

SENATE*Monday, October 27, 2025*

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM VICE-PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Madam Vice-President: Hon. Senators, I wish to advise that the President of the Senate, Sen. the Hon. Wade Mark, is currently acting as President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. Michael de la Bastide SC, who is out of the country.

SENATORS' APPOINTMENT

Madam Vice-President: Hon. Senators, I have received the following correspondence from Her Excellency the President Christine Carla Kangaloo, O.R.T.T., and from His Excellency the Acting President Wade Mark.

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By His Excellency WADE MARK,
Acting President of the
Republic of Trinidad and
Tobago and Commander-in-
Chief of the Armed Forces.

/s/Wade Mark

President.

TO: MR. DANIEL RASHEED

UNREVISED

WHEREAS Senator the Honourable Wade Mark has temporarily vacated his office of Senator to act as President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Vice President of the Senate is required to perform the duties of the President of the Senate, and as a result, a vacancy has arisen in the Senate;

NOW THEREFORE, I, WADE MARK Acting President as aforesaid, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, and in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44, do hereby appoint you, DANIEL RASHEED to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 27th October, 2025 and continuing during the acting appointment of the Senator the Honourable Wade Mark as President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Given under my Hand and the Seal of
the President of the Republic of
Trinidad and Tobago at the
Office of the President, St.
Ann's, this 25th day of October,
2025.”

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

/s/Christine Carla Kangaloo

President.

TO: MR. JOSH DRAYTON

UNREVISED

WHEREAS Senator Michael Simon Victor de la Bastide, SC is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago;

NOW THEREFORE, I, CHRISTINE CARLA KANGALOO, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(c) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, JOSH DRAYTON to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 17th October, 2025 and continuing during the absence of Senator Michael Simon Victor de la Bastide, SC., from Trinidad and Tobago

Given under my Hand and the Seal of
the President of the Republic of
Trinidad and Tobago at the
Office of the President, St.
Ann's, this 17th day of October,
2025.”

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

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

AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Josh Drayton took and subscribed the Affirmation of Allegiance as required by law.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2026) BILL, 2025

Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2026 [*The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance*]; read the first time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

10.10 am

PAPERS LAID

1. Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters (Declaration of Treaty) (No. 2) Order, 2025. [*Attorney General (Sen. The Hon. John Jeremie SC)*]
2. Value Added Tax (Amendment to Schedule 2) (No. 2) Order, 2025. [*The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh)*]
3. Excise Duty (Tobacco Products) (Amdt.) Order, 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
4. Excise Duty (Alcoholic Beverages) (Amdt.) Order, 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
5. Executed Loan Agreement between the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the Corporación Andina De Fomento in the amount of US\$35 million to finance the Project to Strengthen Digital Infrastructure in Trinidad and Tobago through the Establishment of a Tier 4 Data Centre. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
6. Annual Audited Financial Statements of Trinidad Nitrogen Company Limited for the year ended December 31, 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
7. Annual Audited Financial Statements of Caribbean Airlines Limited for the year ended December 31, 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

UNREVISED

8. Annual Audited Financial Statements of National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited for the year ended December 31, 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
9. Annual Audited Financial Statements of National Investment Fund Holding Company Limited for the year ended December 31, 2024. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
10. Draft Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
11. Draft Estimates – Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the financial year 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
12. Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the financial year 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
13. Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the financial year 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
14. Draft Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
15. Social Sector Investment Programme 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
16. Public Sector Investment Programme - Trinidad 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
17. Public Sector Investment Programme – Tobago 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
18. State Enterprises Investment Programme 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]
19. The Review of the Economy 2025. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2026) Bill, 2025

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Madam Vice-President, I beg to move: That a Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2026, be now read a second time.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Madam Vice-President, may I warmly congratulate you on your assent to the Chair.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I am very proud of my neighbour from Maracas—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh:—to be able to sit in this Chair and to lead this honourable House into the proceedings to follow. Madam Vice-President, it is with deep honour and a profound sense of duty that I rise to move that a Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago, for the financial year ending September 30th, 2026, be taken as we now open—allow me to present my opening remarks.

Madam Vice-President, it would be remiss of me if I do not express in a preeminent way my gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister, Kamala Persad-Bissessar SC and MP of Trinidad and Tobago, for her leadership and endless hours spent meticulously guiding the development of the Appropriation Bill, 2026.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: I also want to put on record, Madam Vice-President, my profound respect, gratitude and admiration to the hon. Davendranath Tancoo, Member of Parliament for Fyzabad and Minister of Finance, and to the

people in the Ministry of Finance who have so meticulously worked extremely hard in order to provide this budget for our country's well-being and development. I also want to thank all my colleague Ministers and all their staff for the excellent preparations that they would have contributed in order to make this presentation the success that it is, and wish to also thank the staff in my own Ministry for their invaluable contribution and for their tirelessly working hard to make sure that we meet these obligations.

But, Madam Vice-President, this budget represents the first of major financial statements of this new administration and sets the tone for this Government's financial framework for the coming fiscal.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: It is a declaration of purpose to restore confidence, rebuild the economy and renew hope across every community of our beloved nation. Madam Vice-President, the 2026 Appropriation Bill is presented to this honourable House at a critical juncture in our country's history, at a time when people of our great islands through their democratic rights, call for an administration committed to transparency, compassion and effective governance. This administration has answered that call.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: Respecting the voice of our citizens, this new administration under the guidance of our Prime Minister has delivered a national budget centered on fiscal prudence and people-centered governance for the first time in almost a decade. To quote one public commentator: This is a budget that overwhelmingly demonstrates that fiscal responsibility and social equity can coexist.

Our budget presentation for 2026, T&T First: Building Economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies, is anchored by five strategic pillars that provide guidance to our public policy.

1. Restoring confidence and fiscal stability.
2. Unlocking Productive Investments and Jobs.
3. Optimizing and Commercializing Public Assets.
4. Modernising Infrastructure, Transport and Digital Services.
5. Protecting citizens through Social Investment and Safety Nets.

The 2026 Appropriation Bill, aims to create a synergy between fiscal discipline and developmental ambitions. What this means is that while we have to propose measures to raise additional revenue for Trinidad and Tobago's national goals, these revenue-gaining measures would also simultaneously contribute to other policy commitments such as climate change mitigation, infrastructure development, educational enhancement and much more. And with a special focus on job creation.

To support our intent to increase employment, the Minister of Finance announced the establishment of an employment fund in the Ministry of Finance. The hon. Prime Minister, as you may recall and already come to know, has already launched an ongoing national recruitment drive on October 19th, which is phase 1 of a promise to ensure job security. Phase 2, will be in partnership with the private sector. My colleague Ministers will elaborate on this as we go on in this debate.

We have therefore been demonstrating action towards fulfilling our campaign promises focused on economic impact through job creation, increased investment and fiscal growth. It has been calculated by some economists that as strategic measures outlined in the budget laid out by the Minister of Finance, have the potential to fund the fiscal deficit projected to be almost \$4 billion, which is

roughly 2 per cent of our nation's gross domestic product, which is instructive, in that, what we are doing, we are doing so without imposing hardship on the most vulnerable in our society, unlike budgets in the past 10 years.

10.20 a.m.

Speaking of supporting the vulnerable in our society, Madam Vice-President, we have applied a special focus on advancing public health and boosting gender equality. Demonstrating a gender-responsive budget have allowed us to integrate and to put forward \$5 million for a Women's Health Fund to address period poverty, by providing free menstrual products in schools and funding menstrual health education. This is a humane step that encourages economic growth by reducing missed school and workdays, enabling full participation in society and fostering a more productive and equitably workforce, especially for the girls and the women in our society.

We have provided relief to citizens and businesses, in terms of the \$1 per litre reduction in super gasoline, a measure many stakeholders have celebrated as a much-needed effort to alleviate the rising cost of living over the past few years. These are measures that they could have done but failed to do. This Government is taking the bold step to make sure that, as a Minister of Finance so proudly stated, and as everybody knows, when UNC wins, everybody wins.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: At a time when wages have been at a standstill and purchasing power seems to be on the decline, the Prime Minister's commitment to instruct the Minister of Finance on the 10 per cent wage increase to public servants replaces rancour and anxiety, with hope and renewed vigour; all this while jealously aiming to stimulate our nation's economy like never before.

What we have done, Madam Vice-President, is made this year's budget the

Government's first, more than just a routine fiscal exercise. We have applied our prolific imaginations to prepare a budget that excites thought and imbues creativity. Our measures are deliberate, focusing on modernizing our institutions, stimulating our business sector, inspiring citizens, while ensuring that Trinidad and Tobago is once again on a sure footing. Understanding the current volatility of our global climate, the Government continues to demonstrate courage under the leadership of the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar to make the hard decisions necessary to see Trinidad and Tobago through.

We will continue to communicate openly with your citizens; intensify our attentiveness towards new and improved regulatory frameworks; and pivot, where necessary, in a continued open and an accountability manner to avoid wanton fiscal pressure on our already fragile economy.

Madam Vice-President, we as a Government are resolute that over the next fiscal year, through this budget, we will have the resources needed to do the work for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We will create conditions which stimulate economic growth, especially by partnering with the private sector and ensure that the priorities of the Government will be met by, again, making the difficult decisions necessary for the benefit of all our citizens.

To maximize the Development Goals of Trinidad and Tobago, we are proposing an expenditure of \$59.232 billion against total revenues of \$55.367 billion. The proposed fiscal deficit of \$3.85 billion, or 2.17 per cent, is well within the international benchmark of 3 per cent. Madam Vice-President, we have a wide spectrum of fiscal initiatives geared towards rebuilding and expanding our economy, and creating millions in annual revenue to provide an improved quality of life for all our citizens.

In the coming months, we will be implementing a range of tax and incentive

measures, as stated by the Minister of Finance in his budget presentation, aimed at reduced costs for household and supporting new sectors of the economy. Particularly, there will be the removal of VAT on agricultural machinery and hydroponic greenhouse inputs, which will stimulate local food production, improving food security and lowering prices for consumers. At the same time, a new 5 per cent tax on single-use plastics, effective from January 01, 2026, will fund national recycling programmes, waste management initiatives and raise awareness of environmental responsibility.

This is a strategic measure also intended to achieve Trinidad and Tobago's Nationally Determined Contribution and other commitments to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. This, therefore, demonstrates that our intent is not to punish citizens, as we cannot articulate that enough, but to create avenues for revenue generation through and for commitments, holistic strategic programmes and initiatives, while meeting our international commitments and obligations.

This is our balanced approach, articulated by the hon. Prime Minister, to national development. This demonstrates a thinking budget, and if one were to look closely, will observe that each measure is by design and meant to meet multiple objectives. This, therefore, reflects the synergy, which I previously mentioned, that combines fiscal discipline and developmental ambitions. The 2026 budget also emphasizes a commitment to fiscal accountability as a cornerstone of sound governance and sustainable national development to which we as a Government are committed.

Some of the key initiatives that we will be undertaking in this fiscal year are:

- The comprehensive reform of the Inland Revenue and Customs and

Excise Division, aimed at improving revenue collection;

- Closing compliance gaps and reducing inefficiencies;
- The establishment of a financial oversight and appropriations committee, further reinforcing our commitment to accountability by ensuring that there is proper execution and management of state resources; and
- Implement transfer pricing legislation to create a fairer environment for local businesses, preventing them from being placed at a disadvantage, compared to national/multinational companies that transfer profit overseas.

Simultaneously, it will offer greater assurance to investors by establishing a framework in which Trinidad and Tobago applies tax and regulatory rules that are transparent, predictable and aligned with international best practice.

The introduction of surcharge, such as the landlord business surcharge, based on actual rental income, will broaden the tax revenue base, promote fairness, transparency and accountability. These measures, again, seek to earn increased financial contributions to our national development, while allowing our nation to benefit from environmentally sound measures related to energy conservation, reducing the reliance on Government subvention, and more revenues from other developmental needs. These measures are also designed to foster more efficient service delivery, reduce wastage and improve value for every taxpayer dollar.

Madam Vice-President, in addition, the Government is proposing a suite of measures to support macroeconomic stability and social development. These measures, which were announced in the Lower House, are to be implemented in fiscal 2026. These measures include: A levy on 0.2 per cent will be applied to assets of commercial banks and insurance companies, excluding entities operating

within special economic zones. This measure takes effect from January 01, 2026, and is expected to generate approximately \$575 million.

Selected administrative fees and excise duties on rum, spirits, beer and cigarettes have also been updated. This measure is projected to yield approximately \$1 billion in revenue. Electric vehicles, with a CIF value above \$400,000, will now attract a 10 per cent customs duty, a 12.5 per cent value added tax, and a tiered motor vehicle tax. This measure becomes effective from January 01, 2026, and it is projected to raise approximately \$40 million.

Penalties for traffic, environmental and business offences will be increased to promote greater compliance and enforcement. These measures take effect from January 01, 2026, and it is expected to yield \$180 million.

Concessions on customs duty, value added tax and motor vehicle tax for returning nationals have been removed. This measure will take effect from January 01, 2026.

10.30 a.m.

But, Madam Vice-President, I am significantly proud to be part of this administration, that, after the failure of the last government, we have now been able to address the longstanding issue. The Government, under our Prime Minister, has had the courage to address the National Insurance System's stabilization. The Government's plan integrates a multi-pronged approach of increasing contributions and adjusting retirement ages, which have been outlined by the Minister of Finance and the National Insurance Board.

The reform includes a phased six per cent increase in contributions over two years, three per cent in January 2026, and three per cent in January 2027, and a gradual increase in the full retirement age beginning from 2028, all the way up to 2036. These measures aim to protect the Fund's long-term stability and ensure

contributors' benefits are safeguarded, once again demonstrating the Government's care and consideration for all our citizens, especially for those who have been working steadfastly to safeguard their livelihoods, and especially of the elderly in our society. The retirement age for a full pension will gradually rise from 60 to 65 by the year 2036. I want to reiterate, Madam Vice-President, that this measure is the product of a caring and courageous Government, under a caring and courageous Prime Minister.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Let me pause, Madam Vice-President, to say, for anybody to criticize this measure, for anybody to devalue what this measure means to Trinidad and Tobago, after the actuary report that sat in that government for the last seven or eight years, these measures are long-overdue and desperately-needed, given our circumstances today. And I want to thank the Prime Minister for having the courage.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Value added tax has been removed from locally-produced items, and the Schedule has been published. Foreign used vehicles import policy: The permissible import age for private cars will be extended to six years, and for light commercial vehicles to 10 years. The policy takes effect from January 1st, 2026. Private pensions will be exempt from income tax with effect from January 1st, 2026. New tax deductions are being introduced for approved donations to animal shelters and to the Women's Health Fund. Additional measures to promote research development and innovation through seed funding and incubation programmes have been established. The Government will undertake a review of the value added tax system, with the option to transition to our final point of sale tax while clearing outstanding VAT refund arrears. This

review, once completed, will provide the guidance necessary to ensure that, if we so choose, a transition can be easily made and socially balanced.

This Government has made it clear that we are committed to economic transformation and creating a more favourable environment for investments outside of the traditional energy sector. In fact, we have projected that non-oil revenue would be estimated at 43.4 billion of total revenue, signalling our commitment to this endeavour.

Madam Vice-President, to encourage an ideal climate of investment, we will address the ease of doing business, modernizing and building capacity in our public service and government institutions. We have already begun working closely with the private sector to understand their needs, so that we can create an enabling environment necessary to allow for public-private partnerships in various sectors, both traditional and non-traditional. There are opportunities to advance the entertainment sector in Trinidad and Tobago, to tap into the multibillion-dollar global electronic gaming sector, maritime activities, technology, and much more.

Specifically, we will be upgrading the Customs and Excise administration including the ASYCUDA System, adopting digital payments and standardized procedures in the Customs and Excise Division. These measures are designed to reduce delay, lower transaction costs, and make it easier for both domestic and foreign companies to operate in Trinidad and Tobago. Improving foreign direct investment in our country benefits us all, as it can lead to higher employment, better wages and more advanced technologies integrated into our society.

Furthermore, the budget introduces tax incentives in capital market innovation to stimulate investor interest, the creation of a state-sponsored real estate investment trust, or REIT and the planned issuance of a TT \$1 billion national investment fund bond, provides new investment instruments and signals

that the Government is opening asset-based opportunities to broaden participation, to not only institutional, but also retail investors. For foreign investors, these instruments offer more avenues to engage in Trinidad and Tobago's market, while for citizens, the increased investment inflows help to broaden opportunities for wealth creation and inclusive growth.

Economic diversification, Madam Vice-President, and innovation are foundational elements of this Appropriation Bill. As this Government seeks to move beyond the dependency of the energy sector through deliberate investments in non-energy growth sectors, we will specifically be encouraging growth—and I would just allude to it very briefly because my colleagues will expand on it—in the agriculture and agri-processing sectors, in the digital sector, in the manufacturing industry, tourism and creative industries.

Madam Vice-President, the national budget has outlined numerous initiatives, but permit me to elaborate on an initiative that is dear to this administration. When we came into government, the Prime Minister instructed us to set up the National Payment and Innovation Company of Trinidad and Tobago, and this was done over the last three months. This initiative represents a transformational step in Trinidad and Tobago's journey toward a fully digital economy. Established to modernize and streamline the national payments infrastructure, the company is mandated to provide a secure, efficient and inclusive digital payment eco-system that serves both the public and private sectors. By facilitating real-time transactions, interoperability among banks and fintechs, and wider access to digital financial services, the company will reduce dependence on cash, enhance transparency and improve the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago.

In this regard, we made a significant advancement last week in the

Government's digital transformation agenda, with three national institutions, the Unit Trust Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago, the National Payments and Innovation Centre of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago, signing a landmark agreement to introduce the national electronic Know Your Customer platform. This national onboarding and biometric identification system is a locally-developed eKYC platform that allows citizens to verify their identities and open accounts entirely online, built by the Innovation Centre, the technology arm of NPICTT.

Note, this replaces paper-heavy in-person verification with a faster, more secure and fully-digital process. For citizens, it means less time spent travelling and waiting. For institutions, it means compliant onboarding with a standard that can be applied at a national scale. For citizens, it promises greater convenience and financial inclusion, Madam Vice-President, particularly for small businesses and underserved communities. For the Government, it enables more efficient revenue collection and service delivery. Ultimately, the NPICTT will play a central role in positioning Trinidad and Tobago as a regional leader in digital finance and innovation while supporting the broader goal of economic and diversification modernization.

Further supporting economic diversification and innovation, the Government has allocated \$10 million to the UWI Research and Development Impact Fund in fiscal 2026. This initiative will encourage our nation's researchers and innovators to direct their efforts towards priority areas of national importance, including climate resilience, citizen security, sustainable agriculture and health innovation.

The National Innovation and Incubator Programme will play a pivotal role in strengthening Trinidad and Tobago's innovation eco-system, and advancing entrepreneurship. Through this initiative, 100 young graduates and aspiring

entrepreneurs would receive mentorship, financing and structured support to transform innovative ideas into viable business ventures. This collaboration underscores the Government's commitment to fostering an enabling environment where creativity and enterprise can flourish, broadening the base of small and micro enterprises and driving economic diversification. This will benefit small and medium enterprises through the provision of training in trade facilitation, financing, e-commerce, global marketing and other key areas to help significantly expand the export readiness of SMEs, starting in the upcoming fiscal period.

10.40 a.m.

Another initiative that this Government will implement to foster innovation is the national AI research and innovation hub. The hub aims to empower youth in practical training, in data science, software engineering and creative digital production, thereby opening new opportunities for citizens to thrive and earn within the expanding digital and creative economy. At the heart of this Appropriation Bill, Madam Vice-President, is the Government's unwavering commitment to protecting and empowering our people.

In fiscal 2026, from funding under the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, we will strengthen the national health care system, which includes the upgrades to the San Fernando General Hospital, operationalising of the Couva children's hospital, and the expansion of the renal dialysis programme. Madam Vice-President, these initiatives will save lives and improve access to quality health care across our nation.

Education continues to stand as a cornerstone of our development agenda with dedicated funding for tertiary education and skills training. This includes the provision of scholarships, the and enhancement of technical and vocational programmes and the refurbishment of The UWI Debe campus to better prepare and

serve our young people with a modern knowledge-driven economy. This Government will re-establish the Trinidad and Tobago Hospitality and Tourism Institute, which will provide valuable skills and training for persons in the service tourism industries, again enhancing job creation.

Madam Vice-President, let me stick a pin here, because it is a real travesty when I visited Chaguaramas upon assuming office, that the hotel school not only has been closed but was mothballed for the last seven or eight years. That hotel school used to produce roughly about 700 graduates every year, and even as we talk about moving towards a greater focus on tourism, it is a sad reality that it is left to this Government to now reopen that school to prepare our citizens to be able to get jobs in the service sector and the tourism sector. Another brave decision that this Government has to make, and according to my friend, Phillip Alexander, “we fixing dat too.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The 2026 Budget outlines a comprehensive approach to housing that will allow us to deliver affordable homes through public/private partnerships and innovative designs to make housing more accessible for first-time homeowners through grants, lower-interest loans for young families, and the revival of the Land for the Landless programme. Again, my colleagues will expand on that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Furthermore, to make home ownership more attainable, the Government plans to reduce construction costs by amending the Trade Ordinance to remove restrictions on key materials such as clay, sand and gravel, thereby stimulating the construction sector and creating jobs across plumbing, electrical, masonry, carpentry and other related industries. Madam

Vice-President, these are strategic investments in human dignity, equality and opportunity. They represent this Government's belief that national progress must be measured not by economic growth but by the well-being and empowerment of every citizen.

While the 2025/2026 national Budget is forward-facing, upon our arrival into Government, by an overwhelming consensus at the polls, we have been applying this new fiscal philosophy, moving from passive management to strategic execution. We understand where we stand, Madam Vice-President. Our current fiscal positioning have been shaped by years of inertia, external shocks and underutilization of national assets. This Government has been steadily redefining an actionable future for economic transformation, moving swiftly to implement a multipronged fiscal approach that focuses on government-to-government optimization.

We have been leveraging bilateral cooperation with nations such as the United Kingdom and Canada to deliver cost-efficient, high-impact capital projects outside the traditional moulds of Government's operations. Private sector empowerment through the creation of new investment vehicles and introducing transparent regulatory reform to boost confidence and stimulate foreign direct investment and private participation in strategic national development sectors. This is important because it is where the Government will focus and target development and economic growth by partnering with the private sector.

Asset activation and monetization. Trinidad and Tobago possesses high potential but underutilized assets. We have been, since May of 2025, rolling out a comprehensive strategy to catalogue, commercialize and unlock value from Government-owned infrastructure, land, and entities supporting new non-energy revenue streams and introducing contingent liability, which will be intensified in

fiscal 2026. So Madam Vice-President, the REET is the first investment, and other programmes to go on the stock exchange will follow. This marks a fundamental shift in our Government institutions on how Government functions from primary operator to a modern facilitator of growth. A core part of our strategy, Madam Vice-President, therefore, is to eliminate inefficiencies, and I think the country did the first job by voting in this Government and voting out that Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: To manage taxpayer dollars, Madam Vice-President, we are moving to reduce the purchase of Government vehicles and moving towards a leasing model to streamline operating costs and reduce maintenance expenditure. It is also part of a plan to begin to move to a proper fleet management schedule and to incorporate the use of electric and hybrid vehicles, setting the tone for a more a wide-spread use of cleaner energy vehicles across the public service of Trinidad and Tobago.

We are embracing digital transformation to improve direct fiscal efficiency and institutional connectivity across all of Government. This feeds directly into our aim to streamline operations where Government is focused on facilitation, policy and legislation, which will be our core priority while ensuring that our main economic thrust will be centred around the private sector and creating an enabling environment that will partner with us in our implementation framework as we seek to build conditions suited to a modern Trinidad and Tobago development programme. Along with these fiscal and human resource conditions necessary for long-term international and local investments, we will work steadfastly with all our stakeholders and partners in the same.

Trinidad and Tobago is no longer waiting for global winds to shape our sails. As of May 2025, the Government has been steering the nation's course with

courage, data, and deliberate policy reform. We are rebuilding trust in our financial systems, restructuring the Government to deliver, repositioning the country as a regional innovator and investor hub, and reawakening our economy's untapped potential with a drive to attract international foreign investment. We look to our private sector and our international community as valued partners in our economic revitalization agenda. This Government reaffirms that Trinidad and Tobago is charting a bold and sustainable course toward economic transformation.

Under the leadership of our hon. Prime Minister, we have been restructuring the role of Government, geared toward optimizing the use of national assets and unlocking new pathways for growth through our private sector with an unwavering commitment to fiscal responsibility. As we implement this agenda we welcome the continued engagement and insights of all of our stakeholders and citizens, and development partners. We also value the critical roles that nationals at home and abroad also play in contributing to our progress. We want to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago's future continues to be a resilient forward-moving economy poised to deliver meaningful outcomes for our people, our investors and our global partners.

10.50 a.m.

Madam Vice-President, I also want to that the nucleus of Trinidad and Tobago's new growth and resilience strategy stands squarely on the shoulders of our cluster with the Minister of Trade, Investment and Tourism, the Minister of Finance and the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, an institution working tirelessly to shape a better future for every citizen. Under the leadership of our Prime Minister and supported by a committed Executive and staff in all our Ministries, this cluster continues to drive national transformation in our main core areas of national policy and strategy, statistics and data, environment and climate, economic development, spacial and urban planning and capital

investments.

In July 2025, the Government through the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, and the United Nations, officially endorsed the UN Multi-Country Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022-2026. This is a primary instrument guiding the United Nations development activities towards the 2030 agenda across the English and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. This partnership positions Trinidad and Tobago to benefit from coordinated action in four strategic priority areas, inter alia, economic resilience, shared prosperity, equality and wellbeing, climate resilience and sustainable resource management. Through nation-wide consultation and inter-ministerial collaboration, we are ensuring that development priorities address the needs of all of our citizens with a particular focus on marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Regarding statistics and data, sound policy depends on accurate and timely data. We are working with the UNDP to modernize the CSO to have more timely and accurate data. Trinidad and Tobago has not had a national census since 2011, and Cabinet has approved the roll-out of a national census in 2026. With our role involving environmental climate this year, the Ministry with our Environmental Policy and Planning Division and the Basel Convention Regional Centre for the Caribbean, launched the elimination of hazardous chemicals from supply chain integrated programmes. This first initiative of its kind in the Caribbean targets the carnival/fashion industry to make our cultural celebration environmentally responsible.

So, Madam Vice-President, we have also partnered with the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre to strengthen carbon capture storage and reporting frameworks, enhancing readiness to participate in international carbon markets under the Paris Agreement. The Environmental Management Authority,

an opportunity that will provide for increased international funding and for environmental projects, Madam Vice-President, allow me to commend the EMA because they have now achieved a milestone which echoes the Authority's robust and financial system where they have now been authorized and accredited to disburse on the global climate fund.

Four major environmental policies were also advanced since this Kamla Persad-Bissessar-led administration came into office in May of this year. A memorandum of understanding supporting ocean governance in the Caribbean, membership of the International Coral Reef Initiative, adoption of Trinidad and Tobago's 2030 national biodiversity targets, and an approval of the new National Climate Change Policy.

We have also deepened our engagement with international partners in strategic bilateral meetings especially with the World Bank and in collaboration with the Inter-American Development Bank and the International Finance Corporation. The Government is working to mobilize significant investment targets over the next five years to fund private sector transformation initiatives, job creation, and sustainable economic growth.

Madam Vice-President, I am very pleased to announce, well, to support our Government's continued roll out as we seek to establish the office of the World Bank here in Port of Spain, the MOU and the establishment agreement currently being vetted by Office of the Attorney General. Later on this month members of the World Bank's team will be down here to formalize and engage in active conversation to get that agreement completed. In essence, the work driving and guiding the national budget has been happening. This budget has been well thought through. It is strategic and it is an active and living budget focused on results and implementation, Madam Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development charged with the responsibility of national monitoring and evaluation, and our National Transformation Unit, place a direct focus on M&E at a national level. The industrious team of the NTU has been working with Ministries, departments and agencies across the public service to strengthen our monitoring and evaluation system because we are serious about delivery, about transparency and about making sure that we live up to the obligations that this budget imposes upon us as a Government. So, Madam Vice-President, let me conclude.

Madam Vice-President: Minister, you have four more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Thank you. Madam Vice-President, let me conclude by saying the following. I wish to profoundly thank our courageous Prime Minister for her guidance—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I wish to also, on behalf of all of us, thank my colleague the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I can testify to both the Prime Minister's and the Minister of Finance's long hours spent in working through the formulation of this budget, and I cannot but say how proud I am to have her as our leader and to have him as my colleague.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But I wish to reiterate, Madam Vice-President, that the 2026 Financial Appropriation Bill is more than a financial instrument. It is a road map for national transformation built on fiscal prudence,

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh (cont'd)

social responsibility and sustainable growth. We affirm our commitment to the public sector, to the elderly, to our young people and creating a people-centred approach to leadership and government. In fact, you know, I know many persons may not completely understand, but having worked under several remarkable leaders from 1984 to now, I have served under people like Archbishop Anthony Pantin, like Brigadier Carl Alfonso, like Bernard Dulal-Whiteway, Father Henry Charles, Joe Teixeira and many other remarkable persons. But it is the first time that I can safely say that I am able to work under a remarkable woman in Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I say this, Madam Vice-President, not for mere platitudes, but to say that I am very, very proud to stand and support our Minister of Finance and to support this budget because this is a budget that has listened to the people, taken ideas from all sectors, acted on data and evidence, made hard decisions and put the country of Trinidad and Tobago first.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: You could not want something better in a leader and in a government.

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: They could say what they want, you know, because they do not even know who their leader is.

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

Sen. Roberts: “Oh gawd! Allyuh, ah trying to behave.”

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: We must however recognize that transformation does not happen overnight. But we are laying firm the foundation for change through transparent management, strategic investment and a relentless

focus on results and implementation. This administration will rebuild trust, restore confidence and renew national pride.

Madam Vice-President, congratulations again on your assent to the Chair. I thank my colleagues for their attention. I thank the hon. Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance for this fantastic budget and therefore submit the Appropriation (Financial Year, 2026) Bill, 2025 to the honourable Senate. Madam Vice-President, I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

11.00 a.m.

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Dhanpaul.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul: Madam Vice-President, good morning. On behalf of my colleagues on this side, I would like to let our Caricom family in Jamaica know that they are in our thoughts and prayers, as Hurricane Melissa approaches the island.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: We are also praying for the safety of our students and may Almighty God watch over them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Madam Vice-President, let me apologize in advance in case I misspeak, and call you anything else but Madam Vice-President. I apologize wholeheartedly.

Madam Vice-President, thank you for the opportunity to address this honourable Senate and may I also congratulate you. As I usually do, I preface my statement with, I have no intention of saying anything derogatory about my

country. I would like to begin by thanking and congratulating the hon. Leader of the Opposition for her brilliant response to the national budget.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: I would also like to thank my former colleagues at the Ministry of Finance for their excellent work on producing the budget. Madam Vice-President, the production of the national budget is a model or is the perfect model of the public service efficiency anywhere in the public service of Trinidad and Tobago, and that just goes to show how excellent my colleagues are at the Ministry of Finance. Madam Vice-President, I have known the Minister of Finance for many years. I have always described him as a decent citizen. Only recently, I found him to be a bit agitated and a bit aggressive. I have no idea why. But I hope that at the end of this budget debate, he would not become more aggressive and agitated.

This is now the Government's budget. This is the UNC's budget. They will now be held totally responsible. Madam Vice-President, the budget is not a game. For me, personally, it is always interesting to hear the various commentaries following the delivery of the budget. My suggestion has always been that the budget could either be good, bad or indifferent. It is almost impossible to script or calibrate the perfect budget. To quote a recent editorial in a local newspaper:

“The national budget is not a party showpiece. It is the country's most consequential economic statement...”

Let me get to the point. This budget will be derailed early in the new year, in the new calendar year, or before. It will collapse and it will need to be recalibrated within the first quarter of the new calendar year. This is nothing new. Several budgets have had to be recalibrated under the UNC and the PNM. In fact, I remember an instance where the Minister of Finance put out instructions that each

Ministry should cut their allocation by 10 per cent. It happens. But why? Why would this budget be derailed? It will be derailed for not only what it contains, but definitely, what it does not contain. This budget will collapse shortly under the weight of dubious assumptions and extremely creative accounting.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: But you know, Madam Vice-President, during the Standing Finance Committee, I realized that Ministers—several Ministers, including the Minister of Finance, were more interested in the mid-year review than the actual budget itself. Let me quote the Minister of Finance during the last mid-year review, and he was describing the PNM's budget:

“They knew exactly what they were doing.”

—I am quoting here, Madam Vice-President:

“They deliberately underfunded critical expenditure planning all along...to return after...election and demand more money; a shameless ploy to manipulate public finances for political gain.”

The Minister of Finance goes on in the mid-year review:

“They spent the money without any clear idea of where the money was going to come from. No proper planning, no sustainable financing, just reckless expenditure...What we witnessed under the previous administration was not budgeting...but a calculated scheme of financial deception. Year after year, they passed budgets that are deliberately underfunded, and then come back to the Parliament, cap in hand, for billions more.”

However, just a few months later, the Minister of Finance is singing a different song.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: The Finance Minister said recently in the Standing Finance

Committee:

The Finance Minister says funds are available to meet the Government's current wage obligations"—as it should be—"and that additional resources would be secured through Parliament if needed, the mid-year review."

So, in other words, after blaming the previous administration for miscalculating the budget, what is the first thing the Minister of Finance does? Starts to talk about the mid-year review.

So, let me deal with some of the assumptions that are going to cave in this budget. The international oil price projections. This budget is predicated on an oil price of \$73.25, and a natural gas price of \$4.25 per million British Thermal Units, or MMBtu, and in the face of a declining production in oil and gas. Total budget with revenue projected at \$55.3 billion, of which oil revenue would be \$11.2 billion, and non-oil revenue, \$43.4 billion.

I will show now how these numbers could be seen as highly unrealistic. The United States Energy Information Administration, a highly reputable agency, where they predict the average price of oil in 2026, they projected that the average price of oil would be \$52 per barrel, a full \$20 lower than the projection in the budget. The IMF has projected that the price of oil would be \$62 per barrel in its World Economic Outlook. They are making these predictions based on projected oversupply in the international market.

Similarly, in international gas prices, the US EIA, the Energy Information Administration, 2026, is projecting better gas prices at \$4.16 per MMBtu, and the IMF, roughly the same. So, both oil and gas prices projections by the EIA are lower than the assumptions in the budget. Although we are not—well, I would say, no longer a big oil province and now we are a gas province, a \$20 reduction in the projection could have a significant hit on total revenue. Madam

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Vice-President, the oil and gas prices assumptions are unrealistic.

We must remember that we are dealing with two exogenous factors here that we have no control over. We are price-takers, we have no control over the price of oil and the price of gas. These assumption on prices are some of the main risks to the budget. The revenue projected from the non-energy sector may not be able to compensate for the lost on the energy sector. What is notable here, Madam Vice-President, is that the credit rating agencies and the IMF for the Article IV Consultation are already aware of the risky assumptions.

But there is a method to government smartness. I have to confess, there is a method to the madness. The Government's strategy is to use an inflated oil price assumption to trigger the withdrawal clause of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Let me explain that withdrawal clause to the national community, to the population. If actual petroleum revenues are at least 10 per cent below budgeted revenues for the fiscal year, the Government can access the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund to the amount of 60 per cent of the revenue shortfall. Let me repeat that. If actual petroleum revenues are at least 10 per cent below budgeted revenues for the fiscal year, the Government can access the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund to the tune of 60 per cent of the revenue shortfall. The nation needs to monitor this situation carefully, because when the budget implodes, the UNC Government is heading to the HSF to pay recurrent expenditure.

Madam Vice-President, just a few issues on budgeted expenditure. Total expenditure is budgeted or projected at \$59.2 billion, of which—and this is a pet peeve of mines since my days back in the Ministry of Finance—education is \$8.7 billion and national security, \$6.36 billion. National security stands at 10 per cent

of total expenditure and 4 per cent of GDP. Madam Vice-President, the pet peeve is this, at 4 per cent of GDP—if you are spending 4 per cent of your GDP on national security, and 10 per cent of your total expenditure, you are effectively at war. And you know what is the irony here? It is that we are spending \$8 billion-plus on education and \$6 billion-plus on national security. So, what we are effectively saying is that we are educating people and then spending money to protect us from those who we just educated. That is the irony of these two numbers. It has been my pet peeve for a very long time.

So, getting back to the actual expenditure, I want to discuss mandatory expenditure. Are you aware—and I have said in this honourable House already, Madam Vice-President. Are you aware that mandatory expenditure in this country totals \$54 billion annually, an average about \$4.5 billion a month? So, if your budgeted revenue is \$55 billion, a little over, and your mandatory expenditure is \$54 billion, you understand—and you have some very unrealistic assumptions to generate revenue, you understand how precarious the budget is.

But let me tell you some components of mandatory expenditure. No right-thinking Minister of Finance is going to touch any one of them. Pension and gratuities—and these are direct charges on the Exchequer—social grants, old age pension, for instance, Public Assistance Grants, disability grants, money for the THA, money for the Development Programme and debt servicing, there all part of mandatory expenditure, which, in this country, in this complex society, totals \$54 billion a year, and the projected revenue is \$55 billion. The projected total expenditure is \$59 billion. So, in other words, essentially, you only have \$5 billion for discretionary expenditure, right? So, that is something that I am asking the Minister of Finance to keep an eye on, please. But it is also something, as I said previously, that is going to derail the Government.

11.15 a.m.

I just want to focus on another part of total expenditure that is under the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development. That is in the PSIP or Development Programme as it is known. On page 19 of the PSIP document, the PSIP is projected as \$4.1 billion, Consolidated Fund, \$2.6 and the IDF 1.4. However, the problem with the PSIP is not the size of the PSIP. The problem with the PSIP is the implementation of the PSIP, which creates the problem. And the PSIP is there to generate economic growth; it is there to generate employment opportunities; it is there to generate investment; it is there to spend money on infrastructure, et cetera. The problem is implementation. And you know what is the general problem throughout the public service?—various Ministries do not have implementation units. I do not know if the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development will tell me later on if there are implementation agencies in these Ministries. And I am also wondering whether to match back, and it is an old trick in the Ministry of Finance, to match back to get a targeted deficit if they did not use the PSIP as a residual number.

So let me discuss now the deficit itself. The deficit is estimated at \$3.865 billion, 2.7 per cent of GDP and which the Minister claims is less than the 3 per cent international benchmark. This is very deceptive. Because the deficit does not take into account the following and this is where the derailment is going to take place. Back pay for the 10 per cent increase in salaries. The addition of the recurrent expenditure for salary increases which now come part of mandatory expenditure, debt payment, a direct charge on the exchequer is underestimated by \$5 billion. I would like the national community to go on the website, finance.gov.tt, go in the *Draft Estimates of Expenditure*, they are usually called the yellow book, go on page 110, page 110 of Head 19: Debt Servicing, and you will

see a figure there of \$7.67 billion. If you look at the previous years you will see \$12 billion. How could the figure drop from last year, \$12 billion to \$7.65 this year in the face of increasing debt stock and increasing debt stock. I find that to be very, very, creative accounting.

Next thing that is missing is the VAT figure. On page 5 of the Estimates of Revenue, and I want to quote my sources, because I do not want to be accused by the other side of spreading false information. The fact figure on page 5 of the Estimates of Revenue which also would have a direct impact on the deficit, is \$8.2 billion. But guess what, Madam Vice-President, the VAT figure is not a net figure. There are arrears of \$7.9 billion inside of there. It is a distorted figure meant to distort the revenue.

The fifth thing, there is no accounting for the employer contributions to the NIS fund, had not been factored into the equation. But, Madam Vice-President, let me make it clear to this honourable Senate, that the narrative advanced by the Minister of Finance, the wage negotiations have not yet started and therefore budgetary provision could not be made, is confusing and disingenuous. This was the Government's big ticket item on the campaign trail, everybody knew that. But I will tell you this from my experience in the Ministry of Finance, Madam Vice-President, if the expenditure is front loaded or if the expenditure is back loaded guess what, it is still an expenditure, it is still going to form part of the deficit. So it is a case of where you can run but you cannot hide. I will show how the Minister is aware also of the two deficits. He is very aware. Because, you know what, these Draft Estimates—these are his books, he signed off on all of them, not the Permanent Secretary, not the staff in the Ministry of Finance. The Minister of Finance signed off on all these books. And I will show that he is aware of the two deficits and he is engaged in creative accounting and that the budget will

collapse.

When it comes to financing the deficit, the deficit is financed in four ways: Through domestic borrowing, through external borrowing, as I said earlier, you can withdraw from the HFS or you can use the overdraft facility at the Central Bank. On page 67 of the Estimates of Revenue, on page 67 of the Estimates of Revenue under Head 19, the Minister of Finance in his book outlined domestic financing to be \$8.1 billion, external financing to be \$10.8, total of \$18.9 or \$9 billion, to service a deficit of \$3.8. How is that possible? The Minister must know that he was dealing with creative accounting.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: He must know that. Let me repeat, I will repeat.

