SENATE

Monday, October 26, 2026

The Senate met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]



LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Senator Courtney McNish, who is ill.

TRIBUTE

(DR. BASIL INCE)

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, former Sen. Dr. Basil Ince passed away on October 15th, 2026. I now invite Members to offer tributes. The hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Thank you, Mr. President. On behalf of the Prime Minister, the Government, and my colleagues here in this Senate. I would like to extend condolences to the family, friends, and well-wishers of the late Dr. Basil Ince.

He was blessed to have the opportunity to excel in many fields. In his early years, his athleticism took him into the track and field arena. In this sporting field, Dr. Ince excelled and represented Trinidad and Tobago with excellence. He first brought excitement to his classmates at Queen's Royal College, where he was a record-breaking runner. Later, during his senior years at university, he brought great excitement to his fellow students

through his winning streak. One of the striking highlights of his running career at the university was when he broke the IC4A's 37-year-old record in 440 metres with a winning time of 46.9 seconds. In recognition of all his great successes on the track, Dr. Ince was voted the Pop Houston Award recipient of Tufts best male athlete.

To the delight of the citizens of this land, he represented Trinidad and Tobago at the 1959 Pan American Games and brought home a gold medal in the 400-metre relay and a silver medal in the individual 400 metres. This has indeed been a remarkable achievement of Dr. Basil Ince, and no doubt he would have been the inspiration of many emerging runners.

Dr. Ince's contribution to Trinidad and Tobago is noted in his career as an academic. He served as a senior lecturer at the Institute of International Relations at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, and went on to become Director of the Institute of International Relations. Here, along with his scholarly work, Dr. Ince played a significant role in shaping the minds of students and, by extension, shaping our foreign relations environment.

Dr. Ince himself played an integral role in Trinidad and Tobago's diplomatic development. For two years, he worked at the United Nations, where he helped his country become a member of the UN Security Council. It was the first time Trinidad and Tobago had ever served on the UN Security Council. In the continuation of Dr. Ince's contribution to the development of Trinidad and Tobago, he entered the political arena and served as a Senator and the Minister of External Affairs from 1981 to 1985, and as Minister of Sport, Culture and Youth Affairs from 1985 to 1986.

Dr. Ince will be warmly remembered for the contribution he made to

Trinidad and Tobago through the various arenas he entered. It is with gratitude that we remember him today for the joy he brought to our nation through his many successes at the international track and field events, his contribution to the development of our diplomatic environment and his willingness to accept the position of political office to serve the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Dr. Amery Browne.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Amery Browne: Thank you very much, Mr. President. I acknowledge the kind sentiments of the preceding speaker in this round of tributes.

Mr. President, I rise on behalf of the Opposition Bench in this Senate from the People's National Movement to pay tribute in this Chamber to the life and service of Dr. Basil André Bernard Ince, Senator and Member of the People's National Movement of long service, who was born on the 1st of May 1933, and who left this earthly journey on the 15th of October 2026. He was married with two children. history would teach us that he was born on Queen Street in Port of Spain and grew up in Belmont along with his mother and father. He was very much born as a child of Port of Spain but lived his life as a son of all of Trinidad and Tobago.

Dr. Ince's life of service reminds us of a better time, a more noble era in which we were judged by the quality of our ideas and our presentations and not by loud boasts or insults. Dr. Basil Ince attended Queen's Royal College

in Port of Spain, the great Queen's Royal College, in the year 1952. He then proceeded to study history and political science at Tufts University, Boston, Massachusetts, in 1956, where he earned a Master's and subsequently a PHD in the 1960s, then at New York University. Dr. Ince was an outstanding athlete. He was a record-breaking runner at Queen's Royal College.

In 1952, he was discovered by a foreign coach who was attached to Tufts University and began running for the university in the United States of America. During his senior year in 1956, he was undefeated in dual meets. He won every race he entered in the 600 indoors, the 100, the 220, and the 440 outdoors, and he broke long-standing records while a young man at university. He was voted the Pop Houston Award recipient as the university's best male athlete. So, this was no ordinary sports person.

In his professional life, he went on to represent Trinidad and Tobago at the 1958 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in several events. He also represented the British West Indies at the 1959 Pan American Games, participating in three events and winning the gold medal in the 400 metres relay. He also took the silver medal in the individual 400 metres. He qualified for the 1960 Summer Olympics but had to withdraw due to illness.

Dr. Basil Ince was not just a great sportsman, but he also had an outstanding career in international relations. He served as a senior lecturer at the Institute of International Relations at The UWI St. Augustine and went on to become a much-saluted Director of the Institute of International Relations. He was well published, as well, authoring a number of very important pieces of work focused on Caribbean diplomacy, racial relations, the race factor in international relations of Trinidad and Tobago, and

focusing on chronicling 75 years of Trinidad and Tobago participation in Olympic sport. The last referenced publication was called *Black Meteors: The Caribbean in International Track and Field*. It focused on Caribbean athletes in general, and their quest in pushing our region onto the world stage.

Dr. Ince also had a very notable parliamentary career and political career. He worked at the Ministry of External Affairs. He served for two years at the United Nations General Assembly, where, as it was noted, he helped this country achieve our first period on the United Nations Security Council. He also served as Senator and the Minister of External Affairs and then as Minister of Sports, Culture and Youth Affairs. Notably, he had a period serving abroad as Trinidad and Tobago's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom.

Dr. Basil Ince's life and career have been acclaimed by the bestowal of several awards and accolades both as a sportsman and for his general service to Trinidad and Tobago. His life is one of great inspiration to those who may one day wish to follow in his footsteps, and the way that he carried himself stands as a beacon to all parliamentarians or sportsmen, all sons and daughters of Trinidad and Tobago. He was married in 1961 to Dr. Laurel Ince, who is deceased, and they have two children, Avery and Sterling. He is survived by three granddaughters, who he loved very much.

On behalf of this Bench, Mr. President, on behalf of Opposition People's National Movement I join in the extension of condolences, respect and regard to Dr. Basil Ince, and thanks to his family, his loved ones, for their sacrifice of his life in service to Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Anthony Vieira SC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Anthony Vieira SC: Thank you, Mr. President. It is my honour on behalf of the Independent Bench, to pay tribute to the life and legacy of Dr. Basil Ince, a distinguished son of Trinidad and Tobago who passed away on the 15th of October 2026 at the age of 93.

Dr. Ince was a remarkable Trinidadian, an international athlete, an academic, a diplomat, an author, a Cabinet Minister, and a Senator. Few among us could claim such an extraordinary range of accomplishments. But I would like to begin not with his achievements, impressive as they were, but with the man himself.

I had the privilege of knowing Dr. Ince personally when I pursued postgraduate studies at the Institute of International Relations in 1979 and 1980. He was its director.

10.15 a.m.

More recently, I was invited to join a WhatsApp chat group comprising eminent international relations, economic and security experts, of which he was an esteemed member, so we were able to reconnect again. My abiding recollection is of a soft-spoken gentleman scholar. He was never loud, vulgar or into self-glorification. Indeed, he was humble, almost to the point of being self-effacing. He was considerable, learning lightly, he never boasted of his achievements, nor did he feel the need to impress others with his accomplishments. And what accomplishments they were.

Before distinguishing himself in academia and public service, Basil Ince had already made his mark on the international sporting stage. As we

have heard, at the 1959 Pan American Games he won a silver medal in the 400 metres and a gold medal in the 4 x 4 relay team. He qualified for the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, although illness unfortunately prevented him from competing. He was quite literally a man who could run with the best in the world. Yet, his achievements on the track were only the beginning. He went on to earn a Master's degree and a Doctorate from New York University, becoming a respected scholar of international relations and eventually Director of the Institute of International Relations at UWI.

His academic interest reflected a deep concern with the Caribbean's place in the world; its identity, its history and its development. He subsequently served this country as Minister of External Affairs, Minister of Sport, Culture and Youth Affairs, High Commissioner to the United Kingdom and as a Member of this honourable Senate. He understood both privilege and the responsibility of public service; that leadership is not about power, it is about service. But there was another dimension to his life which deserves recognition.

Dr. Ince was determined that the achievements of our Caribbean athletes should not be forgotten. Through his writings, including, *Olympian: 75 years of Trinidad and Tobago in Olympic Sports* and *Black Meteors: The Caribbean and International Track and Field*, he helped preserve an important part of our national and regional history. He understood that sporting excellence was about more than medals. It was about identity, aspiration, discipline and the capacity of small nations to achieve great things.

When we consider this extraordinary life, there is a lesson that goes beyond athletics, academia or politics. We live in an age when self-

promotion is sometimes mistaken for achievement, when volume is confused with authority and when public life too often rewards those who shout the loudest. Basil Ince represented something different. He demonstrated that one could be accomplished without being arrogant, authoritative without being overbearing and distinguished without being ostentatious. He reminds us that greatness does not have to announce itself, and perhaps that is what I remember most about him. Not the medals, not the titles, not the high offices he occupied, but the quiet dignity with which he carried himself.

For those of us who have had the privilege of serving in this Senate, his life also offers a reminder that public office is not an end in itself; it is an opportunity to serve, to contribute and if you are fortunate, to leave the country a little better than we found it. Dr. Basil Ince did precisely that. On behalf of the Independent Bench, I extend our sincere condolences to his children, Avery and Sterling, his grandchildren and all those who knew and loved him. Trinidad and Tobago has lost a distinguished public servant, a scholar, a sporting pioneer and a gentleman. But we have also inherited the example of a life exceptionally well lived. He ran his race, he served his country, and he left his mark, quietly, graciously and with distinction. May he rest in eternal peace. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, I rise today to join in paying tribute to the life and distinguished service of former Sen. Dr. Basil André Bernard Ince following his passing on October15th. Although I did not have the privilege of serving alongside Dr. Ince in this Chamber, his was a name that travelled well beyond his years of Parliamentary service. He belonged to that

uncommon class of citizens whose contribution cannot easily be confined to one field. A scholar, statesman and sportsman. He ran his race with distinction and gave generously of his talents to Trinidad and Tobago. However, throughout his career he remained a modest and unassuming gentleman, guided by a profound sense of patriotism and public duty. Much has already been said of his public career.

Dr. Ince served as a Senator and Minister of External Affairs from 1981 to 1985 before assuming responsibility to Sport, Culture and Youth Affairs. He later represented our nation as High Commissioner to the United Kingdom and worked at the United Nations during the period when Trinidad and Tobago first secured a place on the UN Security Council. He later served as Director of the Institute of International Relations at the University of the West Indies, yet there was another dimension to Dr. Basil Ince.

Before the diplomat, Minister and academic, there was the young man from Belmont who could run, and run extraordinarily well. He represented this country internationally, won Pan American medals, qualified for the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome and would eventually manage and mentor the Trinidad and Tobago Track Team at the historic 1976, Montreal Olympics when our Hasely Crawford emerged triumphant winning the 100 metres gold medal.

His discipline on the track seemed to remain with him throughout his life and perhaps there is something especially beautiful in what followed. The young man who once raced beneath the Trinidad and Tobago banner would later devote his spend to ensuring that the footsteps of others, other Caribbean athletes, that is, were not lost to time. Through his scholarship and books on regional sport, he gathered triumphs, struggles and stories and

placed them safely into yet unborn hands.

Hon. Senators, that is the rare legacy, to participate in history, to serve within it and then to help preserve it for others. Hon. Senators, Dr. Ince's legacy is a rare one of dedicated service, intellectual achievement and unwavering commitment to country. He participated in history and then laboured to preserve it for others. The holy scripture says in 2 Timothy, which seems appropriate and fit, and I quote:

> "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Dr. Ince ran many races in his lifetime. By every reasonable measure he ran them with purpose and distinction and finished well. To his children, his grandchildren and his wider family, and loved ones, may there be comfort knowing that his was a life of quiet, consistent and consequential contribution. As we reflect upon his life, I extend, on behalf of all hon. Senators, the staff of the Office of the Parliament and on my own behalf, deepest sympathies to the family, friends, students, colleagues and all who mourn the late Dr. Basil Ince. Hon. Senators, may we all stand and observe a minute of silence as a mark of respect.

[*The Senate stood*]

Mr. President: Thank you, hon. Senators. May his soul rest in peace. Thank you, hon. Senators. The Clerk will convey to the family of former Sen. Dr. Basil Ince the sentiments expressed today.

10.30 a.m.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2027) BILL, 2026

Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2027, brought from the House of

Representatives. [*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 later in the proceedings. [*Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

Question put and agreed to.

PAPERS LAID

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the National Institute of Higher Education (Research, Science and Technology) for the year ended December 31, 2016. [*The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh)*]

2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Civil Aviation Authority for the financial year ended September 30, 2008. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

3. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Institute of Marine Affairs for the financial year ended September 30, 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Institute of Marine Affairs for the financial year ended September 30, 2017. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

4. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Chaguanas Borough Corporation

Mayor's Fund for the financial year ended September 30, 2023. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

5. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statement of the Chaguanas Borough Corporation Mayor's Fund for the financial year ended September 30, 2024. [Sen. *The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

6. Draft Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2027. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

7. Draft Estimates – Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the financial year 2027. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

8. Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the financial year 2027. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

9. Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the financial year 2027. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

10. Draft Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2027. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

11. Social Sector Investment Programme 2027. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

12. Public Sector Investment Programme 2027. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*] Public Sector Investment Programme – Tobago 2027. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

13. State Enterprises Investment Programme 2027. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

14. Review of the Economy 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2027) BILL, 2026

Mr. President: The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Mr. President, 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 2027, be read a second time.

Mr. President, this Bill gives effect to the budget presented in the other place by the hon. Minister of Finance. This Government has an economic reorganization plan. Under the leadership of the hon. Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, MP, and through the budget presented by the hon. Minister of Finance, we have integrated this plan with the commitment of the United National Congress' Manifesto and a strategic national development plan for Trinidad and Tobago. The budget is the annual instrument through which the plan is financed. The Minister of Finance set out what this Government will do in fiscal 2027, and how it would be paid for. In piloting this Bill, Mr. President, I will show the framework to which those measures belong and the discipline through which it would be delivered, how the plan fits together.

There are five elements, Mr. President, and each has a distinct function. First, policy. In 2025, Cabinet adopted the United National Congress' 2025 Manifesto as the official government policy framework of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. It states what this Government has

committed to achieve, and it is the common basis on which every Ministry now develops policy and allocates resources.

Second, priorities. In January 2026, Cabinet adopted five strategic pillars: "Restoring Confidence and Fiscal Stability"; "Unlocking Productive Investment and Jobs"; "Commercializing and Optimizing Public Assets"; "Modernising Infrastructure, Transport and Digital Services"; and "Protecting the People through Social Investments and Safety Nets". Every Ministry prepares its fiscal 2027 Estimates against these pillars, and the budget before the Senate is organized by them.

Third, economic delivery. The economic reorganization plan converts the economic commitments of the official policy framework into a limited number of reform pathways, each with a named lead institution, milestones, a financing route and indicators of success.

Fourth, the national plan. the strategic national development plan 2027–2031, now in preparation, will bring the whole of government into one medium-term framework. The Ministry of Finance is concerned with the fiscal framework, the economic reorganization plan with the economy, the national plan with the whole of government. It will set the outcomes to be pursued, the actions required, institutions responsible and the indicators by which progress is measured, and it will align sector plans, ministerial strategies and the *Public Sector Investment Programme* around them, so that the country has one set of national targets, not competing ones. It is being built on evidence with every Ministry at the table and with structured consultations with labour, business, academia, civil society and communities. Alongside it, we aim to complete the national manpower plan

within this fiscal year, so that the skills we train for will match the jobs that investments will create.

The fifth, measurement. A plan that cannot be measured cannot be managed. The Central Statistical Office is rebasing GDP, calculating the Multidimensional Poverty Index and preparing a national agricultural survey. Most importantly, it is preparing the National Population and Housing Census 2027. The census was due in 2021. The pilot census, which I had the privilege of launching this morning at the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, the pilot runs from today, 26th October to the 16th December in nine sample zones, and I urge every household in those zones to take part. "Together, we count." The National Transformation Unit in the public sector's monitoring and evaluation arm is working alongside and complementing the Ministry of Finance, so that every dollar planned can be traced to a result delivered.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: In fiscal 2027, it will finalize the monitoring and evaluation policy for the public sector, put in place a national framework for development results and evaluate priority government initiatives, so that bottlenecks are identified early and corrected without delay. Put simply, Mr. President, the policy framework states what we will achieve. The strategic pillars set out the order of priority. The economic reorganization plan sets out how the economic reforms would be delivered and by whom. The national development plan brings the whole of government into one framework. The statistical and evaluation system tells us whether it is working, and each year's budget, with the *Public Sector*

Investment Programme as its capital component, finances the next stage.

This is an economic plan. The economic reorganization plan begins from a clear diagnosis. Trinidad and Tobago does not lack economic assets. We have a mature energy and petrochemical base, an established financial sector, skilled professionals, industrial estates, air and sea connectivity, and long-standing access to regional markets.

The goal is to convert these assets consistently into implemented investments, competitive production, non-energy exports, foreign exchange and good jobs, public revenue into high-quality public investment, investor interest into capital on the ground, bank liquidity into finance for growing firms, and training into the skills that expanding sectors require.

The plan runs from fiscal 2027 to fiscal 2031, with an acceleration programme over its first 18 to 24 months. It was prepared with technical support from the Inter-American Development Bank, endorsed by the finance and investment cluster, which comprised of the Ministry of Finance; the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development; Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs; the Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism; and Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and approved by Cabinet.

Consultation with business, labour, civil society, academia and our development partners will be completed in the first part of 2027. The economic reorganization plan will be implemented with the country, not imposed upon it. The economic plan has five reform pillars. One, fiscal stability, sustainability and public sector effectiveness; two, private investment and access to finance; three, economic diversification, export and

foreign exchange; four, human capital productivity and innovation; and five, infrastructure, energy security and climate resilience. A sixth pathway, implementation and accountability, delivers the other five. These pillars map directly into the five strategic pillars, so that every measure is budgeted and reported through the ordinary budget process.

The economic reorganization plan also sets its own rules for what counts. An investment accounts when the capital is deployed. A job counts when a position is filled and sustained. An export counts when goods are delivered and payment is received. A road, a pipeline or hospital counts when it is operating and citizens experience a better service.

A small execution unit within the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development will track every milestone, clear blockages and escalate decisions that are stuck. And the hon. Prime Minister and Cabinet will receive regular reports separating what was announced from what was done and what was verifiably achieved. Each intervention is matched to the finance suited to its purpose and risks: The recurrent budget for the delivery system, the PSIP for appraised public infrastructure, private capital for commercially viable assets, and our development partners for technical assistance and concessional finance.

10.45 a.m.

These partners are already at work with us. The Inter-American Development Bank supported the development of the plan. It has assessed our national monitoring and evaluation system, and supports our programmes in health, water, and climate-resilient infrastructure. The Caribbean Development Bank has committed to supporting the plan's

implementation, has placed a senior specialist with the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, and is supporting a new country-poverty assessment with the Central Statistical Office. On the 30th of April 2026, the Prime Minister signed the agreement establishing a permanent World Bank office in Port of Spain, which will also be the group's Caribbean head office for public-private partnerships.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:—bringing the International Finance Corporation, which has already invested more than US $670 million here, closer to the private investment this plan depends on.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The engagement of these partners is itself evidence of a credible plan. Alongside the multilateral banks, the Government is building government-to-government arrangements for the transfer of knowledge and technical expertise. Our engagement with the United States, India, Japan, Ghana, and other strategic partners has moved beyond dialogue to implementation in energy, food security, artificial intelligence, steel, and national security. With the Government of India, we established the country's first National Prosthetics Centre at Clarke Road Penal. Under the plan, such arrangements will be tied to a pillar and the measurable result.

Mr. President, allow me now to take the measures announced by the Minister of Finance, pillar by pillar. Fiscal sustainability and confidence: The Estimates before the Senate provide for revenue of $59.729billion and expenditure of $63.368 billion, a deficit of $3.639 billion or 2.1 per cent of

GDP on assumed prices of US $77 a barrel for oil and US $5 per MMBTU for gas. The budget targets cutting the deficits by half from the Revised Estimate of $7 billion in fiscal 2026. This is the Government's second budget, and it builds on the hard decisions already taken to stabilize the economy. The Minister of Finance reported that he inherited deficits of 5.8 per cent of GDP, and this has been brought down to 4 per cent by June2026.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The revenue measures broaden the tax base and protect it from erosion—a limit on the use of carried-forward losses, withholding tax on management and technical services supplied to local businesses from abroad, and VAT on digital services supplied by non-resident providers. They are matched by the rebuilding of the revenue administration. The figures stated by the Minister of Finance during his budget presentation include—and the Senate will remember that debate we had—136 vacancies filled at the Inland Revenue Division, 102 auditors joining in at—a $113.4 million upgrade of the integrated tax processing system Gen Tax, 102 new officers at Customs and the modernization of the Treasury. Each is a component of the plan's first pillar, whose conclusion is plain: Fiscal consolidation and economic transformation must proceed together. In this pillar, the results have been verified by others. The IMF 2026 Article IV Consolidation found inflation back at low levels, the current account in surplus, the banking system well capitalized, and reserves adequate. The data since confirmed it—headline inflation at 0.6per cent in July, and food inflation down from 4.7 per cent to 1.7 per cent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Net official reserves are at US 5.4 billion or 6.2 months' import cover, and the Heritage and Stabilization Fund at $6.58 billion. Again, a remarkable achievement in this time of our—[*Inaudible*]—Government.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: This Government's economic reorganization plan protects that fund as a stabilization and savings asset. It is financed around the fund and not out of it. Under the guidance of the hon. Prime Minister and the leadership of the Finance Ministers, Moody's upgraded our outlook from negative to stable in June, citing the debt management strategy, including the January 2026 bond issue that enabled a partial redemption of the US $1 billion bond due in August 2026. In July, Standard & Poor's reaffirmed our investment-grade rating. In October, CariCRIS reaffirmed our CariAA rating, with a stable outlook. These reflect the work of this Government since it took office in April 2025. The work of the Government that will continue to make life better in Trinidad and Tobago and, Mr. President, there is more to come.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The hon. Prime Minister has announced that expressions of interest will be invited for the Trinidad Hilton and Magdalena Grand, and the Government intends to divest National Quarries under LABIDCO. This is the third strategic pillar in action. Under the plan, the state enterprises portfolio is managed on the basis of the first enterprise-by-enterprise financial review of 43 state enterprises. Each is placed in one of three groups. One, to be protected and optimized; two, to

be reformed and strengthened; or three, to face a time-bound decision of restructuring. Value-generating enterprises will operate under dividend and performance policies, and subventions would become agreements to deliver defined outcomes.

Mr. President, the Government's case for this is widely supported. Speaking in Port of Spain on October 21st, university professor and economist Dr. Roger Hosein reminded the country that transfers and subsidies now account for some 53 per cent of total Government expenditure and that Trinidad and Tobago must become less dependent on them. State enterprises are part of that burden. Between 2022 and 2025, $14.3billion was transferred to them, and nine out of the 43 enterprises reviewed are balance sheet insolvent. That is why this Government is reforming the portfolio and divesting assets the private sector can operate. Every dollar no longer spent propping up a loss-making enterprise is a dollar that can go to our schools, hospitals, roads and our communities, and this will be done openly with care for the workers involved, and at full value for the taxpayers.

Investments: The Energy Accelerator Hub now brings 33 separate approvals across eight Ministries and agencies under one institution. This is the model the plan applies across the wider economy. One Accountable Point of Contact (Case Managers) named the case managers, published processing standards, and executive problem-solving tables at which firms bring their obstacles and leave with decisions, not delays. The same discipline is reaching the approvals every citizen needs. The Environment Management Authority has streamlined its processes for certificates of

environmental clearance and has issued them over the past year for drilling, seismic surveys, and well development across the energy sector.

DevelopTT has processed 9,257 applications, with four new services added in August. And in fiscal 2026, Cabinet agreed to remove the County Medical Officer of Health from the construction permitting process, ending a step that has held up approval applications for months. The amendments to the Public Health Ordinance will give it effect. All of these measures will also contribute to the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago. The Minister of Finance reported an investment pipeline of 45 projects worth about US $2.17 billion with the potential for more than 7,100 jobs. Under the plan, each is reported by stage from announcement to commitment, to financial close, to capital deployed, and only capital deployed counts. That Point Lisas Pinnacle Steel and Vanadium is investing an initial US $250 million, with a US $750 million to follow, to restart an iron and steel plant by the end of 2027, with an estimated 1,000 permanent skilled jobs to come. That is what conversion from interest to investments looks like.

Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises: Small and medium enterprises are 95per cent of the registered businesses in Trinidad and Tobago and employ close to 200,000 people. Yet they contribute some 30per cent of gross domestic product, whereas in Jamaica, they contribute over 40per cent. The difference is not effort; it is access to finance and coordination. Support for these firms is presently spread across a dozen institutions, and we will consolidate it into a single coherent effort.

Mr. President, consolidation means something specific, and I want to say what it is. It means one door and one application. A small firm should not

have to know which agency administers which instrument in order to obtain working capital, a loan guarantee, a grant towards equipment, or help to meet an export standard. They should only need to know that the State has one place to ask and that an answer comes with a stated time, and how long each decision takes.

And we are not building it alone. The Inter-American Development Bank is our partner in this. Its technical expertise will help us build the credit guarantee and the assessment tools that let a lender say yes to a firm with a sound business and no collateral—the most common reason a good enterprise is refused. The bank has also placed capital into a regional venture facility for Caribbean enterprises; equity of a kind this market has never had. For firms ready to grow beyond what a bank loan can carry, where the facility can reach our firm, we will help them reach it. The work builds on what is already underway.

EXIM Bank has introduced dedicated foreign exchange access for eligible SMEs and a limit on allocations to any single entity. On 43 per cent of the US $555.7 million it has disbursed since May 2025, went to small and medium-sized firms. The Farm Business Formalization Programme will give farmers a one-stop shop for land tenure, registration, records, and access to finance. Retail government securities from as little as $5,000 and a new government savings bond programme opens national investment to small savers. The Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (CARIRI) is the engine of small enterprise innovation. It advised 192 prospective entrepreneurs, completed 41 innovation gap assessments, supported 38 start-ups through its business hatchery and 122 enterprises on intellectual

property, and, with Paria Fuel Trading, trained 40 entrepreneurs in digital business tools and 20 farmers in solar installation.

Export and foreign exchange: The plan gives priority to activities that earn, save, and retain foreign exchange. The target of an additional US $2 billion in non-energy export rate by 2027 and US $5 billion by 2030 is carried into the plan, which will count and export when the goods are shipped and the receipts are verified. More work is required, but we are beginning to see results. The Minister of Finance reported non-energy exports of US $7.16 billion in the first half of this year—US $696 million more than a year earlier. The plan organizes its largest opportunities as six flagships. Agri-processing is the first. The removal of VAT on agricultural machinery and inputs, the Brechin Castle facility, and the Farm Business Formalization Programme are its foundation, and the evidence is already in the data. In the first quarter of 2026, the food, beverages, and tobacco sector grew by 20.5per cent—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:—and non-energy manufacturing by 11.6 per cent. Specialized tourism is another, built on the targets of raising tourism from about six to 12 per cent of GDP by 2030. New hotels at Piarco, San Fernando, and Tobago, and the SailClear system championed by my colleague, the Minister of Trade and Industry, as announced by the Minister of Finance, that cut yacht clearance from four hours to 15 minutes.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Chaguaramas maritime platform for boat repairs, marine services, and aviation maintenance, supports the

ambition of 3,000 yacht arrivals, and US $200 million a year in foreign exchange by 2030.

People and skills: The budget provides $16.3 million to expand technical and vocational education in 56 secondary schools, the Ready Internship Programme for some 1,300 students, and an expansion of agricultural internships from 30 to 100. The plan's fourth pillar begins with the demand of employers, rather than the supply of courses. And it measures certification, placement, and retention rather than the number of persons trained.

11.00 a.m.

The labour market is moving in the right direction; 5,001 more persons were employed in the first quarter of 2026 than a year earlier.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And labour force participation rose from 54.3 per cent to 55.1 per cent. Alongside the economic reforms, the increase of $250 a month in the senior citizens, public assistance, and disability assistance grants, and a new national care and support programme, deliver the fifth strategic pillar, protecting the people while the economy is reorganized.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The investments in water, electricity, roads, and flood mitigation, and the revitalization blueprint, fall under the plan's fifth pillar, which treats infrastructure as a productive system, rather than a list of construction projects. Every major public project must pass the public investment gateway before it is funded: Is it ready? Is there a

demand? Is it good value over its whole life? Is the land available? Is it resilient to climate risks? Can the agency deliver it? Inclusion on a list is not approval to fund. With the procurement reforms Minister of Finance described, this is how projects will move faster from budget to completion.

Climate change: The same pillar treats climate change as an economic constraint, not an environmental footnote. Of every dimension of national vulnerability in the plan's diagnostic, the highest is environmental, climate and ocean exposure. Flooding, coastal erosion, and water insecurity raise the cost of doing business and fall hardest on the households least able to recover. The plan, therefore, makes resilience a condition of public investment. Climate screening of every major project, therefore, before it is funded, its exposure to hazards, the service it must keep running, the cost of adapting it, and the risk that remains. A climate-resilient project preparation facility to make projects ready to build and to mobilize concession on climate finance. Whole-life costing, so that a lower initial cost does not become repeated failure and a higher bill for reconstruction. Energy security and transition planned together, reliable competitive supply as new gas comes on stream alongside efficiency, renewable energy, and the readiness for low-carbon production.

This is built on a national strategy already in place. Cabinet approved the revised National Climate Change Policy in July 2025. Our second nationally determined contribution for 2025 to 2035 was communicated to the United Nations in January 2026. Net zero roadmaps for agriculture, land use, and waste have been completed. The international agreements this Government has signed or joined, among them: the Escazú Agreement and

the BBNJ Agreement on the High Seas and thee Minamata Convention served that strategy by opening access to climate finance, technical cooperation, and regional partnerships. In October 2025, Mr. President, the Green Climate Fund accredited the Environmental Management Authority for direct access to climate finance. This is what is being done now.

Over the past year, 51 desilting and drainage projects, 90,000 sandbags, 6,000 trained community emergency volunteers, and an enhanced flood early warning system. In this budget, $30 million for flood mitigation and erosion control, desalination plants advanced at Mayaro, Morne Diablo, and in Tobago, and $100 million in CAF financing for coastal protection, reforestation, and the sargassum response in Tobago. A US $10 million grant project prepared flood-proofing designs for vulnerable homes and businesses, installed six automatic weather stations, and piloted smart metering in South Oropouche. More than 2,300 hectares have been brought under improved land management, and, in fiscal 2027, we will restore forests and riverbanks, invest about $1 million in grant funds in the revival of the cocoa sector, and advance nature-based solutions in the Caroni and the river wetland, Main Ridge and Courland Watershed.

This is what we will do next: Climate screening will begin with the public investment gateway in the plan's first six months. The Environmental Management Authority is preparing a national project for direct submission to the Green Climate Fund. We will ask our development partners to support the design of a national disaster risk financing and preparatory work towards a contingent credit facility so that the cost of a disaster is planned and priced before it occurs, rather than be met from the

Consolidated Fund after the event when it is most expensive to finance.

Climate action is also an economic opportunity. Green energy and derivatives are one of the plan's first two new sector roadmaps. Two examples, Mr. President, show what that could mean. Methanol is the first. We have eight methanol plants, six operating with capacity above 6 million tonnes. In 2025, we produced 4.26 million tonnes, about 80 per cent exported as a chemical feedstock. The question is, how much more can be sold as fuel closer to home and at higher value? Shipping is moving to lower-emission fuels, and island power stations across the region still burn imported diesel and heavy fuel oils, for which methanol can serve as a transitionary fuel.

At home, a feasibility study by the National Energy Corporation with industry and The University of the West Indies found a methanol gasoline blend technically feasible for our vehicles, and heavy trucks running entirely on locally produced methanol are on trial on the roads in Trinidad and Tobago this year. We will test the opportunity before we commit to it. At the request of the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, the Inter-American Development Bank has proposed an independent pre-feasibility study of Trinidad and Tobago as a regional methanol hub for power generation and maritime fuel.

Sargassum is the second. For years we have paid to lift it off our beaches and bury it, getting nothing back. This Government has chosen a different course. Anchored by science and led by the Institute of Marine Affairs and the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, we aim to build a national sargassum industry that processes the biomass into

biochar, agricultural bio-stimulants, biodegradable materials, and high-value extracts for the multi-billion-dollar global pharmaceutical and cosmetic markets.

The hon. Prime Minister has directed, and Cabinet has agreed, that a commercial arm be established to license development from joint ventures and attract private capital. We intend to work with the United Nations Development Programme and the Inter-American Development Bank to build a regional sargassum-based industry. So, Mr. President, the budget does not stand apart from the plan. It is the first year of it. The plan itself identifies the fiscal 2027 measures that advance each of its pathways so that they attract from the first day of the fiscal year.

The theme of this budget: A People-Centred Approach: Investing in Communities, Transforming the Economy and Securing a Sustainable Future, is a promise being fulfilled through planning, strategy, and hard work. There is a policy framework adopted by Cabinet, five strategic pillars on which this budget is built, an economic reorganization plan that has been approved by Cabinet, a national development plan in preparation, and a system of statistics and evaluation that will tell this Parliament and every citizen, every year, what was promised and what was delivered. The Minister of Finance told the nation that there is more to come, the measures in this budget delivered through this plan and how it will come. Mr. President, I extend my sincere gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, MP—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:—for her leadership, guidance, and

unwavering commitment throughout the development of this budget. To the hon. Devendranath Tancoo, Minister of Finance, the staff at the Ministry of Finance, to my Cabinet colleagues, and their Ministries, and to the Permanent Secretaries and staff of the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, particularly the Project Planning and Reconstruction Division for their work on the *Public Sector Investment Programme,* the PSIP.

Mr. President, in alignment with the announcement made by the hon. Prime Minister, let me state, emphatically, that for far too long thousands of our public officers were required to meet the rising cost of living, support their families, and continue delivering essential services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago while living on 2013 salaries. This was the unfortunate reality inherited by this Government. These workers continue to serve this country faithfully, whilst successive negotiating periods were deliberately stalled and remain unresolved, causing their purchasing power to decline steadily.

The burden was carried, not only by the workers themselves, but by their families and households across Trinidad and Tobago. This Government, led by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, determined that such a situation could not be allowed to continue. We made a commitment to the workers of this country that their sacrifice would be recognized, and that collective bargaining would be treated with the seriousness that it deserves. Consistent with that commitment, this Government maintained an unwavering position in support of a 10 per cent salary increase. We did not merely speak about improving the circumstances of workers; we acted.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The outstanding arrears represent money earned by the public officers through years of service to this country. They are not a favour, a gift, or an act of charity. They represent a legitimate obligation to workers who have already given their labour and who have waited long enough to receive what is due to them. They have waited. They have served. They deserve resolution. This Government understands that behind every salary negotiation is a worker, behind every worker is a family, and behind every outstanding collective agreement are years of sacrifice, uncertainty, and increasing financial pressure.

We inherited unresolved negotiations and a workforce in which thousands of workers have waited years for meaningful salary adjustments. We chose a different course. We chose engagement over indifference. We chose settlement over stagnation, and we choose to place dignity, economic security, and contribution of workers back at the centre of national development where it rightfully belongs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The 10 per cent salary increase is therefore more than a numerical adjustment. It is a statement of this Government's philosophy that those who keep the machinery of state functioning must share fairly in the progress of the nation. The Ministry of Finance has, therefore, been instructed by the hon. Prime Minister to bring the necessary provisions to have negotiations with the named bargaining units concluded immediately. Mr. President, how much time do I have?

Mr. President: You end at 11.21.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Thank you, Mr. President.

I want to state emphatically, Mr. President, for the national community to know. Unlike what others are saying, this country is not in a recession.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Let me say that, by concluding using the words of the Minister of Finance in the other place, 18 months ago, this Government accepted the responsibility of restoring stability, rebuilding confidence, and returning the interest of the people to the centre of national decision-making. The task is difficult, but we did not retreat from it. We made the difficult and necessary decisions. Today, the evidence of progress can be seen in our improving fiscal position, renewed international confidence, investments in public infrastructure, and several reforms on the way across government.

We recognize that much remains to be done. Progress must be accelerated, implementation strengthened, and results felt more directly in the homes and communities of our citizens. This budget, therefore, marks the next phase of our national agenda. It is a budget to attract investment, expand production, create employment, strengthen resilience, and open new opportunities for citizens and businesses. We promised. We delivered. More to come. I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

11.15 a.m.

Question proposed.

Mr. President: Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul: Good morning, Mr. President. As usual, it is good to see you again. Mr. President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill, 2027.

Mr. President, I want to thank my former colleagues at the Ministry of Finance, especially those in the Budget Division, the Strategic Management and Execution Office, the Economic Management Division, and the Debt Department. Mr. President, whatever our differences in this honourable House, public servants who worked painstakingly on the documents provided to this honourable House, the Draft Estimates, the *Review of the Economy*, the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, et cetera, the country owes them a debt of gratitude.

Mr. President, I want to make it clear that every number I use in this contribution comes from the Government's own documents.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Every number. The budget statement, the *Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure*, the *Review of the Economy 2026*, the Central Bank's 2026 Economic DataPack, which is part of the overall data contribution of the Government, and the Central Bank's Monetary Policy Report of September 2026. I will not ask anyone to take my word for anything. I will ask them to take the Government's word and to read all of it, not only the parts read a few Mondays ago. Mr. President, I am also not here to "buss mark", no pun intended.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, I will examine the budget by

disaggregating the economy into four main parts. The real sector, which is essentially production output, prices, and jobs. The fiscal sector, which is essentially, again, the Government's accounts. The monetary sector, looking at monetary policy, rates of interest, credit. And the external sector: the balance of payments, foreign reserves and foreign exchange.

Mr. President, the Government's own document gives answers that the Minister did not read to the country. I intend to clarify them now. I also want to make my response as user-friendly as possible, so I will be pitching it like the so-called man in the streets. Firstly, the real sector: production, jobs and prices. Mr. President, the budget statement makes this promise, and I quote:

> "This Budget will create an explosion of economic activities, hyper-growth, and a boom in job opportunities."

Let us look at what the Minister of Finance said about growth. Using the *Review of the Economy* 2026, the official source based on the data produced by the CSO, laid along with the budget, indicated that the economy contracted by 0.5 per cent in 2026. It says, and I quote:

"Annual real output is projected to decline by 2.2 percent in 2026..."

Right there on page 201 of the *Review of the Economy*. Not grow but decline. In the energy sector, contraction of 6.6 per cent. In the non-energy sector, contraction of 0.7 per cent. In the last quarter of 2025, real GDP contracted by 1.2 per cent, while in the first quarter of 2026, real GDP fell by 1.8 per cent. The Central Bank's own Index of Economic Activity for the second quarter of 2026 shows the economy down 3.2 per cent, three consecutive quarters. And you can find that on page 5 of the Economic

DataPack.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, let us call it what it is. Trinidad and Tobago is in a recession.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Two quarters of negative economic growth result in a recession. Economics 101. Mr. President, let me present more data from an official source to this hon. House as further evidence. The Central Bank Index of Economic Activity has now fallen year on year for four consecutive quarters. Down 1.3 per cent, 2.8 per cent, 3.6 per cent and 3.2 per cent, page 5 of the Economic Data Pack.

By any ordinary definition, our economy is in recession, and the budget statement does not use the word once. But it happened before, Mr. President. And please note the date, and I am quoting here, December 03, 2015, Trinidad *Express*:

> Trinidad and Tobago—"…in Recession.
>
> Three weeks before Christmas, the Central Bank has announced that this country is officially now in a recession. Central Bank Governor"—at the time—"Jwala Rambarran, at a monetary policy forum at the Hyatt Hotel Port of Spain on Friday, said this is in light of continued declines in real...(GDP). He said this country suffered its fourth consecutive decline. He said noticeable signs of the recession will start to set in next year..."

And this is very instructive, Mr. President—

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul:

> "...as businesses begin to cut back on investments, consumers hold back on spending and banks loans become fewer."

