do not, and I sincerely do not, understand the answer. If I say, Chairman, the problem may be with me as a simple mind. My question is, the staff under this Salaries and Cost of Living have you—

Hon. Benjamin: It is for permanent staff. The ushers are brought out based on the activities. This does not apply to them.

Mr. Scotland SC: So can I find out then because I did not see under this heading, particularly under Personnel Expenditure, any—Chairman, you know what? I will

go under Goods and Services under Contract Employment and ask. So this does not apply to them? I will go under Goods and Services next, and I know sometimes there is an allergic reaction to the truth on that side.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Forget the editorializing. Let us move on. Let us move on. Alright. Let us move on. It is Saturday morning. We are here for a while. Come on. Port of Spain North.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. In an effort to move along, Member, under 02: Goods and Services, 04: Electricity, a reduction of \$100,000. As you are aware, the running of Queen's Hall depends a lot on the lights, et cetera, and the electricity. Why a reduction of \$800,000 when you look historically, it has always been over the \$900,000 range? I would like to remind that part of your budget's measures, meaning the Government's, is an increase in the electricity rates where this would fall under. So with an increase in the electricity rates, why are you all reducing the sum of moneys? It is that you all want Queen's Hall to shut down?

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Young SC: It is a typo?

Hon. Members: "Awww geez."

Mr. Young SC: Well, no "awww geez". Answer the question. Why a reduction of \$100,000 when you have raised the electricity rates, Minister?

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North.

Mr. Young SC: Sir, it was the anticipation of the noise that would come to my

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

left or from my left.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. But you are part of it. You are far too experienced, both in here and in the other place to react to noise. Come on.

Mr. Young SC: Question—

Mr. Chairman: Right.

Mr. Young SC:—and I will phrase it, if I am allowed some silence from my friends to the left. With the increase in the electricity rates for the next fiscal which will lead to an increase of electricity for the Queen's Hall, why is there a reduction of the allocation of money by \$100,000 when you look at it historically, they have all used over \$900,000 and at a lower electricity rate?

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, in all the cultural spaces we are on an exercise to use renewable energy sources, which are also solar panels. That aside, the lights would not go out, to correct the Member with regard to his statement. It is a cultural space. The lights will not go out. The funding is sufficient.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. I am satisfied that question has been sufficiently answered.

Mr. Young SC: You cannot install solar panels in the next fiscal, but that is fine because you have nothing in your *Development Programme*. So let us now go to 02/16: Contract Employment. You have reduced the contract employment by over half a million, \$521,000. Is this in an effort to once again reduce employment for the people of Port of Spain?

Hon. Benjamin: Chair—

Hon. Member: “Doh answer”.

Mr. Young SC: “Who said, doh answer? Yuh have to answer.” The whole exercise is to answer, Couva North.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: Chair. Chair, the employment exercise that this Government conducts is to employ persons of Trinidad and Tobago and not only Port of Spain.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: There is no exercise to reduce employment. Members, opposite would have sat and asked me questions under various line Items. And true, I have not reduced employment. We are on an exercise to increase.

Mr. Young SC: Alright. Thank you very much. So, if I may, Chair, to follow up on that? I agree with you. Employment should be across for all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Would you then show me, where is increase in travel for persons who would come from Tobago to go to a two-hour event at Queen's Hall for employment? Because we are not suggesting it should be only the people from Port of Spain. But when you have studied your figures, it seems to be—

Hon. Benjamin: Chair—

Mr. Young SC:—that there is a deliberate—I have five minutes. I know you are getting uncomfortable. I am talking about 16, the line Item is Contract Employment. I am there at Contract Employment following on an answer that was given by the Minister. I understand the uncomfortableness because we have sat here, as I have heard from my colleagues on the other side for five days, and what we are seeing is a deliberate, laser-type attempt to destroy Port of Spain and to reduce employment—

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Mr. Young SC:—in Port of Spain now with Queen's Hall.

Mr. Tancoo: Standing Order 48(6) an unsubstantiated allegation is being made.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Young SC: Is it?

Mr. Tancoo: Can I? 48(6).

Mr. Young SC: 48(6) is a Standing Order—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, as far as I can recall and I being here a little while, as you know.

Mr. Tancoo: Standing Order 48(6) please.

Mr. Imbert: 48(6) is imputing improper motives on a Member. We are not talking about a Member here.

Mr. Tancoo: What are you talking about? Are you—

Mr. Chairman: That is splitting hairs. It is.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Tancoo: Allow the Chair. This is a Standing Order. Mr. Chairman, has to rule on a Standing Order. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Alright. Port of Spain North, can I invite you to ask a simple question, if you propose to do so.

Mr. Young SC: I understand the use of the word “simple”.

Mr. Chairman: Just ask a simple question.

Mr. Young SC: Minister of Finance, the Chair is directing me to ask a simple question. So the simple question under line Item 02/16: Contract Employment is, why are you reducing the Contract Employment available through Queen’s Hall for those who are employable in the environs of Queen’s Hall?

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, we are not reducing employment. The funding is sufficient.

Mr. Chairman: I will take that to be the answer.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
 Bill, 2025
 Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
 Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South, did you still want to ask your question?

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes. Yes, Chairman. Hon. Minister, it is an irrefutable fact that you have decreased under heading 02/011/16 the amount allocated for Contract Employment for fiscal 2026 by more than a half million dollars. Could you tell us if this reduction was part—or part of the reason for this reduction was the non-rehiring of the ushers at Queen's Hall or, Madam, which staff does this reduction apply to then? Who will be sent home?

Hon. Benjamin: Nobody will be sent home. Chair, to save Members opposite this witch-hunt, I will provide details of Queen's Hall in writing. What they left is what exists. Nothing has changed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Okay. I will take it, Mr. Chairman. I will take—

Hon. Benjamin: I am even willing to submit my notes for one of the ushers to take to the other side. Nothing has changed.

Mr. Scotland SC: Mr. Chairman, I will take the response in writing and I am grateful and obliged and I move on.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. I do not think the passage of the notes is necessary at this stage. Right. There being no other questions on 02. Port of Spain North jumped ahead. I propose to go to Head 3. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases. We have gone to page 558. Item 001: General Administration.

Sub-Head 04. Item 007: Households, 21: Naparima Bowl. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. 563, Port of Spain South. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
 Bill, 2025
 Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
 Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Purchases. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers to Subsidies; Item 007: Households; 22: National Carnival Commission; Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services. Alright. Under General Administration, Port of Spain North.

Mr. Young SC: 569?

Mr. Chairman: 569.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. Minister, under 02: line Item 49: Construction of Facilities, there is a reduction of \$4,300 million here for the next fiscal. Is it that there is not going to be the construction of the North Stand for Carnival next year?

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North, I think you have jumped ahead to Sub-Head 02. So, I suppose there are no questions on 001, I take it.

Mr. Young SC: I had none and I looked across.

Mr. Chairman: Right. So, we move on. We are on Sub-Head 02 for the avoidance of doubt. Go ahead, ask your question.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. 49, line Item 49: Construction of Facilities, a decrease of \$4.3 million. What is this in relation to? Is it the North Stand?

11.40a.m.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, sadly no. This question is not—

Mr. Young SC: Sadly no?

Hon. Benjamin:—it is not. I know that is what you want to hear, but it is not.

Mr. Young SC: I do not want to hear that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Hon. Benjamin: You cannot—

Mr. Young SC: Okay, what is it for?

Hon. Benjamin: Well, allow me to answer.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much.

Hon. Benjamin: Thank you Member. So this question is not about \$3 million less. It is about—

Mr. Young SC: \$4 million.

Hon. Benjamin: It is about how every—

Mr. Young SC: \$4. 3 million.

Hon. Benjamin:—dollar is managed, alright? NCC cannot continue on the path of debt, and unpaid stakeholders inherited from the last administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: Under my watch there will be no wastage. So, that is what I could tell you. It is cutting the wastage. But, what you know exists with regards to the greatest show on the face of the earth still stands.

Mr. Young SC: So in answer to my question, Mr. Chairman, the answer is, what is the reduction of—my question is, what is the reduction of \$4.3million in relation to?