Sen. John-Bates: Yes, tell us again.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: On page 67 of the Estimates of Revenue, Head 19, the yellow book, his book, signed off by him, the domestic financing \$8.1 billion, the external financing \$10.8, total \$8.9 or to round it off, \$19 billion to finance a deficit of \$3.8 billion. Madam Vice-President, unheard of. And this as I said the Minister knows. And this is the factor that is going to collapse the budget early in the New Year.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: But there are more problems on the financing side of things. The domestic banks have been complaining that they are overexposed to the Government. The Government uses, Madam Vice-President, two main sources of borrowing: Through the Development Loans Act and the External Loans Act. And there is not much headroom on both. So you know what is going to happen? The Government early in this fiscal year is going to come to Parliament to raise the borrowing ceiling. And you know what is the immediate impact of doing that?—downgrade Standard & Poor's, further downgrade Moody's investors. But they are

going to have to do it because there is absolutely no headroom on both of those Acts.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Yeah, it will have to be external. And the other form I want to speak about is the overdraft facility at the Central Bank. I have said that so many times, obviously the Minister of Finance does not understand it, so I will explain it. The overdraft facility at the Central Bank is consisted of 20 per cent of the budgeted revenue, the Government have the ability to burrow that, okay. However, that 20 per cent of budgeted revenue from that is subtracted, what is the residual from the previous year, okay. So it is reduced based on the level of the balance brought forward. But what would cause us to have to go to the overdraft at the Central Bank? We have been running fiscal deficits or recording fiscal deficits since 2009, and that has caused the build-up of the exchequer one account at the Central Bank. It is called Government cash balances. Anybody could go and check it in the Central Bank and you will see, Madam Vice-President, because of the build-up of fiscal deficit over the years you know what is the size of the— understand, it is a negative. Meaning, it is a debt more or less, it is now \$50 billion.

In other words, the fiscal policy in Trinidad and Tobago is stifled by the overdraft facility at the Central Bank. The Green Fund, the Infrastructure Development Fund are both mortgaged to the Government cash balances at the Central Bank. So how do you fix that? And this is basic financial programming, eh. How do you fix it? Simple. It is the only way you could fix it. You have to run fiscal surpluses and pay back into the Central Bank. It is the only way to reduce that \$50 billion and wean yourself out of the overdraft facility. But it is \$50 billion which is not part of the country's overall debt. But what it does, as I said

previously, it stifles fiscal policy.

So, I would like to now look at selected fiscal measures. My colleagues will obviously pick up the rest. But before I look at the fiscal measures, some of the fiscal measures, I would like to entertain a quote from the hon. Prime Minister in 2020 when she was the Leader of the Opposition. She declared that:

“You cannot Tax a Nation into Prosperity.

For a Nation to Tax itself into prosperity, it is like a man standing in a bucket and trying to lift himself up by the handle of the bucket.

A UNC Government will lower Tax and put money back into the pockets of Citizens.”

On that note, I will look at some of fiscal measures. And they are not all that bad. Some I like. There was a little decrease in the price of super. I have no problem with that. However, me, if I had a choice I would use it on diesel, I would reduce diesel because it has more of an economic impact on a complex society. Because most of our maxi taxis, commercial vehicles, et cetera, use diesel. So it has more of a multiplier effect on the economy.

The other thing I noticed is transfer pricing. Madam Vice-President, multinationals are not going to sit back and let you interfere with their profits. They will continue to find innovative ways to move their profits to tax havens. They are not going—and you know what it is also going to cause, it is going to have a major impact on investor confidence. On the group health plan for public servants: As a proud former public servant, it is already available for public servant who are under the SRC, Salary Reviews Commission. I use it. It is a very costly initiative if you are not under the SRC. But what about the removal—and I am not being self-centred here or anything—of the taxes on public servants’ pensions. The highest public servant pension in Trinidad and Tobago is between

\$25,000 and \$30,000 and about 75 to 80 per cent of the rest of public servants are within the personal allowance. So they do not pay taxes anyway.

Hon. Senators: Tax free.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Tax free. So why not give the—as promised on the campaign trail. Why private sector? And the private sector pensions are 100,000, 200,000, private sector pension. The largest public sector pension in Trinidad and Tobago is somewhere between \$25,000 and \$30,000 before tax. And I want to quote the hon. Prime Minister again on the National Insurance System. According to the hon. Prime Minister when she was the Opposition Leader on the campaign trail, and I quote:

“Any discussion on changing the retirement age will need serious consultations and, should that be the preferred option for the majority, it should be one...by choice.”

Where was the consultation?

“That is to say, those who wish to go home at 60, fine, those who wish to go at 65, fine”—I am quoting the hon. Prime Minister—“But you cannot tell a man...”—to work for his entire life—“put his savings...”—in—“NIS every week, every month”—and you come to tell him now—“Sorry sir, you cannot get it. You have to wait until 65. You cannot continue like that.”

11.30 a.m.

Let me quote the Minister of Finance, 29th, April 2022:

“Tancoo: Unwise to raise the retirement age.”

Tancoo said:

“...it takes no genius to realize that the way to increase the value of contributions is not to penalize workers, but to increase the number of

workers in permanent, well-paid jobs...”

Well said.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul:

“...and raising the number of employers contributing to the system.”

Brilliant.

This is not rocket science—he goes on—that is common sense.

Superb.

It is similarly common sense that what the Government needs to do then is to create the environment for greater confidence in the economy so that investors can come in and create jobs. What a difference a few years makes. Fast forward to now.

Is this country aware, Madam Vice-President? Is this country really aware? Because I am not too sure, because the trade unions are staying—and my comrade here—very quiet on this. Is this population aware that, from January 1st, 2036 onward, a retiree must be 65 years of age to receive a full NIS pension?

Mrs. Roberts-Radgman: Repeat it, please.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Is the country aware of that? I will repeat. Is the country aware that from January 1st, 2036 onward, a retiree must be 65 years of age to receive full NIS? I am not hearing a word from the unions. You know what happened when France went to increase their retirement age by two years? All hell broke loose. Three Prime Ministers ago, exactly. And, you know what? The actual reports, and I am quoting here from—These are published books. The actual reports 2022, 2023 and 2024, projected contributors to fall to 423,249 and the fund to fall to \$25 billion. However, the actual—in 2024—contributors increased to 488,246 and the fund increased to \$28 billion. And so, in other words,

in the NIS now, is this country aware, is the population aware, that after January 4th, 2027, there will be a total increase of 45 per cent in NIS contributions? “That not even Arithmetic. That is sums.” How long do I have again?

Hon. Senators: Six. Six minutes.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: On Customs and Excise, and we know, on cigarettes and alcohol, that those have, what we consider has inelastic demand. So whatever the price, people will still purchase. But on Customs, Excise and Fees, we are told that projected increases will come from beverages and tobacco duties and long overdue indexation of administrative fees and charges. Let me be clear. These are not broad-based high yield reforms that change the 2026 deficit arithmetic in any meaningful way. Nor do they address structural leakages in compliance. And, I want to touch on one thing that I found very creative and innovative and could work also.

Madam Vice-President, we then heard the suggestion of a pivot away from VAT, which has always caused a problem since 1990, as far as I am concerned. The budget statement concedes, accurately, that bi-monthly filing and verification cycles have generated a build-up of VAT refund arrears, undermining working capital for firms and damaging confidence. Yet however, no quantum timetable of a bridging cash flow plan for arrears; no operating model for the new sales tax; and, no clarity on how a sales tax would co-exist with or replace the business levy, very critical, the on gross sales. Layering a sales tax on top of the business levy would create cascading tax on tax distortions, but abolishing the VAT without a prepared base and audit model for replacement tax risks a net revenue shortfall during transition.

Just quickly, the levy and assets of commercial banks and insurance companies. Madam Vice-President, of course, they are going to pass that on to the

customers. I heard the Minister of Finance say, “Well, change banks.”

Hon. Senator: Ridiculous.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Change them into what? Has he ever seen a run on a bank? The landlords business surcharge change where you rent. Of course, the landlords are going to pass that on to the tenant. Electricity surcharge, stay at home and cook. Of course, it will be passed on to the customers.

Removal of the VAT concessions on returning nationals. That is amazing. A few weeks ago, at the Divali Nagar, the Minister of Finance invited the diaspora to come home and then 24-hours later, removed the motor vehicle concession for returning nationals. In other words, you could come home, but no car. Forget your household effects too, because that might be included.

The NIF 3, a major investment vehicle success story in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, it was called a “Ponzi scheme” by the hon. Prime Minister, when it first came out; and Tancoo—the hon. Minister, sorry. The nation knows this.

The agriculture incentives. The agriculture sector is the most incentivize sector in Trinidad and Tobago. VAT and food items. Well you already reduced the VAT base, so you might as well go to a sales tax.

Importation of foreign used cars. Madam Vice-President, that is the most Third World of measures that I have ranked a long time. It started, I will tell you this, it started in 1996 under the Basdeo Panday regime. Foreign used cars came down as completely knocked-down and flooded the market. Madam Vice-President, there are 3,000 vehicles that come onto the road network of this country every year, and guess what? There is no net impact, because no vehicles come off the road network every year. There is no net impact. So a good industry to start up will be a car crushing industry. I just gave somebody an idea.

But, it is silent on the following: Net international road reserves have dropped by US \$675 million in five months since they have been in office. The Ministry of Finance said, “He was left with seven months of the import cover, how could this be happening?” You know what is the import cover now?—5.4. The budget is silent on the 7 per cent online tax. The debt-to-GDP ratio, I heard nothing about that. The economic contraction on page 193 of his document, the *Review of the Economy*, is showing an economic contraction of 0.8 per cent. We heard nothing about lowering the corporation tax. Unfortunately, Madam Vice-President, I do not have much time, but I wanted to say something on PPPs, but I will pass it on to my colleagues.

In conclusion, Madam Vice-President, the Government told the country that repealing the TTRA and strengthening the BIR would significantly enhance revenue collection. Months later, there is no evidence of a material uplift versus the Estimates and no costed annex with dated milestones for the three-phase plan. I am still challenging the Minister, at the end of fiscal 2027, to raise \$10 billion from the BIR reconstruction, like the TTRA would have done. I am still challenging him, and like I said, I will come back to this House and apologize if I am wrong. The budget acknowledges the problem—energy volatility, weakened energy growth, high debt service—but stops short of true consolidation.

Madam Vice-President, after observing the Standing Finance Committee over the last week, and I say this as someone who has worked many years in this arena as a technocrat, it is clear that expenditure has been underestimated and revenue overstated.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: The budget will collapse. Given the fiscal package as presented, the budget will collapse and this is deeply alarming. Thank you very

much, Madam Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

11.40 a.m.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice President: Sen. Attzs

Sen. Dr. Marlene Attzs: Thank you, Madam Vice President, as I rise to make my contribution on the 2026 Appropriation Bill, and the budget presentation, by the hon. Minister of Finance, I first wish to congratulate you Madam Vice President on your elevation to the Chair, so I want to congratulate you on that. And as I begin and consistent with the Standing Orders of the Senate and practices in the Houses of Parliament in the United Kingdom, I should also like to draw the attention of the Senate to the fact that I have accepted an appointment to the Board of Directors of ANSA McAL, a conglomerate with an interest in beverages and motor vehicles.

To the substantive issue of budget 2026, Madam Vice President, permit me to congratulate Minister Tancoo on the presentation of his maiden budget. He delivered with energy, with political poise and importantly, people-centred focus which I appreciated. I appreciated his tone of empathy that ran through his speech and the emphasis on restoring confidence in the economy by putting people first. I think that was absolutely important and brilliant.

The theme that Minister Tancoo used for his budget presentation, T&T First: Building Economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies, captures both the spirit of renewal and the moral imperative of inclusion. It is a timely and worthy aspiration and I intend to use fairness as a common thread throughout my contribution today, because I want to examine whether the policies and priorities outlined truly deliver on that promise for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

That people-centred approach is commendable. It is important, but a

credible budget must go beyond good intentions. It must show how the Government plans to confront our most pressing realities, including issues of crime, foreign exchange shortages and rising debt. On these counts, Madam Vice President, I felt that budget 2026 fell short because before we can assess the fairness of any fiscal package, we must first examine the economic fundamentals on which the budget stands. What assumptions are made about growth? What assumptions are made about debt and resilience? All of these would determine whether the budget can actually keep the promises that were stated.

So I want to turn to the economic fundamentals first and foremost. The Minister spoke of renewed confidence, but confidence to my mind, Madam Vice President, must rest on a vision and on credible data. What is the target debt-to-GDP ratio that the Government considers sustainable? That was not mentioned. What guardrails are there in place to protect investor confidence and to prevent future downgrades? Those were not mentioned.

Madam Vice President, in the *Review of the Economy 2025*, we get painted a picture of stabilization but not yet transformation. Revenues have improved with energy prices, but non-energy diversification remains low and slow. Foreign exchange shortages persist, public debt continues to rise, we are at 80 and rising and our reserves, though stable, are being drawn down to plug short-term gaps. If the theme of economic fairness is to be real, Madam Vice President, we must be fiscally responsible and sustainable. And I will use the first person plural “we” because this is all of our business and my contribution here today is in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and I am a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. We must be fiscally responsible and sustainable. Borrowing to fund consumption or deferred obligations simply shifts the burden to future generations.

On this score, Madam Vice President, it was concerning to me that the

budget presented by the hon. Minister, did not mention the Government's intention to borrow \$18.96 billion. There was no mention of that in the budget presentation. But when you went to one of the yellow books, you saw borrowing of 18.965. And borrowing by itself is not a problem, particularly when you have declining revenues. That is not the issue. What concerns me is the change in the consumption of the borrowing.

In recent years, Government debt has been largely domestically financed but the 2026 Estimates point to a pivot towards foreign borrowing. So of the 18.965 billion, 8.1 billion comes from the domestic market and 10.9 billion comes from the international market. This shift in the composition of borrowing will bring higher cost, greater exchange rate risk and of course, repayment obligations in foreign currency. For the benefit of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, let me be pellucidly clear. Each dollar that we borrow in foreign exchange must be repaid in foreign exchange. And I ask how will these debts, because borrowing is a debt to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, how will these debts be serviced without worsening the foreign exchange train or without driving the debt-to-GDP ratio higher? Those are fundamentals, Madam Vice President.

The implication of this pivot to foreign borrowing is that the country must earn or save foreign dollars through exports, reserves, drawing down on reserves or further borrowing. If these inflows of foreign do not materialize, current and future generations will shoulder the burden through a devaluation process, most likely or higher taxation because every dollar today—let me repeat. Every dollar borrowed today is a promise to repay in foreign exchange tomorrow. And economic fairness, the theme of our budget, demands that we keep that promise as a country.

To my mind, Madam Vice President, Trinidad and Tobago's fiscal challenge

is not the absence of revenue ideas. It is what I call the implementation deficit. Each new tax or levy articulated in the budget, and there were many measures identified, depends on administrative infrastructure that often lags behind the policy intent. So, unless the Government invests early, to my mind, in people and in digital infrastructure—and there have been some conversations around investments in digital infrastructure. Unless we get these going and we get these architectures in place, the 2026 revenues may yield less than forecast, forcing us into yet more borrowing to bridge the gap between revenue and expenditure.

Madam Vice President, following those general comments and observations, I want to turn to some specific sectors that grabbed my attention in the budget presentation. The first thing I want to turn to is agriculture, and persons who know me know that I am pretty close to the agriculture sector. I like agriculture and I like farmers.

I turn to agriculture not merely as an allocation line but as a sector central to our food and nutrition security in Trinidad and Tobago. It is also important to help us save scarce foreign exchange. It is important for rural employment. If we cannot feed ourselves, Madam Vice President, then we cannot claim to be sovereign because we are dependent on importing food. Agriculture should not be an afterthought. It is the foundation of inclusive growth and community stability. Budget 2026 correctly referenced the Caricom initiative 25x2025, now pushed to 25x2030, in which Caricom—that initiative, Caricom countries have agreed to try to reduce their food import bill—reduce their food import bill by 25 per cent. The initial target was 2025 but now that has been pushed to 2030. Yet even as we proclaim that goal, the architecture supporting our local farmers remains fragmented.

We have an opportunity, the collective, we have an opportunity to fix that.

Let me give a very specific example. Every week, some farmers for ten years, some farmers for eight years—if it is 10 years, 520 weeks, it is 8 years it is 416 weeks. Every week, hundreds of small farmers supply produce through NAMDEVCO's markets. Their crops are weighed, recorded, plenty of paperwork and their crops are sold into the national food system. At least once per quarter, and the hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, can correct me, officers from NAMDEVCO visit these farmers to verify that what they are actually selling in in farmers market is what they are growing at home by them.

So there is a system in place. But here is what, many of these farmers, who are visible, productive, every week 520 weeks or 416, they are denied access to incentives or concessional credit because they lack former land titles. The contradiction with that is that on one side, the State records them as bona fide farmers because they are taking their produce and they are keeping records every week. But another side of the agricultural architecture treats them as invisible. That contradiction, Madam Vice-President is unjust and economically inefficient. We must do better by our farmers. Any conversation around agriculture, food security, food and nutrition security, must do better by our farmers.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Attzs: NAMDEVCO recognizes production, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries grants incentives only to deed holders. The Agricultural Development Bank demands collateral, and the Land Settlement Agency moves slowly on leases. This is not me saying this. This is the farmers saying that these are the challenges they face from a fragmented agriculture system. The result for us in Trinidad and Tobago is that the very people who feed the nation cannot access the support intended to support them, designed for them so they can continue to feed the people of our country. Madam Vice President, I respectfully

suggest it is time to reengineer the system. We must do better by our farmers.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Attzs: So that proof of production, not proof of title, becomes the passport to agriculture participation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Attzs: I respectfully propose to the Government that they consider something, what I call an agri-pass. A single digital access point linking farmers to leases, incentives, water, electricity and credit, integrating the data that NAMDEVCO collects every week. I said 520 weeks of data for one farmer. They have pieces of paper every week, they are collecting the data. So they know—and then they are visiting the farms. So they know that people are planting. But yet still, they cannot access the incentives. We must do better to integrate the system.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Attzs: So if we integrate data from NAMDEVCO, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, the Agricultural Development Bank and the Ministry of Finance, this would ensure that our farmers are recognized by activity, not only by acreage.

The other thing that I want to raise on the issue of agriculture, and if we are serious about it we need to have serious conversations, is that we need a modern savannah market. “Yes I does go de market. Yes, I close to farmers.” We need a modern savannah market with sanitation, cold storage and digital payments—that should be prioritized—with regular ministerial walk-throughs, not as photo opportunities, but to keep your finger on the pulse of what is required by our agriculture sector and by the people who drive our agricultural sector.

11.55 a.m.

We want to ensure that we implement concrete measures, Madam Vice-

President, to achieve our targets for the agriculture sector but also to achieve food and nutrition security in our country. In this way—note I keep saying “we”, eh—we move agriculture from simply incentives on paper to access in practice. Food security is not about feeding the nation alone, it is about stability, it is about income, it is about dignity, and when we speak about economic diversification, let us remember agriculture should not be seen as a relic of our past, it should be seen as the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Attzs: Another area that I think demands clarity from the Government, with respect to budget 2026, is with respect to the Government’s plan for crime reduction. During the budget debate, the country did not benefit from a contribution from the Minister of Homeland Security in which he could have outlined his strategies or his measurable outcomes for dealing with crime in the country. Given his background as a senior police officer, I was actually looking forward to a comprehensive strategy, in which he would marry his expertise as an officer, with his new policy-making portfolio as a Minister.

Madam Vice-President, let us be honest, there can be no economic prosperity in Trinidad and Tobago unless we have security. Investors will not invest and communities cannot thrive where fear replaces trust. True security is not simply about police patrols, it is about prevention through opportunity. When young people see pathways in education, in entrepreneurship, in sports and the creative industries, they are less likely to be lured into a life of crime.

In recent weeks, the Minister of Homeland Security himself has acknowledged the rise in serious offences committed by minors. His comments made me recall a 2013 document that was actually commissioned by the hon. Prime Minister during her first term in office. That report was headed by one of

my former university colleagues, the late Prof. Selwyn Ryan, and that document was titled: “No time to quit: Engaging Youth at Risk”. That report, as I said, which was commissioned by the hon. Prime Minister during her first term as Prime Minister, found that vulnerability to crime stems not from character flaw but from the environment in which some of our young persons find themselves: Broken families, peer rejections, school failure and the attraction of easy money.

The committee’s conclusion: The committee, headed by the late Prof. Ryan, they concluded, very simply but it was profound, crime is a system of social failure and the solutions must, therefore, be multidimensional. It is not just about police and patrols and things, it must be a multidimensional approach, where we link law enforcement with education, housing, health and community empowerment. That report provides us with a road map.

The question before us is whether it will finally be used or will we continue to repeat the same old formula of more patrols, more money behind protective services and punitive laws, expecting different results. If we are serious about tackling crime, Madam Vice-President, we must treat it as a national development priority, informed by data guided by and sustained by courage. This is how we break the cycle: Not by fear, but by foresight and by deliberate actions and deliberate strategy to help us achieve particular outcomes.

Madam Vice-President, it would be remiss of me if I did not address the issue of short-term employment programmes, particularly the CEPEP and the URP, which have dominated headlines since May and June of this year. In his presentation, the Minister of Finance promised measures to significantly improve job creation, yet the country has received no further detail. CEPEP and URP were often derided as make-work programmes but their closure has made their value clear, to my mind. Across this country, garbage accumulation and overgrown

public spaces—“nobody cutting de grass”—combined with the onset of the rainy season, have created conditions ripe for a public health hazard, from mosquito-borne and vector-borne diseases. Tens of thousands were placed on the breadline, Madam Vice-President, but let us review the facts.

Between 2009 and 2023, over \$6.5 billion were allocated to CEPEP but alas, only \$2.4 billion has been accounted for in the Parliament since 2014. Accountability concerns are valid, no argument from me. But fairness, as is the theme in the budget, demands that we consider the human impact of the closure of those programmes. Budget 2026 proposes to replace CEPEP and URP with this unemployment fund, promising better paying jobs. This shift raises certain questions to my mind, but before I come to the questions, I just want to share with this honourable House some of the history behind the development of CEPEP.

CEPEP was started in 2002, with two particular objectives: One, community enhancement of environmental spaces—and I am paraphrasing here from the official document—but secondly, CEPEP was meant to be short-term employment for a specific target group; persons who were semi-skilled, who had not finished their full education, single heads of households and females. So, you are really looking at the people who are at the lower echelon, in terms of the income scale. So, you provide them with some short-term employment, they can catch themselves and then, graduate. Of course, that never happened and CEPEP turned out to be full-time employment for many persons.

But back to the question of the shift; the shift from closing the CEPEP and URP programmes to this unemployment fund, and I have some questions, I must admit, Madam Vice-President. Have we asked ourselves, in closing down these programmes, what has been the multiplier effect of removing income from thousands of households for more than 100 days? Has the abrupt loss of income

among these affected workers disrupted the schooling of their children? Have their children been going to school since June? Can these families afford food, rent or necessities? Has this income shock—the loss or the sudden loss of their income pushed single-parent households deeper into poverty? What, if any, are the criteria and transitional arrangements to the new fund? Remember the cohort of people that CEPEP was intended to cater for. What is in place for them to transition to this new fund?

These, Madam President—Madam Vice-President, you see, Freudian slip, a good one. These, Madam Vice-President, are what I consider to be human questions. Economic fairness cannot mean removing the lifeline before building the bridge. And I offer for the consideration of this honourable House a programme coming out of Argentina called the “Jefes y Jefas de Hogar” programme, which was implemented in Argentina after their 2001 economic crisis. Similar, in part to the CEPEP programme, that “Jefes y Jefas de Hogar” programme in Argentina absorbed unemployed heads of households into community projects, while providing them with training and microenterprise support, so that you maintain income but you build capacity. A similar model could be contemplated here in whatever new form. Ultimately, CEPEP and URP must be seen within the national employment strategy—whatever they are called, these persons who were employed by both CEPEP and URP must be part of a national employment strategy.

The budget speaks of raising labour participation but says little about reabsorbing displaced workers in the changing labour market. There is also the migration factor that is reshaping the workforce, and that leads me to what I consider to be another omission in budget 2026. So, we are talking about the labour force participation, we are talking about revenues, we are talking about all

of these income-generating areas, we are talking about all these social programmes, but a glaring omission in this year's budget was any reference to the national migration policy.

The labour force participation rate has fallen to about 54 per cent but there was no strategy mentioned in the budget for how the migrant community, that is already contributing informally to our country, how they will be integrated into the labour market. Migrants work in construction, they work in agriculture, domestic care and retail, all are sectors that are informal, but to speak of increasing labour force participation, while ignoring thousands who already participate, is a policy contradiction.

Madam Vice-President, integration of a migrant population is an economic opportunity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Attzs: We have an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 migrants that access public goods. They access health care, they access education, they access transport, but without any mechanism for them to make tax contributions or to contribute to the NIS. So, the State bears the cost but without fiscal recovery. A structured framework could perhaps allow regularized migrants to contribute through NIS and health surcharges because they access our health facilities. It could allow them to pay taxes, so that we could broaden the base. It could allow them to access health care and training but it would also, more importantly, curb wage exploitation and under-reporting of the migrant community. To me, this is what economic fairness should look like, Madam Vice-President, reciprocity between rights and responsibilities.

Without such a framework, we risk perpetuating a dual economy; one formal and one shadowed, where labour shortages persist even as the fiscal strain on the

country grows. Fairness, Madam Vice-President, cannot be selective. Migrants already contribute in our farms, our homes, our restaurants, but they remain invisible in fiscal planning. To my mind, integrating them formally is not charity, it is good economics.

Madam Vice-President, I now turn to tax reform and the conversation articulated by the hon. Minister, the Minister of Finance. The Government is considering replacing the value added tax with a sales tax, arguing correctly that VAT is onerous to administer. Yes, we have some challenges. The IMF 2017 Tax Administration Diagnostic Assessment Tool, the TADAT report, pointed to this. But the problem is not VAT itself, the problem is that we failed to administer it efficiently.

A sales tax may simplify filing but it carries significant risks. Greater risks of evasion, lower yield and potentially, a heavier burden on low-income households. VAT remains in the words—well, in the numbers of the Minister of Finance, one of our most reliable revenue sources, projected at \$8.2 billion for 2026. So, it is not chicken feed, it is a significant amount of money. Replacing VAT with a sales tax could cause transitional losses during the changeover, but it could also cause structural losses as we narrow the base. Given our deficit budget, that would mean more borrowing or cuts at the mid-year review.

A global example is from Malaysia. When Malaysia shifted from VAT to sales tax in 2018, they saw a significant decline in their tax revenue and evasion. Madam Vice-President, I want to respectfully suggest that the world is moving towards that, not away from it. If fairness is our goal, we must reform what exists, not replace it with something that is potentially weaker and does not redound to our benefit.

Madam Vice-President, I want to speak briefly on the creative economy and

the tourism synergy.

12.10 p.m.

The budget statement on the Orange Economy, again, aspirational but very thin on specifics. It speaks of empowering Creatives, yet offers no coherent framework or measurable targets. There is mention of the Creative Value-Chain Fund without governance details or alignment with existing entities such as CreativeTT, FilmTT, MusicTT, and the artiste registry. Are these to be retained or restructured? Without clarity, we cannot know for sure whether the past lessons have been learned, whether this is an improvement, or whether we are simply duplicating. If it is that previous institutions underperformed, what is being done differently? Where is the new national Creative Industries policy, the financing plan, or task force linking trade, tourism, education, and culture?

The 2025 Nobel Prize in economics was awarded for innovation-driven growth, and that reminds us that innovation and creativity are the true engines of progress. For Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Vice-President, I suggest that building fairness requires us to invest in creativity, not simply celebrating it once or twice per year.

Jamaica's national policy for culture, entertainment, and the creative economy that was recently launched in Jamaica, provides a model. It is anchored in job creation, poverty reduction, and social cohesion. It integrates governance, establishes a culture and entertainment satellite account to measure the contribution of the creative sector to their GDP, and it links the creative sector to tourism, education, and digital transformation.

In Trinidad and Tobago, while I welcome the conversation around the reopening of the TTHTI because I think it was a travesty to close it, given how a central a number of persons who were trained, our tourism policy remains

fragmented. So there was mention of medical sport tourism, cultural tourism, but there was no roadmap to connect them.

A genuine Orange Economy tourism nexus would create culinary trails, artisan markets, and live performance hubs, not simply a conversation around the opening of new hotels and airports. Creativity should not be seen, Madam Vice-President, as a side hustle of the economy because for many of our young people, creativity is their economy. So, more should be done. If this budget truly seeks to build fairness, the creative sector deserves a coherent ecosystem linking policy, finance education, data, and tourism.

Madam Vice-President, I now turn to some overarching questions that remain in my mind, having listened to the budget, having read the documents, and having listened to some of the subsequent contributions. For all of its ambition, the budget raises issues of governance and transparency that, I think, require some clarification to ensure sound policymaking. In that spirit, I pose the following questions in the public interest, with respect to the Financial Oversight and Appropriations Committee (FOAC) sounds good, looks good on paper, but my question is how will it co-exist with the Standing Finance Committee and the Public Accounts Committee to strengthen, not dilute, parliamentary oversight? How will the Economic Resilience Council that is going to approve investment decisions greater than \$50 million—what are the performance indicators, and will the major investment decisions be made public in the Parliament?

With respect to the asset levy, what precisely constitutes these assets? I think there is a need for clarification around that. With respect to the procurement leakages that the Minister mentioned during his presentation, he announced that there was about \$45 billion reportedly lost, and my question is, what is the legislative or enforcement measure that will deliver measurable savings in fiscal

2026? Back to the question of debt sustainability. What medium-term fiscal rule or debt anchor is the Government identifying to help preserve investor confidence?

With respect to the public sector wages, as a former public servant myself, I know it is important to have the 10 per cent increase, but can the country sustain a 10 per cent increase without crowding out investment? With respect to the foreign exchange issue, with more questions than answers, how will relaxing the vehicle import age limits affect forex demands and reserves, especially given the data suggests that within recent years, we spent between US \$300 million and \$400 million on imported vehicles?

The fuel price reduction, I know the population welcomed that. I was in the Gallery when the budget was read, and I mean, it was euphoria, pure euphoria. But what is the economic cost and the environmental impact of this \$1 reduction of the price of super gasoline, and how will these economic and environmental costs be offset?

With respect to education and skills as part of the digitization strategy, there is mention of the education platforms, et cetera, to introduce smart classrooms, e-textbooks, et cetera. How will the Government measure whether AI-based learning investments outlined in the budget actually improve education outcomes? These are governance questions, Madam Vice-President. Until these are clearly answered and publicly articulated, the national conversation on fairness will remain incomplete.

Madam Vice-President, as I close, I return to the theme of this year's budget: T&T First: Building Economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies. How will this fairness be measured? Will citizens see data, dashboards tracking our progress, data that shows real change in income distribution, in gender equity, in access to housing, in access to health care, in access to education? Fairness

cannot be declared, Madam Vice-President; it must be demonstrated and measured. I welcome the mention by the hon. Minister Swaratsingh about the attention to be paid to the Central Statistical Office, which, Madam Vice-President, is the heartbeat of evidence-based decision making in Trinidad and Tobago. We need timely and reliable data. We need to know whether we are moving toward economic fairness or simply repeating it as a theme.

Economic fairness, Madam Vice-President is not achieved by rhetoric, it is achieved by measurable outcomes: By whether the unemployed find decent work, by whether our children can dream beyond their circumstances, by whether farmers, nurses, and teachers can live with dignity, and whether the debt we incur will bring tangible improvements to the lives of every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago.

These questions speak to whether our policies are guided by evidence and whether our institutions are empowered to give us the data we need to plan wisely and act boldly. Madam Vice-President, fairness must not remain a slogan—

Madam Vice-President: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. M. Attzs: Thank you, Madam Vice-President—fairness must be seen, felt, and measured in every community, in every household, and in every life touched by public policy. Madam Vice-President, the people of Trinidad and Tobago need to know that our country is not only building growth but building justice through economic fairness. And that, Madam Vice-President, is the standard by which this budget must be judged, not by its promises, but by its ability to deliver with fairness, transparency, and accountability. And with those comments, Madam Vice-President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the budget for 2026.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam. Vice-President: Minister Baptiste.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development (Sen The Hon. Leroy Baptiste): Thank you, Madam Vice-President. I want to start again, too, by Congratulating you, Madam Vice-President, on your ascendancy to the position of Vice-President. I am honoured to rise in support of this Appropriation Bill, which reflects the Government's commitment to the well-being of citizens and the development of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: Madam Vice-President, allow me first to commend my esteemed colleague, the Minister of Finance—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste:—and his team on this budget, which reflects the clear vision set out by this Government in our official policy framework and focuses on putting Trinidad and Tobago first: Building Economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies. I also laud my fellow Ministers and Members of Parliament who were instrumental in reflecting the will and desires of the people in the first budget in a long time, which can truly be considered a people's budget.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: I would like to commend our caring Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste:—for her profound leadership and vision that is being realized through this budget. I take this moment to congratulate her on her recent People's Choice Leader Award at the Caribbean Global Awards held in London.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: This award, I know, is made even more meaningful as it was the result of a vote, and therefore, in true reflection of the voice of the people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: Madam Vice-President, I must also thank my fellow Senators for their insights into the budget through their respective contributions. I do value the opinions of my colleagues in this august Chamber, and last, but definitely not least, on my list of acknowledgements are all those persons who contributed in one way or the other, by way of their expert opinions, verbal feedback, written comments, et cetera, to shaping the historic fiscal package meant to bring real change to real people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: Madam Vice-President, we do have a very limited time to contribute, but I cannot just move on and leave everything said without some kind of concerns of my own based on what was said here this morning, so far. My colleague, Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul, he spoke about a collapsed budget, and then somehow he said, “Dat does always happen.” I was not sure whether to think it was a bad thing or a good thing he was saying because he kind of acknowledged it had happened before, this concept of a collapsed budget. And then, I heard—and I really understood and respected the contribution of Sen. Dr. Marlene Attzs, and I heard her lament, asking the questions—and Sen. Dhanpaul, it is not a collapsed budget you ought to be concerned about, it is a collapsed PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: Because the questions being asked would have been answered if in the other place the PNM had not collapsed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: You spoke about a budget and figures. I just want to be clear that a lot of that budget is to provide for outstanding arrears left by the PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: You spoke about a failed education system and the budget allocated for that. Let me remind the PNM, my God, this Pontius Pilate thing cannot work.

Hon. Senator: Aye!

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: Colleagues, of the 69 years of self-governance in this country, you have been at the helm for 53 of those years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: Colleagues, the UNC, this big bad UNC, is only 10 years, plus the couple of months that we have been in office. Whatever problems you have in the education system, “is we fixing it now”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: And then you point to the next big issue in the budget about crime and the amount of money we are spending on national security issues?

Sen. Dhanpaul: That is not the point.

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: You feel that is not the point, but this is the point. There is a big budget to deal with crime because we met and inherited uncontrolled crime and criminality left after 10 years by the PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: You spoke about one of the things you hoped for, and I appreciate that. You want an implementation unit in all Ministries so that they can effectively execute. You are right, that ought to be there. What have you been doing for the last 10 years? Why is it not there?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: It is not there because the PNM, not only for the last 10 years and I want people to always remember that, they have been there for 53 years, at the helm of this country. And guess what you have? The public service is plagued with what? With 50 per cent of its positions vacant. Vacancies are rendering it ineffective, and then they come and lament about the ineffectiveness of the public service. Because why? They failed to fill the vacancies, and moreover, they failed to restructure the public service, to modernize the public service to ensure that we could meet the demands of the current society that we live in. The PNM's failure is why we are in a situation where you are now talking about "implementation unit". Yes, it will happen. And guess what? We will fix it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: And, I liked how you mentioned the fiscal deficit. I mean, you gave us a figure too, \$50 billion. Since 2009, you have talked about us having deficits.

Sen. Dhanpaul: [*Inaudible*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: I know, the overdraft. But you have been saying this since 2009. Again, colleague who has been in charge of this place all these years, for you to mention these things as if they came from nowhere, that situation is largely because of the effectiveness and incompetence of the People's National Movement.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: And yes, we will deal with it. I liked how you made a plug for your Cat. Three pension for yourself.

Sen. Dhanpaul: [*Laughter*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: At least that was a good contribution. Give him a

thump, he wants his pension.

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

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: We will deal with that at some other time. But something he also mentioned, and I want to draw it to the attention of the national community, because it concerns me. This bothers me. When you pointed out NIS, and you tried to purport that somehow the Government is going back on its word in how we treat the NIS situation—Colleagues, and I like how Sen. Dr. Marlene Attz would have pointed out the importance of the CSO as our vanguards for data-driven decision making. It is that. One of the major problems that the NIS faced, and we all have to come to understand that, the biggest problem faced by the NIS has been the existence of the People's National Movement.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: Why did I say that? Because in the last 10 years, CSO statistics: over 64,900 jobs lost—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste:—and therefore, the corresponding drop in contribution to the NIS based on the last 10 years of the PNM's existence. So, you have a major deficit of contributions to the NIS fund and we have found ourselves here having to treat with that with a level of urgency lest we face the collapse of NIS at the NIB. When they take and destroy jobs, not understanding the multiplying effect of that, it also impacts the contribution to the NIS scheme. In 10 years, 64,900 jobs were lost. So, I just want to put that on record.

But I am the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprises Development, my focus here in this debate, again, is to treat with two simple issues. One, as the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprises Development, I was elated when the Minister of Finance placed in the budget \$475 million as an employment fund

to treat with the employment of persons in this country. I thought it was something that I needed to comment on, and which I will comment on. And, moreover, to indicate how this Ministry under my charge is going to assist in the sustainable development and growth of our economy. Madam Vice-President, before we can speak of solutions, we must confront failures. The previous PNM administration left behind a legacy of neglect, inertia and decay. The PNM's overall impact on society over the last 53 years, while they were at the helm, as we all know, and they speak about it glowingly—Sen. Dhanpaul, the mere fact is that this economy, they failed to diversify the economy, notwithstanding decades of being in charge.

We have the widening of the income inequality gap between the haves and the have-nots, courtesy of the PNM. We have the out-of-control crime and criminality courtesy of the PNM, and, of course, we have had to, over the years, massive job losses. I would not go into those figures, but massive job losses, whether it is Caroni, Debe, TSTT, Petrotrin and the list will go on. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the last 10 years, we met an industrial relations climate in Trinidad and Tobago that was in disarray, characterized by industrial action, failed wage negotiations, and the collapse of the National Tripartite Advisory Council.

Madam Vice-President, prior to my installation as the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprises Development, the industrial relations climate in Trinidad and Tobago could be described in only one word, and that word is unhealthy. In my former iteration as the President of the PSA, I would have had cause to lead the charge against the politicized special tribunal, where the Chairman would have sought to extend powers that he did possess in a bid to foist a 10-year collective bargaining agreement upon civil servants, when the period which was being negotiated was for six years. In the interest of time, I need not

regurgitate the decision of the Court of Appeal that the special tribunal could not so exercise those powers that it did not have.

My greater point here is that the unjust treatment and the oppression of workers by the former regime were boldly orchestrated from the highest echelons of our public institutions. You see, Madam Vice-President, for the past nine years, the former PNM Government appeared to be shamelessly and appallingly unaware of the need to establish and maintain Tripartite structures that were necessary to steer this country in the direction of industrial peace and harmony. It is trite industrial relations, Madam Vice-President, that in the absence of genuine Tripartite processes, productivity and growth will suffer.

The former Government did nothing to repair the fractures that were formed at the very highest level of NTAC, and so, the inextricable link of failure to consult, negotiate and industrial instability was made manifest. We have all witnessed the worrying indicators of a deteriorating industrial relations climate, with threats of industrial action looming large across several sectors for stalled salary negotiations and poor health and safety practices. Among them, Madam Vice-President, were within the critical sector, such as T&TEC, CAL, and the Port of Port of Spain.

Industrial action and staging of protest were the order of the day, and the inadequate response of the then Government seemed to suggest that the disruptions, work stoppages, losses in production, and adverse economic consequences were to be easily ignored. The then Government abused the remedy of the injunctive relief and exchanged consultation for legalism. Workers were seen as nothing more than pawns in the PNM playbook. This, Madam Vice-President, even while our economy was reeling and still struggling to recover from an economic downturn occasioned by COVID-19. Madam Vice-President, we are

fixing this.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: As I would have alluded to, one of the things I want to stand here in solidarity with is this job creation National Recruitment Drive.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen The Hon. L. Baptiste: Because, I want the national community to trust the process. Trust the process. I heard Sen. Dr. Marlene Attz. I heard her. I am saying trust the process. Madam Vice-President, the best estimate of our future performance where that is concerned could be gauged by our track record. Let us look at some facts, and not the facts from Sen. Baptiste or UNC facts. Now the facts are not yellow, it is not red. The facts are the Central Statistical Office, the CSO facts on employment trends. In the period 2010 to 2015 under the UNC Government, employment increased from 582,100 to 623,300. According to CSO, a net increase of 41,200 jobs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

12.40 p.m.

According to CSO, from 2015 to the first quarter of 2025, under the PNM, according to CSO, there was a decline from the 623,300 jobs to 558,900 jobs, a decline of 64,400 jobs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Now, this is not me. This is the CSO. It did not stop there. Public sector employment, which include public service, statutory boards or state enterprises. Under the UNC, public sector employment was 160,700 jobs. Under the PNM, as of the first quarter in 2025, public sector employment dropped to 129,900 jobs; a decline of 36,800 jobs. Now, this is not made up.

Well, we know the—I am looking at the economist. This thing is now a very

popular indicator that is used, labour force participation rate, those who are working and those who are looking for work. Under the UNC, the labour force participation rate between 2010 and 2015 on average was 61.5 per cent. This is CSO. I want to stress, this is not mine. This is what you could use for decision making. When people want to know who to trust, where jobs are concerned, look to this. Under the PNM, the labour force participation rate dropped by over 6.3 per cent to 54.3 per cent under the PNM. So, you had a fall in the labour force participation rate.

Youth employment, youth employment under the UNC, when they left office in 2015, was 79,600. Under the PNM—

Hon. Senator: Tell them.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—the first quarter of 2025, that dropped to 51,700, a decline of 27,900, and you are talking about job loss. I want the national community to know, we are talking about who could now, which is important, create jobs. I have just shared with you what the track record shows. Under the UNC, there was a growth in jobs. Under the PNM, jobs were lost by the thousands.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Under the UNC, jobs were increased and under the PNM jobs were lost by the thousands. Colleagues, guess what? The UNC can fix it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Madam Vice-President, as Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, work is a core responsibility. Decent work is a core responsibility under the Ministry of Labour.