Sen. Roberts: December 2015 was a PNM year. PNM. He "doh" even know. [*Laughter*]

Hon. Senators: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Members, it is too early, right? Let us not get—everyone will get a chance to speak. Take notes.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Please, please, Senator, do not engage in that kind of language, please.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Everybody will get a chance to speak. Continue, please.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, of course, I knew the PNM was in power, but Jwala Rambarran was the—he said it, he was the Governor of the Central Bank, simple. And, Mr. President, just last week the hon. Prime Minister is quoted as saying, in her contribution to the debate:

> "In…"—its—"…May 2026 Article IV report, the IMF projected growth of 0.8 per cent in 2026…accelerating to 3 per cent in 2027 and averaging approximately 3.5 per cent in 2028 and 2029."

But, Mr. President, why is the hon. Prime Minister quoting the IMF report? The report was not laid in Parliament. What we have to analyze is the *Review of the Economy*.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: And the *Review of the Economy* states that the country is projected to contract by 2.2 per cent in 2026.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Why is the hon. Prime Minister using a document that is dated May 2026? Is the Prime Minister saying that she has no faith in the *Review of the Economy*? Is the Prime Minister saying that the *Review of the Economy* should be recalled? What is the signal to the international financial community? Or the Prime Minister is saying growth by 0.8 per cent, the *Review of the Economy*, laid in this Parliament, is saying contraction by 2.2 per cent.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: And you know what, Mr. President? All the data in the budget is based on current prices of the GDP or constant prices. So, are we saying that the data in the Estimates are unreliable? Including the $500 million error in the THA Estimates?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Therefore, is the Minister's analysis of the budget wrong? These are not my numbers, Mr. President. I have not made up a number here. And I want to stress this: absolutely no blame should be directed at the excellent public servants.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: The Minister brought these documents here. He has to own these documents.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, these documents were all approved by

the Cabinet, then laid in this honourable House. This budget contains too many errors and inconsistencies. Anyway, Mr. President, if this budget will deliver hyper growth, where is the forecast? There is no projection of GDP growth for 2027. None.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: A budget that promises an explosion in growth but will not put a number to it, is not a plan. It is a hope. Further, Mr. President, data produced by the Central Bank shows business lending, and in the Economic DataPack, page 3, business lending, the money borrowed to expand and hire, grew just 0.6 per cent in the year to July. This is not a boom, Mr. President. This is a business community holding its breath with no confidence in the economy. And I just want to add a few more indicators. Net credit to the private sector, again, from the Economic DataPack, official document of the Central Bank. Net credit to the private sector fell from 8.6 per cent in quarter two of 2025, to 3.5 per cent in quarter two of 2026. And one of the indicators of that is new motor vehicle sales. Page 6 of the Economic DataPack, new motor vehicle sales fell from quarter four 2025 to 3,273. Quarter one 2026, 2,226. Clear indicator of the confidence, or lack of it, in the economy.

In addition, more evidence, Mr. President. The Central Bank reports that the rate of the overall mortgage market cooled from 6.6 per cent year on year to 5.9 per cent by March 2026. So, people are not taking mortgages. So, let us look at jobs now, Mr. President. I will have to speed up a bit. The Minister of Finance made much about jobs. He told the country that 5,000—and the Minister of Planning just quoted that number, he told the

country that 5,100 more persons were employed in the first quarter of 2026 than a year before. Extremely correct. But he did not finish the sentence.

The CSO's official data show that in the same quarter, the first quarter of 2026, the unemployment rate rose to 5.4 per cent, up from 4.9 per cent a year earlier, and 4.3 per cent the quarter before. The number of unemployed persons rose to 31,900. Employment fell by 5,900 in a single quarter. The Minister of Finance displayed these numbers proudly on page 212 of the *Review of the Economy*. Mr. President, in addition, the Central Bank's Monetary Policy Committee Report on the 30th of September, less than a month now, said plainly that:

> "…labour market conditions weakened…"—and—"…that labour demands softened through July 2026."

These are not the words of the Opposition, Mr. President. These are the words of the Central Bank. Let us look closer still. Employment in petroleum and gas, the jobs that pay the highest wages in this country, fell from 12,800 in March 2025 to 6,500 in March 2026. It halved in one year. Mr. President, then there is the Revitalisation Blueprint, and this is incredible. The Minister of Finance said that this programme would employ close to 51,000 jobs annually, raising to a peak of approximately 72,000 jobs in 2028. Correct.

However, Mr. President, the entire construction, electricity and water sectors of this country employ 67,000 people today. 22,000 jobs would mean more than double the construction workforce in two years. If there is a financing plan, private or public, that makes that possible, the country deserves to see it. And, Mr. President, I would like the Government to

answer. What happened to the unemployment fund of $475 million to hire 20,000 people? I have not seen any in the Estimates of Expenditure for 2027.

11.30 p.m.

Mr. President, I want to now look at some food prices. Food price inflation is low at 0.9 per cent at the end of June 2026, falling from 4.9 per cent in June 2026. That is true. That is good for households. However, Mr. President, very low inflation, alongside rising unemployment, falling credit and contracting output is not a sign of strength. It is a sign of weak demand. It is what an economy looks like when people are not spending because they are not confident in the economy, and I challenge any of my colleagues opposite to go and tell their supporters that the prices in the grocery fell by 0.9 per cent.

Let us look quickly at energy. Mr. President, the Minister spent a long time on energy, and rightly so. Over 70 per cent of our foreign exchange still comes from energy. Let me acknowledge the projects that are real. The Cypre project is producing. The Mento development reached peak production of over 280 million standard cubic feet a day in June. Those projects were sanctioned, financed and drilled over several years. Mento began producing in May 2025, and SIP's second phase in November 2025. Mr. President, energy investment decisions take years, and those who are celebrating them today know very well when those decisions were taken.

Mr. President, the Minister then reads a list: Ginger, Mahogany A, Juniper phase 2, Coconut, Aphrodite, Manatee Plus, Mento phase 2. Moreover, he said this is all in 2027. Mr. President, let us be serious. Seven

developments delivering gas in a single year would be extraordinary anywhere in the world. Projects slip, rigs are late, weather intervenes. If even two or three of these projects slip by a quarter or two, the gas, the royalties, the foreign exchange and the growth all move into 2028, while the spending in this budget happens in 2027. Mr. President, new gas must first replace old gas. Our mature fields decline every year. A budget that books the revenue of those projects before they flow is a budget that spends the gas before it has reached the shore.

Mr. President, the Central Bank data shows natural gas production in the first quarter of 2026, at 2,427 million cubic feet a day. That is 2.7 per cent lower than the year day before, even with Mento and Cypre on stream. In addition, Mr. President, ammonia production fell by 25.8 per cent. Urea production fell to zero after the Nutrien shutdown. The *Review of the Economy* reports the manufacture of petrochemicals down 19.8 per cent. On the Manakin-Cocuina, the *Review of the Economy* indicates that first seismic data is expected to be completed in the quarter of 2027, with a decision on drilling to follow. That is welcome news, not for now, but for some time in the next decade. Mr. President, this is not revenue for this budget.

Let us move now quickly to the fiscal sector, the Government's own accounts. Mr. President, the headline of this budget is a deficit of $3.639 billion, or 2.1 per cent of GDP, down from $7 billion this year, in the face of rising oil and gas prices; a deficit of $7 billion. And that was in June, without the back pay included. If that was real, the Opposition would applaud it. So let us put it to the test.

Revenue is projected to rise from $54.2 billion to $59.7 billion, an

increase of about $5.5 billion, or 10 per cent. In an economy where the Minister's own document says it is shrinking, where does that money come from? You are in a hole of $5.5 billion. So, Mr. President, I checked the *Draft Estimates of Revenue*. Page v, the "Abstract of Estimated Revenue", shows that total tax revenue, income tax, corporation tax, VAT, customs duties, everything the Inland Revenue and Customs collect, rises by only $684 million, less than $700 million. That is after all the new revenue-raising measures the Minister announced a few Mondays ago have been included.

Taxes on income and profits are budgeted at $26.19 billion for 2027, against $26.19 billion in 2026, essentially flat. Not a dollar more, basically. Taxes from oil companies fell by $660 million. Taxes from individuals, from the wage earners of this country, fell by $176 million in a year, and the Government says it is paying $2.5 billion in new salaries and arrears. A few things are not adding up, Mr. President. If the taxes are flat, where is the $5.5billion increase in revenue?

So, let us turn to page 21 of *Draft Estimates of Revenue*, Head 06: Property Income. Mr. President, property income is the dividends the State expects from its companies, chiefly the National Gas Company, plus royalties on oil and gas. It is budgeted to rise from $8.46billion to $12.69billion, an increase of $4.2billion. Profits from state enterprises alone are projected to rise from $2.37billion to $4.94billion. That is more than double. Royalties are estimated to rise by 44 per cent. In other words, Mr. President, nearly four of every $5 in this budget depend on state enterprise dividends and royalties. Now, one may say perhaps NGC will have a good

year; perhaps. However, here is a part the Minister did not read.

On the same page 21 of the *Estimates of Revenue*, move across to column 2026, last year, the Government budgeted property income at $12.9 billion. What came in? Mr. President, $8.46billion, a shortfall of $4.4billion. And you know, Mr. President, unbelievably, astonishingly, the Minister of Finance took the same line that fell short by $4.4billion last year and budgeted it again at almost the exact same number, $12.9billion. If a business presented this plan to a bank, the loan officer would send it back.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: If a student presented that to an examiner, he would write in the margin, "Show your working."

Mr. President, but there is a pattern. In October 2025, the Minister stood in the other place and promised a deficit of $3.865 billion for 2026. But by the mid-year review in June, the deficit had become $7 billion. After $3.5 billion of extra spending, it projected to end the year at $7 billion with all the $3.6 billion in back pay. The target was missed by 80 per cent. So, it means that, that was in June, I am almost sure that the deficit is going to be about 10 per cent of GDP. Today, he promises a deficit of $3.6 billion for 2027. Same starting point, same method. Why should the result be different, especially the $500 million error in the THA estimate? You know what that means, Mr. President? It means that the mid-year review for next year is already in deficit by $500 million.

Mr. President, let me now look at the expenditure side, because the Minister stated that expenditure rises only by 3.5 per cent. This is what is being spent on. In the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, Transfers

and Subsidies are $27.1 billion. Transfers to Statutory Bodies are another $7.4 billion. Together, that is 57 per cent of all recurrent spending. Personnel costs rise 8.6 per cent to $11.9 billion. Interest and debt is $7.3 billion. Mr. President, add those four together: Wages and salaries, interest, Transfers and Subsidies, and Transfers to Statutory Bodies, that is $53.7 billion. It is 88 per cent of all recurrent spending and about 85 per cent of every dollar this Government will spend in 2027.

Mr. President, I have done it ad nauseam in this Senate, explaining mandatory expenditure. Every month, this Government spends $5 billion on mandatory expenditure. You cannot cut mandatory expenditure. Pensions, salaries and wages, debt, Transfers to State Enterprises, you cannot cut that; $5 billion. Before the country earns a dollar, the Ministry of Finance knows it has to look for $5 billion every month. So, what does that leave for discretionary expenditure? Not much, just about $3 billion. Mr. President, mandatory expenditure cannot be cut in a bad year without cutting wages, pension or grants. In addition, on top of it, the Estimates show another $10.3 billion to repay the principal on maturing debt.

Mr. President, just quickly, on the *Development Programme*—how much more time do I have again?

Sen. Roberts-Radgman: You have 15 minutes again.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: 15?

Sen. Roberts-Radgman: 15/16 minutes.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: On the *Development Programme*, the capital that builds roads, hospitals, drains and creates construction jobs is $4 billion, which is about 6 per cent of the budget. Incredibly, it is lower than the $4.1 billion

allocated last year.

Now, Mr. President, just a bit on this *Development Programme*. Unfortunately—and it is something I regret myself personally—at the Ministry of Finance, unfortunately, the *Development Programme* used to be used as a residual number. In other words, you have your revenue, you have your recurrent expenditure and you are trying to arrive at a deficit, the difference would be made up residually by the *Development Programme*. That is not the way it should be done. The *Development Programme* drives your economy. It drives your employment generation, your investment creation. And just a few weeks ago, the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development said the capital programme, the implementation rate was 69 per cent. Mr. President, the economy will never grow at that level, with an implementation rate of 69 per cent. And this is just my view, the *Development Programme* should be no less than 10 per cent of the GDP.

Let us look at the debt, Mr. President. The Central Bank reports adjusted general government debt of $149 billion in June 2026, 86.5 per cent of GDP. It is not always about the size of the debt, Mr. President, but the trajectory of the debt and the country's ability to repay. Currently, the trajectory is not moving in our favour. The Minister told us that $70 billion of debt falls during the next five years and that Government borrowed $21 billion in 18 months. Mr. President, Moody's has warned that a debt burden significantly above current levels would be consistent with a lower rating. In addition, Mr. President, also very concerning is the non-energy fiscal deficit. The gap between what we spend and what the non-energy economy pays in was 11.9 per cent of GDP in 2024. In 2026, it is 15 per cent. That is

the true measure of whether we are diversifying or not, and it is going the wrong way.

Mr. President, in this budget, there are some numbers that simply do not add up. A budget statement is not an ordinary political speech. Investors read it, rating agencies read it, the IMF reads it. When the numbers in the speech do not match the numbers in the Government's own documents, all 13 of them, it is not the Opposition that loses credibility, it is the country.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: First, the inherited deficit. The Minister said that the former administration left us with a deficit of 5.8 per cent of GDP. Mr. President, the Central Bank's DataPack on page 11, using the Ministry of Finance's figures, shows the overall deficit at 4.8 per cent of GDP for fiscal 2024, and 4.6 per cent for fiscal 2025. I asked the Government to table the calculation behind 5.8 per cent. If there is an adjustment, let us see it.

Second, revenue that is not revenue. Mr. President, the Minister said that the third National Investment Fund bond will generate approximately $1 billion in revenue. A bond backed by state shares is not revenue. That is why it's called an NIF bond. A bond, it is either borrowing or the sale of the people's assets. It is a financing item. It is what you call an in-and-out transaction.

11.45 a.m.

This is also true for withdrawals on the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund cannot be treated as revenue, Mr. President.

Mr. President, sometimes what a budget leaves out tells you more than what it puts in. The VAT refunds: In a statement, the Minister told us that his Government inherited $10.6 billion during VAT and other tax refunds. In Budget 2026, he promised to bring closure to outstanding arrears. Twelve months later, Budget 2027 contains no schedule, no VAT bond offer, no offset mechanism, and no figure on how much is still owed. Mr. President, follow what that means for the revenue figures. The Estimates make no provision for those arrears. The VAT number in the Estimates of Revenue of $9 billion is not a net figure, in other words it is not arrears. It does not deduct what the State already owes taxpayers.

Every dollar of arrears that is eventually paid will come out of the VAT the Government says it will collect. The real VAT revenue is lower than the number in this budget, this number distorts the revenue figure.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: It also means that the fiscal deficit is much higher. Mr. President, both EY and PwC noticed. PwC puts it best: Delayed refunds turn businesses into involuntary lenders to the State. Every dollar of VAT the State owes a manufacturer is $1 that manufacturer cannot spend on wages, on raw materials, or on expansion. If the Government wants the non-energy sector to grow, paying what it owes is the cheapest stimulus available, we ask the Government, how much is owed today and when it will be paid.

Mr. President, the Minister of Finance said the Chief Personnel Officer proposes to pay 40 per cent of PSA's arrears in cash. What happens to the other 60 per cent, bonds? At what cost and when? None of these

costs is in the budget. However, I am sure that they will show up as supplementary appropriations in the mid-year review, exactly as they did last year. The fuel subsidy—Mr. President, the Government held the price of super gasoline at $5.97 a litre, when by its own figures the world price is $8.72. The Government said that the subsidy cost $290 million last year. Every motorist appreciates it. However, at today's fuel prices, what will it cost in 2027? The budget does not say.

Property tax and the Revenue Authority. Mr. President, the Government suspended the property tax collection and abandoned the Revenue Authority. Whatever one thinks of these decisions, they narrow the non-energy tax base that Moody says will decide our rating. What replaces them? The budget does not say. Mr. President, last year I challenged the Minister of Finance to increase revenue by $10 billion by the end of fiscal 2027, using his restructured BIR and Customs, and not the TTRA. Based on his revenue figures, the challenge is still on.

Mr. President, let me turn to the monetary sector. The third sector analyses, because it tells us what the people and businesses of this country actually think about the economy. On monetary policy, the Government has held the repo rate, the rate at which it lends overnight to commercial banks, at 3.5 per cent since March 2020. With inflation at 0.6 per cent, that is sensible. The banking system has liquidity with excess reserves of over $4 billion. Mr. President, the banks have money to lend, so why is no one borrowing? Business lending, as I pointed out earlier, grew by just 0.6 per cent in the year July 2026. Credit to the private sector, as I mentioned earlier, grew by 8.8 per cent in 2025 and has slowed to 3.4 per cent.

Mr. President, broad money, essentially, which is the money supply, is contracting down 1.6 per cent in the year to July. Demand deposits, the money which businesses keep for day-to-day trading, fell 7.5 per cent. Meanwhile, and this is very critical—time deposits rose 12.7 per cent, which means that people are locking away their savings, not spending or investing. Mr. President, between October 2025 and July 2026, there was not a single private sector bond issue on this local market. The Government was the only borrower. Mortgage rates on new loans have risen to 5.3 per cent, even though the repo rate has not moved from 3.5 per cent. Mr. President, when businesses will not borrow and households will not spend, the problem is not the price of money, the problem is confidence.

I want to look at capital flight and the whole foreign reserves. Mr. President, let us look at what is happening to savings. The three-month Treasury Bill in Trinidad and Tobago now yields 0.91 per cent less than the US T-bill. When a saver can earn more money by holding US$ and TT$, of course, demand for foreign exchange rises. In addition, the budget says nothing about it. Mr. President, this is how capital flight works. It does not come with a press release. A business converts its TT dollars surplus into US dollars and holds it abroad. A family moves its savings into US$ assets. An importer pays for goods that are over-invoiced and leaves the difference outside. Together, they drain our reserves.

Mr. President, that transaction can be traced. In the balance of payments defined loosely as all transactions between residents of Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the world, the item net errors and omissions, money that leaves through channels the official statistics cannot see, were

minus—and this is where the capital flight comes in—were minus, US $584 million in 2025 and minus US $360 million in the first quarter of 2026 alone, page 15 of the Economic DataPack. At the same time, the foreign currency the public sells to the banks fell 14.6 per cent in August compared with a year earlier. Mr. President, people are holding on to their US$. I am sure if I give everyone inside of here a thousand US, the first thing they will do is take it home and put it under the pillow or the mattress. Never puts it in a bank, and that is one of the problems why we are facing such a foreign exchange shortage.

Mr. President, capital flight is a vote of no confidence. When the domestic interest rate is below the US rate, the Government is encouraging capital flight. Mr. President, I would just like to say a bit about the external sector quickly. Mr. President, ask any small business owner what keeps them up at night, and the answer is the same, foreign exchange. Mr. President, the Minister told us that the foreign exchange allocation system this Government inherited was, in his words, riddled with corruption, inefficiencies, weak oversight, and unfair practices.

So, Mr. President, if there is a foreign exchange cartel, why did the Governor of the Central Bank not say so? The Governor of the Central Bank came out early o'clock and said there is no foreign exchange cartel. What he said is that there was a demand and supply issue. If the supply keeps falling and the demand keeps rising, there must be a shortage.

Mr. President: Senator, you do not have much time again [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senator: Two minutes, two minutes.

Sen. V. Dhanpaul: Mr. President, just quickly, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. The Minister of Finance said the HSF grew by $6.58 billion, but the Government cannot take credit for that. Mr. President, let me explain quickly how the NAV—the Net Asset Value—of the Fund grew. The HSF money is invested abroad in international bonds and equities through the Central Bank, not one cent in Trinidad Tobago. Through the Central Bank and the external asset managers, it appoints—it is managed totally by external asset managers. When world markets rise, the funds value rises. Over the last year, the Fund's value rose by $109 million, even after the Government withdrew 510. The Fund did not grow due to some new government policy. That is a very bogus claim. It grew because world stock and bond markets rose while this Government was taking money out. Thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Dr. Marlene Attzs.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Marlene Attzs: Thank you, Mr. President, and thanks for the opportunity to contribute to this budget debate. Like many citizens, I always look forward to the budget reading so that I can understand what are the Government's plans for the country, and as I begin my contribution, I am hoping, well, I plan to ground my contribution today around a few questions that align to the Minister of Finance's theme for the budget presentation. So, my overarching or guiding theme would be: "How can we be sure that the resources allocated in this budget will facilitate the economic transformation of our economy, and how can we be sure that the allocations made and the

measures identified in the budget will improve the lives of the average Trinibagonian"? So that is my starting point, based both on the theme of the budget presentation and also the measures that have been identified.

I particularly want to interrogate what has actually improved in the country, what is likely to improve in the country and what is likely to improve, particularly in the lives of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, based on the measures, the projects, and the resource allocations announced. After years of budgets, after years of conversations around diversification, and after years of significant public expenditure, we continue to have a challenge with economic growth in our country. We continue to have foreign exchange constraints. We continue to have unreliable services, and we continue to have cost of living pressures, notwithstanding, what inflation figures have been quoted in the budget. I think if you ask the average citizen, they will not be able to relate to any reduction in the inflation rate.

Mr. President, it is important, I think, for us to understand and to acknowledge that these challenges span different administrations. So, standing and accusing one or the other really does not help advance the conversations, and certainly will not resolve them. I have to say that I welcome announcements to honour wage settlements. I welcome announcements to assist vulnerable households. I welcome announcements to strengthen public safety, and I also welcome announcements to modernize revenue administration. I noted on that score that the Minister of Finance indicated that the issue of the sales tax was no longer going to be pursued by the Government, but there will be some efforts to review the VAT administration system.

I propose to look at a few areas in my contribution today: The area of sustained growth, the issue of fiscal credibility, citizens' lived experiences, institutional capability, and accountability for the results that we are seeing. I was happy to hear Minister Swaratsingh indicate that the old adage, you know, we have to measure if we want to manage, and the Government was going to move assiduously towards greater levels of measurement. I am looking forward to those improvements as we navigate the space.

I too looked at the various documents, the *Review of the Economy*, the Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure,, et cetera. The *Review of the Economy* was particularly interesting on several counts and as other speakers noted, the Review of the Economy reported that real GDP declined by 0.5 per cent in 2025, and in that document, there is a projected further decline of 2.2 per cent in 2026. The Ministry's 2025 figure is partly affected by the treatment of taxes less subsidies on products, and the projected 2026 decline in the Ministry's Review of the Economy also reflects weaker energy and non-energy productive activity.

It is interesting to note that the World Bank projected a smaller contraction in 2026 of 0.2 per cent, and the IMF also forecasted marginal growth of 0.2 per cent. But I think when we look at all of these figures together, what is contained in our *Review of the Economy*, what is said by the World Bank, and what is said by the International Monetary Fund, the forecasts may differ. But the reality is that none of these forecasts point to robust expansion of our economy, and I think that is where we should all agree.

1200 noon

Given the national conversations that have taken place since the budget was read on October 12th, I felt it would be useful for me to place our current economic performance in a longer-term perspective. So I went to the Central Statistical Office's data, and I looked at quarterly GDP data at constant prices, specifically GDP at producer prices going back to 2013. I wanted to get away from the noise, so I went back to 13 years. Based on the CSO's constant price GDP at producer price measure, output in 2025 was approximately 15 per cent below output in Trinidad and Tobago in 2013.

This differs from headline GDP at market prices, but, importantly, it exposes a longer-term weakness that cannot be explained by the latest budget cycle alone. It also reinforces the conversation that has come out from the international community, from Moody's, from Standard & Poor's, from the International Monetary Fund, from the World Bank, that we have a structural challenge in Trinidad and Tobago that needs to be addressed. So playing games with numbers does not help us unless we address the structural challenges that we face.

More recently, GDP at producer prices fell by approximately 1.2 per cent, year-on-year, in the fourth quarter of 2025, and by 1.8 per cent in the first quarter of 2026. These comparisons, to my mind, do not by themselves establish a technical recession, but we cannot debate away or question 13-odd years of weak and uneven economic performance in Trinidad and Tobago. A lot of Budget 2027, indeed much of the economic success of our country, continues to be contingent on the energy sector. So I would like to look at that sector for a moment.

Mr. President, given the dynamics of the energy sector, I thought it

would be useful for me to consult with someone whom I consider to be a leading national energy adviser. But I think for the persons who are listening and viewing this debate, we must understand and we must be able to distinguish gross production from new gas fields—and a lot was said about new gas fields in the budget—we must be able to distinguish new gas field production from net additional gas production after we account for declining output from the existing fields, because it has been said today, and in the other place, that we have a mature energy sector.

So we are not starting from a position of strength; we are starting from a position of some weakness. I think we also need to ask, critically, given how much we are depending on the energy sector to provide the much-needed fillip to our economy, we need to ask ourselves, "How much additional gas will actually become available to downstream manufacturers?", "When will that gas arrive?", and "What measurable benefits will it generate in government revenue, in foreign exchange, in local procurement, and in jobs?" It is nice to announce all of these measures, but the announcements are simply inputs into a process. They are not necessarily outcomes.

More importantly, Mr. President, or in addition to, more important than the differences between production forecasts is the baseline from which those forecasts are calculated. As I indicated, we have the challenge of low production and also mature energy fields. The *Review of the Economy* for 2026 indicated that:

> "…natural gas production averaged 2,442.1 million standard cubic feet per day…"—during October 2025 and May 2026.

And that was down 5.1 per cent from the corresponding period a year earlier. That *Review of the Economy 2026*, one of the 13 documents laid in the Parliament, also indicated that ammonia production declined by 21 per cent, and:

"Urea production declined by 91.6 per cent…"—

—over the same eight-month period, and this is from October 2025 to May 2026.

These are not abstract numbers. They are contained in the Government's documentation and available for everyone to see. But these numbers point to serious pressure on Trinidad and Tobago's gas-based industrial economy, including gas supply constraints, and we are coupling with that the shutdown of Nutrien's operations. These are dire consequences for gas production, for export earnings, for employment, and for the wider multiplier effect on economic activity supported by the petrochemical sector. The real test for us, as a country, is not how many new projects are announced, but whether these new projects can replace declining production, whether they can restore reliable and commercially viable gas supplies, whether they can sustain existing industries and generate measurable—the Minister's words, "If we cyah measure it, we cyah manage it"—whether they can generate measurable additional national benefits.

A useful question to pose generally, and particularly in the context of Budget 2027, is, what is the Government's integrated plan with named projects, with accountable institutions—the Minister identified in his presentation this morning, the pillars—the accountable institutions, which are the accountable institutions, which are the delivery, what are the delivery

dates and the measurable targets to restore downstream activity, to strengthen our national earning capacity, and to demonstrate tangible benefits to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? The Minister of Finance identified in his presentation an investment pipeline of 45 potential projects worth approximately US $2.17 billion, with the potential for more than 7,100 jobs, and that is taken from his budget statement. These prospects are welcome. Everybody wants our economy to succeed; everybody wants our economy to grow, but projected jobs are not jobs already created. We need to know which projects are financed and approved, and which will begin delivering tangible results in fiscal 2027.

I have to link the conversation around jobs to be created to the National Workforce and Manpower Strategic Plan, because if it is that we are talking about for these jobs coming on stream, we need to know how those investments will be matched by occupational forecasts, credible training pathways, and evidence of skill gaps. But building that more productive and resilient economy requires us to start with credible public finances. With that in mind, I want to look at some of the fiscal assumptions underpinning Budget 2027.

The Revised 2026 Estimates show revenue of approximately $54.247 billion, expenditure in fiscal 2026 of $61.247 billion, and a $7 billion deficit. For fiscal 2027, revenue is projected at $59.729 billion, and expenditure projected at $63.38 billion, and the deficit coming down to $3.639 billion. So the long and short of the arithmetic is that expenditure rises by 3.5 per cent, but revenue must increase by just over 10 per cent. So the projected halving of the deficit between fiscal 2026 and 2027 rests primarily on

getting all of that revenue, an additional 10 per cent in revenue.

Mr. President, at approximately $63.37 billion, the proposed expenditure for fiscal 2027 is among one of the larger national budgets over the past 13 years or so. But the size of the budget, particularly in nominal terms, and I have to say that is in nominal terms, does not necessarily give us the whole story, whether the Government is spending more in real terms, but, more importantly, the size of the budget does not tell us whether citizens are better off for all of that spending. The more consequential question, in my respectful view, is, "What are we achieving and what have we achieved as a result of these substantial public resources being expended, particularly after we look at inflation and the growing demands on the public purse?"

If, in fiscal 2027, we actually realize a smaller deficit, everybody would applaud. That would be the most welcome news. But how much of that additional $5.5 billion depends on energy prices and production, improved collections and exceptional receipts? The budget assumes oil of US $77 per barrel and natural gas at US $5 per MMBtu, but I have not seen in any of the documents or in the conversations around the budget, any scenario analyses that tell us how sensitive are the fiscal projections to changes in price, to changes in production, and to changes in project delivery.

Consider this, Mr. President, if the Government collects just 5 per cent less revenue than they projected, with expenditure remaining unchanged, because there are commitments, the deficit could increase from $3.64 billion to approximately $6.63 billion, almost $3 billion more than anticipated, if we just have a 5 per cent shortfall in the revenue that is projected. This is

not, by any means, a prediction of fiscal failure. It illustrates why we, the people, the citizens on whose heads the benefits or the costs of the budget will accrue, it illustrates why we need to understand what are the downside risks to these projections, particularly when, as I illustrated a little while ago, our economy has been experiencing prolonged weak growth.

The *Draft Estimates of Revenue* for 2027 project non-tax revenue increasing from $10.83 billion in fiscal 2026; the Revised Estimates to $15.83 billion in fiscal 2027, almost $5 billion more, but tax revenue rises by only about $684 million. Property income, which the previous speaker spoke about, accounts for much of this increase, rising from approximately $8.46 billion to $12.69 billion, more than $4 billion more. For the listening and viewing public, I do not want us to confuse "property income" with "property tax". That is not the conversation. Property income can include petroleum royalties, returns from public enterprises and financial institutions. So again, I want to ask, what exactly is explaining this increase in Government's revenues, how much of this is likely to be recurring revenues, and how much may depend on exceptional distribution or receipts, things that are outside of the ordinary?

If we go back to fiscal year 2025, in fiscal 2025, property income was initially estimated at $8.86 billion, but subsequently revised downwards to $7.05 billion. I think that experience should provide us with some starting point, some baseline to warrant some scrutiny of the assumptions underlying the revenue projections for 2027. The projected reduction in the deficit is only credible if the revenues are in fact realized. Another feature of the budget for fiscal 2027, and a long-standing feature that deserves some

attention is the issue of Transfers and Subsidies, which account for a substantial share of Government's expenditure.

Again, the *Review of the Economy 2026* reports that approximately $33.4 billion in Transfers and Subsidies in fiscal 2026; 54.5 per cent of total expenditure, more than 50 cents in every central government dollar, was spent on Transfers and Subsidies. These payments support our pensioners, our vulnerable households, institutions, utilities, and essential services. The question is not whether such support is inherently undesirable; that is not the issue, but I think we need to ask ourselves, "Who benefits generally?", "What is achieved?", and "Whether we can sustain these levels of transfers and subsidies, and for how long?"

12.15 p.m.

In response to a question I posed in the Senate, Minister Swaratsingh at that time indicated that the additional subsidy as a result of the reduction in super-gasoline by $1; he provided at that time a figure of $318 million for the fuel subsidy. Subsequently, in the budget presentation, the Minister of Finance reported the subsidy cost the Government $290 million. I think that $28 million difference deserves some reconciliation, including whether the Estimates cover different periods or accounting bases. The *Review of the Economy* also identifies a TT $750 million petroleum product subsidy shortfall. I think it is a reasonable question to ask: how do these figures relate to each other? And how will the continued fuel release—that reduction by $1—how is that going to be financed in 2027, particularly against the backdrop of ongoing political conflicts and volatility in global emergency markets? These are all exogenous uncertainties that could place

additional pressure on the subsidy bill with implications for Government's expenditure.

While motorists welcome relief at the pump, we have to recognize that every dollar committed to fuel subsidies has an opportunity cost. I wonder whether alternatives were considered, including targeted household relief or investments in public transport, which could reduce transportation costs over time and be more sustainable. I think these are important questions to be posed, particularly when fiscal resources are constrained, and citizens expect both immediate relief and longer-term and sustainable economic progress. That brings me to a question on debt and what I call the intergenerational responsibility, Mr. President.

I noted the Minister in his presentation this morning mentioned, I am using the word scorecard, but he alluded to reporting that the Government plans to do in the future to let the country know what has been achieved versus what has been promised, et cetera. But I think the country should get some clear-cut reconciliation of borrowing, refinancing, repayments, guarantees and public sector obligations. Bandying about the figure of the debt-to-GDP ratio is useful for those who understand it, but the average citizen does not particularly understand what the debt-to-GDP ratio is and what commitments we, the people, have to finance debt. But the debt-to-GDP ratio does not also tell the whole story. It is simply a ratio of the amount of debt we owe, as opposed to the GDP that we earn in any particular year. So, I think it is important for us to understand how much revenue that the Government earns goes toward interest payments, how

much debt must be refinanced and how much is owed in foreign currency. That is a point that I made last year.

Last year I questioned the approximately $20 billion borrowing provision that was in Estimates of Revenue. This year, the Minister in his presentation referred to more than $21 billion that the Government has borrowed over 18 months, including borrowing to refinance existing debt. The Minister also shared with the population approximately $70 billion in obligations that become due over the next five years. I think it is reasonable for us to ask, where is the financing bridge for this debt that the country is accumulating? If we are going to impose this debt on future generations, I think it is reasonable for us to understand where we are going with this debt.

The borrowing provision falls from approximately $19.89 billion in fiscal 2026, to $8.44 billion in fiscal 2027. That is a good thing if we maintain that, but a smaller borrowing provision is not the same as a smaller debt stock or a lower repayment burden. That *Review of the Economy*, again, explains that of the US $1 billion sovereign bond issued in January 2026, approximately US $593 million refinanced an existing Eurobond and US $407 million was allocated toward budgetary support; US currency. The US $800 million July bond also served refinancing and general financing purposes. Refinancing is a legitimate part of debt management, but refinancing does not make the debt disappear. It replaces an existing obligation with a new one. Borrowing for budget support is also debt, repayable from future public resources.

So, again, I am making the point that I think it would be helpful to see a reconciliation showing these opening and closing debt balances, gross

borrowing, interest repayments, et cetera, and how it is meant to align with government revenue and expenditure projections. The question is not simply, how much the country owes. But I think a more important question is what we have to show for it. What we have to show for how much we have borrowed, how we intend to repay it and what obligations we are leaving to future generations.

Speaking about savings and future generations, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, which is our national savings account, for want of a better description, in the budget the Ministry indicated that the current balance as at August 31, 2026, was US $6.58 billion, but the *Review of the Economy* document reports US $6.45 billion as at September the 30th; different reporting dates. I think we need to understand the difference. It might seem small. But it is significant. The *Review of the Economy* document also reports withdrawals of US $379.6 million, with no deposits to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in fiscal 2026. But the closing value of the fund as at September, whether you deal with the $6.58 billion or $6.45 billion, it was higher by about US $109 million than the previous year, which is as a result of investment returns that are exogenous. Investment decisions brought in some returns to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and they appear to have more than offset the withdrawals, but again, we do not have all of the reconciliation details. I think it is also important for the population to understand that an increase in the market value of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund is not the same as putting savings into the account. So, when you talk about the fund standing at $6.58 billion or $6.45 billion,

nothing has been added to that fund in terms of savings for fiscal 2027. This is simply as a result of what has happened on the international stock market.

Again, I want to ask, Mr. President, with all of these expenditures over many years, our budgets are read in billions of dollars, and many citizens may not even grasp how much money that is. Because for the average Jane and Joe Public, the budget is really about their daily lived experiences. As one of our renowned calypsonians, late and great Lord Funny said:

"…how yuh feel…"—after yuh spend all dat money—"…how yuh feel?"

So, families experience the budget in whether income covers food, bills, medicine and schooling and whether the public services that their taxes finance actually work. Families do not experience it in terms of what we can quote as a declining inflation rate. When you see them in the supermarket, they will tell you that they "doh" understand how you could say that the food inflation has declined, because that is not their lived experience.

I also think that before we announce another suite of measures, we should ask, or the country should be made aware of, what happened to last year's commitments. What was delivered? And what difference did it make? So, for example, the Minister of Finance, in presenting his budget presentation, reported that, with respect to the asset levy on banks and insurers, $397 million was collected as opposed to the projected collection of $575 million. Not too sure what explains the difference. But for the average citizen, since this is an asset on banks and insurers, do we know if this asset levy has been imposed on the average citizen, thereby further

increasing their cost of living? So, I think for citizens, we need to know not simply about the billions in the budget, but we need to know who benefits, who bears the cost and whether some of these measures identified actually deliver the promised result. The real test of the budget, Mr. President, is not what the Treasury necessarily collects. I mean, that is important, but I think it is also about how citizens feel.

Perhaps nowhere else is the distinction between public expenditure and meaningful outcomes more evident than how we care for the most vulnerable in our society. I was happy to hear the Minister in his presentation this morning speak; one of the pillars I think he identified was protecting people. There was the word vulnerable inside of there. So, I apologize. But I do know that the Minister did make mention of the Government being committed to protecting the vulnerable in our society. I was happy to hear that because I think some of the most vulnerable people in our country are the ones who are living on the streets.

So, a couple weeks ago, I posed a question about homeless persons; street dwellers. A response was provided that a street count conducted from November 20th to 22nd in 2023, recorded 624 persons living on the streets. Port of Spain accounted for 235, San Fernando 168, and there were some other geographic distributions. These are persons whose circumstances should inform the design and location of services. A more recent street engagement exercise by the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services, an engagement done between April and June2026, did not provide a new count, but it focused on the perceived contributing factors to people living on the street, with mental health conditions cited as the leading

reason. I think that finding warrants a response. But it is not equivalent to a clinical diagnosis or proof that mental illness caused homelessness in each case.

The *Social Sector Investment Programme* for 2027, one of the 13 documents, offers evidence on the response to social displacement. It says that between October2025 and August2026, the Social Displacement Unit of the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services reported 1,152 street engagements and identified 389 new clients. During that period, 20 persons, according to the *Social Sector Programme,* transitioned to stable accommodation, independent living placements were recorded, et cetera and two persons were actually reintegrated with their families. Now, I think that is important. I think that is useful. I think it shows that the Government is, in fact, making some headway. But I think we also need to distinguish between what activities have been undertaken and whether or not we can ensure that we have more sustainable and long-lasting outcomes. What we need to establish, I think, Mr. President, is how many persons have successfully moved off of the streets, how many have moved into stable accommodation, and whether or not they are receiving some kind of support to rebuild their lives.

Mr. President, from my own observations—I am not in the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services—there appears to be a growing presence of socially displaced persons seeking shelter in public spaces, including: Constantine Park, which I see on a daily basis; frequent visits to San Fernando, I see the bandstand on Harris Promenade, a place of choice for displaced persons; various bus shelters along the East-West

Corridor and just yesterday, on my way into Port of Spain, I noticed from Independence Square, up Abercromby Street, including at the National Library, providing shelter for a number of homeless persons. These are people living in circumstances of considerable vulnerability, often in plain sight.

While we know that the reasons for social displacement may be complex, we need to ask ourselves whether the interventions are coordinated, adequately resourced and delivering lasting outcomes. I also wonder, Mr. president, based on the findings of the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services, if the finding that mental health features so prominently, whether there is any active coordination between the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services and the Ministry of Health to provide coordinated support for these socially displaced persons.

12.30 p.m.

Mr. President, another visible test of whether public expenditure is improving people's lives is the condition of our public spaces. In a $63 billion budget, neglected drains, overgrown recreation grounds and accumulated garbage might appear to be small matters, but for the affected residents, they are everyday tests of whether public services are working. So, there have been some complaints by members of the public reported in the media—so there are some stories carried in the media in August 2025 and in January 2026; people complaining about accumulated garbage at different parts of the country. So, there was the conversation coming out of Union Hall in December, inadequate maintenance at Palmiste Park in

January, and not all of these complaints or outcomes can be attributed to the closure of CEPEP.

But they raise an important question, Mr. President: Are the new arrangements delivering the standard of maintenance that our citizens expect and have become accustomed to? Minister Ameen previously described the NPUPS, the National Programme for the Upkeep of Public Spaces, as a pilot programme and when she addressed a question I posed in this Chamber, she said, dependent on additional resources. And the fiscal 2027 Estimates have, in fact, an expansion of the programme, but effective delivery also requires adequate staffing, equipment, supervision and coordination.