Hon. Benjamin: It is to treat with the corruption and the wastage that exists.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: So you are saying that there is corruption at wastage at NCC?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: I would have—Member, asked and answered, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Young SC: I did not hear the answer to that. I just asked the question for the first time.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Young SC: Go on record and say it.

Mr. Chairman: Alright, let us move on. Any other questions on Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services? Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Hon. Minister as it relates to Other Contracted Services, I see there is a reduction of \$2.1 million. Are you satisfied that the allocation that you have would be able to treat with this matter?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, the allocation is sufficient.

Ms. Beckles: Can I enquire from you, what would you normally classify as Other Contracted Services?

Hon. Benjamin: One second. So, this would treat with some equipment, lighting equipment, screens, projectors, generators, tents, toilets, tables, chairs, flooring, decoration, food, et cetera.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, and you are saying that that reduction—

Hon. Benjamin: As I said, we are cutting out the wastage. So, of course, yes, it is sufficient.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 03, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, Item 007: Households, Item 008: Subsidies.

National Academy for the Performing Arts, Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 03, Item 001: General

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
 Bill, 2025
 Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
 Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Administration, Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions, 007: Households, 009: Other Transfers.

60: Southern Academy for the Performing Arts, Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, Item 007: Households.

Hon. Members we will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. Consolidated Fund, pages 227 to 229. Item 004: Social Infrastructure, A. Culture. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. So looking at Item 001: Museum of the City of Port of Spain/Carnival, I am seeing \$2.5 million here. Given that in previous years there was an allocation for the Pan Trinbago headquarters, is the Pan Trinbago headquarters going to be adopted somewhat in this Museum of the City of Port of Spain/Carnival?

Hon. Benjamin: Mr. Chairman, this is not the line Item for that.

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, no?

Mr. Chairman: No, the answer is that this is not the line Item that deals with that.

Mr. Des Vignes: No problem, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Alright. A. Community Development. St. Ann's East.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. With regard to line Item 005, could the Minister indicate what exactly is the purpose of this \$5million

allocation?

Hon. Benjamin: One, minute Member. So, we are at Queens Hall right? Mr. Chairman, the allocation provided will be utilized to make the final payment. We are on 005: Queens Hall, Member? That is the one you are asking about?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: No, I am on 14/A. 001, no 14/A./005, sorry. Infrastructure Enhancement Community Recovery Report.

Mr. Chairman: This is—no this in this book?

Hon. Benjamin: My 005 is Queens Hall.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: What page are they on?

Mr. Chairman: 228.

Hon. Benjamin: *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure.*

Mr. Chairman: *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* at page 228.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Consolidated Fund?

Mr. Chairman: *Development Programme.*

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Right.

Mr. Chairman: Right, so it is at page 288, Minister. It is the penultimate Item on page 228 on the first column.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: No, did you move to Community Development on 228?

Mr. Chairman: Yes. You identified it Member. You said Social and Community Services, A. Community Development, Item 005. That is what you identified to ask.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Yes. I am on the right page, 228.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, so am I.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: 005. Infrastructure Enhancement Community Recovery

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Report. You are on the—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Sorry?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I am on the 228.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, so am I.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So it is not Queens Hall.

Mr. Chairman: No.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: That is what I am saying.

Hon. Benjamin: Yeah, there was a mix up, sorry, sorry about that Member. Alright, so, Mr. Chairman, the 2026 allocation will be utilized for repairs and upgrade, works to a number of community centres and facilities. These include, but not limited to Hindustan, La Gloria, I am seeing here one of the soup kitchens, the Spree Simon soup kitchen. There would be a centre for consideration—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Mr. Chairman, well could I ask for it in writing then?

Hon. Benjamin: Okay, sure.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: It will be easier that way, and could I also add to that under 006, if there are plan works under 006? If you would add that to?

Hon. Benjamin: I do have it here, but if the Member wants it in writing—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: It would be easier, it would be better for me to have it in writing.

Hon. Benjamin: Sure.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, I appreciate it.

Mr. Chairman: Alright, thank you. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Hon. Minister under Refurbishment of Civic Centres and Complexes, can I enquire whether that is an Item under which the First

Peoples improvement of their project, would it fall under here?

Hon. Benjamin: No, Member, sorry.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So is there any—I mean, I looked in the last fiscal year, and I looked everywhere, I did not see anything. So is there anything at all for any improvement works?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, as you know that is an ongoing exercise and it is being treated with, and we would have meet with the First Peoples. I am just providing an answer—

Ms. Beckles: Yeah, sure.

Hon. Benjamin:-but, yes, that is being treated with.

Ms. Beckles: But it is not in the Estimates as yet, or may be later on?

Hon. Benjamin: It is catered for.

Ms. P. Beckles: It is catered for, alright. But, I just did not get it—I mean honestly I looked everywhere, I did not see it.

11.50 a.m.

Minister if you, at some stage, I mean I am just asking, and I am happy for the commitment that it is being catered for, so maybe at some stage you can point it out for me I will be very grateful. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I am at line Item 006: Refurbishment to Community Facilities. Minister could you tell me if under this line Item, community centres are covered or addressed?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes. Yes.

Mr. de Nobriga: Yes, they are. Minister, could you tell us what community

centres will be covered under this \$2 million Vote?

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, and I have to begin that statement saying that although we do have a listing here, it is not limited to that. We do have to treat with some exercise with regard to priority because we do have some centres that were left in a kind of deplorable state. But we are treating with St. Augustine South, San Rafael, Manahambre, Freeport, Vessigny, and it is not limited to that, Valencia is under this. There is a facility with regard to Mayaro. So we do have, we are trying to tend to a lot of the different facilities that have urgent works that are needed.

Mr. de Nobriga: Chair, just one follow-up. Minister, as you know there was a refurbishment of the Cocorite Community Centre. Are there any costs that would be covered either under this or I believe in a similar line Item under your IDF that would be keeping the Cocorite Community Centre from being reopened?

Hon. Benjamin: As I said, we are doing an audit exercise with regard to all the community centres and we would treat with the centres then. So rest assured, Member.

Mr. de Nobriga: Okay. Chair, just one last Item. Minister, with regard to the Cocorite Community Centre, I would have done a walk through with staff members of the former iteration of your Ministry, snag lists were identified and they were addressed. So as far as I know, all those issues have been completed and the centre is ready to open. If there are any items that are keeping it still to be addressed under these line Items, I would appreciate if you and I could have a conversation about it.

Hon. Benjamin: So you are right, Member. This did come to my desk. The projects team did treat with all the issues with regard to the snag list. There is one

minor outstanding issue they have to treat with and they are dealing with it. So rest assured very soon and, of course, we will have a nice opening.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, A. Administrative Services; F. Public Buildings. Member for Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. Under Public Buildings, previously this is where the Pan Trinbago Headquarters was. I see the restorative works to the former Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts at Jerningham Avenue, the figure has doubled. Is it that there is some alignment between the Pan Trinbago Headquarters?

Hon. Benjamin: That is not the line Item. I appreciate the Member is fishing.

Mr. Des Vignes: No, it is not fishing. It is where it was last year, it is not there again, so I am just asking.

Mr. Chairman: I think we are dealing with this year's line Items.

Mr. Des Vignes: So there is no line Item this time around for that, for Pan Trinbago Headquarters, Minister?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, we are treating with what is in front of you and that is a matter for the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin:—and that matter has been dealt with and wait, you will be invited in time to come.

Mr. Chairman: Shall we move on?

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Infrastructure Development Fund, pages 324 to 325, Item 004:

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Social Infrastructure, A. Culture; A. Community Development. Member for St. Ann's East.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, with regard to line Item 001 under A. Community Development. For avoidance of all doubt I am on page 325. There is \$6million allocated for the Refurbishing of Community Centres. Does the Minister at this time have a list of community centres that will be refurbished under this line Item?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, I do, but it is not limited to this. I am a Minister that treats with calls from the community council and, of course, treats with urgent priority, because as it is right now, I do have a tree that fell on one of my roofs, so we are not barred into this, but if the Member want this in writing I could provide it.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I would appreciate it.

Hon. Benjamin: But I am putting on record, we are not barred into this. We do treat with it as reported by the projects team.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you kindly. And with regard to construction of communities centres, is this line Item going to be doing any construction?