Then we come to the perennial issue of make-work programmes. And we

know this is of great concern. Again, I want to acknowledge Sen. Dr. Marlene Attz and how she would have spoken about the—and I really appreciate the concern. Madam Vice-President, this country is a member of the International Labour Organization. Therefore, we are obligated. I want to stress, we are obligated, if not compelled, to promote decent work.

You know, we speak about contractors, and this is not a matter I could discuss here. It is sub judice, but I am not studying that aspect of the contractors and CEPEP and what have you, but what took place in that environment, what you call work. Make no mistake in believing when you hear somebody has a contract for three years, that you feel for a moment that persons got three years of employment. That is not the case. When I speak to the persons impacted, they will be given a fortnight. They have to come again and hopefully be called again. If you get two fortnights, you go home and you may be called again. That is inconsistent with the concept of decent work that we have obliged to.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: “Decent work” by definition is productive employment that offers a fair income, workplace security, and social protection for families. We all know the problem is make-work programmes, and we have to deal with it. And we know the solution is decent work or well-defined, sustainable jobs; real jobs for real people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: But Madam Vice-President, you know, we all understand what the problem is. We understand what the solution is, but it is always who will bell the cat. “All yuh know the story about who will bell the cat?” We all know, hopefully, the story of the mice. That the mice were being terrorized and being hunted by a cat. The mice eventually called a council of the mice to

determine how to treat with this threat to all of them. They brainstormed and a young bright mouse came up with an idea that they should tie a bell around the neck of the cat so that when it approaches, they will hear the bell and will make good their escape. The mice instantly rejoiced at the brilliance of the idea. That is a great solution, they shouted. However, as they rejoiced at the solution, an old and wise mouse asked in a subdued tone, “I hear all yuh, but just who will bell the cat”? With that, the council became quiet, as there was no volunteer.

Madam Vice-President, the moral of the story is simple. As noble and as necessary as the goal may be, it remains merely an idea, unrealized and untouched unless someone steps forward with the courage, conviction, and fortitude to carry it out.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Alas, came April 28th, 2025. And with it came the election of the United National Congress and its leader, our Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: The hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, by her actions declared unequivocally and emphatically that she will bell the cat.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: She has launched an unprecedented initiative to replace indecent work, make-work jobs with decent work.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: She has launched the national recruitment drive to fill over 20,000 public service jobs and state enterprises, including vacancies in TSTT, T&TEC, WASA, et cetera, et cetera. Colleagues, we are on our way to decent jobs for all.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Once and for all, the Government has taken lead in promoting decent work in our beloved nation. We are honouring our ILO obligation for decent work. Real jobs, real people, real change.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Colleagues, I want to quickly just declare that this is just not only just positive news, you know. This is something I want us to quickly recognize what are the benefits. Because the UNC plan to create the 20,000 public service jobs will reverse the negative trends created under the PNM. It will promote economic stability, it will restore loss in employment, it will stimulate consumption and it will boost the GDP. It will reduce poverty, crime and youth disengagement. It provides sustainable, safe jobs with clearly defined terms and conditions. Colleagues, again, real jobs, real people, real change.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: In that environment, assuming there be—because by now if anyone had gone on the site you know it is all jobs. This is seeking to fill vacancies and there are several tiers to it. There is a phase one, there is a phase two, and I will get into the other aspect of it, but all jobs to fill from basic skills, trade.

If one was to assume on average at the filling of those vacancies, that you have net increase in salary of about \$6,500 a month per person, looking at high salaries, low salaries and between salaries. That translates to TT \$78,000 a year someone could own. And if you have that now being the mean or median salary, you have total direct household income based on 20,000 being 20,000 by 78,000. Annually, we are talking about an injection of \$1.56 billion.

For the NIS, it could mean contribution to the extent of over \$253 million

annually.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: It also could mean increase, of course, the obvious increase in the labour participation rate, reduction in unemployment, increase in youth employment. But moreover, moreover, you have the impact on that where indirect job creation is concerned. To use the economics term, the multiplying effect, that what you could deal with when you have jobs, jobs create more jobs. That is just what happens. Demand-driven growth, that is just what happens. Yes, demand for more goods and services, that is what just happens. And there are all types of multiplier rates that are used, if it is tradable, if it is non-tradable, job growth. But even the most conservative multiplier effect, if you were to use at 1.5, because in some studies it will let you know if it is a tradable job, where it is export. As much as 2.5 indirect jobs could be created from one new job and greater.

12.55 p.m.

But if you use a modest 1.5, you are talking about the possibility of what?—20,000 jobs, indirectly creating 30,000 jobs, and then you have a total of 50,000 jobs. Even if you have a lower salary, mean salary, for the 30,000 jobs, maybe 5,000 or \$4,500 for the salary, you are talking about the possibility of adding a next \$1.8 billion, again, in circulation in this economy. I am saying this because I want the business community to know that they have to support this budget—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—and this initiative, because it seeks to inject into this economy as much as over \$3 billion by the National Recruitment Drive initiative of the hon. Prime Minister, Kamla Persad Bissessar SC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Needless to mention, it also means a serious injection in funds for the NIS. Real jobs, real people, real change, comrades.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: I want to spend my last few minutes—I tell you, you do not have much time for this thing, I need some more time—to just simply say, some of what, as the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, we have been engaged in.

Madam Vice-President, on April 28th, the people of Trinidad and Tobago chose competence over chaos. Under the leadership of the hon. Mrs. Kamla Persad Bissessar SC, the United National Congress administration has launched its Workers' Agenda, 20 action items, all activated, not one shelved, not one ignored. We reject the 4 per cent and the 5 per cent offers imposed on public officers, and the Prime Minister, the hon. Mrs. Kamla Persad Bissessar, directed the Minister of Finance to instruct the CPO to return to the negotiation table with a 10 per cent offer—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste:—for the period 2014 and 2019. That is not rhetoric, it is action. It is respect. It is promises made—

Hon. Senators: Promises kept.

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptist:—and promises kept.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Again, National Recruitment Drive, 20,000 positions across 25 Ministries. Again, real jobs, real people, real change. Colleagues, we have again reversed—in that simple move, seek to reverse the labour participation rate.

We are talking about, also, the creation of a productivity ecosystem, Madam Vice-President, and with that, I know my time is nearly out. I would like to wind-up by saying, the UNC is not just fixing what is broken, we are building what is never dared, and those who still cling to their old ways, I say this, the train has left the station, either get on board or get out the way.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: Madam Vice- President, I thank you, because under this UNC Government, under the leadership of the hon. Mrs. Kamla Persad Bissessar SC, one thing is certain, promises made, promises kept. Because when UNC wins?

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

Sen. The Hon. L. Baptiste: I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Lalite-Etienne.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Alicia Lalite-Etienne: Madam Vice-President, Government Senators, Opposition Bench, Independent Bench, media, visitors, the watching public, good afternoon, every one. We are here today because we come here at a crossroad to debate something, a very important document that is the going to affect the lives of every one of us; rich or poor, the disabled and nondisabled. It is going to affect every single person that occupies this country. We have to be very careful of looking at the country as collapsed, gloom and doom, now we are going to see the bright lights and stuff like that.

Now, this budget, I view it as—I could align it with a Christmas tree. So, I will distinguish it as a Christmas tree. It has a lot of glitter, plenty glitter, that even the blind could see.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: However, not everything that glitters is gold.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: I am not saying that things are not looking bright on the horizon and things are not fine. For example, you have economic fairness. It has a lot of catchwords, words that desperate people would long to hear, and are happy to hear. So, you have a lot fairness and fiscal policy; the budget belongings to all of us, which is true, that is one main true point; and this budget is going to deliver people first, and it is going to look at targeting vulnerable income, unlocking human capital, and building safe and resilient communities, and investing in people while investing in progress.

These are catchwords, that when you hear this, you feel hopeful, you say, “Yes, all our problems are solved.” But, no matter what, we do we are in a global crisis, and that global crisis—or this a global community has been hit very hard with the pandemic, and we are struggling to come out of it, the entire global community. Life has changed for each one of us and everybody is looking for an olive branch, everybody is looking for this olive branch or this promise of paradise in the future. There is no promise of paradise in the future. We have to make things work, we have sacrifices to make, and I can understand that protecting the vulnerable—and we have to know certain strategies that are practicable and some strategies may not be so practicable.

Our main focus is the vulnerable people that are being hit day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute by the decisions of people who are placed to make correct decisions on their behalf. As the Central Bank, in 2025, stated that food prices are going up, inflation is going up. All right? So, we are looking at a budget here that, in certain categories, are going to stimulate increase of cost of

living. We have to come to the realization of it. We cannot duck out of it. We have to tighten our belts. What we have to realize is that cost of living is going up. This budget, in one way or the other, we have to face the reality, it is going to contribute to it. Jump high, jump low, it does not matter if you want to butter it up, it does not matter if you want to put the glitter of Christmas tree lights on it, cost of living is going up.

For example, a dollar off super gas, I view this as a distraction carrot to the main meat of the matter. If things are going to be tough, say it from the beginning, “Hey, you all, we will have to tighten our belt. Things are hard,” X, Y and Z. But, for example, that distraction carrot, “everybody happy” when they go to the pump and they are paying \$50 less, but when you increase taxes, what happens is that there is a triple effect. When people have to import goods and these companies have to pay to clear their containers, who do you think it is going to be trickled off to? Are they going to say, “You see me, I am not touching the vulnerable, I am not going to interfere with raising the prizes of the products”? No. The budget said, “This is going to increase,” well, the products are going to increase as well. People have to come to the realization that when you go to the supermarket, the cost of living is going up, it is going to continue to go up, and certain parts of this budget are going to contribute towards it.

The companies that have to pay more are going to pass it off. No matter how much exemptions on certain products, we all have to live, we all have to eat, we have to survive. I know the budget has a lot of promises in it, but right now, for people who have lost their jobs, on the breadline, accustomed to getting a salary, this week, nothing, they have children to support, they have rent to pay, they have mortgage to pay, you cannot tell them, “Hey, wait and see, we coming 2026 with promises that will be fulfilled.” They want help now. Many are thrown on the

breadline, thousands are thrown on the breadline.

Instead of weaning them off of a broken system, they were immediately slashed. How are you going to feel that you are working, you have children, you have your bills, and in a blink of an eye, you have nothing? “Children watching you, wifey watching you”, what next? Many people are homeless. Because of this, they have to return to their parents’ homes and stuff like that. They do not know what to do.

1.10 p.m.

And it came about in a critical moment. Just think about it, my child passed the SEA, and there are costs involved. Everybody knows the booklist is thousands of dollars.

The next item—I do not know how the horse run away and leave the cart. But I cannot understand why parents have to pay such an exorbitant amount when they go to register their children, thousands of dollars. So they have to go with the registration fee of thousands of dollars. When they get the booklist, thousands of dollars. They have to pay for uniform, and then they have to pay for their children’s transportation. This is the reality that many people had to face in September. So while you know, “hey it is good, of promises, but yuh cyah dump people into ah abyss, and den tell dem, wait fuh de promise it coming down de pipeline.” They need it now, they need that olive branch now.

Grants. The little bit that the grants will offer, they have to go through means assessment and everything. And the thing about it is, it is not all getting. Not all people are getting. And you know who is suffering too now? Our future generation, the children. Some children cannot go to school. Parents say, “ah cyah pay yuh school fee, or ah cyah pay de transportation fee”, alright. So right now our future children are being affected.

I could understand a wean system, or a tier system that the Government, you know, has adopted in several areas. But to just slash like this, is like—it is for the poor people, the low income people, alright. Many people could choose what they want to have for breakfast. We coming down to the reality, being realistic. You can have your eggs, your butter, your cheese. You can have cereal, if you want to have coffee. If you want to have tea or drinking chocolate. Some people this morning, they have no choice, and the children, bread and butter and a cup of tea.

And when they reach to school, they have to depend on the School Feeding Programme. Thanks to the School Feeding Programme, because you know why? Daddy unemployed, he got thrown on the bread line. And these are low-income people, alright. So, when we are talking about these promises, “and it coming, and it coming, and it coming”, yes, these are promises, but there must be a safety net for people who are vulnerable. You are talking about another glitter, another twinkling bulb, is protecting the purchasing power for the vulnerable.

Now, when you are protecting the purchasing power of the vulnerable, you cannot do that by plunging them into unemployment. If you plunge them into unemployment—in economics you have what is called supply and demand. And if somebody does not have purchasing power, then obviously it would affect their demand. They have to now scabble up what is a priority from what is not, and it trickles down to supply. It affects the supply as well.

So, this is the big reality that we are faced with, which a lot of people are listening to on public media now, hey, yes—there is not a bridge as Sen. Attzs said. That bridge to transform, that bridge to transform is not in promises for next year. It is in promises between tomorrow, I need a meal, or my children need transportation, or my children need money for books.

Some students, we are in October, and the list of schoolbooks, it has not

been completely filled as yet. Why? Because mummy cannot help, daddy cannot help. Many parents have to pick up—other than those that were slashed, generally have to pick up a second job because of rising food prices. Talking about the average man on the street.

So when you raise various taxes, and different taxes, and there is where we will increase revenue, and we are going to get more money to pay our debts and stuff like that. You know who is going to feel it? The poor, the vulnerable, the person who is on grants. Because the grants are not going up, the pensions are not going up, and the salaries people are getting is not going up. So when cost of living goes up, and somebody has a mortgage, somebody has loans, and cost of living going up, alright, the thing about it is they still have those bills to pay.

For example, tax on industrial and commercial electricity. We all know, any time you tamper with utilities, it is going to trigger a cost of living increase. So do not think that the port, Massy Stores, Food Basket, and other places, alright, I could go on and on. Industries like, you know, food, the hardware industries, people's mom and pop stores, fast food outlets, are not going to raise their items, the final product, because they are not going to incur that bill and leave it whereby it is not going to trickle down to the poor.

So you cannot tell me that you are going to increase industrial and commercial electricity, and it is not going to touch domestic people, the poor, domestic homes. Cost of living is going to go up, the grocery is not going to say, "oh my goodness, alright, we are not going to increase on flour, and sugar, and milk, and the essential things, and rice, and no, we will try to incur that cost." No, the cost is going to be passed on. And when it is passed on to somebody who has a fixed salary amount, alright, and already struggling, and many have to pick up a second job to make things work, then what happens?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: So you seeing here, you are seeing here where people are being affected, you cannot say, “wait, promises are coming”. Cost of living is going up and the budget is triggering it, parts of the budget are triggering it.

So you are giving something in one hand, and taking it back in the other. That dangling carrot of super, for the drivers, people who have vehicles, when they have to go and purchase parts in the Bamboo, and the motor establishments, who have to pay commercial electricity, and industrial electricity charges, you think they are going to leave the price of a radiator the same? You think they are going to leave a fuel pump the same? You think they are going to leave those parts that is essential for the car at the same price? No, it is going to go up. So when people think they are saving \$50 at the pump, that is why I say, that is a distraction carrot, because you have to go and spend it back, right back, you have to go and spend it.

For example, you are saying now that you are going to charge banks and financial institutions. You think these banks and financial institutions are going to absorb that cost? Where are they are going to throw the cost? Where do you think it is going to throw the cost? It is not going to say, “hey, I eh throwing de cost on you, you getting disability grant, or you gehin pension, or your salary low.” It is everybody that is going to feel it, in higher service fees and stuff that the bank—that people are already crying out for.

So the thing about it is, they are going to pass on that same commercial electricity cost as well. So when you are saying, “alright, hey, we raising dis, we raising dat, but we are, you know, we are fair.” When it comes, how fair is fair? Alright. So you are seeing here that you cannot tell me that certain aspects of the budget are not going to increase the cost of living. I am raising the points as we go along, alright?

Alright, let us look at the service charge for landlords. Right now, there is no regulatory for landlords. They are just raising as fast as cost of living go up, they are raising. A lot of people in this country are renting, from young people even to the elderly are renting. “And de landlords go say, you can’t tell me I have to incur ah over \$2,000 fee and I not going to pass it on”. Because hear what? “The landlord ha tuh pay de fee.” The landlord now, comes back and he is running a business and he has to pay different charges. What is he or she going to do? Pass it on to the poor tenant, and the poor tenant—okay, the poor tenant is going to have to pay. “Wey dey paying it from?” The increase in rent. Food gone up, where are they paying it from?

And this landlord fee is not just for private, you know. Let us say people are being innovative and you have entrepreneurs having their little cosmetic store, hairdressing and all these things. Now, hear what, they have two fee increases to pay. One, electricity because they fall under commercial. And two, landlord fees, that landlord is going to factor into the rent.

So, cost of living going up, people who are entrepreneurs and have businesses wondering, “Lord, what will happen next?” We will have to pass the charge on to the customers. And then the customers holding their head and saying, “Lord, we having promises coming down de pipeline, but dey have to put things in place.” What would happen in 2026, January 2026? And hear what? “In January 2026, dey goin and take out more money out of de salary for NIS. “So you are going to take out more money for NIS. I understand that. And what is so hurtful, on the same note of NIS, people are paying into a fund because they want to be independent. They will not be qualified for elderly government pension, so they are putting away for their later years. And to be hit in the face with this startling reality, “where we money gone? All yuh ting collapsing in 2033, yuh know, so we

hadda take more money outta all yuh salary.” So, it is like Lord Jesus.

1.25 p.m.

“Then, all what we were contributing into, where it gone? Who manage it bad?” Bad investments—what went wrong over the years since NIS began to now?

Hon. Senators: PNM.

Sen. Roberts: Yes, correct.

Hon. Senator: Obviously, PNM destroyed it.

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettiene: “All who was in governing power since then til now, where de money gone?” It is so sad because all of us are going to be affected.

Hon. Senator: Correct.

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettiene: All of us. And, I could understand that the Government realizes that this is a serious issue and it must be dealt with now. All right, I understand that. “But doh tell me you going and take money out from January. And dey saying, ‘Is not much, is not much’”. If you calculate every week, four, sometimes five weeks a month, and you total it, you will see how much every month for somebody who is getting an average salary, sometimes just the bare minimum wage.

And then, linked to what I previously said, with all the costs of living going up, my main concern for this is taking the money and dumping it into the abyss. The same thing is going to happen all over again. I believe in preparing, preparation, putting the guardrails, so when it starts—because for one month, you are going to collect a good amount, a sum of money; two months, three months, four months. So while guardrails are now being put into place, how much money has been collected already? So I have a big concern for it, of putting the guardrails, because you know what would happen? If God spares my life in 2033,

and our lives in 2033, if no guardrails are put in place, we are going to be faced with this same issue. “Wey de money gone?” So what we need to do is put in safety nets, a proper guardrail, and proper accountability. You cannot say you are going to put it in, in the future, while taking money in January.

So that is my main concern. Because it is very sad that the people of Trinidad and Tobago,—the working class—when it had the pandemic, and people realized that companies, some businesses, were taking out NIS contributions and were not paying it to the NIB Board, there was pandemonium. People were scared. People wanted to know. For years, companies were not doing it.

“So, now we are hit with another reality that fund going and collapse. De fund going and collapse. So if de fund going and collapse, all right, okay, something has to be done. What everybody want to know is that when it time for retirement, dey have—Because dey putting into something, is happy to say, ‘Here it is’, than ‘Where it is?’, or ‘Where it gone?’”

So, we need proper guardrails because this is our money that is coming out of our salary, and now it is going to be an increase into our pockets that we now have to—we did not cause the problem, but we now have to pay to fix it—that is, the working population of Trinidad and Tobago. So I am hoping that the Government would put in safety nets and accountability checks and balances, and guardrails toward this, so we would not have to go back to saying, “Hey, five/10 years we had increase again. Allyuh pension, it disappearing.” When you put into a fund, your pension should not disappear.

So, the thing about it is that it is so scary when the people, the public, have to hear that. So I am hoping that the Government will put guardrails to protect the vulnerable and the working class so that they will be able to know that in the future, when they retire, they can pay for their medical, and they can be able to

survive and live, and not plunge into poverty.

Now, I go to another little topic called exemption of taxes for private pensions. They are saying, “Ooh, yes, that sounds really good”. Now, if the cost of living is going up, the exemption of taxes on private pensions, obviously, it is going to be reabsorbed. “Because even though de tax ent take out in one way, de tax is going to be taken out either in food or in services.” Because you cannot tell me that the utility companies that have to pay commercial electricity are not going to raise their rates on the packages that they offer consumers. “It coming. It coming”. When they see it—all these conglomerates that are serving have businesses and chains of groceries and utility companies, it is coming. “So when people feel, ‘Hey, I doh have to pay increase in electricity because I am domestic’, it coming, but in another category you will have to pay for it. So even though you save yuh \$50 at de fuel pump, yuh hadda pay it some other way.”

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: Even though you do not have a car or you do not have a vehicle, it is going to be trickled off to you, either in an increase in the payment for the taxis, or the maxi taxis. All of that is going to increase, because everybody is going to increase. Because, you know why? It is a ripple effect. This is what is called the ripple effect.

So, you know, as I said, “cost ah living going up. We hadda brace for it.” But my heart sank last week Friday when I heard on a public media, “We have to learn to invest. Now people have to invest.” Invest what? “What could we invest when people cyah even have a bank account?”

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: Right now, many people’s bank accounts—and I am talking not from me, I am talking from people who spoke to me and told me many

of them, “de bank account, it hatta remain at ah opening balance. They living pay cheque to pay cheque.” So what are you going to invest? “Yuh children transportation fee to go to school? Yuh rent? Yuh money fuh buying groceries? Yuh money for mortgage and money for yuh utilities? And it going up in January?” So when I heard this statement, it was like “what?” That has to be so unrealistic and insensitive. “Because I cyah invest, so much less to meet the needs of people. Yuh talking bout investment? “Right now, people doh want to hear investment. Right now, people, dey panicking. The cost of living going up. They cyah buy and put down groceries. It go finish, one, or it go turn into weeble.”

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: “Because that is what people were doing in the pandemic, and dey buy ah whole set. They take out loans to buy groceries, and it all turn bad. So there will come a certain point whereby you have to face it. So right now, people thinking what happening?” The future generation—we talk about a lofty 10million for research at The University of the West Indies. You know what is going to face students right now? You know what is more, the buzzword? Increase in fees. They were going to increase it, and they just held off for now, but it is going to happen.

What are students going to tell their parents? “And hear de big thing; you go tell me, ‘Turn to GATE.’” GATE has a means assessment, and it is very, very rigid. So when they come and they assess mummy and daddy’s income, “they doh want to know that de groceries gone up in de supermarket, inno”. They will say, “You don’t qualify.” So, it will affect education for our future.

This is the reality of what is happening, so it is just for us to think. I am not shooting down the entire budget, but as I said, it has a lot of glitter. A lot of glittery wording to make us happy, but in the future, while waiting for all those

promises, what is going to happen in the interim? “So I doh know what we going to invest. I am still waiting to think what de man on de street going to invest. It would be nice if yuh could do ah survey and reach out to people on de street and ask them if, ‘Yuh have any money right now to invest?’”

Honestly, I was very shocked to hear that, because you know what? When I heard that, then I came to the realization that some people they either are not in tune to—they talk about poverty, they talk about “vulnerable”, but they do not know what it really means. They never lived it. For somebody to say invest and learn to invest, and things will get better, for a poor person who is trying to make ends meet day by day, I think it was unrealistic.

I will now focus a little bit on—they talk about, there is “foundation for life”. It is going to be used for the less fortunate and you have 1,461 units being built in Arima, D’Abadie, and Couva. Fine, I am so happy for that. But then I read that persons with disabilities are going to be focused on being down Edinburgh 500. Why Edinburgh 500? Could somebody tell me why? “If we talk about being inclusive, and we are going to be treated equal, why put us in Edinburgh 500?”

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettiene: Over a year ago, one of my students died, and they found him in his house a few days after under suspicious circumstances. He lived in Edinburgh 500. And the next thing about it is, if you are talking about equality, all the glitter, Christmas tree bulb words, and the glitter of inclusiveness and equality for the vulnerable and persons with disabilities, I do not agree with taking and herding all persons with disabilities. So you are trying to make a district of disabled people.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Senator, you have two more minutes.

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: In my international experience, I have never seen that, and I do not agree with this. I believe in full inclusion. Why should persons with disabilities only be thrown in Edinburgh 500? So if they want to come to Port of Spain and they are on a disability grant, they have to pay for three means of transportation or wait for the bus; certain areas. Why we cannot live in one of those units in D'Abadie, in Couva, in Arima, in St. James, in Maloney, Lopinot, or in any other of the housing developments?

1.40 p.m.

It would be great to see persons with disabilities living among other citizens. We do not have a plague that you have to sectionize us off and quarantine us. That is a form of quarantining, and in the human rights, all right, the CRPD 2006, they talk about inclusiveness. Trinidad signed on to it. They ratified it. "So yuh can't take and section we off and trow we down in Edinburgh 500." We want to walk out of our homes. "Good morning", to anybody else and you know what it is? Many neighbours will say, "hey, I admire this person because they live so independently". We would be examples in the society.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: For those who want to think about being lazy and sit by the street corner, they could say, "hey, you see me, let me get my act together, because a blind person, look the person in a wheelchair, the person hearing impaired, look, they living going to work, and they are maintaining their homes". "But doh put we down" and exclude us and only Edinburgh 500. I do not agree with it, and I do not think—

Madam Vice-President: Senator.

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne:—when that decision was made, it was made—

Madam Vice-President: Senator, your time is up.

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: Time is up?

Madam Vice-President: Yes.

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: All right, okay, all right. Well, thank you very much for your listening and I think I got the point across, thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: I just want to leave with a question, all right, and the question is, the Government strategy, all right, with all that I—

Sen. Allahar: Madam Vice-President, her time is up.

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: All right, okay, thank you.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]—manners.

Sen. Allahar: Why? No, it is not manners, everybody has to be treated equally.

Sen. A. Lalite-Etienne: All right, sure, not a problem. All right, thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Vice-President: Okay, all right, Senators, all right, I think we have been here for a while. Okay, Senators, we will be taking lunch now, I think we will be back at 2.30 p.m., so now the Senate is suspended.

1.42 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

2.30 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Roberts.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Housing (Sen. The Hon. Anil Roberts): Thank you, Madam Vice-President, let me first of all start off on a bit of a sad note, the national community, the national sporting community and the swimming fraternity have been hit by two unfortunate deaths recently of former national swimmers. One Stephan Ottley, former Fatima boy, national record holder, one of the best

breaststrokes the Caribbean has ever seen, he passed away yesterday. And Jerome Brammer, a former national swimmer also of Fatima College, passed away in Washington about six days ago. So, to the swimming fraternity and to Trinidad and Tobago as a whole, I want to express our deepest condolences to the family and friends of these national heroes.

Madam Vice-President, Sen. the hon. Dr. Marlene Attzs, I say I congratulate you on your ascension to the board of Ansa McAl, and I hear it, and I am glad that you disclosed that. But suffice it to say that the Government under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, while respecting and understanding corporate Trinidad and Tobago and the importance for job creation, is a Prime Minister of the people, for the people and by the people. So, when she is weighing policy decisions, she would lean on the side of those most challenged, those at the lower ends of the economic ladder. So, when you see the policies for extension of our increase in age limit for foreign used, that is to allow all the citizens to be able to afford transportation. While some people may believe that that creates traffic because the roads are designed only for a certain economic bracket, I can assure you that this Government understands the problems, will create innovative solutions, to ease traffic and increase production.

Also, the cost and the requisite taxes that were put on duties on alcohol. Everybody knows that is self explanatory, the prices have been raised and while, as Sen. Dhanpaul said, that is an inelastic demand, we also want to stress that the PNM was at great pains to complain about how much was always spent on health and the health care system, free health care, even suggesting that they wanted to privatize it and throwing innuendos. But healthy lifestyles are a part and parcel of this Government to reduce the cost of NCDs and lower the bill for the health sector. So that is part and parcel of this policy.

This budget must be commended. The Minister of Finance, guided by the hon. Prime Minister, for the first time in nine and a half years, we saw a budget with a plan, with possibilities, with hope. We saw public servants and labour celebrating, rather than being angry and vexed at being talked down to. We saw citizens happy to go to the gas station. Yes, \$50 per tank may come up to \$400 but it is a benefit across the board, and the multiplier effects will take place as transportation costs decrease and the Government's agricultural plan and diversification takes root as we move forward.

So, Sen. Attzs, I also will implore you at your new position seeing that you did not mention that Guardian Media Limited falls under your auspices as a board member of Ansa Mc Al group, that so, maybe we could start to see a little bit more fair and balanced—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—journalism from Guardian Media Limited rather than reporters so full of venom, and not understanding their journalistic principles because you are a lady and a citizen who has lived extremely well and fairly and balanced, and I am sure that you will not be part and parcel of encouraging any sort of Balisier juice from a Guardian Media Limited. So, I look forward to them returning to their basics, back to basics, their journalistic principles. Ask hard questions, of course, but the absolute venom and political bias of the PNM could not be the way. That is why they also lose \$14 million per year, which you would not want to oversee.

Hon. Sen. Lalite-Etienne, do not worry, hon. Senator, the guard rails have been put in place. The guard rails to protect the NIS and protect the nation's Treasury and to protect the country have been put in place.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: They were put in place on April 28, 2025, in a landslide victory—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—removing the issues and the problems that you may have had with NIS, that this Government agrees with, that citizens have been contributing, but that PNM blight, that PNM Government has ruled us—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—for 76.2 per cent of our existence. When you ask them “where de money gone”, you are correct, because they had people like Calder Hart and Andre Monteil in charge of our money, and we do not know where it went. But this Government has to “bell the cat”. This Government cannot allow by 2033 the entire system to collapse, because then everybody who had contributed would lose, every single citizen, every single worker would lose. So, the hon. Minister of Finance and the direction of the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, and the Prime Minister, have decided that they will “bite the bullet” and protect the future for all of our citizens and it is worthy of a pounding of the table.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: I assure you, as you say, that you would contribute and you hope to be alive at 2033 and I wish that you are—God’s speed, but in 2033 the NIS will be alive and kicking because the guardrail is there and the PNM shall never return to government in this country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Sen. Lalite-Etienne, there is no herding of any special needs or differently abled people into any one area, I am not sure where you got that from. Edinburgh 500, the bottom floors, as well as all HDC

developments across Trinidad and Tobago are going to be made available in certain percentages for differently abled people. So, there is no herding of anyone anywhere, that is just an opportunity for those who are most in need to access housing. Plus Edinburgh 500, while all over Trinidad and Tobago became a “hot spot” under the PNM and nowhere was safe, whether Goodwood Park, Lange Park, Gulf View, murders happened everywhere—the current Prime Minister and the Ministers of National Security here are dealing with that situation and the murder rate has come down 42 per cent.

My learned colleague, my young Sen. Rasheed here, temporary Senator lives in Edinburgh 500, so I do not understand why you are criticizing, but I can assure you that all over Trinidad and Tobago, anywhere, those differently abled, our people will be treated equally with fairness, love and respect—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—as has always been done by the hon. Prime Minister. We must not live in a vacuum. People have track records. People have policies that they have done, that they have created. The hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar was Prime Minister of this country from May 2010 to September 2015. In that time, she increased funding for differently abled autism grants, went up to \$1,500; \$2,500 per school—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—per student in all areas. In special needs and Paralympic sport, she increased sport funding across the board, for all of our differently abled, for the Trinidad and Tobago Blind and Visually Impaired Cricket Association, for the deaf, for everybody across the board. She created schools and encouraged sports camps during the months, as we say, or the July, August and Easter, over 6,000 children who were differently abled received high level,

qualified coaching and talent identification in sport. School feeding programme increased for the differently abled, opportunities will abound.

In the HDC, in the Ministry of Housing, unlike the PNM that spent some \$2.8 “b-b-billion” and only built 4,775 houses in nine and a half years, this Government will build houses and opportunity will abound for all, including, the differently abled. So, I want you to rest assured, that nobody will discriminate, nobody will treat those most in need and most vulnerable with anything other than love and respect on this side.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

2.40 p.m.

The hon. Senator [*Laughter*]*—*I always have to laugh when I say this*—*the hon. Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul, a former permanent secretary who lost his way, not understanding that permanent secretaries have to be apolitical, that they are there to protect the public purse, he boasts about his affinity to PNM back in 2008 and 2009, when he was promoting and pushing the TTRA, the policy of the PNM, and I do not understand how he can say that so freely, not understanding that public servants must be apolitical.

Governments change. We are in the political arena. We delve in it and we will battle and we like that, but a public servant, especially one as qualified and as brilliant as the hon. Vishnu Danpaul, for you to admit that while you were a permanent secretary, you were a PNM, that hurts me in my heart, in my soul and that is why the country is in a mess. Because others, like you*—*you also see your colleague, who you worked with in the Ministry of Finance, the most powerful Ministry, the hon. Alison Lewis, as we lost government in 2015 September by spurious means*—*but we would not discuss that now. *En passant*, she went onto the Board of the PNM port authority. She also went on the Board of Republic

Bank. She also, after having advised the previous Government that NiQuan and those assets of old GTL were of no good and it was a bad debt, she went on a board of NiQuan and got the assets from the PNM. This is why our country is in a mess.

So, I have heard the words uttered by Sen. Dr. Attzs and Sen. Lalite-Etienne, fairness, equity, impartiality, opportunity, living out the words of the Constitution—let me tell you, hon. Sen. Lalite-Etienne, it is not Christmas decorations, it is not jokes, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, who is the Prime Minister, who selected her Cabinet, her MPs, her Members, her Senators, she believes in that. Her policies, as Prime Minister, show that. The first Cabinet Note she every brought was the Children’s Life Fund. She continues to show that she loves people and believes in equity.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Because she swore in on this, the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago, which says in the preamble that we will respect:

“(b) the principles of social justice and therefore believe that the operation of the economic system should result in the material resources of the community being so distributed as to subserve the common good, that they should be adequate means of livelihood for all, that labour should not be exploited or forced by economic necessity to operate in inhumane conditions...”

The Prime Minister believes this, she lives this and her policy shows this.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: And this is what this budget is about. So, anyone who comes to pretend that this Prime Minister is unfluffed, like the PNM who came here and every minute, it is arrogance, it is gallery, it is laughing, it is

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts (cont'd)

dishonesty, they cannot even account for the money the Auditor General—an independent institution could not formulate an opinion on the PNM's accounts for two years straight, and they have the audacity to come here and criticize a Government just incoming. And the hon. Vishnu Dhanpaul, who was there, who is of finance, will stand and tell us about what he believes is going wrong and the debts and so on. You will have a great understanding because you knew better than anybody what was being obfuscated, what was being hidden from the population. We hide nothing from the population, but we will fix it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: “We not fraid”. We have the wherewithal. You see, the problem with the PNM is that they take their level of incompetence and cast it upon others. Let me assure you, hon. Sen. Dhanpaul, that Ministers here in their different spheres are very qualified. They have earned their position through hard work, education, discipline, punctuality and the ability to be creative. We do not select people just because we like them or they went to the right place, at the right time. We do not select people who failed in mathematics. We do not select people who took six subjects and failed five and boast about it. We have brilliance across the board. So, while you cannot see the diversification that will come because your shades are dark and it is coloured by your colleagues who are incompetent, I can tell you the revenue streams that are going to be increased will create a difference, will create greater tax revenues, and will create opportunities across the board.

You sat in a Government—I know you only got “ah corbeaux sweat of ah month”, but before that there was—from since 2015, sport tourism in Trinidad and Tobago. Kamla Persad-Bissessar constructed some of the greatest facilities. I do not know if you have even been. That Aquatic Centre—in the USA, there is no

aquatic centre like that. That centre could have generated over US \$3.5 “muh-muh-million” between November 25th—Thanksgiving—and January 13th before the semester starts for spring in USA and Canada, with teams coming to train. But do you know what PNM did? Sat down.

All the eggs in a dragon basket. “One super Minister flying back and forth to go and dance conga line”, hoping to get something with a narco-terrorist, drug trafficking regime, rather than developing what we have, for example, sport tourism. Do you know that your PNM Government only went out in 2023, late, and it did not even come in yet for RFPs for a master plan for sport tourism? “De PNM is ah blight and that is why we are here”. This Government is not, and cannot be compared to what the PNM does.

So, anybody analyzing this budget presentation, with a lens of the PNM, is woefully inadequate because you have to be able to walk and chew gum. The hon. Senator Dhanpaul said that our Minister does not want—or he wants to dip into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, therefore, he predicated the budget on a price that was so high that means he could dip in it. Well, one thing this hon. Minister of one month of “cobeaux sweat” knows about is dipping in the Heritage and Stabilisation—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—because they dipped. “Whether he was here, or in London, or in the Ministry of Finance, dem dip like never before. The only thing dey did not have was chips and ah dip”. Thirteen times, over US \$3 “buh-buh billion”, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in 2015 September was left by Kamla Persad-Bissessar at US \$7.6 “buh-buh billion”. After nine and a half years, it should reached somewhere around US 15 to \$17 “buh-buh billion”. Instead, it dropped to US \$5 billion and this PNM gentleman here, is here with a straight face,

telling us that we want to dip in it. When we were in government, we put money into it. It expanded from US \$2.3 billion up to \$7 billion.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: The other thing that he would know—I am glad, because he knows it inside out. The way to budget and the way to dip into the Heritage and Stabilisation—he did not tell the country that when his Minister—his Minister of “grin and laugh at the population”, his Minister of “raise price and harass everybody but himself”, when they budgeted, they took the price right up to the exact number, higher than they expected. They took it—they budgeted at \$92 per barrel and US \$2.36 per MMBtu, the exact number, knowing fully well, that if you budget lower—because most Ministers of Finance would leave a gap, would leave a little bit there, so that once you go 10 per cent above what you predicated your budget on, that money would be deposited in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. But what they did was budget so close, that it “cyah” be an increase, so they did not have to put savings for our children. PNM is anti-children, anti-savings and anti-people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: The hon. former Minister—well, the Minister—the Minister—“is two Minister ah Finance” and then one changed from Finance and went into Public Utilities, and the first thing he could do is spent \$1.3 million to outfit an office, so he could feel comfortable. But that is PNM. So, to tell the hon. Senator, the PNM is gone, so do not judge us by the PNM. The blight is gone, the failures are gone, and the lack of diversification is gone.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Those who just want to use the Government to enrich themselves, they are gone. Sen. Dhanpaul said that it is a derailment and whether

the salaries are 10 per cent. When it comes before or after, you know it has to be paid. Yes, it will be paid. It will be negotiated. And he knows fully well that negotiations could go up, down, around, all around and only his finance people, who are very bright with equations and so, can only calculate when the actual figure has been decided. Suppose the PSA negotiates very well and gets up to 10.25 per cent. Who knows? The starting point is 10 per cent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: “So, yuh done come here and put ah budget, budget is not ah game to play”. When that is budgeted, it will be handled and it will be paid for, because Kamla Persad-Bissessa believes the resources of the country are for all, and for all the workers.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: So, there will be new revenue streams. There will be job creation. You all shut down—you sat in a Government that shut down a refinery, caused negotiations—you spoke about the oil and gas and we are being price-takers. That is true. Except that the way that we do it, NGC has to negotiate with the upstreamers. How come you did not mention to the population that when your former Prime Ministers, one elected and one selected, went to Houston to negotiate a gas price, that immediately after that, EOG and bpTT, their revenues went up 69 per cent—as you well know, they have to post their results in their bulletin and if they went up 69 per cent, what does it means? It is a zero-sum game. So, we went down 69 per cent.

So therefore, that ridiculous negotiation, the upstreamers took advantage of your former two Prime Ministers in Houston, who took people like you and Gerry Brooks, and other intelligent people, put them aside and then went to cut a deal.

Whatever deal they made, the people of Trinidad and Tobago suffered and NGC made a loss.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: So, I can assure you, Kamla Persad-Bissessar and Minister of Energy and Energy Industries will allow those intelligent public servants, who studied and are very bright, to negotiate on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and not some failed lawyer who ended up in CIC because his daddy got him in there and he bullied Imran. That will not be happening. So, we are safe. The guardrails are there.

The hon. Sen. Dhanpaul said, “This budget will collapse.” Well, I wanted listen to him on that topic, because he is an expert in collapse. Yes, so you must listen to experts. If you have a problem, you have an aneurysm, you have to listen to the neuroscience, right?—to the neurologist. So, as an expert in collapse, I sat, listening to this expert in collapse, because the economy collapsed under the PNM, the foreign exchange collapsed under the PNM, the job market collapsed under the PNM, safety and security in Trinidad and Tobago collapsed under the PNM, infrastructure in Trinidad and Tobago collapsed under the PNM. “De PNM Government and all collapse on April 28th”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: “Balisier House now collapse, all de contractors gone. How come it stop? Why—tell us why it is not going up now? Where de money was coming from?” So, Sen. Dhanpaul, you also collapsed, unfortunately, as Minister of Finance. “Yuh swear in and get ah cobeaux sweat fuh ah month”. That could be a world record—and I like world records, eh. In less than a month, you were out of office. “Ah feel I will rename you, Sen. Collapsingh”.

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

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: You talk about downgrade—this—“yuh know, sometimes I sit here and I want tuh know if de PNM feel everybody ha no memory. If we like dat movie, *50 First Dates*, where de girl had got in ah car accident and her long-term memory was dissipated and gone and therefore, every day she began a new life”. That is what the PNM believes.

You were there for nine and a half years, when Kamla Persad-Bissessar handed over to you, and you were the permanent secretary, the credit rating was “AAA+”. In 2015, “AAA+”. By 2024, you dropped it down to “BBB- stable”. And then with your economic policies, the thinking that the Government, not understanding the new policies of this Government, it went down to negative and you are saying that is the UNC’s fault? Let me tell you something, if you read the—and you know better than I do—but I am really talking to the population out there. The rating agencies, they give you negative, but they think that they may—if you do not make changes, they may downgrade you.