So according to the *Draft Estimates of Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* for fiscal 2027, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government's overall allocation has increased from $2.36 billion to $2.96 billion while its Development Programme allocation declines from $280.7 million to $271.1 million.

Mr. President: Senator, you end at 12.35 p.m.

Sen. Dr. M. Attzs: Thank you kindly, Mr. President. So, Mr. President, it is also interesting to know that while CEPEP has been discontinued in Trinidad, Tobago has retained the programme. So, it would be interesting for us to understand how the programme is rolled out in Tobago, because we have been told that the programme in Tobago is going to be aligned to Tobago's agriculture thrust and hopefully, this could help alleviate some of the food import challenges that we are seeing in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, I want to touch briefly on the fiscal policy support, and it relates to the VAT—the proposed VAT on foreign digital services and

again, I am looking forward to some clarification on how that is meant to be rolled out. Some persons have already referred to it as the "Netflix tax", but depending on the final legislation, it could also affect software that many persons use on a day-to-day basis, including things like Microsoft 365, Adobe, Canva and all of these things, including software that students at the University of the West Indies use on a daily basis. So, I look forward to getting that clarification from the relevant Minister.

So, Mr. President, as I wind up my contribution, you know, I want to say that this is not a call for pessimism. I do not sit on that side of the fence. I think it is a call for us to confront our challenges honestly, acknowledging the realities before us and work collectively towards a better future.

We recently paid national tribute to the extraordinary life and legacy of the Mighty Sparrow, and I think one of the things that the Mighty Sparrow's passing reminded me—his timeless calypso called "Lend a Hand", and I think it is important—I see you smiling, Mr. President. Clearly, it has conjured up some good memories for you. It is a time for us to put our differences aside and work together for the good of our country. Dr. Sparrow's message resonates as powerfully today
as it did when he first sang, and:

"Now is the time"—for us—"to rebuild".

Indeed, Mr. President, it is reconstruction time in Trinidad and Tobago, and I think we all have a part to play. Government, business, labour, communities and citizens must put our collective shoulders to the wheel, but collective effort must be guided by information on what we are rebuilding and where we are heading. Because, Mr. President, the true measure of the

national budget is not simply what we allocate but by what we achieve and what we can leave behind for those who come after us. Mr. President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Alicia Lalite-Ettienne.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Alicia Lalite-Ettienne: Good afternoon, Mr. President and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to contribute towards this debate. I would kindly ask you, if the time is close to expiring, can you give me a 10 minutes?

Mr. President: Yes.

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: And also, if you have to be on your feet, if you could let me know, if I am not aware of it. Well, today marks an important event; an important event for persons. We have been hearing about the vulnerable, you know, people who are less fortunate, even my colleague with the socially displaced. I would like to start my contribution—I always like to start it with a quote, and my eyes lit up on the quote of Jesse Jackson:

"When everyone is included, everyone wins."

So, when everyone is included in all aspects of society, only then everyone is going to win. So, as I continue along in that trend, we talk a lot about inclusion; we talk a lot about digital inclusion, financial inclusion, social inclusion for the vulnerable, and other aspects and other communities within our society.

The purpose of inclusion is to assist in the removal of barriers and to promote the equality and development of individuals and to promote

equality for all. So that is the purpose of inclusion. And the reason why I said this is because everyone knows I have my own limitations, which I have lived with for all my life. But you know, as you go through life bit by bit, there are also limitations that are also imposed on you, sometimes intentionally or unintentionally. And with this budget debate, the reason why I said that is because when the documents were presented, it was not accessible. The package was not accessible. And I must, hats off to the Senate Secretariat and the IT department of the Parliament who dedicated countless hours to try and see if they can get some of the materials accessible for me. And time—when that was, it was—a lot of time had passed, but I still say, you see, whatever little I did get, I will contribute on. So, I must say hats off to them because they tried very hard to see that they could get some sort of information accessible for me.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: I tried. I tried. With all my little technology, you know, expertise, I did try, and I tried to be independent and when I realized nothing could not happen, I cried out. And they tried and they had to set aside certain things and they had to try to make things happen, so that I could contribute. And I said, this experience demands for me to be on my legs. The reason why I say that, and I stress inclusion, is because I got access to the SSIP report and, you know, little is better than nothing. For me, I am very grateful, all right.

Other than listening to debates and stuff like that, when you have access to your material, you could go through it and you can access and you can do your research. So, I have a lot of limitations. So, my contribution

will be very narrow in scope, with the materials that I was able to gain access to through the assistance of the Senate Secretariat and the IT department. And it will not be long, but, however, I will identify it in, you know—the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, Minister Swaratsingh, you know, he had it in five pillars for the presenting of the budget. And for me, for my contribution, I will just look at a few Ministries, and the first Ministry I would like to look at is the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence.

I can strongly remember back in the month of March, I stood here and I contributed to the Advance Passenger Information and Passenger Name Record Bill, 2026, and all my recommendations, I was invisible. Nothing was mentioned about it, nothing was considered and hence the reason why for the situation that occurred now. Because serious attention was paid to what I was saying with accessibility, this would not have happened. So, I looked at all the lofty programmes that were rolled out in 2026, with IT and artificial intelligence for, you know, citizens and the digitization of different platforms so that all the government services, you could access them online, which includes the departure and arrival card system and stuff like that.

Now, when I spoke about, you know, technology, technology has its advantages and disadvantages, and you have to know how to work around it, and I know it can be challenging at times because, as a government, you have to think of everyone; everyone's needs and the demands and the services that are being provided. Now, with persons with disabilities, we strive for inclusion because we want to be included in everything within society, because we pay our taxes and we do what we do like any other

citizens in this country.

So, with the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, they identified that advancement in technology and artificial intelligence will improve accessibility and capability and, you know, the development of human lifestyles and education. But the programmes and the platforms, because—this budget, I would like to say before I continue, it was created, the format, everything, all the content was created with artificial intelligence and my screen reader was telling me it. Everything, artificial intelligence, AI-generated, AI-generated, AI-generated, AI-generated and graphics.

12.45 p.m.

So, if you utilize artificial intelligence, yes, it is great, but it comes back now to accessibility and with the algorithms, if you input algorithms that are biased and—"what yuh put in is what yuh gonna get out", Mr. President. And actually, what was put in, all right, that is what I received, the output. So, you had the input, they used AI, but it clearly showed that when they use artificial intelligence, they are producing a document to read all the programmes that the vulnerable people, and the citizens of Trinidad will benefit from. However, the beneficiary cannot read the document and it is because—

Sen. Allahar: Mr. President, can I? May I?

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: Yeah.

Sen. Allahar: I am very, very sorry to intrude on the Member's contribution. I just wanted for clarity, she has made a very strange allegation, which if she can tell me—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Allahar: If she can tell us, if she can tell us—

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. President, according to the Standing Orders, is this a point of order?

Sen. Allahar: Would you sit down, please? I am speaking.

Sen. Dr. Browne: "No, I won't, I will not." You are interrupting the Senator.

Mr. President: Okay, okay, okay, okay—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Allahar: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. Browne: "No, you're being rude."

Mr. President: Listen, listen. Members, Members, I am on my legs and both of you are being disrespectful. You are rising on a point of order, because then what is the point?

Sen. Allahar: Mr. President, I am just asking her to give way because she has made a point—

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. President—[*Inaudible*] allow her to respond.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Allahar: Mr. President—

Mr. President: All right, all right, okay, all right.

Sen. Allahar: Can she give way, Mr. President, through you?

Mr. President: Sen. Alicia Lalite-Etienne, the Minister is asking whether you can give way to him to clarify a point that you have made. Are you willing to give way?

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: Yes, I will give way.

Mr. President: All right, she is willing to give way.

Sen. Allahar: Thank you very kindly, Mr. President, through you, if the goodly Senator could tell us, please, she has made an accusation about the budget being done by AI, and we would not want the population to go away with the wrong impression. So, could she tell us, please, what parts of the budget that she is speaking about that was done by AI? Because it is a very strange accusation, and I am sure she is responsible enough to identify what part.

Mr. President: Okay, all right, okay, okay.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Allahar: Oh, please, shut up!

Sen. Roberts-Radgman: Excuse me, Mr. President, I demand an apology.

Mr. President: Yeah, yeah, please Senator, you cannot tell a Member to "shut up", I mean you said it, let us agree with that. So could you kindly—?

Sen. Allahar: Of course, I apologize.

Mr. President: Yeah, thank you. Sen. Lalite-Etienne, you heard the intervention. You heard the clarification that is required. You can resume now. You can speak.

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: Thank you. Now, I have not even gotten—all right, I am actually saying, my experience, and then I was going to round off—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne:—so I did not even get a chance to, my dear, hon. Senator, to actually round off what I had to say. And you asked what documents were generated by AI? Is that what you are asking?

Sen. Allahar: Yes, please.

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: Okay. Well, all the documents that I have gotten, all right, excepting the Minister of Finance's statement, are generated by AI.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: If you want an example, I can have my computer increase the speech, open up the original documents I have received, and you will hear my screen reader saying "that is generated by AI". So, I will not come here unless I have facts. And—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Allahar: Mr. President, may I just ask her to give way, if I may?

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: Give way again?

Sen. Allahar: If I may, because we are having a discussion, a very useful discussion? Can you give way so I can get some clarification?

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: No, I would just like to finish round up, and that is it, all right?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: And if I was given accessibility to the documents, because last year, I did not have this problem. I never stood up here and talked about anything. I stood up, I gave my contribution, Mr. President, if you remember, and that was it. So, I just stood here, and I am saying what I experienced, and then I will just finish up my contribution, all right, and that is it. And, you know, as I said before, it could be intentional, it could be unintentional. I am not accusing the Government of any intentional acts on the vulnerable, so I am just clearing that. I am just talking about my experience, my accessibility, with getting the documents so that I could

perform my duties and do my research, and that is all.

I am talking about the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, because what they are doing is they are having training programmes, they are having platforms, and these platforms, when they are—and they are using a lot of AI when these platforms are created, and the reason why I am mentioning it is just a simple advice. The reason why I am mentioning it is because if it is not nipped in the bud, the same programmes that are going to be digitized, what is going to happen is that the vulnerable would not be able to access, and that is all I was getting to later on in my contribution, all right?

What happened is that for the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, even the UNDP 2025 states that using digital advanced technology and AI for the development of human development, it must have access, design, and inclusion. It is in the UNDP Report 2025. So, if certain things AI is utilized for, and certain groups within the society cannot gain access to it, what would you account it to be? Then some groups are locked out of some information. All right? So my recommendation—

Sen. Smith: Mr. President, would the speaker give way? Would you give way?

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Just have a seat for a second. Listen, I do not think we should get involved any further.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: No, wait, listen. We can have a discussion with the hon.

Senator at another time, but to get into this toing and froing, I do not think—so at this point in time, I will just ask her to continue, and I will ask my colleague from the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence to take notes so that we can respond to her concerns, right? And if you need clarification, there will be an opportunity where you can engage her privately behind the scenes, and she will clear it up. But this toing and froing, I am not permitting it. Continue, please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: Thank you, Mr. President. So my suggestion to the hon. Minister is that in the future, when you all are having your—also including in your programmes, your AI training, I see that you all are launching out training, which is great. That is why I said, "You know, just hold up, I just need to continue". That is all I was saying, that you all are having—you are opening up training to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, that if you all could be mindful and to include persons with disabilities into the advanced training that you all will be having, AI. Because you talk about integration, and you talk about integration from primary, secondary, and tertiary, so, persons with disabilities, like myself, are integrated.

However, when we have reached the tertiary level stage, with preparation for the labour force, we also need to be integrated. So, I am just kindly asking if you could be mindful, and you can also do research on it as well, and you would see what I am talking about, but it would be really good if persons with disabilities could be included in the training programmes that you all are rolling out, and all the initiatives for 2027. Because there will be online platforms, digitized platforms for services, and I am wondering if

persons using adaptive devices would be able to access the information that they will need using these platforms.

The second Ministry I would now like to focus on is on Ministry of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development. I saw where the Minister, he will be focusing on improving labour laws, et cetera. My recommendation is that if he could be also mindful of inclusion of persons with disabilities, especially the OSHA Act, Chap. 88:08. What happened is that many employers use certain sections of the OSHA Act as a reason why persons with disabilities should not be hired in the workplace. They talk about risk and they talk about security, and if we are talking about equality and full inclusion, what would happen is that if he could keep mindful of when he looks into the legislative aspect of the labour laws and OSHA, if that could also be considered.

Also, Mr. President, with the Ministry of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, I saw where they had programmes in 2026 for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and which was really great. People benefited in development of skills and where the Government is matching social assistance with skills and entrepreneurial techniques, and also guidelines to prepare people for the world of work, or for them to be an entrepreneur because people—as Trinidadians, we have a lot of creativity.

But as I spoke about integration a few minutes ago, what I would also like him to be mindful of, we talk about full inclusion, I spoke about the purpose of inclusion. The programmes that you launched, they were really interesting. If it was another place and time for me, I definitely would have registered for some of those programmes. But what I realize is that I saw the

Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, they had programmes, and actually, it was inclusive, 28 deaf persons were included in their training.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: And the reason why I mentioned this for the hon. Minister Baptiste, is that persons with disabilities want inclusiveness, not exclusiveness. So, not segregated like programmes that are designed specifically, all right, for persons with disabilities. If you have this type of disability, you will have these type of programmes. What is important that when you have programmes generally on a scale for the entire—in the country, persons, a percentage of that persons with disabilities will be actually enrolled in that programme.

1.00 p.m.

The reason why I am saying that—psychologically, it is very good for an individual to be included in the environment that they will be preparing for. So, if these entrepreneurial programmes and leadership programmes and different programmes are there and geared to prepare you for the labour force, then having separate programmes is not going to fully prepare you for the labour force, because when you are employed, just like how I am here. I am among—it is nothing that is segregated. So, what is happening is that, if you look at other jurisdictions, you will see that full inclusion is what is important.

Many years ago, hence the reason why globally they moved away boarding school mentality and made it a more inclusive learning environment for persons with disabilities. So, persons with disabilities—where in the primary, secondary, and tertiary education sectors. But when

coming for the preparation for the world of work and preparation for being included in the workforce we are in separate programmes. However, the programmes are supposed to be included as well.

So, what would happen is you would have a smooth transition when the person is already trained, because I see that people get training. People got temporary employment because persons with disabilities want meaningful work because they need to support themselves. Not all the time, people would be around. Not all the time, mommy and daddy would be around. So, persons with disabilities need to learn how to fish and how to survive in the big pond. So, what would happen is that more inclusiveness, just like the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries whereby persons are actually included in the regular programmes.

I would like to also look at the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation. When I looked at the programmes and the report on one, the ELDAMO service. They have 63 persons registered, 30 by 31—63 persons registered for the service. And when I looked at the report for the Ministry of People, Social Development and Family Services, approximately over 120,000 elderly persons received grants and for persons with disabilities it is over 30,000 persons receiving disability grants.

Now, this service is for the elderly and differently abled. So, my maths cannot add up where there are only 63 persons benefiting from the service. I know some people will say, well, you have the PTSC service, and persons could utilize that service as well. However, Mr. President, with that service, that is for people who could move, people who could be mobile and go to a bus stop. But what about people who have serious mobility

problems?

So, I just want to—because it sounds like it is still being run as a pilot project, or what is happening to the demand, or what is happening between supply and demand for the elderly and differently abled. Because it is in the report that only 63 persons are registered for the programme. So that question came up, and I was wondering how there are only 63 persons when there are so many elderly and persons with disabilities.

I know I have persons with disabilities who are mobile and could use other forms of transport. But still, those 63 persons, you know, I could not understand the figure of 63 persons. Also, I was wondering if the service is extended to Tobago, because I do not see any mention of Tobago. But I was wondering if the service was extended to Tobago.

I now shift attention to the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure.

Mr. President: Sen. Alicia Lalite-Ettienne, you have 10 more minutes, right?

Sen. A. Lalite-Ettienne: Okay, sure.

What I would like to enquire, I saw we had—15 digital control systems were implemented around the city. I was wondering if there was one repair of the pedestrian digital audible systems—there are few—one. And if the Ministry, in their allocations for next year, has been thinking about expanding it—the pedestrian digital audio system—and if any were placed into these 15 intersections that were mentioned.

I will shift now to—I saw the penalties for the employers' NIS will be increased. And my question also is: Yes, the NIS has been increased, so more money is going into NIS, but the question is, are the increased funds

that are collected from the increase of NIS contributions from the employee and from the employer going into the system that was not functioning effectively before? Because if it is continually going into the old broken system, then that will lead to problems later down the road.

So, Mr. President, as I wind up, I just was interested in inclusion, accessibility, and making certain recommendations that will benefit. I am not criticizing the Government, but these recommendations will benefit the same people that you all say you will provide services for and actually are working to provide programmes for within the upcoming fiscal year.

So, Mr. President, with these few words I like to thank you for the opportunity to contribute today.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Minister in the Ministry of Housing, Sen. Anil Roberts.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Housing (Sen The Hon. Anil Roberts): Thank you, Mr. President. It is apt that Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul of the PNM, a finance guru, a man who was the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance for over a decade, a man who had a "corbeau sweat" as the Minister of Finance—will give his contribution, his entire contribution, with his national flag upside down. That shows that he understands what he did to this economy as a PNM—that he put the economy in distress, he put the country in distress, but the stressors were removed on April 28th, 2025—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—and that is why this Budget 2027 is coming forward.

I cannot stand to sit here with the brighter people than me in economics and finance, with you, Sen. Dhanpual, and you, Sen. Dr. Attzs, who just stand there and give out disinformation—talking about inflation and that people out there would miraculously see a decrease in prices, knowing full well that there is a decrease in the increase, or the rate of increase of prices, and therefore, there is still an increase, but it is increasing at a slower rate. So, to talk about prices going down, there is no deflation. No one said there was deflation. There was a decrease in the inflation rate of .9 per cent, and therefore it is trending in the right way, and people's purchasing power is holding up.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: But you all come here, and you all talk that just so in the Senate as educated, intelligent people in economics and finances. We have to stop that. I must say to Sen. Dr. Attzs, I want to thank you for agreeing with the Member for Siparia.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: For agreeing with the Prime Minister that in transfers and subsidies there needs to be efficiency and productivity, and that the money must get to those who are most in need and not freeloaders and those who are lazy. So, you can say it. You could stand there and say, "I agree with the Prime Minister." It is okay. "Doh be afraid."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: No ghost, no fake, no corruption, clean it up and get the money to those who need it. So, I welcome your endorsement of the Prime Minister's plan, programme, and policy moving forward.

When I hear PNM talking on the economy, it is like "fellas pelting Molotov cocktails into a place, burning down TSTT, $20 million, burning electricity wires and then coming to complain that the electricity switch off." The PNM decimated the economy, destroyed it, then come here to say, "Yuh borrowing X amount, yuh rate of this is too much, yuh putting us under stress, the foreign exchange." Is you who did it. We will fix it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: I love when people say, "Ah, problems exist across administrations.' dat mean you is ah PNM in yuh heart, and yuh cannot say that de PNM failed, was a failed government. Dey brought us to failed status. Yuh always try to pretend like we just arrive here like a corbeau just drop here." No. We must follow a track record. We must follow a policy. We had 10 years of PNM. The best way to predict what could happen and what will happen is by analysing what was there before. And what was there before was the worst Government in the history of this country; the PNM.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: The budget statement by the hon. Minister of Finance says: A People-Centred Approach: Investing in Communities, Transforming the Economy and Securing a Sustainable Future. This is what we have to do at many avenues. We have to walk and chew gum and move forward. But the hon. Prime Minister, with her heart where it is for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and the change in the policy where the resources of the country belong, in her opinion and the opinion of the Cabinet, to the people. She is not going to wean the people of the resources

and tell them zero, zero, zero, nothing for you, take away fuel subsidy, and then her Cabinet Ministers recuse themselves 720 times. That is not Kamla Persad-Bissessar. So, this policy shows that when we fix the damage done by you, the people of Trinidad and Tobago will benefit.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: The hypocrisy of the PNM reminds me of a quote. I had to research. "Allyuh inspire meh to do some extra research because of the hypocrisy, especially of Sen. Dhanpaul. Ah wouldn't of mind if Sen. Rose or somebody talk that because dey in finance, dey weren't in charge." You were there. You decimated it, and you stand up here with arrogance to tell us in 18 months that we must fix all that you damaged in 15 years?

William Shakespeare's says:

"False face must hide what the false heart doth know."

"So you could pretend all dat false face here for de cameras but de Dougla here to tell yuh no, no, no, de numbers coming and ah will show yuh the real numbers."

Your Leader of the Opposition, and no amount of untruths repeated by desperate people will make it true. Your hon. Leader of the Opposition said, *Guardian* October 16th, 2026, and yes, Sen. Dr. Attzs, I still print out the Guardian. "I doh but it. It losing 30 million. It is a PNM paper but ah I still have to read it to give the quotes."

> "With two consecutive quarters of negative economic growth and two consecutive years of accelerating contraction in real GDP, I take no pleasure…"—

Says the Leader of the Opposition, the piece of leader of the PNM, one third of party.

> "…saying what the Minister's afraid to, what the Central Bank Governor may not want to admit, and what many economists are seeing: this country is now in a recession…"

Repeated by you, Sen. Dhanpaul. Then there is the former Minister of Finance who did not have a "corbeau sweat". He had a long, sustained period to decimate us, to bring us pain, to embarrass this country, and to show arrogance to all the citizens. The hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East says in that same article on October18th, but in the *Express* this time.

> "…this country has not already crashed, it is poised to do so in the coming month."

"De PNM is like ah drunk driver who crash de car, step out so drunk and say, Boy who was driving." That is you all. Colm Imbert is saying that the economy is going to crash. "You cannot crash it twice. He done crashed it." We have to fix it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

1.15 p.m.

We have to take it by the body shop.

> "Imbert said Tancoo had ignored the reality faced by citizens, where some were suffering and starving…"

Imagine the PNM, and Colm Imbert for Diego Martin North/East, who the country knows for 40 years, is now pretending he cares about people, poor people, "all yuh not making sense". You are trying to sell something that

people would not buy:

> "…they have no money, businesses are crashing, the economy is in a recession…"

So, the PNM comes out here to say, "recession, recession, recession". Okay.

I now read from a Ministry of Finance Memorandum, dated—after the budget and after the response; so the 17, October, 2026. Statement from the Hon. Davendranath Tacoo, Minister of Finance:

> Trinidad and Tobago is not in a recession. A technical recession is two consecutive quarters of falling GDP.

So, in constant prices quarter one of 2025, negative 7.6 per cent. And one must note, when you are looking at numbers, you also have to look at trends. Every first quarter in Trinidad and Tobago, even in years of maximum growth of 3 per cent, 4 per cent, 5 per cent, the first quarter for many—a disparate number of reasons always shows a negative because, Christmas, people are spending plenty of money, men are not spending, people are owing, things slowed down, contraction, people get their bonus early, their payments early for Christmas; different things will affect the expenditure patterns and so on, for the first quarter, but what you could also look at is the reduction in the decrease in the growth.

So that quarter one was negative 7.6. Then it was followed by three quarters of positive growth. Quarter two, plus 4.3 per cent; quarter three, 2.1 per cent; quarter four, 0.3 per cent, and then quarter one of 2026, negative 8.1, as the first quarter. So, it is one quarter, which is a normal quarter of negative growth, as you would know better than anyone, Senator. You see why I am a bit agitated, because you know this. So, to stand and pretend and

talk like you just came out from a doubles stand is unfortunate. That is why I could deal with you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: The Economy grew for three consecutive quarters in 2025, but you all PNM coming, recession, recession, recession. "Doh try to call bad on the country, doh cry", the UNC is here, and we are fixing it and things are progressing.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Now, let us get to real facts of the PNM, because if T&T were in a recession, two consecutive quarters of negative growth, which we are not. A recession is better than a depression. The PNM had this country in a depression.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: The definition of an economic depression is, a prolonged period of severe economic decline.

The country experienced a major reduction in business activity over the last eight years of the PNM over 6,243 SMEs shut down and closed down, before COVID. Then you could include COVID, but I will give you all a little break for COVID because you all did not handle it well, but it was a new experience, so I will not bully you all on that. But before COVID you shut down the economy. Furthermore, increased unemployment. Before COVID, over 56,000 people lost their jobs as you decimated the economy.

Other things that define a depression: reductions in production, investment, and consumer spending. You ran negative foreign direct investment in 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024. Capital flight, you spoke about. You

really have to be a hypocrite to talk about that. The economy becomes so weak in a depression that businesses struggle to survive, right?

If you remember in Port of Spain, I did a video on it, way back in 2018, when you are driving down Ariapita Avenue into Port of Spain: *alquiler*, for lease, for rent, for sale, all kinds of things, businesses shutting down. Over 35 buildings from up at the top by the MRI Centre to the old Ice Factory, and you all come here to talk when things are progressing to talk about recession to create a recession, to manufacture recession; there is no recession.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Widespread financial hardship for an extended period. That is a depression. PNM pain. The pain of the PNM is a depression. It manifested itself, and that is why the election results and you all talk about the people out there and how they are feeling. You know how you would know how people feel, election and election results; 2019, Local Government Election, licks; 2022, THA election, 14/1; 2025, election, 28/13; January 2026, 15/0. It means the people know that the PNM is a hypocritical party and they got rid of them.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Now, let us go further, because they want to talk this recession which does not exist, but the depression that existed let me help you, Sen. Dhanpaul, with some real numbers. And just to get you before I go to these numbers, another quote for you, because the hypocrisy is so real could cut it with a knife like a cheesecake with strawberry topping. Samuel Johnson said:

"Hypocrisy is the necessary burden of villainy."

So, the PNM has to be hypocritical; they have to come here with nonsense because their objective is to get into the Cabinet, recuse themselves, rent their own buildings, benefit their brother's company for $10 billion and enrich themselves, and they even say, when you are enriching yourself in the PNM Cabinet the right thing to do while you are enriching yourself is to recuse yourself. That is the policy of that and that is why the people have rejected you and will continue to reject you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Talking about the depression. Trinidad and Tobago quarterly GDP growth, 2015 to 2020—I just want to show you some of the negative, since you all are so good, you all come and say two quarters of negative growth is recession. But what about when you have two quarter by two quarters by two quarters and so on. That is called depression. 2016, PNM, negative 10.5, quarter one, negative 0.6 quarter two; 2017, negative 0.46 per cent, quarter two, negative 2.6; 2018, negative 7.0; quarter two, negative 0.5; 2019, negative 4.6, negative 1.1 per cent; 2020, negative 9.1 per cent, negative 19.2 per cent. "All yuh well know bout recession, all yuh is expert, yuh carry us from recession into depression and now we in progression."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: When we also talk about the overall, the overall figures for the year, the yearly growth, you like that too; 2014, UNC 3.7 per cent growth; 2015 unfortunately PNM got an extra hour for elections because the EBC seemed to like the PNM and did not tell the UNC and you

all scraped in. New Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Chrisopher Rowley, Member for Diego Martin West, and immediately from 3.7 per cent growth to negative 0.6; 2016 the PNM got the time to settle in now, the Cabinet settled down, you all intellectuals get in to the Cabinet to share one brain cell and it comes up to negative 7.4; 2017 negative point 4.8 per cent; 2018 negative 1.0; 2019, or my goodness they grew by 0.5. You shrink by 8 per cent, but you grow 0.5. Congratulations, you all should pop champagne in that Balisier House that you cannot account for; 2020, back to the PNM norm, negative 8.09 per cent; 2021, negative 0.8.

So, what you are describing your run as, Sen. Dhanpaul, you were there with them moving along with them as the Permanent Secretary. Let us try something else; let us go to GDP. Time running too fast. What was that? This was percentage growth, right, and this is raw figures now. In the overall GDP of the country—

Sen. Dhanpaul: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—yes, this is—"Ahh", you know the thing, you are brighter than me. That is why I am vex with you because you come here and be disingenuous with your upside down flag. That is why I am vex. You see in 2014, real GDP, $187 "b-b-billion". UNC—I would not bore them, but by 2022, after six long, painful, torturous years of PNM, our country shrunk from $187 "b-b-billion", which means jobs, money, expenditure, people have net present value, their money is valuable, they are going, they could buy, they have power purchasing priority, everything going good, things are nice, but under PNM they take our big ballooning economy and shrink it down by 2022, to $148 "b-b-b-billion". A reduction

of $39.5 "b-b-billion". You all are coming to talk about recessions and problems and debt and so on. Let me continue.

"Oh, look ah have a lil note here for" Sen. Dhanpaul talking about capital flight. Your negative foreign direct investment, 2020, 2021, 2020—money was running from the PNM like voters, and you all come to talk about capital flight. What about capital—you know what is real capital flight, US $2million in a crocus bag by airport from a merchant bank.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: That is capital flight. That is capital in flight too. They are coming now, Trinidad and Tobago foreign reserves. You talk about the US, okay, let us talk Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Member for Siparia, when she left, 2014, US $11.497 "b-b-b-billion" and then PNM, we got PNM for nine years, Mr. President, nine years, I am telling you of pain, nine years of torture and they are still talking arrogantly. You cannot be such a failure and arrogant; that is an oxymoron. They dropped it down from US $11.497 "b-b-b-billion" to a paltry US $45.599billion, eliminating US $6 "b-b-b-billion" from our reserves to our people. And simultaneously, obviously, what would happen is the import cover dropped from 13.3 months down to under six months.

So, when they talk about the economy, the PNM should be the last people—you all should never come back anywhere near an economy. You all should not even rent cars from Econo-Car Rentals. Anything with economy you all should be left out.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Trinidad and Tobago Heritage and Stabilisation

Fund. And Sen. Attzs, come on, you said US $6.58 billion. Say it with the meaning that it deserves. The highest level in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. Say it proudly, do not be afraid.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Never before has the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund reached so high. So say, well done Kamla, well done Dave. Thank you, UNC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Do not look for something bad. You could make up all kind of excuse. Yes, they had exogenous shocks; they had that during your time too, so why did you not do it? Everywhere in the world there are exogenous shocks in prices. You had shocks in prices, you had prices go up to $95 and $110 per barrel and 6 MMBTU, you all took the shocks and shocked the country and took everything in recusals and left the people suffering.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: So, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund dropped under the PNM. I am just showing you all that under the PNM you all had us in a depression; you all come to talk about recession. A recession is an improvement from a depression. Then they come now to the national debt. That is the one that made me choke on my dinner mint here today, that Sen. Dhanpaul, the "corbeau-sweat" PNM, the Minister of Finance for one month, would come to tell this UNC Government about debt. When Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Prime Minister, the Member for Siparia left the economy in 2015, September, the debt portfolio, the national debt was $75

"b-b-b-billion". By the time we came back now to save the country, thank the Lord for the people being so intelligent, you know what the debt burden was that Sen. Dhanpaul and Minister Imbert and the PNM did, they raised it from $75 "b-b-billion" to pay back, to $146.9 billion that the people have to pay back.

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: Shame, shame.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: And just to let you all know, just a little example, because they are going to say in the Ministry of Housing, well say something about housing, I have to say something about the debt burden. This is PNM borrowing in the Ministry of Housing for four years, and they build 1,800, houses, okay. Hear how much they borrowed, Mr. President, that my newborn grandchild, who is one month old, he will have to pay back PNM borrowing and PNM corruption and PNM incompetence, "poor little fella he eh even know".

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Well, I do not know who built it, but hear the loans, 19 May, 2020, $650 million loan at 7.49 per cent. That is the best interest rate you could get, Sen. Dhanpaul? That sounds rather expensive. But it seems like you did not care. Sen. Attzs, is that not rather high? You would know better than me. Tell me, Sen. Attzs.

1.30 p.m.

Then there is ANSA Merchant Bank. They took it on 11 October, 2021, $475 million at 5.125. A better—that was a better loan—

Hon. Senator: A better rate.

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: Yeah. A better rate. A better rate. Then another one from Republic Bank, a "b-b-billion" dollars on the 6th of January, 2023. It had local government election coming up, a billion dollars they borrowed, 5.65 per cent fixed rate. These are things that the people have to pay back, you know. This is what the citizens have to pay. "And allyuh come to mamaguy people with nonsense today, allyuh PNM". The ANSA Merchant Bank, 18 September, 2023, another $700 million. Sen. Attzs, "I doh know, you could recuse yuhself from dis discussion. Is ANSA, ANSA, ANSA. You doh have to answer though".

And then there is Scotiabank, 08 February, 2024, $500 million at 5.9 per cent. But this one is the coup de grâce. "Dey select ah Prime Minister. De PNM vex, dey not fostering good relation because dey had a man wanting to be a leader dey, he geh spit out. Fight in Tobago, fight in Balisier House that dey cyah account for. Dey pick ah next man from Port of Spain who just join, ah just come who nobody like. Bacchanal now, election call. You know election call, we on de hustings saying, yes, do this, we going to vote so. De dougla hosting meeting, you know wa PNM doing? Borrowing more money for allyuh to pay back".

On April 3rd, in the heat of election, 25 days to election, PNM and HDC went and borrowed $200 million at 5.3 per cent from Republic Bank. That was a whopping total in three years and nine months. Sen. Attzs, do the math. This is who you have to talk about. Do not just pretend that they did not exist. Mr. President, $3.525 "b-b-billion" borrowed from May 20th to February 24th by the PNM, three and three-quarter years at an average interest rate of 5.7 per cent interest and an overall span of between seven to

10 years for the people to pay back. This is where the people's money have to go because of the incompetence of the PNM. "But dey only bill 1,825. Somebody divided up that for meh nah; 1,825 house at 3.525 b-b-billion", but one Minister geh $500 million in contract. Dat is PNM, and that is why allyuh will remain right dey.

Credit rating, the depression. Kamla left the country, Aaa. Which one yuh want? CariCRIS, S&P? "I doh have time. De time too short for meh to talk". Moody's, we were Aaa. You took us down, PNM, to AA with high risk. S&P rating, we were A, strong capacity, Kamla, UNC, Siparia, and you took us down by 2022, 2023, 2024 to Bbb-. If I went to my mother with a Bbb- out of Fatima, "de amount ah licks I woulda get up dey in Newberry Hill, Dhanpaul". But you come here with your flag upside down to mamaguy the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Yuh fix it now? Yeah."

Let me take you now, Mr. President—you might like this one because this article was done on October 03, 2020, by Asha Javeed:

"The Government is obliged to spend..."

I wonder if we could guess who saying is this. "If allyuh feel who saying this, just whistle, right? Ah mean meh finger shaking, right? I am going to quote from somebody. It might be you, Sen. Dhanpaul. Not you? Well, it is Sen. Dhanpaul, PNM Senator. October 03, 2020, Asha Javeed in the Trinidad *Express*:

> "The Government is obliged to spend. The Government is obliged to spend $3.5 billion a month on average.
>
> That's $42 billion a year, in what permanent secretary in the Ministry of Finance, Vishnu Dhanpaul, described as mandatory expenditure.

> 'Without collecting $1 from the Board of Inland Revenue, the Ministry of Finance knows that for the next month, we are facing a bill of $3.5 billion; without earning $1, Government has to spend $3.5 billion a month,' said Dhanpaul, at a Government-hosted forum, Spotlight on the Budget and Economy at...Hyatt..."

"Dat was when yuh was ah closet PNM. You did not come out as ah PNM yet, but yuh hear what yuh saying?"— 2020, and you did nothing about it. We are now fixing it, and you are coming to criticize—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—this Minister of Finance and this Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development? "I find yuh fass and out of place".

Furthermore, when you are talking about another Member who led you and chose you to be his Minister of Finance, as soon as he was elected by the former, former, he spit out the other Minister of Finance and chose you. That is not really a badge of honour because he is the worst Prime Minister for one month in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. And what he did, as he talks about the poor people and helping those—you want me to read this? As he was in the Cabinet—you did not know about this? You had to know about this because you were the Permanent Secretary who had to sign off on some of these things.

From the records from the Ministry of Finance, we can confirm that for that period 2018 to 2025, that 23 loans were awarded to NCB Merchant Bank Trinidad and Tobago, formerly NCB Globe Finance Limited. It will shock you to know that the Government borrowed $10.8 "b-b-billion" from

NCB Global. Before Mr. Stuart Young swore to be a Minister in the PNM, NCB Global had zero public sector work. "Yuh doh find dat just a little lucky?" It is just lucky that within eight years of him being a super Minister, his brother's company, where his brother was CEO, gets $10.8 "b-b-billion" at an average of 6.2 per cent, with $22 million in fees, and you come here to talk to us about those most in need—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts:—and the people need? "Fire bun de PNM. I doh want to go through—it so big, I would not go through it". But this is all the interests, and when it got, and who—and Stuart Young, the former Prime Minister of the PNM, is talking about others who are doing things, and the UNC is corrupt and so on. This is the epitome of corruption, nepotism and wrongdoing, and that is what this Government is correcting. So, you want to know how we are going to fix the economy? Eliminating this, eliminating friends and family, eliminating 720 recusals. I should not be "boufing" you because you did not even get a chance to recuse yourself. In that one month, you probably did not even have a Cabinet meeting.

Now, hear this one. One of the worst things that I have ever heard in politics happened in another place, and it was reported in the newspapers, that there was a debt of $9 "b-b-billion" left on the books of Trinidad and Tobago from T&TEC not paying NGC. You see, Sen. Attzs, you want to know about the new projects, and the old gas and the new gas, and the Ryder Scott report and the Horizon? Okay. But part of the problem exists when you have incompetent, irresponsible people who ran the country for nine and a half years, allowed a bill to reach $9 "b-b-billion", and when asked, "But

why did you do that?", the answer of the PNM is, "You asked the people to be in charge, you wanted to be in charge, the people voted for you, deal with it." But it is not for the Government, us, to deal with it, you know.

You know who has to deal with it? You know who has to deal with it? The citizens of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Every dollar that they have to spend for PNM incompetence, PNM delinquency and PNM not paying their bills is a dollar not given to the differently abled, not given to children, not given to the homeless to get them off the street. That is why PNM must stay there. Because this could never be.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: And they sit there now and arrogantly say, "Yes, we did that. Yes, we did not pay our bills. Yes, we shattered the economy, so what? You deal with it now." We will deal with it, "doh frighten". We are bright enough to deal with it, but we will not accept criticism from those who made the bed that we now have to fix, "and the bed ha cockroach, bed lice and the foam gone through".

Furthermore, let me just tell you, this is an article about that. So, they knew—"yuh know, the dougla doh just talk". I have to show you that they knew and they did not fix it. They refused to fix it. They left it. This is why they always talk about IMF, IMF, IMF, because they know that is where they were heading.

In 2019, Minister of Finance, Colm Imbert, said, transfers and subsidies were up at 27.3 billion, right, and the burden of WASA and T&TEC—he was talking it out. This was back on October 03, 2020.

"Imbert said the Government has had to offer financial support to two

> of the country's utilities—the Water and Sewerage Authority…and the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission…
>
> For fiscal 2020, that figure of support to WASA, said Imbert was $2.5 billion…"

Well, clearly that was not true because then the debt would not have climbed to $9 billion, so this was untruths being spewed by a PNM Minister of Finance, including support, a US $100 million loan to pay off debts at the Desalcott, but they are still owing the Desalcott. The debts were not paid off, "so where de money gone that the people have pay back?"

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: This is the question the people want to ask the PNM. WASA has not been paying its bills to the Desalcott, and that continued right up. When we came there, it had debts to the Desalcott, countless millions of US. That is PNM. They have debts at HDC, debts at Ministry of Education, debts across the board. They were not paying their bills, and they were mamaguying the people. We have to be responsible and handle the situation as best as we can. So, when you add up the monthly subvention to WASA, that $700 million for desalinated water, and the other debts that we incurred for WASA, you are talking $2.5 billion.

> "In addition, he said the Government had to subsidise T&TEC to the tune of $500 million to pay its debt to the National Gas Company…"

He knew it, but he never did it. And when the hon. Minister and Member for Couva South now tells the former Prime Minister of the PNM, "You all left this debt there, $9 b-b-billion dollars. We have to deal with it," his answer to the people of Trinidad and Tobago is, "Deal with it." They do not

care.

So, the Government was required to enter into an arrangement to borrow in excess of $5 billion so that we could give that money to the National Gas Company. Otherwise, NGC would collapse. Well, NGC did collapse. NGC collapsed terribly. NGC made a loss for the first time under PNM. NGC is the lifeblood, the plasma, the heart and soul of our nation. Mr. President, 2010, $2.093 billion profit; 2014, $4.79 "b-b-billion" profit; 2013, $6.514 billion profit under Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the UNC.