Hon. Benjamin: Are you seeing the line Item, Member?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Well, exactly that, I see no line Item either. So is that the Ministry is going to be doing construction on community centres because there is no line Item for that?

Hon. Benjamin: That is our mandate. So, yes, Member.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, the construction of the community centres is not in your IDF here though. So that will be handled in a different way?

Hon. Benjamin: Member—

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 86 Ministry of Culture and Community
Development (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Well, it is a rhetorical question, Chair, no answer is required.

Hon. Benjamin: No, Member, as you know during your tenure UDeCOTT usually builds these centres. You will be invited to the opening. Yes, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Under the same line Item 001, could the Minister indicate if the Samaroo Village and Carapo Community Centres are on your list to be refurbished?

Hon. Benjamin: Repeat, Member, sorry.

Mr. Romain: The Samaroo Village and Carapo Community Centres, can you indicate if those are on your list to be refurbished.

Hon. Benjamin: Not before me. But as I indicated we are not barred into this, we do treat with it with regard to the urgency.

Mr. Romain: So just follow-up, Minister, if I write to you on those community centres can they be added to the list?

Hon. Benjamin: Of course we will send out the project team and they will do the necessary evaluations and good consideration would be given.

Mr. Romain: Greatly appreciated.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 86 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Minister, thank you very much and on behalf of the Parliament I wish to express my gratitude and thanks to your staff. We are sorry and apologize for having inconvenienced you on a Saturday morning.

Hon. Benjamin: Chair, if you would permit me, I too would like to express my

Head 40 Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (cont'd)

gratitude to the dedicated technocrats, staff of the Ministry and of course, as you said this Saturday morning that they came out. Thank you again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Head 40: Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, \$550,406,100.

Mr. Chairman: Let us give the Minister and his staff sometime to convene. Minister, can you indicate when you are ready? Shall we go? I will now invite the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries to make a brief opening statement and I do not think I need to remind him, it should not exceed five minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.00 noon

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much, colleagues. It is an honour to present to this Committee and I am joined, of course, by the very distinguished Member for Point Fortin and Minister in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. Our Permanent Secretary and other senior members of our staff join us as well this morning to present.

Mr. Chairman, the energy and mineral sector continues to play a crucial role in driving the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. This sector remains critical to our development and it is our responsibility, at this time, to effectively manage, regulate and oversee this sector on behalf of all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, the resource owners.

At the outset, our Government reaffirmed the significance of the energy sector to the social and economic development of our nation. The Government, ably led by the visionary Member for Siparia, Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, declared its intention to take a more proactive approach to reaffirm the country's position as the energy hub of the region. This was done by

leveraging our tremendous experience, our human capital, our infrastructure, our location and our strong regional and international relationships. The revitalization of this sector will necessitate the adoption of strategic energy policies, designed to optimize our hydrocarbon resources. Mr. Chairman, we intend to ensure that the citizens of our country receive fair economic benefits, while simultaneously allowing our investors to achieve reasonable profits.

Current investments are forecasted to incur capital expenditure of an estimated US \$10.2 billion through 2027. The bulk of these investments stem from negotiations with the upstream oil and gas companies. Mr. Chairman, you will note that we inherited a sector that was in a steady pattern of decline from 2015 to early 2025. There was a significant decline in oil production, in gas output, and indeed, a demobilization of the human resources in this sector.

Mr. Chairman, in the six short months we have been there, we have been able to renegotiate with several of the key and principle players to ensure that several of our gas projects are expanded, and indeed, we get greater value. We were pleased within the first few months to announce the Manatee PLUS project, which it dealt with a 10 per cent increase in production rates over the previous production target.

Mr. Chairman, in the six short months we have been there, we are extremely pleased to note that under our watch, ExxonMobil returned to Trinidad after 22 years—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. Moonilal:—to participate in deepwater drilling. Mr. Chairman, we also noted that we were able, very quietly but in a very sustained manner, guided by the hon. Prime Minister, to achieve what the last Government lost. They lost it, we got

it, the OFAC licence to continue—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. Moonilal:—exploration, development, planning and negotiations with all stakeholders on the Dragon gas project. We did not, unlike the former administration, place all the eggs in one basket. We are working on several major gas projects at this time, of which the Dragon is one, and that we will be dealing with in the coming days. Mr. Chairman, as well, you will know that we are in the process of a deepwater bidding process, a round, and we will also release some information on that.

Pursuant to our mandate and our vision of recreating Trinidad and Tobago as the energy hub of the region, we are in sustained discussions with the Government of Grenada, Governments in Guyana and Suriname in the region to deepen our strategic interface and partnership across the Caricom territories.

Mr. Chairman, another major initiative which I would like to indicate is that, we are working with all local and foreign stakeholders to ensure that we conduct exercises and improve the ease of doing business in the energy sector. We believe that we can have an additional value of US \$120 million per year, only by reducing the time, the red tape and the bureaucracy of dealing with the energy projects.

So, Mr. Chairman, I would add more as we go along, depending on the questions that are raised on this matter. Thank you very much.

12.05 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: Head 40: Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, \$550,406,100 stands part of the Schedule.

This sum of \$550,406,100 for Head 40: Ministry of Energy and Energy

Head 40 Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (cont'd)

Industries is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We now proceed to consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* to be found, for the avoidance of doubt, on page 273 of the relevant volume. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, Item 001: General Expenditure. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I was glad to hear the long run up and the precis by the Minister and in particular, how he intends to deal with the industry because the whole country is seeing one of our largest producers at Point Lisas pick up their bags and leave because of his mismanagement of the industry—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC:—which takes me directly to 01/01. Minister, can you tell us, how many positions on the permanent establishment exist at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries?

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you. May I?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much, Member. Thank you very much, Chairman, and to respond to the Member's response in an unrelated part of his question, but I will respond. May I just remind the Member that under his administration, several plants, including the M1 plant, Proman, closed in November 2016. They closed an entire refinery in 2018. Yara was closed in December 2019. Atlas plant methanol closed in September 2024. The gas plant phase 2 closed in December 2024, and I can go on, and on, and on. But it is not necessary. I just want to tell the Member, because it may come back again later in the proceedings, that we are in discussions

with Nutrien. It is very sensitive and we expect that we will get a great opportunity to revitalize our strategic partnership not only in one area but in several areas pursuant to our diversification agenda.

In terms of the real question the Member had, the number is 290, of which 146 would be permanent with bodies 71 and without bodies 73.

Mr. Young SC: Sorry, my question was how many permanent positions exist. You said 290 and then you went on to say 146 are permanent. I did not ask about contract. How many are permanent positions?

Dr. Moonilal: It is 290 with 146 appointed.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. So therefore, you have—is that where you said that you have— how much are vacant?

Dr. Moonilal: 144 vacant.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you, and then to move now, because you have had a decrease of \$1.7million in your line Item 01: Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance. Is it that you do not expect to fill those vacant posts?

Dr. Moonilal: I am instructed that the 1.7 decrease is due to the arrears that we would have paid pursuant to the SRC.

Mr. Young SC: So with that being the case, then we go to line Item: 08 Vacant Posts, Salaries & C.O.L.A. (without incumbents) and you have an increase because it is the first time it appearing of \$200,000. When I say first time it is appearing, it did not appear in 04 or 05. What is this in respect of?

Mr. Young SC: For positions that we expect to be filled by the DPA in the coming fiscal.

Mr. Young SC: What positions are those?

Dr. Moonilal: Advance Petroleum Inspector I, Senior Chemical Engineer,

Head 40 Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (cont'd)

Chemical Engineer I and II and the Petroleum Engineer Assistant, among others.

Mr. Young SC: Do you currently have the position of CTO filled?

Dr. Moonilal: Not quite.

Mr. Young SC: Are you intending to fill that position?

Dr. Moonilal: We intend to. It is a matter for the Service Commission as well.

Mr. Young SC: Now let us go to line Item 14: Remuneration to members of Cabinet-Appointed Committees. What Cabinet-Appointed committees do you have?

Dr. Moonilal: We have the same committees that were there prior to April 28. The Minerals Advisory Committee, the EITI Steering Committee and the Local Content Committee.

Mr. Young SC: What about the Refinery Committee?

Dr. Moonilal: That committee is existing and it is being supported by Heritage.