However, the guardrail is on. Changes made, April 28th. “Bright people, intelligent people running, good Prime Minister, not arrogance, not golf course, not disappear for 27 days and go California and doh tell nobody”.

2.55 p.m.

There is a Government in charge that will make the changes requisite and get us back, climbing back up to that triple-A grade rating that we had before.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: “And ah doh even know, my hand does shake when ah see ah document with ah PNM logo on it. Ah does feel ah does ha to go home and do some jharay, and all kinda thing.” But the People’s National Movement put out a statement about this budget, and it says, the media release, Opposition outlines reasons for rejecting the UNC’s 2016 budget. The Opposition wishes to

place on record its official position regarding the Appropriation (Financial Year 2026) Bill, 2025:

“THE Opposition...voted against...”—this—“...budget...”—because it—
“...‘represents a betrayal of the people’s trust and a continuation of the UNC Government’s deliberate campaign of deception’.”

It goes on to say:

It “...burdens small businesses and protects the wealthy and politically connected’.

Well, I will pause right there for a moment:

“...protects the wealthy and...”—the—“...politically connected”.

Let me read something for you, and when you understand that this Government is going to put some burden on the wealthy—and, hon. Sen. Lalite-Etienne, do not believe that bullies will survive. The way you contributed, you said, “Well, once we tax the banks, they will pass it on”. Understand you have a Government here that understands how to deal with bullies, how we deal with oligopolies, how to deal with those who collude, so have no fear. We do not just do things without thinking, we have a lot of brainpower in the Cabinet.

But let me just give you—maybe, Sen. Dhanpaul, you could help me with this one, because right here I am reading about rental of properties, for example, and you see that we are going to equate, and we talk about equity across the board and giving resources to everyone, and giving everybody a fair share. But what if I was to tell you that there was a politically connected—“leh meh read allyuh words, you know—a politically connected landlord who rented a property to the PNM Government, and when he rented this property to the PNM Government, the law, Trinidad and Tobago law, the property was under residential. There was only residential approval, which means residential electricity rates, residential water

rates. You should only be able to charge residential rent as opposed to the higher rents of commercial. As you would know, when you get commercial permission or if your land moves from agricultural to residential, your land and your value asset goes up in value.

What if I were to tell you that there was a politically connected landlord who rented a building to the Government, of which he was a part, and the Government approved that and paid that landlord commercial rent for six years, and that landlord is yet to get change of use? What would you say about that? What would you say if the PNM Government was paying taxpayers' money at commercial rates to a landlord who only had a residential building? What would you call that? Because you said that this budget is fraudulent. I suggest to you that what I am talking about is fraud, because if you charge and you pay for something, the taxpayers' money, for something of that, that does not exist, you break the law, you receive excesses of money. That is criminal conduct. That is fraud.

What would you say if I said that, that is the situation? What if it was investigated by the authorities and the authorities said to this politically connected landlord, "Well, you have to pay \$3 million, because residential to commercial, you have to pay". And what if I told you that that was taken to Cabinet in 2021, and on April 28, 2025, no decision had been made to tell that landlord to pay his \$3 million and he was still collecting commercial rent from a residential property? What would you say, hon. Sen. Dhanpaul? Would you say, "It is fraud"? Would you say, "It is fraudulent"?

You come here and you discuss the UNC budget as fraudulent; strong words, but I put to you that that was in your Cabinet. A PNM, politically connected person—you "don't know because you was only there for a month. You like to jump out, you know. You does run faster than Usain Bolt. When yuh in

something, yuh in de whole bag, eh. Yuh buying de bag and de caboodle.”

Hon. Senator: Collapsing.

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: So I can tell you this is being passed to the hon. Attorney General—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—to be passed on to the Fraud Squad.

If anybody wants to answer and correct the record, they can at any time they jump up, okay, because the Fraud Squad will do the investigation. I am not a police officer, but all I know is that if you are collecting money under false pretences, that is fraud. And to Sen. Lalite-Etienne, that is what the UNC and Kamla Persad-Bissessar is against, and that is where the resources will come to be spread down to all, because the PNM is greedy. They eat all the food on top, recused themselves 652 times, which means taking decisions to benefit themselves, their friends, their politically connected, then come to attack the UNC Government.

You all have no shame. If anybody wants to stand up and clear the record, I am here. Sen. Al-Rawi, anything to say?

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: The next one, there was another PNM Minister who went on big press conference and said, “My family companies and thing do business. I am a big Minister and a powerful man, and all kind of position, and nothing I did to enrich myself, and so on, and there was no preferential treatment”. You all wanted to go through this. “You all must not attack people and call them fraud when alyuh know when de cap fit, wear it, and ah have ah whole carload ah cap for alyuh today.”

“No preferential treatment”, well, I am privileged to be in the HDC as a

Minister in the Ministry of Housing, and there is a certain powerful former PNM Minister, Senator, big boy, wanted to lead the PNM, and he said that, “No preferential treatment was ever given”. Okay. However, I have in my hand, in June 2025, the Managing Director at the HDC—now, HDC under PNM owes—the Ministry of Finance is correct, nearly \$1 billion that they “doh” pay their bills, but they come to tell us—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—probably more, we “eh finish adding up yet”, but close to \$1 billion. “We owed goods and service providers to the tune of \$77,962,906 in June of 2025.” This is about hundreds of contractors who are owed, but somehow the Managing Director, who is very close to some of the Senators sitting down here—we could say One Woodbrook, and all of that—very close, decided to do a lot of work, went through these documents to select who would get pay and who would not get pay.

Now, remember, we are run by this Constitution, if everybody is owed money then everybody has the same right to be paid, and it should be based on a policy, whether it is length of age, debt, who is owed longer, who is owed more, whatever, a fair opaque policy. But this HDC Director, Jayselle McFarlane, came and presented to the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Housing, she wanted to pay out money. Not the full \$72,962,906, but she wanted to pay out a portion of money, \$31 million or so, and when this document was presented, when going through it, we saw companies like Pical Services Limited, \$6,367,000; Rivulet Investment, \$2,800,000.

Whoever know these companies just whistle, you know, just whistle, because you all come here in this Parliament and play sanctimonious. Sure Surv, if anybody’s family connected to that, whistle, \$2.04 million, a total of \$11.2 million

out of \$20 million for these companies connected to one PNM former Minister, but they say, “It is no special treatment”. Is that not special treatment? What is the policy? When you look at the documents—I cannot show it, Madam Vice-President, but, I mean, when you look at it, you get nervous. “When yuh see de kinda thing, all de yellow, it is just de Minister company and dem, de family companies.” This Managing Director took all the citizens that are owed all that money and somehow just selected that of a PNM Minister to pay out \$11 million like that. Is that preferential treatment? Is that equity? Is that fairness? Is that working with all those most in need? Is that helping the differently-abled or is that self-serving? That is what the PNM is, corrupt to the core.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: And then we add on that and it goes on and on, you know. I could go on but that is going by the Attorney General too and to the Fraud Squad, but I “doh have time” go through all the PNM corruption.

But then they talk also about CEPEP, and they cry for the workers of CEPEP. Imagine a man, a former Minister, a former Attorney General get up on a platform in public and say, “he want he children to cut grass”.

Mr. Vice-President: Minister, you have four minutes.

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: “He want he children to cut grass. Well, I could tell you, I have three children and if they have to cut grass because that is the best they could do, well so be it. I will go there and carry dem ah bottle ah water and watch dem cut de grass. But never one day did I dream about my two daughters or my son going out in the hot sun to cut grass for a living. Ah really didn’t”. I dreamt about them being attorneys, one is an attorney. I dreamt of them being professors and businessmen—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—and academics, you know, and sports heroes. I work towards that. But a man who made \$145 million while he was sworn to be a Government Minister is telling poor people and the differently abled that he want his children to cut grass. Well, take all the money you made from the PNM Government and give it to people who are cutting grass.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Because the 10,000 workers that they claim is workers with CEPEP and URP, out of the \$1.4 billion that some Minister went and tell some chairman that the Cabinet had approved, but the Cabinet did not approve, and the board members were duped into approving on the day of the election, April 28, \$1.4 b-b-billion for contractors of CEPEP; not for workers, contractors. And hear who are some of the contractors, ask the Mayor of Point Fortin, the PNM. He is the mayor who is in charge of keeping the place clean, picking up garbage, cutting bush, but he has a \$2 million CEPEP contract. That is PNM. Those days are gone. The guard rail is here.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Another “just come” one from downstairs, you talk about equity, equity and merit has returned with the UNC. “If yuh bright, yuh bright, if yuh children bright, yuh bright”, get what you deserve, but you have an MP from the PNM downstairs who only got into Law School with some Bs. All other children could not get in but somehow some PNM plan, he get in, but on top of getting in, he had \$2.7 million with his family in CEPEP contract too. So he is a CEPEP lawyer and a CEPEP contractor.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: “Buh it didn’t done dey, yuh know, it didn’t done dey.” Over the last few months—“ah ain’t go lie, ah doh cry easy, and meh

daughter just geh married and ah didn't cry because she lucky she get ah good man to marry", better than I could ever be. So I was happy with that. But I have nearly cried meeting people at Housing, women, single mothers, poverty; four, five children, thousands of people.

I have met at least 850 people coming, begging—begging, thinking Minister could give them a house, reference number and so on, full families. You know what the PNM did other than not build house, in nine and a half years they built 4,775 houses. You know what they did, they gave the same CEPEP MP, the same, “couldn't get into law school MP”—that was not enough for one person, you know what they did, they gave him an HDC house too. “He ain't have no wife. He ain't have no family. Me ain't even kno if he would ever have ah wife.” So ask Kareem Marcelle if this is what being in Government is about.

The PNM is gone because the PNM is corrupt.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: So imagine the PNM, we are talking about Edinburgh 500 and differently-abled—yes, people will get houses and people will be loved and respected and given an opportunity to uplift themselves, not this PNM disgrace. So not only he get squeezed in law school, where he did not deserve to be, so he could earn money, he has CEPEP contract to cut grass now too and then get a house, while single mothers and families are begging for housing. That is PNM and the PNM is gone and shall never return. God will not do Trinidad and Tobago that.

Hon. Senators:[*Desk thumping*]

3.10 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: “And ah next one, Guardsman, PNM campaign manager, San Fernando West. Yes. Look at this. All kind ah ghosts; ghost bills.

This going by the Attorney General, too, for Guardsman.” That is San Fernando West. Right. And, finally—

Madam Vice-President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: “Time up?”

Madam Vice-President: “Time up.”

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Okay. “Well, the hon. Ralph Gonsalves get ’way today because I was going dey too. I go do that on Doubles and Coffee.”

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Thank you very much, hon. Madam Vice-President. “Allyuh PNM, talk now.” Bless.

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Sen. John-Bates.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Janelle John-Bates: Thank you, Madam Vice-President, for allowing me this opportunity to make my first-ever contribution to a budget debate in this Parliament.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: I am very happy to have that honour because, like most civic-minded citizens in this country, I have always followed budget debates very religiously. I follow these debates religiously because budget debates reveal three very important things, they reveal to us the state of our national coffers, they reveal to us the Government’s vision, if any, for the short and medium-term development of the country, and it also gives an indication of how our national patrimony will be divided amongst the citizens.

Now, given my background, my perspective on the budget has often been coloured by my experience as a young professional. So, that is the lens I often viewed the budget through. But, though that remains largely true, my assessment

of this budget has been coloured by another new, profound and personal experience, that of motherhood. So, it is from these two vantage points that I have examined this Government's budget presentation, and I have come to one ineluctable conclusion about this budget: This budget is fake. This budget is fraudulent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: It is merely campaign rhetoric dressed up as feasible policies and initiatives.

Madam Vice-President, I expected this budget to address the concerns of parents, especially mothers. This expectation arose because of the public posturing of our Prime Minister. She has often cast her leadership in maternal terms, speaking about her love of children, styling herself even as the nation's mother and positioning her Government as the protector of families and children. In one of her speeches reported by *Newsday* on May 14th, 2024, this Prime Minister had this to say:

“...one of the most fulfilling feelings is the happiness and joy experienced “when you return...home...”—to a—“...happy...” family.

She went on to say that:

“...it...”—is—“...possible to balance career aspirations with family life...”—encouraging—“...women not to view motherhood as a hindrance to their professional goals.”

She declared:

“It is very possible to have a career and be a mother at the same time - you don't have to choose between...”—the two.

Sen. Anil Roberts embellished this imagery of the Prime Minister as mother, and mother of the nation by mentioning in his contribution that one of her first

initiatives was the Children's Life Fund, and you know, they often position her in that light. But, Madam Vice-President, it is very easy to tell women, "Go off, have children, and the career will fall into place."

A government that truly cares about mothers and fathers would not just romanticize the vocation. It will support it would support the vocation. It would ensure that those who have to work outside of the home are able to balance those responsibilities with their responsibilities to their family. That balancing act, Madam Vice-President, is becoming more and more difficult to achieve. Just getting to work on a daily basis has become a herculean exercise for many individuals. For those of us who live in the East, Central and South, and you who have to work in Port of Spain, we have to get up and leave the house between 4.30 and 5.30 in order to get to work on time and drop the children to school. God forbid, "yuh put him out your thoughts" and leave your house after 6.00, no telling how many hours you would spend in traffic. And, the journey back home is just as daunting. Most of these people leave in the dark and arrive back home in the dark, and their children suffer the same thing.

The cost of living for young families is another burden. A single box of pampers that could last a child two to three weeks costs \$350. "Doh talk about de price of formula." The smallest tin of formula, the cheaper ones, cost about \$80 and that lasts you about a week. And, if your child has any kind of reflux or any other sensitivities that requires you to buy the more expensive one, you are going to pay double. Do the maths. You are adding that to the price of milk, bread, produce and transportation, and you have families constantly making trade-offs between nutrition, comfort and survival. It is because of these issues, and more, I expected to hear a plethora of initiatives in this budget geared towards, mothers, fathers; parents. I wanted to hear things that would ease the burden of parents. Perhaps, a

baby box initiative like what they have in Finland, where you get a maternity grant that provides an expectant mother with either a package of baby essentials or a cash benefit. Or maybe an extension of our early childhood centres, where you would have day-care services for children under three years old. Or, maybe, even a country-wide flexible working arrangement for parents.

So, I listened to the Minister of Finance's speech, I combed through the Estimates, I listened to the Standing Finance Committee religiously for the five days, and, Madam Vice-President, I was disappointed. There was nothing viable beyond the \$1 reduction of super, nothing for parents; salt. VAT-free salt, I guess.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Wash it down with some mauby or something. But nothing, nothing viable for them.

Madam Vice-President, in many countries, governments have moved toward more gender-responsive budgeting. They have provided a framework that examines how every fiscal measure impacts men and women differently. These sort of frameworks recognize that women often bear a disproportionate share of unpaid care work, and that policies which ignore these realities only deepen inequality. Such a lens would have compelled this Government to ask, how will this tax, this surcharge, a grant, how will it affect mothers? These mothers who often have to choose between buying groceries and paying a light bill. How will this policy impact the single father raising two children on a minimum wage? A truly caring government would have used this budget to rebalance opportunity, not through slogans like—what is it?—economic fairness and wins for all and sundry, but through fiscal design. Madam Vice-President, if this administration is sincere about supporting families, then it must build motherhood and fatherhood and care work into the economic equation—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates:—not treat them as mere afterthoughts.

Now, Madam Vice-President, let me be fair. I saw two initiatives in this budget that may have been of interest to some parents, if they would have been posited in a fair or a realistic implementation plan. Firstly, there was the PEARL Project. It was said that this project would be aimed at ensuring challenges in vision, hearing, growth and development are detected before they become learning barriers in children and that there would be universal screening initiated for children between four and six years to detect learning challenges.

Now, Madam Vice-President, early detection of development delays are critical. That is a very critical thing for a child's future. Now, when I speak of development delays, for those who are not familiar with the term, I am referring to when a child does not achieve the expected developmental milestones at a particular age range. In simple language, these delays occur because of the way the neurons in their brains would have been wired in an unhelpful way. This can cause these children to struggle in one of the areas of development. These areas are: Gross motor skills, so that relates to how you walk, you crawl, you run; fine motor skills, that relates to your ability to hold and manipulate objects; speech and language; social and emotional skills; and your cognitive intellectual skills. If these delays are not addressed early with targeted intervention, the severity of the developmental disability may be exacerbated, learning outcomes are poorer, and children are less likely to achieve success in school, and later in life.

Madam Vice-President, other countries usually screen for development delays periodically when the child is between zero and three years old, so that the interventions can commence as soon as possible. This is because the brain is very neuroplastic at that age. That means it has an ability to adapt if given the right

interventions, and the wiring can be changed so that you can have more successful outcomes in these children in the future. Madam Vice-President, these therapies, when done early, they create the correct connections in the child's brain and the stronger those skills and behaviours are secured in the brain, the better outcomes for the children. These interventions usually involve, speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, behavioural therapy, and other resources and support for children and their families. The assessment and follow-up of these therapies are very expensive. In the private sector in Trinidad, an assessment could cost as much as \$5,000, and each therapy session costs as much as \$500 per therapy session.

Now, if a child has a global delay, and they have to have interventions in all the areas I spoke about, that is three, four and five different therapies, once per week. And, if the child has to go through the public sector, where the assessment may be free, you have another problem. Currently, appointment dates at the child development behavioural unit in Mt. Hope are over a year in the future, and the development clinic in Arima is not too far behind with those dates. Therefore, any initiative that could result in a speedier, more efficient support for children suspected of having development delays, those are welcomed.

But, Madam Vice-President, screening children, as this Government has suggested, between four and six years old, that is too late. Entirely too late. You do not have to take my word for it, you know. Take the word of the renowned Dr. David Bratt. In an article entitled:

“\$1 Budget”

—dated the 21st of the October 2025, Dr. Bratt had this to say:

“The description of the PEARL project is a riot of confusion, obviously written by someone with no idea of what they are doing. It's also one of these politically correct statements that have no basis in reality...”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates:

“...Screening children...”—between—“...4-6?”” That’s too late.”

And I am continuing the quote, you know:

“You need to be screening children from birth at a national child development centre...”—whose—“...scarce resources are concentrated...”

And, Madam Vice-President, this is not no talk, you know? This actually happens in our neighbouring Caribbean countries. Saint Lucia for example, they screen for development delays at health centres when the child is six months, eight months, three years and five years. If needed, the child is then referred to the Child Development and Guidance Centre, which provides comprehensive development assessments, early intervention and therapeutic services. So, Madam Vice-President, the PEARL project is just, yet another example of how this administration, their tendency to announce the plan first and plan it sometime later. The roll out of the concept before building the structure is not sustainable.

3.25 p.m.

At the same time, that same pattern of announcing the thing and then looking to plan after, that pattern repeats itself in another area touching women’s dignity and health, that would be a concern to parents, this period poverty project. Madam Vice-President, the period poverty project is a laudable initiative. Many women and girls struggle to afford adequate menstrual hygiene products, several organisations in Trinidad already recognize this, the Soroptimist International, the Project You Foundation, Feminitt Caribbean, they have all done commendable work to address this issue of period poverty and I commend them for that.

In fact, Madam Vice-President, the last PNM administration, we also recognized that period poverty reflected deeper challenges of inadequate hygiene,

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poor waste management and limited menstrual health education. To confound that problem, the Community Development Division of the Ministry of Sport and Community Development launched an End Period Poverty Project in April 2024 which began in Mayaro and expanded quarterly to other districts, so I applaud this Government for continuing the good work started by the PNM. But I note only \$5 million has been allocated to launch this pilot project to fund education and the sensitization campaigns; \$5 million?

Sen. Dr. Chaitan-Maharaj: It is \$5 million more than you all did.

Sen. J. John-Bates: Madam Vice-President, for my friend who did not hear me, I already said the PNM already had such an initiative and unlike the current administration, we were not dependent on partnerships to sustain the project, \$5 million could only sustain this project for six months. You are banking on private citizens and NGOs to do the heavy lifting, \$5 million is simply not enough. Now, would it not have made more sense to subsume this project under a broader adolescent health programme, to administer it through the Ministry of Health via health centres? Unfortunately, we did not get any logistical framework, we did not get any implementation plan, so we cannot scrutinize it further. So yes, we note the good intentions in the Pearl Project and the Period Poverty Intervention, but there is a saying, Madam Vice-President:

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

Madam Vice-President, for all the shouting about winning, the Minister of Finance actually delivered a budget that undermined the ability of mothers and fathers to sustain their families—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates:—and eroded the assistance currently available to them. First, let us take the increase in the National Insurance contribution, which was touched

on by some other speakers. This Government announced a 3 per cent rise in 2026, followed by another 3 per cent rise in 2027. In real terms, by the end of those periods, citizens would be paying 45 per cent more in their contributions than they do already. For a mother earning \$6,000 a month, that means an additional \$120 taken away from her salary every month. Now, for some that might seem insignificant, but for many households, that \$120 is the week's transport, the groceries, or the child's ability to get to school.

Then, we had the Landlord Business Surcharge, which Sen. Lalite-Etienne delved into. It was said to be a tax to broaden the revenue base and promote fairness. And, you know, the Government is now calling on landlords to register with the BIR, costing them a one-time payment of \$2,500 and then they have to pay 3.5 per cent of their gross annual rent if their income exceeds \$20,000. Madam Vice-President, the reality as Sen. Lalite-Etienne already pointed out, is that this charge will be passed on to renters no matter what Sen. Anil Roberts says. For a single mother struggling to keep her family afloat, that is an extra \$100 or so that may be tacked on to her rent, that \$100 could sink the family and the only advice that the Minister of Finance could give is, move. Really, move? I would invite you to go on to one of those renters pages on Facebook and see how easy it is to find a landlord who is willing to house a mother with children, most of them say no children allowed. Do you know how hard it is to find a nice, decent landlord who will accept children? Moving is simply not an option for many people.

Madam Vice-President, in addition to these increases in expenditure, parents now have to worry about the possibility of the dismantling of other systems that were provided to their children. Let us take the School Nutrition Programme, that programme has been cut by \$10 million. Do you know how many mothers and

fathers depend on that to provide breakfast and lunch for children? Do you know how many children will starve because of that cut?

Then we have the School Supplies and Book Grant which the PNM started, \$1,000 to assist financially disadvantaged students to acquire supplies at the beginning of the school year, that grant is also in jeopardy. “Parents eh sure” to get that grant in 2026 because during the Standing Finances Committee, the Minister of Education admitted that no funds have been allocated for that grant in the budget. The programme he said, “...is...under review”.

This Government will, of course, point to their universal laptop programme as proof of their commitment to children and education and students, but history has shown that the first iteration of that programme failed spectacularly to obtain its objectives. Teachers were not trained on how to integrate devices in the school. The schools lacked the technical staff, the schools had no Wi-Fi and Internet connectivity and there was no maintenance to assist with the upkeep of the devices. It must be that Sen. Daniel Rasheed is a unicorn because he is one of the few people whose devices lasted more than a few years.

Yet, the Government insists on reviving the same model, promising to deliver 18,000 laptops to Form I students for this academic year. Which Form I students? Not in this country. Because first we heard they were getting it by the end of September, now in the Standing Finance Committee, the timeline moved to at the end of this school term. Madam Vice-President, where are the laptops? Are the children really getting these laptops? Madam Vice-President, as the young people say, “It not easy”. “It not easy” out there for parents and this regime is uninterested in ensuring every citizen can provide for their family.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: How could they be interested when they heartlessly

terminated over 40,000 URP and CEPEP and reforestation workers?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Many of whom were single mothers. How could they be interested when a sitting Senator is calling on UNC Members to let go of PNM employees? How?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: That is a caring Government? This administration is not sincere about supporting all families at all.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: If it were, they would build motherhood and fatherhood and care work into the economic equation and not treat them as afterthoughts. Madam Vice-President, supporting mothers and fathers is not merely a matter of compassion you know, it is sound economics. Countries that invest in family support systems see higher female labour force participation, lower poverty amongst single-mother households and long-term gains in child development and national productivity.

Madam Vice-President, now I turn to the youth perspective. Young professionals and young people in general they do not fare better than parents in this budget. Madam Vice-President, what does this demographic think about? What are they concerned about? What do they want to hear in a budget? I posit there are three things that are very high up on the totem pole for young professionals and young people in general, jobs, education and housing, so I will look at them in turn.

The Government would have this public believe that they are doing an excellent job when it comes to job creation. After firing over 50,000 people in a short five-month tenure and freezing hiring in the first part of that tenure, they are

now boasting of this recruitment drive, advertising 20,000 jobs through a new national employment website. But how realistic is that promise? Madam Vice-President, calypsonian Crazy, he sang a song called “Liars.” I do not know, you look young, you might not be familiar. But it says this:

“Half of what you see is just illusion, most of what you hear, is not the truth. The things they tell you, it will be convincing, it have no value and it deceiving.”

Go and listen to that song. Illusions and falsehoods, those are the order of the day when it comes to the line Items in the Personnel Expenditure in this budget.

In many Ministries, the sums budgeted for Personnel Expenditure cannot even cover the salaries of the existing staff, far less the so-called new recruits. During the Standing Finance Committee, the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services admitted that all 600 vacancies in her Ministry were being advertised on this recruitment drive, but there was no allocation to pay any of the persons hired. In defence of the recruitment drive, the Minister of Finance jumped in. He spoke of an Employment Fund, over \$475 million to meet short falls. But, Madam Vice-President, it is simple Math you know, \$475 million cannot pay the salaries of 15,000 people far less for 20, even if you pay them at a minimum wage. Those are not real jobs, they are just announcements, false advertising. Fake.

It appears that this Government intends to work magic to find the money to pay for all these jobs and that is not my assessment, that was the explanation given by the Minister of Housing during the Standing Finance Committee. It was pointed out to the Minister that there was not only a reduction in the allocation for Salaries and COLA in the budget but his entire Ministry’s budget was reduced by almost \$100 million. And when he was asked where he could vire the money to

hire the people, he said, “We do magic”. Madam Vice-President, this is not *Harry Potter*, you know, we are not in Hogwarts. “Yuh cyah run ah Ministry by magic, okay?” And unfortunately, magic cannot save the On-The-Job Training Programme from the chopping block either.

For years this initiative has given young people an opportunity to gain practical skills and experience through real-world work environments all while gaining an income. This so-called caring Government has cut the OJT Programme by \$45 million at present. At present OJT Programme has 4,489 trainees, yet the Minister of Tertiary Education and Skills Training intends to hire only 40 people this year.

This Government likes to speak about investment in innovation, yet it has scrapped the \$500 million Long-term Loan Guarantee Scheme for small and medium enterprises. Under that initiative launched in 2022, the Government guaranteed 80 per cent of the value of the loan. To soften the blow of the announcement of the scrap, they have announced what they call the National Innovation and Incubator Programme that will benefit a mere 100 individuals. Madam Vice-President, 100 persons in a country with tens and thousands of people unemployed and underemployed, with 40,000 people or 50 and climbing, of people who were just—

Sen. Roberts: 40 or 50?

Sen. J. John-Bates: Yes, it is climbing. It is climbing everyday with you all. That 100 people will barely scratch the surface, Sen .Anil Roberts, but I will come to housing.

Madam Vice-President, housing. The housing market is very daunting for most young people, even starter homes are listed at \$1 million and up. In a *Guardian* article entitled: “What Salary gets a million dollar home?”

Dated the 9th of October, 2025, the President of the Association of Real Estate Agents of Trinidad and Tobago had this to say:

“A critical concern in the current real estate environment is the affordability crisis facing young professionals aged 25–40. Despite a steady level of interest in homeownership among this group, actual purchases remain low. High property prices, stringent mortgage qualification criteria and limited affordable housing options have placed homeownership out of reach for many...”

Madam Vice-President, this Government knows that housing is a hot-button topic, that is why they were up and down this country peddling dreams about housing. They promised home ownership, a fund where the young people coming out of school could contribute, and the Government would put the remaining funds toward a down payment. Where is this fund? I would like the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance to answer that. Where is the fund for the young people? Worse still, up and down, they were making these grand promises of delivering 500 houses a week, eh, that was the first promise.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Wait, we are getting there. Then the Minister of Finance made a boast about delivering 20,000 houses in his budget speech and the published speech said, the speech that all of us got, said, 20,000 houses in two years.

3.40 p.m.

When they realized “water more than flour, this is what they said, “Nah, that was a typographical error.” Now, we hear that they are only building 612 houses in the year. “Where de 500 houses per week gone?” Magic. At the rate that they are going, if they are only 612 houses, and God forbid they last the five years, that

is only 3,000 houses in the five years.

They wanted to deliver these 20,000—how many houses—you know, the numbers are fluctuating, whatever number of houses, they were going to do it through a PPP initiative. But these PPP initiatives have some problems. I will not delve into them deeply. I will just list some of the problems that those initiatives often have. They often have unexplained fiscal costs. They often have significant implementation delays and sometimes, the private partner defaults. So, whatever number they were projecting, without the magic that they have, it was never going to work.

Now, the Minister of Housing so eloquently said in the Standing Finance Committee that housing is the foundation upon which dreams are built and generations find stability. “Yet where de funding for the affordable housing programme? It missing. Nowhere to be found in de budget”. They cancelled the funds for the regeneration of communities in east Port of Spain. “East Port of Spain get rel knocks in da budget, yuh know”. We have to look at that. What is it about east Port of Spain, boy?

Hon. Senator: “I could tell yuh.”

Sen. J. John-Bates: Huh.

Sen. Roberts: “Tell meh.”

Sen. J. John-Bates: This Government really wants us to believe that they care about the struggles of young people and young families? Is this really a people-centred budget that they were boasting about?

Madam Vice-President, let me move on to education and skills training. I would like to thank the Government for, at least, maintaining the You-Tec Programme started under the PNM administration, which trained hundreds of young people in cosmetology—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Yes, clap for yourself, Minister—events management, culinary arts. Thank you, former Minister of Youth Development and National Service. This Government has also indicated that it will commence a new construction sector skills programme.

But, Madam Vice-President, under the now defunct Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, young people already had access to training in construction, in addition to several other excellent programmes. You had A.L.L. S.E.T., where they go training in heavy machinery. You had the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme, and we heard a lot about that before, and I am sure my fellow colleague will delve into that. You had AMPLIFY, where they got training in music production. You had training in hair braiding, weaving, nails. “Yuh know how much de nail tech does charge?” This Ministry ensured that youths could have a viable option to gain employment—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates:—and to be self-employed and self-sufficient. This Government has gutted most of these programmes and rebranded a few to mamaguy the people into thinking they are doing something new for the youths.

Madam Vice-President, while this budget speaks of youth empowerment, the numbers tell a different story. The few initiatives are dwarfed by cuts and these were programmes that were already delivering. It is a budget of substitution, not expansion. As the Opposition Leader rightly called it, it is fake and fraudulent.

Madam Vice-President, when a budget offers substitution instead of opportunity, when it cuts more than it creates, there is only one predictable outcome, brain drain. When bright young minds cannot find opportunity here, they will take their talent elsewhere. Every engineer, teacher, nurse, creative who

leaves, they take with them, not only their education, but our public investment in their training. Young people do not leave because they lack patriotism. They will leave because of lack of prospects.

With this Government's unrealistic economic outlook, that was already explained by Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul; the rising cost of living, which was already recognized by Sen. Lalite-Etienne; and with the crime unabated, despite the imposition of a SOE and with a Minister of Homeland Security only blowing hot air, more and more young people will be pushed to emigrate. No amount of expansion of the avenues for citizenship with whatever Bill will compel young people to move to Trinidad and Tobago if this Government continues on the current trajectory. If the Government truly wishes to retain young people and attract others, it must create opportunity, not only for youths in its strongholds, it must create opportunity for all youths, even those in east Port of Spain. Youths from urban areas deserve to win too.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: Now, I will just spend a few minutes addressing some of the points raised by Sen. Roberts. It will not take much time. He did not say much. Now, he spent a lot of time attacking Sen. Dhanpaul on a personal level, talking about, he was a PS and then he turned PNM and "blah, blah, blah". But yet the Senator fails to—I wonder if he remembers a name. Let me see what is the name. Emmanuel George. "Da name right ah bell?" Was it Mr. George? "It doh ring ah bell?" Look it up. He was a PS and then became a UNC Minister. So, it is absolutely nothing wrong with being a PS and then going over into a party.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: "Sen. Roberts start to talk about who bright and wa bright, and who got in school without help and la la la. Sen. Roberts, please look tuh yuh

left, yuh right and yuh back before yuh start talking about who bright and who eh bright and who needed help”—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates:—“and how many passes. Think about all who blowing hot air and not blowing hot air”. Okay?

Then the Minister spent time talking about the 10 per cent for public servants. Yet again and again, this Government keeps saying, they have to wait on the negotiation before they can put the 10 per cent in this budget. I do not buy it. I do not buy it. It makes no sense because in the Standing Finance Committee, time and time again, it was admitted that funds were placed in the budget as a contingency for different line Items that had nothing substantial, “boards that doh exist”. Yet the Prime Minister has indicated that the public servants, the negotiation will start at 10 per cent, but somehow it was so hard to put the 10 per cent there if you had the money? “Da doh make sense”. To these public servants, I want to apologize. You are not going to get this money by Christmas. It is not going happen because if you have to negotiate and the money is not in the budget, you have to wait until, at least, the mid-year review to get the money. So, I am sorry. It is not coming before Christmas.

Then Sen. Anil Roberts spent time—and I expect many of his colleagues will do that—“talkin bout de nine years PNM in government and wa dey do and wa dey did not do”.

Hon. Senator: Nine and a half.

Sen. J. John-Bates: Sen. Baptiste—nine and a half, sorry. I am corrected. Sen. Leroy Baptiste also spoke about that. You know, that is still not a good excuse because you are here now. Well, if you all spent nine and a half years talking about all the thing you would do and would not do for everybody, all and sundry,

who will win, and who will win, and who will win. The people gave you the country to run, focus on that, run it. “Doh study what de PNM did and did not do.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: And I want to also say to Sen. Roberts, he needs to get his facts straight. “All de thing about de paper he was showing, despite our Standing Orders, and the reports he going and pass tuh de AG, I hope he get those facts straight. All right? People lookin fuh ah former Minister of Sports, eh.” All right.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: So, in my last few minutes, Madam Vice-President, I want to grade this budget. I will let my colleagues settle down, so they could hear the grade.

Hon. Senator: “Nah. Doh let ddem waste yuh time”. Come on.

Sen. J. John-Bates: The grade is F. I give this budget an F.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: F for fluff, F for false and F for fraudulent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. John-Bates: They built the revenue base on an over-optimistic energy price, already out of sync with market realities. There is little in the budget that truly speaks to diversifying our economy or investing in the product of power of the people. While the Government talks about economic fairness, it has failed to make adequate provisions for young people, our bright capable ambitions young people who are not short on talent, but very soon, they will be left short of opportunities. Meanwhile, the Government has laid new layers of burdens on mothers, fathers and families through surcharges, levies and hidden taxes disguised as reform. This is not accountable fiscal policy as they have touted. It is political expediency dressed up as policy.

So, Madam Vice-President, I want to leave you with this. Our families deserve better. Our young people deserve better, and Trinidad and Tobago deserves a Government that deals in truth and not in elusion and magic. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Jones-Simmons.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Candice Jones-Simmons: Thank you, Madam Vice-President, and I wish to congratulate you on your elevation to the role of Vice-President of the Senate. I also wish to thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2026), Bill, 2025, and to share my own perspectives on the aspects of housing as outlined in the budget.

At the outset, I wish to endorse the Government's view that housing is both a social necessity and an economic driver. Indeed, a home is not only a shelter, it is the foundation for stability, dignity and community life, and so I welcome several measures outlined by the Minister of Housing: The increase in the Home Improvement Grant Programme, which will be doubled this fiscal year; the first-time homeowner grants; and the Foundation-for-Life Programme, which will provide rent-to-own options for seniors and single mothers. These are positive steps worthy of recognition, as they have the potential to make the difference in the lives of our most vulnerable.

Now, prior to Sen. Lalite-Etienne's contribution, I also wish to commend the Government on its initiative for inclusive housing for persons with disabilities at Edinburgh 500. You see, Sen. The Hon. Roberts, it is stated in the Minister of Finance's budget statement that inclusive housing for disabilities will happen at Edinburgh 500. So, I understand why this led to her belief that it is limited to that

and therefore, this is why it underscores the importance of consultation with stakeholders. So, now we understand how that perception can affect people because the truth is, there needs to be inclusive housing at all developments. So, I am heartened by your acknowledgment that this will occur.

Sen. Roberts: Correct.

Sen. C. Jones-Simmons: Right. So, Madam Vice-President, I note with interest that the proposed reintroduction of the Land for the Landless Programme. In its earlier iteration in 2015, this initiative provided qualified applicants with a service plot of land and a foundation, along with options for two or three-bedroom house designs and construction materials. It was a promising idea. However, it faced challenges. Notably, many applicants signed agreements for sale, but they never made any payments of deposits. Many of them were unable to complete construction because they lacked a stable income or access to financing to purchase the land allocated to them and therefore, the programme was shelved in 2017. So, as we move to reintroduce this programme, I urge that it be done with stronger policies, stricter eligibility criteria, better financing screening and adequate financial support mechanisms to ensure that beneficiaries can actually complete and occupy their homes and get the deeds.

Now, the Minister of Housing has also indicated—and I believe it has been mentioned, at least, twice here before—that the new housing construction will be funded through public-private partnerships, PPPs, and through innovative financing mechanisms. Now, the marriage of public-private partnerships and housing is not new. For example, the Mahogany Court, which is a 160-unit apartment complex at Mount Hope, was completed in 2016, using a PPP model. This is where the Government provided the land and a private contractor or developer covered the construction cost. However, PPPs are not without hurdles in

the form of complex contracts, delays, managing poor quality in construction, the issues of disputes, accountability and most notably, the allocation of risks, which must be carefully managed to ensure that the public sector is not left absorbing the greater burden.

We continue to expect transparency in the allocation of these proposed projects, and I was certainly looking forward to hearing more, Sen. Roberts, about these innovative-financing mechanisms that you were planning to use in supporting this much controversial target now of 20,000 affordable homes, referenced I should say, not only in the statement of the Minister of Finance, but also in the introductory remarks of the Minister of Housing.

3:55 p.m.

So, let us turn to this housing target issue. In 2015, it was projected that 10,000 applicants would benefit from national housing annually. Today we are saying 20,000 affordable homes, and that is ambitious, we can acknowledge that. The question remains to me, over what period will this be achieved? Because history gives us lessons here.

In fact, between 2003 and 2018, fewer than 14,000 homes were built by the HDC, which was far short of the targets between 2003 and 2018, a 15 year span. So, it felt far short of the targets of 100,000 homes promised in a decade. So this raises questions about the feasibility of current projections. Particularly, given the reduction in housing allocation, which of course, you can appreciate is a concern, from \$1.28 billion in fiscal year 2025, to \$662 million year in fiscal year 2026. So, this disparity underscores, I believe, the need for us to re-examine housing policy. You see we are always overpromising and under delivering, and so we need to ensure that we align plans with fiscal and institutional capacity.

If the need remains the same, the target is ambitious, and the allocation is

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reduced, I think it is fair for me to ask, how realistic is this? We must address consistent variances between what is budgeted, and what is actually spent. Because I am saying this, year to year to year, we continue to have unmet housing needs. This turns me to a concern that I have heard ventilated just before.

The adequacy of our nation's housing stock is a vital indicator of the standard of living of our people, and it is a sad thing. But the reality remains that for most people on the HDC, owning a home is out of reach. Approximately, 85 to 90 per cent of applicants on the HDC waiting list, they do not qualify for mortgage financing. Many of them just do not have the required income to save for the deposit, and many of them, you know, they say even after they have saved for years, by the time they have amassed any savings, they do not qualify for the requisite mortgage term. So, this means that a significant portion of our population will continue to rely on rental options.

We therefore, need to ask, who exactly are the intended beneficiaries of these 20,000 affordable homes? Because if the average person cannot afford it, and they cannot meet this mortgage criteria, then is homeownership the benchmark of success? Government housing policy may have to shift and place greater emphasis on affordable rental opportunities, and rent-to-own models so that citizens can transition from tenants to homeownership, if we are being realistic.

Now, I note that the Minister of Housing has also expressed a desire for single family units in village-type communities with reduce lot size. As opposed to the apartment, or condominium style, multi-storey development. While, this reflexes a commendable vision of community living, I believe that the availability of land will determine how practical this venture will be, as we may be required still, Sen. Roberts, to pursue a mix of solutions, including, retaining the multi-storey developments, especially, in high demand areas.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*].

Sen. C. Jones-Simmons: Much of our policy discourse rightly focuses on the poor and the vulnerable. However, we must also consider our shrinking middle class. You see the young professionals, the ones with the university degrees, our teachers, our nurses, they are fast becoming the working poor. Many of them are ineligible for state assistance, and they cannot afford to purchase homes on the open market. They cannot even afford to purchase a home with joints incomes, even that is a struggle. If they are shut out of homeownership, we risk deepening inequality. The words of the Mighty Sparrow come to mind:

“Children go to school and learn well
Otherwise later on in life you go catch real hell.”

Sadly, Madam Vice-President, many young educated citizens in our society catching real hell, and that is because there is no incentive. You come out of school you have to pay student loan, and you have all these big dreams, and you cannot even afford to buy a decent house.

The inability to own a home contributes to disillusionment and that phrase that we have heard in this House “brain drain”, our brightest minds are leaving us for opportunities aboard. So, I wish to suggest that our housing policy should also cater to this group who forms the backbone of a stable and thriving nation.