Then you come into the PNM, and by the time you reach 2020, after the former Prime Minister and Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West, when he took over the energy portfolio and negotiation from 2017, you know what happened to NGC? You would like to listen to this, Sen. Rose. You were out in England, so you may not be aware. NGC made a loss, "l-l-l-l-loss" for the first time in history of $2.135 billion, on top of Petrotrin being shut down, on top of 11 companies running out of Point Lisas, turning Point Lisas into a ghost town. That is what the PNM did, and we are here, and we have to correct it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: And we are moving in the right direction and moving into progression. They are trying to claim is recession.

But let me also tell you, the corruption of the PNM is gone. April 28, 2025, is a red-letter day. Let me give you some more—you all are aware of some of the corruption. Let me give you some more at NGC under that former Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the former PNM Prime Minister.

Mr. President: You have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. A. Roberts: "Ohhh". Beachfield Condensate Storage and Compression Facility—let me just basically tell you all, because I am running out of time—$501,270,000 for a project that is of no value to the people of Trinidad and Tobago; half a billion dollars wasted by your former PNM, Stuart Richard Young, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, and you all coming here to criticize this Government when we have to go through and fix your decimation?

You know, I will not even—at the NIB—it has too much. But at NIB Trinidad and Tobago, that former Minister, you replaced him but you did not get a chance to try to do a good job. Under them, they spent over $357 million. Are you aware of it? On MPower, "ah kinda AI ting, some computer ting, de ting not working up to now"; $357 million of nothing. It reminds you of PNM's Project PRIDE.

1.45 p.m.

"Dey also rent ah building in Tobago. All yuh want to talk to Tobago, look, meh Senator from Tobago. Dey rent ah building from some Dom Hadeed. I doh know who dat is. The water—I went to Tobago and swim; the water was blue. It was blue waters in Tobago. Dey rent ah building and dey pay ah set of money. The building ain't no good. The engineer say it had no columns, no electricity, nothin. But PNM signed contract and paying, 49,000 per month and de building was never utilized. The UNC had to come and deal with this and get, so no other Tobagonians have ah building to rent, right? Dem had to go and find ah building—"

Hon. Senator: Mr. Hadeed—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Roberts: "Well, dey said, you know, auntie, we got too much."

Sen. Nakhid: Too much.

Sen. A. Roberts: "Eh, ah wonder if the people in Laventille and Beetham, all yuh trying to make dem go and protest. I wonder if dey could say, we got too much. Yes, all yuh, we got too much. Meh people in Maloney, de youth men out dey, dey could come out and say under the PNM: 'Oh Lord, fellas, we got too much.' We got too much, auntie. We get land, we get contract, we get workers during COVID, we get buh-buh-billions, we get building rent, and the building is like the labasse. Dat is under the PNM. That is why the people reject you. You will get those votes of those few who got through."

But let me finish off here, because people, we are going forward. We are dealing with the issue, but you know what you have to also think about? There is something called opportunity cost. And if April 28, 2025, did not arise, and let us pretend for a moment, as terrifying as it is—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Roberts:—that the PNM somehow gerrymandered and scraped a victory, extrapolating from their performance of nine and a half years. If Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the UNC did not jump in and save this country, let me now give you a little picture. Press play on the Netflix. "Sen. Attzs, yuh get ah little tax, no big thing. I know yuh like your Netflix series and ting. But let us project the PNM continued decimation to 2030. All yuh ready?"

Hon. Senators: Yes.

Sen. A. Roberts: What would have happened for the numbers of 2030 if

the PNM had continued on what was their proven track record? The debt of Trinidad and Tobago would have moved from $146 buh-buh-billion by 2030. It would have been $175 buh-buh-billion. The debt-to-GDP ratio would have moved from 86 per cent to 115 per cent. The HSF would have been totally and completely depleted by 2030 had the PNM won the election in 2025. The foreign reserves, remember, from 2014, it moved from 11.4 down to 4.8. By 2030, with the best estimation, there would have been a paltry US$800 million left in reserves had the PNM still been in charge. The import cover, that $800 million would have meant one month, if so much, not even a full month.

The real GDP decline had the PNM won that election, and the people did not save this country from the PNM—the real GDP decline without COVID under the PNM was $37 buh-buh-billion in five years. "So, if you extrapolate that with your same performance going forward, and doh tell meh dat you are better than Colm because you was right there with Colm. So the failure is both of y'all stapled to both of all yuh your chests. Doh spit him out and throw him under the bus. It is easy because he is small, he could fit, but you were there".

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. A. Roberts: By 2030, the real GDP would shrink to $122 billion. And just to remind you, Mr. President, it was their former Prime Minister who said: "Hard times till 2027.' So, doh come here and say we in recession and we in pressure." We are not. There is no recession. We are in progression, Mr. President. I thank you very much.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Hon. Senators, we will now pause to have some lunch. We will come back at 3.00 p.m. This Sitting is now suspended until 3 p.m.

1.50 p.m.: *Senate suspended.*

3.00 p.m.: *Senate resumed.*

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Mr. President: Sen. Dr. Margaret Rose.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Margaret St Rose: Thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Mr. President, this budget is unserious. And when I use the word "unserious" the layman might think I am referring to it being a joke or funny but I am not. Unserious, in philosophical terms, means that the assertions and claims underlying what you are saying have no correlation, no connection with reality.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: And we have no better example of this unseriousness than what we just witnessed with the last speaker.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: And I want to address this issue that the Government seems to be all in a huff about, and the last speaker spent almost his entire 40 minutes trying to rebut that this country is in a recession. He is saying: "We are not a recession; it is a progression." But the problem with that account is the very statistics produced by the Central Statistical Office of Trinidad and Tobago, which are in the *Review of the Economy* produced by the Government, produced by the Ministry of Finance. In that document, it is pellucid; it is abundantly clear that the economy, according to the CSO data

contracted at the end, the real GDP and let us be clear on what we are talking about. Real GDP growth contracted by 0.5 per cent at the end of 2025 and is projected to contract by the end of 2026 by 2.2 per cent, decline, steady decline, Mr. President. That is in the Minister of Finance's *Review of the Economy.* And that is after several years of sustained expansion of the economy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: And the figures are clear. In 2022, the real GDP growth in Trinidad and Tobago expanded by +0.9 per cent. In 2023, it expanded further +1.5 per cent. In 2024, it expanded even further by 2.25 per cent. This Government comes into office in 2025, and at the end of 2025 our economy has contracted and is predicted to contract further 2.2 per cent at the end of this year. Facts are facts—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—truth is truth, and there is clearly a crisis of truth in this country. And when we have a Government that is producing figures that the citizens cannot rely on, what is the state of our democracy? Because a lot of people believe that democracy is exercising your right to vote, and they think it is about going and putting that vote in, and then we stop at the end there. Democracy is more than that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Democracy is every day. Day in, day out, citizens are being informed about what the Government is doing and also being given an opportunity to participate in the decision-making and in the policies that are going to influence their welfare and the welfare of children and their

children's children. And the only way a citizen can be informed is if we can rely on the Government's statements, their data, what they tell us.

The speaker who spoke last made much ado about the Minister of Finance. He read out of a statement on October17 from the Minister of Finance saying different figures. So, telling the people of Trinidad and Tobago: "No, you cannot believe the Opposition when they say we are in a recession." And I should say for the citizens, for the Members of public, a recession generally they say, when you have two consecutive quarters of decline you are in a recession. And so, the Ministry of Finance's data says that.

No mention at all by the Ministry of Finance when they made that statement that the last speaker so eloquently quoted from, of well, why the *Review of the Economy* had those figures. No mention. We heard of the hon. Prime Minister in the papers being reported as saying: "There is no recession." Opposition is saying A, B, C, and D, but why have they not come and given an explanation for what is in the *Review of the Economy*? This document that is based on CSO data. Why have they not come and provided an explanation if they are saying the figures are wrong, but it has been produced by the Ministry of Finance? If you say the figures are wrong, it is one of two things. Either this Government is deliberate—is just palpably incompetent, or they are trying to mislead the public.

Dr. Browne: Both.

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Both, yes, thank you, or both. Whichever way it is unserious. The budget is unserious when you have—citizens right now are asking themselves, are we in a recession or not? Well, I will say to the

citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, read the Ministry of Finance*'s Review of the Economy.*

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: It is not the Opposition telling you so. It is the Government being inconsistent, internally inconsistent. They are coming to the Parliament to say that they are not in a recession, but in their documents based on the information from the Central Statistical Office it is saying clearly that we are in a recession. And this is not the only issue that demonstrates the unseriousness of this Government.

I am not going to be labour the point because my learned friend from Tobago is going to come, but we saw the travesty of justice. We saw the travesty in the Lower House where the Leader of the Opposition—and I really want to commend her—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—for her very, very comprehensive and powerful response to this budget where she said that: "This budget is deceptive, deceitful and destructive," and I join with that. And I add to that that it is unserious—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—which is an analytical proposition that I am placing here. It is an analytical proposition. The propositions upon which this is based are false. They are unsound.

So, we have a situation where a half-billion-dollar error is in the *Draft Estimates*; is in the document before the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and before the Members of Parliament. And the Minister of Finance very

casually admits, "Oh yes, it was an error." It was a half-billion-dollar error. Mr. President. I think my learned friend, Member on the Opposite side, was saying: "Oh, we should be thanking the Government; Opposition should be thanking the Government. The Government needs to thank the Opposition of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: The Government need to thank the Opposition leader of Trinidad and Tobago for pointing out this error. Unserious, unserious, that is what this budget is.

3.10 p.m.

Unserious, unserious; that is what this budget is. But more than that, we see this issue downstairs, and I am going to talk more about it in the substance of my contribution.

Mr. President, I am going to ask you to please let me know when I am 10 minutes to the end. You know, because I heard the Minister of Land and Legal Affairs, this young man, who, at some point, we will come to have serious issues. I am starting to have serious issues. But this young man in the Lower House is talking about the public-private partnership for housing in HDC, and is saying, not a cent, and I have it under quotes, he says not a cent of HDC money would have been spent in that $3.4 billion contract. I am going to show that that is absolutely inaccurate, untrue, and therefore unserious, and I will show that in the context of my contribution.

But they have been saying that for the last few months since this issue broke in April. "No public money is going to be spent." It is palpably false, demonstrably false, and I will show that. This cannot be serious. This

cannot be a serious Government. Where is the accountability? Then that Minister of Land and Legal Affairs—and I am going to raise it here because I do not know who is coming after me to continue to put before these Chambers unscrupulous false accusations against my colleagues, and even me.

I hear my name, Margaret Rose, "calling" in the Lower House by the Minister of Land and Legal Affairs related to Woodgreen and Balisier House. Mr. Vaughn Rondon, a business partner of mine, being head of procurement in the HDC during this Woodgreen award. It was put on the *Hansard* downstairs. I will put it on the *Hansard* here.

Mr. Vaughn Rondon—the award of that contract, the decision to award was made on the 24th of August 2023. Mr. Vaughn Rondon was removed as main procurement officer of the HDC on the 11th of May 2023. Then he was sent on indefinite leave. He was sent on leave on the 22nd of August 2023 and therefore did not participate in the decision to award. Even though—I mean, I say nothing about the underlying issues relating to Woodgreen. That is subject to pending litigation. Even Mr. Vaughn Rondon's status is subject to pending litigation. So, I am saying this innuendo thrown out that, somehow, I am aligned with something to do with Woodgreen—this is what this Government is doing: Misinformation; fake news—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—disinformation, very much like who they are aligned with. You know, the powers that they say they align with and are very proud to be aligned with. Let us see what you do on October 28 in the UN. Let us

see what you do.

But what I want to—I am going to go into my substantive contribution, now, Mr. President. And how I want to address the issues in relation to this budget is this. I speak from a public procurement perspective, and it is when I listened to my learned friend's contribution, Sen. Dr. Marlene Attzs, and she said one of the key questions is: How do we ensure that what we say here in this budget would be achieved? And do we ensure the measures that we put here are going to achieve economic transformation? I agree with her. That is one of the central question, or the essential question, that we should be asking. Why? Because there is a relation between a budget, public procurement, and the outcomes that one achieves.

The relation is this. The budget tells you, Mr. President, what it is I intend to do with public money. This is what I intend to do with public money. Public procurement is the process that manages and addresses how you spend that public money in order to achieve the outcomes that you are indicating that you want to achieve.

So, if you have a budget and you do not have public procurement governance—good public procurement governance, there is no answer; there is no proper answer to the question that Sen. Dr. Marlene Attzs has given us here, provided to us with her erudition in economics. If you do not have public procurement governance—proper, sound, effective public procurement governance that ensures transparent, accountable expenditure of public money so that the value for every public dollar is maximized—if we do not have that, then we are nowhere, at all, when it comes to

addressing the effectiveness of this budget, and therefore, we are unserious. We are entirely unserious.

We are unserious because you have this budget, and you are saying you are going to do all those things, and you are saying you are going to achieve these outcomes, but in September 20—just last month, you got the procurement law. We all lived through that. We all lived through the gutting of the procurement law. Large categories of procurement: national security, energy, emergencies for public utilities, public-private purpose partnership for housing. Then every Monday morning, the Minister could wake up by order and exempt more. All of those are exempt. And "like" you come here to beat your chest and act like you all are the best Government, and you all are doing all these good things for this country. No, you are not. No, you are not.

I want to get to this point: The reason that Sen. Kennedy Swaratsingh, the hon. Minister, gave for gutting the procurement law was the bottlenecks. It had all these bottlenecks. And this Minister came on September28th, came in this Chamber, and was saying, oh they are—as at August31st, the PSIP, Public Sector Investment Programme implementation rate was 30.7 or 30.8 per cent; 30 per cent, down so much from the 10 to 15-year average of the PSIP implementation rate.

The PSIP implementation rate, according to Sen. The Hon. Kennedy Swaratsingh, was between, on average, 65 per cent for the last 10 to 15 years, ending in a high in 2022. Before the Act, the public procurement law was proclaimed. In 2022, he said, "Aha", it is 72.3 or 73.2. He said those two different figures, one at the beginning and one at the end. But

70-something per cent in 2022. And then comes in September to say, as at the end of August—and he does do the qualification, "You know, year-end is really the end of September, so there will be an additional expenditure." He tells us that, but his primary justification was that it dropped to 30 per cent, from the 70-something to 30 per cent.

So, of course, people would be like, "Oh dear, this procurement thing must have really"—because the procurement legislation passed in April 2023. And he said at the end of 2023, 2024 it was dropping from 70-something. It was 60-something per cent. But then for 2025 up, 2026, he is saying, no, 30 per cent now. And we had to deal with. Oh my God, are there really bottlenecks in procurement law, and I tried to show? No, there are no bottlenecks in the procurement law, because I can go through the timelines, and eventually I will. But you know, if you look at the figures now at the end of—now we have the year-end figures. Now we have the year-end figures. So, at the end of August, he said $4.1 billion was the fiscal 2026 PSIP allocation, and by the 31st of August, they had only spent $1.25619 billion, 30.8 per cent.

Now, in the PSIP 2027, we now have what they say are the accurate year-end figures. So, in one month, it jumped from 1.25619 billion to 2.846.088, 24.4 billion, doubled in one month, leaving us now with an overall PSIP implementation and utilization rate of 69.4 in this year with them. They spent the money, even higher than the averages from before.

Now, I am not saying at all, and I will not say at all, that this Minister was misleading Parliament when he said only 30.8 per cent utilization in September. Maybe things took a long time to come. He did not have all of

the proper figures in. But if we take what is in that 2027 PSIP report that we now have, it means that the justification relied on to gut procurement law did not exist. I am going to repeat that, because, Mr. President, I am talking to you, but I am also talking to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The justification for the gutting of the procurement law does not exist. There was a higher utilization rate of the PSIP than in the years before.

Sen. Smith: Mr. President, I stand on 46(1). The relevance, procurement, gutting of the—that is not the existing debate. It is all tedious repetition. We have heard it a number of times, 53(1)(b).

Mr. President: We are dealing with a finance Bill, right? So, it is broad, and it is wide. Continue, please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Thank you, Mr. President. And so, in my respectful view, Mr. President, the primary justification advanced, that there was some stumbling block to them spending, does not exist for the gutting of the procurement law. And so, we have to listen to what utilization rates of the different allocations were explored and examined in detail in the Lower House. It is not for us to repeat what went on there, but I am trying to bring coherence to these issues that were identified.

When one looks at what was identified in the Lower House during the five days of the Standing Finance Committee questioning and examining of all of these Ministers in respect of their Ministries, when one looks at it, you will see the reasons being given—and I have catalogued a few of them—the reasons being given for why they did not use all of the money. Under Sub-Head 28: Health Development Programme - RHA Equipment and Works.

What the Minister said: Bidders incomplete documents; no suitable bids; re-tendering; simple projects taking over 12 months; supply chain delays. Under Head 83: Homeland Security, he says a new technical assessment was needed and is still in procurement. A new technical assessment was needed.

3.25 p.m.

Listen to the reasons given. Head 64, Police. Sub-Head 03, line Item 001: Vehicles, "The procurement started late."

Hon. Senators: What?

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Yeah, the procurement started late. Head 83: Homeland Security, "Prison Service had a procurement issue". Head 83, fire service, Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment, Item 01, "The procurement process was not very timely". Head 78: Social Development Programme, four production scanners are still ongoing because of procurement challenges. Head 78, Item 47: National Enrichment Centre -Therapeutic Services, delayed at the expression of interest stage, "some procurement challenges".

Head 67, Item 113: Enterprise Solution at Town and Country Planning: Consultancy procurement started in 2026 and is still ongoing. And it goes on like that. Head 18: Finance, Budget Division. Sub-Head 02/16: Contract Employment, Specialist Staff, "We are procuring them as we speak, and we are facing some procurement challenges". Head 69, "It is a procurement problem". It was like, it was a decibel, "It is a procurement problem, it is a procurement problem". But no proper articulation of what that problem was.

What procurement problem? What procurement problem? Because if

one understands the timelines, even in the most extensive procurement exercise, which is international open competitive bidding, you can start and close within 40 days. And we saw in the HDC procurement, you all did not have any problem. In one day, approving people.

Sen. Smith: Mr. President, can we speak about something other than procurement in the Appropriation Bill? 46(1), please.

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Mr. President, as I tried to—

Sen. Smith: 53(1)(b), can we speak about something else?

Mr. President: What I would suggest is that in this budget debate, if you can make, Sen. Rose, reference to a particular Item in the budget and you relate it to procurement, I think you will be able to tie up the points. Okay?

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Thank you, Mr. President, but that is exactly what I was at pains to do. Read out all of the Heads of expenditure, all of the line Items, and indicate what the reasoning given by the Members in the Lower House was, and the reasons given were procurement. So, I am addressing procurement.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: I am addressing the unseriousness of the explanations given. I know I make you jumpy. Right? And so—

Mr. President: Sen. Rose, this is the Senate. This is not the House of Representatives. And whilst we may make reference because it came across live, it was public, when we are in the Senate, we cannot be continuously referring to what takes place in another House. This is an independent House. So, that is why I am saying that if you are talking about procurement, you look at a line Item in the budget document, and you

connect it. But you cannot be making reference to what Members said in the other place all the time. You could do it en passant. It cannot become centre stage. So, continue, please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Mr. President, I am referring to several Heads and several line Items. And speaking to the procurement process relating to those Heads and those line Items.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: And I am saying, Mr. President, that when they say procurement issue, procurement challenge, procurement problem, it could not be the duration of the procurement exercise, because I am saying the most extensive procurement exercise, open, competitive, international bidding, is 40 days. And all the other procurement exercises coming down are much less: 20 days, 10 days. And it goes right down. You can even do limited selective bidding for low-value, low-cost procurement: seven days, 10 days, sometimes three days, under what the law used to be. Also, in terms of challenges, 20 days. From the date of challenge to the date of the decision, only 20 days.

So, the point I am trying to make is that it is not compliance that was the problem. What was being identified were procurement capabilities. And procurement capabilities are entirely relevant to this budget. It must be relevant to this budget—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—because it is the answer to the question Dr. Marlene Attzs asked. And the question is, how can we ensure that what we intend to

do in this budget achieves the objectives?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: The bridge between what a government says it wants to do and what it actually achieves is public procurement. You cannot get around it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: You cannot get around it. And the challenge here is that we have thrown out procurement law, using the procurement law as the reason for—

Hon. Senator: You have 10 more minutes.

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—10 more minutes? Using procurement law as the reason for not being able to achieve certain outcomes, when really, it is procurement capabilities. It is a problem of capabilities. And when we look at what has been excluded now, national security, with no definition of what national security is, that is billions of dollars. But what I would say is, when you look at the Estimates, what one would have to do is, not all of the money under national security would be procurement. It would be the goods and services. It would be—I have it listed out somewhere, but I have 10 minutes. I have 10 minutes. All right, so it would be the goods and services, and under those goods and services, you will see approximately $1.4 billion under the TTPS. But we do not know. Are they going to say all of the procurement under TTPS, under the Ministry of national security, Ministry of Defence, would be national security? We do not know because it was so poorly drafted, those exemptions, it is just national security.

So, national security is gone, energy procurement, another $2.731

billion when you look at Head 40: Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and you look at the Sub-Heads 2, 3, and 4, which relate to contracted services, office equipment—I tried to pull out what would be goods and services and works—$2.7 billion. No oversight. No oversight whatsoever. And then you look at the $2 million threshold, where this Government has now allowed every permanent secretary to procure up to $2 million with absolutely no rules or regulations. How can we assure the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that these funds will be spent transparently, accountably—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—and with a view to achieving value for public money? How do we ensure? There is nothing. They removed the simplified procurement regulations, and now, with the $2 million threshold, what they could do, a contract could be for $5 million—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—and then they just split it to 2.5, they split it to 1.9. They split it to 1.9, 1.8, and do 10 at $1.8 million, 10 contracts at $1.8 million. That is $18 million. No oversight. No oversight whatsoever—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—before and during the process. They have to report on it after. But I will have them know: check CP2026-19, *Amalgamated Security Services v EMBD*. That is what they tried to do. They tried to split—EMBD tried to split the procurement under the $1 million threshold, under the old law. But we were able to launch a challenge, and the OPR came and said, "No, it is under the $1 million, and it was emergency". And

the OPR says, "No, let me look at the historical data". "How much was this contract before? Oh, why is it this? We are going forward with this."

So, that particular contract challenge was eventually withdrawn by Amalgamated. But before it was withdrawn, the OPR said, "I will keep jurisdiction". And so that is a signal being sent to suppliers in Trinidad and Tobago. If you think that this Government is splitting contracts—

Sen. Alexander: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose:—you can still go and try to challenge these processes.

Sen. Alexander: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Mr. President—

Mr. President: Please, please, the crosstalk.

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Mr. President, at the end of the day, we have a budget here that has been—much has been said about it, and much more will be said by my colleagues.

Sen. Alexander: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: I have more to say, but it is just a lot to try to put in, right? One of the things that I was asked to raise, and this again points to the unseriousness of this Government, because Minister Swaratsingh, in his opening, said, "You know, we are supporting the small and medium-sized businesses, and we are doing all of this for the small and medium-sized businesses, and we are going to support them and coordinate everything under one, you know, hub to support them".

But they are unserious because they are saying that, and yet they are putting this new tax, this new VAT, on foreign services, on non-resident supplier services. That is measure No. 5, Head 03, Sub-Head 07: Item 001.

That is going to seriously impact small and medium-sized businesses in this country. We are talking about professionals who use these software services. We are talking about consultants. We are talking about small businesses that need Canva, need all of these services. And some of these small businesses are not even VAT registered, so they will never get that back. That is going to severely impact the small and medium-sized businesses.

So, Mr. President, what I want to say is that we only have 40 minutes to speak here. Our vote does not count for much here. So, what is important here is that we raise our voices on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And in this country, the citizens can no longer be passive. And I know my friends just want to say, "PNM, UNC, PNM, UNC. God, we are so tired of it". This is not a PNM and UNC issue. This is a citizen issue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: This is a citizen issue.

Sen. Alexander: They are not sick of us. They are sick of you.

Sen. Dr. M. Rose: Whether or not they are sick of PNM, the citizens are going to be impacted by this budget and by the lack of procurement governance to manage how this budget is spent and how these outcomes are achieved. And so, Mr. President, if a government is not serious about truth, then we have to create a citizenry that becomes serious about their power, not just at the vote, but every day in terms of being informed. I thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Dr. Desirée Murray.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Desirée Murray: Mr. President, thank you for allowing me to contribute to the debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2027) Bill, 2026. The theme is: A People-Centred Approach, Investing in Communities, Transforming the Economy, and Securing a Sustainable Future. As its theme suggests, the national budget is, in essence, a statement of values. It tells us whose needs matter, which problems we prioritize, and whether public resources are being created to cause lasting improvements in the quality of life of the nation's citizens. It tells us about the opportunities available to the nation's children and the kind of society we intend to leave for future generations.

3.40 p.m.

According to the data from the World Bank, health care is consistently one of the largest expenditure categories of a national budget, alongside education and social protection. The total projected government expenditure for Trinidad and Tobago for fiscal year 2027 is $63.368 billion, while expected total revenue is $59.729 billion; a fiscal deficit of $3.639 billion, or 2.1 per cent of the gross domestic product, the GDP. The health sector received the biggest budgetary allocation of $7,474,075,200, representing 12 per cent of the total government expenditure.

Across major global economies, governments allocate an average of 15 to 20 per cent of their total national budgets to health care. In the US, programmes such as Medicare and Medicaid account for approximately 28 per cent of all federal spending. In the United Kingdom, the tax-funded National Health Service, the NHS, accounts for one of the largest portions of the UK national budget, with 19.7 per cent of public spending directed

toward health care. In fact, according to the latest data, 2024—2026 analysis from the Office for National Statistics, health care expenditure in the UK accounts for approximately 11.1 per cent of the GDP.

Emerging economies generally keep health spending at a smaller fraction of the national budget. So, generally, the richer a country is, the more it spends proportionally on health. In Latin America and the Caribbean, health expenditure accounted for 6.9 per cent of GDP on average. This indicator ranged from 4.3 per cent in Saint Lucia, to 11.1 per cent in Cuba, and 9.7 per cent in Suriname. For fiscal 2027, based on the projected GDP implied by the fiscal deficit of 2.1 per cent, Trinidad and Tobago has allocated approximately 4.3 per cent of its GDP to health care spending. So, this is at the lower end of the scale for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Health care spending is split between public funding and personal financing. According to World Health Organization and World Bank data, the total health care expenditure for Trinidad and Tobago is 7.3 to 7.5 per cent of GDP. So, given that government health spending accounts for 4.3 per cent of GDP, this is approximately 57 to 59 per cent of total health expenditure. That means that private and out-of-pocket spending, including health insurance, private hospital visits and purchase of medication, accounts for roughly 41 to 43 per cent of total health expenditure.

Mr. President, my contribution today will be limited to health care. I will not be representing Doctors Without Borders today.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: I will be focusing on the need for health system strengthening; access to health services, including medicines; fairness in

public expenditure; and support for children with special needs. At the heart of all these issues are two fundamental questions: Are we getting value for money? Are the people who need public services the most receiving their fair share? In moving the Bill, the hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Minister of Finance stated, and I quote:

"Trinidad and Tobago does not lack economic assets."

So, it is not about how much we spend. It is about how we spend it.

So, let us address the issue of value for money. As an example, last fiscal, $6.078 million was reimbursed to UDeCOTT for preventive and corrective maintenance of the Ministry of Health's Administrative Building at Queen's Park East, based on the BOLT arrangement: build, own, lease, transfer. This is a brand-new building opened just three years ago in August 2023. Yet, a stone's throw away at the Port of Spain General Hospital, where I work, eye surgeries were cancelled on multiple occasions due to a leaking roof and non-functioning air-conditioning in the eye theatre. The Minister of Health has stated that the bulk of funds allocated to the RHAs is used to pay salaries and wages. So, when surgical lists and clinics are cancelled due to maintenance and repair issues, staff are essentially being paid to do nothing, while surgical waiting lists continue to grow. We cannot continually praise health care workers as heroes, and then fail to provide the working conditions and the tools they need to function. This is a complete waste of resources and just does not make any sense.

When we speak about whether we are getting value for money, another example is the External Patient Programme, commonly referred to as

the EPP. The question must be asked: Are we treating illness at the expense of building capacity? Mr. President, the EPP was established in 2014, under the People's Partnership Government, to facilitate access to medical treatment for patients who could not receive the necessary care at public hospitals. Its original purpose was understandable and commendable. When a citizen requires a life-changing or life-saving intervention that cannot be provided in the public sector, the State has a moral responsibility to explore every reasonable avenue to obtain that treatment. However, after 16 years of the EPP, we must ask whether the programme has been accompanied by sufficient investment in the long-term development of our public health care system.

Let us examine how much money has been allocated to the EPP since its inception in 2014, how much has been spent in each financial year, and what proportion of the expenditure has gone toward particular categories of treatment. These are essential questions of public accountability. In fiscal year 2014, the EPP allocation was $10 million; in fiscal year 2015, the allocation was increased to $50 million to $60 million; in fiscal year 2019, there was a further increase to $66 million; in fiscal year 2020, the allocation was $58.3 million; in fiscal 2021, the allocation jumped to $73 million; in fiscal year 2022, the allocation was $97 million; in 2023, $84 million; in 2024, another jump to $110 million; and in fiscal year 2025, $170 million. Last year, the allocation was $130 million. So, Mr. President, that is over $850 million allocated to the EPP since its inception in 2014.

Of the $130 million allocated in fiscal 2026, $81 million was expended on the renal dialysis programme; $28 million on treatment of adult

cardiac disease; and $12 million was expended to enable access to surgical procedures, including vitrectomies, hip and knee replacement, and digital subtraction angiograms through external service providers. For fiscal 2027, the Estimate has been increased by another $15 million, when compared to last year, and is now $145 million; $80 million for renal dialysis, $50 million for treatment of adult cardiac disease and $15 million for the surgical waiting list.

Mr. President, the vast amounts spent on renal dialysis and cardiac surgeries is particularly concerning. Chronic kidney disease and cardiovascular disease are associated with the non-communicable diseases, NCDs, including high blood pressure and diabetes. Both these conditions place a considerable burden on patients, their families and the public health care system. Yet many of the risk factors contributing to these conditions are preventable or modifiable. Prevention of ill health must become a national priority. It makes little sense to spend enormous sums of money treating diseases while under-investing in preventing them. So, I was very heartened to hear the Minister of Health, in his opening remarks during the Standing Finance Committee stage, mention plans to address the issue of overconsumption of sugar and childhood obesity. The population should also be educated about the importance of reducing their salt intake because excessive salt consumption can elevate blood pressure, which is the main cause of end-stage kidney disease, requiring renal dialysis. So, Mr. President, we need greater investment in primary prevention, secondary prevention, health promotion and primary health care. The Government plans to increase the number of health centres with extended opening hours. This

could be very beneficial, as it provides opportunities for patients to attend to their health needs outside of normal working hours.

Mr. President, we must also confront the epidemic of childhood obesity. Our children are growing up in an environment where inexpensive energy-dense foods are readily available, opportunities for physical activity may be limited, and sugary drinks and heavily-processed foods are aggressively marketed. The consequences may follow them into adulthood in the form of diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, arteritis and other chronic conditions. We, therefore, need coordinated action involving schools, parents, communities, health care professionals, the food industry and the Ministries of Health, Education, and Sport and Youth Affairs. That would include healthier school meals, nutrition education, safe spaces for physical activity, early identification of children at risk and support for families who struggle to afford nutritious food. Mr. President, the other obvious fact is that some of the money spent on the External Patient Programme could be better invested in developing the capacity of our public hospitals to perform joint replacements, cataract surgeries and vitrectomies.

Now, I am not arguing that the EPP should be abolished because there will always be a need for additional capacity. Rather, the programme must be assessed against a clear strategy for developing and increasing the capacity of our public hospitals. Have we invested sufficiently in operating theatres, modern surgical equipment, trained personnel, rehabilitation services and the systems required to sustain these services? In addition, what monitoring and evaluation systems are in place for the EPP? The EPP should be evaluated regularly and the reports made available for public

scrutiny. There should be transparency and accountability. Every dollar invested in the EPP must be evaluated using evidence, not assumptions.

So, Mr. President, the need for greater capacity becomes particularly clear when we examine access to cataract surgery. Earlier this year, in May, an international charity cataract project exposed the unmet need for cataract surgeries. Thousands of patients turned up desperate for cataract surgeries, despite the millions of dollars expended in the External Patient Programme over the years. This must be cause for concern. Hundreds of cataract operations were performed, but that is not the end of the story. When it comes to medical missions, we must also examine surgical outcomes, including surgical complications, post-operative visual acuity and the proportion of patients whose vision improved meaningfully. Patients deserve access to high-quality eye care services within a reasonable period of time and should not have to choose between one or the other.

So, Mr. President, an important question is: Are patients in each of the five regional health authorities equally likely to receive cataract surgery within a clinically appropriate period? Are the resources being evenly distributed across the regional health authorities? How many ophthalmologists, ophthalmic nurses and surgical facilities are available? This is important, as Dr. Rose was saying, about procurement. How many patients are awaiting surgery, and how long have they been waiting? So, the objective should be that a person's chance of receiving sight-restoring surgery should not depend on which part of the country that persons live. I will not make reference to any landmarks in the capital. So, a country can spend billions of dollars and still fail its most vulnerable citizens.

While we are on the topic of value for money, I would like to turn to the registration of pharmaceutical products and procurement, areas in which better decision-making could improve both affordability and access to medicines. India has developed a substantial pharmaceutical manufacturing industry and is an important global supplier of generic medicines. The National Prosthetics Centre provides concrete evidence of the excellent services that can be provided in collaboration with India. So, we should make full use of international opportunities, but reform is needed in the Chemistry, Food and Drugs Division.

Now, I understand that there are plans to undertake a comprehensive review of the Chemistry, Food and Drugs Division. I applaud the hon. Prime Minister's suggestion to bypass local review for drugs that have already been vetted internationally by regulatory authorities, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. I also welcome the updated list of drugs on the Chronic Disease Assistance Programme, the CDAP. However, I am particularly concerned about access to medicines for glaucoma. There is no first-line glaucoma medication in the form of eye drops on the Chronic Disease Assistance Programme. This is not available on CDAP. Now, I understand that the Ophthalmological Society of Trinidad and Tobago has been seeking a meeting with the Minister or the CDAP Technical Committee, or Review Committee, to discuss, including first-line glaucoma treatment on CDAP. I hope that this will happen soon.

Medicines are also very important in treating conditions, such as diabetic retinopathy and other retinal vascular diseases. There are some medicines that need to be administered by intravitreal injection into the eye

that are not available in the public sector. This is why I refer to the fact that up to 47 per cent of the total health expenditure is borne by out-of-pocket expenses despite the very large health budget. For eligible patients, timely treatment can preserve or improve vision and reduce the risk of severe vision loss. So, I call on the Ministry of Health to establish a clear pathway for evaluating and providing clinically indicated treatment in the public service, because a patient's ability to preserve their sight should not depend solely on whether they can afford private treatment.

Mr. President, I now turn to an issue that deserves far greater attention in our national budget, the rights and educational needs of children with disabilities and special educational needs. In Trinidad and Tobago, we have made important commitments to inclusion and to support persons with disabilities and their families, including those attending mainstream school. Referring to the Ministry's budgetary allocation, the Minister of Health has stated, and I quote:

> These figures represent this Government's commitment to give every child in Trinidad and Tobago the opportunity to learn, develop their talents and build a better future.

But, Mr. President, I am aware of at least one 14-year-old child who is being prevented from attending mainstream school because there is no special needs assistant assigned to that school. That child has been forced to stay away from school and to pay for online schooling at home.

Mr. President, consider the implications. A child loses access to daily interaction with peers, structured learning and the social experiences that are part of growing up. A parent must assume additional financial

responsibilities, and the disability grant, intended to support the child's wider needs, is diverted for educational access that should be properly assessed and supported. That child has lost access to PEARL, the Programme for Educational Advancement and Relevant Learning, which is intended to provide support for children with special educational needs. They have also lost access to the expanded technical and vocational education in secondary schools being implemented by this Government. All very good initiatives, but of no use if they are not accessible.

For a child with an intellectual or learning disability, autism, attention-related difficulties, developmental delays or communication difficulties, a trained teacher assistant or special needs assistant may be essential to help the child participate safely and meaningfully in classroom activities. Mainstream education must not become a system in which a child is nominally enrolled, but effectively excluded and told not to attend school. So, the State must identify how that support will be funded and delivered. It should be identified in the budget. But I have not been able to identify an allocation for special education in the fiscal 2027 Budget.

With appropriate support, individuals with disabilities can learn, work and contribute. Our responsibility is to ensure that every child has a fair opportunity to develop his or her abilities. Children are among the most vulnerable members of society, but they are also among the most robust and resilient. That is why no one in this Senate voted against the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill, 2025.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: I was very happy to learn that children have already

benefitted from the expanded list of life-limiting conditions that are now eligible for funding.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Nakhid: "De whole PNM vote against it".

Sen. Baig: The PNM voted against it. Are you serious?

Sen. Roberts: Check your facts.

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: So, Mr. President—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray:—that is why no one in this Senate voted against the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill, 2025.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: Repeat it.

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: That is why no one in this Senate voted against the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill, 2025.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: Repeat it one more time.

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: That is why no one in this Senate voted against the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill, 2025.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: Mr. President, the challenge facing Trinidad and Tobago is not simply whether we have enough money to address our problems. It is whether we are making the best possible use of the resources entrusted to us. Across every sector, it means evaluating expenditure by what it achieves for the people who need public services most.

So, Mr. President, I return to the question with which I began, what

does our budget say about us as a nation? Does it say that we are satisfied with treating disease while failing to prevent it? Does it say that we accept a situation in which patients are referred privately for surgery because the capacity to deliver that surgery in the public hospital remains inadequate? Does it say that if someone cannot afford to pay for sight-saving drugs out-of-pocket, they will lose their sight? And does it say that a child with a disability may be left at home because the necessary educational support has not been provided?

I believe that we can have a health care system that combines effective treatment while also investing in prevention. We can have well-equipped public hospitals that provide high-quality and timely services rather than relying on increasingly costly external arrangements. We can have a Chemistry, Food and Drugs Division that maintains rigorous standards without unnecessary duplication and delays.

Mr. President, we can boast about the size of our health care budget, but what does that mean if a patient cannot obtain the prescribed medication or cannot see because cataract surgery remained inaccessible? A truly people-centred budget must be judged by whether it reduces suffering, expands opportunity, promotes fairness and gives every citizen a reasonable chance to live a healthy, dignified and productive life. So, Mr. President, in the unmistakable words of the Mighty Sparrow—"ahem"—

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray:—[*Senator sings*]—"that is all, that is all, that is all".

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. D. Murray: Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Francis Lewis.

Sen. Lewis: The next round.

Mr. President: Next round, okay. Anybody? Anybody else would like to speak? Sen. Roberts-Radgman.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Melanie Roberts-Radgman: Thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to join the debate at this time. Let me start off by—oh, she is not even here. She is gone. Nonetheless, in her absence, I still wanted to congratulate, on behalf of our Bench, Sen. Dr. Lalite-Ettienne.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: She is now officially newly minted as Dr. Lalite-Ettienne. We are indeed proud of her. We continue to recognize her contributions to this Senate, to the country, and also to her professional field.

Now, Mr. President, two Mondays ago, immediately after the reading of the budget presentation, I recall that the Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly, he took to the media and he indicated to the media that he was gutted. I have no doubt that he was indeed gutted. I think any person residing in Trinidad and Tobago, doing business in Trinidad and Tobago, with any interest in Trinidad and Tobago, would have been indeed gutted after the reading of this budget.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

4.10 p.m.

I know for sure that over in Tobago, 15-nil or otherwise Tobagonians were, in fact and are still in fact gutted.

Now, Mr. President, as the address to the media went on, to save face, the Chief Secretary would have said: "You know, husband and wife sometimes have their disagreements and the falling outs, but it does not mean that they need to separate, the marriage does not need to end". To be quite honest, that is where he lost me because I imagine that in the Chief Secretary's mind, the UNC-led central government would be the husband, and then the TPP-led THA would be the wife, and it then follows that the people of Tobago, the island of Tobago, will be the children because we are relying on the central government to support us. I guess the product of the marriage, the child.