Mr. Young SC: So that committee does not fall under this line Item: Remuneration to members of Cabinet-Appointed Committee?

Dr. Moonilal: No, it does not.

Mr. Young SC: Was that Committee appointed by Cabinet or appointed by heritage?

Mr. Young SC: The committee was appointed by Cabinet.

Mr. Young SC: So you are not telling us because you put in a very strange proviso there that is being supported by Heritage. Is it being paid by Heritage?

Dr. Moonilal: TPHL, it is being supported in terms of stationery and whatever they need and also—

Mr. Young SC: TPHL is the holding company.

Dr. Moonilal: Trinidad Petroleum Holding—

Mr. Young SC: —Heritage is a subsidiary of TPHL.

Dr. Moonilal: It is being supported by Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited in terms of support for stationery and whatever they need plus stipends.

Mr. Young SC: So the Cabinet appointed Committee for this refinery committee that you all have touted is being paid by TPHL or by Heritage because they are two separate legal entities and TPHL really does not have any income.

Dr. Moonilal: Chairman, could I indicate that I have said to the Member that the Refinery Restart Committee is being supported by TPHL. He has asked for the list of committees under 14, which we have given and has gone on, to another matter. I do not think I have anything else to add.

Dr. Moonilal: Well, Mr. Chair, with the greatest of respect, my question was, let us go it over again because the Minister is becoming a little confused. My question was, is the Refinery Committee appointed by Cabinet?

Dr. Moonilal: The Refinery Committee is appointed by Cabinet. I said so.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, so then we go to this line Item 14: Remuneration to members of Cabinet-Appointed Committee, there has been an increase of \$254,700. So therefore, the next question I ask which is in accordance with what is the normal procedure for payment of persons by the State. Is that Cabinet committee is being paid by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries under this line Item? I am not asking about support. Are the amounts for the members of that committee being paid under this line Item by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries?

Dr. Moonilal: May I indicate—and there is no confusion here. When the committee was appointed and we looked into the figures of the Ministry, we did not have sufficient resources to support the committee and the Cabinet decided to

Head 40 Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (cont'd)

appoint this committee and the entity TPHL in collaboration with Heritage gave the support by way of stipend and other resources. The central Ministry under that heading did not have the resources necessary.

Mr. Young SC: So, Mr.Chair, with the greatest of respect, the Minister seems to be avoiding the question. Mr. Chair—

Mr. Chairman: No, no, no.

Mr. Young SC:—I asked, Mr. Chair—

Mr. Chairman: Hold on.

Mr. Young SC: —are the committee members being paid by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries under this line Item?

Mr. Chairman: And the answer is—

Mr. Young SC: The Minister then goes to support. I am not asking about support. Are the stipends being paid by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries under this line Item?

Mr. Chairman: And the answer to that was no.

Mr. Young SC: And then the question becomes, he brings in TPHL and Heritage, two separate legal entities. Which entity is paying the stipend of the—?

12.15 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: I do not think that arises under this line Item. Let us move to another line Item.

Mr. Young SC: Hold on, Mr. Chair. With the greatest of respect—

Mr. Chairman: I have ruled.

Mr. Young SC: With the greatest of respect—

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, I have ruled on that issue. The answer to that is the remuneration to members of Cabinet-appointed

committees. The Minister has outlined the committees—

Mr. Young SC: That this committee is not being paid under this line Item. Right.

Mr. Chairman: That is the answer. You know very well you could get that information otherwise.

Mr. Young SC: So therefore, we have this anomaly that they are being paid. Is it TPHL or is it by Heritage?

Mr. Chairman: No, I have ruled. The Minister has answered the question. Come on, let us move to another line Item.

Mr. Young SC: So let us go now to line Item 23: Salaries and Direct Charges; there has been an increase of the salaries. Now direct charges are for specific officers, meaning that it comes out directly from the Consolidated Fund. Correct?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Could you ask your question, please?

Mr. Young SC: But I did ask the question. Under line Item 23: Salaries - Direct Charges, the “Direct Charges” means that it comes out—there are certain positions that are paid directly from the Consolidated Fund. Is that correct?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: So what are these reductions of \$986,000 for the next fiscal?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: It dealt with arrears for the SRC that do not arise again.

Mr. Young SC: So there was an increase previously to pay the arrears of these officers who are paid directly from the Consolidated Fund based on the acceptance of the SRC recommendations?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Yes, there was an increase.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. Nothing else, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services. Item 001: General Administration. Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West.

Head 40 Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (cont'd)

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. Minister, the information we have is that on the arrival of the two Ministers at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, the Ministers have asked that additional offices be set up for them in the south of Trinidad and that they are now running two offices, both for yourself and for your junior Minister, at the cost of the taxpayers. So looking under this at line Item 02/04: Electricity, I see an increase of \$82,000. Is that so that yourself and your junior Minister can have offices in south Trinidad as well?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: “What you have against south?”

Mr. Young SC: I have absolutely nothing against south. It is a question being asked.

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

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: “What you have against south?”

Mr. Young SC: It is a question being asked.

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

Mr. Young SC: There is a Ministry of Energy—

Hon. Dr. Moonilal:—based in south.

Mr. Young SC:—a Ministry of Energy at the towers here and now there are offices being set up for the two of you all in south Trinidad—

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Member, “we did not plug on ah new light”.

Mr. Young SC:—and you all do not go to Port of Spain. I am asking a question. Is this additional electricity to fund your offices in the south of Trinidad? I do not care if you have offices in Tobago, I want to know on behalf of the taxpayers—

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. Chairman: Okay, there is no need to shout.

Mr. Young SC:—if this additional cost is because you have an office now in south

Trinidad. Yes or no?

Mr. Chairman: Okay, there is no need to shout the questions. There is no need to shout. We have microphones, we are about not more than 15 feet apart—

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: *[Interruption]*

Mr. Chairman: Hold on, Minister. There is no need to shout. Okay.

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Member, the increase is to cater for arrears to T&TEC from the arrears left by the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: He did not pay his light bill and that is what the increase is for. If he had paid his bills and not run away without paying, we would not have an increase here.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: And, could I just for the record, because I believe mischief is afoot.

Mr. Chairman: All right, Minister.

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: The south offices, there has always been the office of the Ministry of Energy in San Fernando.

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

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: And the Member may not have been familiar with the offices in south Trinidad and what has happened is we now have made accommodations for both Ministers to conduct business and to meet the players in the energy sector in south—

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

Hon. Dr. Moonilal:—which is much more convenient for many folks instead coming into Port of Spain with traffic and wasting time to and from. So that it is

for the convenience of the sector and the stakeholders who appreciate that they can now see one or two Ministers at the drop of “ah hat” to conduct business.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. So the answer is yes, at a cost to taxpayers—

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: But there is no new cost, the offices were there.

Mr. Young SC: Am I allowed to finish? But you have just said that they have now expanded because there were not two Ministers of energy before.

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

Mr. Young SC: Mr. Chairman, may I be allowed to ask you my questions in silence?

Mr. Chairman: All right, ask your questions. Let the Member ask his questions.

Mr. Young SC: In silence.

Mr. Chairman: In relative silence. Let the Member ask his question.

Mr. Young SC: Yes. I am now on line Item 08 which is Rent/Lease-Office Accommodation and Storage. I understand why there is a sense of anxiety because the truth is they have increased the cost to the Ministry.

Mr. Chairman: All right, you see, that is why you are inviting the—just ask a question.

Mr. Young SC: Well I am.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Go on.

Mr. Young SC: I am allowed five minutes to ask my question and to précis my question the same way the Minister is not answering questions but comes with long précis to try and extricate himself from the difficulties he has found himself in.

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

Head 40 Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (cont'd)

Mr. Young SC: So now at line Item 08: Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage, there was one office for a Minister before in Port of Spain. There are now four offices—two in Port of Spain and two in San Fernando—where we all know there was a Ministry of Energy at all times. What is this increase of rent of 150,000 is for? Line Item 08.

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Again, Mr. Chairman, this increase is to pay arrears of rent that are owed.

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

Mr. Young SC: Arrears for where?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Before we entered office. This has nothing to do with new rental for new offices. The offices were there already and the former administration, the former Minister failed to paid the bills for rent.