I wish to turn to a little bit of a pet peeve of my mine, a briefly related matter. The importance of upholding the rule of law in taxation and property matters. You see we have a challenge in Trinidad and Tobago with the enforcement and respect for laws. Legislators and leaders, must be careful, not to encourage disregard for lawful obligations even when we disagree with a policy.

You see, there was a time when citizens were told not to pay the property tax and some of them who did were ridiculed. Yet, many complied, not out of

partisanship, but because they are law abiding citizens aware of the legal consequences of non-payment. You see, property tax operated as a charge on property, allowing the State to recover unpaid taxes against the land itself. So, many citizens complied because they were aware of the implications of non-compliance. There are citizens who understand the relationship between property, wealth, and taxation, and appreciate that taxation when fair, can promote economic justice, and support community development, which brings me to this point.

You see, now, the Government is proposing a landlord surcharge to take effect on January 1st 2026, with rates of 2.5 per cent and 3.5 per cent of annual rental income with a one-time registration fee of \$2,500. Now, after we have been telling people not to pay the tax, we now need to get their buy-in, and we need them to now comply. We need them to buy into this proposal. This measure has generated concern and confusion. Some erroneously believed it only applied to commercial properties. You see because the Minister of Finance sought to make a distinction between this surcharge and the property tax by saying that it would only apply to commercial activity. So, I think it needs to be clearly stated that this surcharge will apply to all leased properties, residential or commercial, that generate rental income.

As an attorney-at-law who has spent a lot of years in real-estate transactions, I am also interested in the details of the legislative framework for the implementation of this surcharge, and the tax administration procedure, including the administrative functions for a non-compliance rates or fraudulent declarations. Because I wish Mr. Roberts were here to answer this one, or perhaps I may refer this to Sen. The Hon. Phillip Alexander, or even if the hon. Attorney General were here. Will this surcharge operate as a charge against property? But, I guess we

will get the answer to this question.

Right, so, while the measure maybe viewed as equitable, since the targets income earning property, it also affects many small landlords, including homeowners and pensioners, who rent parts of their homes to cover mortgages or supplement fixed income. So, these persons, every single cent derive from rental income is needed, and they will be impacted, significantly by the implementation of the surcharge, even though people say it is nominal, every cent for these persons counts.

The impact on tenants cannot be ignored. In the absence of rent control, landlords are likely to pass the surcharge on through higher rent. That is predictable and it has been discussed all throughout. The truth is, there is the statement that right now that the landlord is king, and tenants have very little bargaining power in a market with little affordable housing. So, the Minister has asked the citizens, the Minister of Finance that is, to push back against unjustified renting increases. But, I ask, without supportive regulation or functioning rent assessment board, exactly where are the tenants to push back to when safe affordable rentals are scarce?

Indeed, our Rent Restriction (Re-enactment and Validation) Act of 2002 lapsed since 2003, and rent control mechanisms have not been reinstated. I note that in the 16th interim report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration in 2020, it was noted that in the absence of these regulations, both tenants and landlords are at risk in different way. So the tenants are at risk of exploitation and the landlords are risk of managing the delinquency of tenants. Now, rent control is a very thorny issue, but it deserves renewed legislative attention.

Now, this is another issue I wish to highlight, because I understand that the

Minister of Finance noted on a recent interview on a radio programme that he was not aware of it, and I think I could raise this issue at that it is time. It is important to note that property tax remains enforced, despite the Government's intention to repeal it, it has not been formally repealed. This has resulted in uncertainty in property transactions, which requires vendors to issuing indemnities for purchasers, or sometimes purchasers withhold funds to cover potential tax liabilities. This situation is untenable, and I believe that citizens deserve clear and consistent laws that do not shift unpredictably with each changing administration.

Lastly, Madam Vice-President, I turn to Tobago, a place that is dear to my heart. On the issue of property there is a lack of clear land title, which remains a major obstacle to economic development on my island. So let me explain that whereas, property may just seem to be about shelter, it is more than that. It is the opportunity to take your property, take the equity in that property and get a loan; to take that loan and to improve your home; to take that loan and to finance education for your children, to develop your small businesses, access healthcare. For many Tobagonians they cannot do that because they do not have proper land title.

This problems stems from historical challenges that go as far back as Hurricane Flora in 1963, where documents were lost. We have a history in Tobago of having unadministered estates, and their significant delays in probates and land registration. It is something I feel passionate about, because it has been discussed, it has been well known.

In fact, the recent discussion on August 24th, 2025, between the Chief Secretary and the Minister of Land and Legal Affairs, of course, it signals a commitment to address this matter. They have discussed that they will give resources to increase the processing of applications for Tobagonians to bring their lands under the Real Property Act. They have indicated that the vacancy of

Assistant Registrar General, will be addressed.

But, I wish to respectfully highlight that the cost of bringing an application to bring your land under the Real Property Act, ranges from \$60,000 to a \$100,000. So, merely expediting these applications is not going help the average Tobagonian, because the cost remains prohibitive.

4.10 p.m.

So I was hoping to hear much more about how we were going to get proposals to really address this situation. I know that the previous administration mentioned mandatory registration of titles and that would have been operationalized in 2020, but that was not a reality. So what I want to say is that Tobagonians do not just need aspirations. We need a real plan and we need real solutions—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. C. Jones-Simmons:—because resolving this issue would grant immediate relief and unlock economic opportunity for the people of Tobago.

So, Madam Vice-President, I end by saying this: The adequacy of a nation's housing is a measure of the quality of life of its people. Our task is to craft housing and land policies that are transparent and practical policies that align targets with fiscal reality, encourage compliance with the law and protect tenants and landlords alike. I wish to emphasize that now is the time to resolve this long-standing land title challenges for Tobago, and if these objectives are achieved, then the promise of home as a necessary place of security, belonging and opportunity can truly be realized for all citizens of this beautiful island of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Vice-President, I thank you.

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Dr. Chaitan-Maharaj.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Natalie Chaitan-Maharaj: Madam Vice-President, before I start, may I also congratulate you on your assent to the Chair. Before I delve into the substance of my contribution to this debate, I must express my heartfelt gratitude to those who have made this possible. I commend the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, along with their dedicated teams, for converting the will of the people into this comprehensive budget document. Their tireless efforts reflect accountable fiscal responsibilities that prioritize the needs of every citizen.

I extend my thanks to all who participated in our nationwide budget consultations, especially the people of Arouca/Lopinot, for attending sessions and providing feedback, questions and suggestions and their concerns. Their input has been instrumental in shaping this fair budget. I remain their voice in and out of Parliament. A special acknowledgement goes to our hon. Prime Minister who played a critical role in guiding the policy and direction and meticulously examining the policies and allocations to ensure that they are aligned with our vision, prosperous Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: I give personal thanks to our hon. Prime Minister, for her guidance and for this sacred blessing to serve that she has afforded me.

Before I debate this budget, I must first address Sen. John-Bates' errors. First, how dare she berate our hon. Prime Minister? As a mother, she should have respect for those who are older, who have and hold office higher than this.

Sen. Baig: "She cyah walk in her shoes."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: Sen. John-Bates asked for baby boxes when the PNM cancelled our hon. Prime Minister's baby milk grants.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj (cont'd)

Sen. Baig: Exactly. They did that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: She cannot fill one shoe of our hon. Prime Minister and the mother of this country. Sen. Janelle John-Bates went to pains to say that she is a mother and lamented traffic issues from east to west, the price of Pampers boxes and formula boxes. Now, I too am a mother, and I suffered all these things under a PNM government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Baig: They have it so.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: All those were woes that the PNM put in place under their reign.

Sen. Baig: “Where she was 10 years ago?”

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: As for her foray into child development issues, I will only give her kudos for attempting to pronounce the medical nomenclature. I will correct that screening and development therapy is not available only at Mount Hope. The NTRC that will be opened by us will offer free therapy for all disabled people, which is more than they ever did.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Baig: Tell them.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: Furthermore, it was the PNM who refused to open early childhood education centres.

Sen. Baig: Tell them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: Took away laptops, cut school transport, scholarships and GATE. Sen. John-Bates should ask her colleagues why they kept the children’s hospital closed for 10 years, why they voted against the Children’s

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj (cont'd)

Life Fund Act? Their solution was to give children weed.

Sen. Baig: Shame.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: She spoke about our budget, cutting this and cutting that. Let us talk about cuts. The hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar and then hon. Minister Dr. Tim Gopeesingh from 2010 to 2015 gave \$133 million for textbook grants annually. From 2016 to 2024, under the PNM, it was cut down to \$33 million annually.

Sen. Baig: “Hmm.” Tell them again, tell them again.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: They cut the textbook grants by \$100 million.

Sen. Baig: “Hmm.”

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: Over nine years. The PNM refused to open the Couva children’s hospital, saw the death of 23 babies at the Port of Spain General NICU. School feeding, they lamented. From 2010 to 2015, 76,000 meals were served daily. From 2017 to 2020, it dropped to 48,000. In COVID, it was 28,000. So, please, Sen. John-Bates, remember that Crazy also sang the song, “Doh try Dat”, in 1980.

Sen. Baig: “Yeah, fast and out ah place.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: He also sang, “I am Kamla” in 2013.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Baig: “Doh try dat.” We like that.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: Madam Vice-President, as we debate this budget, I must address and rebut some more misleading narratives put forth by previous speakers from the Opposition. The PNM has a history of unfounded attacks on the UNC, often painting us as incapable of sound governance, while conveniently forgetting their own track record of failures. Yet, it was under their watch that

foreign reserves plummeted from US \$11.4 billion in 2015 to just \$5.4 in 2024.

Let us talk of their mismanagement and the funds that do not come and disappear. I will bring your attention to a 2025 *Guardian* article on the 23rd October, four days ago.

“Mayor’s company collected \$2M in CEPEP contracts

Investigation exposes political ties, missing audits & conflict-of-interest concerns”

Over the company Link Limited, owned by a Point Fortin Mayor then, who garnered more than \$400,000 per year in CEPEP earnings from 2021 to 2024. Investigations will be ongoing even then as the Mayor did not file a declaration of income in 2023. I will leave the rest of that to Phillip.

So you see, they are trying a kind of reverse uno on us, Madam Vice-President.

Hon. Baig: “Ha, ha, hi.”

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: Sen. John-Bates has a child; she will understand that one. What they do is they cry foul over our realistic revenue projections, but their own budgets are riddled with over-optimism, leading to repeated drawdowns from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in their tenure. They are trying to assume that we will do what they already did. Madam Vice-President, Sigmund Freud calls that psychological projection.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Baig: You sure they understand what that mean?

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: I will explain it to them.

Sen. Baig: Explain it to them. Teach them.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: It is a defense mechanism that one uses to protect your ego from guilt and shame. I will repeat it.

Sen. Baig: Papayo.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: It is a defense mechanism that one uses to protect your ego from guilt and shame.

Sen. Baig: Shame, shame on them.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: Recently, newspaper articles and editorials have echoed PNM criticisms, labelling our budget as fake and fraudulent, a budget of deception. But let us get the record straight. These claims are nothing more than a political spin. The Opposition decries our revenue assumptions for oil and gas prices as unrealistic. Yet, they ignore credible international forecasts that align with our figures, especially in a recovering global market. Their assertion of a hidden TT \$20 billion deficit, it is baseless, fear-mongering, Madam Vice-President. Not one of their speakers has discussed how they arrived at that insane figure.

They complained about hidden taxes, like the 0.2 per cent assets on levy banks, the electricity surcharges, but these measures are targeted at high earners and industries. And the earnings from them will fund social programmes without burdening the vulnerable. Meanwhile, they overlook the relief we provided, like the \$1 reduction in super gasoline that directly affects and benefits motorists. This half of billion dollars that we will retain from these pump figures they remain in the hands of the people, and it will have a multiplier effect on the economy. It will not increase the cost of living.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: They talked of mass terminations in CEPEP and URP, and Reforestation. This is a distortion because we have replaced these programmes that they used to keep our people living hand to mouth. We have replaced these programmes, starting with our recruitment drive, to allow citizens a

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj (cont'd)

chance at acquiring real jobs, with real security that they can take to the bank.

Hon. Baig: And real people.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: As for them, the labelling of workers in CEPEP and URP is linked to gangs. It is not only defamatory, but it is insensitive, and we reject their behaviour outright.

Madam Vice-President, much has been said about the long lines at the offices of the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services as if these long lines are somehow the fault of the new administration. Let me make it clear, these queues existed before as a result of their inefficiency.

Sen. Baig: “Hmm.”

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj:—that happened before April 2025 in their outgoing regime. These citizens, since we have come into government, who are abandoned without support turned to the Ministry in desperation for assistance. We responded immediately, expanding our intake points, redeploying staff and extending hours to meet the surge in need. Because, unlike our predecessors, we do not turn our back on the people. We have also taken note of claims that persons are being turned away at banks when they attempt to cash their cheques.

Madam Vice-President, let me make it categorically clear, public sector funding revolves around the assurance of funds. No cheque is issued by this Ministry unless they are confirmed, no cheque—and it has allocations to support it. The narratives that they are pushing are therefore no more than an attempt to mislead the public and to sow doubt about the Ministry’s fiscal discipline and reliability. Under this UNC-led administration, every cheque issued to a citizen is secured, valid and honoured, because we understand that public trust must never be compromised.

Madam Vice-President, when this UNC Government assumed office on April 28th, 2025, we inherited a Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services, long neglected by the previous PNM administration. Public buildings and facilities were left in disrepair, with outdated infrastructure hampering service delivery. Vacancies were rampant, leaving key divisions understaffed and unable to meet the needs of our citizens effectively. Wastage of public funds was evident in numerous procurement failures, which the PNM has shamelessly attempted to blame on this Government.

For example, the provision of the manned canine security services, at various locations for three years was botched under their tenure, leading to delays and inflated costs. Again, the janitorial services for three years and maintenance of the Ministry's AC services for two years, all marred by improper tendering processes, resulting in inefficiencies. These failures squandered taxpayers' money and compromised the safety and functionality of our facilities. Madam Vice-President, this is the state of affairs we met. A Ministry in crisis where promises to the vulnerable were broken time and time again. But, Madam Vice-President, a promise made, a promise kept

4.25 p.m.

We are fixing it under this UNC Government. We have already delivered on key commitments and are implementing plans to address these inherited problems head on. In just our first 150 days, we accelerated policy implementation, ensuring uninterrupted support for our nation's most vulnerable, best highlighted, Madam Vice-President, by the processing of thousands of senior citizens pensions applications, left in bureaucratic mothballs by that last Government for years and years. And the speedy repair of the cheque printing machine that broke down after the last Government left it unmaintained for nearly a decade.

Sen. Baig: “Nah, man.”

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj:—because when the UNC wins, everybody wins.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Baig: A cheque-making machine they could not fix, boy.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: This fair budget reflects that, with targeted investments in social development that uplift all citizens. Madam Vice-President, as part of our continued modernization of the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services, we have also undertaken the strategic realignment of the Geriatric Adolescence Partnership Program, GAPP. This programme which for years, languished without focus is now being restructured to deliver measurable outcomes in elder care and intergenerational engagement, because the elderly are a source of wisdom, experience and stability.

A new framework will place emphasis on structured community service, intergenerational learning and skills transfer between seniors and youth. This realignment, guided by our hon. Prime Minister and my line Minister, reaffirms our commitment to ensuring that no segment of society, neither elderly nor young is left behind. Moreover, Madam Vice-President, we have committed ourselves to making this Ministry more people centered and less robotic and faceless. Too often, citizens previously described their experience with social service delivery as cold, procedural and distant, we are changing that. From retraining frontline staff for empathy, to reorganizing service desks for easier access, and embedding community officers in underserved areas, our goal is to restore the human face of public service. The Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services must always live up to its name, being about the people first.

Today I will give a short interim six-month report on the performance of our Ministry. This performance, Madam Vice-President, is a direct reflection of our

renewed mandate, effective from 28 April, 2025. Madam Vice-President, in providing context for this and the considerable work that we are executing on the ground, I must note that my Ministry's overall financial commitment to citizens we serve, is an allocation of TT \$6.012 billion. Our swift and substantial commitment demonstrates our continuous uninterrupted flow of support, prioritized by this new administration for our nation's most vulnerable populations, as we close our current fiscal cycle.

Our first look at our Gender Affairs Division, which has returned to this Ministry from the Office of the Prime Minister. Madam Vice-President, the Gender Affairs Division is at the forefront of our mandate, to foster gender equality and protect our nation's women. A key priority for this administration since taking office. For this reporting period, the Division's commitment to achieving its objectives has been clear, with an allocated budget of \$7 million, the Actual expenditure has been \$6,637,810.90 with a further commitment of \$164,933.05. Spending all we can, to do as much as we can. Madam Vice-President, our work during this time frame has concentrated on several high impact initiatives, including the completion of the RISE programme at the women's prison and youth training centre. It saw 20 participants of the female prison and 11 participants of the youth training centre, successfully complete training in fashion design and upcycling.

The Division also conducted two gender training sessions, benefiting 90 individuals and successfully executed community outreach engagements that serve an additional 265 beneficiaries. The National Domestic Violence Shelter is a crucial medium for providing shelter for victims. It has provided support to 37 persons over the reporting period, including not only adult women but minors of both sexes. Madam Vice-President, this type of assistance is evidence that the

Ministry through this Division continues to keep the mandate of meeting the needs of the most vulnerable among us.

Now, Madam Vice-President, as an OBGYN, in the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services, I am proud to pay specific attention to the profound socioeconomic issue of period poverty, which the Minister of Finance has noted, continues to undermine the health and educational opportunities of many women and girls in Trinidad and Tobago, as many endure struggles to afford menstrual hygiene products. I will go into the details, so that Sen. John-Bates will be able to understand that it is not a reliability on NGOs alone.

The period poverty intervention has been championed and driven by the Government since its assumption of office in April. Madam Vice-President, as a Ministry, we recognized the helplessness of women and girls who cannot afford these basic hygiene products and that this tragedy undermines their health, dignity and most critically, their educational and economic opportunities. No young girl should face the embarrassment of having to ask a friend for a pad, pretending that she forgot hers at home, when the reality is that she did not have enough of her own. In response to this pressing need, as was recently announced by the Minister of Finance in the budget statement, we will collaborate to establish a Women's Health Fund seeded with an initial, not total, initial—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj:—seeded with an initial, \$5 million in capital from the Government. The fund will be used to launch a pilot programme for the distribution of free menstrual kits in educational institutions. Please note, Madam Vice-President, for Sen. Bates' education, it is not merely a product distribution exercise, as was done by previous NGOs. It will be accompanied by wide-spread education and sensitization programmes on menstrual health for all groups,

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj (cont'd)

including men and boys with the explicit goal of dismantling cultural stigma around a natural process that affects every woman, every month. This is a vital initiative, reflecting the compassionate vision of this administration.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: Excellent. Excellent.

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: For Sen. Attzs, who made the point that we need research and education to drive us going forward, we are also planning an important research project, the menstrual health and hygiene in the workplace survey, to gather data from 5,000 employees to inform future evidence based policy, proof that this Government listens and then leads.

Madam Vice-President, our commitment to the children of this country remains resolute. I therefore turn next to child affairs. Under the strategic direction of this new administration, the Child Affairs Division is tasked with ensuring that every child in Trinidad and Tobago, is safe and supported and allowed to thrive in alignment with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. For this period, the Division expended \$900,000, of Actual expenditure, it was \$729,444.04 with commitments of \$37,314.59. Looking ahead, Madam Vice-President, the Division does have an ambitious and comprehensive pipeline of projects for the 2026, fiscal year, all grounded in our National Child Policy. These initiatives are designed to create a Trinidad and Tobago where every child can feel safe, heard and empowered. They include one, the expansion of the Child Rights Ambassadors program, leveraging digital training to cultivate a generation of young advocates.

4.35 p.m.

Two, the child mental health initiative, Mindful Moods, Happy Views, to equip our primary school students with emotional resilience tools, particularly

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during examination periods because, Madam Vice-President, there is truth to the old adage, “What the mind does, the body follows.”

Three, a health and nutrition fair, specifically for children with disabilities, ensuring inclusive access to essential health services.

Four, the Born to Shine’s National Children’s Inclusion and Wellness Fair for World Children’s Day, targeting 3,000 children across Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Vice-President, turning next to the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. Permit me to express my gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister for her foresight in seeing the need to bring such an important agency under the remit of the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: The Authority has continued its integral work of meeting the needs of the vulnerable children in the country. For this reporting period, the authority has achieved the following, outlined by geographical region. In the north-east, a 13 per cent increase in school visits; a 20 per cent increase in visits to community residences; and more than 65 per cent increase in supervised access sessions. Madam Vice-President, notably, this also resulted in the closure of more than 80 per cent of existing cases.

In the south and central, the Authority undertook 424 new investigations and closed 810 cases. The authority has also enhanced its forensic capacity, with the installation of new forensic equipment at both our south and Mt. Hope centres, and activated medical services in the south. Importantly, 30 members of staff have now been trained in new interviewing techniques.

In the area of foster care, there are currently 160 children receiving foster care, 115 in traditional placements and 45 in kinship care. Over the period, 39 new placements were made and 12 children were successfully transitioned into

permanent family-based care.

With respect to adoption services, the authority facilitated 19 adoptions, comprising five closed and 14 opened adoptions, including kinship cases, and eight sensitization events were done, aimed at encouraging adoption and understanding the process were also hosted.

After giving the rundown of those divisions, also within the purview of our Ministry, I should take a moment to address some of the issues that Sen. Alicia Pauline Lalite-Etienne raised. There was a claim that the Ministry of People, Social Development and Family Services is questioning persons with disabilities because we are actively considering dedicated housing accommodation at Edinburgh 500. This claim is reckless as it is revealing. So, let us be plain, consultation is not interrogation, inclusion is not intimidation. This Government is doing what the previous administration refused to do. We are moving from photo ops and platitudes to tangible, accessible housing solutions, designed with the disability community for the disabled community.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: I beg to wonder, where was Sen. Lalite-Etienne's outrage when accessible units were promised but never delivered? Ramp, lifts and universal design basics were treated like nice-to-have add-ons instead of non-negotiables. Stakeholder consultations were a box-ticking exercise that produced zero accommodations and even less accountability. There was silence then, performative fury now. Why? Why, only when an active, concrete proposal is on the table, Madam Vice-President, Edinburgh 500, do we hear the sudden chorus of negativity and obstruction? Edinburgh 500 lies in close proximity to Carlsen Field, where the NTRC site will be launched, meaning that services would be offered in close proximity to the homes of persons with disabilities.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: So that means, hear is what is actually happening. There is active consideration, not delay. Edinburgh 500 is under rigorous accelerated review to ensure universal design, independent living features and integration of support services. It is co-creation, not coercion. The Ministry's engagement with the disabled community and families is to embed lived experience into unit layouts, amenities and transport access and safety. That is respectful policy-making, not questioning anyone's worth. There is dignity here and delivery. The end goal is simple. Keys in hand, rights upheld and independence supported. The Ministry will not be deterred by this selective indignation. We will press forward, openly, accountably and decisively until accessible housing at Edinburgh 500 is not a headline but a home.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj: Together, these achievement represents our unwavering commitment to safeguarding the nation's children and elderly and women and all the vulnerable, ensuring that everyone grows, lives and prospers in a safe and nurturing and supportive environment. Madam Vice-President, all of these achievements outlined reflect that our Ministry is managing public funds with diligence and delivering tangible results to the people of this nation, all within the framework of progressive policies, established since this administration took office. We at the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services look forward to continuing this vital work in the new fiscal year. Because when the UNC wins—

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

Sen. Dr. N. Chaitan-Maharaj:—everybody wins. When the UNC wins, people win. When the UNC wins, everybody wins. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President.: Okay, Senators, I think we can take a break until about 5.00 p.m. That is fine? The Senate is now suspended.

4.43 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Murray.

Sen. Dr. Desirée Murray: Madam Vice-President, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the budget debate for the fiscal year 2026. The national budget is not merely a statement of figures, it is a statement of intent. It tells us who and what the Government values and prioritizes, and it signals how government policy will translate into the well-being of citizens. The foundation of any strong economy is a healthy population. The allocation of \$8.2 “buh-buh-buh-buh-billion”—

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

Sen. Dr. D. Murray:—which includes the Development Programme to the Minister of Health, represents almost 14 per cent of the total allocation of the budget and it is a clear reflection of the value the Government places on health as a pillar of national development. As the World Health Organization reminds us, there can be no economic development without human development, and no human development without health. In fact, Goal No. 3 of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals identifies “Good Health and Well-Being” as a requirement for peace and prosperity for people and planet, now and into the future. This message was echoed into the theme of the recently concluded Divali Nagar celebrations, “Loka Sangraha”, “welfare of the world”, which emphasized collective welfare and social harmony.

My contribution today will focus on three interdependent health-related

pillars. These are one, health and health care delivery: Are we ensuring universal access, genuine equity and measurable outcomes? Two, climate and the environment: How can we better align environmental and public health goals? And three, fiscal fairness, which I think is a common thread: Are our revenue-generating measures socially just and economically balanced?

These issues intersect. When a patient has to wait months for surgery, has to inhale polluted air, has no choice but to live in substandard housing, or must choose between paying for food or paying for medicine, these are not isolated concerns. These are social determinants of health that call for an integrated policy approach.

Madam Vice-President, before proceeding further, it would be remiss of me as a health care worker myself not to commend the thousands of dedicated health professionals across Trinidad and Tobago, who continue to serve under immense pressure. I know the long hours, the personal sacrifices and the unwavering sense of duty that underpin their service. We must never forget the courage displayed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when so many stood on the frontline before vaccines were available.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: Many citizens are alive today because of their devotion. That brings me to my first pillar for discussion, health and health care delivery. Within the budgetary allocation of the Minister of Health, I noted several commendable initiatives: The medical equipment upgrade programme, with \$60 “muh-muh-muh million” allocated—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: Sorry, I cannot help myself—the hospital refurbishment programme at \$35 million; and continued support for specialized health care

services through public-private partnerships valued at \$130 million.

5.05 p.m.

These initiatives demonstrate a commitment to modernizing infrastructure and improving service delivery. In many ways, the real test of these initiatives lies not in the number of machines purchased or facilities refurbished but in the everyday experience of patients navigating the health system. The Government could strengthen its position by ensuring that such investments are accompanied by performance indicators focused on patient outcomes such as shorter waiting times, improved clinical recovery rates and measurable gains in quality of life.

Trinidad and Tobago, like many developing nations, faces a double burden of disease, enduring communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, dengue and influenza while simultaneously grappling with non-communicable diseases, or NCDs, like diabetes, hypertension and heart disease.

Last month, September 2025, the World Health Organization released its updated recommendations for the influenza vaccine composition for the Southern Hemisphere 2025 flu season, a reminder of how quickly viral strains evolve. As the influenza season commences, the Government may wish to consider ensuring that of \$77,650,000 allocated to vertical services and of the \$1 million set aside for Promotions, Publicity and Printing that sufficient resources are directed to the expanded programme of immunization with urgent attention being paid to influenza vaccination. The flu season runs from October through April with peak activity between December and February or in Trini parlance, between Christmas and Carnival. Let us remember that prevention through immunization saves both lives and future healthcare cost from hospital visits and admission.

Non-communicable diseases, NCDs, meanwhile account for over 60 per cent of all deaths in Trinidad and Tobago. NCDs are not only medical conditions, they

pose economic, social and developmental challenges. They reveal inequities in access to healthcare and highlight the urgent need for preventive strategies at the community level. I therefore commend the signing of the Country Cooperation Strategy 2025—2030 between the Ministry of Health and the Pan American Health/World Health Organization. It is five strategic priorities from strengthening universal health systems to addressing the impact of climate change on health are both progressive and holistic. But the while the grass is growing, the horses are starving. More citizens would benefit if these priorities were translated swiftly into operational plans within the regional health authorities complete with timelines, community outreach targets and measurable health outcomes.

Madam Vice-President, primary healthcare is the foundation of a health nation. It is our first line of defence. The most effective healthcare system is one that prevents illness before it begins. Prevention, education and early intervention are cost-effective, saving lives as well as money. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Many health centres, the first point of contact for citizens, still struggle with staff shortages and outdated equipment.

At the Standing Finance Committee last Thursday, the hon. Minister of Finance gave an undertaking to provide a breakdown of the regional health authority vacant posts referenced in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, line Item 009: Other Transfers, sub-Item 01. I am hopeful that the Government intends to direct a portion of the vacant post allocation of \$165.9 million specifically towards filling posts at the primary care level, ensuring that the health centres are adequately staffed. Additionally, publication of an annual regional health authority workforce report showing which facilities received additional personnel and what impact that had on service delivery, would not only demonstrate accountability but also reassure citizens that the resources invested are

improving care where it is needed most.

Madam Vice-President, I turn now to the Chronic Disease Assistance Programme, CDAP, one of the most tangible manifestations of Government's social responsibility. For many citizens, CDAP represents not policy in theory but policy in action. I welcome the Ministry's decision to establish a review committee to evaluate the existing CDAP item list. This initiative is timely and necessary. As an ophthalmologist, I must respectfully ask the Government to consider expanding the current review to include first-line glaucoma medications. Glaucoma is widely recognized as a non-communicable disease of the eye and remains the leading cause of preventable blindness in our country.

The World Health Organization and the World Bank have noted that blindness prevention is among the most cost-effective health interventions globally. Early detection and affordable access to eye care and eye medications save not only sight but future healthcare costs and social support expenditure. Many patients fail to use their prescribed eye drops regularly because they simply cannot afford them. More citizens would benefit if the Government explored strategic procurement of high-quality generic glaucoma medications, especially through existing Trinidad and Tobago-India bilateral partnerships.

India's pharmaceutical sector, one of the largest producers of affordable generic and biosimilar medicines, presents an opportunity to lower drug cost without comprising quality. Indeed, when India provided 20 dialysis units, two C ambulances and hosted a prosthetic limb camp benefiting 800 citizens, it did more than supply equipment. It demonstrated compassion in healthcare. The Government could further value—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: The Government could add further value by ensuring that

the electronic prescription, the e-prescription service, when introduced, is used to assist in monitoring prescription use, identifying gaps, updating the CDAP list annually and preventing wastage. Through such integration, Trinidad and Tobago can stretch every healthcare dollar further while widening access to life-saving and sight-saving medicines.

Madam Vice-President, the establishment of the surgical backlog committee is another practical step towards resolving the health system challenges. The focus on ophthalmology, orthopedics, gynaecology and neurology is appropriate given their impact on quality of life and productivity. The external patient programme allowing public patients to access procedures in private institutions remains a pragmatic measure to address capacity constraints but this appears to have become a permanent fixture with an increasing budgetary allocation. The allocation for fiscal year 2026 is 130 m-m-million compared to 120 million for fiscal year 2025 which this programme expended in funding dialysis, cardiac and surgical procedures for hundreds of citizens.

Let me breakdown the numbers. The average cost in the external patient programme for renal dialysis per patient was \$133,689 with 748 patients benefiting. The average cost per cardiac patient was \$16,298 with 859 patients benefiting and the average cost per vitrectomy eye surgery was \$61,225 with 98 patients benefiting. These figures underscore the value of partnership but also invite reflection. The Government could perhaps justify its continuation of these programmes by complimenting financial reports with clinical outcome audits, tracking improvements in survival and vision restoration. Transparency in outcomes would enhance confidence and ensure that we have not merely spent but that we have spent well.

At the same time, more value would be added if some of these funds were

redirected towards building in-house specialist capacity within the public service. Our partnership with India could again be pivotal expanding to include surgeon exchange and specialist nursing training programmes, which would help build sustainable expertise within our public health system.

Furthermore, a small portion of the \$100 million dialysis budget for fiscal year 2026 redirected towards early screening, dietary education and community-based diabetes management to prevent kidney failure and diabetic retinopathy would be far more cost effective than perpetually funding dialysis and vitrectomy surgeries. In this way, we would move closer to a health-care model that is preventive and sustainable. However, prevention must be more than a sound bite. It must be measurable and it must be institutionalized.

I will refer to my specialty of ophthalmology, for instance, diabetic retinopathy, one of the leading causes of preventable blindness in Trinidad and Tobago. Thousands of our citizens live with diabetes and many will develop eye complications. Early detection and modern treatments can preserve vision in the vast majority of cases. Currently, eye injections, proven to halt diabetic eye damage, remain unavailable in the public system. Ranibizumab, which is manufactured by Novartis, India and marketed under the name Accentrix, has been considered by the National Drug Advisory Committee, NDAC, for inclusion in the national drug formulary. The Government could further demonstrate its people-centred ethos by proceeding with bulk procurement of this anti-VEGF drug from India. Diagnostic infrastructure that enables early detection of diabetic retinopathy is equally important.

The \$60 million medical equipment upgrade programme can have an even greater impact if procurement of optical coherence tomography or OCT machines were evenly distributed across all regional health authorities. As it stands, in the

2026 Budget, one RHA is earmarked for two OCT machines while another has none. It is not equity when patients from one RHA have access to imaging at no cost while others in another RHA must pay private institutions out of pocket to access the same test. The procurement process for critical diagnostic equipment should be streamlined, transparent and equitable across regions.

Madam Vice-President, when it comes to vision care, delay is destructive. Every month, without proper imaging and without access to eye injections, means more undiagnosed and untreated eye diseases causing blindness and greater cost to the State when these patients require vitrectomy surgery down the line.

5.20 p.m.

As the saying goes, “a stitch in time saves nine.” Ultimately, the goal must be to evolve from a curative to a preventive health care model, one that screens early, treats affordably, and empowers citizens with education. In doing so, we preserve not just sight, but dignity, independence, and productivity.

My second pillar for discussion is climate change, the environment, and human health. Madam Vice-President, I commend the Government for recognizing the link between environmental stewardship and public health.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: Climate policy is, in fact, health policy. Our nation is a small island developing State—yes, Sen. Nakhid, a small island developing State—and stands on the frontline of environmental change, as evidenced by coastal erosion, floods, heat waves, air pollution, and more frequent and severe hurricane systems. I pause here to ask that we keep our fellow Caricom citizens in Jamaica in our thoughts and prayers as Hurricane Melissa will make landfall in Jamaica—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray:—as a rare category five hurricane in the early hours of tomorrow morning. Climate change brings with it direct health consequences from vector-borne disease outbreaks, such as dengue, to respiratory illnesses caused by inhalation of micro-plastics, which originate from the breakdown and degradation of larger plastic items like bottles and bags. I therefore welcome the 5 per cent tax on single-use plastics—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray:—as a meaningful step forward. There will be even greater benefit if this policy evolves into an outright ban, coupled with incentives for reusable packaging in line with the end goal of the Sustainable Packaging Coalition of advancing and strengthening the business case for more sustainable packaging.

The Government's plan to earmark revenue from plastic taxes for national recycling programmes, public education waste management initiatives, and public environmental education is commendable. Every dollar spent on preventing environmental degradation saves many more health care costs later.

Similarly, transport emissions contribute significantly to respiratory illnesses. Public transportation is unreliable and potentially dangerous, and I understand the desire to provide reliable transport in this crime-filled environment. The decision to increase the maximum allowable age of imported used private cars to six years and light commercial vehicles to 10 years could be balanced by introducing an emissions tax modeled on the London ULEZ charge and the Congestion Charge.

ULEZ is the Ultra-Low Emission Zone in London, and the charge applies if you drive an older car, van, motorcycle, or moped. Vehicle emissions in Trinidad and Tobago have significantly increased in recent years due to rising vehicle

numbers contributing to air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. However, at present, there are no standards for motor vehicle emissions. According to the Minister of Works and Infrastructure website, motor vehicle inspections do not currently include an assessment of emissions.

Perhaps it is time for the implementation of a vehicle emissions testing programme in Trinidad and Tobago, as has been previously proposed. I hope that this would be part of the National Climate Change Policy, which aims to reduce or avoid greenhouse gas emissions.

Control of vehicle emissions falls under the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act Chap. 48:50. Part VI, section 100 of the Act allows the Minister:

Subject to negative resolution of Parliament, to make regulations in respect of health, safety, or environmental matters with respect to the registration of motor vehicles or trailers, including the prescribed vehicle emissions, use of unleaded fuels, and vehicle specifications for motor vehicles or classes of motor vehicles for the purpose of registration.

Legislative amendment to incorporate emissions testing into motor vehicle inspection could facilitate the addition of an appropriate emissions tax, added to the \$300 motor vehicle inspection fee. Older, higher-emissions vehicles could incur an emissions tax, creating both a health and environmental incentive. The additional revenue generated could be used to fund public transport and transit improvements. Madam Vice-President, when we protect the environment, we protect not only the lungs, but also the futures of our citizens.

The final pillar for the discussion is fiscal fairness. Madam Vice-President, fiscal fairness is the lifeblood of social equity, and I understand the Government's attempt to capture income currently outside the formal system through the landlord business surcharge. Is the intention then for other groups earning undeclared

chargeable income to be targeted next? Unemployed junior doctors who do home visits, for example, or teachers who give extra lessons? I am just asking. That is a thriving trade of undeclared income. Anybody who has had a child who has done SEA can attest to that.

With respect to the landlord business surcharge, clarification is needed as to whether this measure overlaps with existing income tax laws. Currently, rental income is already taxable under the Income Tax Act Chap. 75:01, although exemptions are granted for new construction in certain circumstances. Twenty-five per cent tax is paid for chargeable income of \$1 million or less, and 30 per cent for chargeable income of more than \$1 million. Moreover, many residential property owners who may also be landlords and who are law-abiding citizens, paid property tax prior to the April 2025 general elections.

Does this mean that law-abiding landlords would be double taxed, or triple taxed, having paid income tax, property tax, and now the landlord business surcharge? Offset mechanisms such as crediting property tax against the surcharge, exempting new constructions that meet the criteria, or allowing rental income to be included in the personnel allowance threshold of \$90,000 for low-income earners should be considered.

Landlords are not a homogeneous group. Some own large commercial complexes, others are retirees renting a single annex or spare room to supplement modest pensions. A tiered phased approach, as suggested by the Association of Real Estate Agents, could, therefore, achieve greater fairness, perhaps starting with commercial properties before extending to residential units.

These recommendations could add real value to the final framework, balancing revenue generation with social equity. Small landlords and pensioners should not be unduly burdened and accused of tax evasion while multinationals

continue to engage in transfer pricing. That is not equity. Taxation should demonstrate fairness and reinforce public trust. Madam Vice-President, health in its fullest sense remains the truest measure of national prosperity. This budget reflects investment in new medical equipment, hospital refurbishments, digital health transformation and infrastructure, and international cooperation. It also demonstrates recognition of the threat posed by climate change.

Further good faith could be built by embedding prevention and social equity at every level of policy implementation. Let us measure success not merely by a balanced budget but by shorter waiting lists, cleaner air, reduced NCD-related morbidity and mortality, less blindness from glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy, and fairer taxation. Health is the responsibility of every Ministry, every community, and every citizen.

Madam Vice-President, through the Ministry of Health, the Government's policies will empower the capable. If the policies are also fair and equitable, they will also protect the vulnerable. As Mahatma Gandhi wisely said:

“It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver.”

I thank you, Madam Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Chote.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Sophia Chote SC: Madam Vice-President, thank you for the opportunity to address this honourable Chamber a bit earlier than I had anticipated, but not seeing anyone jumping to their legs, I thought I would take the opportunity early in the evening, rather than late at night. I wish to make a few points with respect to the budget and some of the issues raised therein.

I will do my best, I assure you, to try not to repeat what others have said

unless I absolutely have to. There is one area that I want to focus on, though, and that has to do with the NIS and the approach taken to the NIS. I have to address this issue because I think we must admit that the administration of the NIS system, as it stands now, is in a poor parlous state, and decisive action is long overdue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. S. Chote SC: For me, personally, it is lamentable that nothing has been done to ameliorate the situation, especially since we have known about this in this Parliament since 2018. And, I place on the record that in 2018, a joint select committee of this Parliament held an enquiry into the national insurance system. We heard from stakeholders from all over the country, we heard from citizens, and we reviewed what was then the 9th Actuarial Report of the National Insurance Board.

That report said that the fund was going to be depleted by 2029 to 2030. So, we knew that in 2018, and yet absolutely nothing was done. Now this is painful to me because the pensions provided under the NIS system are a cushion for many of the workers who have spent their lives in low-income jobs; they rely on these pensions.

Now it was not an isolated report in 2018. This matter, or this state of affairs, continued to be a live issue when I checked parliamentary records. The report was laid in Parliament, and then, as is required, the then Minister of Finance was required to provide a status report, which he did in 2018.

5.35 p.m.

And he provided a further report in 2021. By this time, the 10th Actuarial Review of the NIB had been published. But I ought to say, while we call it the most recent one, it was actually dealing with the 2016 situation. But that did not say anything new. It confirmed the fact that this state of affairs needed

remediation, and it needed remediation immediately. It appears as though no one listened. Parliament's work was ignored. While these reports were made to Parliament, no steps were taken. We continued as before.

For those who may not understand how this system works and how it has worked since inception, there are basically three branches of the NIS. You have the short-term branch that deals with sickness, maternity, funeral benefits and that kind of thing. You have the long-term branch, which is where the heaviest drawdowns come from: pensions, invalidity and survivor pensions. And then you have the other smaller branch of employment, injury. What has happened is that we have never put as much into NIS or NIB as we have taken out, and that has continued historically. And NIB's investments have not increased. In fact, they have gone down. Our foreign investments have contracted, obviously, because if you do not have forex, what are you going to be investing?