Now, Mr. President, as the head of the household—and I am still going with the Chief Secretary's analogy—it is the husband's duty to provide for the child. The husband, as the head of the household, is not permitted to neglect that child or to fail to provide for that child. As a wife, as the Chief Secretary has deemed himself, it is not enough for the wife to stand there and accept that level of neglect.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: As the one who is mainly responsible for the day-to-day care of the children, as a wife, you have to stand up, and you have to speak up, and you have to defend your household. If not for the sake of the well-being of yourself, at least for the sake of the well-being of those who rely on you. At the end of the day, whether or not the relationship between the UNC and the TPP, the relationship between central government and the THA, whether it is good or bad, the children, Tobago still needs to eat. We still need healthcare. We still need a proper education, and we still

need money to pay for the things that facilitate our development on the island. The household needs to run, similarly, the island of Tobago still needs to run.

So, for the life of me, Mr. President, I have been having a lot of difficulty over the last two weeks. I am not understanding how the Chief Secretary, the Secretary for Finance, the THA itself, and more so, most importantly, the ones who have the opportunity to stand in this esteemed Parliament and talk, our two Tobago MPs—I do not understand how they have accepted this level of disrespect, disregard, and negligence meted out to the people of Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: They know it is wrong, Mr. President. They know that we in Tobago cannot continue to function this way. Yet, for the sake of political loyalty and expediency, they have chosen to remain silent. Mr. President, you would note that I am never really the type to call out my fellow Tobagonians. I have a certain level of solidarity, but at some point, the line has to be drawn. This has gone too far. Tobagonians know that this has gone too far, and I note that the morning after the reading of the budget, Mr. President, even the adviser to the Chief Secretary himself, he got on the media, and he said some profound words. He said: "The only loser in this budget is Tobago", and he was absolutely right and he gets my respect, Mr. President. Because there is politics, politics is one thing, but then, Mr. President, there is the survival of an entire island.

Now, last fiscal, we heard a lot about the largest allocation and the largest allocation and, Mr. President, I did caution that it was an election

gimmick, but nonetheless, "we take pappy show and we take chain up". Now here we are one year later, and our allocation for the Tobago House of Assembly has been reduced by 6.37 per cent at a time where we need as much funding as we can possibly get. This is a very critical time in Tobago's development. If you add to that reduction, the allocation for spending by the central government, then the percentage reduction in overall spending or Tobago's overall allocation, that figure goes up to 6.74 per cent.

So, Mr. President, imagine that the Government's overall spending for fiscal 2027 has increased significantly, yet, Tobago's share in that spending has decreased significantly, and I want us to let that soak in. So the country got more, Trinidad and Tobago got more, but Tobago got less. Mr. President, is almost like "we is the dog in here".

Mr. President, the TPP has to take some blows, and the Chief Secretary has to take some blows where this is concerned. Because back in 2024, we had the opportunity to secure our financial interests on the island; the autonomy Bill. They do not like when we speak about that autonomy Bill. But Mr. President, that Bill guaranteed us a minimum allocation of 6.8 per cent of the national budget, 6.8 per cent. That allocation did not depend on whoever political party was in Trinidad or whoever political party was in Tobago, it was not dependent on whether or not the national spend went up, or whether the national spend went down. We were guaranteed our 6.8 per cent. That was a full-on legislative safeguard.

Mr. President, I look at our allocation for fiscal 2027, and I note that had we secured that 6.8 per cent allocation guarantee, at least this time we could have very comfortably received an allocation of $4.30 billion. So, for

us over in Tobago, we could have received $1.553 billion more than we received had the UNC not blocked that autonomy Bill on the instruction of the Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly. One foolish phone call, one man's clouded ambition, one unholy alliance between the UNC and TPP have cost us $1.553 billion for one fiscal year. So, we lost last fiscal, we have lost again this fiscal, and we will continue to lose until that autonomy Bill is passed and Tobago's budgetary entitlement, among other things, is entrenched in law.

I recall that the Prime Minister, on the first of only two visits that she has made to Tobago since she became Prime Minister, she declared: "You do not need a law to give Tobago more money", and Tobagonians got so hopeful. Mr. President, with all due respect, the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, the Minister of Finance, they have proven within a few short months that that is not true. We do, in fact need a law to guarantee that Tobago gets more money.

Now, Mr. President, I know that whenever Tobagonians, myself included, when we stand up and we advocate for greater funding, for more allocation, even this whole issue of autonomy, when we talk about it, our brothers and sisters in Trinidad sometimes they do not understand where we are coming from. Mr. President, what Tobago gets, what Tobago deserves, what Tobago is allocated, it should never be a subjective matter. It should never be subject to the whims, fancy, sobriety of any politician or any political party. Investing in Tobago, Mr. President, investing in Tobago's development is precisely how you diversify the national economy.

We have stood here time and time again, and even in the debate today, Mr. President, I have heard previous speakers talk about revenue generation and how we achieve economic diversification. I keep saying it: Look at Tobago, consider Tobago, look to Tobago for the economic diversification that everyone wants for this country. The last PNM-led central government understood that, and that is why they fought tooth and nail for ANR International Robinson Airport. That is why there was such an infrastructural push across all of Tobago, including parts in the east. That is why there was so much emphasis on improving the southwest water supply. That is why we saw things happening in terms of trying to bring a name brand hotel to the island. All of these investments and so much more, they were in preparation for a stronger and more sustainable tourism sector on the island. Investing in Tobago is precisely how we invest in our national economy.

Now, if we are talking about agriculture and food security, and I think it was Dr. Attzs who mentioned the importance of food security. So, if we are talking about agriculture, food security, lowering our national food import bill, then we simply need to invest in agriculture in Tobago. If we are talking about tourism, attracting foreign exchange, then it is simple: Invest in your leisure, your sport, and your health tourism over in Tobago. If you are talking about expanding your blue economy, then it is simple again: Invest in your marine recreation, your container shipping, your sustainable fishing, your marine biotechnology, all of these things over in Tobago. If we are talking about monetizing the orange economy, then we need to get

serious about investing in the performing arts and in the creative industries again in Tobago.

These are the kinds of investments that bring forex not just to Tobago, it is Trinidad and Tobago, it is one economy. So when you bring foreign exchange to Tobago, it circulates throughout the national economy, it circulates throughout the country. These are the kinds of investments that bring jobs, that attract further FDI to the island or to the country. These are the kinds of investments that bolster further economic activity across the country, Mr. President. So it is no longer a matter of simply giving Tobago more money, that is not what we are discussing, it is about investing in Tobago in a way that allows the island to expand key industries that bring about a national return on a national investment.

Tobago has the answer to so many of our economic problems. We just need to invest in the island. We need to invest consistently, and we need to invest significantly to develop these industries. It was Sen. Dhanpaul who said it very clearly when he said: "Your development programme drives your economy". Tobago is not excluded from that. So when I look at this $166 million that we have been allocated for fiscal 2027—

Hon. Senator: Only?

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—yes, $166 million is what we have been allocated at such a critical time for Development Programmes. It does not even begin to put a dent in the kinds of investments we need on the island. Last year, central government gave us $201.5 million for Development Programmes. This year, 12 months later, we are now getting $166 million for Development Programmes, a considerable reduction.

Mr. President, it is almost that by the time we meet 2030, we might be getting zero, our investment, our allocation for Development Programmes might be zero. I will go a bit more into the figures, Mr. President, because that is where all the details are. But before I go there, I want to add one more thing with regard to development in Tobago, or development allocation, and the inadequacy of that $166 million allocation that we have gotten. This is something that I want the Senate to understand, something I want the people of Tobago to understand, and hopefully the Government. At this point, I do not even know if they care, but nonetheless, I am on my feet, so I will advocate, Mr. President.

The ANR Robinson International Airport has very recently, the East Terminal, the new airport, has recently commenced operations. That airport was not built to remain underutilized. It is a state-of-the-art airport that we have there on the island.

4.25 p.m.

We now need additional airlift, significant additional airlift coming to the island. At the same time, we need to improve the quality, as well as the numbers of our room stock on the island. We have to improve our infrastructure. Sen. Zakour is looking at me because we have conversations. I acknowledge the work that he is doing with regard to airlift; I give him that. He is continuing the work that was started under the previous administration, and I commend him for that. I know that in his contribution he will share a bit more of what he is doing, and I give him that, but, as I said, Mr. President, we need to improve the quality—

Hon. Senator: Raise the car park—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: "Well, me and he will talk about dat. Dat ain't applying in Tobago. We car park stay down."

Nonetheless, Mr. President, we need to improve the quality of our room stock. We need to improve the numbers of our room stock on the island, Mr. President. We need to improve our road networks. We need to improve our infrastructure on the island. The south-west area in Tobago is still experiencing incredible water woes. That is where a lot of our tourism—the majority of our tourism activity is concentrated. We need even more recreational activity on the island, Mr. President.

If there is ever a time that Tobago needs a larger allocation, Mr. President, it is now. Sen. Dr. Attzs asked about the Government's integrated plan; such a plan must, must, must include a very strong Tobago development push. Mr. President, it is not enough for the Government to come with all the pomp and flair to open the airport, but, at the same time, you cut the legs out from under us where development funding is concerned. It does not go hand in hand. It is almost like we have been handed with one hand, but then it has been taken away with the other. What good is that airport if we do not have the development funding that is needed to build out our systems or services in Tobago, even our human resources, in a way where we can attract visitors to the island.

Now, Mr. President, when I spoke about national economic diversification via Tobago-centric investment, I mentioned a few critical sectors. So I want us to pay close attention to how the central government has treated those sectors. You would have noted that I mentioned agriculture, I mentioned tourism, and a few others. Now, before I even go to

agriculture, I want to start with the most shocking one, and I would have heard my colleagues make mention to it, but I want to go a bit more into it, Mr. President, because without a healthy population, there is absolutely no productivity, and without productivity you have no economic growth.

Now, on Friday, October 16th, the Leader of the Opposition, she made a very disturbing revelation during her response to the budget, and she drew the country's attention to page 103 of the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the THA*. She took us to Head 6, Sub-Head009, line Item 07: Tobago Regional Health Authority, and, Mr. President, there, in black and white, we saw where the allocation to the TRHA had been reduced from $750 million in fiscal 2026 to just under $240 million for fiscal 2027. That is a reduction of $510 million, Mr. President, a 68.03 per cent reduction in funding for the Tobago Regional Health Authority.

Now, Mr. President, in Tobago we rely on our RHA—

Sen. Roberts: Mr. President, I enjoy my young colleague, but 53(1), we heard that extensively from Sen. Dr. Margaret Rose, please.

Mr. President: Yeah. I want to uphold that Standing Order and to ask—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President:—Sen. Roberts-Radgman if you could kind of—you know, you made the point; it has already been made by Sen. Dhanpaul, Sen. Dr. Margaret Rose, and I am saying that you are making it. So if, at least, you tighten it and move on, please.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Guided, Mr. President.

Now, Mr. President, my colleagues would have spoken about the

errors and the numbers; I am now looking at the implications on the island from a very organic and from a local, and a very Tobagonian perspective. What I was about to say, Mr. President, is that in Tobago we rely on our RHAs. We do not have St. Clair and Southern Medical, and Medical Associates, and all like that. We have our hospitals and we have our health centres.

Now, Mr. President, what is quite telling is that the hon. Minister has stood up here to raise a Standing Order on tedious repetition. What concerns me as a Tobagonian, because when I leave here tonight or in the morning, it is back to Tobago I am going, and if, God forbid, something happens to me, it is to hospital I have to go, Mr. President. What is quite telling is that after this was identified by the Leader of the Opposition last Friday, no one from the Government picked up on it or addressed it. Not the Minister of Health—

Sen. Al-Rawi: Not in winding up.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Yeah, not in winding up, not the Minister of Finance, not the Prime Minister, not our two Tobago MPs. Mr. President, everybody just swept this under the rug, just as my colleague is expecting me to now come here and do again.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Mr. President, and I am going to go into what happened at the committee stage, because at the committee stage the Opposition kept pressing and pressing for answers, and eventually the Minister of Finance indicated that it was a mistake.

Mr. President, when I heard that utterance that it was a mistake, "ah

pick up meh" phone and I called Sen. Dhanpaul, and I said to him, "Explain to me this budget process. What happens? How is the budget prepared?" And he explained to me, "It's about four months and you go back and forth", and he went into the—

Sen. Roberts: Mr. President, I am begging, 53(1), she has gone back to "the mistake and the mistake", and called Sen. Dhanpaul that is very nice, but let us move on, please.

Mr. President: Yeah. I want to uphold that Standing Order again, and I will ask Sen. Roberts-Radgman, if you can kindly tie up and just press on. I think the point has been made. Okay?

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Thank you, Mr. President. Alright, so I would not be labour the point, except to say this, Mr. President. If the Minister of Finance's admission in the other place, in the Standing Finance Committee, was that this $510 million reduction was a mistake, then it reflects gross negligence, it reflects gross incompetence, and it reflects a Minister of Finance and an entire Cabinet that is incompetent and incapable of doing the job that they were elected to do.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: They should demit office because, Mr. President, for the life of me, I cannot understand 70,000 people on one island, 100 per cent dependent on this allocation, page 103. It is right there, 009. Alright? Line Item 07.

Such a major decrease, Mr. President, and it has not been addressed. It was not picked up, it was left to fester, Mr. President. No one has mentioned this, Mr. President. The proposed solution for this—what has

been proposed is that the THA vire from other allocations, from other areas, to be able to make up for a $510 million reduction or a mistake in the TRHA's allocation. I beg your finest pardon—

Sen. Roberts: Mr. President, 53(1), I do not know why my learned colleague is ignoring your ruling, she just cannot stop.

Mr. President: Yeah. I am hoping that you are not ignoring my ruling. Right? I think that you have said enough, let us move on. Okay? Let us go on to another point.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Alright, Mr. President, I am guided. Thank you for your guidance. So let me then go, Mr. President, let me move on from that and let us look—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: No, no, no, no, it is fine, I know what to do. Let me look at some other areas where we have reduced funding, Mr. President, because what we are seeing is that we have been asked to vire moneys from other areas to supplement the TRHA's shortfall, but in these other areas, key areas, we have also experienced significant reductions in our funding. The point being, there is nowhere to vire funds from, unless we decide that we are going to sacrifice one essential service in Tobago in order to make up for another essential service.

So this is what Tobago has been reduced to—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—where we have to pick and choose. It is either you have health or you have education. It is either you have health or you have agriculture, because we are being told to vire from other areas, Mr.

President. I have a few pointed questions actually, Mr. President, and these questions have not been asked. Given the reduction in other line Items, Mr. President, given the reduction across, for instance, the division of tourism, the division of agriculture, which area, specifically, is the THA expected to transfer funds from to make up for this shortfall? How soon will we be given a supplementation? Are we expected to come back in the mid-year review next year in order to receive a supplementation?

The current allocation that we have been given, the $240 million funding allocation, how far does this get the TRHA before those funds run out? Because as my friend over here said, we are not in a recession, so if we are not in a recession, Mr. President, then there should be no challenge in giving Tobago the funding that it needs in order to manage its affairs.

Sen. Baig: Mr. President, 53(1)(b), we heard about the issue of this recession from Sen. Dhanpaul, Sen. Rose, now by this Senator, 53(1)(b), please.

Mr. President: Yeah, I think the hon. Senator has gone on to another point. Continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Thank you, Mr. President. "I am not sure what happen to meh blue soap fren over dey, like he fraid de world recession."

Now, Mr. President, connected to health is agriculture and food security, and as I mentioned before, one of the key pillars for development in Tobago requires that we invest to a significant degree in agriculture. I noted that Dr. Attzs, even in her contribution, she mentioned Tobago's agriculture

thrust, and she mentioned that this can alleviate a significant portion of our food import bill. So let us examine how the central government has treated Tobago where agriculture is concerned. We are still looking at the *Draft Estimates*. We are now at page 53, we are going down to Sub-Head 009, and we would see exactly what the Government has done with regard to agriculture. So look at, for instance, the Tobago Agribusiness Development Company. We know it as TADCO. There has been a $2 million funding cut in TADCO, a 22 per cent decrease.

Now, Mr. President, and I will read from their site:

> TADCO's core mission is to improve food security, boost local agricultural production, build an eco-food brand, and reduce the island's reliance on imported food.

That is the mandate of TADCO for Tobago, and eventually for Trinidad and Tobago. So a company like TADCO, with such a significant mandate, they have had their funding reduced by 22 per cent for fiscal 2027. Now, if you go a few lines higher, Mr. President, and you look at Sub-Head 008: Tobago Agro Processors Incentive, the allocation in 2026 was $2 million; for fiscal 2027, this has been reduced by 95 per cent, a 95 per cent reduction in its allocation to a measly $100,000.

4.40 p.m.

Now, Mr. President, the Tobago agro-processers incentive programme is a specialized regional incentive that supports our local food producers, agri-businesses, and agro-processers in Tobago. The initiative is meant to support entrepreneurs through funding, training, and technical assistance. Funding for such an important programme has been reduced by 95 per cent.

Similarly, the Farmland Development Programme started by the previous administration—such a strong programme with such good potential—90 per cent reduction in allocation for fiscal 2027. The Minister of Finance was unable to account for the reason for such a significant reduction in this allocation.

Now, if you go to Contract Employment for workers in agriculture—and we are still under the Division of Food Security in the Draft Estimates—we are now looking at Sub-Head 002: Agriculture, line Item 16: Contract Employment. The 2026 allocation was $5.3 million. For fiscal 2027, that allocation has been reduced by $1.3 million—a 25 per cent reduction in allocation in funding for contract workers within the division of Agriculture. So, the question here: Is it the intention of the Division of Food Security, such a critical division—one of the key pillars for development in Tobago—acting under the instruction of the central government to fire workers in agriculture? Is it that some contracts will not be renewed? What are the implications, Mr. President—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—of this 25 per cent reduction in the allocation for Contract Employment? And there are many, many others also, Mr. President. The point is not to list out in detail every single employment or programme funding reduction, but it is to demonstrate how this budget very clearly and very directly impacts negatively upon several important sectors across Tobago. Now let us shift to another major pillar of Tobago's economic development—and this one is a big one, Mr. President. Every time we talk about Tobago, we talk about Tobago's tourism industry.

When you look at the allocation for your key players in your tourism industry—let us start with TTAL, the Tobago Tourism Agency Limited. They have had their funding cut by $10 million—a 20 per cent reduction. Now, TTAL is who markets and promotes the destination. Tourism is a product, and for a product to be sold, it needs to have buyers. How do you reach your buyers? You market and promote your product. Marketing and promotion require funding. So, with this $10million cut—a 25 per cent reduction—is it that we are now expected to market the destination less? Is it that they are going to let go workers?

Hon. Senator: Seventeen minutes.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Thank you. Is it that they are going to let go of workers in order to make up for a whole $10 million reduction in funding? What is the plan, where TTAL is concerned? And I keep going back to the fact that Tobago is at a very critical juncture in its development. Marketing Tobago as a destination at this specific point in time, Mr. President, is incredibly essential to how we move forward, to how we develop our economy, and to us being prepared or placed in a situation or in a position where we can sustain ourselves. What use is the airport, for instance, if international visitors are not marketed to and they cannot come through it? What use is even the Marriott—that we just had a sod-turning for—if persons are not coming there to vacation in Tobago?

You know, Mr. President, sometimes as a Tobagonian, I become so frustrated with the "mamagism" and the "pappi showing" thing. Because two weeks ago, the Government ran up to Tobago and they turned sod for a hotel in the black of the night, but at the same time, they cut funding that is

needed to market the destination to ensure that persons know about the hotel—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—to know about the destination and to come to the hotel or other hotels to visit the destination. Mr. President, that could never be good enough. That is why Farley was gutted; he was not wrong. Now, let us turn to Tobago Festivals Commission Limited, Mr. President. And Festivals Commission does exactly what the name says: It administrates for all of our major festivals across the island. And for anybody who knows about Tobago's tourism product, our festivals are a major part of our tourism product. So, for fiscal 2027, the Government has reduced festivals allocation by $2 million.

Now, here is the problem with that reduction, Mr. President: Festivals has a significant allocation, nonetheless, but here is the problem. Festivals is the worst debtor you can find on the island. Festivals currently owes so many stakeholders, cultural groups, practitioners, vendors and suppliers from as far back as fiscal 2025. Even when Festivals received an increased allocation last year, they were unable to satisfy all of their outstanding liabilities. It means that for fiscal 2027, they are still going into that fiscal year—the new fiscal year—with aged debts and outstanding liabilities. The Minister of Finance is aware of this, Mr. President. He admitted same in the Standing Finance Committee. Everybody in Tobago is aware of this. Vendors have been complaining. For the Tobago Carnival, you had stakeholders threatening to pull out of participating in the Carnival because they are tired of being owed by Festivals Commission.

So, when the Government decides to give Festivals Commission who owes so many of our stakeholders, cultural groups, and vendors, money; when they decide to reduce their allocation knowing very well that so many of our people in Tobago are still owed, is it that the Government is saying to these people who are owed, "Well, doh expect to be paid in fiscal 2027". "Hard luck dey. Yuh out ah luck." Mr. President, Festivals Commission need more money. It needs a larger allocation. These people need to be paid. Because the Government has cut this funding knowing very well the situation with regard to Festivals, and knowing that there are businesses who are crippled because the amount of money they have been owed by Festivals, they cannot function at this point in time, is almost as if the Government is complicit in dealing further damage and blows to these local businesses who are so essential. Their functioning and their operations are so essential to Tobago's Tourism Industry. Look at even our smaller stakeholders, Mr. President.

Mr. President: You have three more minutes.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: Three more?

Hon. Member: Not 50?

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: All right, even our smaller stakeholders, Mr. President, our dancers, and our cultural groups—you will see that even their funding has been cut significantly. Now, Mr. President, very quickly, there is one other thing that I wish to talk about in the interest of time. There is so much more, but in the interest of time, there is one other thing I need to talk about, Mr. President. Funding for the ferries: We have four ferries that operate between the sea bridges. When the ferries go down, Mr. President,

we feel it in Tobago. It was revealed that funding for the operations of these ferries has been cut by $15 million, Mr. President. Again, it is almost like we are playing "Russian roulay" with things that affect—

Hon. Senator: Roulette.

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman:—Roulette, "roulay"—that impact our lives and livelihoods in Tobago, Mr. President. Something, again, has to be done. Because while Trinidad might be able to operate on a crippled sea bridge, if it is underfunded and not supplemented, then in Tobago we suffer. We saw it a few weeks ago. Mr. President, at this point in time, the picture is crystal clear: Very little funding for Tobago's programmes despite Tobago's potential to significantly aid in national economic development; abandonment of Tobago's health sector despite the importance of health and wellness to national productivity; underfunding of the green economy despite the need for food security and the need to reduce our food import bill; and underfunding of the blue and orange economies, despite their roles in developing a sustainable and profitable tourism sector on the island.

Mr. President, in the interest of time, I will wrap up by saying this: Tobago's development is essential to national development.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. M. Roberts-Radgman: We cannot speak economic diversification and leave Tobago out of it. The central government needs to do right by Tobago. They need to do better for Tobago. Mr. President, I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Francis Lewis.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Francis Lewis: Thank you very much, Mr. President, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2027) Bill, 2026, for the financial year 2027. I do this as an Independent Senator—I know that has been the subject of much conversation for another time, but I have no manifesto to defend, and I have no political opponent to defeat or blame. And I really do not have an interest in scoring points with either side of this honourable House. My responsibility in looking at this budget, is whether it provides to us, a credible, affordable, implementable plan, for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Just a little bit of context—I have spent much of my professional life working with budgets and plans, so where I come from is that—right hand, left hand; a budget needs a plan, a plan needs a budget, and they need to be in sync. So that is when I read this and then I read the budget statement, that is what I am looking for: the synchronization and the alignment across it.

Now, I want to start with a very basic statement: I want this budget to work. I want it to work because our citizens need it to work. The businesses that we all know, need it to work. Our young people—and I want to talk about that in a minute—need it to work. Our public servants who depend on the Government and the revenue generated need it to work. And our country cannot afford another year where expectations are raised, but the economic and institutional foundations for delivering them remain insufficiently strengthened.

So, the contribution I want to make today, Mr. President, is in the spirit of constructive scrutiny.

In saying that, I recognize—and the Constitution is very clear of the Government's responsibility to set priorities. So the starting point that I used for the budget is: What is the priority stated by the Government? Not whether I think it is a good priority or not, but is the priority clear? Because if it is not, then one would have a problem. So there are five major areas or priorities that were identified; that is a good thing. The hierarchies of the priorities were less clear, and I want to address that as I proceed with this contribution. I believe the Opposition has the requirement or responsibility to challenge it, but beyond that, I believe the House has a responsibility to ask whether the proposed expenditure or revenue expectations, assumptions and policy measures will deliver the results that citizens are being promised throughout this discussion.

You know, Mr. President, in preparing for this debate—fortunately I had some time—a week—and between the statement by the Minister on Monday to today, I have been continually asking people as I meet them, "What do you think of the budget"? And "give me your thoughts". I got some interesting reactions. The first—and I think this was said with a degree of relief—and Minister Swaratsingh might like this—is that it was not described in any way as a hardship budget, and that was welcomed by many people. Yet when I asked people, "Tell me two or three things from the budget that stood out for you and that would make a difference in your life". What was surprising was that people had difficulty telling me one thing, much less two or three. When I asked them to describe the budget—and this could be taken as good or bad—and I mean, this is not in any way to be disparaging. The budget was described to be as very beige. You know, kind

of, "Well, it is generally not anything very good or anything very bad".

In uncertain times, that is not a bad thing, but for people looking to move ahead, being very beige, or not good or bad, or anything of significance, is worrisome. I do not offer this observation as a verdict on the budget. I offer it as a question that would cause us to ask about priority, direction and ambition.

4.55 p.m.

So, when I look at the central economic proposition of the budget—because it is a budget, it is about numbers. And in my assessment, I try to separate the budget statement, which has the theatre of Parliament, versus the budget, four very simple pages, or three and a half in the Bill, that is really a series of numbers. And one therefore puts it in a spreadsheet and compares numbers against other numbers, last year, this year and then you drill down. So, I am trying to look at it from the point of view of a budget, from the point of view of the disciplines in which I was trained.

And when I asked, well, what is the priority, what is it that the Government wants to do, quite clearly, the Minister of Finance stated the five major—and Minister Swaratsingh, I think, repeated them—things that they want to work on, and that is a good thing, it has a degree of clarity. I would offer as a thought, think of it as a pyramid, there must be something at the apex of the pyramid. So, even if you have supporting priorities right underneath the summit priority, we need to be very clear on what that is.

I want to suggest one for consideration. Even if it is not accepted, at least it will, I hope, help the discussion move forward. And it is based on a very simple principle, one that many of us who have worked in business

know, "yuh cyah pay what yuh doh have". So, whether the budget is a few dollars or billions of dollars, whether it simply announces programmes, increases grants, supports institutions and promises investment, it becomes an empty exercise if you are not clear on where the money is coming from and how it will come.

It was interesting in looking at both the IMF, done in May, and later on, the World Bank, done in October, two reports, one longer than the other, and their projections for 2027/2028. And you went from, at least in the case of the World Bank reporting a negative growth to a very positive growth, and you asked, where is that coming from, and the explanation is, it is going to come when the various projects that are planned, that are hoped for, come about, and we generate gas, and we generate the royalties and revenue from that. And that is good, but it is basing a budget on a lot of hope, and we have seen no end of difficulties where, well beyond what we can do, external events, shifting price and shifting market demand.

So, the question I would ask is, how confident are we in those revenue flows?—not that I want to jinx it. "I doh want to put no goat mouth on it". But at the same time, a responsible manager asks, what happens when I stress test the budget, any budget, and I make an assumption that I get 5 per cent less, 3 per cent less, or some significant factor changes and I have to rethink what I would put my priority to?

So, as we look at revenue, I am looking at how do we move and deal with a deficit, depending on how you calculate it, somewhere between 2 and 3 per cent—and the figures command our attention. But it still needs an apex priority, and I want to suggest that the apex priority is, how will this

budget look if we said everything in it is going to be aligned to the country achieving, in the shortest possible time, a growth rate of 4 per cent of GDP on a consistent basis? Now, that is long haul, eh. That is not easy. It is easy to say, very hard to achieve. And there are elements of our behaviour, and there are elements of the programmes and initiatives that will need to be rethought to be able to make that happen. The value of an apex priority is that it forces an alignment, or at least forces you to recognize where there is no alignment or limited alignment.

So, my question would be, how do I achieve that? My proposal is that it cannot be achieved by the Government alone, as much as you could wish it; as much as one could wish that the projects come to fruition, that there are no delays, that there are no events, whether elections or wars, that will substantially shift underlying assumptions. And if you "cyah" do it by yourself, who is going to do it? But the reality is—and this is a very good thing—that you do not have to do it by yourself. This is a budget for the country. It is about public money that is being held and used for the public. And the question I would have is, how well are we—we as a Parliament—embracing the rest of society so this becomes something that moves everybody forward, so it does not try to fall on the shoulders of a government, however well intentioned and however well resourced? To be able to do that would require a change both of rhetoric and of behaviour.

In chatting with quite a senior person on taxation measures in particular, and generally their firm dealing with the Government, they made a statement partly in jest, but it is worth paraphrasing. It was, if bureaucracy were a national resource, Trinidad and Tobago would have a lot to sell, and

a lot of very good quality product to sell. So, I said to them, well, come on, you cannot just say that, what do you mean? And what they said is, when they and their staff engage with the Government, Board of Inland Revenue, the various authorities, it is just too hard to get things to work. What was interesting was that, that was the observation. What was more interesting is what was behind that observation.

So, I offer a thought. If the bureaucracy is what people are seeing, what is the behaviour that is causing that? And I offer a thought—and if I am wrong, and I want to be wrong, by all means, tell me so. Bureaucracy tends to come about sometimes when there is a tension between loyalty and competence. That was told to me. I said, what do you mean? They said, well, if you have a competent, professional civil servant who has worked in the service, "cut their eye teeth there", done the training, understands how to make it work and they have done this for 15 years or more, they are not going to put that at risk if they think it is going to get other people upset. I said, who other people? They said, well, you know, "nah", them. I said, who them? They said, well, Ministers, others in the political directorate.

So, help me explain what you mean. They said, what happens—and this is "an" explanation, not "the" explanation—is that if I am uncertain—I am a professional, but I am uncertain how actions will be viewed, there was a concern expressed that I am going and follow the letter of the law. As they write it down in the regulations, that is what I am doing, whether it makes sense, whether it is out of date, whether there is a better way to do it, because if "ah doh do dat and somebody geh vex, dey go geh vex with me and I go geh in trouble and ah not putting my career at risk". On the other

hand, I said to them, but then we do not move forward, or we move forward very slowly, and they said, that is exactly the point.

Now, it would be very interesting to do a survey across the service and to find out why there is this level of bureaucracy. Because Trinidadians are known for initiatives, we are known for thinking outside of the box, and I "eh" talking about trickery, I am talking about getting things done, and we see it happen in a whole range of places. So, why does this behaviour happen at a time when it does not serve the national interest? I put that as a thought. If I am wrong, then so be it.

One of the comments I have gotten continually, Mr. President, is, "Why allyuh still talking about diversification? How many years? How many decades are we going to hear that?" And people were hard-pressed to identify not what to do to diversify the economy, it was a more fundamental question. When I asked, I said, okay, so assume that five years from now—because this is not something this year or next year—assume that the economy is diversified, or more diversified, what would it look like? The challenge, Mr. President, was that at that point in time, a lot of people got flummoxed.

Sen. Roberts: Flummoxed?

Sen. F. Lewis: Flummoxed. They did not know, or they could not immediately say to me, this is what a diversified economy would look like from what it is now.

Now, this is not a criticism of anybody in this House, certainly not of any Government, past or present. It is when diversification becomes a phrase that is used as a throwaway line, as a line to "crack ah whip like ah

blue devil", and the very people to whom it must have meaning—because it affects lives. "Hear ah tell yuh", this is what will be different, this is how it will affect me and this is how it will affect "meh chirren". One of the best descriptions I heard when I pushed that conversation was somebody saying to me, you know, one of the things I have realized—this is an older person—this is not the last job "ah" going to have and nobody "eh" coming to save me.

So, a diversified economy for me means that there is an opportunity. If I go there and search for it, I can find it. Right now, I do not have a sense—and if I am wrong, again, I would welcome being corrected—that people feel that there is opportunity there for them. For many of our institutions, UWI as an example, and other tertiary institutions, this is graduation month. I went to a number of graduation and award exercises at UWI last week. In talking with the young persons graduating, the vast majority of them with their BScs, is that they have worked very hard, they have followed the rules, they have done what they think we expect of them. They are not sure that in following the rules they are going to get through and there is sinking feeling that they described that—and they are not looking for somebody to give them a job.

They are not looking for rainbows and for the thing to open up, but they are looking for a reasonable opportunity to get on and to get ahead, and within a couple of years of graduation, finding some kind of reasonable employment, at a reasonable rate of pay, in the field in which they were trained. Because they are very conscious that if a third year comes and they do not land in the field in which they were trained, the years of training in

university become lost because we forget. They really do not want to simply settle. That disquiet was echoed to me over and over again.

So, the question becomes, how do we define diversification in a way that is reasonable and practical for us and for others, and how do we interpret that for when people see the need for opportunity to know that there will be opportunity there? Because the proper management of the economy has helped create that. So, ultimately, for them, graduation is demonstrated by results, and the results of being able to move one's career.

Another test of any budget is looking at the revenue assumptions beneath the budget. I looked—and this budget, a couple of the major assumptions were the price of gas and the price of oil. So, I looked at some of the yield curves and the forward curves and, you know, I do not have a problem with the budget numbers and assumptions used for the price of gas and the price of oil.

5.10 p.m.

I tend to be more conservative, I would have used a slightly lower price, but in no way could I say those prices were unreasonable, you know, somebody was just fantasizing.

So, I did not have a problem with that, but in too many other areas, I did not or could not clearly see the underlying assumption that supported the number. So I would see a number, I would hear a statement, I would hear some wonderful rhetoric around it, and if I pushed back on it, it was squishy. Why this number? Why should I believe it? Not that I want to disbelieve it, but why is this number credible?

So that, when we look at a budget of roughly $60 billion, $59.7

billion, an expenditure of $64 billion, and a deficit of about $3.7 billion, which is quite significant. Why should I believe that that deficit will end up where it was, where last year we had in the budget, and get up, "take ah bligh", because you were in office just for about six months, so one was still learning the ropes, and then the actual deficit ballooned to 7? And the question I have is, why should I believe that this deficit will stay at the 3.6? I am uncomfortable with 3.6, but assume that I stay there. Why would I not expect that it would balloon as it did this year, when conditions were favourable for actually reducing the deficit rather than increasing it?

And that prompted a different kind of question of what happens, and this is very standard budget management, "what happens if the budget doh work?" Not that you hope it does not, you know, you work very hard to get it to work, but how do you stress test the budget? How do you make sure, or what do you think about when you ask, "If this budget does not quite deliver in the time frame that you expect, what are you going to do?" What will you hold back on? What will you cut? How will you shape both expectations and the numbers?

And there, a comment I got continually, was we hear a lot of high-flown statements, but we do not hear a conversation that is real and genuine on what happens if, for any reason, it does not quite work, and that is a hard, hard conversation to have. I have worked in large enterprises, complex enterprises, where leadership required and understood it needed to have that conversation, because nobody could predict the future. We tried to see over the horizon with our forecasts, but when you cannot, and someone says, "And what will you do if?" To have a reasonable response to that?

And that hinges, or is the hinge point for the credibility in the revenue outlook. "Yuh cyah pay what you doh have, as much as one would wish to." But the credibility of those projections are based on assumptions and in a number of areas, I found difficulty in assessing because the evidence to assess was not there.

In thinking about the budget, I ran a very simple exercise that I think is worthwhile for all of us to look at. Some of you may have done this. We talk about a deficit. We talk about a deficit running—well, last year, when the final numbers come in of about, $7 billion. This year, we are talking about a deficit for next year of, what is it, 3.7—3.6/3.7.

But a more fundamental question is, how much are we paying each year in interest costs? Because our debt-to-GDP ratio, using the broadest definition of that at 84 per cent, of government debt, total government debt, and it begs the question, how much are we paying? And, of course, that begs the question, well, what interest rate are you using? So, I tried to calculate a weighted interest rate that came out about 4.9 per cent, which is expensive, and the more we borrow is the higher that rate is going to become. But it is a weighted rate against many different instruments that the country has used for borrowing, and is projecting into the future.

But the key point is that, Mr. President, is that the country needs to pay about $6.02 billion, my best estimate, again, I stand to be corrected, per year, simply for the cost of money that we have borrowed. And whether it is a previous Government borrowed it, whether a present Government borrowed it, the reality is that it was borrowed in the name of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So, it is the people of Trinidad and Tobago that owe

that money. And it is costing us in a just under $60 billion budget, $6 billion, 10 per cent of the budget. I tried to put that in context. We are paying on average annually, and this is not in principal repayments. I think $70 billion is due within the next five years, and some of it will be refinanced, et cetera. This is pure interest payments, as I understand it.

Ministry of Health, we allocated about $7 billion, but we are paying bankers to borrow money, $6 billion. The Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services has an allocation of $6 billion. We are actually paying—the amount of money we are giving to the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services is how much we are paying in interest.

Education, we pay less in education than we pay in interest charges. Education is $5.3 billion, we are paying $6 billion in interest. Public utilities, we are paying $3.3 billion versus a $6 billion interest payment. A big item in the budget, and I had to agglomerate for three different Ministries, is what we used to call National Security. So, I agglomerated the Police Service that has its own budget Head of $2.9 billion, the Ministry of Homeland Security of $1.9 billion, and the Ministry of Defence of $0.4 billion. So, the total national security, what we traditionally would look at, is about $4.98 billion, call it $5 billion, of interest is $6 billion. But national security is critical to many of the things and initiatives that the Government wants to do. We are paying more in interest than we are able to put to national security.

Tobago House of Assembly, $2.9 billion versus $6 billion in interest. Ministry of Works and Infrastructure, $2.2 billion. Ministry of Rural

Development and Local Government, $2.1 billion. What is my point? It is, we talk deficit, it is a number, it is a term we use. It has real impact on money that we cannot spend, and so it becomes, how do we put, and here I want to very much support the earlier comments, particularly by my colleague Dr. Attzs, how do we put our economic fundamentals in place? And that brings a bigger question.

A budget is a one-year instrument. "De reality is dat yuh eh going to get Trinidad and Tobago's finances in order in one year, or three years, or even one parliamentary term." Whatever one may say of Sen. Dhanpaul's politics, and that much has been said, he would be the first to tell you, these are long-term—you have to think long-term. You need a medium-term plan and a long-term plan of how you are moving from 64 per cent debt to GDP, down to a more reasonable number, in an environment in which interest rates for the last two years have been rising. And as we borrow more on our credit rating, and I am glad that our credit rating is where it is for S&P, CariCRIS, et cetera, "but it eh getting better, we go end up paying more."

So, how do we as a people through our Government honour our obligations? And I do take the point that you all have inherited obligations, some of which were from your first term in Government, but that is a reality that any country has to deal with. And out of that, how do we manage the risks that we cannot see, but which we know will come? And it is not beyond the capability of our professionals to work out what to do well in advance, but it is difficult for them, Mr. President, to do that if they worry that they can get somebody vexed. Now, I am not saying that anybody has threatened or bullied or caused anything, but sometimes in the vigour of

trying to move, how do we cause the action to be inclusive rather than exclusive? And how do we get to the point where we do not need repeated borrowings simply to keep the engine of the economy moving?

In all of this, there has been less said about what is the return on investment other than keeping the ship of state stable. One of the things, and this one, when I suggested it to some retired senior civil servants, I got a look of shock, Mr. President. A tool that I am accustomed to using in business is a scorecard. So, I said, "Well, what if we have a scorecard for Ministries and for major programmes that are reported on quarterly in the first instance, maybe bimonthly, and ultimately monthly?"

What are the things that move us from allocations, activities, and ultimately how do we measure it? Because—and here I am fully on board with our Minister of Planning and Economic Development, in saying "If you cyah measure it, you cyah manage it." "What a scorecard does is that it presents a picture, and sometimes it doesn't present ah picture dat yuh like, that yuh 'fraid will embarrass yuh, but at the same time, if yuh run blind, yuh go fly into de side of ah mountain." So, how do we get there? And that is a level of sophistication that I would like, that is done routinely in the corporate enterprises that I work with, and it is something that I very much would like to see at least on an experimental basis within the Government.