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

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: So we had to come to the Minister of Finance—

Mr. Young SC: The former Minister never renovated his office the way you have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars—

Mr. Chairman: Okay. You see—

Mr. Young SC:—renovating offices now.

Mr. Chairman: You see—

Mr. Young SC:—and if you are unaware, all of the major players—

Mr. Young SC:—renovating offices now.

Mr. Chairman: All right, okay, enough.

Mr. Young SC:—in the energy sector are in Port of Spain.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North/St Ann's West, Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, enough.

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Mr. Chairman: Listen, this is needless, heedless and useless quarreling; just ask questions.

Mr. Young SC: I am.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, but—please.

Mr. Young SC: So let us go now to line Item 16: Contract Employment and there is now an increase in contract employment by one and a half million dollars, another increase to the taxpayers. Would the Minister kindly advise what this increase is for? Ramdeen?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Chairman, the—

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North/St Ann's West, come on, that is entirely inappropriate.

Mr. Young SC: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. Chairman: It is.

Mr. Young SC: What is the increase for?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Chairman, the Ministry currently has 132 contract positions. The Ministry will be aiming to fill some of these vacancies, 82 vacancies, in fiscal 2026 with a focus on management positions in the technical divisions, including energy research and planning, energy information management and technology division, the petroleum operations management division. The increased allocation will also be utilized to cover expenses arising if approved terms and conditions from the CPO are higher than the approved interim salaries being paid to officers. That is the explanation.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. Minister, would you provide us with a list

of all of the vacancies and all of the positions that you intend to fill in writing?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Yeah, we will look and see if we could get that information to supply to you and Members in due course.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. Minister, let us go now to line Item 23: Fees, an increase of \$984,800. What is this being utilized to do?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: I am advised it is to facilitate the payment of audit fees, legal fees and brokerage fees related to the Ministry's operations.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. And now if we can go to line Item 28: Other Contracted Services. An increase of \$52.8 million. What is this in relation to?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Chairman, I am advised this is to facilitate the payment of services to contractors for designated oil spill clean-up operations from unknown sources and closing cost associated to the Tobago oil spill clean-up operations as well as further contingency funding for effective operational responses for any future environmental hydrocarbon events.

12.25 p.m.

Other services covered under this Item include: Consultancy services, technical studies, software maintenance, sampling and testing for the Minerals Division, and the production of extractive industries transparency initiative reports

Mr. Young SC: So, one of the Items that it is meant to cover is the cost related to the oil spill in Tobago from February 2024, if I remember correctly, or 2023, yeah?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]—on that.

Mr. Young SC: Through the IOPC, are we recovering sums of money, and can you tell us what those sums of money are so far?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Yes, we are in the process with the IOPC to recover. We have submitted a claim.

Head 40 Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (cont'd)

Mr. Young SC: You have submitted claims. How much?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Roughly \$311 million, they have reviewed \$125.6 million, offered \$56.1 million, and paid, so far, \$31.8 million.

Mr. Young SC: Alright, and the exercise will just continue?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Just continue.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Young SC: Well, the extraordinary expenditure which I did not ask about would have been related to—presumably, it would have also been related to the oil spill expenditure.

Mr. Tancoo: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Young SC: I did not mention it. I did not ask a question either. Let us go to line Item 87—

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: That was used to pay \$183 million to the NGC that the NGC spent on Train 1 when they were advised not to spend on—[*Inaudible*]—

Mr. Young SC: So, Minister, well, I am glad you—

Hon. Members: “Ohhh.”

Hon. Dr. Moonilal:—so the Ministry had to go back and pay NGC that—

Mr. Young SC: I am glad that you have opened that up, because that was payment to NGC for the sums of money that the Government recovered from Shell and BP related to the closure of Train 1. That was paid to central government, and then paid over to NGC. So there was no loss related to Train 1, but, of course, you would not know that, because you are not running the sector.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, you know—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright—

Mr. Young SC: Line Item 37: Janitorial Services—and I can see why there has been an increase in Janitorial Services, hearing the utterances of the Minister this morning.

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

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman, if you would allow me an intervention on a housekeeping matter. The Member's behaviour continues to be reprehensible, out of touch, and totally unhinged, and Chairman, we have been enduring this for five days now, and there is no repercussion.

Ms. John: And before that, 10 years.

Mr. Padarath: There is no repercussion; all we keep hearing is, “Members, Members, behave.” But it cannot continue that this Member is totally unhinged.

Mr. Chairman: I am trying my best to draw a delicate balance between keeping discipline and allowing constituents, through their Members, to ask questions and interrogate this budget document. But there has to come a time when we have to realize we are on the final day, that we are just taking an extraordinary amount of time in matters which really do not assist the process, okay? So, if we can just move on now. Ask questions. Please do not inject personal vitriol and invective into the questioning process.

Mr. Young SC: Line Item 61: Insurance. We have seen an increase of Insurance. From 2024, it was just under \$61,000; in 2025, it was \$62,000, Revised Estimate of \$46,000. We are seeing a huge increase to \$620,000 under Insurance. What is this in relation to?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Chairman, I am advised that the Insurance figure here is to support the use of the synthetic aperture radar systems in Port of Spain and

Head 40 Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (cont'd)

Chaguaramas for monitoring oil spills, as well as insurance coverage for field officers in the Ministry's technical divisions.

Mr. Young SC: Using the radar system now, the insurance for it is going to be around this cost of \$620,000?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: I am so advised.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. Next Item 65—sorry, that is it for under 02, Mr. Chair. So now the next one is 03.

Mr. Chairman: All right. I am assuming no one else has any questions on this. So, I am going to go ahead now to Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, page 275. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. No questions under that, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. So we go now to Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies—pages 275 to 276—Item 004: International Bodies; Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers; Item 011: Transfers to State Enterprises. Hon. Members, we will now move on to *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* Consolidated Fund, page 117. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services; A. Administrative Services. Port of Spain North/St Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. Minister 09/005/A. 003: Renewable Energy Efficiency Initiatives. This year, you are allocating \$5.3million. What project is this in relation to?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: This, I am advised, is the project associated with the installation of a solar PV system at the Port of Brighton to be funded under the PSIP.

Mr. Young SC: This is the LABIDCO project to make it a green port?

Hon. Moonilal: Correct.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. And then, under G. Acquisition of the Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) for the Detection of Oil Spills. Is this now going to be completed this year, seeing that your insurance, now, is kicking in?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: It has been completed. This figure is for maintenance and repairs at the Chaguaramas insulation.

Mr. Young SC: And it is being managed out of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries?

Hon. Moonilal: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: You do realize you jumped ahead to G., so I am going to go to the Infrastructure Development Fund at page 269, Item 003: Economic Infrastructure; D. Industry. So, hon. Members, that concludes that.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 40 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: I want to express my gratitude to the Permanent Secretary and Members of the staff at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, the Minister in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, himself, Mr. Kezar. May I also thank the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance for the budget allocation to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. And, of course, we want to say a special thank you as well to the Prime Minister and Minister of Finance for the lowering of the price of Super gasoline by \$1—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. Moonilal:—and to express the gratitude of over 400,000 consumers of Super gasoline that they have saved moneys.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. Moonilal: And this year's budget, Mr. Chairman, came at a time when, historically, people would go and fill up their tanks because they were in mortal fear of the Member for Diego Martin North/East. This year, they filled up their tanks and did not lose money—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Have we not finished, Chairman, what is going on—?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal:—because the price of gas went down for the first time in memory, so we are extremely pleased that we were able to—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Is this the budget debate going on? What line Item, we finished the—[*Inaudible*]—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, what line Item is this—?

Hon. Dr. Moonilal:—I thank all Members for their cooperation. Thank you very much, and God bless.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Okay. I too should like to thank the Members of staff of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. We apologize for having to bring you out on a Saturday, but the holiday intervened, and the five days are set aside, and, unfortunately, you fell on the fifth day, so, my apologies. Thank you all very much, and our gratitude.

Members, I had proposed to take the lunch break now, but I have been assured that we can press on with the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs and I have—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]—

Mr. Chairman: I am getting some opposition on the other side.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]—

Mr. Chairman: Well, unless there is agreement, I propose—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]—

Mr. Chairman: Okay, well, we will take the lunch break now. I do not propose it to take an hour. I propose to take 45 minutes, so I want to come back here at 1.10 p.m.