So we have got to a situation where NIB's 2024 report, which is on its website, shows that we are now at a situation where 83.45 per cent of payouts fall within the category of long-term. I am surprised that the system has not already collapsed, because how have we managed from 2018 to now, with no effective steps being put into place to stop this terrible slide, which would remove the social cushion that so many people rely on. I think there are well over 200,000 people who will rely on this cushion. It is amazing that this system has not collapsed, and I am grateful that some steps are at last being taken to remedy the situation.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. S. Chote SC: Now, whether these steps are sufficient or whether they will simply permit the NIS to have a longer life, I cannot say. People are concerned about the fact that we are extending the retirement age, but I have to tell you that in 2018, when that enquiry was done, other Caribbean countries were already

extending the retirement age or were contemplating it. So what we are doing now is nothing new. It fits in with the way in which other Caribbean territories, our neighbors, are managing their affairs. So there is nothing to be afraid of there. When I looked at—and I was trying to trace the history of how this issue was addressed to show that this was not a one-off, but this was a deliberate disregard for something which was important to the lives of many of our citizens, and I say it without apology.

I note that on the 25th of June, 2021, a statement was made in Parliament by the then Minister of Finance who advised—and this was three years after 2018—that contributions to the NIS had declined by 4 per cent, that there had been an increase in the number of beneficiaries, that administrative costs had increased by 14.3 per cent, and the net yield of investments in 2021 was about half of what it had been in 2019. So, not only was this system going down, but it was going down at a speed, and apparently, nobody was prepared to put a boulder on the road to try to stop it. So I have to say that I am grateful that steps are being taken. The steps may have to be vigorous, but I think it is something we have to endure.

Madam Vice-President, you will forgive me if I pause in my speech or in my contribution to you because, as I said, I had thought that I was speaking later in the day, but it appears fortune favored me today. There are a few other things I want to address: manufacturing and tariffs. Now, I cannot avoid that word. I have not heard it much in the debate so far, but how are we going to deal with these tariffs? I appreciate that the greatest impact of these tariffs will be on the non-energy sector. But it is my understanding that the non-energy sector will include a sector that we want to revive and give life to, and that is the manufacturing sector. I have not seen anything or I have not heard anything to suggest how we as a country will be addressing these tariffs.

I want to talk about the taxes on beer, alcohol and cigarettes. I do not think that the huge increase which is being contemplated is appropriate, simply because it hurts revenues. It means that everybody who has a bar, a parlor, a restaurant, who has any small business in the entertainment industry, whether year-round or for Carnival, will be hurt by this huge escalation in cost. By all means, put T&T first, put the tax on what we import in terms of beer and alcohol, but leave what we make here at a reasonable price or at an affordable price for our citizens. That is my respectful suggestion.

In terms of going back to tariffs, I will say that I also wondered why tariffs were not spoken about, because surely it is going to impact what we import. We import food, we import pharmaceuticals. We import things like feed for poultry and other animals. This is going to affect our food bill. Why are tariffs not being spoken about? What is the plan for the tariffs? Is there some sort of quid pro quo that I do not know about, or we have not been told about? But it is certainly something that we must take into account when we are dealing with a budget debate.

Tax on landlords, 3.5 per cent tax. There are certain aspects of this that we have to consider. One, many of our citizens live in multi-generational homes, so granny might be the landlady for the grandchildren and so on. Is that contemplated? Is it now contemplated that such a person will be paying this additional tax? Landlords could also be described as people who run Airbnb's, guesthouses, and bed and breakfast establishments. All of this is going to impact the tourism industry. Are these people now going to be taxed this 3.5 per cent? Now, I think we have to take into account or we must accept that budgets in these times are conservative. I get that, I understand it. You have to be conservative, but at the same time appreciate that there are citizens who are trying to be

enterprising and to add to their incomes by starting small businesses. And you do not want to impose something like a tax which will dissuade them and which will make it impossible for them to have a decent living for their families.

Now, law, justice and national security. I was really hoping that I would have heard something about these areas because that is my thing. I wanted to hear what was being said. I saw figures being allocated, but nothing was really said about how these moneys were going to be spent. Well, that does not prevent me from putting a few of my views on the record. Because the judiciary, after all, is an arm of the Executive, and since 2020, this institution has reached a devalued state and continues to be devalued. Apparently, the Leader of Government Business wants to correct me on my learning of the law, but I will ask him if he could do that outside of my contribution and not during my contribution. So, I think I would have liked to have heard in the budget presentation what was planned for the judiciary in terms of plant and equipment.

Our citizens live in a country where, since 2020, courthouses have not been opened. There has been a devaluation of the justice system in terms of its transparency and accountability. We need to spend money on opening courthouses across Trinidad and Tobago. The most egregious examples of virtual court, which was sold to our citizens as being cost-cutting and financially viable, resulted in instances or examples like these:

- A litigant appearing without a shirt in court.
- A police prosecutor appears in a tropical short-sleeve shirt, rocking back in a chair while he addresses a court.
- People driving their cars and talking to the court.
- Poor people having to reveal their humble homes with holes in their

galvanize, unplastered walls and chickens in the yard while they attended court on their phones.

- Adjudicators refusing to show their faces or turn on their cameras or sitting in backgrounds where their faces are not visible.
- People knocking attorneys and litigants off virtual platforms to give decisions in their absence.
- Inadequate bandwidth to allow all parties in a case to be seen and heard.
- Public trials guaranteed by our Constitution are done in private.
- Stymieing of legislation like AJIPA, which was intended to accelerate the process of criminal justice by permitting judicial officers to send electronic messages.
- Permitting delays.
- Delisting matters and simply not hearing cases.

That is the face of justice which we face today. And I certainly would have liked to have heard a bit more about how this situation is going to be corrected.

The DPP's office, well, soon it might just be the DPP himself because almost all of his staff is gone at the higher levels or middle management. Unfortunately, many of them went to the judiciary, who happily took them. We have to understand that the endgame of crime-fighting necessarily involves funding of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and proper management of the courts. That is the endgame. That is where people get convicted, that is where they get punished, that is where they get sentenced, and that is where they get sent to jail.

5.50 p.m.

So, we need to address this and we need to fill in this picture for the citizens of this country, so that they can be reassured that these matters will be addressed,

and addressed in short order by this administration, because it is certainly has been overlooked by the last.

Now, just a few points, just in closing, I am not going to address every single thing that I thought was good or not so good in the budget, but I did like the suggestion, in terms of the screening of children. I thought that the age of four to five was because this is when they would be starting school. So, I understood that that was the reason for the screening at that point. I think our system has to be nuanced to provide good-quality education for students who are differently-abled and not only those who can survive in what we refer to as “a normal school environment”. So, I commend that effort.

I commend the introduction of ASYCUDA, in terms of the organization of Customs. I simply ask that consideration be given to having it nuanced to our local context and that all necessary laws be amended to ensure that its operation is effective. Thank you, Madam Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Roberts-Radgman.

Sen. Melanie Roberts-Radgman: Good afternoon, Madam Vice-President, and let me begin by congratulating you on your ascension to this new role. I quite like it for you. I am a girl’s girl, so congratulations to you.

And because I am a girl’s girl, Madam Vice-President, allow me a few minutes to address something that has affected me as a black, Afro-Trinbagonian woman existing in this Parliament, something that occurred last week. Now, during the Standing Finance Committee sitting, there was an image that was taken off from the parliamentary broadcast channel, and it was of my colleague, Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly. It was taken and it was altered. I am actually becoming quite impassioned about it, because I am very aware that as I speak about this, I may

very well be the next target of this vicious attack. Nonetheless, they took an image of her hair and they altered it and they circulated it with the intent to insult her and to bring her down; her black hair.

Today, I stand and I wear my locs in protest of the racism and the misogyny that was meted out to someone, who is highly intelligent, highly qualified, highly educated, with a PhD in Biochemistry—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—a black colleague who stood here, like myself—she stood in the other place and she contributed so admirably to this very budget exercise. While she stood in defence of our nation and asked the questions that members of the public want to have answered, she was being attacked. I will not call the name of the culprit who perpetrated such an attack, but what I will do is demand that they apologize for it, that they apologize to all black women, like myself, who enjoy wearing our locs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: And I dare him, Madam Vice-President, I dare him to step out of his lane and try that again. I dare him.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Madam Vice-President, at a time when our country is as divided as it is, we have no business in this Senate carrying out those kinds of attacks and those kinds of divisions against anyone in here or outside. We need to do better than that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Thank you for your kind indulgence.

Sen. Allahar: Who is that?

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: The person knows himself, Sen. Allahar.

Nonetheless—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: No, no, no, no, no. We do not behave like that over here.

Now, let me get down to the business of today. And I start by saying this, this Government has not done Tobago any favours, and I was hoping that I would hear a bit more about Tobago before I rose. But I make it very clear, from what I have heard so far, the Government has done Tobago no favours.

It was just in December 2024, a few months ago, that the then PNM Government brought the Tobago Island Government Bill and the Constitution (Amdt.) Bill to this Parliament. Now, those Bills ensured that Tobago, the THA, received a minimum budgetary allocation of 6.8 per cent of the national budget; 6.8 per cent, at the very least, guaranteed to the people of Tobago, guaranteed to be managed by the Tobago House of Assembly. It was the same UNC, who was then in opposition, and they opposed, refused, rejected, denied and deprived us in Tobago of a fair share of the national spend. The People's National Movement stood here and asked the Parliament simply to treat Tobago fairly. We have a budget where the theme revolves around fair treatment. And that was all that was asked by my party, by the then Government, let us treat Tobago fairly.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Let us allow the Tobago House of Assembly the opportunity to manage their affairs in some real way and the UNC said, no. They resoundingly said, no. They sat there with their little sellout friends from in Tobago, the TPP, and they maliciously kept money out of the hands of Tobagonians. And now it is very funny to me that they come here like Trojan horses and hand us a so-called 5 per cent allocation, 1.8 per cent less than what we

were guaranteed. And they expect us in Tobago to clap and to dance like they have done something so good for us.

This UNC Government and their little TPP friends in Tobago are like, as we like to call them, the “UNC B minus team” that we have in the Assembly right now, they are just as fake and fraudulent as this budget that they have now forced down the throats of Tobagonians.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Imagine it was this Government who robbed us—

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Quiet down, you had your turn—gave us a little piece of what they stole from us and then they are trying to convince Tobagonians that they did us a favour. “All yuh used tuh cut Jesus slippers”, fake and fraudulent. And if the UNC and the B minus team in Tobago really wanted Tobago to win, they would have agreed to the 6.8 per cent minimum that the People’s National Movement tried to secure for Tobago last year. The UNC did not give Tobago more. The UNC, backed by the UNC B minus team in Tobago, colluded to ensure that Tobago got \$1.5 billion less.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Madam Vice-President, I am going to come back to this issue about Tobago’s autonomy in due course. But right now, I am moved to shed some light on what has been happening in Tobago over the last four years, because it is important that this Parliament, this Senate and the nation understand what we have been faced with and what we have had to endure on our island.

I will slow down here. Let me slow down, because the situation is dire in Tobago and it needs to be properly ventilated. Now, over the past four years, Tobago has seen a gradual increase in our allocation. In 2022, we received \$2.5

billion. In 2023, we received \$2.6 billion. In 2024, we got \$2.7 billion, and then in 2025, \$2.96 billion. The THA has been given roughly \$11 billion over the past four years—roughly \$11 billion, and what do we have to show for it? Has any of this benefitted Tobagonians in any significant way?

Let me tell you what has been happening on the sister isle. The TPP has had this weird little secret affair with the UNC for the past four years. Now, they used to try to hide it. And up to a few months ago, they were vehemently denying any kind of connection whatsoever with the UNC. They were ashamed to associate themselves with that party. They were ashamed to let Tobagonians know that they were in bed with the UNC. For a long time, they pretended that the TPP had no connection with the UNC, and they disavowed any and all connection. But now they are very bold with it. As you can see, affairs are expensive things. So, my fake and fraudulent friends in Tobago have been taking Tobago's allocation each year, for the last four years, and what they have been doing is syphoning it back to their financiers and friends over here in Trinidad. Every single project, every major project done in Tobago, boom, it is a Trinidad contractor. It is no secret that he who pays the piper calls the tune. "And if yuh want tuh know who paying dem pipers in Tobago, just follow de money".

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Our lion's share of our allocation has been diverted towards Trinidad. Our locally-grown, locally-invested, locally-operating contractors have been blacklisted, they have been neglected and they have been scorned by the very Tobagonians who were meant to protect them and build them up in a certain kind of way.

It saddens me to inform this Senate now that a significant portion of the private sector has been killed off in Tobago by the UNC B minus team, while the

rest of them struggle to even remain afloat. We have had businesses closing down. We have had businesses sending workers home just because they cannot afford to sustain these blacklisted businesses.

I recall at one point, I think it might have been in 2022, where our Chief Secretary vehemently defended his administration's decision to award \$309 million; the sum of \$309 million awarded in infrastructure projects to contractors in Trinidad, and all of these awards took place within the period of one month. And when he was pressured, he continued with his support and he continued defending what he had done. And to place this into context in terms of these figures, it might seem smaller for Trinidad, because Trinidad's spend is much more significant, it is bigger. But when you take \$309 million, think about our allocation for development this fiscal, this upcoming fiscal, and multiply that by 150 per cent, that is the figure that was taken and syphoned away back to Trinidad by the TPP administration.

Even as recently as last month, our minority leader stood in the Tobago House of Assembly and had taken the TPP administration to task for giving away a job, as simple as building an early childhood centre, to a contractor in Trinidad.

Now, Madam Vice-President, I want to make something very clear. Let me place this on the record. My sentiments here are not to be taken as anti-Trinidad. That is not what I am doing with my sentiments here. But we simply need to understand the nuances within the Tobago economy. Major spending on the island is undertaken by the THA. Our suppliers, our service providers, our vendors, our SMEs all rely on the THA's spending, which then stimulates and keeps our small economy running.

You see, Madam Vice-President, when a Tobagonian business receives a dollar, it is not very difficult to track the movement of that dollar through the

Tobago economy. Some goes to smaller businesses within the same sector or the same industry via subcontracts. We tend to subcontract out to other operators in our space. Some goes to workers, and then these workers and their families spend across various local sectors. So, when you start to talk about our supermarkets, your Bill Brown, your Penny Savers, your Viewport, Ms. Agnes up in Goodwood; when you start to talk about bakeries such as Breb's Bakery, Patricia's; even our reef tour operators, you have Alex, you have Frankie's; your market vendors, your mechanics, your food vendors, your hairdressers, your nail techs, your gardeners, your fishermen, butchers, credit unions, with each cent that is spent by a Tobagonian in Tobago, another sector of our local economy is strengthened.

Now, I am guessing that none of us—I am hoping that all of us are intelligent enough here, that I do not need to explain that the opposite stands true, when our already very limited development budget is diverted to non-Tobagonian contractors. We see very little to none of that money, and then our economy remains suppressed.

6.05 p.m.

Now, the People's National Movement understood this, and we understood this well, and prior to that plague that is the UNC B-minus team that we have in Tobago right now, we boasted about a thriving little private sector, and I will give you all a small example in the interest of time. Tobago has had a few housing projects over the years, and I want to pull out the Adventure Housing project, and I want to pull the Roxborough Housing Project, and these are two successful communities that were developed under the PNM-led THA. Now, the goal then, was not just to provide housing to families across the island, but it also was to engage, and build capacity among our local contractors, and our local service providers.

The Adventure Housing project, for instance, the responsibility for the building of that housing project, was spread out among five—five local contractors build the homes in Adventure, “Homes of Adventure”, and the thing is this, it is not just about building homes, Tobagonians got jobs, hardware got sales, persons with a little backhoe, and a little tractor got sub-contracted, because you see, here is how we operate in Tobago. When a local contractor gets a job, they will hire a few little labourers from right there in the village to perform the services. They will hire a mason from up Speyside, who they are accustomed working with, they will tell you “Ah bringin ah man from Speyside, he coming and do some work down here for me”. They will run by the hardware down in Canaan to pick some material. They will pay a fella down the road, who has a van to cart away materials on the van back or some waste from the project site, on the van back. They will pay every little Tom, Dick, and Harry you could find.

A lady who sells food, they will bring her in to feed the workers, while the workers on the project. That is how we operate in Tobago, and it might seem very simple, but this is how, we in Tobago, ensure that our little local economy continues to thrive. Everybody gets a piece of the pie. The thing is, this is a concept that is very much rooted in our culture, and traditions. We like to say, “Learn to dance at home before yuh dance—”. Let me put it in pure Tobago parlance. “Dance ah yard, before you dance abroad”. It just means that you take care of home, you make sure your people are okay, before you start moving outward.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts-Radgman: You see, my party understands, and my party, the People’s National Movement, we understand that for the people of Tobago to win, we need to put our contractors first, we need to put our Tobago suppliers first, we

need to put our vendors first, we need to put artisans first, we need to put Tobago first, because what good is Tobago's allocation, if Tobagonians cannot benefit more than mere breadcrumbs from it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts-Radgman: While I am on this whole little UNC/TPP union, I just need to discuss one more thing. I need to caution Tobagonians on this. Tobagonians, need to take note of the Government's decision to completely eradicate the CEPEP and URP programmes on a national level. We in Tobago are not immune to the effects of such a decision. It is plain as day to see where this is going.

In 2021, when the TPP came into power, they promised us that no jobs will be lost. All over the election campaign, "Oh pro-Tobago, no jobs will be lost". As soon as they came in, they started slashing and dashing workers, including workers who worked in the CEPEP programme administrative office. In 2025, we saw that the UNC did the exact thing. They made promises, and they pushed this worker-friendly agenda, but then before the last ballot could have been counted, "boom", CEPEP and URP workers were gone. And then, when public cried out against it, they promised, "Hey, we will bring back these people", and then the fake and fraudulent budget showed up, and we heard "nah" the programme is no more. Two things quickly come to mind, "Show me your friends, and I will show you who you are". The other one is, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time". We know that the TPP is simply the UNC B-minus team that operates—[*Technical difficulties*]

Both parties have already shown us just how vindictive they are. CEPEP and URP workers in Tobago really should not think for a minute, that they would not suffer the same fate as their friends and their colleagues in Trinidad. It might

not be right away, because we are about to deal with a THA election, and you know they need to safe face, but it will soon come. We have a Chief Secretary, who has so far endorsed every single thing that this UNC Government does, reckless at is it, to the point that he has opened the endorsement bringing war to our shores. Imagine beautiful little Tobago, now has to be worried about war. Really!?! Do you really think that our Chief Secretary will break ranks on something like CEPEP and URP? Before I close off on this topic, I like the questions that Dr. Attz asked. She said, what is the multiplier effect of closing down these programmes? Now, can you imagine the impact that such a move will have on Tobago's economy? Can you imagine the social impact as well? The Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, used his 40 minutes, well 37 out of the 40 minutes to bash the PNM, and there is some weird obsession about the PNM that comes from that side, "I cyah understand it", but if that is their thing that is their thing. Madam Vice-President, \$182, 231,500 was allocated to his Ministry, and yet he has failed to account to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, for how any of this will be spent, and with the three minutes, it was exactly three minutes that he spent talking about employment. He mentioned the multiplier effect. But what he failed to ventilate for us, is the multiplier effect on the 40,000 people, actually 50,000 people, that his Government has unceremoniously fired over the past few months.

Now, let us dive deep into Tobago's allocation properly. The Tobago House of Assembly has been promised \$2.96 billion to manage its affairs. This amounts to 5 per cent of total national expenditure, and the Senate is just asked to note very quickly, that the Dispute Resolution Committee, DRC's recommendation refers explicitly to our allocations for recruitment, expenditure, and development programmes. That is the money that we use to manage our areas, and when I say

ours, I am talking about Tobago, the Tobago House of Assembly our areas of responsibility under the 5th Schedule. Now, Ministerial Heads do not fall under the purview of the THA, so, any spending that is done via the Ministry, should not be included when we calculate the percentage of the national budget that has been allocated to Tobago. This has become the practice, I know this has become the practice, but for the purposes of this debate, I wish to not conflate overall spending in a way that we mislead the public. The THA has been promised 5 per cent, for them to spend, and that is that.

Now, let us look at the allocation for Recurrent Expenditure, and this falls under Head 15 of the Draft Estimates. Tobago has been promised a sum of \$2,742,074,800 to treat with our recurrent expenditure. Now, this represents an increase of \$333,579,060 from last fiscal's allocation. Now, when the hon. Minister made this announcement during the reading of the budget, with some sort of—I do not know, it was unjustified exuberance, but nonetheless, it would have been easy to be misled into thinking that somehow, this was a win for Tobago, but of course the devil is in the details of this budget.

Now, on Friday during the Standing Finance Committee, and I need to commend my Opposition colleagues in the other place, for phenomenal job well done. The hon. Minister, revealed some concerning information, and there is quite a bit, but the bit—I will just get through a bit of it, in the interest for time. Now, I looked at few Sub-Heads, under the Office of the Chief Secretary. Sub-Head 02, line Item 015. My colleague in the other place flagged this, a brand new Sub-Item 27: Official Overseas Travel, \$195,000 taxpayers' dollars allocated to overseas travel all of a sudden. Now, according to the hon. Minister, when he was questioned about, where this just pop up from, all of a sudden this money pop up? The Minister said, this is a nominal sum placed there in the expectation of travel.

No concrete need for travel identified, but monies allocated so folks could play Dora the Explorer all over the globe.

Now, I am wondering how, all the people who have been crying in front of buildings in Tobago, in front of THA buildings, all over Facebook, in front of the various offices asking for their little money from performing in Heritage and performing for Carnival. I wonder how they feel, hearing that this has been allocated for Secretaries to just go and travel. No real plans, just give them some money. In some cases, \$400, \$500 \$1,500, and they cannot get their money, Tobagonians suffering, but we have this allocation here.

Now, I skipped ahead a few pages, once my colleague flagged that, I started going through. I looked at the Division of Finance, Sub-Head 02; line Item 19: Official Entertainment. Note, the actual expenditure for 2024, was \$7,599; \$7599 was the expenditure for 2024. This was for Official Entertainment. The Revised Estimate for 2025 was 50,000, yet come fiscal 2026, folks are asking for a \$100,000. Now, to entertain who or what?

During the Standing Finance Committee, the Minister really could not say, perhaps is to host a campaign launch, who knows, we are in the season. Now, while we are looking at the Division of Finance, Sub-Head 02, line Item 27, an increase in allocation for overseas travel. Division of Food Security, \$450,000 increase for overseas travel. Division of Tourism, \$300,000 increase for overseas travel. Division of Education, \$100,000 increase for overseas travel. Community Development, \$175,000 increase for official overseas travel. Settlements, \$500,000 aggregate increase for overseas travel. It just went on across the Divisions. Let me, hasten to add that maybe two Divisions reduced their allocations for overseas travel, but that is because in the last three years “dey palance so badly to the tunes of thousands of dollars traveling all over the world

that dey finally had to pat down”. They were looking little bad, and Tobagonians were complaining, and questioning it, so they finally pat down, and then when you look at the total THA’s overall allocation for official overseas travel, you would see that this has increased by \$2,870,000.

Now, outside of these areas that I have highlighted, I also need to draw the public attention to one other factor around the increased recurrent allocation, because once I saw the money increased, I wanted to know, well, what is being spend, and how does this benefit us in Tobago. The details is where you really find the devil. Now, we would have all recalled that back in November 2024, the then Prime Minister accepted the Salary Review Commission’s proposal for salary increases, for politicians, and other public officers. Now, a significant percentage of the increase in the THA’s allocation that we are seeing, is actually to account for the salaries in accordance with the approved SRC recommendations. So, if—that they did not want, that they kicked up against, but they happily enjoying it now.

In the mid-year review, we got 32 million for back pay, and for the salary increases, and they happily took it.

Hon. Member: “Nobody give it back”?

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: No, no, they did not give it back they happily accepted it, and went home with their bags of money, and you heard no complaints. Now, let us look at the increase and the impact that these increased salaries has had on our allocation. So, if you look at for instance, Division 03/001/01, for instance. Sums allocated for payments of—and when I call these figures, I am removing any sums that were allocated for SRC arrears, in 2025, that is when they would have gotten their nice big, fancy back pay. Now, when you look at these Sub-Heads, you are noting an increase in allocation for salaries and COLA. At the Standing Finance Committee stage, the Minister actually confirmed

that, yes, the monies, and the increases that you are seeing under these line Items are actually to account for SRC salary increases. You will observe pretty much the same occurrence across the various Divisions.

So, once you take of the one-off arrears that were paid in 2025, for instance, in Division 2, Office of the Chief Secretary, line Item 01/001/01, there is a \$1.5 million increase earmarked for certain salaries. If you look at Division 1, which is the assembly legislature, there is also a marked increase, is the same for the Division of Food Security, same for the Division of Tourism, which also has an increase of \$1.2 million, which is earmarked for certain salaries.

Now, Madam Vice-President, I want to make it clear, my intention here, because I am not knocking the salary increase, the SRC made their recommendation, and our administration approved it. So, my intention really is just to help the Tobagonian public understand where this increase allocation is really going. Now, I strongly believe, and I have been saying this since my maiden contribution, we the Members of this Senate, we have responsibility to the people out there, to ensure that we present the information in a very clear manner, in a manner that they can understand, in a very transparent way.

6.20 p.m.

Now, the thing is, beyond the catch phrases and all the little soundbites, we need to really ensure that the people who are listening, the people who we are here serving, that they understand what we are doing when we come here, what we are doing when we go to the various Ministries and understand how that impacts their lives.

Now, I would have heard Sen. Dr. Attzs commend Minister Tancoo on his empathetic approach to presenting the budget, and I agree with her. But then, she went on to lament, much like other people, the omission of certain important

truths. So, to this end, I want to make this truth very, very, clear, Madam Vice-President. The majority of this purported increase in budgetary allocation for the Tobago House of Assembly is earmarked for increased trips. We have a lot of money marked for official overseas travel by the THA. We have increases earmarked for entertainment and revelry by the THA, and then we have money earmarked for increased salaries to public officials like the Office of the Chief Secretary, and then to pay the increased operational cost that has been imposed on the THA by virtue of the Government's new policies.

Now, before I move on from the allocation for recurrent expenditure, I need us to note one more thing. This bit bothers me and troubles me dearly. During the Standing Finance Committee's examination of Tobago's allocation, every single time the hon. Minister was asked about the sufficiency of allocations for various line items to treat with Tobago's business, his response was the same, "if it is not enough, they can come back and ask for more". So basically, Tobago's day-to-day affairs have been under-budgeted, and we should come here yellow-bellied and cap in hand, and ask for hopefully more when the UNC finds the money.

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: Mid-year review, mid-year review.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Mid-year review. For me, I am a little bit bothered because it seems like this Government has plenty money to find. They have to find money to pay PSA. They have to find money to pay for the NIS increases—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—they forgot to account for when they did their budgeting. They have to find money for the fake and fraudulent jobs that they are advertising somewhere about. Now, they have to find money for their comrades to run Tobago. "Is real clown ting with dis Government here."

Now, Sen. Dhanpaul took his nice time and he explained the Government's

dubious projections and creative accounting. And then, I heard Dr. Attzs ask several important questions, and I paused and said, “You know, I will come in a little bit later because I needed to hear answers.” And then we had a Senator legit get up and say, “Trust de process. Just trust de process. We go figure it out.” The thing is, I do not know that we could really trust these people.

Why are we talking about trust? Where is our CAF loan? We were promised a CAF loan during the mid-term review? “Tobago”, they said, “Aye, Tobago we love all yuh, we going to give you all ah CAF loan.” Now, I have not heard any further mention of it till today. As far as I am aware, this has not been disbursed to date. It is just a bunch of hot air like the Minister, huffing and puffing. And, let me save them the obligatory, “Well, the PNM approved the programme but never implemented it”, rebuttal that I know somebody is going to come with. In June, a promise was made. It is the end of October, and up to now, the promise has not been delivered.

Now, let us turn our attention to the funding allocated for Tobago’s development. And, here is where the Assembly, the THA, really gets to exercise its discretion in rolling out plans, policies, and programmes that improve our lives on the island. Here is where Tobago, the THA, really has a say in its own affairs. When you see a development allocation, you know well right, I could do something for my island. And actually, no, let me use the wording provided in the Government’s *Public Sector Investment Programme* manual. No, no, no, I have it here. Lovely:

“This is a vital planning and budgeting tool that enables the Government...”—and in our case the THA—“...to translate its long-term vision and policy objectives into tangible projects. Through these funding mechanisms, the PSIP plays a crucial role in advancing Tobago’s growth

and improving the quality of life for all as it relates to fiscal year 2026 theme - Trinidad and Tobago First: Building Economic Fairness Through Accountable Fiscal Policies.”

So this is our planning and budgeting tool.

In 2024, the Central Government gave the THA \$205 million to advance its development agenda. This year, the UNC-led Central Government has promised the THA \$201.5 million. So this Government who claims to love Tobago so much has given TPP its lowest ever allocation for developmental programmes since the TPP has been in office.

Imagine, those are your friends, and for the four years that they have been in office, their friends are finally here in central Trinidad, and now we get our lowest ever development allocation. Something seems off there. The TPP needs to watch their friends, because their friends are fake and fraudulent. And, it is interesting because the same Chief Secretary who criticized and chastised the previous Government for \$205 million, is now praising this Government for \$201.5 million. Old people does say “ungratefulness, worse than witchcraft.” I wish somebody could help me understand this level of hypocrisy.

I will read, just to support what I am saying, I wish to read from a *Guardian* article published online on October 1st, 2024. So just over a year ago. It states:

“For yet another year, Chief Secretary Farley Augustine is not happy with Tobago’s Budget allocation, with members of his executive describing it as ‘fiscal wickedness in high places.’”

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: “Hmmm.”

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: “Hmmm.” Then a few paragraphs down the article continues:

“...Petal Ann-Roberts, Tobago’s Finance Secretary, condemned the island’s

\$2.5 billion budget allocation, calling it ‘empty, lengthy, and oppressive.’

Roberts was frustrated over the \$1.2 billion cut...”

Madam Vice-President: Senator, five more minutes.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Already? Jesus Christ. Alright.

“She said that this shortfall forced Tobago to rework all its plans, calling the allocation ‘fiscal wickedness in high places.’”

Now, let me go quickly back to 2023, the good old days when we used to get budgets on time. “This one was from October 3rd, so we already had we a budget. Mmmm.”

For context, in 2023, the PNM-led Central Government initially allocated \$260 million to THA for development programmes.

Note that that allocation actually increased, they got closer to \$300 million that year. But at this point, the THA was commenting on the \$260 million. And this comment came from Deputy Chief Secretary Faith B. Yisrael. She said:

“...yesterday it seemed as though that the Government was actively trying to use the budget to ensure that Tobagonians do not realize the kind of development they think they deserve.”

Two paragraphs down, she is quoted as saying:

“...when you look at the fact that Tobago for the entire fiscal year expected to use \$260 million for all of our development, we recognize what’s happening,”

Now, let us return to the \$201.5 billion allocation of 2025. I am reading from *Guardian* Media article of October 14th this year—

Sen. Roberts: You real like *Guardian*.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—where Finance Secretary Petel Ann Roberts said:

“...the team was ‘quite pleased with what we have been allocated’, adding

that it will help Tobago ‘develop at a different momentum versus the last 20-odd years.’”

“My goodness, as my good friend, wuh he does say? Sen. Baptiste wah yuh does say? My gawd!” There is so much to unpack here:

“\$205 million for development...”—programme—“...fiscal wickedness in high places.”

“Oh Lord we go dead.”

“...\$260 million for development programmes...”

Tobagonians are being deprived of development. “Allyuh wicked.”

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: No.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: \$201 million for development programmes, we are:

“quite pleased...”

“Dis hadda to be some kind of Zander maths because it eh mathsing at all.” These are the words of the UNC B team.

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: Farley Augustine.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: “Farley Augustine, de maths eh mathsing at all. Allyuh takin ah page outta Zander book. If yuh leave it up to dem over dey, most ah half cud really be de most.”

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Alright, I wish I had some time to really go through. But, Madam Vice-President, how much time I have?

Madam Vice-President: Two minutes.

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: Two minutes.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Two minutes, alright, so let me close. Alright—

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: Three minutes.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Three minutes, alright. Let me close by returning—

I will ventilate the rest of this on the media, catch me on the media. Alright, let me return to the issue of Tobago's autonomy. And here, I really need to echo the Leader of the Opposition's statement that this Government and their comrades in Tobago owe the people of Tobago an apology.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Years of consultation. All the work put in by highly experienced, talented, and devoted, and educated Tobagonians to bring the Tobago island government legislation to fruition. And actually, I recall being a brand new grievance officer up at the PSA, and going with Watson Duke to meet Orville London, he was then Chief Secretary up in Calder Hall, because he was hosting updated consultations on this very Bill. And, after we consulted on this matter, the UNC in Trinidad and the UNC B-minus team played in our faces. I filed a question, but I will ask it here again. What is this Government proposing for the island of Tobago? Where is your legislative agenda? And is the issue of autonomy for Tobago on that agenda?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: I ask these questions on behalf of the late Hochoy Charles. I ask it on behalf of people like Deborah Moore-Miggins. I ask it on behalf of people like Orville London. I ask it on behalf of even people like Brother B. He raised the issue with me again last week. And, as a matter of fact, I raise it on behalf of the 60,000 residents of Tobago who are crying out—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—for greater fiscal and financial flexibility for the Tobago House of Assembly that govern our affairs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: The only persons that I do not ask this question on

behalf of is our two confused MPs in the other place, and our Chief Secretary who has seemed to lost his direction.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: If you say that, you say that. Thirty seconds. Alright. Here is the thing. Had this UNC Government and UNC B-minus team in Trinidad—

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: Tobago.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—in Tobago, allowed the island government Bill to pass, we would have secured a minimum 6.8 per cent allocation in the same budget. We would have received an additional \$1.5 billion in funding, and we would have had a Bill. Had these Bills passed, we would have had an allocation that actually supports the development agenda for the Tobago House of Assembly and Tobagonians.

I will end, three seconds, I will end my contribution with the words of the great and honorable Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, some of my political colleagues believe they can—[*Inaudible*]

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

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Vieira.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Anthony Vieira SC: Thank you, Madam Vice-President. Madam Vice-President, originally my intention was not to participate in this debate. Truth be told, there is much in this budget that I like.

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

Sen. A. Vieira SC: There are some aspects that cause me concern, but on balance, given that this is a new administration, my thinking is that it is still too soon to assess. My thinking was to see how things play out over the next year and then

draw my conclusions. Not so much on what is said, but on what was done. But there is an elephant in the room, an elephant that compels me to speak. One that has not been acknowledged or spoken about, and this has to do with a new uncertainty. Uncertainty, not only in our economy, but in our region and the wider world.

The fiscal measures before us today are being considered against the backdrop of growing tension between Venezuela and the United States. With Trinidad and Tobago, by virtue of geography and history, standing in the middle of this geopolitical cross current. Now, ordinarily a budget is an exercise in domestic planning. Revenues, expenditures and priorities for the coming year. But when the winds of global politics begin to shift, those plans can be tested in ways that no spreadsheet can anticipate. The question therefore arises, can we assume that life in Trinidad and Tobago will proceed as normal? Or will these hostilities render our budget redundant even before the ink is dry?

6.35 p.m.

Madam Vice-President, the tension between Venezuela and the United States is not new, but it has entered a dangerous new phase. In recent weeks, Venezuela has condemned joint military exercises between the United States and Caribbean partners, including operations involving U.S. naval vessels visiting Port of Spain. Our Government has rightly emphasized that such exercises are routine, transparent, and defensive. Yet, for our neighbour across the Gulf, these movements have been viewed as provocation.

Now, I am not looking to frighten the timid, nor am I one to advocate policies based on fear. Fear is a bad counsellor, and it is no great provider of wisdom. But we should recognize that we are operating in a heightened risk environment, one in which a diplomatic miscalculation could trigger a regional

incident. For a small island state positioned only a few miles from the Venezuelan coast, the potential spillover, whether military, humanitarian, or economic, cannot be ignored.

Let me say from the outset, I do not believe that these developments render the budget redundant. Trinidad and Tobago is not at war. Our institutions are functioning. Our people go about their daily lives. But the budget as presented, assumes a relatively stable external environment. It assumes that regional trade will continue unhindered, that energy exports will flow, and that investor confidence will remain intact. Those assumptions are now open to challenge, in my respectful view.

Our task, therefore, is to examine whether the fiscal plan before us has built-in resilience, whether it anticipates uncertainty, or whether it rests on fragile foundations. The first and most obvious risk lies in our energy sector, one of the very cornerstones of this budget. Trinidad and Tobago's gas and oil production depend heavily on cross-border cooperation and foreign investment.

The Dragon gas field project with Venezuela was intended to revive gas supply and to strengthen our downstream industries. Yet, a recent announcement from Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez proposing termination of the energy cooperation framework has cast doubt over its future. If hostilities escalate or sanctions tighten, that project and others like it could stall indefinitely.

The impact would not be immediate collapse, but a slow erosion of investor confidence, deferred investment decisions, and a tightening of fiscal space. Our budget projects significant revenue from the energy sector. But we in this Senate must ask, have these projections been stress-tested against geopolitical risk? What happens if international capital hesitates, or if insurance premiums rise on account of regional instability?

In recent months, several international energy auctions have attracted fewer bids than expected. Now, this is not necessarily a reflection of our geology, but of our geography; perceived regional risk. Foreign investors, particularly the Western multinationals, are cautious. They view the Caribbean Basin not only as an energy opportunity, but now as a potential theatre of confrontation between great powers.

Minister Swaratsingh spoke about moving beyond dependency on the energy sector, and—music to my ears. The Government should be commended for pursuing diversification and for strengthening relations with non-traditional partners, but prudence demands that we do not overstate likely inflows.

If the budget assumes robust energy revenue—and I think I heard an international oil price of \$73.25, and a natural gas of \$4.25—we must build a contingency buffer, a reserve to cushion against sudden external shocks. Otherwise, we risk being caught off guard, as we were in past cycles when projects stalled or prices fell.

Now, while I understand the sentiments behind the remark that Trinidad and Tobago is no longer waiting on the global winds to fill our sails, the reality is that geopolitical tension also brings with it human consequences.

We have already seen large numbers of Venezuelan nationals seeking refuge in Trinidad. To our credit, this country has managed that situation with relative compassion, though not without strain on public services and our local communities. If the current tension worsens, if conflict or further economic breakdown occurs across the Gulf, those migratory pressures are going to intensify. Our hospitals, schools, and social services have to be prepared to deal with that possibility.

It is therefore appropriate, I think, for the budget to include or at least anticipate humanitarian contingencies, funding allocations for border management,

refugee assistance, and community integration. These are not acts of charity. They are matters of national stability. We also have to be candid about security.

As a sovereign nation, Trinidad and Tobago cannot be complacent about the movement of military forces so near our borders. While we do not expect hostilities to directly involve us, we are nonetheless exposed to maritime risks, illegal crossings, armed trafficking, and accidental incursions. As such, I would like to urge that this budget make adequate provision for national security and coastal surveillance, not as an act of aggression, but as a matter of responsible preparedness. The cost of vigilance is always less than the cost of unpreparedness.

Madam Vice-President, the geopolitical situation also demands diplomatic finesse. Trinidad and Tobago enjoys long-standing relations with both the United States and Venezuela. We must not allow ourselves to be cast as a proxy or pawn in any confrontation. I like how Prime Minister Mia Mottley put it:

“...we”—should be allies—“of all, and satellites of none.”

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: This budget, while an economic document, must also reflect foreign policy coherence. Our trade, our energy diplomacy, and our humanitarian posture must all align with a clear national interest; peace, stability, and constructive engagement with all partners. Perhaps the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs could be tasked through this budget with preparing a geopolitical risk report, advising Cabinet and Parliament on emerging regional tensions and their likely fiscal impact. That would be an act of foresight.

We may or may not be on the brink of a dreadful precipice. I do not know. Time will tell. But even absent conflict, the mere perception of instability can drive up costs. Insurance premiums for shipping could rise. Importers may face delays or higher freight charges. In a small import-dependent economy like ours,

those costs translate quickly into inflation. The budget should therefore be tested under different price scenarios for fuel, food, and shipping. A sensitivity analysis would help policymakers and citizens alike to understand the range of possible outcomes. Fiscal planning without contingency is fiscal planning by hope.

So, Madam Vice-President, what is to be done? First, this Parliament should support the creation of a contingency fund, a dedicated reserve to address external shocks, whether natural or geopolitical. Second, we should encourage the Ministry of Finance to adopt flexible fiscal rules, for example, automatic expenditure adjustments if energy revenues fall below a defined threshold. Third—and others have said it—we must strengthen our domestic production base; agriculture, manufacturing, and creative industries, so that we are less exposed to external shocks. Resilience is not merely the ability to withstand crisis. It is the capacity to continue functioning in spite of it.

Finally, Madam Vice-President, the Government must communicate openly with the citizenry. Uncertainty breeds anxiety, and anxiety undermines confidence. The public should understand that while risks exist, the State is alert, it is capable, and prepared. Transparency builds trust. If adjustments become necessary later in the fiscal year, they will be better accepted if citizens know in advance that such possibilities were anticipated.

I began by asking whether this budget remains relevant in the face of possible hostilities between Venezuela, the United States, and ourselves. The answer, I believe, is yes. The budget remains relevant. Life in Trinidad and Tobago will, in all likelihood, proceed as normal. Our schools will open, our courts will sit, and our markets will trade. But it would be reckless to pretend that the world beyond our shores poses no threat. The true measure of a good budget is not whether it survives a calm year, but whether it holds firm when the storm

comes.

This is a time for sober management, for prudence, and for foresight. We cannot control what happens in Washington or Caracas, but we can control our preparedness. Let this budget therefore not only be a statement of expenditure, but a statement of resilience, a demonstration that Trinidad and Tobago understands its vulnerabilities and is determined to safeguard its sovereignty, its stability, and its people. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

6.50 p.m.

Madam Vice-President: I am not seeing anybody. Anybody? Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development.

[*Minister stood*]

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: “All yuh PNM collapse.”

Sen. Lewis: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Vice-President: Yes, because I was looking around for someone. I did not see—

Sen. Roberts: No, no, he will give way. He will give way to you.