Now, this next point is a criticism. We are debating a national budget, an annual national budget, at the end of October for a fiscal year that starts in October. "Let me tell yuh, dey eh have any businesses that I know where that would be considered acceptable." And the reason is very simple, it has to do with timing. For many of the businesses that I have worked with

where we put in planning systems, and let me use an annual January to December planning period, we push very, very hard for all business plans to be finished, approved, signed off by the board, signed off by the bank, having everything in place by the middle of October, so that the management can put in place in the month of November, into whatever piece of time you have in December, because Christmas tends to affect some businesses, sometimes in quite different ways.

So that, when January rolls around, from January 2nd, "yuh cooking with gas, yuh moving, things are in place, whether it is staff are hired, people are trained, equipment is brought in, raw materials are in place. You cyah come in January tuh plan, de plan and de budget for that year, and yuh at the end of January."

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Lewis: No, what is happening is we will assume—if I may, let me respond to that. We will approve—this budget will get approved by the end of this week, Mr. President. "Dat eh ah problem, right, so end of October." Put yourself in the position of the senior persons who have to implement this. Now, it is not that they do not know the numbers, and it is certainly not that they do not know what they want to do, but starting from a standing start will probably take them through the month of November, and this is not bad will or the obstructions or anything, it is just that is what it takes to move a complex organization, and then Christmas is going to hit. "Yuh not going to get de budget and de initiatives dat de budget is intended to support really kicking in until January, and den we hit Carnival, is ah early Carnival dis year."

5.25 p.m.

It is almost designed to cause us—it is not to fail, but to certainly be very slow, and when you lose that time, as one manager told me, "You can't eat back the time gone." So, I would urge—we are where we are, Minister.

Sen. Alexander: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. Lewis: All I am suggesting is you see next year this budget has to be done and dusted well before the fiscal year starts. I am not sure why it has taken this long, but to be debating and not have an approved budget at the end of the first month, you have already lost 8 per cent of your time. It stretches into next month. That is 16 per cent of your time. Christmas and Carnival hit. You are setting yourself up. You are setting yourself and all of us up for not being successful. I just want to move on from that.

In terms of managing the risks, we need to plan and think beyond one year. I have spoken to that. I do not need to say very much more. It used to be that the world worked in terms of five-year development plans and went to three years, and then governments got very opportunistic and said, "Listen, we go make it as we go." When I looked at successful economies in the region and across the world in the Commonwealth and beyond, they tend to have something that looks at longer-term planning, whether it is three years—maybe five years is too long.

That is why the Private Members Motion from my colleague, Sen. Dr. Attzs, was talking about a manpower plan. It is not predicting or telling people what jobs to go into, but it is really trying to look over the horizon to say, "Well, we are going to put rell resources into this call education." Can we make sure we get a reason for return, or return on it, by making sure that

there is some alignment? That comes with thinking through where the longer-term aspiration is.

I want to touch on a point and, Mr. President, I would be very much guided by you because I need to be sensitive as I make this point. Budgets are instruments of the Parliament and of the Government. The Parliament and, in fact, the Constitution, in its wisdom, established a number of committees, joint select committees in order for—beyond the work of the Chambers—to scrutinize the plans, the budgets, the implementation by the Ministries and by the multiple organizations. I think the last count was well over 150 organizations that are being directly funded through this budget.

I sit, and I am saying this: I am as guilty as my colleagues. I sit on two committees, the PAC and PAEC. These are scrutiny committees. Both committees have had in-camera meetings. The PAC has not had, in 18 months, a single public hearing. That is unacceptable. The PAEC has had two. Both committees have to do a report to the Speaker. I tremble when I think about what the report is going to say.

How do you excuse that a requirement of office is to scrutinize, and you "cyar" get your act together? And here I am in that group that cannot get its act together to scrutinize the people who have been allocated funds. No. Come on, we have to do better than this. I am sure that there are good reasons, but whatever they are, it has to change. Behaviour has to change.

So, the last thing I want to do before closing is to just talk a little—I tried to do an assessment. I used a very simple scale of one to five. "One" is very good or excellent for various criteria for assessing the budget. So, "one" is very good. "Two" is satisfactory. It will work. It will be

improved, but it will work. "Three" is weak, or it is not functioning effectively. And "fourth"—

Mr. President: You have one minute again.

Sen. F. Lewis: Oh, God! Thank you, Sir. Tends to be that we did have enough information. Overall, the budget will give us a "three". That is weak, and it needs further work. And with that, Mr. President, I think I will wrap up and thank you greatly. Much appreciated.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Faris Al-Rawi SC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Faris Al-Rawi SC: Thank you, Mr. President. We had so many contributions from the Government that it is hard to keep track, so it gives me great pleasure to join this debate. Mr. President, a lot of things have been said, so I will focus on some tight areas. I will begin by answering some of—

Sen. Alexander: Paternity.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Paternity? Somebody brave enough to mention that word here boy? Sen. Alexander is obsessed with paternity in the wrong way.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Mr. President, I will start with the contribution coming from Sen. Roberts. Sen. Roberts is always a very spirited debater and puts forward quite skilfully, in his own way, the position according to him that this Government has to treat with, as he put it, $9 billion in remnant borrowings.

Sen. Roberts was reflecting upon the fact that, according to him, when the UNC came into office it met $75 billion in debt, and he was saying that at the change now they are dealing with a debt of $146.9 billion. Quick calculation, sorry—from 2015 to the debt now is $66 million in difference. Sen. Roberts said that a debt of $9 billion is left on the books for Trinidad and Tobago, and he was complaining that it is a large sum, and he was saying that Trinidad and Tobago has to ask, effectively, where has that money gone, and he was complaining that it is an unfair position for the Government to be managing.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: T&TEC?

Sen. Roberts: The $9 billion for NGC.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: The $9 billion at T&TEC. Thank you so much for the clarification. Let me correct that to get it right. He was speaking about $9billion in debt T&TEC has to NGC for power not paid, but he did say that the Government had $146.9 billion to treat with at the departure of the PNM 2025.

Now, Mr. President, if I turn to the *Draft Estimates of Revenue* for the Financial Year 2027 and I go to X that is at beginning at it just before page 1. And I look to Financing Items 10 and 11. Mr. President, I note that the Actual for 2025 is $10 billion plus $2 billion, $13.4 billion. The 2026 Revised Estimate is $22.455 billion, and the Estimate for 2027 is $8.436 billion. We know we are coming to a midyear. We know that there have been arithmetic problems with it. But, Mr. President, if you take on average $15 billion a year, you have crossed well over $45 billion in three years.

But, Mr. President, to answer—and this is just for the sake of the record. To me as Sen. Roberts said because Sen. Roberts said you have to look into the past to understand what has happened, he said you analyse that. Mr. President, he is correct. For the record, and in quick answer to Sen. Roberts, I must put on the record: Trinidad and Tobago, in 2015, the first budget presentation put there, the Minister of Finance, then Colm Imbert, Member for Diego Martin North/East, came, informed the population that the Governor of the Central Bank had warned the new PNM Government that there were two days of financing left for Trinidad and Tobago, discounting the day he was standing on.

Mr. President, he then said very plainly the fact that we had had minus $15 billion. In other words, then we were left with the move of our Treasury into a $15 billion deficit, Mr. President. And when you then take the figures that Sen. Roberts went through, Sen. Roberts stopped effectively at 2020, took a little jump over, but Sen. Roberts, of course, did not go through the crash of oil, when a barrel of oil was at $27 trading. When COVID actually came, West Texas Intermediate was at minus $2—meaning you had to pay somebody US $2 to come and move a barrel of oil.

Sen. Roberts did not reflect upon the borrowings that had to happen when we lost 96 per cent of our oil and gas revenue. Sen. Roberts did not speak about the COVID pandemic that occupied this country. Sen. Roberts did not speak about the capital investment that the PNM put in and, for the record, quickly, surely the Point Fortin Hospital is a landmark project. When we looked at the Central Block construction, that is one of the recent ones undergoing completion now, partly under this Government and largely

under our government.

When we go to Roxborough Hospital, Diego Martin Health Centre, the Sangre Grande Hospital, the San Fernando Waterfront, with over $3.2 billion in investment. Things like Skinner Park, things like the Diego Martin Stadium, things like the Chaguanas Market upgrades. You go to the roundabout and the flyovers all along the highway. You go to the investment in education. You go to the fact that not a single public servant was dismissed even during the COVID pandemic. I say that is accounting for value for money, Mr. President, despite what Sen. Roberts may say otherwise.

Mr. President–

Sen. Roberts: "So, Rowley do good then?"

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*, *laughter and desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Mr. President, of course I will say that PNM under Prime Minister Keith Rowley did excellent, Mr. President, work and investment.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Mr. President, when you get to the fact that the Central Block was built out of a seismic survey that UNC ignored. One earthquake would have resulted in the collapse of the entire Central Block. You have to admit, whether you like it or not, try as you may to reinvent facts, there was excellent work done.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Mr. President, that does not even include the sea bridge to buy the vessels that we took. The reinvestment, realignment.

Now, Mr. President, the truth is, in April 2025, the PNM suffered a loss at the polls. The Government was elected, and they are now headed up to two years of governance, Mr. President, and they have to account in this budget for value for money.

So, Mr. President, I would like to say that we dealt with the issue of recession. Sen. Roberts calls it "depression," something to be avoided rather than a recession. Sen. Dhanpaul has very simply said that there is marked position on the fact that we are in a recession. He went back to when the PNM had a position of reflecting upon recession.

But I would just simply say as that point has traversed that the IMF itself had noted that Trinidad, after four quarters of growth under the PNM, was finally in a position of sustained growth. Today, Mr. President, the numbers demonstrate that we are in a recession. The question is what we do about it. Does this budget in its allocation, Mr. President—does this budget take us to where we want to go?

Now, Mr. President, we are $63.4 billion in revenue in this budget estimation. We are estimating $5.9 billion, nearly $60 billion in expenditure. It is estimated that the deficit will be $3.6 billion. A deficit budget is nothing that is new. It is a basic concept of Keynesian economics that you can have legitimacy in this type of deficit expenditure, fine. But, Mr. President, what we expected to hear from the Government was a value-for-money statement.

Mr. President, I propose to go into a little detail on one Head in particular, and this is Head 42 the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to treat with where we are and what we are talking about in this

budget, Mr. President. Mr. President, we know that the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government had five hours to contribute to the budget.

I listened to her contribution. I focused on the newspaper reporting, et cetera. There were four and a half hours in the Standing Finance Committee that forms part of the budget package integration that were all here, and the books are what guide us in this debate. But, Mr. President, what I noted is that the Minister could not account for a single statement of value for money.

What we heard from the Minister, Mr. President, was that Cabinet has approved something. We are waiting for PMCD. We are waiting for approval for terms and conditions. We heard the Minister try to give a justification, which I will come to in a moment, for the so-called answer to our challenge on equity, equality, and parity, Mr. President.

5.40 p.m.

But, Mr. President, what we saw in the allocations, if you take Head 42, you go into the recurrent expenditure on the one hand, and you go to the development projects, Mr. President, on the other hand, it is testimony that not everybody wins under the UNC. It is testimony, Mr. President, that despite election promises there were no cuts and repeal of online taxes. There were not cuts to corporation taxes as the UNC Manifesto says that would happen. Whilst they say there was a cut to property tax, which features under Head 42, by the way, and features in the *Draft Estimates of Revenue*, Mr. President, as at zero this year, which features in local government reform, which is a theme that the Minister spoke to. The fact is,

Mr. President, we have received none of the benefit that was promised to the population, and instead what we have witnessed is in my view, a challenge to constitutional equality.

Mr. President, we all know that section 4 of the Constitution 4(d) says that you have the right, effectively, quite simply put, to be treated equally. When you go to Development Programme of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, I just find it staggering. Fortunately, the books of reflection give us the '25, '26 and '27 figures. We are going through Actual, Revised Estimates, Mr. President, and we are going through the Estimates for this year. So, there are three years that hit us in terms of perspective.

Mr. President, it is said that we are in an election run-up to local government elections. Call it an election year; we have precedent that is reflected in these books as to what happens in an election year in development financing and local government, and I just cannot believe what I am seeing, Mr. President. So, what does the Government tell us, Mr. President? The Government tells us everybody is treated equally. When UNC wins everybody wins. We are then told, Mr. President, that "mash up de place west of the Lighthouse". If you come south of the Lighthouse or east of the Lighthouse, you will be figuratively or intellectually beaten into a frazzle.

Mr. President, we were told, no, no, do not say that there is discrimination in funding because the truth is if you look at the global figure you will see that the seven PNM corporations have, according to the Government, received more financing. Now, Mr. President, effectively in a

budget like this, the Constitution says to us under section 64, that the Senate is really irrelevant to the process. We all know that a money Bill originates in the House, we know that if it is within a month of the close of the Session, even if the Senate does not say, yes, to a money Bill, it can still pass. But, Mr. President, in today's *Express* there was a quotation coming from the article by Ana Ramdass:

> Prime Minister—"…not surprised Opposition voted"—against the budget.

The budget is targeted according to the Prime Minister towards wasteful spending. And this is what today's article says, today's *Express*, and I am quoting:

> '"Prime Minister…"—the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, I say that because I am owing that—"said she was not surprised that the Opposition People's National Movement (PNM) voted against the Appropriation Bill in the House of Representatives on Saturday.
>
> She predicted yesterday that Opposition senators would reject the national budget legislation when it reaches the Upper House.
>
> The Prime Minister accused Opposition MPs of being displeased with the Government's decision to eliminate wasteful expenditure during the Standing Finance Committee's examination of the national estimates.
>
> 'No I was not surprised. They appeared visibly annoyed in the Standing Finance Committee that wasteful spending and programmes were cut. They will also vote against it in the Senate. No one cares what the President's senators do any more. They have been discredited already and they did that to themselves with their behaviour.

Government will accept no amendments from them,' Persad-Bissessar said."

So, the narrative of this debate coming from the highest office holder in terms of electoral politics, the leader of our Government, the leader of our nation is really, this is a waste of time. Perhaps it is why we have only heard from the mover and one other speaker on the Government Bench, so be it, Mr. President, that is democracy at work, it is what it is. But, Mr. President, when we get down with that narrative to Head 42, we have to look at these figures.

According to the development funding for 2027, we have the fortunate factor of being able to compare the 2026 and 2025 figures because they are published in the books. If you look to the PNM corporations, Arima, at 2025, which is in the books, $18.2 million in development; Diego Martin, $17.4under the PNM hand, $17.4 million. You get to Port of Spain, $19.7 million; you get to Point Fortin, $17.6 million; San Fernando, $20 million-odd; San Juan/Laventille, $17.1 million; you get to Tunapuna/Piarco, $18.1 million. Fine.

Let us look at the UNC figures, Mr. President. Chaguanas Borough, $17.2million; Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, $17.1million; Mayaro, $17.2 million; Penal/Debe, $17.1 million; Princes Town, $17.4 million; Grande, $17.7 million; Siparia, $17.35 million. Mr. President, you are looking at a near parity, pound for pound, with the two Cities in Trinidad, Port of Spain and San Fernando, standing slightly different. Enter the UNC's Actual reporting figures this year, the 2026 figures, and add the Estimates that we see now for development under the 2027 Estimates. Here is where we go.

Arima, dropped them from $18.2 million to $5.6 million last year. This year dropped them to $2.5 million. Diego Martin, one of the largest corporations not only in geography, but by population and by built population footprint. Let me repeat that, by built, meaning highways, meaning residential areas, meaning drains, meaning development. Very different from rural. You take Diego Martin from $17.5 million you drop it $2.2 million. Mr. President, Port of Spain, the Capital City. You take it from $19.75 million, on parity with what the PNM and UNC corporations had in 2025, you give the entire city the built City of Port of Spain, that is the area west of the Lighthouse, $2.6million.

Now, Mr. President, the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government said, and we are hearing it parroted here, anxious, anxious, $37,000, $37,000, "like a lil—in meh ear".

Sen. Roberts: Like a "lil" what?

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—$2.6 million for the built-up City of Port of Spain, when the fact is that the migrant community on a daily basis to Port of Spain is 200,000 users.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: The Red House sits here, the President sits here, the Capital is supposedly here. Mr. President, last time I checked, cruise ships are here, hotels are here. I do not know of a cruise ship arriving anywhere else in Trinidad other than at Queen's Wharf, Mr. President. Mr. President, $2.6 million for the whole of Port of Spain. Let us get to Point Fortin. We are dropping them from $17 million to $2 million; San Fernando, you are dropping from $20 million to $3.8 million; Tunapuna/Piarco, Mr. President,

everywhere from the north, the beachfront, Blanchisseuse, the North Coast right down to the highway, $9 million.

But, Mr. President, let us look at Princes Town, one of the smallest geographical footprints that we can look at in terms of electoral municipal corporation politics. As opposed to Port of Spain's $2.2 million, hear the figure for Princes Town, $37.45 million. This is the figure for Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, $19 million; Chaguanas, $37.9 million; Siparia, $26 million.

Now, Mr. President, quite interestingly, the Minister admitted that these are the figures. There was, unlike Tobago which admitted, where the Minister of Finance admitted that there was an error, forced to admit that there was an error after Tobago expressed its gutting, the guttedness that it felt. It felt that it was gutted in the budget. I am using malapropisms quite properly. When I come to the fact that, Mr. President, that we are treating with equity here, the Government's answer to this was "nah, nah,nah", not so fast, Mr. President. "In fact, we saw an increase overall."

Now, to put the Development Programme into context, Mr. President, what we are really saying is that there was a 76 per cent drop in funding for the total PNM corporations and an 85.6 per cent rise for the UNC corporations, Mr. President. If you took all of the PNM corporations' Development Programme funding, take all, take all seven of them and you add it up, you get $31.62 million. Let me just remind you Princes Town alone got $37.9 million. So, you take seven PNM Corporations, the two Cities, Port of Spain, San Fernando, Diego Martin as a massive footprint itself, you add all seven together and you cannot cross Princes Town.

We are told, no, no, no, the Opposition is playing smart with foolishness. Let us look instead to the overall picture, Mr. President. So, what did the Minister tell us? Not only the Minister but the hon. Prime Minister herself spoke on the issue covered in the press, saying that the PNM corporations received more money, pound for pound, go and check the books. So, I went, and I checked the books. I went to the *Draft Estimates of Revenue*, the *Draft Estimates of Expenditure* and what did we see? Yes, it is true that the recurrent expenditure was with more allocation to the PNM. If we look to those figures, across all 14 corporations there was recurrent allocation; it was definitely noted that there was a rise by $571.5 million. But of that $571, nearly half a billion dollars, Mr. President, $556.8 million, call that $557 million of it, 97.4 per cent of that is personnel, Mr. President. Salaries, wages, COLA, NIS alone; I am not going to other emoluments, comprised $546.16million.

The seven PNM-controlled corporations were in fact, up cumulatively by $384.9 million. But of that $384.9 million, 94.8 per cent, call it 95 per cent of that or $365 million is personnel. Again, wages, COLA, comprising $291.5 million, salaries and COLA $55.5 million, NIS $11.9 million. Mr. President, the fact is that the wage bill rises not only in PNM corporations, it rose on both sides, the seven UNC, the seven PNM. But, Mr. President, that is actually reflected in the rise, because if you take the PNM corporations you are seeing 55.6 per cent rise in recurrent expenditure and the UNC Corporations you are seeing a 51.3 per cent rise. Why is there a disparity? Because Port of Spain and San Fernando and Point Fortin, Mr. President, pay salaries themselves that the other corporations do not pay. So that

accounts for the position.

But, Mr. President, there is no way on earth that you can honestly say to the population that this represents equality of treatment. And therefore, in all sincerity, how can we stand collectively and say that you can support that kind of discrimination? Mr. President, it is not a small discrimination; it is not a small disparity. On the one hand, the UNC corporations get 85.6 per cent of the money, and on the other hand two of the main cities get 14.4 per cent. Mr. President, what did the hon. Prime Minister expect us to do? How could the hon. Prime Minister be surprised that we would not vote for that?

5.55 p.m.

Mr. President, this comes from a UNC Government. For the 10-year period of financial appropriations, 2015—2025, Mr. President, they did not vote for a single budget; not one.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: I recall, under Dr. Rowley, Mr. President, in 2010, when we were the Opposition, I recall the Opposition being instructed to vote for the People's Partnership budget, because Dr. Rowley said it would be infra dig, it would be intellectually dishonest to vote for a budget which was largely prepared by its predecessor, being the PNM. At least there was some shame to be saved, Mr. President. So, Mr. President, the Prime Minister expresses surprise—

Sen. Nakhid: "You have plenty shame".

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC:—quoted in the papers, Mr. President. Shame is putting the kind of post that Sen. Nakhid puts. Shame is that kind of post.

Lack of shame, I should call it, Mr. President. Some of these things, Mr. President—

Sen. Nakhid: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC—frighten me, you know, Mr. President; genuinely frightens me as to the divisiveness and the—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Let me not go there. Let me stay—

Sen. Nakhid: I will deal with you after.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: "You cyah deal with a fly, you go deal with me? Ketch yuhself".

Sen. Nakhid: "You is ah batty man".

Hon. Senators: [*Interruption*]

Sen. Browne: Mr. President—

Mr. President: "Aye, aye, aye". Withdraw that, Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. Nakhid: Withdrawn.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Mr. President: Let us not go there, please. Let us not go there, please. Continue.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Thank you, Mr. President. "Cyah help dem inno, Mr. President. One worried the mark go buss, and if yuh minding child, and the next one throwing insults. I doh know what to say, Mr. President".

Hon. Senator: No, come on man.

Mr. President: Please. Please. Please. Please.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Alexander: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: Yeah. Listen, listen, listen. I just ask—

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Listen, listen, listen. Sen. Al-Rawi, withdraw that for me, please.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Sure, Mr. President. With pleasure, withdrawn.

Mr. President: Thank you. Listen, Sen. Al-Rawi, listen, everybody will get their chance to speak who have not spoken as yet. I am trying to listen, but I cannot. Could I ask Members, and so on, to listen in silence? Continue, please.

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: Thank you, Mr. President. So, Mr. President, we heard in terms of the invitation to accept that there was equity in local government. We heard the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government say to us that Port of Spain got less money because it spent none of its $100,000 on disaster preparedness. But, Mr. President, I noted when I looked into the books, Chaguanas' contracted services were almost doubled to $23.5 million, but they only spent $15.8 million and still gets $19.2 million for 2027, against $12.7 million in 2025. You know what that is call? It is called a double standard, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: It is called make it up as you go, Mr. President. So, Mr. President, on the point as to the Prime Minister's expression of surprise that the Government would be met with the Opposition saying no to the budget, we must and will say no to discrimination.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: We must and say no to the breach of the principle of equity, Mr. President. Mr. President, why do I say that? Because I actually served in the same Ministry, Mr. President, 2023, 2024. If you go back to *Hansard*, Mr. President, you will see the allocations that were provided to the PNM and to the UNC corporations side by side. And when you go there, Mr. President, in 2023, for instance, October 10, 2023, the PNM controlled seven, got $201.5 million; the UNC got $201.15 million, 2023, equal down the line.

In addition to that, RDC spent $2.1 million on the Chaguanas Market, 1,555 contracts spread across south-east, Mr. President. In fiscal 2025, the last PNM budget, every corporation got roughly $17.15 million. But, Mr. President, we had also catered—and it is reflected in the revenue statement, the *Draft Estimates of Revenue*, Mr. President. We had reflected that with the property tax, now repealed, accounted for as zero dollars to be expected this year, Mr. President, with property tax, each corporation would have received $20 million of its own money.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: And, Mr. President, it hits us now. Not only have you given them the money, Mr. President, in a disproportionate way that the UNC corporations are 86 per cent higher, but when we dealt with the recent amendments to the public procurement law, Mr. President, what did we see? We saw that spending limits dropped from $1 million to $500,000, Mr. President. So, not only you give them less, but "you tie yuh hands". And, Mr. President, that brings me to a very interesting point, and I want to thank Sen. Rose for raising the issues.

When you get to how you are going to spend the money that is being given to you in this, without traversing anything that was said before, with respect to public procurement, I note that the exceptions to spending, the exceptions to public procurement—for instance, in this budget, Mr. President, we have Landmark TT, the special purpose company is set to receive roughly $3.6 million. And it is said that its capitalization is going to be a small load because, Mr. President, it is going to be effectively the umbrella entity that handles public-private partnership, and in handling public-private partnership, it is being sold to us, "Listen, get rid of public procurement because it is holding you back." Now, stick a pin.

Mr. President, under the PNM, we ran with the public procurement law fully proclaimed and still managed to have performance be accounted for. When I came to the Parliament as Minister, I gave value-for-money statements two years, one of which is reflected in these positions, Mr. President, where I was able to speak about the number of jobs created. Mr. President, I was able to speak to the number of projects, the number of people hired. We gave value-for-money statements, Mr. President, how many roads done, how many positions done. In one year, we accounted for 7,600 jobs created by taking the number of contracts done, showing where it was allocated, explaining how it was expended.

But, Mr. President, when you get back to procurement and you get back to this budget saying to Landmark TT, "Take $3.6 million," and the population is being invited to say, "Listen, do not be concerned about public procurement. Wait for the housing," I went—thanks to Sen. Rose—to the:

"OPR

Accountability

Integrity

Transparency

Value for Money

Section 41 Inquiry Report, Procurement Activity: PMCD…Request for Proposal..."

This is concerning the Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation. It is dated July 01, 2026, and relevant to the allocation for Landmark TT in this budget, $3.6 million.

The invitation given to us, Mr. President, that we are simply to accept that procurement should be accepted. We are to say, "It is okay. Let them take the money from the contractor. Let the contractor take the risk," is the argument. When the contractor takes the risk, "Do not worry, the taxpayer is not exposed." But listen to this. I quote, Mr. President, from page 47, and here is what the OPR says in relation to this—"Listen, do not worry, the risk is really the contractor's, it is not public money," is what the Government tells us. It says this:

"The OPR has noted, however, that despite the HDC's assertion that the contractor would bear all the risks from construction…same was not substantiated by the documents provided by the HDC."

Because:

"…all utilised a modified FIDIC Silver Book contract which clearly imposed liability upon the HDC for payment after completion."

In this regard, the OPR considered the expressly modified FIDIC Silver Book clauses, which included clause 14.7. So, a feature of Landmark TT is

that even though the contract says that the risk will stay with the contractor, that the contractor is there, here is what the OPR has noted. When you use FIDIC Silver Book, even though you said that in your memorandum of understanding, in your procuring documents, et cetera, clause 14.7 of FIDIC Silver Book says:

> "…'Except as otherwise stated…[Employer's Claims], the employer shall pay to the Contractor the amount which is due in respect of the final statement within 56 days…'"

It goes on to say this:

> "…the deduction of amounts included in previous Statements…"

—with respect to that:

> "The Employer shall then give notice to the Contractor and make payments of the amount which is due in respect of the Statement in accordance with Sub-Clause 14.7…
>
> Promptly after the latest of expiry of the Defects Notification Period, the Retention Money shall be paid..."

And here is what it says:

> "Therefore, the actual contract documents place responsibility for payment upon the employer, i.e. the HDC."

Let me repeat that. Even though you say under the PPP that the risk is with the contracting entity, Mr. President, the OPR says that the actual risk for payment obligation being a fact upon the employer, it lies, in this case, with the HDC.

> "Furthermore, the OPR has noted that the lands will be utilized appear to be publicly owned lands, irrespective of whether they have been

> vested in the HDC. Consequently, the proceeds of sale of any housing units by the HDC inherently remains public in nature with the contractor bearing a right to build upon the public land and recoup its expenditure from the sale of the public asset."

It noted further that because there is a reliance upon the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Bank:

> "…a state enterprise,"—it is adding—"…to the public nature of the transaction."

It is saying the OPR has formed the view that even if the HDC was not paying the engaged contractors directly, there is still utilization of public money since contractors are being paid from the proceeds of public land.

So, Mr. President, what that is to say, put into summary context, is really simple. Not only is there an inequality in approach of treatment within the mandates of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, not only is there no shame in at least trying to make it look as if it is equal—you see, Mr. President, this is an old trick, you know. You can allocate the same amount. The question is how fast the money is going to be released. But at least there is a remedy there because if it is released, every corporation has the right to challenge by way of suit, Mr. President. So, not even an attempt to mask it, Mr. President.

We are told further, take a drop in spending limits by amendment to the procurement law. And, Mr. President, I keep hearing this term about friends and family and financiers. All fair game. No problems. Feel free to treat with that. But, Mr. President, last time I checked, they have some questions to answer in Landmark TT, you know. "Who is who partner in

law firm? Who husband working in the company?" What are the degrees of connection? These are legitimate concerns, Mr. President. Maybe there are answers legitimately. I do not know, Mr. President. It is like when I heard a little bit earlier, Sen. Roberts was talking about some property owned in Tobago, "and when he swim in de water, it was rel blue", Mr. President. I went and I did a quick check. I know that NIB was renting a property for $45,000 a month. I know that NIB apparently paid this rent for a year but refused to move in when it was given an instruction. The Government said not to move in, Mr. President. So, is that payment as a consequence of the readiness of the property or is it as a result of a direction? Mr. President, I heard—thank you.

Mr. President: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: I heard mention in the other place, reported in the newspapers, of the Tembladora matter, Mr. President. Again, under the label "friends, family and financiers", they mentioned somebody who is not in this House to defend themself, and that was in reference to Howard Chin Lee, Mr. President. Mr. President, do you know what the actual facts were? I heard the Minister of Land and Legal Affairs saying that it was a couple thousand dollars and that they—gave the impression that a multimillion-dollar facility was mortgaged for a value of US $19 million, but it was only a couple thousand dollars they paid him for it, Mr. President. Mr. President, it was a sale of assets to the tune of much more than the mortgage of $19 million, bought for in cash from a US enterprise, Mr. President, and what was on the deck for the Government was merely the consent to assign the

lease and getting an option for further 99 years that you have to pay for. It is nothing of what was represented as a scandal, Mr. President.

So, Mr. President, we obviously, spotting things like Head 42, have deep concerns about discrimination amongst the people in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. President, and last time I checked—even though people in this place, like me, lost an election, ran for an election, others opposite ran for an election—they ran for places west of the lighthouse too and sitting in this House. Those people, Mr. President, some perhaps lost their deposit, but the point is there are other people than the UNC living all over this country, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Al-Rawi SC: And everybody deserves to be treated with equality, Mr. President. We are in good hands with the AG. I know that he will watch equality carefully as the guardian of the Constitution sitting in the Parliament, Mr. President. So, Mr. President, we look forward to further contributions, especially from the Government who has yet to speak in this debate. I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

6.10 p.m.

Mr. President: Anybody else? Sen. Foster Cummings?

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. President, may I—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. President: You would like to speak? Okay, Sen. Dr. Amery Browne.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Amery Browne: Thank you, Mr. President. I believe we would want to save Sen. Cummings' powder for later in the political battle here in

the Parliament. Mr. President, I cannot help but mention *en passant* that what we are experiencing, and those who are looking on at the parliamentary channel, might pause to observe that the flow of this debate is a bit unusual for a budget debate. Those of us in the Chamber with a lot of experience would know that normally you would have rounds where the Government will present their responses to the Opposition et cetera.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: But clearly the Government has a different approach and I would want to say that such an approach is not in keeping with the best traditions of democracy and debate in the Parliament.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: I am entitled to give my opinion, Mr. President—Mr. President, I am not going to entertain this foolish crosstalk that is taking place across there.

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: I am going to request your protection and silence in this Chamber while I speak. It is not entertaining to me at all, Mr. President.

Mr. President: I do not think we should get—let us calm down. I think—the Senator is speaking. Allow him to make his contribution. Continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you, Mr. President. I appreciate it. Mr. President, my task at this stage of the debate, where a number of colleagues have already spoken on this side and I think two on the Government side, is made somewhat easier and maybe, maybe briefer based on the excellent response to this budget by the hon. Penelope Beckles-Robinson.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: The Leader of the Opposition of Trinidad and Tobago and all things being equal, the next Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, it is also made somewhat easier by the excellent contributions that have preceded me on this People's National Movement Bench in the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: As well as colleagues in the Lower House and at the Standing Finance Committee. I want to particularly recognize Sen. Vishnu Dhanpaul who went—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne:—who clearly did his homework and went to great pains, very clearly, cogently and I dare say respectfully. There was no rancour, there were no insults and slurs thrown about, but laid a very clear case in support of the Leader of the Opposition's assertion, truism, that Trinidad and Tobago is experiencing a fiscal recession at this time. And Senator Dhanpaul gave us both the definition and the evidence in support of that conclusion, Mr. President. And I was waiting to hear a rebuttal, a refutation, a cancellation, a denial, et cetera, and I heard none of it.

In fact, Sen. Dhanpaul was so clever as to use the Government's own data and statistics to support his conclusion, and the result of that was the Government ended up arguing against their own figures, and I think we should have expected it. The Prime Minister herself heralded that approach

when she leaned on the IMF data and not on the *Review of the Economy* presented by her own Minister of Finance and approved by the Cabinet that she chairs. That was a clear sign of what was to come. So, Mr. President, there is no doubt of the facts presented by Sen. Dhanpaul and those facts have not been challenged in this debate.

This is a budget debate and these are not inconsequential conclusions. This affects foreign direct investment; this affects confidence in the economy; this affects the financial sector; this affects every aspect of the potential development of Trinidad and Tobago, and to see the Government not take this seriously and brush it off—and I heard an entire speech about the PNM in 2020 and all sorts of things. I thought maybe we got into a time machine and we are in an election campaign where the UNC was in Opposition arguing against the PNM Government. That is not the case. You are now in charge; you need to account to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, so I started by saying my task might be made easier and maybe somewhat more brief, but I have to make some observations on the expenditure this Parliament is asked to approve for the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs. This has been an eventful year for the Foreign Service of Trinidad and Tobago, and there have been so many changes to what we deemed, we, in the broadest sense, the people of Trinidad and Tobago deemed as clear and principled positions which have stood the test of time and which this country could be relied upon across administrations.

I heard Sen. Roberts make a most bizarre assertion when he said:

"The people who say that problems persist across administrations are PNM at heart." But Mr. President, I would not get into the obvious weakness in that assertion. What I would say is that what has persisted across administrations is not just problems and challenges, but it has been the principles that have stood our foreign policy very well since our independence. And a lot of those principles have been challenged, rolled back, reversed by 180 degrees, and sometimes seemingly cancelled, without any justification or explanation.

I am not going to give the full list or review of the performance of the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs over the last fiscal period. A number of commentators have already done some of that. I would just maybe give a list of some of the major concerns that have arisen. The whole issue of Caricom solidarity and the unreliable, unsupportable, and unprincipled positions of Trinidad and Tobago during this fiscal period, where we contribute so much of our resources to Caricom. We continue to do so, but at the same time, it is not just about the money you put into an entity, it is also about your—the ability of that entity to depend on Trinidad and Tobago as a founder and a leader. And this Government and its representatives were found completely wanting in that regard.

Sen. Alexander: Mr. President, 46(1). We are dealing with the budget here.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President.

Mr. President: No, no. That is a Head. Foreign Affairs is a Head. He is dealing with Foreign Affairs. Continue.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you, Mr. President. I am not even going to

comment. I am trying to make your job as easy as possible. [*Laughter*] I could. So, Mr. President, again, I am not giving an exhaustive list. So, the issues in relation to Caricom have been identified and flagged by not just myself, but by many stakeholders as a cause for significant concern. I am hoping that the upcoming fiscal year will see some changes. We still have not heard anything about how that advisory opinion at the Caribbean Court of Justice is going to be funded. I have been unable to identify any specific allocation in that regard, but it is going to be considerably expensive. In my own view, a complete waste of resources, all back-writing a script to justify the absence of the Prime Minister and the failure of the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs to fill in for him during a retreat in St. Kitts and Nevis. All of that heavy weather being made.

Mr. President, some of the other issues that arose are the silence of Trinidad and Tobago on the ongoing genocide in Gaza in the Middle East, Mr. President. And I would say that stakeholder after stakeholder has called for the Government to raise its voice, to assert itself both within Caricom and at the United Nations on this issue. The Government has been silent while this travesty of humanity, these atrocities, continue to occur.

Mr. President, and the issue I really want to comment on is the situation in Cuba, the situation in Cuba. So, we fund diplomats who are still in Havana. There is no ambassador of Trinidad and Tobago, and that applies at many other important capitals around the world. It applies in Brasília, and I notice that the Government has yet to extend official congratulations to President Lula on his victory. I am hoping that by tomorrow morning such would be extended, which is the norm in our diplomatic practice.

So, with respect to Havana, Mr. President, we must be concerned. While we seek for the feeding of our people, the education of our children, the advancement of our own society, right here within the Caribbean Sea, there is another society under siege literally. They have been able to depend on the voice of Trinidad and Tobago since 1962. When the UNC was in power before, they were able to depend on that voice. And now in this last fiscal period, we have seen a reversal of that solidarity to the extent that stakeholders—there is an upcoming vote at the United Nations General Assembly, where we pay our representatives to work for Trinidad and Tobago, and my advice is a clear instruction has yet to be conveyed.

So, there is some suspense. Will Trinidad and Tobago vote in support of the resolution that calls for an end to the embargo? Mr. President, this is not controversial; it should not be a controversial position for a country with the history and integrity of this nation that we are part of. It really should not be, and I want to use my platform here today to call on the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, notwithstanding whatever waters under the bridge, to resist the temptation of doing the wrong thing at the General Assembly and ensure that our representatives, whom we pay, are instructed to support the resolution—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne:—brought by the majority of countries who have indicated support for that resolution, calling for an end to the blockade. Mr. President, I want us to be concerned about that as well.

Why am I talking about this vote, this vote, this vote, this vote? Mr. President, there was another vote recently at the United Nations General

Assembly, where we do have what is considered an ambassadorial level position. We pay and support a permanent representative at the United Nations. In fact, our current Leader of the Opposition once served in exactly that position. Mr. President, there was some consternation in the prelude, the build-up, to a vote at the General Assembly a few weeks ago, during this last fiscal period, on—it was a vote on the ability of Palestinian representatives to contribute to—

Sen. Smith: Mr. President, I am sorry to interrupt the goodly Senator, but 46(1).

[*Mr. President confers with Clerk*]

6.25 p.m.

Mr. President: Member, this is a budget debate, even with Foreign Affairs as a Head—and the Member has a right to speak on that subject matter. I would ask the Member when he is making his contribution to link it back to Foreign Affairs, the Head, and what particular area that you are focusing on, okay?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you very much, Mr. President. Crystal clear to those of us who know what a budget debate is. I appreciate it. Mr. President, what we are speaking about is that we are asked to approve. The Parliament is asked to approve expenditure for foreign affairs. In a budget debate, one looks at the performance of the sector, and normally the Government will account, via its line Ministers, for their performance in each sector. They are doing their part. We are doing our part today in this Senate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: So, sometimes those interruptions might be, I do not know, their conscience bothering them, because they are seeing us doing our part and they know they are not doing their part. Mr. President, as I was saying, before that lengthy interruption by the Minister—and maybe he is nervous because he knows what is going on there. We are paying these representatives. We are funding them, and we expect them, certainly, to be honest with the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and the media when they are called upon to give the substantive positions of this country on the international stage.

I am referring, as I was saying, to a vote at the United Nations, which empowered the Palestinian President to address the high-level debate in New York of the General Assembly. Mr. President, there was some concern that Trinidad and Tobago, trying to please other capitals, might not vote in favour of allowing the Palestinians to address the General Assembly. Then the vote occurred, and I saw an article written by Akash Samaroo in the Trinidad *Guardian* of the 22nd of September2026, and I was so pleased to see this article.

So, sometimes when you are trying to prevent a contribution, it might be good news being shared within the foreign affairs sector. I was very pleased because I saw—very first paragraph, September 22nd, 2026:

> "Trinidad and Tobago has voted in favour of the United Nations General Assembly resolution…"—I am quoting—"…allowing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to address this week's high-level debate virtually after the United States barred him from

travelling to New York."

Excellent news. Sound and principled position, Mr. President. And it seemed that we were with the majority. The resolution—the article goes on:

"The resolution was overwhelmingly adopted on Thursday 17th…"—September—"…with 152 countries voting in favour, three against and four abstaining."