Mr. Padarath: Chair, I appreciate what you are saying, but what we found a bit difficult, when there are so many Members in the tea room to serve all at the same time, it is a bit difficult. So I would ask for the one hour, please.

Mr. Chairman: Well, perhaps I am being insensitive because I eat alone, so okay, we will come back at 1.35 p.m. Thank you all very much.

12.37 p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee suspended.*

1.35 p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee resumed.*

Mr. Chairman: This meeting of the Standing Finance Committee will resume.

Head 65: Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, \$269,403,500.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs to make a brief opening statement not exceeding five minutes. Minister.

Hon. Sobers: Mr. Chairman, let me begin by thanking the Minister of Finance for his brilliant budget presentation and for his recognition of the work of the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, which was captured in a section of the budget statement relating to improving our place in the world through global partnerships, strengthening ties and expanding opportunities. I also wish to thank the Minister of Finance for the fiscal 2026 allocation under the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and under the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, under Head 65: Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs.

These allocations are more than the 2025 Revised Estimates and are also greater than what the accounting unit is projecting the total expenditure of the Ministry to be as at the 30th of September, 2025. This increased allocation is reflective of the confidence this Government has reposed in the country's foreign Ministry. Mr. Chairman, the initiatives presented under this year's budgetary allocation to the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs reflect a Ministry that is undergoing transformation into one that is actively seeking to make Trinidad and Tobago safer, stronger and more prosperous via engagement, bilaterally and multilaterally, at headquarters, through 17 diplomatic missions and three consulate generals.

Given the specific purpose and mandate of this Standing Finance Committee, as opposed to other bodies of the Parliament, myself and the team from the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs are happy to provide any additional information or explanation to Members of the House in order to facilitate a better consideration of the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* under Head 65.

I equally take this opportunity to thank the Parliamentary Secretary, my colleague from the constituency of Mayaro, and staff of the Ministry at the headquarters and at the overseas missions who continue to offer yeoman service to this country, by raising the flag of Trinidad and Tobago high, through promoting our country's interests. They do so tirelessly in an ever-increasing dynamic global environment, and for their efforts, I express sincere appreciation. Mr. Chairman, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That the Head 65 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$269,403,500 for Head 65: Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. We shall now proceed to consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. This is to be found on page 355 in the respective volume.

We start at Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Overseas Missions. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Overseas Missions. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Overseas Missions. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 001: Regional Bodies; Item 002: Commonwealth Bodies; Item 003: United Nations Organisations; Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers; Item 010: Other Transfers Abroad.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services on page 161; A. Administration Services; F. Public Buildings. Infrastructure Development Fund, Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, page 292; F. Public Buildings.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 65 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Minister, may I thank you. And on behalf of the Parliament, I wish to thank your staff, who, I am sure, worked tirelessly in preparation for this

hearing.

Hon. Sobers: Mr. Chairman, I would also like to join and thank all the staff at the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, all our divisional heads, our Permanent Secretary, Deputy Permanent Secretaries, and other divisional heads who are currently here with us, who worked tirelessly on preparing these documents and also preparing for today's Sitting. I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: And I want to apologize to them for the inconvenience we must have caused them and their families by having to come here on a Saturday, but it was unavoidable.

Hon. Sobers: Grateful, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you all very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Our next Head is the Office of the Prime Minister. So, let us just wait for the technocrats.

1.45p.m.

Mr. Chairman: When you all are set.

Mr. Padarath: Five minutes?

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Five-minute statement, hon. Prime Minister. Alright, ready? Okay, Head 13: Office of the Prime Minister.

Head 13: Office of the Prime Minister, \$522,702,600.

Mr. Chairman: I now invite the hon. Prime Minister to make a brief opening statement for a maximum of five minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for

the opportunity to address this honourable House, as we really wind up now on deliberations pertaining to the fiscal 2026 package, and here now in the Finance Committee.

If you will permit me, sir, I want to say thanks to you, hon. Speaker, and the members of the parliamentary staff who have been here all of this week and some of last week. Can we thank the staff and the Speaker of the Parliament—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC:—for their hard work. I would like to thank the Minister of Planning, and the Minister of Finance and all other Ministers, together with their staff from the various Ministries who have laboured long and hard to make this package to bring to this House. We thank them as well.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: I take time to thank all those persons who sent in suggestions, concerns, recommendations, we thank them as well. Today I want to thank the Permanent Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister, PS Barrow and her team who have been working exceedingly hard.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: And I thank those persons who are in the Office of the Prime Minister, Minister Barry Padarath, Minister Darrell Allahaar and Parliamentary Secretary Wilfred Morris. We want to thank all of them for their contributions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Mr. Chairman, over the last several days and fiscal 2026 in the House, I am happy to come after two former Prime Ministers in one fiscal year following the other.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: And this exercise is remarkable in several ways. First, we have an absolutely new Government, and we have a new Opposition on the other side. This is the first time in my memory that a Prime Minister has come to the Standing Finance Committee to account to the nation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: And not so remarkable, Mr. Chairman, is the fact that maybe once or twice in our history as a Parliament that the Opposition collapsed in the debate and abandoned their constituents.

So, Mr. Chairman, in this fiscal year, the national budget allocated about \$553 million to the OPM, comprising TT \$494.1 million in recurrent expenditure and \$29 million under the Consolidated Fund and \$30 million through the Infrastructure Development Fund. This, Mr. Chairman, represents a substantial 66 per cent reduction from the revised allocation to the OPM of TT \$1.266 billion under the former Prime Ministers and for fiscal 2025. So, we have reduced in this, in allocations by 42 per cent recurrent expenditure, the Consolidated Fund by 10 per cent and the IDF reduced by 92 per cent. This recalibrated allocation reflects the significant shift in the office's mandate and operational focus for the new fiscal year. And how were we able to do that? Yes, there are several reasons for reducing the allocations of the OPM. One had to do with the removal of certain Items, line Items, divisions from the Office of the Prime Minister. So, a reduction. The other had to do with taking note of what happened in the last fiscal and beyond. For example, when we look at the cutting out of waste, corruption and mismanagement, we saw that last fiscal about \$50 million were allocated for official entertainment, jointly, and for hosting of functions. I remember last year,

we were very concerned about that, about feting and hosting, and so on, and we spoke out against it.

We took note of that. We have to cut that out because we are in fiscal times and need more discipline and more attention to people-centred development. So, we cut the allocations in those two and, of course, in several others. Because you see, Mr. Chairman, we are very aware that beyond policy design—

Hon. Member: *[Interruption]*

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Is someone saying something, Sir? I will claim injury time. I will claim injury time. Someone seems to be trying to disturb me but I will not be deterred, I will continue.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: As a Government, we are acutely aware that beyond policy design, implementation, efficiency and delivery, remain areas where citizens expect improvement. It is for this reason that the OPM has been deliberate in shaping our proposals for fiscal 26 to strengthen execution capacity, to modernize systems, to eliminate inefficiencies and ensure that government services reach people in a timely and meaningful manner.

Mr. Chairman, the allocations before this House reflect a balanced and intentional programme built on four pillars for the OPM and of course, for our Government. One, strengthening executive leadership at institutional effectiveness, including critical investments such as a Whitehall companion building, the visitor management system, the OPM ICT plan, which will strengthen coordination, improve security and enhance public service delivery across government. Two, driving strategic oversight in national security and foreign policy.

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, Mr. Chair, I think the Prime Minister has five minutes to do her opening remarks and her five minutes is up.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Mr. Chairman, I will be guided.

Mr. Chairman: Prime Minister, I will give you two extra minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: Under what rule?

Mr. Chairman: I have given everybody—

Mr. Gonzales: Under what rule? Under what rule? Under what rule? Under what Standing Order, Mr. Chair?

Mr. Padarath: That is the injury time.

Mr. Gonzales: Under what Standing Order?

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Mr. Chairman, I ask for injury time.

Mr. Gonzales: Under what Standing Order, Mr. Chair?

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: The longer you speak is the more injury time I will be entitled to. So, Mr. Chairman, I thank you very much.