Madam Vice-President: The Minister is giving way.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: We want to hear you, but the PNM are cowards. The PNM are cowards.

Hon. Senator: When UNC wins.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Francis Lewis: Thank you, Madam Vice-President. Thank you, colleagues. I appreciate it. I want to start my contribution by commending the Minister of

Finance, the Ministry's staff who worked on this and all who contributed to creating this budget. I have worked over my professional life on many budgets, including some that are very complexed, and I would have to guess that the development of a budget for a country is an order of magnitude of both complexity and difficulty that is well beyond what most people would deal with. But the fundamentals of budgeting remain.

A way that I chose to approach this budget, and I did this in previous budget contributions, is to use a very simple form of analysis called the traffic light analysis, in which I try to identify that which I think is green—using the colors of the traffic light. Green does not necessarily mean great, but it does mean good. Anything can be improved, so green is something you want to keep but you may need to improve it, but it is very worthwhile in keeping. It is a building block. Red, I am not persuaded. Maybe I do not have the information, maybe I do not have the insight, and I accept that. And yellow, using the colour analogy, is thoughts on innovation, experimentation, approaching things in perhaps a different perspective, so it can neither be green or red because you have not necessarily tried it yet.

In terms of the green, I commend the work being done and contemplated on the NIS. I think that is outstanding. I like the idea of 10 years looking forward. I have not seen the actuarial studies to know if the rates are the right rates, if the increases are the right increases, but that is a detail that can be corrected down the road. I value the approach, going forward, with the aim of strengthening the NIS.

In an earlier debate, we had a discussion around the Revenue Authority. The Government has chosen to go in a different direction, but it is direction that I support. Because however you do it, however organizationally you organize yourself, you still need to strengthen the people, the systems, the processes. And I

take the assurances—I mean, I know it is in the future that you would see a pay-off, because people are now being hired, systems are now being put in, so I am expecting that by the time we do a revenue review, by the time we come around to the next budget, a lot of what is planned, I hope, would be in place. I think it is a good start that that has been recognized, and it would appear, from all that has been said by a number of people, that work is being done there.

I think the work on transfer pricing is devilishly difficult. I think it is a worthwhile thing to start, where it will end with all the potential externalities that you really do not want to people to feel, investors to feel, that you are creating an unstable environment. I think that is a worthwhile initiative. And some of the green issues that are contemplated, I think, are worthwhile. I could go on. There are a number things that I think are very strong in the budget.

In terms of the red, it was red flags for me, would be, I do not believe your energy price forecast. Everything I have read suggests that there would be an expansion of energy production over the next several years, with the likelihood that price will drop. So, where the price is now at the mid-60s, depending on the index you use, we are projecting 70, and some of the things I have been looking at, the International Energy Agency, for instance, is projecting a price down in the 50s.

Now, it is not that I am wishing that we do not get a good price, but if you overprice, or if you overestimate your revenue, “yuh goin an ketch hell”. “We, the country, are goin to ketch hell”, because you going to have revenue from shortfalls that you should have anticipated.

I think the deficits are going to really put pressure on the Government, on the country, and the cost of servicing the external loans will create another set of pressures, and I am not sure that we have dealt with or started to address, and there may be discussions happening privately or confidentially regarding foreign

exchange. It is a burning issue. I work in business, and when I talk to people across businesses, and I say, "If you were me, what would you want to have said?" They say, "Oh gosh, bring us some predictability on foreign exchange." The sense I have is that our economic fundamentals, particularly with foreign exchange, are out of kilter, and that has to be fixed. I am not advocating a devaluation but it should not be off the table.

I was there, as some of you were, when the country had to take a 35 per cent devaluation in 1991, but that set the stage for success right through the 90s and into the noughts. And will it cause hardship? Probably, yes. I am not advocating for it, but I am saying it cannot be taken off the table because you have got to get the thing balanced. And right now, we are out of balance and it is reflecting throughout the economy and with parallel markets working.

The yellow has to do with how we are going to both, not only hire, but pay the officers that we need for the public sector. My sense in talking to people on the statutory commissions, and talking to the staff themselves and to PSs, is that the models we use make a series of assumptions historically. There was predictability. The problem is employment is a far more flexible concept today, and given the wage rates that we have for some of the jobs that need to be filled, with some of the expertise that need to be filled. I do not know that the rigidity of the present system, or what I see as the rigidity—maybe I am wrong—will serve as we flex to attract and hold the people that we will require.

I am not yet seeing incentives for export development, and I am going to deal with that a little bit later on. Digitization, I have heard a lot being said about it, I support it, but I am not yet confident. Now, I will be the first to say that in the world of techno junkies and techno peasants, I am probably at the techno peasants side, but I recognize that need, I applaud the recognition to move, but I am not yet

seeing exactly how we are going to convert systems. I once worked in a bank, and we introduced both telephone banking and internet banking. The technology is actually not hard. It had its own challenges, but it was not hard. Convincing people to change, that was devilishly difficult. I think the population is probably readier to change, but do not underestimate the difficulty of people changing practices of years.

In all of this, this introduces, for me, the question of what is the changing role of government, and how do we create a government and an institution, or institutions, that have to deal with VUCA?—VUCA, from the trade I work in, Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and—good Lord, I am forgetting the “A”. But the point is, in a world where things are uncertain, complex and continually changing, how do you create agility? And this is almost counter-intuitive, because the organization, and organizations, want stability, they want predictability. Yet, at the same time, you have to have the ability to change, and change fairly quickly.

Let me give you one practical example. How are we going to generate the tourism for the country? Standard practice is you go to a number of trade fairs. At the trade fairs, it is a marketplace, you encounter tour operators. The tour operators are trying to pull together airlines, hotels, ground transport, restaurants and the Government, and they are saying, “Okay, if I can get X number of people”—and they will describe the demographic and the potential spend—“what is the country going to support this, in terms of promotion?”

Our experience—and this is very direct experience. I worked for some years at “Bee-Wee” and subsequently, I have done work for the Trinidad Tourism Limited. The problem is that our systems are set that if the operator has a proposal, it has to come back. As it comes back, it has to meander through a long and often Byzantine process in order to get approval and by the time you indicate

interest, they are on to somewhere else, you have lost the opportunity, and I know the Minister, with his own experience in other jurisdictions.

Now, it is not an impossible task to solve, but our situation is we have a certain very set process that makes assumptions about how the world works, and this is not about people being bad or people not recognizing it. It is the systems themselves are working against us and I am curious as to how we will change that. So, how do we anticipate change and become future ready? That is going to become a major, major area, particularly as we deal with an external environment.

Now, when I look at the budget, for me, a budget is a reflection—a reflection in numbers of a plan. When asked, the Minister of Finance and others pointed to, “Well, our manifesto was enshrined as the policy of the Government,” and I understand the logic of it, but a manifesto is created for a very different purpose, not policies, it is created to win an election. I am not saying, it is not a good base document to start with, but I am not sure that you could simply enshrine it or convert it. So, when I look at it, I am looking for something that is central. When I look at a plan, any plan, whatever scale, has to have four things. It must have very clear objectives.

In this budget, I see lots of initiatives, I see lots of pieces. I agree with my colleague, some of them are quite attractive. But what is the central theme? When I look to countries that have succeeded, countries as big as China and India, as small as Singapore, Estonia, in developing countries like Rwanda, they were very clear, or they sought to be very clear in the complexity of the world and to bring predictability. They were very clear in terms of what is the apex objective, meaning if you think of a set of objectives, like a pyramid, what is at that very top of the pyramid? For many—and I am not saying this is necessarily what we have to do, but it has served others in good stead, what they use is GDP growth.

Our GDP growth is anemic. I cast no aspersions, I cast no blame. I am simply saying, it is at 1 per cent, and all the rating agencies—the Standard & Poor’s rating put us, I think, at 1.1 per cent. I looked at a World Bank report very recently, this weekend, they put us at less than 1 per cent, and the projections over the next several years, all are hopeful, saying, you know, they hope the Government will act and they will put things in place.

But if I had to suggest—and I will defer to my colleagues with both the expertise, the training, the experience and the modelling to do it, at a best guess, I think we need to be shooting for a GDP growth rate of probably of the order of 4 per cent. More than 4 per cent, I fear the economy will overheat and inflation becomes a different problem. But less than that, we do not create the revenue, we do not create the jobs, we do not create the opportunities that people are looking for.

I am not wedded to 4 per cent. I am just using that as an indicator. And it worries me that I am not seeing it central to the budget. So, if I use my colleague’s characterization of Christmas tree ornaments, I am looking for that stem of the Christmas tree that anchors everything, and it is not clear. I suspect that that anchor will either be GDP growth, imperfect as it is as a measure, but at least we have the tools to measure it and it does pull everything else in line.

We need job growth. We have 18,000 children going to be graduating because that is the experience with SEA. Right? So, rounded numbers. We have to create 18,000 good-quality jobs every year, however we do it. And I do take the point that in constrained circumstances, one may choose to change this programme, chop this, but it does not change the fundamentals across the country for at least that number of jobs being created.

7.05 p.m.

At the end of the day, a plan is a promise. We have advantages in preparing the statements and in doing the research, here I would want to very much commend the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development. I think our CSOs is a gem. It has fallen behind, I suspect. But, there was a time in the Caribbean where we were the model for everybody to follow. I think our CSO is very good, very professional, and I look forward at some point—I hope sooner rather than later of the conversion to a statistical institute, rather than a department off. It sounds like it is a small thing to most people but there is a very real difference. And why? Because truth and data is not a luxury. And we cannot make good decisions for planning, budgeting or anything else if we do not have data at hand, reasonably accurate, reasonably timely.

So my concern is, what is going to be the apex goal of the budget? I am not seeing it as yet and I am not saying that in subsequent discussions and development that it may not be revealed, but I would expect it should have been there. The thing that I would want to ask the Government to focus on is—and this is hard, because there is a great demand for the Government to act and the Government, I think, thinks of itself as a Government of action. But inside of that runs a danger. Is it a Government of action or a Government of enablement? If, philosophically we say, “No Government could create the series of opportunities, jobs, that are required in society but the society can create it”. How does a Government enable the others to move the economic needle? And that is going to be a challenge, because simultaneously you are going to want to get people saying “you should do this and you should do that”.

In truth and in fact, yes there are things that only a Government should do or could do or may want to do. But the larger issue is we cannot create the economic

dynamism if this society is not engaged in it. And in that context—a question I often ask people when we are talking casually, is how many businesses do you think there are—operating businesses—in Trinidad and Tobago? And I have gotten answers—and from people who should know from as low as 10,000 to as high as 200,000.

Based on the last CSO census of businesses—that was done a few years ago—but as I understand, it updated based on dipstick studies they may do. The census suggested that the number of operating businesses—so we cannot take what is on the companies registrar, because a business could close down but it is still on the registrar. There may be shell companies, non-operating companies. The number of actual operating businesses in the country is probably of the order based on that census of between 26, 27,000.

As a consultant purely for convenience, a number I use is about 30,000. Again, if you are up 1,000 down 1,000—so if we have 30,000 businesses employing outside of Government, the 400/500 odd 1,000 people, they are generating the economic activity that we have. What is behind that number, is if you ask, “How many businesses have 10 or less employees”. The number is 91 per cent. The vast majority of businesses in this country have 10 or less employees.

However, in the US, there are millions of businesses. The last number I saw was 90 per cent. In the EU, it is—the last number I saw was about 87/88 per cent. In other words regardless of country, culture, geography, the vast number of businesses are small. What a small business needs, is not what a medium-sized business needs. And let me characterize that. A small business, often the task is on survival. It is substitution. You focus on your production. You sell what you make and you could make a living.

When you grow to a medium-sized business—we define a medium-sized business in Trinidad as more than 20 employees. So I am using as a characterization of business that varies—depending on seasonality, a manufacturing business that varies between 70 at the low end and 85 to 90 at the high end, depending on season—a year. Manufacturing business probably doing about \$40 to \$50 million in sales. Their needs are very, very different than the small business. And once I was doing a survey, I was interviewing one of—not a conglomerate, but one of the larger companies, it employed at that time about 3,000/3,500 and I said to the CEO “but you are a large business, I mean you should be able to do—” and his reaction was as though I had really dropped some good cuss on him. And his reaction was “do not ever say that”. And I said, “buh wait, stop, stop, stop”, what it is that I did wrong? He said “yes I have 3,500 employees”.

In Trinidad and Tobago people think I am large. I have to fight that every day with my employees, because our competitor Nabisco, has 100,000 people in the hemisphere. So the day you feel you large, you run the risk of complacency and the dangers that come from that. So I said “what do you need from Government?” He said “I doh need grants, I doh need loans. I need treaties. I need trade routes. I need things that only a Government could negotiate”.

My point is, we have a tendency to come up with one-size fits all. This cannot be one-size fits all, depending on the size of business and not only its size, it sophistication. It needs very different sets of interventions. That is a level of sophistication that we have not yet achieved in this country. And this is casting no aspersions on any government that has been there in the past, but does create the opportunity for the future to develop a level of sophistication that we need to aspire to. An example of that is our tourism product at this point in time, in terms of how

we are organize it, is relatively old fashioned. When I contrast that with what is done in Jamaica, Bahamas, St. Lucia, Barbados, they really have caught and understood the ways in which different parts of that value chain need different kinds of assistance or sometimes to be left alone. That is a lesson we have to learn as a country.

I decided to look at what will move the economy. We have to re-focus the energy sector. I have been sent at least three/four emails about the recent announcement from the Venezuelan official—that is going to have to be redone. So what are the other legs we could walk on? There is manufacturing. It moved from 11 per cent to 17 per cent, non-energy manufacturing and it is relying largely on the Caricom trade. All I will ask is, as we take whatever actions we need to take or the Government believes we need to take—if we upset our Caricom partners, we could find it very difficult. Not simply to expand but to simply sell into markets that companies and individuals have spent a lifetime building relationships with.

All I am asking is that, as we do whatever the Government thinks they need to do, be very conscious that not too far away—and the way it was described to me by someone in the sector—he says you know “I am a Trinidadian, but for an accident of birth, I am a Trinidadian. My market is all of Caricom in the first instance. I do not think of Caricom as an export market. It is my market. I jump on a plane and I travel as easily to Antigua, as I do to Jamaica, as I do across the region. I have relationships with people that go back 20 years. If yuh monkey pants dat, all of ah sudden my business is going to stop or be severely constrained”.

The next on the list is probably financial services. That is about 11 per cent. I know the Government has some plans—they have announced a number plans of what they want to do with banks, insurance companies. That is generating

diversification in the economy. How we continue to support that, is going to be critical. Tourism, is less than 5 per cent. We do not yet know—and I cast no aspersions, Minister, to tourism, but when I looked to the yellow books, the allocation for Tourism Trinidad Limited, I think was \$34 million—\$34 million TT dollars. That is what? Less than \$5 million US. Barbados spends more than that in market promotion, in key markets that they use to attract. I mean Jamaica would look at the number and say “wey dat for”.

There is no money as yet or maybe I have not found it, as yet, for how do we generate the business. And when I say that our approach is old-fashioned and at the back of my mind I really want to say “our approach is a little bit primitive”. It is that we believe that if we create a great product, customers will come. We have a Minister of industry, he has written a book, a great book, and what his life experience is as many in the sector, is that you could have the greatest product in the world, you still have to go out there and find customers. Now, if it is not good, “yuh” go lose. But simply saying “I have a great product” and working at that is not enough. So the focus on business development across the areas where we could generate income, I am not seeing it. And I do not know if there is enough money to do it. So it means that hard choices going to be made of “ah going and spend here but not there”.

Agriculture—we have started with agriculture. Agriculture is over a billion dollars. I think is 1.1. I will be curious to see how we would generate the income from agriculture that we need. And when we talk about agriculture in this country—and this is based on a project I did a couple years ago. I presume it is still accurate. Our great success in agriculture is poultry. Oh goodness gracious, we are good at poultry.

Our feed to conversion costs is excellent. Given the fact that we do not grow the feed here, so we have import it, if our costs are higher, but within the region our feed to conversion costs are great. And we do an excellent business. The four big agro processors. How are the policies that are contemplated going to affect and help that industry that has—that is over a billion-dollar industry that has capacity to move the economic needle? We need to help a business with less than 10 employees. They move the economic needle for themselves, their families and those are they employ and that is a good thing. But you want to move the economic needle for the country? How are we going to do that? And there are lots of basic things that are needed, for instance, being able to export. Right now, we cannot export because the cross-licensing that needs to happen as far as I am aware is not in place. Now countries guard their poultry industry jealously, but it is something we could negotiate, perhaps.

So again, when I go through the yellow books and I look at allocations in—how we are actually going to move the revenue, I am not seeing it. At the heart of all of this is, if the budget is an allocation exercise, you cannot allocate what you do not have. I have suggested earlier—I will make the suggestion here, I will be the first to say “take it with ah grain ah salt” because I have not done the organizational studies to justify it. But when I listen to this debate—when I read the books, the vast majority of what I am hearing and what I am seeing is about allocation. I am seeing a lot less focus on revenue generation.

You cannot spend what you do not have. And perhaps, organizationally, whether we do it with a Minister in the Ministry of Finance that focuses on revenue generation across all its faces, or whether you want to contemplate setting up a ministry of revenue that focuses on that. Because as the world environment changes, I suspect we are going to have less money to spend, which means

pressure for allocations is going to increase. Which means that the pressure on cash flow is going to increase. Which means that the effort and focus of the top people in the Ministry is going to be on allocations and cash flow, which is at it should be. The challenge is who is saying “you deal with that. I going and focus on how we grow the revenue”. Maybe it is not going to be this year, but if we do not do that—and this is by Ministry by Ministry, how do we generate revenue?

7.20 p.m.

Not simply by taxation. How do we encourage and create an environment for businesses to thrive? Businesses will tell you, as I am sure they have, what they need in terms of ease of doing business, because if this Government does not reshape this economy, you would have lost a golden opportunity.

I really hope—I think the budget gives you a first step, maybe a half a step, but I think that needs to be the goal, and it needs to be really, really driven. I want to wrap up by asking a question that I ask myself—sharing a question I ask myself. I am an Independent Senator speaking at seven o’clock in the night to colleagues, and thank you for the attention, Madam Vice-President. Who am I speaking for? The Bench does not caucus. I have not chatted with any colleague, and no colleague would dare put God out their thoughts and chat with me about, “What are you going to talk about?” We are independent in that. I think we are called “nine republics”. It is a unique feature.

I was looking to see, of the 200-odd countries in the world that have some form of government—well, how many had a bicameral Legislatures, how many had a Senate, and how many had Independent Senators, the way we have it. I think I came across—the number was either nine or 10 of 200 countries. I think four of them are in the Caribbean. As I said, when we were doing the tributes to our colleague, Deeroop Teemal, whatever system you have, you have to get it to work,

and our job is to get that system to work. So at the heart of this, each of you as Ministers have very clear constituencies; colleagues in the other House are very clear because they have, literally, a constituency that becomes a primary focus. Who is the constituency here? And that contemplation led me to look at our election.

Permit me just to read a few numbers so I do not get it wrong. The total electorate was 1.153 million persons eligible to vote. This is straight out of the Elections and Boundaries Commission post-election database. The UNC won 335,000 voters, roughly; the PNM won 224,000 voters, 29 per cent and 19.4 per cent respectively. That is about 560,000 voters collectively across both parties, which came to about 48 per cent of the number of electors. Other parties were about 5 per cent, so the total number of persons voting was about 622,000 or 53.9—call it 54 per cent of the population.

That number worries me. It worries me because if I go back and I ask, “How many people voted?”, and I went over the last 10 election cycles, from 1995, various election cycles, 63 per cent, 66 per cent, 69 per cent, our highest ever was in 2010, 69.9 per cent; in 2015, 66.8 per cent. From 2020, we were 58 per cent; from 2025, we were 54 per cent. I mean this with no mischief in it, but, quite frankly, the number of people who did not vote or spoilt their ballot is significantly larger than either of the parties that won seats in our House of Representatives. Those people’s voices need to be heard. So I want to conclude with, if I am to speak—and I am not a politician. I have no desire to be running any political movement, but those people need to be heard.

This morning I happened to be in one of the Ministries, and there was a very kind officer. She was working with me and we were just chatting, and I said, “What do you want to see in the budget?”, because I have to hustle up because I

have to be here for 10 o'clock, and the person said to me, "Oh gosh, I really need that 10 per cent. I am clerical, I am working on a 2013 salary. I have four children and I renting". It does not get more real than that. That is the voice for which we also need to speak.

Madam Vice-President: Five more minutes, Senator.

Sen. F. Lewis: Thank you, Madam Vice-President. So if I say that those voices—and I not unique in saying, "Those voices need to be heard", not just through me, but through all of us.

My question is, how do we move, given the contribution of my colleagues, given volatility and uncertainty, given the need to be agile, how do we move? I have a thought, and I would ask that you do not think ill of me for it. A central theme of the budget presented by Minister Tancoo is on "win", and I understand that, and that is a lovely—he does use it very effectively as a rhetorical device. I want to suggest a different theme that, over our heads, is "Together we aspire, Together we achieve". The behaviours I have seen, and I am being—I do not mean it as pejorative, but I am calling an observation, it is one thing to have banter, but at some point we need an all-of-country approach. We have hard times coming. There is going to be difficulty.

We need to do better than some of the conflicts that I have seen. I understand that there are partisan interests. I understand that parties matter. They do matter in our system, and you have to win an election, but the concern I have is, how do we move from campaigning to governing? I mean this in no negative way, but how do we prepare the population for what is to come? Let me tell you, like Melissa, the storm is coming, we have the capacity to deal with it. Thank goodness. Our forefathers have prepared us and prepared this economy, but how we work together in this House—I cannot speak for the other House—and how our

behaviour translates into how we find common cause, it is about achieving that.

[*Member points to the Coat of Arms*] Thank you, Madam Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Drayton.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Josh Drayton: Thank you very much, Madam Vice-President. Before I decided, I was going to have a different approach, and then something happened that caused me to switch my approach, and it is following up on what my colleague closed with, the whole-of-country approach. Madam Vice-President, I have served as a temporary Independent Senator since about 2018, this is the first time that I have seen this, for lack of a better word, deadlock in terms of Opposition Bench, Government presenting, where the Independent Bench literally had to bring up the rear. I do not know what is happening, and truth be told, I am not concerned either.

I think we all have to look inward and figure out how are we going to manage this country and this democracy. I have very good friends on the Government Bench, I have very good friends on the Opposition Bench, and I have very good colleagues and friends on the Independent Bench.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. J. Drayton: I am, Senator. [*Laughter*] My concern—I just need to express that before I get into just a couple of words on the budget. I think in addition to that, it is very clear to all of us by now that there have been several reports in the past on the past administrations, which had recommendations, whether it is the NIB and others, that have not been followed and recommendations have not been heeded to.

I think we have to reflect on how these reports and recommendations play a

role in the development of budgets and plans moving forward. Many of my colleagues mentioned data and the quality of data coming out, whether it is from CSO or otherwise, and it is something that we have to address. We have to think about this budgetary process which, way back in 2019, when I contributed, I mentioned the length of time that any of us have to review such a massive amount of work. I guess, Sen. Al-Rawi, you were there at that point where I raised all of the budget documents, and is it sufficient time, two weeks, to review all of this and pass it.

Are we able to exercise our due diligence sufficiently? It seems as though these are recurring things, but there is hope, because each time I mention it, perhaps it fell on some good ears or not, but there is an opportunity, Minister, to think about the budgetary process and the level of due diligence that all of us have and the length of time and the effort that we would have to review these documents and really be able to share our views in a very sound and technical way.

Madam Vice-President, the budget represents our hopes and dreams. All of us know that it is the most-watched aspect of Parliament's proceedings annually. I think some have estimated this one to go up to about 40,000 in the Standing Committees. Therefore, we have a responsibility to explain to the population what is happening within our country and what are these plans. But, Madam Vice-President, I wish to say that the Government's role in this process is to facilitate an environment where there is growth, there is innovation, there is betterment of life, but at the end of the day government also has to steer this process.

So it is facilitating, coaching and creating the right environment but also directing it. I think that as my colleague and friend, Sen. Vieira, spoke about, that if we were to think about any of us in a job, the first six months is called the

probationary period. The Government, the present administration, has been in government for six months. During that probationary period, most times you have an onboarding process, and therefore it would be, to my colleagues on this side, perhaps a bit too harsh to immediately judge your plans based on a six-month internship or onboarding process.

What that means though is that the Government, by identifying these plans, have also exposed themselves to what are some of the key things that they would like us to review and review your performance moving forward. Therefore, Madam Vice-President, I wish to note that there are some elements within this budget that, like some of my other colleagues, I support. For one, there is a need to tighten the gap in financial crimes, and therefore I see the strengthening of the legal and financial integrity and FATF compliance. Tackling financial crimes is an excellent way forward.

7.35 p.m.

I know that several of my colleagues, and persons that I know are in support of the removal of tax from personal pensions. Additionally, the agricultural incentives that are listed have also been welcomed. I also wish to note that the funding for research and development which has been identified, RDI funding for example, Minister, that has also been welcomed. Some of my colleagues have also raised the 5 per cent tax on single-use plastics as a welcomed element. However, I wish to ask, what is the transition plan for the move from single-use plastics? What is it, Minister? So, perhaps in your wind-up you can speak to that.

But I can recall that, further, there have been reports about the use of Styrofoam. I think there has been a report done about—it is probably about five years old by now, speaking about the toxic use of Styrofoam, which I have not heard any reference to. I would wish to hear from the Government whether there

are any plans to transition, because that is one of the things, how do you transition the various industries, with respect to Styrofoam? And, of course, its impact on our individual health, as well as the environment.

There are some elements within your budget that I wish to point out, that I do have some concerns about. The Minister of National Security may wish to speak on this, but the harmonization of pensionable age across all agencies under law enforcement. So, you have within the defence force, 47 and 50, and then you have 60 and then 65 for some instances. Is this something that you wish to look at?

My colleagues mentioned the issue of housing and low-cost housing. Again, this presents an issue. There were several research papers coming out over the last decade/decade and a half, which speak to the fact that a government policy of housing for all is unsustainable because you just cannot supply it. So, there is the element of low-cost housing. But as my colleague spoke to earlier, low-cost housing also carries with it some other risks. So, it will be useful to find out what is the plan and strategy to address housing in the various tiers.

I also wish to mention that youth in housing and agriculture was one of the key elements within the last government under the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. It would be useful to find out what is the status of it, because I find it very interesting that the last administration was unable to complete the necessary 150-plus houses for those young persons. As far as I am aware, in Chatham, there are about 15 of them. It would be interesting to find out what is the status of that programme, one. But, two, what is the situation with respect to those who graduated from that programme? Because they too would have given up their time, their energy, their lives to participate in a two-year programme and now unable to utilize the lands that they are currently occupying. I know that some of them would have had some licences to operate, but

even those have not been fully distributed. In some instances, they do not even know the boundaries to their land. So, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, you may wish to speak to some of that.

In terms of national security—

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Drayton, we have a procedural matter to handle. Just give me one minute. I will give you back your time.

Sen. J. Drayton: Sure.

Madam Vice-President: Leader of Government Business.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Sen. The Hon. Darrell Allahar): Madam Vice-President, we have been doing quite well so far, so that, in accordance with Standing Order 14(5), I beg to move that the Senate continue to sit until the completion of the business at hand.

Question put and agreed to.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2026) BILL, 2025

Sen. J. Drayton: Thank you, Madam Vice-President. My colleague on the Opposition Bench mentioned Tobago. I know that sometimes we think of Tobago as the child, and Trinidad as the parent. But a model that we may wish to consider to increase revenues into Tobago beyond tourism, may be to consider parts of Tobago or the entire island, as a tax-free or low-tax zone. This has been very successful in very small islands, such as Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands, et cetera. It may shift investors into Tobago. That may be something that the Government may wish to explore or think about.

Also, with respect to the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, Minister, it will be useful to hear about the status of digital

transformation within the Ministry. The reason why I am asking this is somewhere around 2021/'22, I asked the then Minister of Public Administration and Digital Transformation, Minister Bacchus, what was his digital transformation strategy for Trinidad and Tobago, and he came back at several times and reported that it was in development, et cetera. But part of public sector modernization, thankfully, both roles are now fused, public admin, as a coordinating Ministry and responsible for transformation. Artificial intelligence, on the other hand, is to reflect on business processes, necessary governance structures, and the people to get this done. It has to be done in a very strategic way. While there have been elements of digital transformation or digitalization of elements of government, I am yet to fully hear or see any document that speaks towards that holistic vision.

So, it will be useful to hear from you, within the context of this budget, what are the strategies, if you have plural strategies, or if there is a strategy combining all, what is the status of digital transformation and digital readiness within the public sector? Because as we go into the discussion of artificial intelligence, we have to reflect on one thing: Garbage in; garbage out. What does that mean? It means that unless we have the necessary data sets as inputs, whatever you are asking the system to interpret and to give a result, if it is not connected, which is one of the key challenges of government, as you would know, the inter-connectivity, then you are not going to have that kind of change and transformational change that you wish to see.

So, Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, one, it is, of course, what is the plan in terms of digitalization and the strategy? If there is an update on that. But, also two, there are countries like Singapore for example, who have an artificial intelligence policy framework. Is it that the Government or your Ministry is in the process of developing such a strategy, understanding the wide

impact, the changes in the kind of jobs that will be required within the public service, and how do we upskill those? And that speaks to the modernisation of the public sector.

My colleague, Sen. Vieira, spoke about the dynamic and very chaotic environment that we live in, both globally and regionally in geopolitical terms. Citizens need some kind of assurance. And, yes, we are going down—we are hearing bits and pieces, we are probably seeing more from the international media, on Al Jazeera, on CNN, on BBC, than sometimes is covered here. It would be useful—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. J. Drayton:—to hear from the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs a bit more.

Mr. Sobers: I am here.

Sen. J. Drayton: Thankfully.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. J. Drayton: So, Minister, you know, it is going to be interesting times moving forward. And I do recognize—

Sen. Allahar: Do not let your heart be troubled.

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

Sen. J. Drayton: My heart is not troubled. I put my trust in God, right.

Sen. Allahar: That is good.

Sen. J. Drayton: But what I would say, though, is that we need to get a very clear message across. Citizens need to feel comforted, and from word on the ground, the people that I interact with, not a lot of persons feel comforted by these growing tensions. It affects a lot of things, as Sen. Vieira alluded to in his contribution. It is something that we have to handle in a very delicate way, both, of course, with our

citizens and our Caricom neighbours.

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. J. Drayton: Sorry?

Sen. Nakhid: I was saying PNM “doh” worry when the corridor was blowing up with murders in Laventille—

Sen. J. Drayton: So, Sen. Nakhid, I agree that there is a need for that multipronged approach when it comes to addressing crime and criminality. I know all too well. In my previous incarnation, I was at CARICOM IMPACS. So I am very much aware of crime security concerns.

Sen. Roberts: So, who ordered the flight—

Sen. J. Drayton: So—

Sen. Roberts: Which PNM Minister?

Sen. J. Drayton: Sen. Roberts. Sen. Roberts

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. J. Drayton: Well, no. I am saying that from the context of understanding the impact. But I think a lot of our crime and criminality also has to do, and perhaps the hon. Attorney General could speak to it, which is, how do we address the criminal assets and gains? Because it is something that we have had to contend with throughout in the region. And how do we address things like civil asset forfeiture? How do we address removing the gains that criminals have from their—whether it is organized criminal enterprise or transnational organized criminal enterprise? And I know there are steps that you have started to take, but it will be useful to find out how that features as a key element in building out the capacity under your Ministry, as well as the Ministry of—I would assume in this instance—Homeland Security because I suspect that there is a dual function there.

7.50 p.m.

There are lots of other elements that I would like to speak to, but I want to say that my expectation coming from the Government being six months in charge of our affairs in Trinidad and Tobago, I would not be too hard just yet. But what I would like to say is, your budget is conservative enough, understanding the difficulties that, I guess, we may face within the next couple of months, and your foresight. But at same time, you have to use this as an opportunity to demonstrate to Trinidad and Tobago, and to all of us, that you are serious about governing Trinidad and Tobago and addressing some of the concerns to making this a better place and once that is the case, you would continue to have the support of the people, and that is really what this really boils down to.

It is not about any of these Benches here, it is about the quality of life for all of us to live in a safe, secure, healthy environment and get sustainable growth, and if we are not achieving that, then we are doing nothing. So, I guess, now is the time that you have now put your plans in place, and we will monitor those plans as you move forward. Madam Vice-President, with those few words, I wish to thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: I think right now, you know, some of us might be feeling a little hungry. So, it is 7.51 p.m. We will be back at what?—8.45 p.m.? Okay. So, the Senate is now suspended.

7.52 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

8.45 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Rasheed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Daniel Rasheed: Thank you, Madam Vice-President, and I would like to

join my colleagues in this honourable House in congratulating you on your ascension

once again.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: I am very proud of you. I am very, very proud of you. A heartfelt thank you to the hon. Prime Minister, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, and her team, the Minister of Finance, Davendranath Tancoo, and Minister in the Ministry of Finance, the hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh. This is a budget rooted and grounded in the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This budget puts Trinidad and Tobago first.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: This budget did not just come out of nowhere. I will let you know, this budget took hundreds of pre-budget consultations to come up with. It is a budget for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: In fact, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar is the only Prime Minister in Trinidad and Tobago's history to ever formulate a budget from consultations with the people of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed:—because Trinidad and Tobago first. For 10 long, long, long years wasted under the Rowley administration, the people of Trinidad and Tobago were treated like an afterthought. Ten long years with Sen. Cummings, with Sen. Al-Rawi, with Sen. Dr. Browne, and the people of Trinidad and Tobago were an afterthought—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Nakhid: “Gih dem, Daniel. Gih dem, Daniel”.

Sen. D. Rasheed:—forgotten, dismissed, and discarded. Our nation was like cheap collateral in the PNM’s game of power and greed. The friends, family and financiers of the PNM were allowed to feast on this country’s lifeblood, while the economy bled dry and ordinary citizens were left to starve in the wreckage. Sen. Roberts-Radgman, “check de people next tuh yuh. Check de people next tuh yuh”. Our Tobago, not just your Tobago, Sen. Roberts-Radgman, our Tobago was abandoned—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed:—abandoned by the PNM; abandoned. Meanwhile, the hard-working people of this nation were left to carry the burden of paying the price of the corruption, arrogance and selfishness of those who were supposed to serve them. The citizenry cried out for compassion in the Government and for 10 years, they got nothing. They cried out for 10 years for jobs, nothing. They cried out for a lower cost of living, nothing.

Hon. Senator: Nothing.

Sen. D. Rasheed: They cried out for safety in their own homes, nothing.

Hon. Senators: Nothing.

Sen. D. Rasheed: So, on April 28th, when the people of Trinidad and Tobago spoke, they spoke with vigour and resolve, and it takes—

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: Madam Vice-President, it took and it takes Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the UNC Government to finally put Trinidad and Tobago first, as it should have always been.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: Madam Vice-President, I have been listening and reading commentary about the budget since Monday last week, and I want to thank the

Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago and the national youth parliamentary network for their dedication in hearing the voices of the youth in this matter in their pre and post-budget talks. I listened very closely and the recurring theme that has been revolving is that this budget is a pro-youth budget, a budget for the youth of Trinidad and Tobago. In every sector in this country in this budget, youth has been placed at the forefront of measures. Let us take a little dive into that.

First, youth development and empowerment. Sen. Cummings, the UNC Government is fixing that You-Tec Programme, that broken You-Tec Programme that you had, with direct investments into skills and the future of our nation's youth. Hundreds of young people are no longer, and will no longer sit on the side lines. They are being trained in real income-earning skills, like cosmetology, event management and culinary arts, "de same culinary arts dat all yuh shut down in 2019, at the TTHTI, the Trinidad and Tobago Hospitality and Tourism Institute. All yuh shut it down just like Petrotrin".

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: Shame on them.

Sen. Baig: Big shame.

Sen. D. Rasheed: At the end, they are not walking away with a photocopy or a promise, they are walking away with an accredited CVQ certificate. "Not de fake ones dat dey does print with de Ministry logo on it", a CVQ certificate. This certification unlocks jobs, unlocks contracts, business opportunities and dignities. This is what a Government that cares for young people looks like. This is the UNC delivering for the youth of Trinidad and Tobago.

The UNC Government has launched a major expansion in the technical and trade training for youth. Young men and women are now being offered certified training in high-demand fields, like health care, support, drilling operations,

plumbing and other trade certifications. These are not just short courses, they are real career pathways, not dead-end gigs. Skills tied to jobs, not just certificates. Skills linked to income, not just ideas. This Government is guaranteeing that our youths are equipped for sectors that matter, where our economy demands workers, and our young people can earn and thrive. This is what the UNC does, create opportunities that transforms lives and builds the nation.

The UNC Government is breathing new life. We are breathing new life into youth development centres across Trinidad and Tobago. Centres in Chatham, Persto Praesto, El Dorado and Chaguaramas are being refurbished, modernized and reopened. They have been left to dilapidate and “tuh mash up; mash up”. Sen. Janelle John-Bates called me a unicorn because apparently, my laptop is the only laptop that is still working. I want to tell Sen. Janelle John-Bates that unlike the PNM, “we does keep our things good, we doh mash up everything that we come into contact with”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: “Everything dat dey hand touch, dey does mash it up”.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: The PNM Government left youth to fend for themselves with Rowley, with Sen. Cummings. The UNC is now building a new system that will hold strong, hold up. The UNC Government will, and has put youth leadership and youth empowerment at the centre of national development. Through the Retiree Adolescent Partnership Programme and the National Youth Policy, experienced professionals are mentoring and guiding young people, so that knowledge, wisdom, and opportunity are passed on to the next generation.

8.55 p.m.

No child is left without guidance. No young person is left without support.

With a national youth policy 2026 to 2030, this Government is building a long-term framework that will ensure youth leadership, youth entrepreneurship and youth civic participation are protected in law and in policy. That is not just a slogan. That is a binding commitment to our future. While the PNM neglected our youths, the UNC will and has institutionalized youth power so that young people are not only included but positioned to lead.

The UNC is opening doors of opportunity wide for our young people. In the booming construction industry through the construction sector skills programme, 250 of our young citizens are being trained and certified to work and start their businesses in construction. Brick by brick, skill by skill, we are not just building careers. We are building our future. Young people are gaining real qualifications needed to earn a real income, securing contracts and becoming employers themselves, real jobs for real people.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: On that note, Madam Vice-President, I would like to congratulate and thank the hon. Prime Minister, along with her team, the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, the Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, and the Minister of Works and Infrastructure; every part of the team for the national employment drive that this country has never seen before. And for the first time under a UNC Government—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed:—we are now seeing what love is. Let us talk about education and skills training. The UNC Government believes that every child in Trinidad and Tobago deserves a tool to succeed. We are rebuilding the education system that was left broken and abandoned, and yet the former Minister of Education had the nerve to sit in the Standing Finance Committee and she was questioning like

she was not there for 10 years.

Hon. Senator: She was not there.

Sen. D. Rasheed: Well, you are right. Under Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar education is not a privilege, it is a right.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: You know I cannot speak about education without speaking about the laptop programme, and as long as I stand in this Chamber I will continue to speak about that laptop programme. I stand here today as someone who personally benefited from the UNC's original laptop programme when the lap top was placed into my hands—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed:—it was not just a device. It was an opportunity. It was access. It was a ticket to a future that the PNM never wanted children like me to reach.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: The UNC Government has restored this life-changing programme once again. Eighteen thousand Form 1 students will be receiving their laptops to support their learning. I know Sen. John-Bates wanted to know when and when and when. “Why she did not ask when Rowley, Sen. Al-Rawi and Sen. Cummings was there. Why she did not ask when then”?

Hon. Senator: She was not there.

Sen. D. Rasheed: Ten thousand eight hundred teachers, 10,800 teachers will be trained in AI to guide them into a modern-day classroom. The digital divide that the PNM has created will and has begun to close by this UNC Government. When the PNM shut down the programme in 2015 shamelessly, students were left behind. When the PNM shut it down rural communities suffered the most. When the PNM shut down that laptop programme many children were forced to share

devices, sit in libraries until late, late, late in the night or to borrow a phone, borrow a little tablet to get their homework done.

Today, under the UNC every child can learn. Every child can compete and every child can succeed because education should never depend on where you live, how much money your parents make or what political party you come from.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: Let us talk about special needs education. The UNC Government sees every child in this country, not just some children, not just the ones who fit a narrow mould, every single child. That is why \$11 million in this budget has been allocated to upgrade 13 partner schools that specifically supports differently-abled learners. These upgrades mean better facilities and Sen. Alicia Lalite-Etienne, I know you would appreciate this measure a lot. These upgrades mean better facilities, improved resources and classrooms designed for inclusion. Children who once felt invisible are now being brought into the centre of learning. Inclusivity is not a slogan under the UNC. It is policy. It is funding and it is action, and it is the heart of this Government's education agenda.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: Let us talk about the PEARL Project. The Government is safeguarding the future of our youngest learners through the PEARL Project, where children aged four to six will receive universal screening. This ensures that developmental learning and health challenges are identified early because when we detect challenges early, we prevent bigger obstacles later. We protect childhood instead react to crises. Under the UNC, the child is not forgotten. The child comes first.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: I know the PNM would not like to hear that. If we all

remember a couple months ago, they voted against the Children's Life Fund.

Hon. Senator: Could you believe that?

Sen. D. Rasheed: They voted against it, you know. They did not even abstain; against it.

Hon. Senator: Shame on them.

Sen. D. Rasheed: Vacation repair programme. The UNC took immediate action upon entering office on crumbling schools left after a decade of neglect. We repaired and upgraded 279 schools.