Mr. President, 152 countries voting in favour. And it went on to say:

"Trinidad and Tobago's vote is consistent with its stated support for Palestine…two-state solution."

The article very, pleasingly, referenced the 2024—under the People's National Movement—recognition of the State of Palestine and establishment and diplomatic relations. So, the key paragraph, Mr. President, is that confirmation, and I am reading. I am quoting:

"Confirmation of Trinidad and Tobago's support for the Palestine resolution came from the country's Ambassador to the United Nations..."

And the article then goes on to name him, but it is our ambassador to the United Nations. Mr. President, out of an abundance of caution, in light of that and the information that was presented to the public of this country, unrefuted by the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, I went to the United Nations' official record of that vote. It is available at the United Nations Digital Library. Participation by the State of Palestine during the 81st session: resolution/adopted by the General Assembly**.**

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: The vote date, 17th September—Mr. President, there

is a groan coming from those.

Sen. Alexander: Mr. President, 46(1), again.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: I think this is above the heads of those who are trying to interrupt me.

Sen. Alexander: 46(1), again.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, this is a budget debate. May I proceed?

Sen. Alexander: Everybody is above your head.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: What is going on with—

Mr. President: Wait, just, just—

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: He is disrespectful.

Sen. Alexander: You too.

Mr. President: No, wait, wait.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: What is he talking about?

Mr. President: Wait, wait, wait. Listen, every Member has a right, whether it is a budget debate or an ordinary debate, to rise on a point of order. That is his right. I will rule accordingly, but to deny that Member the right, I will not permit it. Every Member is entitled to so rise on a point of order, budget debate or no budget debate. I am saying what the Member is focusing on is a Head, and if you look at the Bill before us, there are some 44 Heads of Expenditure. If I am mistaken, Foreign and Caricom Affairs is one of those Heads. And a budget debate is as broad as it is wide. Take notes, respond. I do not uphold that Standing Order. Continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Thank you, Mr. President. As I was saying, I went to

the official record at the United Nations with respect to that vote. I noted that all of Caricom voted yes to that resolution; all of Caricom: Barbados, yes; Belize, yes; even Cuba, yes; Grenada, yes; Guyana, yes; Jamaica, yes; Saint Kitts, yes; Saint Lucia, yes; Suriname, yes. So those are the ones that I noted, Mr. President. Then against Trinidad and Tobago, there is no vote recorded at the United Nations General Assembly.

Mr. President, there is no vote recorded at the United Nations General Assembly on a matter as fundamental as that. When you have our nation's ambassador telling our society that we voted in support of the Palestine resolution, Mr. President, that is a red flag for the conduct of our foreign affairs in Trinidad and Tobago, well-funded by our taxpayers, and so much time has passed when the Government could have corrected the public record on this, and they have sat in silence while the population was being misled. They have sat in silence while the population was being misled. This Opposition will hold the Government to account every step of the way.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, I condemn the nonparticipation of this country in that vote.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: And I condemn the Government, as a whole, the Government's participation in the misleading—which is worse—misleading the society on the fact that they did not vote. Mr. President, I took note of Sen. Dr. Murray's contribution, where she paid some significant attention to the health sector. I think she took some of the—there is always a risk for me speaking after Dr. Murray, not that we say the same things, but she tends to

be very thorough and covers our health considerations quite well. All that I would want to say, maybe, in addition—not in addition, all I would want to say in this portion of my contribution, really focuses on access to pharmaceuticals.

Mr. President, because I have heard the Minister of Health contribute substantively on the topic, and others at the Standing Finance Committee and elsewhere. I think, sometimes in the discourse, we lose the lived reality of ordinary citizens. So, when a drug is unavailable—and we cannot deny that currently in this country, there is a serious concern with shortages of a number of vital medications. Now, I have heard the Minister of Health indicate that he has recruited a consultant to look at the CDAP programme and examine changes. Mr. President, we all know the kinds of timeframes that approach can entail, and whether human lives are at stake and at risk, we need to have a very different approach.

Mr. President, I took the time to call a number of pharmacies, and I visited several as well in the build-up to this debate to find out from them what is the experience of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago with respect to the availability of drugs. Now, these are people who are part of the industry, whose livelihoods depend on providing pharmaceuticals to patients. So, a number of these pharmacies are signed up to the CDAP programme, which means, Mr. President, that they are approved to dispense certain medications to patients free of charge, provided that those medications are approved under the CDAP programme and the patients meet certain criteria. But there are a number of drugs that patients are being prescribed within the public and private health care system that are approved under CDAP, but for

months have been unavailable to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Again, I do not want it to be an academic discussion, as some of it has come across, but when you have patients with seizures, you have patients with Parkinson's—so Epilim is one of those drugs. Levocarb is another. Patients with Parkinson's disease have very few options, Mr. President—sometimes there are alternatives available, but in many cases the patients are getting multiple opinions, which confuse them. Some doctors are resolute on avoiding generic medication, and if that is the patient's doctor and they are advising them to go with the original brand name, sometimes the patients are terrified even to try an alternative. The result is a population that is starved of the first-line options for a number of these diseases.

Amlodipine has been in short supply. Levovarb, Mr. President. Drugs like Sinoprill, basic ACE inhibitors for hypertension, and these are diseases that we are all susceptible to, Mr. President. I am not going to tell my medical or anyone else's medical history in the Parliament, but these are frequent diagnoses. And maybe some of us—Zoloft, an antidepressant—we can make fun of those things and mental health, but there are so many of our citizens who, from time to time, would depend, whether it is in the perimenopausal period or any other period of their life, when a drug like Zoloft can be almost life-saving, certainly life-changing.

And so, Mr. President, I just want to put a human face on that—and when a patient who, for years past, could have dependably relied on the free supply of these drugs for a chronic illness to suddenly find themselves burdened with the requirements to pay hundreds and at times thousands of dollars to purchase this medication, where are they expected to find the

money from, especially if they were among the tens of thousands who have been put on the breadline due to political decisions during this fiscal year? So, Mr. President, that is a big, big concern. My understanding is that we are still running on a 2023 tender within the procurement system involving NIPDEC. It is rolling over.

This Government has rolled it over from month to month to month. They have not even signed the 2024 and 2025 tenders, and there are a number of additional questions that I think the Minister of Health and the health sector should really respond to: Why were 450 awards granted during this period for medications that are not approved for use in Trinidad and Tobago? Why are there such frequent stock-outs of vital lifesaving medications, Mr. President? Where have the pharmaceuticals gone?

6.40 p.m.

Mr. President, I took note of Senator Lewis's—it was Senator Lewis, in his very charitable run-up to the wicket, when the Senator said that he spoke to a number of stakeholders in the society and some of them said, paraphrasing, "The budget was not as bad as maybe it could have been". I think that is accurate enough, sufficiently accurate. The budget was not as bad as it could have been. And, Mr. President, I think a lot of the concerns from my own interactions have been around things like fees, fines, taxes, levies, duties, rates, et cetera. And many of them would have been conditioned by this Government's systematic, over the last fiscal year, systematic increase in every available fine, fee, rate, and tax, affecting the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

So, maybe this was a case in this budget of sort of running out of

additional things to tax. Mr. President, only to recognize today, when the budget process is completed in the Lower House of Parliament, when all the Ministers have spoken on various things, to see the publication by the Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago of one that they may have missed during the fiscal. I do not know if the Minister will speak during this debate. He certainly has not interrupted the flow of Opposition contributions thus far, where the airport parking rates at our only international airport—where citizens are from all walks of life, have to park from time to time—have now been increased, effective November 01, 2026, by 50 per cent from what existed before.

Mr. President, so it may not have been in the budget, it may not have been referenced or explained by the Minister of Finance, or even foreshadowed, but it is now just part of an inexorable burden that has been weighing on the shoulders of our citizens, and I am concerned that the Government is detached from the reality that those citizens are facing. Mr. President, so a budget is about money, but in my view, it is also about more than money.

A budget debate is an opportunity for any administration to signal to the country what the overall direction is for the future, at least for the upcoming fiscal year. A budget speech is an opportunity for the Minister of Finance, and really, by extension, the Prime Minister, who would have approved it, to account to the population for the performance for the last year, and to give some clear direction and standard for the year to come. We do not have a State of the Union address, and the other things that other societies utilize. The budget speech is something that a lot of people pay

attention to. Mr. President, how much more time do I have? Oh boy.

Mr. President: You end at 6.50, 10 to 7.00.

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Time flies. Mr. President, so I just wanted to say that I paid some attention to the youth budget talks, which occurred on the 13th of October, 2026, and as a Member of this Bench, I must say that we were very impressed by the contributions of the young persons—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne:—the young parliamentarians. I believe one of our Independent Senators, Sen. Lewis, was a moderator or had some role like that. It really went very well, and what impressed me the most, Mr. President, was a very mature and respectful manner in which those youth parliamentarians were able to make their presentations and contributions, and to respond to others. Note what I said, the youth were very mature in their parliamentary interactions. And, Mr. President, I wonder if you can say the same about what transpired in the Lower House, and some—managed—some of what has transpired here today.

I always bear in mind that even if I have to withdraw something, and you heard some comments earlier, we encourage young people to listen to the parliamentary channel, Mr. President, and our children, and therefore, should that not guide us? Should we not care about the example that we set in our language here in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago? I recall in the last budget debate—so we have to look at where we've come from, Minister Swaratsingh stood and reproached Sen. Melanie Roberts-Radgman for using what he described as disparaging language. And you know what he was referring to, Mr. President? Sen. Radgman had referred to TPP

participants as the "UNC B-team". And she was reproached, I do not know if you recall, by Minister Swaratsingh. And now the same Minister Swaratsingh is here piloting and contributing and will wind up this debate.

So, you found time then to reproach what he described as a disparaging comment. She simply said they were the "UNC B-team". Mr. President, over this last fiscal year, from his contribution that time to his contribution today, there has been so much water under the bridge, and the slurs, the disparaging comments, we reached as far as "Luciferian" and all sorts of things. And I wonder if the same guidance and wagging finger would be presented in those circumstances. We are the only—and I am winding up, Mr. President, we are the only Parliament, proudly, in this region, that has a 24-hour broadcast. Continuous streaming of our proceedings to ears out there, including young people.

There were days when, as you would drop your children to school, you would encourage them to listen to the Parliament Channel, because they may hear something about the history of this country. Dr. Basil Ince, Winston Mahabir, and all the others, and on the UNC side as well, Mr. President. Kelvin Ramnath, he would be a little cheeky sometimes, but always of a certain standard, and I am just worried. I do not want to address the—

Sen. Alexander: Mr. President, 46(1), please. Where is this lecture leading us?

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: I am winding up, Mr. President. And Mr. President—

Sen. Alexander: "Yuh winding up long."

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, what is wrong? Do we need some

Zoloft?

Mr. President: Okay, okay.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Members, Members, Members. Members.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Members, Members, Members. I think we are about to wind down, okay? I think you have three more minutes? All right? You have two more minutes, right? Sen. Browne?

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: I did not think it should be a point of controversy, but sometimes, when a point like that is being made, those that object the loudest, or those who—

Mr. President: Please, please.

Sen. Alexander: Mr. President, but he has—

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. President, those who object the loudest are those who depend on that discourse as the only currency they provide to their political party and to this Chamber.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. A. Browne: That mentality, I condemn, Mr. President, and I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Sen. Foster Cummings.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Foster Cummings: Mr. President, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this budget debate. You know, during the four years or so that

I served as a Minister in the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, it is an opportunity like this that we would look forward to, to report to Trinidad and Tobago on the work that we would have done in the preceding term, and to speak to the country about the plans for the fiscal year before us, to talk to the country about what we plan to do, and the effect of the budget on their lives, because citizens look forward to how the budget is going to impact their lives. Whether the gas price is going up, whether a tank of gas will cost more, whether you are going to have Development Programmes that will improve their lives, whether they are going to get within the city of Port of Spain, sufficient development money to make sure and maintain the capital city, as opposed to all of the PNM corporations getting less than one UNC corporation, but I am not going there. Sen. Al-Rawi dealt with that already.

But it is this debate on the budget that gives the Ministers of government who have executive responsibility, who were elected to govern for all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, including those west of the lighthouse, Mr. President, that the opportunity is given to speak to the country and to account to the citizens on the conduct of the Government during the financial year we have just ended. And the Government gets the opportunity to say to the persons who elected them to office, what we plan to do going forward. But you live, and you learn, and this is probably the UNC's way of reporting to Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, I feel it for the young people of this country. I spent some time going through the Draft Estimates—both of the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* and of the *Details of Estimates of Recurrent*

Expenditure, looking for what the Government plans to do for youth development in Trinidad and Tobago. Having served in that Ministry before the election, I felt that maybe last year the Minister did not find his way as yet. And maybe, having not found his way by now, he would have come to the country and given us some food for thought. I understand that Sen. Nakhid might be replacing him sometime soon, and maybe at that point we might see some work happening in the Ministry of Youth.

But as it is now, I have looked through all of the Estimates. I have not found in either of the yellow books except for one Item, Mr. President. There is one Item of development work for young people under Social and Community Services, Item 008: Industry-driven Training Programme. It is the only programme, Mr. President, that is intended to do some training. And let me speak about it a little bit. This programme the Minister announced in the budget, the allocation is $2 million. It is expected to focus on training 1,300 young persons. And, Mr. President, it is for a duration of four weeks. It targets secondary school students aged 16 and over.

The programme is intended to provide practical workplace experience alongside training in financial literacy, entrepreneurship, workplace ethics, resume preparation, and interview skills. It is a very short-term programme. It is supposed to run sometime during the July-August vacation. First to begin, the work that they hope to achieve within that four-week period is very ambitious. I do not know who will be executing the work—which agency—but it is a lot to consume within a four-week period. But if we look, they intend to attract or to target 1,300 students, and they will receive a stipend of $1,500.

Mr. President, the student stipend will therefore account for 97.5 per cent of the announced allocation. And therefore, this raises several questions. How does the Ministry intend to deal with student orientation and workplace preparation, training materials and delivery, supervision and monitoring of placements, appropriate insurance for the workplace, administration and evaluation? And I have some questions. Since $1.5 million of the announced $2 million allocation will be required for stipends, how will the additional programme costs be financed?

6.55 p.m.

What safeguards will there be to ensure appropriate working conditions and meaningful supervision of these students? How will the students be selected, and what measures will there be to fairly assess the young persons who participate? Mr. President, so much more has to be said about this programme, but this clearly, based on what is in the budget, is the only programme that the Ministry has designed to train young people in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. President, when I saw the increased overall allocation, I was almost fooled. I saw that the allocation went up to almost $40million. And I said, "Wow, something is going to happen." But, as I went in deeper, what I realized was that the recent responsibilities were taken from hon. Prof. Prakash Persad—very experienced in all levels of training in this country—and shifted to the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, where it is going to die. YTEPP, MIC and NESC—the combined allocations in the Development Programme for those three agencies now being transferred from the Ministry of Tertiary Education to the Ministry of Sport and Youth

Affairs are what fooled the country into thinking that there was some development programme for young people. All of these agencies were at the Ministry of Tertiary Education and are now being shifted to the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, where the current Minister is going to kill them.

Mr. President, as I listened to the contribution of the hon. Minister in the other place, apart from a lot of misinformation that I picked up from that contribution, one particular thing stood out, and when I heard the Minister say it, I said to myself, "My mother always said, 'anybody who talks too much will make stories up to fill in the gaps.'" I listened to the Minister; he made an astounding allegation. He said to Trinidad and Tobago that in the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, there is a building that houses the headquarters of the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs at the corner of Elizabeth Street and Tragarete Road in Port of Spain.

I understand that the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs has two head offices. The former head office of the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, where the Minister is based, and then the Elizabeth Street office where the Parliamentary Secretary is based. So, it is the Parliamentary Secretary's office that he was referring to, which was the previous office of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Services. He said the most astounding thing. He said that a previous Minister—he said that the landlord for the building had said to him—was not third-party information—him, the Minister—that a previous Minister had spoken to the landlord to make an arrangement to increase the rental of the office from $400,000 to $800,000, Mr. President, and that Minister said to the landlord, "Increase the rent to $800,000, and I will just take $250,000

monthly." And I said, "But that is a most astounding thing. That sounds to me like misbehaviour in public office."

So, since I worked at that Ministry from 2021 to 2025, I went about my research. If a rent like that has to be paid, some allocation has to be made for it. Mr. President, you will be astonished to know that I went back 10 years and could not find a single allocation in any of the budgets for any year, during the time that the PNM was in power, where an allocation was made to increase any rental for that particular property. I could not find it. But I said I would not stop there; let me find out about some more about this. I then looked to see, well, who owns this building and which landlord could have said such a thing to the hon. Minister? But you see, under the PNM—I do not know what happens now. Maybe Minister Dominic Smith can tell us about this—but under the PNM Government, rentals of offices were handled by the Ministry of Public Administration—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings:—and a division called PRESD in that Ministry.

I do not know if Ministers now in the UNC could rent offices to people and increase rents and make those kinds of arrangements. But under the PNM, no Minister responsible for any Ministry could make any arrangements to rent any office. It was handled by the Ministry of Public Administration and a division called PRESD.

So, I did some enquiries, and Mr. President, this building is owned by a company called Neema Investments Limited. Its directors are one, Amin George Habib and Daniel Habib, and its lone shareholder is Mr. George Habib. I want to state categorically here today, Mr. President, that I do not

know, have never met, or have never had any conversation of any kind with Mr. Amin George Habib or any representative of Neema Investments Limited, so it is impossible, particularly on my part, having served in that Ministry, that the Minister could not be referring to me, Mr. President. It just never happened; it is not true, and it is a total fabrication, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings: The records will show that this building, which has a total usable space of 3,400 square feet, has been rented for some time by the State, for the sum of $391,000 monthly, which is roughly $11.50 per square foot. In December of 2024, or before the PNM demitted office, PRESD, which works under the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, reduced the rent for the building, Mr. President. Would you believe that? Mr. Habib was offered a rent of $375,000 monthly, which is roughly $11.30 per square foot—an offer which I am told was accepted formally by Mr. Habib. Based on the storytelling conducted by the Minister in Parliament, he wants us to believe that Mr. Habib told him that he was offered a rent of approximately $800,000 for a benefit to someone of $250,000 per month.

Mr. President, that would work out to a rate per square foot of $23.50. Maybe the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence can tell us which property in or around Port of Spain is renting for anything more than $14 per square foot by the Government. And, Mr. President, rental of office space by the State ranges between the low end of $8 and the high end of $14 per square foot. This claim is outlandish; it is reckless, it is impossible, a blatant untruth, and an abuse of parliamentary privilege.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings: The one thing that we do know is that we have a privilege here in the Parliament of free speech. But when we exercise that, there is one ingredient that cannot be excised from it, and that ingredient is the truth.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings: Mr. President, so we see the paltry one programme that this Government has put in place for young people in this country—at-risk youths. For some reason, the Government believes that youth development is about locking up young people and throwing them in prison. They even announced that they are going to build a new prison and that they are going to move the prison from Port of Spain and build a prison complex. So somehow, they think that to treat with the development of young people is to arrest the ones who are misbehaving and lock them away, while you put nothing in place for the at-risk youths in this country.

What did we do when we were in Government? In addition to setting up a Ministry particularly dedicated to the development of our young people, the NEET category that Sen. Attzs always speaks about, that is, those young people who are idle and about in the community and not involved in any formal training programme. Some of them may not have done too well in academics. How are we addressing those young people? Let me tell you some of the programmes that we did. Because you see, in order for us not—the Government has a particular style. Their style is personal attacks. In order to try to silence the Opposition, they try to come at you with personal attacks. It does not matter to them whether it is true or not; as long as they

get it out in the public space. If the Independent Senators, on the day that they vote with the Government, they are angels falling from heaven. On the occasion that they do not agree with the Government's policy, they are called satanic, et cetera, et cetera. There is another word I cannot remember now.

Hon. Senator: Scumbags.

Sen. F. Cummings: Scumbags. Only because—you must not disagree on a policy of this Government. It is frightening. I never thought I would be in a place in Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings:—where you could not voice a different view.

Sen. Alexander: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Cummings: There was one lady who made some statement about Venezuela and some plane flew into some house or whatever. She was locked up for about six months. Another one who made—not a comment that I agree with—and before you know it, she, her niece, her nephew-in-law, and everybody "in" prison for months. We never thought that the country built by Eric Williams, Basdeo Panday, CLR James, and Patrick Manning would reach the point where a citizen making a statement would be held and put in prison for making that statement. The Government does not want anybody to disagree with anything they say.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings: That is where we are in Trinidad and Tobago. As a matter of fact, the minute you voice a statement contrary to the view of the Government, you come under heavy attack. And the country is paying close

attention. The country is paying close attention. The Government is living in a bubble—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings:—speaking to itself, and telling itself that itself like itself, the actions of the Government are popular and that the country is behind them. And all Trinidad and Tobago will do while you fool yourself into thinking the power you were given is some absolute power to persecute citizens of this country. The time is going to come; we will wait, and we will remember—and when I say we, I mean the citizens of this country. And the Government has enough time to live true to its "When UNC win, everybody wins," and the "yellow is the code," et cetera, et cetera. The Government has enough time to amend its ways and serve all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings: And it is glaring. It is so glaring that when you look at the Government policy—as a matter of fact, they do not mind telling you that we are going to serve everything east of the lighthouse. And I wonder how some of the Members of the Government feel, knowing some of the problems we encounter in this country, that we abandon the young people who need the Government's assistance—the most vulnerable in society, Mr. President.

The constituency I serve before which is currently represented by the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, that constituency in many cases—some of the young people could not afford to go to school right in Arima. So, I advocated—whether there are gangs or not, we have a responsibility to

break that culture. I advocated for the construction of a new school in that community—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings:—a youth development complex in that community, a national library in that community, a new swimming pool in that community, and all those programmes were on the table. We had youth development programmes. I would just share some. I have done it before, so I may not go into the 50 programmes that we had, but I will share some. Under the PNM Government, we had the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme, designed to train young people in agriculture and offer them a new career path; the Youth Agricultural Shade House programme; the Youth Aquaculture Programme; and the CCC, which we appointed a committee to re-evaluate and get some efficiencies in place. And the cohort was just about to go in when the Government changed. They scrapped the CCC. All these programmes that I am calling out to you, Trinidad and Tobago, the UNC Government has scrapped them. Headed by the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs.

7.10 p.m.

MiLAT scrapped. This is at-risk youth programmes, you know. Youth programmes for youth from troubled communities who want to—they want to do better. They are hoping, they just do not have the financial resources to do it. They want to get into some training programme to equip themselves so that they can be employable. So that they can go into small business. That is what they want. Instead, we want to whip them. We want

to ignore them. We want to provide no resources for them, Mr. President, and then we want to call them lazy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Se. F. Cummings: We want to call them lazy, and we want to say there is no hope for lazy people in this country. I say to you, Mr. President, that is the most simplistic analysis of the situation, and we need not look far. The United Nations has a lot of information that the Government can take advantage of. The MYPART programme, these are residential programmes done with the defence force, right, and we scrapped those as well.

Mr. President, we had a skills-to-work programme. We are taking these young people in, upskill them, certify them. These were not programmes where you get some participation certificate, you know. Mr. President, these programmes were run by NESC, MIC, YTEPP, UTT, UWI, COSTAATT, all of these accredited organizations. And at the end, therefore, of these programmes, the students received CVQ certification, so that they were able to then get into the workplace not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but up the Caribbean, and some of them work right now even in North America.

Some of these programmes involve a Drilling Rig Operations Programme, and the Drilling Rig Operations Programme trained, drilling rig roustabout, drilling rig roughneck. I mean, we are an energy industry. You want to tell me—I hear the Minister talking about industry. What is it? Some pretty word here—industry-driven training programme. These people who were not able to find employment in Trinidad, they could go right next to Guyana. And some of them have gone on working in Canada even right

now. Mr. President, another programme, an apprenticeship programme, P.I.P.E., which is an apprenticeship programme in pipe laying that was done in conjunction with WASA, another programme stopped by the Government.

FUSE, an apprenticeship programme with TTEC, training young people to maintain overhead lines, et cetera., creating almost immediate employment for them after they complete and are certified. This was a very popular one. All Set Heavy Equipment Operation programme run with NESC. We had young people learning to operate backhoe, excavator, skid steer, dump trucks—women and men. Air conditioning and refrigeration, Mr. President. Automobile servicing, you know, you have these new electric hybrid vehicles. Some of our mechanics not so equipped with maintaining them, and we have decided, okay, we will train up a cohort of young people who can service these vehicles.

National Leadership Training for youth workers and young people involved in youth work. This was done by UWI. Then we know we live in the age of social media—the UNC should know about it. They used social media as a major marketing campaign in the last election, and they have not stopped campaigning, Mr. President. It is like they have not realized they have won the election, so that they are still campaigning.

So they know the effect of social media, and a lot of people fell for it, that is why they are in the Government. But we utilized, we designed a training programme to train young people in social media marketing and management, so that they can use social media to get into business, and many of them are actively doing that now. That was PNM policy; the

Government has stopped that as well. AMPLIFY, a music production and life skill programme, training young people in digital photography, video production, graphic design, voice training, stage presentation, and life skills. PNM policy at work.

Now, the Government has this tendency, everything was corrupt, everything was corrupt. Well, if everything was corrupt and you stop it, give it a different name, shine it, repolish it, brand it, put your own people to run it, but do not abandon the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Se. F. Cummings: The 40 Under 40 Mentorship Programme, utilizing volunteers who have excelled as entrepreneurs, as entertainers, as sportsmen and fashion designers, et cetera. We utilized these young people to go into the schools, target the third formers and the fourth formers from various secondary schools, and we know they need to see exemplars. They need to be exposed. I mean, the exemplars cannot be the gang runner or the person who is pushing the drugs on the street. They need to have that relationship with persons who they can emulate and follow, and that was the nature of that programme.

Then we went down to South, because you see, for the PNM Government, whether you are east of the Lighthouse, west of the Lighthouse, south central, you are a citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and we govern for everyone.

Sen. Baig: Oh my God, really?

Sen, F. Cummings: We govern for everyone. Yes. So we designed a programme, an industrial apprenticeship programme—by the way, the

Drilling Rig Operation Programme was run out of St. Madeleine. Right? The other programme I am speaking about now, the Industrial-Mechanical Apprenticeship Programme, was run out of Heritage in South Trinidad. That programme involved industrial maintenance, electrical and mechanical, and welding, all focused towards the oil and gas sector. We put in the first cohort of 50 persons, they did very well, and the Government came into office and, of course, scrapped the programme right away.

In addition to that, Mr. President, we had the programme dealing with crane operations. You know where that programme was being run out of? Penal, with a company called Tower Crane Operations. In forklift operation, boom truck, mobile crane, tower crane operations up to CVQ level three certification, rigging and banks man training included, and that programme, Mr. President, was very successful as well. The Government has scrapped that programme.

PLAR, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition for skilled and experienced persons who have been operating in the technical and vocational field, who do not have certification. They could be assessed through this programme, and once successful—of course will have to sit a short course to get to this stage—they can receive institution-based certification, and this would lend towards enhancing their employment capabilities and, of course, their competence towards further professional development. A very, very relative programme. If you know it, you know they have a lot of persons probably coming to your home to do plumbing, to do electrical, et cetera, they may not have the required certification. We cast a net to bring in that pool of persons, train them and certify them, give them

a short course programme, and they can then move on to improve their marketability.

The final one I will share with the Senate today is the Micro Enterprise Business Development Grant programme. So we are training all of these people. Some of them will find employment, some of them will want to go into business. And they do not come from the means to have the seed funding. So that this Micro Enterprise Business Development Grant is intended for those persons who want to be self-employed, to come into a programme where they will be trained in entrepreneurship. They will be trained how to keep their books, they will be trained how to do their NIS and taxes, et cetera, they will be trained in bookkeeping, and at the end of that, the successful completion of that, they will be able to access a SEED Grant of $20,000.

So, for instance, you trained somebody in tailoring; they want to start but they cannot. They want to buy a sewing machine. You think they could go to any bank to qualify for any loan at 19 years with no work history? They want to buy a serger. You want to buy your first inputs into the small business, you get that start up—blend towards diversification of the economy, would create direct jobs, will create indirect jobs, and that is what the young people hope to get from a government. Not talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, and $2 million in a budget for a whole fiscal year for a programme that lasting four weeks and giving you no proper certification.

So, Mr. President, we have to discuss as well what are the Government's plans. I mean, if we even look at the promises that the Government has made towards agriculture. Well, I feel it for the Minister of

Agriculture because it seems like every week he is losing some part of that Ministry, to the super Minister of Lands and something, Legal Affairs and everything. Right?

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Cummings: You had your chance, you will get your chance to wind up, right? Mr. President, in that Ministry that is now responsible for lands, legal affairs, the other one that building houses now—

Hon. Senator: Landmark?

Sen. F. Cummings:—LandmarkTT, et cetera, et cetera. They have now added the Palo Seco Agricultural Services Company Limited. What they have done is to take all of the state enterprises that have anything to do with land—because PSAEL is a large landholder in South Trinidad. Trintoc holds a lot of the lands that were previously—the Trintopec lands, the Petrotrin lands, most of that vested in Trintoc, and they have put all of that in a basket under the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs, in addition to the state lands. Mr. President, they are giving out leases of 199 years. That is four generations.

I recently filed a freedom of information to find out who they have given all these leases to. Because they had been making a lot of noise about who received leases while the PNM was in government, while saying nothing, fingers on the lips, like when you are in secondary school or primary school, and Miss say, "put your fingers on your lips". Not a word about who they have been giving lands to, not one word.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Cummings: But every Monday morning, every Monday morning, they are jumping up and down the place about every other citizen that received lands under the PNM Government. One hundred—well, do not let us go down that road because that is a road I can go down but we would not go down that road today. Because, Mr. President, it is a matter that we have to look at in this country, the distribution of land in this country, state assets, and who are the beneficiaries?

Going back three decades, going back three decades. So one day we will have that conversation, Sen. Roberts. Who are the beneficiaries? So now they have come up with a mechanism to give out land for four generations, 199 years. What is the application process? Who is evaluating who should get these lands? What is the price being paid?

Sen. Roberts: "Ah case ah Blue Waters".

Sen. F. Cummings: But 199 years, and that, Mr. President, the intention is they have taken lands away from Minister Ratiram. "He cannot touch no land, and the little piece that remain with the PSAEL, dey take that too. So, the Ministry of Agriculture is now the Ministry of bhagi, cassava and yam".

Sen. Roberts: So what wrong with bhagi, cassava and yam?

Sen. F. Cummings: Bhagi, cassava and yam, nothing else. So that, the farmers who they promised—because they made some promises to the agricultural farmers, you know, they made some promises—25-acre agricultural parks all sounded the nice. The UNC manifesto promised that.

Orange Grove Agricultural Development proposed Orange Grove, 271 lots; 50 million for the development of Caroni lands at Orange Grove. Thirteen sites expected to produce apparently approximately 5,000 lots for

former Caroni workers. Agricultural development, 300 acres at Orange Grove, and Mr. President, they went on and on, but over 50 per cent of the allocation for development works in agriculture has been assigned to the Palo Seco—P S A E L. So maybe if the Minister of Agriculture speaks in this debate, he will tell us what the connection is.

7.25 p.m.

The very PSAEL is the company conducting the work at UWI South, Debe. They are the project manager for that job. They initially told us the job would cost $70 million. I understand it has reached to $90 million, and in the allocation for this year, an additional $70 million has been put in there. I have no quarrel with tertiary education, whether the campus is in Debe, Barrackpore, wherever it is, but what we need to do is to make sure that students everywhere, west of the lighthouse, east of the lighthouse, particularly where we have troubled youth—

We refurbished, Mr. President, right here in east Port of Spain, a youth development centre, because Sen. Nakhid always speaks about the "young black man", and the ones who are shooting and killing each other in the streets, et cetera, et cetera. They are not the only young people living in these communities. There are young people in these communities who are very productive and want a little step up from the Government.

We refurbished the Basilon Street Youth Development Centre in Port of Spain. We refurbished that and it was completed just before we left Government, sometime in February, or so. A year after, I went up to Basilon Street, and I saw the beautiful facility padlocked with some security guards, and I said to myself, "What is happening here after this type of

investment?" The Minister then visited the site afterwards and promised the moon and the stars to the people in Basilon Street. Mr. President, I invite you, or any Member of the Senate, or any member of Trinidad and Tobago to drive up to Basilon Street. The facility is still padlocked. There is no allocation in the budget to do anything to it, and the young people of east Port of Spain still wait on when the Government will do something for them.

In Point Fortin, we also refurbished the facilities there, a former NESC facility, because we know in that community people are interested in welding, et cetera. It was completed, the refurbishment—

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]—closed it down.

Sen. F. Cummings: No, we met it closed. It was completed. We have it equipped—

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

Sen. F. Cummings:—two minutes—ready for occupation. If you go down to Point Fortin now, nice, painted up, look very nice; no allocation in the budget for the young people of Point Fortin. The same thing in Palo Seco. The same thing in California, where the aquaculture programme was being run from. Fishes in the—well, I mean, by now, no fish inside there.

So, notwithstanding the significant investment—and it is time we stop this in Trinidad and Tobago. These things are not about politics.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings: It is time we stop it. When we are elected, pull the politics out of your responsibility to administrate and govern for everybody in this country. Listen, you might think this is a—

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Cummings: Listen, Mr. President, he will have the opportunity to wind up, he could say whatever he wants after that point. Please leave me, let me speak. Okay? The young people of this country are depending on you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings: Not even in 2010 and 2015 did the UNC Government do to Trinidad and Tobago what they are doing to this country today, Mr. President. Not even then. So I say to you, I say to the UNC Government, the young people of this country require your attention. Whether you think they are PNM, whether you think they—what is the other party, the one from Panday party?—whether you think they are that party—

Hon Senator: Patriotic Front.

Sen. F. Cummings: Patriotic Front, whether you think they are UNC, whatever your thoughts are regarding their political alignment, they are citizens of Trinidad.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. F. Cummings: They are citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Cummings: I know you jealous Balisier House. When UNC build a headquarters, come back and talk to me. Right?

Sen. Roberts: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. F. Cummings: The PNM is 70 years old. So, Mr. President, I once again call on the Government to be responsible and represent all the young people of this country. I thank you, Mr. President.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Leader of Government Business.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Sen. The Hon. Darrell Allahar): Mr. President, in accordance with Standing Order 14(5), I beg to move that the Senate continue to sit until the completion of the business at hand.

Question put and agreed to.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2027) BILL, 2026

Mr. President: I now recognize Sen. David Nakhid.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. David Nakhid: In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful. Mr. President, I have to say as we do in Islam, [*Foreign language spoken*], to keep my composure, because I find it absolutely fascinating that the two people who spoke with such passion about youth and about shame are two people who have benefited to the tune of $200 million of taxpayers' money, without shame, and $500 million in contracts for himself and his family, and come here to talk to us about what we have done, what we did not do, and all of that, after 18 months.

Now, it is not about being facetious and having comparatives, but when we are talking about a budget, it is very clear that we have to compare what those on that side, after 10 years in continuous government, claimed that they had done, and what we, after 18 months, are trying to do. That is just the facts we are talking about. I will get to you after, you and your partner in OPR, Ms. OPR. I will get to you. Take it easy. So when we come here and talk about what they have done, 10 years, half a trillion

dollars, that is what the poor man on the street wants to talk about. That is what they see, half a trillion dollars.

All this talk about line Item, half a trillion dollars, forget all the fabrications and misleading information, and manipulation of figures that they use today, and I will go into some of that and what they have done. They have demonstrated to a nation called Trinidad and Tobago that they are not fit for government at any level, local or national.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: So I find it fascinating.

I want to go into it, that Sen. Al-Rawi, who benefited—and we have to keep saying it because they are hoping that we forget. What is your famous solo, "We will remember"? Well, Trinidad and Tobago has not forgotten and will not forget. You and your family, while you were skipping out of the Cabinet, recusing yourself, your family was benefiting to the tune of $200 million of taxpayers' money, even to the point—

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. President, Standing Order 46(6).

Sen. D. Nakhid: What?

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Alright. Yeah. Alright. Members, we are all aware that the Member has quoted a Standing Order, 46(6). I think, I think you have to be careful in terms of imputing improper motives to any Member of this House. Make your contribution but do not impute improper motives. Continue.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: What I am clarifying there, Mr. President, is a matter of

public record. These are figures that are on public record and quoted ad nauseam in the Senate and in the other place. This is someone who stands up here, in the most pompous of matters, to talk about shame. I did not invoke that. I have never seen any "Nakhid" renting buildings to the Government and making that kind of money whilst in government. Certainly not me. But I see the name Sen. Faris Al-Rawi in those matters. I definitely see that.

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: Mr. President, I rise on Standing Order 46(6). Not only is it untrue in the manner in the [*Inaudible*] way, but you want to bring a substantive Motion, no problems, Mr. President, but he is properly on an improper motive, and you have guided us skillfully in the past on these matters, Mr. President.

Mr. President: Yeah. Hon. Senator, as I keep saying, let us not impute improper motives. Any Member is free, as was indicated, to move a substantive motion against any Member, but in speaking on any issue, let us try not to personalize things. Make your statements, but do not infringe the Standing Orders. So I will just ask you to be guided. Okay?

Sen. D. Nakhid: I am guided, Mr. President. I just thought it was—I do not want to use "fascinating". I am astounded that someone could so easily get up and talk about shame when speaking about me, when I, as far as I know, any of my family has ever been involved in anything or gotten any contracts for any buildings. I mean, I think that is appropriate here to note.

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: Mr. President, I respectfully rise on 46(6). I do not think the hon. Member is understanding where we are, Mr. President. This is an improper motive he is raising, Mr. President, quite properly. Again, I have

no problems in answering a substantive motion, none at all.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: No, I understand where you are coming from, but I have indicated to the hon. Senator. I think he is attempting to take a different approach. But as I said, let us observe 46(6), as far as is possible. Do not impute improper motive to any Member. Okay? Make your statements however you wish, but do not breach the Standing Orders. Please, continue.

Sen. D. Nakhid: No improper motives at all. I put out the case before the public; I let it be known that whatever Sen. Nakhid says in Parliament, he also says it in public.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: And I say it in my best Attorney General impression, "I make it clear that who the cap fits, let them wear it."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Let me clear up quickly before I move on to Sen. Cummings. We had Sen. Amery Browne, who continues to lecture all of us on protocol and other matters every time he speaks, but today he went beyond the pale, he went beyond the boundary. He spoke about how the Government, under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, did not vote for the Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, of the Palestinian Authority—did not vote in favour of him coming to speak—well, not "coming to speak", that is not our decision. Again, in my best Attorney General impression, "That is not in our hands. That is in the hands of the US Government." He was not allowed to come into the country, but the decision was to vote in favour of him speaking virtually.

Well, I have here—I had cause to go and pull it up quickly, and it shows to me here—it is saying right here, on the e-delegate record:

Voting intentions, Fourth Committee—

—all of that, submitted on 18/09/2026 at 11 minutes past 1.00:

Vote: Trinidad and Tobago vote in favour of participation by the State of Palestine during the 81st session.

Hon. Senator: No.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Yes. I mean, there is no way someone who claims—

Hon. Senator: Shame. Shame.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—who comes here with a clear fabrication, misleading, misleading, misleading the Senate—

Hon. Senator: And talking with arrogance, shame.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. President, Standing Order 42(9).

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. President: Yeah. Yeah. No. No. No. No.

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]—want to clarify.

Mr. President: No. No.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

7.40 p.m.

Mr. President: Please. Please. Please. Please. Standing Order 42(9), I will consider that. But a statement has been made by Sen. Amery Browne. It is on the public record. A statement is being made by Sen. David Nakhid contradicting what you have said. The question here is whether you are prepared to stand by your statement made earlier—

Sen. Dr. Browne: Mr. President, can I answer your question?

Mr. President: No, I am asking you a question based on his statement.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Would you like me to respond?

Mr. President: Yes. No, I am asking you—

Sen. Dr. Browne: Do it now, or do you want me to do it after?

Mr. President: I am asking you, if you want to clear the air on what has been alleged by him?

Sen. Dr. Browne: Of course, Mr. President, do you want me to do it now or after?

Mr. President: No, no, no. You could do it now. Because I do not want it to go on the record.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Has he given way, Mr. President?

Mr. President: I "doh" want it to go on the record.

Sen. D. Nakhid: "Take way."