Mr. Gonzales: No, not—

Hon. Members: Mr. Chairman, I thank you very much and we look forward to—

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Speaker, we are claiming—

Ms. Beckles: We are asking. But it is not fair to us because you have consistently, with every single Member here, told us when---so, we could have asked. I mean, at least—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Beckles: No discretion.

Mr. Chairman: I have not restricted anyone from speaking.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will not detain you

longer, except to say we are committed to serving the people with people-centred government—

Hon. Member: Unlike them.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: —unlike the other side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will not be distracted. We will continue to create jobs, diversify the economy and—[*Inaudible*]

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Okay, so I think the time is—Mr. Chairman?

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC:—Trinidad and Tobago a prosperous time for this nation. I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That Head 13 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$522,702,600 for Head 13: Office of the Prime Minister, is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, and the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*.

We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, which are to be found at pages 55 to 57 of the relevant volume. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Gender Affairs Division, Item 003: Communications, Item 004: Government Printery, Item 005: National Archives; Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, Item 001: General Administration.

1.55 p.m.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 13 Office of the Prime Minister (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, under 02/001: General Administration, line Item 16. Having just heard the Prime Minister tell the population that she is reducing allocations at the Office of the Prime Minister, would the Prime Minister kindly explain in line Item 16, why contact employment has been doubled? So, it is now at \$22 million, an increase of \$11 million historically being at \$12 million?

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: There are additional positions that have come into the OPM as other line Items and departments and divisions have come in, and these need to be filled.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much Prime Minister. Prime Minister this is under General Administration.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am being advised—

Mr. Young SC: This is not under the Communications, it is not under Gender Affairs, et cetera.

Mr. Tancoo: Chair. Chair.

Mr. Young SC: What additional divisions have come under General Administration, of the Office of the Prime Minister?

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North, I think there is an interjection by the Minister of Finance. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Tancoo: Chair, the hon. Prime Minister was responding to a particular question raised by the Member, and he interjected with another question.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: Can I request, Sir, through you that Members allow the Prime Minister to respond to questions that they have asked fully. Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. So, here is how I propose to do this. We ask questions, get the answer, and if there are follow-up questions, ask specific questions.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: So that we can have some structure and order in this.

Mr. Young SC: Mr. Speaker, I did, and I apologize if I did not, and I cut the Prime Minister short. So, maybe we can repeat it. Having said that you are reducing allocations and reducing—I am allowed five minutes. I know you all get nervous when the Prime Minister is here, but you are okay for today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Tancoo: The Prime Minister was responding to your first question.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Member.

Mr. Young SC: So, 02/001 line Item 16: Contract Employment. Hon. Prime Minister, traditionally under Contract Employment at the Office of the Prime Minister there has been an allocation of \$12 million. That has now been increased to \$22 million, an increase of \$11.4 million. Would you kindly advise, and of course this is under General Administration, it is not under any additional division brought into the Office of the Prime Minister, this is contract employment. Would you kindly advise what new contractual posts are going to cost \$11.4 million?

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Mr. Minister—

Mr. Young SC: Member.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Member, sorry. Perhaps you did not get enough time to spend in the Office of the Prime Minister.

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

Mr. Young SC: So, is that the answer? So, this is my pension then?

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: If you did—I have not completed my answer.

Mr. Young SC: Is the Prime Minister going to provide an answer, Sir?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: I will answer you.

Mr. Chairman: That is why I said, ask questions, let the Prime Minister—let the answers come, so we do not interject.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, maybe if you did, you would have found out, as I am advised, that these contract positions, there were 205 total contract positions, filled positions, and the vacant ones are 117.

Hon. Members: Wow!

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, filled 205. So, in order to fill these positions, given our national recruitment drive, we have to put more money.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: You spent days asking the Minister of Finance, where is the money? There is the money to fill these positions in the OPM.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much, Prime Minister.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: I can give you a list if you like, of all the positions.

Mr. Young SC: Would you kindly do that? Provide us with a listing in writing of all the new additional contract positions. Thank you.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: The PS has it here, and we will provide.

Mr. Young SC: Can we now go to line Item 27: Official Overseas Travel. Official Overseas Travel has been increased by \$9 million for the next fiscal. Nine million dollars from a traditional \$2 million or \$1 million. Can you kindly advise the country what this additional \$9 million under Official Overseas Travel is for?

Mr. Chairman: This is line Item 27. Are we clear?

Mr. Padarath: Twenty seven?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you, Chairman.

Mr. Padarath: Chairman, line Item 27, raised by the hon. Member. Yes, there is an allocation of \$10 million.

Hon. Member: Make up your mind.

Mr. Padarath: Sorry, an increase of \$9 million. But, what the Member will not tell you, is that they left several outstanding bills, and arrears, for this Prime Minister to have to pick up.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Padarath: And yes, hon. Prime Minister, I think the Member, before demitting office, also travelled to Jamaica, which we are also still paying out of this line Item. So, if the Member had a little bit of shame, the Member would tell the full story—

Hon. Stuart Young SC: Shame?

Mr. Padarath:—that part of this allocation, the increase has to do with arrears.

Mr. Chairman: Let us just give the answer—

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much. So, we have gotten the answer from the Member for Couva South, that it is arrears. Would the Member for Couva South, put in writing to this House, out of the additional \$9 million, exactly how much is in arrears? No?

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Chairman, I am advised by the Office of the Prime Minister that those bills are still coming in, because they have racked-up so many bills over the years without paying, that there are a number of bills that are still coming into

the Office of the Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Padarath: However, apart from the arrears that we have coming in, it the intention of the hon. Prime Minister, and the Office of the Prime Minister to send several staff members on training. It has not happened over the last couple of years, as well as the hon. Prime Minister, and Ministers, from time to time, will obviously have to travel, yes, but they will be returning investment, and not yams, and yam seed to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Padarath: One such instance, Mr. Chairman, you would recall upon completing the United Nations General Assembly later last month, the hon. Prime Minister led a delegation, with respect to meeting with the Crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates, as well as the Crown Prince of Kuwait. We are looking and new investment opportunities for Trinidad and Tobago. The Prime Minister, and others will be leading that charge, to return investments that will be down to the benefit of the people, and the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, as apposed to what we saw, where millions of dollars for the last nine-and-a-half-years, was spent, and up to now we cannot get the yams or the yam seed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: So, Mr. Chairman, having allowed the Member for Couva South his diatribe, and his attempts—So, in other words, the 9 million additional dollars is obviously not for the payment of arrears, but it is for the payment of the entourage, of the scores of you that decided to go to UNGA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: Is this the line Item—

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Chairman, this Prime Minister has no caddy boy.

Mr. Young SC: But that is what you are there for, to hold the handbag.

Mr. Padarath: Therefore those that will be attending—

Mr. Young SC: You were holding the handbag.

Mr. Padarath:—will be attending in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and not to play golf on any golf course around the world.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: Line Item—

Mr. Padarath: Racking up bills for the people of Trinidad and Tobago to pay, while you ride their backs.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: Riding backs?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Mr. Chairman. On a point of order.

Mr. Young SC: You come back with your racist terminology.

Mr. Chairman: Can we move on with a question now?

Mr. Young SC: Line Item—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Young SC: Mr. Chair, no you all—It is obvious what is going on here. We cannot get a straight answer. I am at line Item 62 now. Promotions, Publicity and Printing. I have five minutes, to lead up to the question. As I said, you all seem to get very excited, which is understandable, once the Member for Siparia gets here.

Mr. Chairman: All right.

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Chairman, if you could have a question from the Member, please.

Mr. Young SC: Promotions, Publicity and Printing. Mr. Chairman, if I may be

allowed to ask my question?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, please. Go ahead.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. In 2024, the allocation was \$29,000. In 2025, the allocation was \$20,000, with a Revised Estimate of \$100,000. It is now being allocated for the Member for Siparia, the Member for Couva South, the Member for Mayaro, and all others under the Office of the Prime Minister. The country should now be aware that \$3.5 million from a traditional \$29,000, is now being allocated for Promotions, Publicity and Printing. Would the Member for Siparia kindly advise what is going to cost this country \$3.5 million? Is it for the front page of OCM's *Express* newspaper and editorials?

Hon. Member: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: No, I think the question—we will cut off the question as, “What it is going to cost?”