Hon. Senator: Yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: This is one of the most successful school repairs in years this country has ever seen. We delivered classrooms that were fully ready and safe for our students to return to learning. The UNC Government delivers results, not excuses.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: Let me talk about the security in schools. No child can learn if they are scared to be in a classroom, none. The UNC Government ensures safety in schools come first.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: Ninety-five Special Reserve Police officers have been strategically deployed in 50 high-risk schools. Incidents will be dealt with quickly and violence will not be tolerated. Our children deserve to feel secure. The UNC is making that a reality.

Sen. Nakhid: They did not have that for Imran Khan.

Sen. D. Rasheed: I know this is under Prof Persad's purview. I just want to mention it just a little bit, the UWI Debe Campus. A promise made by the UNC

and a promise kept by the UNC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: They UWI Debe Campus will be fully operationalized in training, law, forensic science, information technology and artificial intelligence. The south of Trinidad and Tobago is finally receiving opportunities it was denied for under decades of the PNM administration. The UNC is correcting decades of imbalance and neglect.

Let me talk about the Next Class programme. The UNC Government is taking education boldly into the future. \$4.64 million invested into Next Class, an AI powered teaching platform launching January 2026. Students are not being prepared for yesterday's world, they are being prepared for tomorrow's economy. The UNC believes in a future for every student, not just for a few privileged ones.

Let me talk about the elevateTT programme, a powerful shift in education starts with empowering teachers. Fifteen thousand educators are being trained in modern digital teaching tools, \$5.72 million invested in teachers' development because when teachers rise, students rise. The UNC is equipping those who shape our nation's future.

Let me talk now about Youth Business Trinidad and Tobago, \$2 million have been added to strengthen the YBTT and expand access to microfinancing for young entrepreneurs. That means more start-up capital. It means more registered small businesses. It means more young people earning their own income. The UNC Government does not trap youth into dependency. The UNC invests into youth independence.

Sports, culture and creative industries, the UNC Government knows that our young people are talented, creative and full of potential. This budget invests into their gifts so that they can build careers, culture and national pride. Sport and

culture are not hobbies. They are interests and industries, and with the right investments, they become employment, entrepreneurship and income for our youth.

Creative value-chain fund. The UNC Government is transforming creativity into careers. The creative value chain fund expands the entertainment and cultural industries, film, fashion, music, animation, arts, visual arts, design, these sectors already employ thousands of young people. Now we are supporting them with financing training and export promotion. The UNC is growing the orange economy into a powerhouse that will generate thousands of youth jobs. When the UNC wins, the young people win in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: Let me talk about the health and wellbeing for the youth. The UNC Government believes that our children must be healthy to learn, to grow and to thrive. Health is not a privilege reserved for a few. It is a right that belongs to every child in Trinidad and Tobago. Children Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill, “allyuh doh forget that, eh. Dat does still hurt me today”. The Children Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill. I am so proud of my Prime Minister for that being her first Bill—as soon as she became Prime Minister that was her first Bill. We have expanded the Children Life Fund to give hope to family facing the hardest battles. Life limiting conditions such as sickle cell disease and rare childhood cancers are now covered. Parents will not have to beg for assistance to save the life of their child. Children will not die waiting for help to arrive. Compassion is the official government policy under the UNC.

I want to talk about the crime prevention and youth safety. A child who fears school, a child who fears home, a family who fears to walk in their own streets, that is a country in crisis. The UNC Government is tackling youth safety

with action and with accountability.

I want just to jump a little bit to rehabilitation focus on prison reform. The Port of Spain prison is 268 years old and built to punish, not rehabilitate. The UNC Government is replacing it with a modern, correctional facility designed to reform, reintegrate young offenders, not to write off our youth, but to give them a chance to rise again.

Police expansion, 800 new Special Reserve Officers have been integrated into strengthening public safety. Young recruits are being trained with discipline, intelligence and respect for human rights. Crime will not define our generation. The UNC Government is putting safety back into the hands of the people.

Tobago youth unemployment. Tobago deserves the same opportunity as every other young person in this nation. The UNC Government is finally delivering what “de PNM and dem” failed to do.

Tourism expansion. International tourism is opening the doors for employment wide for Tobago youth. The completion of Tobago’s Marriott and Elephant Tree Resort. Direct flights from the US to Tobago, more jobs, more visitors, more economic activity. The UNC is rebuilding Tobago’s tourism economy with urgency and with respect.

9.10 p.m.

Eco-tourism development: Tobago’s natural beauty is finally being used to empower its youth. New marine and nature-based employment paths are being created, tour guides, dive operators, conservation workers, and eco-tourism entrepreneurs. Tobago youth are taking their rightful place in a green economy transformation, and the UNC Government is unlocking Tobago’s full potential. For a Government that got elected into office just six months ago, and who met a destroyed, dilapidated, underfunded, under-resourced youth sector, I must

commend this UNC Government for making fiscal 2025/2026 a youth-centred year

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: So, let us find out what the PNM left us with. We must not allow those on the other side to forget how they left Trinidad and Tobago.

In education, we found myriad of disasters from the PNM. Schools in decay, leaking roofs, poor sanitation, inadequate furniture, no functioning furniture procurement plan for nine-plus years, overpriced and ineffective remedial education programmes, high rates of students indiscipline and violence; 22,000 suspensions between 2022 and 2025. Leadership crisis in schools because there are thousands of acting positions which they refuse to fill. Low digital capacities and slow Wi-Fi in schools. Many schools with no Wi-Fi or no digital access. Expired early childhood centres contracts, and gaps in development tracking.

Under the PNM in 2023, only 59 schools repaired. Under the PNM in 2024, 159 schools repaired. Under the UNC in 2025, 458 schools repaired, 279 major, and 179 emergency repairs by this UNC Government. They have left \$3.5 million in unpaid stipends and over \$10.5 million pending cost for failed remedial programmes. Over 22,000 suspensions, 3,700 fights, 458 assaults, 879 cases of sexual misconduct recorded before reforms. But we will fix it. We will fix it, Phillip, we will fix it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Rasheed: We are replacing PNM's Re-engaging for Success with priority school projects. We are targeting 56 secondary schools, and 187 primary schools. We are going to integrate literacy, numeracy, teaching training, parental engagement and data-driven performance monitoring, formal remedial programmes, staff redeployed with proper supervision, new Continuous Assessment Components (CAC) will return to the SEA exam, after school study

centres, and adopt- a-school programmes, as announced by our Minister of Finance.

Now, this my soft spot, digital transformation and AI in youth, Minister Dominic. We have audited 130 secondary schools and found 121 below the target speed. Internet upgraded to 500 megabits per second download and 250 megabits upload, in all secondary schools; 454 primary schools added to the digital upgrade plan. Parental empowerment, new national parenting training, and you know what, I can go on and, on and, on, but I do not want to keep us back any longer, so let me wind up here.

So, to you young men and women of our twin land nation, this message is for you. You are not just the future, you are the now, you are the half-beat of this country, you are the fire in its veins, the promise in its sunrise. Under the UNC Government you are seen, you are heard, you are valued. It may have been hard to feel ignored for the last 10 years under a wicked PNM Government. You may have felt held back under a wicked PNM Government. But, this is my promise. The days of being overlooked are over, because when the nation believes in you, when a Government believes in you, and stands with you, and invests in youth, and open doors for you, when you pick a tool in a trade school, when you log into a new digital platform in a classroom, when you stand on a sport field that was prepared for, and you when you build a business from your home, when you step into a house that you can finally own, these are not just possibilities. These are commitments made by your UNC Government.

So hold fast to your dream, chase it relentlessly. Let no voice tell you that you are less, let no circumstance convince you that you are powerless. You have a right to belong, you have a right to succeed, you have a right to live in a nation that lifts you up. This is your moment, your generation's moments. You will move

this country forward, you will rebuild it with your hands, your hearts, your minds, and the world will lean in and listen to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago. Because under this Government you matter. Your stories matter. Your lives matter, and you will not walk alone. We will walk with you, we will up support you, we will invest in you. The future is yours to take, make it your own. Rise and let Trinidad and Tobago rise with you, because when UNC wins, everybody wins.

Madam Vice-President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Al-Rawi.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Faris Al-Rawi SC: Thank you, Madam Vice-President, and may I say congratulations to you on presiding over this budget in the Senate, it has been a while since we saw a lady sitting in the Chair, congratulations.

Madam Vice-President, it is wonderful to see youth in action, full of gusto, drinking the Kool-Aid of politics. I think however, that Sen Rasheed has been here many times, he not a novice to this Senate at all, he has done well, coming up as a youth parliamentarian et cetera, great delivery, great structure.

My simple recommendation to the hon. Senator is please have a look at the Estimates of revenue, have a look at the Estimates of expenditure, and if I do justice to a debate, permit me very quickly just to put on record a few things that I would urge Sen. Rasheed to have a look at, if his words are to hold the substance that he proposes that they ought to.

For instance, the revenue is one thing which I propose to spend some time on. But in answer quickly to expenditure, surely Sen. Rasheed has noticed that the OJT Programme, a lifeblood for many people aspiring to move from education into employment, has been cut by \$45 million in this budget. That is 750 young people

put out of employment. That was confirmed in Standing Finance Committee by none other by the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training, who is right here with us, who has not spoken yet. He is not too far away from you honourable Sen. Rasheed.

Perhaps, if you have a look at the Estimates of expenditure you will note that the remedial education programme has been cut \$4.4 million, a 37 per cent in expenditure; at-risk students that you just said, you are in standing support for, gone. Perhaps, Sen. Rasheed noted that the book grant was cancelled, no allocation for 20,000 vulnerable students affected. Perhaps, Sen. Rasheed missed the page where the School Feeding Programme was cut by \$10 million. Maybe Sen. Rasheed missed the Vacation Revision Programme, cut, no help for children scoring under 30 per cent in SEA 2025.

Now, let us connect the dots for the good Sen. Rasheed. Take those very children from OJT, the vulnerable students scoring under 30 per cent, the Book Grant cancelation, School Feeding Programme cancelation, and recognized that their parents are URP, CEPEP, and forestry, and contract workers, numbering some 50,000 people, and ask me if what the good young man, the honourable Senator had to say, even rings partially true. Not at all.

You see, these books that we are here to analyse and discuss, these are serious things. Let me say this. The Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago sits opposite. I genuinely wish the Government well. Why? It is my Government as a citizen of the Republic Trinidad and Tobago. There are many competent people sitting opposite me. I always find it remarkable listening to Sen. Ratiram. He is a gentleman every moment in time, I have never seen him being disrespectful in the many years I have sat opposite him listening to his contributions. What the hon. Attorney General has managed to do without

bacchanal and positions, I sometimes wonder if I could have ever have done it. He has managed to do some very difficult things, and to have no difficulty in doing it. That must come down to talent; you see he keeps his tongue still at the most times. You look at the Minister of Trade, Investment, and Tourism. The Minister of Trade, Investment, and Tourism is somebody that comes from an incredible background. Sasha Cosmetics is known in this country, it is known in the Caribbean, it is a world-wide brand, it is one of best. This is not a Government filled with people that cannot do the job. The question is are we going to get over the rhetoric, and deal with the analysis?

So, let us start with Sen. Vieira was for a moment. Sen. Vieira referred to something which is part of our budget analysis. The *Review of the Economy 2025* demonstrates an excellent performance for three years prior to 2025. It demonstrates a significant portion of repayment of our long-standing debts, it demonstrates a growth in the economy, and it recognizes quite truthfully that as we move into this year, there is going to be a contraction for the first time. But, what the *Review of the Economy* does not do in its usual way, is to focus upon what is happening globally and regionally in what Sen. Vieira mentioned this afternoon.

Today in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, two very important points of news has come about. One, there is to be an extension of the State of Emergency, so published by Ian Alleyne in a discussion with the hon. Prime Minister. Two—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—well, if you do not know the relevance God help you. Lord help you. Two, this announcement coming out of Venezuela.

Executive Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez, listen to words quoted:

“We propose to President Nicolás Maduro the denunciation of the Energy Cooperation Framework Agreement between Trinidad and Tobago

and Venezuela. Consequently, we request that all bilateral gas agreements be suspended.”

Most people are mistaking this for a talk on the Dragon Deal.

Madam Vice-President, if we go to the revenue of Trinidad and Tobago, the *Draft Estimates of Revenue*, and we see where the revenue is deciding our fate. If we look at the revenue classifications, we are looking at taxes on Income and Profits, taxes on Property, taxes on Goods and Services, under tax revenue. The second category is Non-Tax Revenue, Property Income, and Repayment of Past Lending in particular. Then there is the financing, which is Borrowing.

When we look to the numbers, we will see that taxes on Properties are intended to move from our \$126 plus \$38 million, that is a \$134 plus if you disaggregate the figures coming from 2024 to 2025, for Property Taxes, we are moving to \$421 million. When we get to the taxes on Goods and Services we are jumping from \$9.8 billion to \$11.4 billion. But, Madam Vice-President, when we go to Borrowing we are jumping from \$10 billion in 2025 to nearly \$19 billion in 2026. When we look at taxes on Income on Profits, and I am just going to highlight the increases, because it is tied to the Venezuelan position that I just mentioned.

So, we see that taxes on Income and Profits it is the decrease there, is the \$110 million for landlord surcharge. When we look to commercial assets, this is again taxes on Property. This is the commercial asset tax \$420 million that is on banks and insurance sectors.

9.25 p.m.

When we look to the next figure, Commercial Asset Tax, in particular, it is confirmed again at page 4, \$420 million. We see a move from \$529 million for Excise Duties to \$1.823 billion. That is, alcohol, et cetera, and I will come to that.

Alcohol and Tobacco Taxes itself is \$115 million; Online Purchases, \$70 million; the Gaming Commission Levy, \$400 million. When we get deeper into the budget figures, again on revenue, Royalty on Oil and Gas moves from \$3.23 billion to \$4.328 billion. When we look at Dividends and Surpluses, State Enterprises jumped from \$1.1 billion to \$5.1 billion. When we look to State Enterprises again, this time under the Ministry of Finance (Investments Division), we jumped from \$26 million to \$1.1 billion. When we get to the position for Repayment of Loans by Public Enterprises, we dropped from \$677 million to \$1.5 million. We get to Sale of Assets, we jumped from \$3 million in 2025, for Sale of Assets, to \$700 million. When we get, Madam Vice-President, to Domestic Borrowing, we are jumping from \$8.1 billion and Foreign Borrowing, \$10.8 billion.

Now, let us focus on that, royalties, let us focus on income from taxes, let us go from state enterprises, a chunk of the revenue that we are looking at is essentially from oil and gas. When we jump to the Venezuelan situation the population is currently misguided, does not understand because someone has not spoken yet for the Government. Perhaps we will hear that shortly. The position with Venezuela in seeking to cancel the framework agreement between Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela affects our revenue item—

Sen. Smith: Madam Vice-President—

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Would you like me to give way?

Sen. Smith: 46(1). I say this to the relevance of the Venezuela situation to the Finance Bill.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: That is relevant, Madam.

Madam Vice-President: I will give the Senator the opportunity to bring it in so that everyone could understand where you are coming from.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Thank you, Madam Vice-President. Bring it in? Thank

you. I just read the line Items, royalties, taxes, revenues, I gave the figures. It is in the budget documents that we are now looking at, the realistic prospect of having the revenue come to book. So, thank you hon. Senator for your intervention. It perhaps allows persons looking through us, Madam Vice-President, to understand in a tighter context, we are talking about the actual receipt of revenue upon which our Estimates of Expenditure are based—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—from the revenue item, *Draft Estimates of Revenue for the Financial Year 2026*. I have given you page number and Item number. And when we are looking at the position of Venezuela today, our royalties from oil and gas are directly contributing to our economy, our state enterprises. Let me spell them out. The NGC, the NEC, these are state enterprises which are expected to yield a jump from \$1 billion to \$5 billion. But, for the benefit of those paying attention, Madam Vice-President, when we talk about the cancellation of the Energy Cooperation Framework Agreement, the big-ticket item is the Loran-Manatee field. And permit me to explain this in simple terms.

There are three gas fields that Trinidad and Tobago looked to Venezuela to discuss and there is a fourth very important gas field which is in our local waters, our deep-water provinces which Exxon has received the deep-water licensing under this Government for. The framework agreement contemplates a unitization agreement for the Loran-Manatee field. That, for those who wish to understand it, is a big balloon underground filled with gas and 73 per cent of that balloon, the gas in that balloon belongs to Venezuela and 27 per cent belongs to Trinidad.

Under the framework agreement there was an agreement that Trinidad and Tobago could pop the balloon, get first gas, which means high pressure gas, easy to lift, take its 27 per cent up front and leave 73 per cent for Venezuela. Shell

committed, they did the exploration work, they started the construction management, that gas is to come to market and that gas is what—the prospect and realization of that gas, is what has kept the downstream sector in Trinidad and Tobago, the users of gas, Atlantic LNG, Nutrien—until it had shut down recently for a different reason—that prospect of 27 per cent first gas, high pressure gas, is what has kept us there. It is responsible for foreign direct investment. The other two fields with Venezuela, are the Dragon field, for which an OFAC licence has been obtained for six months to have discussions with Venezuela, and the Cocuina field which is not on the table.

So there are three fields. Our entire prospect of keeping our industrial estate alive depends upon possible gas, moving to probable gas, moving to proven gas. This is proven gas. It is what allows a plant like Atlantic LNG, for which we now have 11 per cent aggregate, which feeds our economy, to stay here without mothballing its plant and moving like Nutrien is attempting to do now. And therefore, the revenue item in these projections here of a \$1 billion jump to \$4 billion for state enterprises, because it has not been explained, falls into question. The royalty jump falls into question, but more than that, the take that comes from the Atlantic LNG players and the like, they only stay here if they have line of sight on gas. And if an announcement such as this comes out of Venezuela, today, you run the risk of a cancellation of the project which means our economy falls flat.

Do I want this? Am I celebrating about this? Not at all. Must the Government act quickly, decisively, with diplomacy to bring the players back to the table? Absolutely, yes. Do we wish the honorable Prime Minister to speak to this issue? Absolutely yes. Fortunately, we have the honorable Attorney General here with us, who has had discussions concerning the OFAC licence for six months. I am sure being a competent Attorney General that he perhaps has an

insight into this, but Trinidad and Tobago is in an instance where confidence matters.

You heard Senator Dhanpaul say something earlier today. Have you ever seen a run on a financial institution?

Hon. Senator: Yes.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: A run on a financial—yes, we have both seen it. We have seen the run on financial institutions. That is where everybody lines up at any bank and says, “I want all my money now”. No financial institution can survive that. It is tied to confidence. And the confidence in our petrochemical sector, be it upstream or be it downstream is the life blood of this economy. And therefore I pray that the hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and the Minister in the Ministry of Finance will tell us what the state enterprises dividend and take is going to be between \$1 billion to \$5 billion, what has caused the jump. I would like the hon. Minister to also explain to us what prospects are on the horizon that the hon. Prime Minister has alluded to, if we read the reportage coming in whilst we are sitting here.

The hon. Prime Minister appears to have put out a statement which says that Trinidad and Tobago’s economy is not dependent on Venezuela. I respectfully would like the hon. Prime Minister or those in the Chamber tonight to speak to the impact of this framework agreement with Venezuela as it specifically relates to the Manatee aspect in Shell’s exploitation of that.

Now, how does that also affect our confidence? When we look to the fact that Exxon, which is operating in this exploitation in Guyana, has taken the deep water acreages in Trinidad and Tobago, and there is prospect there. We must be acutely sensitive to the geopolitical climates that are in gear in relation to Venezuela—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—Trinidad and Tobago and other aspects of the—

Sen. Alexander: Madam Vice-President, 46(1), please. The Prime Minister said today—

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Your ruling, please.

Sen. Alexander: 46(1).

Madam Vice-President: Yeah, I got it. I will give the Senator his opportunity to finish up and get it together, right?

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Thank you, Madam Vice-President. I am quite confident in my relevance, I assure you. So, Madam Vice-President, we in this Chamber and in this country cannot be afraid to discuss things openly. That is what we are here for.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Nothing pejorative has come out of my mouth. Nothing at all. I am asking for the voice of explanation to be applied so that confidence of the investors for foreign direct investment can be had in our oil and gas sector, and I was on the point of Exxon. The continuation of oil and gas revenue by way of royalties, by way of PPP, by way of taxation, the three methods by which we get our moneys from oil and gas, and then the downstream sector which is counted as non-oil, but is in fact oil, nearly 45 per cent of our revenue, this is what I am talking about. This relates to 45 per cent of our revenue, Madam Vice-President. And therefore, the call from the Opposition, in light of what we are seeing today and in days prior, is very simple. This is our country. We wish for confidence to be assured by way of explanation, by way of the demonstration of diplomacy, by way of prudent positions, because, Madam Vice-President, we cannot afford to get it wrong.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Madam Vice-President, my odd surname, “Al-Rawi”, is Iraqi. I have watched my father’s family go through the Iran/Iraq war, the first Gulf War, and the second Gulf War.

Hon. Senator: What does this have to do with—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senator: “Stand up and talk all kinda stupiness.”

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: And when you look to the issue of confidence, and you look to your impact in your revenue items that can be caused by diplomatic instability, these are very relevant to our budget in discussion today, Madam Vice-President.

Madam Vice-President, that is exacerbated when you look to the figures on the NIS, the price of oil—let us go to the underpinning of the budget. We are saying that the price of oil is being pegged at 73-odd dollars. We know that WTI, West Texas Intermediate, and Brent Crude is likely to trade at \$50. That is nearly a \$20 overestimation of oil and gas. What will the estimation of oil and gas be for our revenue item in the scenario of instability, is very real to whether we achieve our target and whether we are able to afford the overdraft facilities that the country has, the debt-to-GDP ratio, because, Madam Vice-President, if the outlook changes to downgrade a negative outlook, our cost of borrowing is going to go up, and our deficit will increase. Dare I say, if you look to the revenue expenditure balance you will note that the NIS move, the 45 per cent increase in NIS is in very summary form based upon a 2020 actuarial report, which I will summarize as Sen. Dhanpaul has already addressed it. That report has found itself to be in error. It is wrong.

There is room therefore to have as little as a 25 per cent increase as opposed to a 45 per cent. If you look to the overestimation of the price of oil, you are looking at a \$1 billion to \$2 billion overestimation in our revenue item. If you look

to the debt servicing arrangements, which I raised earlier, very simply we have a debt servicing that is dropping in our borrowing item. If we look at page 61 of the revenue item, we are dropping our debt servicing from \$677 million, nearly three-quarter of a billion dollars, to \$1.5 million.

9.40 p.m.

Madam Vice-President, we must repay a \$1 billion bond this year, 2026 coming, this fiscal year. There is no way on earth, Madam Vice-President, that our cost of repayment cannot be explained. Hon. Minister Swaratsingh, I am asking if you can specifically, through you, Madam Vice-President, address where this drop in repayment is coming. I would appreciate it, so that we can understand. Is it that we are extending the life of loans? Are we refinancing to the year 2032, 2042? Can it please be explained, so that we have the understanding of how the revenue expenditure balance is happening?

Madam Vice-President, let us go to the performance, in terms of the books. We have in the Appropriation Bill this year, if you want to judge the number themselves, we are in the Heads of Expenditure, dealing from Head to Head. I would like to take the Head 42: Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. They are receiving \$2.094 billion this year.

Now, the theme of the budget is fairness, and when we are going to Head 42 and we look to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, we have some questions to ask and we have some analysis to be had. The itemization—if I can just find that note. The itemization in the Head 42 is an interesting one. It shows us what our actual performance figures look like. So, Head 42 demonstrates a number of things for us.

Number one, there is a change. If you look to the aggregate figure for 2026 and you compare it to 2025, you are looking at an aggregate figure of roughly \$600

million. When you look to what is different between local government 2025 and local government 2026, it is a few things. Number one, CEPEP is removed, it went to Public Utilities. Number two, URP is brought from Ministry of Works and Infrastructure to Rural Development and Local Government. And when you look to the net aggregate figure, by the allocation of \$7.5 million for CEPEP, you know for sure, 11,000 workers have gone clean. So, we have the death of CEPEP. Number two, we know that URP, with a \$5 million allocation, 5,000 workers are gone for sure. Fortunately, it appears that Forestry, which moved from RDC, the Rural Development Company, across to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, is alive, because they have kept an 80 to \$81 million position. So, we are looking at roughly, another 5,000 workers, which I am sure my colleague, the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries can speak to because they have kept the Forestry figure alive. It was \$80 million in 2025, it is \$81 million in a different Ministry right now.

But when you look to the concept of what is happening—we heard Sen. Rasheed speak about all these glorious things that people win when you vote for the UNC, et cetera, I hope it is so. But what we can actually tell you, Madam Vice-President, is that if you do an analysis of the Development Programme in particular, you will see what actually happened in the last six months, and let me break it down this way.

The yellow books, the Estimates of Expenditure, demonstrates, for example, at the Port of Spain City Corporation, they were allocated last year, \$19.75 million, they actually spent \$4.2 million. So, they had a 79 per cent failure rate. If you look to the San Fernando City Corporation, they were allocated \$20 million, they spent \$8.6 million. That is a 57 per cent non-performance. Arima, 74 per cent non-performance. Point Fortin, 71 per cent non-performance. Diego Martin, 42

per cent non-performance, and what do I mean? They were allocated \$17 million and they only spent \$11 million. Chaguanas had a 128 per cent performance. They were allocated \$17 million but they spent \$22 million. Penal/Debe had a 150 per cent performance. They were allocated \$17 million, they spent \$25 million. Couva/Tabaquite had 107 per cent performance. Princes Town had a 61 per cent performance. Siparia, a 66 per cent performance.

Madam Vice-President, the only thing that can result in those figures—having been a Minister in charge of that myself—is the release of moneys. For nearly seven months, six months, it is clear from the performance indices that there have been no effective releases of a fair and equitable type and nature across the PNM corporations versus the UNC corporations. So, your performance is tagged only to one thing, release of moneys. It cannot be that in a UNC corporation, you can have a 107 per cent performance, or you can have 126 per cent performance, Madam Vice-President, and you do not have it in others.

But it gets very interesting when you examine the concept of fairness, when you go to the allocations for this year. Port of Spain—now, this is the Development Programme, Madam Vice-President. This is road works, this is drainage, et cetera. Port of Spain drops from \$19.75 million to \$4.1 million. Let me explain this, Madam Vice-President. The Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago saw it fit to give the capital city of the country \$4.1 million. Madam Vice-President, you know what this can do?

Sen. Ratiram: Madam Vice-President, I rise on Standing Order 48(6) of imputing improper motive by the Member, Sen. Faris Al-Rawi. He is articulating what he was accustomed to under the former administration, where the PNM would have withheld allocations, having—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: Just get to the point and move on. Oh gosh.

Madam Vice-President: Senator, I would just like you to clarify for me because I and all was having a bit of confusion understanding, which—because I do not know if you were talking about 2024/2025, when you were calling out your figures. So, if you could just be a little bit more clear for me to understand.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Sure. I am happy to oblige, Madam Vice-President. I will repeat, again, in the English language. Port of Spain was allocated, in this budget, \$4.1 million and last year for their Development Programme, they got roughly \$20 million—\$19.75 million. That is a 97 per cent cut in funding.

Sen. Baig: Madam Vice-President, I wish to raise a Standing Order—

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Madam Vice-President, until I hear a Standing Order, I am not sitting down.

Sen. Baig: Madam Vice-President, 46(6). He is still doing the same thing.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: What is an improper motive about a percentage? “Jeez and”—I have seven minutes to wrap up.

Madam Vice-President: Do not worry. If it is anything, I will give you your time.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Vice-President: I understand. We all—I will give you your time to finish up but as you said—continue. I would allow you.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Madam Vice-President. Madam Vice-President, the person outside there listening to this may not understand what \$4.1 million is; \$4.1 million, in the scheme of local government, is perhaps equal to one retaining wall of a serious failure. This means that no roads, no drains, no other factors can happen but, Madam Vice-President, when you add into the other reflections, Point Fortin has had a 69 per cent reduction; Arima, a 70 per cent reduction; Chaguanas,

on the other hand, has had a 222 per cent increase; Penal/Debe, a 222 per cent increase; Princes Town, a 219 per cent increase.

9.50 p.m.

Madam Vice-President, I have never in the years of paying attention—a short 16 years in the Parliament—I have never seen a budget like this in 16 years.

Sen. Roberts: A good one.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Good for some, who getting 220 per cent increase. Bad for others who are getting a 97 per cent decrease.

Sen. Baig: It is you who cut people.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Madam Vice-President, when you add that to the fact that there is a massive unemployment figure in this country, one can commend the initiative to have 20,000 people hired, it is commendable. There is a portal for it. We are told that the allocation for that money comes from the Unemployment Fund, which is \$437 million. But when you do the math of 20,000 people in \$437 million you get a whopping \$2,000 a month. Let me repeat. We are saying that it is a good idea to hire 20,000 people and pay them from the Unemployment Fund, which has \$437 million. When you do the math, you get \$2,000 a month. But Madam Vice-President, there are some people that could never achieve the qualifications, and we heard Sen. Roberts talking about grass cutting positions, et cetera. There are some people for whom this country now accepts the value of grass cutting for all that is good about it.

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

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Madam Vice-President. Our country is in a state of—

Hon Senator: Dilapidation.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi:—dilapidation. Grass is 12 and 14 feet tall. The drains are not

cleaned, the garbage is not collected and it cannot be that this is what is to pass. Now, if my friends opposite were to say there is a mid-year budget, well, okay. But there must be some fairness and equity in this equation. Because Madam Vice-President, it cannot be that there is such open discrimination numerically and therefore, physically. Because you drop OJT, send home CEPE, send home URP, send home 120 change agents in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, Head—

Sen. Smith: Madam Vice-President, I stand on 46(1), Madam Vice-President, I stand on 46 (1). Standing order 46(1).

: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Smith: The Senator has been running all over the place, and now he is back again, please. Can he just straighten his argument and get to the point? 46(1).

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Can I have my time, please? Thank you.

Madam Vice-President: You still have your time. You can continue.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Yes, Madam Vice-President. It gets worse. When we get to the San Fernando position, for example—

Sen. Ratiram: Madam Vice-President, I rise on 53(1)(b)

Sen. F. Al-Rawi:—and you go to the Waterfront, you will note in the waterfront—

Sen. Ratiram: I rise on Standing Order 53(1)(b).

Madam Vice-President: He is standing on a Standing Order.

Sen. Ratiram: Senator, 53(1)(b), persistent tedious repetition.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Ratiram: How many times will he be bringing up this matter on CEPEP and URP?

Hon. Senator: Next point. Move on.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Vice-President: I have and you cannot tell me what do when I am in this Chair.

: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice President: No. I am talking to Sen. Browne. I know we have been here long. We are all tired, we want to finish up. I can understand that. We have all heard about CEPEP and URP. Let us continue. Let us move on from the CEPEP and URP, please.

: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: Madam Vice-President, I know I have done my job when people are afraid to hear the truth.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi: I was on the San Fernando Waterfront by way of development by way of revenue generation. It has been canceled. There is zero dollars and zero cents in it. If you look to the Housing Village Improvement Programme, you will see that it has been completely cancelled. I heard Sen. Rasheed talking about “get prepared to own your own house.” The Housing Village Improvement Programme is one of the hallmark aspects of success for people that have never had home ownership in their lives. But it is clear not only by the methodology of debate and interruptions, that this Government does not want to hear anything that can expose the fabrication that they have come with in the numerical justification of the budget.

There are massive holes in the logic of the arithmetic of the budget. There are massive risks afoot in this equation, particularly in the oil and gas sector. There are inexplicable items in state enterprise revenue expectation, 1 billion to 5 billion. There are unexplained as yet aspects in relation to source of revenue,

cetera. But the most important point is this, external borrowings are currently with a headroom of US \$5 million.

For us to raise that debt ceiling limit by a motion in this Parliament, it means that our borrowing is going to drive our external ratings downward because the minute you borrow on the external side of the equation your ratings move downward. Cost, therefore, becomes a factor for loans and Madam Vice-President, this budget is simply unsustainable. It is a fantasy unless there is explanation. But most importantly, I will end by saying, I genuinely ask the Government to do what is necessary by way of explanation immediately to the vagaries that surround us right now in our political aspects and in particular as it relates to the Manatee interest in the oil and gas. Thank you very much, Madam Vice-President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development.

Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development (Sen. The Hon. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Madam Vice-President, being the magnanimous Government that we are, we give way to allow more voices to participate in the debate. [*Pause*]

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: I think Sen. Browne wanted to speak. He was saying something—

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: If you want me to—

Sen. Dr. Browne: [*Inaudible*] I have to direct everything to you—

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: If you have to direct everything to me?

Sen. Roberts: “Go ahead nah. It means he doh have to talk. You talk nah. He eh ha nutten to say”.

Hon. Senator: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh (cont'd)

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: I got up and I planned earlier on to end the debate without any form of—

Hon. Senator: Rancour.

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh:—or disagreement. But two things that I have to take objection to: One is the consistent speaking down that Sen. Al-Rawi did to my very good colleague, Sen. Rasheed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Roberts: He is a bully.

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: I have seen young people beg to come to places like this to be able speak their truth whether you like it or not and Sen. Rasheed is entitled to his voice and I thank him for his contribution.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: You see that is why, Madam Vice-President, when you talk about fairness, it is a travesty and they speak from both sides of their mouths. In fact, when Sen. Al-Rawi talked about a run on banks, he should know. He was on the board of a company when that happened.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: And did not take any responsibility for it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: When they want to ask, ask about where this and where that, where the 5 billion? Where the money from the Auditor General's Report?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: So do not come and want to ask us to explain things when you yourself have yet to explain “where de money

gone”.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: If Sen. Roberts-Radgman wants anymore sound bite, in the words of Patrice Roberts “Dey could rock so.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: You know, Madam Vice-President, it is with real sadness that I have to speak to the shame that anybody in the PNM Bench, to have to talk about NIB. Sen. Chote SC was at pains to point out how long this has been outstanding. They talked about 45 per cent—at the end of the day, if they have done what they were supposed to do, we would not be in this situation today.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: We will fix it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: And you know, Sen. Drayton, this Government of internship is full of people who have been here for a longtime, led by a Prime Minister who understands her responsibility and who does not need any internship.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: And who directed us to make sure and address the issues they failed to address to make sure Trinidad and Tobago moves together as one, because when the most vulnerable suffer, we all suffer. So we do not need to be reminded of our responsibility. We are very cognizant of it. I am really trying hard. In fact, let me just say this. I want to thank Members of the Independent Bench. I found their contribution in general—thank you very much for that

Sen. Roberts: Even Sen. Vieira's contribution was enjoyable.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: In fact, I found the contributions were, in general, quite good. In fact, I also just want to expand a little bit for the sake of Sen. Lewis and Sen. "M-M-Murray."

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: But two things, Sen. Lewis, in fact, when you talk about where growth will come from, I mean, we have been at pains to point out time and time again that there are two important pillars in this economy and the Prime Minister in her wisdom, did two things that we continuously overlooked. One, in national security, she disaggregated the roles and responsibilities and ensured that there is focused attention not just on defense and border security but on homeland security, and on justice, to make sure that we place the important focus on making sure that we can address those issues in total.

And secondly, when you talk about economic growth, that is why there is a cluster with trade, planning and economic affairs and development and finance to make sure that we coordinate our approach to engender the type of growth we want to see, but more importantly, to under the role that the private sector will play in all of this.

When it comes to Housing and other areas, there is a big role for the private sector. In fact, there is a significant amount of work that we are inviting the private sector to partner with this Government to make sure that we get the requisite growth in other areas because, as you know, even if we start to build hotels now in Tobago, the tourism sector will take—even if you do that, that contribution to revenue will take time. But we have to

make those investments now. We have to start training people. We have to focus on jobs. We have to make sure and get the economy going.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: And that is why to go back to Sen. Dr. Attzs, it is “we” all of “we” all of us. Sen. Drayton, is a total effort that is required for Trinidad and Tobago, because we have had 10 years of mismanagement—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh:—10 years of inertia, 10 years of passing the buck, 10 years of not being able to make the hard decisions and then you have this Prime Minister who comes with courage and stands even if and even when she stands and needs to stand alone. She is convinced that her focus is to make Trinidad and Tobago a better place and all of us are here to help her make that happen.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: So I do not want to hear anybody, especially those who have been derelict in their responsibility, want to sit and come and preach and ask us, where is all of this? Where were you? What did you do? What gives you the moral authority to ask us to account?

Hon. Senator: They have none.

Sen. The Hon. K. Swaratsingh: And many of us sat here and allowed that to happen, too, eh. Because I hear the indignation that Sen. Chote SC had for the NIB and when this Parliament was being ignored, when that matter continued. Year after year, nobody said anything. So it is not that we are without blame.

10.05 p.m.

You know, I was really trying, as I said, to wind up this debate and Sen. Dhanpaul, for once, “I ain ha nothing tuh say about you because I aint think yuh say anything that made sense, but like—ah only kidding, ah only kidding”.

Sen. Roberts: “And yuh geh enough licks fuh the day.”

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But I have to say, Sen. Roberts-Radgman, that this constant referral to your Tobago colleagues in that disparaging remark about UNC B minus, it is unbecoming of a fellow Tobagonian. In fact, I will only say this because you were once part of the UNC B team, that if UNC B could “beat allyuh in Tobago, then doh come and test UNC A”.

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

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But there are some points that I think we have to address and a couple of the points that Sen. Chote made. Sen. Chote, just to tell you that when the Prime Minister visited the UN General Assembly in Washington, the Minister of Foreign Affairs did meet with the commerce department to talk about tariffs and we have had ongoing meetings with the US Department of trade and commerce referring to the tariff matters. In fact, we have continued to have those conversations with them and engage with them behind closed doors.

The other thing of course is that in the manufacturing sector, the Exim Bank is going to continue to play a very important role and has been moved back to the Ministry of Finance in order to repurpose them to make sure and focus on supporting the manufacturing sector. The third thing that I think

you referred to and I must say that the rent assessment board will continue to play—in fact will have to play an even more rigorous monitoring role to make sure that the landlord surcharge is not unfairly passed on to other people. So we do have some things to do. And of course, one of the things that we have been focused on as we get past this budget is to move towards implementation stage because, as Sen. Attzs alluded to, a lot rests on our ability to implement the things that we have discussed and put in the budget. So those are some of the worthwhile points that I think we will take forward with us.

So let me end, therefore, Madam Vice-President, to thank colleagues for all their input and just to remind Sen. Roberts-Radgman that when you are referring to somebody like the Minister of Labour who has been President of the Public Services Association and has worked long and hard in the vineyard of labour, you cannot refer to him as if he has not earned his dues and made a contribution that is worthwhile of national recognition.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So colleagues, not only do we commend this budget to you, this Appropriation Bill but also to know that under this Prime Minister, when Sen. Vieira talks about the contingencies required and the road ahead, it is clear that this population, that Trinidad and Tobago believes that the hands that they have placed this country in are the best hands that are needed for today's challenges.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I am confident and I stand solidly behind my Prime Minister. In fact, I am probably the only person in this House that has served in uniform and I could tell you without fear or favour

that my Prime Minister has not only my confidence and commitment but my solid support as she leads our country during this period.

So, Madam Vice-President, again, I want to thank the Minister of Finance, the team at Finance and the team, the public officers in Planning for their tremendous support and hard working. I want to thank my colleagues on the Independent Bench for their worthwhile contributions and I want to continue to commit to the public of Trinidad and Tobago that this is a government that stands firmly behind the policies we announce, that will always put Trinidad and Tobago first and to put the people of Trinidad and Tobago first and will tirelessly to make sure that we execute on the things we commit in this Budget.

So, Madam Vice-President, with those few words, I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Before I put the question, I would like to congratulate all the female Senators tonight, every single one of you who contributed, and I congratulate you. Fix your crowns, ladies.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Madam Vice-President: Minister of Finance.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Madam Vice-President, in accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2026, not be committed to a committee of the whole Senate.

Question put and agreed to.

Question put and agreed to: That the Bill be read a third time.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Sen. The Hon. Darrell Allahar): Madam Vice-President, there are two Motions under Government Business, two excise Motions and we can deal with them today if Senators wish or we can come back on Wednesday at 1.30. I do not know if you want to deal with them now.

Sen. Dr. Browne: What are the Motions?

Sen. The Hon. D. Allahar: Excise Motions, they are on the Order Paper or we can come back on Wednesday at 1.30. You all want to deal with them today? They are on the Order Paper.

Sen. Dr. Browne: We have no other business?

Sen. The Hon. D. Allahar: Pardon me?

Sen. Dr. Browne: We have no other business?

Sen. The Hon. D. Allahar: And we have no other business and we propose to deal with them together, they are interrelated. Yes.

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Allahar: Well I thought we were going until tomorrow.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Allahar: Well I thought we were going until tomorrow so I was going to put them for tomorrow but the Motions are here.

Sen. Dr. Browne: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Allahar: So let us see. So you want to come back on Wednesday then, very well.

Sen. Dr. Browne: No, no—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Allahar: If you wish to have them done today, we will do them today, we would like to do them if you consent. If you do not consent—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Vice-President: Okay, Members, we could suspend for about five minutes so you all could come to a resolution and we will resume at 10.20 p.m.

10.16 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

10.20 p.m.: *Senate resumed.*

ADJOURNMENT

Madam Vice-President: Leader of Government Business.

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Sen. The Hon. Darrell Allahar): Madam Vice-President, we had discussions, but at least one of my colleagues said he will wait until you come back and we resume, to tell us his position, Sen. Browne. And Sen. Vieira, I do not know what his is position is, either, on behalf of the Independents.

Sen. Vieira SC: For the record, I think the Independents will prefer to come back on Wednesday and debate this.

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Browne.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Thank you, Madam Vice-President. We also would prefer, given the nature of these orders, that it be subject to the proper scrutiny of this Senate.

Sen. The Hon. D. Allahar: Very well. Madam Vice-President, in these circumstances, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Wednesday, October 29th, at 10.00 a.m.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 10.22 p.m.