Mr. Young SC: What is going to be for?

Mr. Chairman: Yes. You see, the problem why it descends into that, is the infusion of the invective. The question stands “What the 3.5 million—”. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

2.05 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: Prime Minister—all Members on both sides allow the Prime Minister to answer the question, please?

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am advised by Permanent Secretary Barrow that this increased spending on this line Item is towards stakeholder engagement. The National Commission for Self Help has now come under the Office of the Prime Minister, so more moneys will need to be

spent. The Housing Programme Facilitation and Implementation Unit, there are certain programmes that come under the OPM, and also, the recruitment drive and content creation. This is projected for expenditure under this Item.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: Gender Affairs Division; Item 003: Communications; Item 004: Government Printery; Item 005: National Archives; Item 006: Freedom of Information Unit; Item 007: Office of Information Commissioner, page 62. We go to Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases at pages 63 to 64. Item 001: General Administration; Item 003: Communications; Item 004: Government Printery; Item 005: National Archives.

Sub-Head 04, page 64 to 66 inclusive. Item 001: Regional Bodies; Item 003: United Nations Organizations; Item 004: International Bodies; Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions; Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers; Item 011: Transfers to State Enterprises.

Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies, page 67. Hon. Members, we will now move to the *Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*. National Library and Information System, NALIS, page 5. Personnel Expenditure. Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 5 to 6 inclusive. Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 03; Minor Equipment Purchases. Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we will now move to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, Consolidated Fund, pages 20 to 26. Item 004: Social Infrastructure, pages 20 to 24. G. Educational Services; E. Settlements; A. Culture; C. Welfare

Services.

Hon. Members, Item 005: Multi-sector and Other Services. A. Administrative Services, pages 25 to 26. F. Public Buildings, page 26. Hon. Members, we will now move on to the Infrastructure Development Fund. Item 004: Social Infrastructure, page 242. B. Recreation. A. Community Development. C. Welfare Services. Item 005: Multi-sectoral and Other Services, page 243. F. Public Buildings. There being no questions, I propose to put the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 13 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Prime Minister, might I thank you for attending today, and most importantly—

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Creating history—

Mr. Chairman:—creating history, I am told.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: My thanks to the public servants.

Mr. Chairman: I, too, would wish to thank your public servants for the time that they have devoted to this exercise, which I am sure must have been considerable—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman:—and for the inconvenience that we would have put them through for coming here on a Saturday. It was regrettable, but unavoidable. Thank you.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you Mr. Chairman, again to the public servants—all week.

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: I have been here every day. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
 Bill, 2025
 Head 01 Office of the President (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Mr. Chairman: Okay. So we are going to take some time for the public servants.

[*Chairman: Dr. Ali*]

Head 01: Office of the President, \$20,782,000.

Madam Chairman: I now invite the Minister of Finance to make a brief opening statement, not exceeding five minutes.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. The Office of the President serves as the official institution that supports and facilitates the work of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, who is the Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. The President's role is quasi-ceremonial and constitutional in nature. The President serves as a non-partisan safeguard of the Constitution, ensuring that all branches of the Government operate as required by legislation. In this regard, the Office of the President provides administrative, protocol, and logistical support for the President's official duties. We now hold ourselves available for questions, should there be any from the Members of the Opposition. Thank you.

Question proposed: That Head 01 stand part of the Schedule.

Madam Chairman: Hon. Members, the sum of \$20,782,000 for Head 01, President, is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. Sub-Head 01, Page 2, Personnel Expenditure. Item 001: General Administration. Sub Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration.

2.15 p.m.

Sub Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
 Bill, 2025
 Head 01 Office of the President (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Administration. Sub Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we now move to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, Consolidated Fund, page 2. Item 004: Social Infrastructure; A. Administrative Services.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 01 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you very much. I would like to extend thanks to the Office of the President and to the members of staff, the technical staff, who are here today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Chairman: I would also like to thank you all for being here.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

[*Chairman: Mr. Singh*]

Head 05: Parliament, \$153,541,100.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of Finance to make a brief opening statement. Minister of Finance.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Chair. Chair, the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is the country's national Legislature, where, amongst other things, Bills are debated and passed into law for peace, order and good governance of the country, and where the people's representatives speak to and represent their interests.

The Office of the Parliament provides the administrative and apolitical support services to the Parliament, and the Office functions under the leadership of the Clerk of the House, assisted by the Clerk of the Senate as deputy head. We hold

ourselves available to any questions that Members opposite may have.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, the sum of \$153,541,100 for Head 05: Parliament is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* under Sub-Heads and I will identify the page numbers. Sub-Head 01—page 23—Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Office of the Ombudsman. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 24 to 26, inclusive; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Office of the Ombudsman; Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 26 to 27, inclusive; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Office of the Ombudsman. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 002: Commonwealth Bodies; Item 004: International Bodies; Item 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we will now move to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, Consolidated Fund, at page 9. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services; A. Administrative Services; F. Public Buildings.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 05 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, the Clerk of the House, Mr. Brian Caesar, who has worked tirelessly throughout this exercise. And we thank him for that—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman:—and all the other members of the staff who have given yeoman service to this exercise.

Hon. Members, the question is that the sum of \$50,405,695,293, be

approved as a grand total.

Question put and agreed to.

Schedule ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to: That the Bill be reported to the House.

House resumed.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Davendranath Tancoo): Thank you very much Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I wish to report that a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending the 30th day of September, 2026, was considered in the Standing Finance Committee and passed without amendments. I now beg to move that it be read a third time and passed.

Question put: That the Bill be now read a third time.

Hon. Member: Division.

Mr. Speaker: A division have been called for.

The House divided: Ayes 28 Noes 12

AYES

Padarath, Hon. B.

Persad-Bissessar SC, Hon. K.

Tancoo, Hon. D.

John, Hon. J.

Moonilal, Hon. Dr. R.

Lee, Hon. D.

Hosein, Hon. S.

Ameen, Hon. K.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 05 Parliament (cont'd)

Alexander, Hon. R.

Maharaj, Hon. D.

Mohit, Hon. V.

Sturge, Hon. W.

Bodoe, Hon. Dr. L.

Dowlath, Hon. Dr. M.

Ali, Dr. A.

Morris, W.

Benjamin, Hon. M.

Sobers, Hon. S.

Watts, Hon. P.

Seecheran, Hon. Dr. R.

Kesar, Hon. E.

Elder, Hon. C.

Sam, Ms. S.

Narinesingh, H.

Roopnarine, Dr. N.

Gosine, Dr. C.

Thomas, D.

Sampson, J.

NOES.

Gonzalez, M.

Beckles, Ms. P.

Imbert, C.

Gadsby-Dolly, Dr. N.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2026)
Bill, 2025
Head 05 Parliament (cont'd)

2025.10.25

Young SC, S.

Scotland SC, K.

de Nobriga, S.

Manning, B.

Marcelle, K.

Des Vignes, H.

Birchwood, C.

Romain, D.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

2.25 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Speaker: Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime

Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath): Mr. Speaker, allow me to congratulate the hon. Prime Minister for creating history—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Padarath:—by holding herself accountable to the people of Trinidad and Tobago earlier today. I want to congratulate the Minister of Finance and Members of Government for a phenomenal presentation.

Hon. Member: Mr. Speaker, what is this?

Hon. B. Padarath: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Young SC: Oh God, is the adjournment of the House, stop sucking up.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Let us have the Motion—

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

Hon. B. Padarath: Mr. Speaker, after the Opposition had voted against the people of Trinidad and Tobago today—

Hon. Member: Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: No, no, no, no.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: We are going through the formality. What is the reason for this relentless pounding of desks? Leader of the Government Business, can I call on you to move the Motion?

Hon. B. Padarath: Yes, Mr. Speaker, after they have voted—

Hon. Members: No, no, no, no.

Hon. B. Padarath:—against the people of Trinidad and Tobago today, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: No, no, no, no.

Hon. B. Padarath: Voted against public servants.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Hon. Members: No, no, no, no.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Padarath: Voted against water.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Hon. Members: No, no, no, no.

Hon. B. Padarath: Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House now adjournment to a date to be fixed. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon Members, I would have thought that everyone would have been anxious, rather than delay this process.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 2.30 p.m.