Hon. Senators: "He giving yuh way. "He give way."

Sen. Dr. Browne: Okay, okay. Thank you. Mr. President, what I did during my contribution and I gave the reference, I went to the official United Nations Digital Library with the official record of the vote of every nation. This is the repository of those votes. I also read out the votes of Caricom member states and the fact that for Trinidad and Tobago there is no vote recorded. It is as simple as that.

Mr. President: Okay, thanks, thanks. Okay, continue, Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. Dr. Browne: Thank you, Mr. President.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Once again, the epitome of incompetence, a lack of proper diligence, a lack of ability to say, "I am wrong, I made a mistake".

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: "I apologize." PNM arrogance in full flight, in full flight. I have the record here.

Sen. Roberts: Read it again.

Sen. D. Nakhid: And we voted:

> Vote in favour of participation by the State of Palestine during the 81st Session.

"Talk done." What is all this kinda—"I not on that that stupidness—[*Inaudible*] doh want to hear what he saw". If you did your work improperly.

Hon. Senators: Privilege.

Sen. D. Nakhid: He should be referred to the Committee of Privileges.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: And you know what, you know what, you know what, Mr. President, no, we "hadda" take these things seriously. Because I remember a couple of weeks ago when we were in this same Senate and we had a debate, somebody "geh" up here and talk about, with full confidence, South Africa and about how it was not based on colour codification. I remember the words, because I have it on *Hansard*, I pull it up too. He came and said, no, it was not based on that, it was based on the legal structures in place and so on and then wanted to get up here just like "de next one", just like Sen. Browne, and deny what I say and deny, you know, he talked about that with full arrogance. I have it on *Hansard.*

And you know after speaking with one of my mentors, I thought it better, you know what, let this arrogance, this incompetence, let it run free, let it run free. You

know, let them continue to exist, let the people of Trinidad and Tobago continue to exist, that all they have on that side is arrogance, all. And I will quote somebody, I think it is Minister Ameen, "how you could be arrogant and so wrong all the time"? How could you be arrogant and sanctimonious all the time? But you are wrong, you said the wrong thing.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: And I have it on *Hansard*. So, Mr. President, you know I heard things, I was following the debate very carefully and I heard Sen. Roberts-Radgman talk about the airport and what a great job they did with the airport. And, you know, you expect from an Opposition, because I sat over there one time with a wonderful Opposition Bench. I sat over there and I remember we had to be on point with everything we came up with. Our Senate lead at the time, he would not accept anything less than that. We had to come up every time, every time we were in a war, every time and our Senate lead now is the same thing. So when I saw or heard Sen. Roberts-Radgman talk about the airport and all that, I had to go and look and I got these figures.

In 2014 under the Kamla Persad-Bissessar, I do not like to say People's Partnership, under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, arrivals to Tobago were 96,000. In 2019, under the PNM, it went down to 28,000. Is Sen. Roberts-Radgman aware of that? In COVID, it was zero, of course. Before 2025, it was 30,000. Meaning, if you are armed with these figures and this is what PNM is about, "eh" they "doh" really care about figures, although they like to bring it up when they are in Opposition. When you are armed with these figures and you have arrivals coming in at 30,000 under them,

under their incompetence, famed for their incompetence, they could mismanage anything. You go and build "ah" airport with a capacity of 1 million.

Hon. Senators: 3 million.

Sen. D. Nakhid: 3 million. Sorry, I stand corrected, 3 million. For who to benefit? No gas line, all "kinda ting", for who to benefit, for who to benefit? That is the question you have to ask. Because I am confident, having gone through many times what they have done, in their history, that every dollar spent in Trinidad and Tobago, PNM takes 70 cents and if you ask me the figures, I want to tell "yuh" I am sure about "dat". And if "yuh" ask Sen. Dhanpaul, people like him, they will know, they will know. So that is why they will come in here and try to invent a narrative, as Sen. Cummings is famous for. "Yuh" ask him, well, how, how you have—although you and your family is—[*Inaudible*]—and all of these things.

Hon. Senator: Black people.

Sen. D. Nakhid: 32, 32, and that is what they come with, they use the race card, black people. "Well, you alone black awa?" "You alone black awa?" "Doh come with that race card by me inno, you alone black "awa?"

Mr. President: All right okay. Please. Please.

Sen. Cummings: "Waste ah time." [*Inaudible*] Come on.

Mr. President: Listen. Listen, calm it, calm. Let us calm down and let us not go into that direction, please. Let us not get into that talk. Sen. Nakhid, let us not get there. Sen. Foster Cummings, we are not going there. Continue, Sen. Nakhid.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Thank you, Mr. President. When the goodly Senator

spoke, I did not interrupt him once, not one time. He could come with that race-baiting talk about "black people cyah geh nothing and thing". I have never seen him put himself on the line for any black person like me. I have never seen that.

Hon. Senators: Correct.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: All over the world, I have never seen that. They could talk "wa dey" they want—

Hon. Senator: [*Interruption*]

Sen. D. Nakhid:—and campaigning for black people as well there.

Hon. Senator: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: "Is not you come, is not you come?" Under Al-Rawi's advice to talk about I was in jail?

Mr. President: Okay, all right. Sen. Nakhid, let us not go down that road, please. And listen, I am not permitting any crosstalk again from either side. I will ask you to leave the Chamber, go into the restroom, cool yourself, drink some coffee. Right. Have respect. Do not go that—let us not go down that road, let us not go down that road. I am not officiating and supervising and presiding over that. So I am just asking both the speaker and those who are listening, desist from crosstalk, and Sen. Nakhid continue, but let us not—we "doh" have to go down that road. Let us, continue, please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: I can understand why the Senator is getting demonstrably hot under the collar, because for someone who continues to say what he said,

I did not bring it up, I let him speak. But it is well known that anybody who has achieved that kind of wealth and every time you talk about it and "yuh" question it, legitimately, because it has been questioned outside of the Parliament, he says, "well I come from a family of businessmen". Okay, I have nothing against black business. As a matter of fact, this Government offered, I remember, black people in east Port of Spain, if they would remember, when Kamla Persad-Bissessar and Jearlean John offered black ownership of homes, they came out and they said, "black people eh going and take wa allyuh offer". I remember that clearly. And we all know what, black ownership of homes is the pathway to what, generational wealth, they "doh" know that?

Because for that side, PNM, it is only certain people, according to him, could get wealthy, not the ordinary person in the street and to use his parlance, the black man. They in street, they are not allowed to get wealthy under the PNM. It is only certain people who could rent out buildings for $200 million, certain people who could get contracts for $500 million but the ordinary black man everything we bring the UNC, under Kamla Persad-Bissessar to help them, they are against it.

Even laptops "dey was" against. "Wa dey say, if we feel black people duncey". I mean it is incredible. That is why I say it is fascinating to me, that when "yuh" armed with the figures and I will go back to—

Hon. Senator: Roberts-Radgman.

Sen. D. Nakhid:—no, Sen. Al-Rawi. I will deal with her after—who went on, you know, because he starts off very measured and then he goes off on a rant about the UNC and we have here figures. Original allocation for Port of

Spain $19,750,000. You know what is the Actual expenditure, $4.1 million. San Fernando this is under the PNM, eh. San Fernando city, for that time he "geh beat" by Minister Dowlath, $20million was the allocation, how much was spent, $10 million. "Wa dey" coming to talk about? I "doh" care if "is" $2 million, $1 million, anything you give them to help people, they end up taking it. Anything you do or allocate to the PNM, "dem" end up taking it. People could say what they want.

Why, if they so care about their constituencies, why the under-expenditure? Why the lack of expenditure? Port of Spain has been in their control for how many years, 62 years. 62 years, you cannot walk through Port of Spain and feel comfortable. You cannot walk through. With all the talk they are talking about geographical discrimination and "dis" and "dat" and west of the Lighthouse and east of the Lighthouse. Completely misquoting what the hon. Prime Minister said. She said, if "allyuh doh care about allyuh own people west of the Lighthouse, well, we will concentrate on the people who want change, east of the Lighthouse". What is so difficult about that? You all do not care about your own people when you all in government, you "doh care about dem when allyuh" in Opposition, why is that? Why is that? Because "allyuh" not concerned about making the ordinary man progress in life. "Allyuh not concerned bout that. Alyuh concerned about making allyuhselves wealthy, allyuh financiers wealthy."

And you know, proof of that because I heard somebody mention Dominic Hadeed and these are things we have to speak about frontally, they are talking about 199-year leases. "I eh hear allyuh complaining about da lease allyuh give Dominic Hadeed. I eh hear allyuh complaining about

that." Properties worth $51 million renting for $51, 000. A bunch of jokers and frauds, boy. And want to come here talk about shame and what we are doing and what we are doing. They do not realize the implications of these things. Giving somebody $51 million properties for $51,000 a year in rental and they want to talk? That alone should disqualify "allyuh" from any argument that "allyuh" looking to improve the lives of the common man.

And I could go on with their hypocrisy you know, with their newly minted Senator who tried to take to front about how, "dais ah partner or the head of de OPI was ah partner and all ah dat". It does not matter. When you are talking about procurement, you are talking real actual bias and perceived bias, and that is what we are talking about. You have indicated by your statement that there was some perceived bias in the matter. Why did you not excuse yourself? Why did you not say well, he is my not my partner anymore? Why did he not?

Sen. Dr. Rose: Mr. President, 42(9), please.

Sen. D. Nakhid: So, Mr. President, you know, they will get hot with me because I did not like the reference talking about "shame." Because shame for me is when you misappropriate things that do not belong to you, there is no greater shame. The taxpayers' money, you and your family are wealthy. "Yuh driving Porsche, selling it to dis one."

Sen. Roberts: Three Porsches.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Three Porsches, "all ah dat" and you are happy with yourself and walking around that you have some moral authority in here to speak. No you do not, you do not.

7.55 p.m.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Look at the people in your constituencies first and foremost. I am not even talking about east of the lighthouse. "I not even going by our own constituents." Why have you not improved the lives of the people in your own constituencies that you are in control of? You want to come and tell us about geographical discrimination? Look at yourself. What have you done for your own people? "La Horquetta/Talparo pelt out da one, San Fernando West, why? Jusso?" There is a reason for that. What have you done? So, be careful when you are talking about shame and who "have" shame. Be careful when you have cocoa in the sun. I take these things seriously, especially coming to the name Nakhid. Seriously, I come from a working family, a middle-class family who valued education, which you all cut. GATE. GATE, from $750 million to how much Anil?

Sen. Roberts: Two eighty-five.

Sen. D. Nakhid: Mr. President, $285 million. Everything, everything that could improve the life of the common man, you all cut. Every single thing that could improve the life of the common man, you all cut. I continue. "And yuh know, when yuh looking at these figures, yuh have to ask yuhself—cause yuh know when yuh don't spend dis money, yuh don't geh it again. Why didn't y'all help de people in your constituencies? Why didn't y'all help if y'all so concerned about dem now, now that we come?"

This is the point, Mr. President. We have been given a mandate by the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and we have taken the country in a different direction. Yes, we have, and I know change is uncomfortable; I know it is not easy being in Opposition, especially when you rule the roost

for 10 years. I know that—and access to everything because that is the system we have. And I know it is difficult when that is pulled from you and you see a whole different direction the Government is going in right now.

And this goes to Sen. Dr. Attzs and "they", and her friend, Sen. de la Bastide; they have to realize something. They have to realize something, that they have to give us time. I heard Sen. Dr. Attzs talk; everything is a supposition. A whole 40 minutes on supposition, "Well, if and if." We are here 18 months; they were there 10 years. You all do not want to give us a chance to go in the direction that the people voted for? No? That is not allowed?

"Well, tell us if after 10 years, somebody here on this side walk away with half a billion dollars in contracts, or if somebody was renting a building for $200 million, then tell me, and I will tell you, 'Yea, we were hypocrites.'" I will hold my hand up and tell you we were hypocrites. But until that day when I could identify on that side, then you will have to give that some credit, and I am talking to the Independent Senators here. You all have to give that some credence, some value, because that is what it is about. These are more than just numbers. "I could come here and tell allyuh all de numbers. I hear Sen. Cummings who scurried out de Chamber talking about programmes."

Do you know, when I examined these programmes, all of these programmes that he is talking about, they were poor in quality execution, poor in CVX qualifications, 11 per cent when we assessed it, 11 per cent of the people who they said qualified were really and truly employable, 11 per cent, that is an independent assessor. In other words, the programmes were

poorly run. Some of the programmes he talked about—"heavy equipment". When they looked at it, you had lines, so they had six people in the programme, two people would go through the day because they had lines, because it takes time. When you are showing somebody heavy equipment, it is not a 10 minutes. You have to take time. You have to show him. You have to equip him.

So, you know, when we send some of these people to the TTMA, the Manufacturers Association, they say, "Aye, Senator, we have to send dem back, dey not ready for employment." The programmes were so poor, and a lot of these programmes overlapped each other, Sen. Vieira, they overlapped. "One programme was so similar to de next one, dat I recommended dat one programme be scrapped because it was just ah waste ah money. It was just take ah money. He spoke of all these programmes, why he didn't speak about de Caravan Programme? Ah wish he was here." Caravan Programme. In two days, a caravan programme, $850,000. Ten times they put it on. That is how much? $8,500,000, $8 million in two days. "What programme you goin and help people in marginalized communities in two days? Caravan Programme. Yuh geh dem ah T-shirt. Yuh geh dem ah—".

"And when we looked at it, aye, yuh know, when yuh look at de programme, de same service provider, and yuh know who is one of de directors on dat company, as de service provider? Yuh see, I doh want tuh —why allyuh does open up allyuhself to dem ting? Allyuh know allyuh in wrong thing, cool allyuhself nah. Yuh make it. Okay. Yuh make ah lil money and thing, don't come and try and convince me you come from ah

family ah businessmen, I is ah fool awah?"

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: Exactly. And the directors on the company, service provider, $8,500,000. "Dais how de PNM operates."

Sen. Dr. Rose: [*Inaudible*] It is imputing improper motives to a Member in the House.

Sen. D. Nakhid: "To who? To who? To who? I ain't call ah name."

Mr. President: Continue, please.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: "Clearly, clearly, de Senator know something we don't know. Who the cap fits—. We go back to—according to de AG, who de cap fits?" And it clearly fits somebody on that side.

No, I am not playing with them. Let me tell you why I am not playing them. I am from the East-West Corridor, and this is the crux of the matter here, Mr. President. I have seen too many young men who I grew up playing football with, who I lived with, from Champ Fleur, all the way to Laventille. "Dais my area. Dais my area. My mother's family from Picton. My father's family from St. Joseph. Dais my area. I have seen too many of them go de wrong way. Dey like to talk about dey provided programmes." They were laughing at people. People were coming out of there, as I said before, unable to be employed. Unable to be employed after spending millions of dollars. They talk about YTEPP. They talk about MiLAT and all of these programmes.

"De amount of money dat was going in there, you know who was making de money? I know these programmes by heart. Ah doh even have to

look at ah paper. I doh have to look at ah paper. I went through this thing with ah fine tooth comb. Yuh know who was making de money, Sen. Chote? De coordinators in MiLAT, not de people it was intended for." Yes, they had numbers, 1,000 people and all of that. All of that was just cosmetic; the actual value for money was not there.

So, the Prime Minister said, "Yuh know what we doing? We closing down these programmes and coming back new. And dais what we doing."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Sen. D. Nakhid: Thank you. Here is Sen. Al-Rawi, I wrote this down. He talked about what they did. They built Skinner Park, "ah death trap, a death trap. De day after dat cyclist died, I went there, I went to Skinner Park, and so much so, that dey end up coming—OSHA—and closed down de facility that dey built for millions of dollars. And boast about how dey built that, yuh know. Boast about dat, you know."

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

Sen. D. Nakhid: **"**Yeah, we will open when we deem it fit for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: "We just don't build things like you. We just don't build things like de PNM. We just don't build things like de PNM, quickly. With all de HDC falling down. Billions of dollars dey spend. Dey build nothing. Dey do nothing properly. I called them before, one of my first contributions in the Senate, a shell Government. Everything is ah shell. Everything would just look good. Ah shell. Nothing of substance. Talking about Skinner Park

if it open. We will open when it is safe and nobody could go there and ride on a bike and just fall down and dead."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: "Blood gush out de man neck. and den yuh want to talk. And yuh know what, to hear somebody talk always telling somebody else in the Senate about children and all kinda ting. Boy. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let me leave dat alone."

He talked about the Diego Martin Complex that they built. I went and visited that in Opposition when they were there. "If you go in there, supposedly built—they moved out ah whole set of people from there. From down by riverside dat poor. People who used to go and sweat there openly. Fellas go know bout dat, dey used to go and sweat there openly. They build up ah big complex. When I went to see there, I couldn't even get in. Is only Porsche. Dey build up ah state-of-de-art super gym, and then dey come out only their financiers coming out ah there. I stay right there and make ah video. Who they build dat for? The people of Diego Martin? They build it for their own financiers, dey own friends. Dais how dey does move, and den want to come in here and talk about ah budget after 18 months?"

I said here in this Senate last year, "Give us time. Give us two years." The measurable index by any organization is always two years before you could start to talk about what is measurable? What is the data? "Every time, dais normal. Dais just common sense. Dais logic." Ten years, half a trillion dollars, you have nothing you could point to that actually benefited the people of Trinidad and Tobago, absolutely nothing. Rubbish. "And den you coming here to try and judge us after 18 months, talking about we are worse

than a former—you talking about us living in ah bubble?"

We have been very transparent. We have a Prime Minister who has said she is not going by the status quo. She is not doing the same thing over and over again. She come out different this "rounds".

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: "Ah think allyuh realize dat. She's come out differently this rounds. She not taking dat. She not letting nobody speak, come and speak no racist chupidness about her. She not letting nobody come and talk about dat. You know, he will laugh, you know, cause he is one switching from Indian to Syrian, Syrian to Indian, I dunno where he going. Yuh know what I mean? He dunno heself. He dunno heself."

I will leave this to him, maybe he not proud in John Jeremie's style, "maybe he is not proud of who he is, but I am a proud Arab and used to get all kinda sad N-word and all kinda ting in Europe. But, you know what I mean? Maybe if ah—anyway."

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

Sen. D. Nakhid: "So—boy go and find out who kill de man who see yuh children and dem wit de guns before yuh talk nah."

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

Sen. D. Nakhid: "Oh, gosh."

Mr. President: Let us not engage in those things. Sen. Nakhid, you have two more minutes.

Sen. D. Nakhid: All right. So, Mr. President, in finishing, I did not get a chance to go into the kind of spending that went on in the OPM under the former administration, which was ridiculous in and of itself. "Nah, I doh

have de time. What I will say is—I doh even have time to go into de gender-neutral former Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, when I look at the kind of spending average cost per trip."

So, I will end with this. I will end with this. "We have ah Government who, in 10 years, ghettoized, and I eh talking about de corridor. Dais my concern. Ghettoized places were middle class." Mt. Lambert, Mount Hope, Champ Fleur, St. Augustine. "I could talk about all these places and anybody here who is from the East West Corridor know what talking about. Dey ghettoized de place by dey consistent pilfering of public funds, by their refusal to spend correctly on de corporations in their own constituencies, and dey are responsible for the kind of surge in crime dat we have seen, but we fixing dat too."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. D. Nakhid: "We fixing dat too." So, Mr. President, I thank you for the opportunity to address all these fabrications, misleading statements made by that side, by the PNM side. Let it be known, I have no love for them. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. President: Okay, colleagues, Senators, now it is 8.10. I want to propose that we suspend and we return at 9.00 p.m. When I will return, Sen. Chote SC will have the Floor. The Sitting is now suspended until 9.00 p.m. Thank you.

8.10 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

9.00p.m.: *Senate resumed.*

[MADAM VICE-PRESIDENT]

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Chote SC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Sophia Chote SC: Madam Vice-President, thank you for the opportunity to speak, and I wish to reassure you and my colleagues that I will not detain them too long. My contribution really seeks to have some clarification on one or two issues. I must confess that speaking on a budget is really not my favourite thing because it is not lingo with which I am familiar, so if I use the wrong words in asking my questions, I ask for forgiveness upfront.

Now, because of the area of work that I do, what happens in the Judiciary and how the Judiciary is treated is always of importance to me. It is dear to my heart. The Chief Justice gave his speech at the opening of the Law Term on the 9th of September, 2026, and I am sure most of the lawyers attended. He emphasized the need for making sure that we have open justice and justice is done in person and he went to talk about what he had found when he had become Chief Justice, and he said this.

The fiscal infrastructure of the judiciary was a major need for overhaul, and then he went through the different courthouses. I mean, in San Fernando, they were almost all shut down, with 16 courtrooms shut down. The family court was shut down eventually had to move the Waterfront Centre. The Magistrate's courts were shut down. I think the Tobago courts may have been kept more or less open, with some help in terms of maintenance from the Tobago House of Assembly. Now, the Minister of Justice, in the other place, said that at the end of its term, the Government wants to make sure that all courts are opened, and I applaud

that certainly. That is something which I totally support. Now I see a figure here in the Bill of $ 579,454,980. I just wanted to ask a few things. One, does it mean that the Judiciary is now getting its own funding? Because that was always a question mark. Should the Judiciary get its own funding.

Is it that the Judiciary is now getting its own funding or this is just an allocation and the funding will come from the separate Ministries? That is the first thing I would like to have clarified. Out of this figure, how much of that will be recurring expenditures? How much of that will be salaries and that kind of thing? How much will be used for the actual infrastructure—which the Judiciary has said, and has cried out for, as being absolutely essential?

So, these are my queries, and I think it is important for members of the public, for citizens, to know about because people in remote areas—I saw that the Chief Justice spoke about reopening one of the courts in eastern Tobago. So, citizens throughout Trinidad and Tobago want to know when they can return to their courts and how soon. I get the point. You are not going to be able to—no government is going to be able to fix it in a short space of time. Are there priority projects, and how far along are they?

So, Madam Vice-President, as I said, I apologize for probably not using the right lingo, but these are the things I would respectfully like to have clarified by the hon. Minister when he does his winding up.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Sen. Vieira SC.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Anthony Vieira SC: Thank you, Madam Vice-President, and I too

undertake not to be too long. There is an aspect of this budget debate I find somewhat troubling, and that is the apparent reluctance of the Government to meaningfully engage in the debate on its own budget. I say this is as a matter of parliamentary responsibility.

The budget is arguably the most important statement of a government's priorities, its values, its vision for the country. It determines not merely how public money will be spent but which national needs will be addressed, which will be deferred, and which sections of our society will benefit most from the choices made by government. Surely, one would have expected the Government to welcome the opportunity to explain and defend those choices.

It is 9.05 p.m. at night. We have been here since 10.00 a.m. this morning. All the Members on the Opposition Bench have spoken, and five Members, including myself on the Independent Bench, would have spoken. But just three speakers on the Government Bench. And where those contributions were made, there was very little serious examination of the difficult questions raised by this budget.

The purpose of a budget and a budget debate is not just to secure the passage of an appropriation Bill. It is to subject the Government's financial and policy decisions to the scrutiny of Parliament. This scrutiny is not an inconvenience to be endured. It is an essential feature of responsible government.

Indeed, one might have expected Government Members to be the most enthusiastic participants in this debate. After all, this is the Government's programme. These are their priorities.

Sen. Roberts: Madam Vice-President, 46(6), imputing improper motive. "If you doh understand"—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: No motive is being imputed. I am just making an observation.

Sen. Roberts: "You are talking about people work ethic and passion—[*Inaudible*]. Yuh outta place." You are insulting.

Madam Vice-President: All right. All right. I understand, but let us just not go down that road. Let us just stick to what you want to say, and we continue.

Sen. A. Vieira SC: Yes, but as someone charged with accountability and oversight, it is within my purview to ask where the explanations are.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. A. Vieira SC: Where are the justifications? Where is the serious engagement with the concerns, which have been raised by the Opposition Bench and the Independent Senators? I am not suggesting that everybody on the Government Bench has to speak. But parliamentary accountability is not measured by the number of speeches delivered or the hours consumed. It is measured by the willingness to confront difficult questions and to provide meaningful answers.

I find it concerning that the Government which seeks parliamentary approvals for the expenditure of billions of dollars of public money appears unwilling to engage or to subject its decisions to the discipline of serious parliamentary debate. Parliament is not just a mechanism through which the Government gives legislative effect to the decisions taken elsewhere.

Parliament is an institution of accountability. Its purpose is not just to

facilitate the exercise of Executive power, but it is to ensure that such powers are exercised responsibly, transparently, and in the public interest. A parliamentary majority may give the Government the numbers to pass a budget. But it does relieve that Government of the responsibility to justify it.

Suffice to say I am disappointed that the responsibility seems to have been taken so lightly in this Chamber.

Sen. Roberts: How much—[*Inaudible*].

Sen. A. Vieira SC: I move on.

My other concern has to do with allocation of funding for the municipal corporations. Let me disclose that I live in the west. And I will be directly affected by how well or how poorly the Diego Martin Regional Corporation is funded. So, it leads me to wonder whether this budget serves the interest of the nation as a whole or does it leave sections of our society, especially those north and west of the Lighthouse, feeling that they are less deserving of the attention, resources, and the protection of the State.

Every Government is entitled to its priorities. Every budget necessarily involves choices. But those lines must be informed by principle, and that principle must be that it transcends party politics. The resources of the nation belong to all the people irrespective of their political loyalties, their geographical location, their social circumstances, or their perceived relationship with those who exercise political power. The national purse is not the property of the Government. It is held in the trust for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And while a government may legitimately distinguish between competing needs, it must never—it must never distinguish between

citizens on the basis of political favour or disfavour.

I am very concerned. I am concerned that aspects of this budget raise serious questions about the equitable distribution of our national resources. Those questions deserve answers, not political defensiveness. Equity does not mean that everyone must get the same. It means that everyone must be treated with fairness; that differences in treatment must be justified by differences in need. And that no community, no community should be made to feel that its place in the national family depends upon its political allegiance.

There is a distinction between governing with a political mandate and governing with the partisan mentality. The former is the legitimate consequence of democracy. The latter—

Sen. Roberts: [*Interruption*] [*Inaudible*]—*mascara*.

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: I am so sorry. Madam Vice-President, please, 55(1).

Madam Vice-President: I just spoke to him.

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: I am sorry.

Madam Vice-President: Yes.

Sen. Roberts: Sit—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. Al-Rawi SC: No, no. Madam Vice-President, I am asking, please, for some measure in this. I did not see that you had spoken, and I will not be directed or shouted at by the Member with your leave, please.

Madam Vice-President: Okay. Members, just let him finish. Carry on.

Sen. A. Vieira SC: Thank you, Madam Vice-President.

I was just saying there is a risk when there is a perception that government is operating with a partisan mentality. That risk undermines the

very foundations of our democratic society. A government is elected by some of the people, but it is entrusted with responsibility for all of the people, and that is the standard I believe that this budget should be judged against.

A national budget should be an instrument of national cohesion, not a source of national division. This is a national position. One which every government, regardless of its political complexion, should be prepared to embrace. I would ask—in fact, I insist—that our elected representatives serve with a fidelity that the Constitution requires of them.

I thank you.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: Attorney General.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

The Attorney General (Sen. The Hon. John Jeremie SC): Madam Vice-President, I do not intend at quarter past nine tonight to get into a slinging or a shouting match with any Member of this Senate.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: But I have to state the Government's position and put it on record.

Now, our Constitution recognizes a distinction between the functions of the House of Representatives and the functions of the Senate. In the House of Representatives, a money Bill such as the one which is engaging the attention of the Senate tonight is required to be passed—and then to be passed. The Bill has gone into committee stage in the House—that is, the House of Representatives, the elected representatives in respect of which my

learned friend made certain demands a second ago.

Money Bills—this is a money Bill—do not even go to a committee stage in this House. There are Members of this Senate who hold ministerial office, including me. We sat in committee stage in the other place for five days. We participated in a budget debate, which, if you take it into account, the mover—that is, the Minister of Finance and the respondent would have lasted two days.

9.15 p.m.

I left the precincts of the Parliament on Saturday evening after the Bill was passed in committee stage in the other place. For the Senator to sit on his derrière over there, today, for the first time, and to accuse those of us on this side of sloth, I reject that.

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: For there to be any question about my work ethic or the work ethic of my colleagues, I find that is indefensible and crosses the lines.

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: My colleagues will know that I am the slowest on this side to anger, but I am angry. Now, in respect of the distribution that my friend speaks about in terms of geography, I am told, and I believe, that the allocations which have been made this year, in this budget, represent a more equitable distribution of the nation's resources than has ever taken place before.

Sen. Roberts: He never bothered to check before.

Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC: And that matter was interrogated line by

line in the other place. That is all that I have to say.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Vice-President: The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Thank you very much, Madam. Vice-President, and let me add very quickly to what the Attorney General just alluded to. In fact, as the Minister with responsibility for the PSIP, I can tell you that in 2025, Diego Martin Borough got $17,450,000 and, Madam. Vice-President, would you make a guess as to how much they spent?

Sen. Roberts: Zero.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Zero.

Sen. Baig: Zero.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: They know that. They do not have anything to say because it is PNM.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: In 2026, they got $11.1 million. Madam Vice-President, I would trouble you to guess how much they spent?

Hon. Senators: How much?

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Seven hundred thousand.

Sen. Roberts: Shame.

Sen. Baig: Shame. But you want to talk about disparity.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: This year, the decision to give them

$2.2 million, I shudder to think how much they might spend. But, Madam Vice-President, when you want to cast aspersions, please, get your facts.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: That is the point.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: To answer Sen. Chote's—so two things I will tell you Senator, I think it is a very fair question. One of the things that came out in the PSIP conversation is that the Hall of Justice requires significant renovations. In fact, it may run us over $150 million. Now, if you recall, and I think it is important to note that we came into government in May of last year. In May of last year, it would have been passed halfway through the budget that we would have inherited. So, we are now coming to the end of our first budgeting cycle.

You would also recall that during that time the Prime Minister, in allocating portfolios, would have shifted some of the responsibilities that would have been in the Judiciary to the Ministry of Justice. So, there was a period of where you had projects still under the Judiciary that now has become projects under the Ministry of Justice. But the Judiciary is still responsible for the recurrent expenditure, but the projects, and I know the Minister of Justice would have met with ourselves in the PSIP Programme, talked about Cluny in South and some of the other courts that the Minister of Justice is working very hard to try to have those concluded in fiscal '27.

So, we are working assiduously on the ones in Arima, one in San Fernando and there are a few others. Then there is also the revitalization plan that Minister John would have spoken to that would have spoken about a judicial complex. But the focus in the fiscal with the Ministry of Justice

are those projects that are being far advanced and ought to have been completed, but will be completed in fiscal '27.

Now, to go back to something Sen. Vieira said, and I too want to just—I try—and I spent a lot of time preparing for this debate—to come with a focus and a structure that will put some of the measures the Minister of Finance would have announced into some economic context. I would have spoken, for example, Sen. Attzs, I would have spoken to the economic framework. And in fact, Sen. Lewis talked about the five pillars and how we prioritize those five pillars. We do not prioritize these five pillars. We act on all five.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I am not sure which one you want me to put first. Which one do we leave out? People development, investments? Which one do we leave out? Which one do we focus on? It is the Government's responsibility to make sure that all of government is focused and building Trinidad and Tobago to be a better place for everyone.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The second thing you talked about Sen. Lewis, is that you talked about the PAC. That is chaired by the Opposition. It is not chaired by the Government. So, when you asked, but why are those committees—ask the Opposition, do not ask us. We do not chair it. There is something else you mentioned that I also want to remind you of, because I think it is really, really important when we say these things that we understand where the responsibilities lie. You talked about—I remember what it is now. You talked about why, when you are working in

the private sector and some of your clients, you pass a budget.

The budget is required to be passed 30 days after the end of the financial period, when the fiscal year comes to an end. So, the budget is required to be passed by the end of October, which is why most budgets are read in the beginning of October.

Sen. Baig: He did not know that?

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Now, while I was not in Trinidad, the structure was changed so I came into a structure where you have the budget being read on a Monday, the Opposition responding on the Friday, you go into the debate, and as the Attorney General said, Members of the Lower House were engaged with that debate Friday, Saturday, Monday, and then have to go into five compulsory days of Standing Finance Committee. So, in effect, the budget takes two weeks in the Lower House. The reason why we are debating it now, this is the earliest time we in this Chamber could debate the Bill.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So, I am really, really, sometimes a little bit aghast when—and those are things that people here would know.

Madam Vice-President, I think I went to Sen. Attzs to discuss one or two things, and I would have shared with her some thoughts on the debt and what we would have inherited. The Minister of Finance said, and that is one of the reasons why, again, to go back to Sen. Vieira's thing, I do not know, I spent a lot of time preparing, and I do not know if anybody referred to anything I said. Nobody referred to anything I said. Nobody in the Opposition referred to anything I said. You all do not listen; it is not a

debate. People come with a prepared text and read their text or a prepared group of things and discuss that.

So, sometimes I wonder, and this is not the first time, I mean take one of the most irrelevant contributions, that of Sen. Dr. Browne. He mentioned my name, but did not talk about anything I would have said or contributed. But just mentioned my name because I do not know, maybe he wants—I live rent-free in his head, I do not know. But the point is that there is nothing that they talk about—in fact, I came with a very prepared economic framework, to cast the budget into an economic framework, to discuss some of the things.

[MR. PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Because the Minister of Finance obviously, in reading the budget, would not have the time to do everything. And because we are one Government, with one approach, with one plan, it is left to me to put some additional context to that plan.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And I challenge anybody opposite, challenge anybody opposite, to tell me that I am wrong. Did anybody raise any matter that I would have started off with the debate? But no, those on the opposite side degenerate the debate to fit a narrative.

Hon. Senator: Correct.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And let me just also start with Sen. Dhanpaul. Now Sen. Dhanpaul and I are friends. Very good public officer and would have served the country. But it is wrong, because the first quarter of every year, and let me read some figures. First quarter of 2015, 11.8 per

cent; first quarter of 2016, negative 10.5 per cent; first quarter of 2017, negative 4.6 per cent; first quarter of 2018, negative 7 per cent. Always, because after the Christmas season the economy takes a dip.

Sen. Baig: "Ooo", tell them, tell them.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: What nonsense!

Sen. Roberts: You do not know.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: In fact, it is the same argument for jobs. After the Christmas season, with a lot of season—and I have said it before, but again, they keep repeating the same narrative. After the seasonal jobs in the Christmas season, the first quarter of every year sees a decline in employment.

Hon. Senators: Correct.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Every year, because seasonal uplift to the economy, seasonal employment will go back down when it is out of season.

Sen. Baig: Correct.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But they consistently want to push a narrative that is incorrect, false, misleading and hypocritical.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And Sen. Dhanpaul should know better than that.

Sen. Roberts: Exactly, exactly.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But go ahead.

Sen. Baig: He is an old PNM—

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Go ahead. When it comes to the economy, I want to read an article in the *Trinidad Guardian*, on September 28th, 2024.

> "With low levels of gas production and a less than favourable market, Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley says there will be difficult times for T&T until new gas production in 2027.
>
> Discussing the future of T&T's gas industry at Atlantic's 25th anniversary and restructuring celebrations at Clifton Hill, Point Fortin, yesterday…Rowley said the seismic work is progressing on the proven fields, such as with Cocuina and Manakin, giving confidence that there is a strong flow of gas coming from the border and across the border in the medium term. Therefore, he said T&T has to be responsible and hold the fort."

Sen. Roberts: Now they want to burn down the fort.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:

> '"The period between now"—article continues—"and the 2027 second quarter would be one of difficulty for the people of Trinidad and Tobago because the current levels to which we are producing, and the market situation, would cause us or should cause us to be responsible and hold the fort with a very good view and good confidence that come 2027, we would be in a better position with this industry.'"

Dr. Keith Rowley, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, during 2015 and 2025. Your Prime Minister who said that.

Since we came into Government, the Minister of Finance, the Prime Minister have been at pains to say that Trinidad and Tobago will still, even

though we are doing well with what we have, will still have to manage the economy properly in order for us to maintain services to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and to make sure that everybody benefits in the economy together. And that is what we did over the first fiscal period and will continue to do so for the next five years.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Alexander: They come to make mischief.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: We have said it, we have been transparent, we are being upfront. The Minister of Finance in his budget statement—and I want to refer to some of the things he said, Mr. President, and he said it, and all of us got these books, all of us got it.

Sen. Roberts: Them "doh" read.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: "When this UNC administration entered office 18 months ago, we inherited the legacy of the PNM: a significant debt burden, including $12.04 billion due almost immediately…"

9.30 p.m.

Sen. Roberts: "Let Vieira pay that."

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Went on to say, Mr. President, and I really tried very hard to be intellectual in this debate. I tried to provide a contribution that is void of—that put context, and all those in the front take it down a political road. "Well, if is politics you want, is politics you go get."

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The Minister of Finance stated, he said:

"We are strengthening the UNIMED Group Health Plan."

Do you know, Mr. President, that public officers contribute to a group health plan that for the last two to three years they could not get any payment out of? You know why? They allowed the group health plan for public officers just to go—Mr. President, I have to try and cool myself.

Sen. Roberts: Yeah. Stay calm.

Hon. Senators: Calm down. Calm down.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, these wicked people, wicked people in the last administration, public officers are still contributing to the plan, and we are now left to put money into the plan so that people could get their medical contributions. In the budget here, but nobody talked about that. Talking about all things we are fixing. Talk about bureaucracy.

The Minister of Finance went on to say that over the last fiscal we did not borrow money, not like them. Sen. Roberts read out what they inherited in 2015 and where we are by 2025, almost doubling the debt. And Sen. Lewis, "it eh UNC debt" because typically when you borrow, it is seven to five years, five to seven years, so it is debt we inherited over the last 10 years. And the last fiscal, the Minister of Finance had to refinance debt, borrowing of $21 billion is largely to refinance what we inherited.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: With a Eurobond of $1 billion due in August of this year. So, the fact that we can do that, still meet our 10 per cent commitment to the public officers, put money into the UNIMED Insurance Plan, look after all the services of Trinidad and Tobago, and still maintain a standard of living that sees this country progressing from a stable

outlook to a future that we can all participate in. Rather than you come and say to the Government, you know what, I may not agree with everything you do, you know, but well done, good management of the economy, because all of us could go to the grocery and still buy, still shop, and still live, with crime down.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But for whatever reason, you do not want to give Kamla Persad-Bissessar any credit.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But like the Attorney General, I too will stand up today. I too get a little bit incensed. You know, I listen to Sen. Cummings talk about all the youth programmes and so on. You could graduate all kinds of young people, but if they are not employable, those are just statistics that you are creating to fool and mamaguy.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs came to Cabinet, and Cabinet approved a programme where those youth programmes are now being matched to opportunities with the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturing Association, where they could move from training to graduation to employment.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: We might take some time, but we will fix it.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, Sen. Cummings, well,

obviously, I think, you know, these guys, like I suppose others in other places, they will say their thing and run. Run. "Because all the talk yuh talk about all those youth programmes", I used to be in the defence force. I used to be part of CCC. But when we came in, they had all the staff at CCC and no trainees. No trainees. Talk about you care about youth, then why did you not open the Couva hospital? You care about children, why did you not open the Debe Campus? You care about young people, why did you not open "all them" schools the Partnership government left? But you leave everything, but you care about youth.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: Vieira had nothing to say about that. It is good in Vieira's eyes. Vieira likes that.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, all they should have come to say today is, "Davendranath Tancoo, well done".

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But, Mr. President, and it would be remiss of me if—there were two things that Sen. Lalite-Ettienne said that I need to correct. One is, I think what Sen. Allahar was trying to intervene to say was that in her contribution she was making it sound as if the budget was produced by AI, and I want to be very clear, so I got a copy of the *Hansard*, I just want to be very accurate:

> "So, if you utilize artificial intelligence"—the Senator said—"yes, it is great, but it comes back now to accessibility and with the algorithms, if you input algorithms that are biased and—'what yuh put in is what yuh gonna get out', Mr. President. And actually, what was put in, all

right, that is what I received, the output. So, you had the input, they used AI, but it clearly showed that when they use artificial intelligence, they are producing a document to read all the programmes that the vulnerable people, and the citizens of Trinidad will benefit from. However, the beneficiary cannot read the document, and it is...

Thank you very kindly, Mr. President…"

Sen. Allahar tried to intervene.

And then she said:

"…that I have gotten, all right, excepting the Minister of Finance's statement…"

—is—

"…generated by AI."

You see, it trended online as if she was intimating that the budget was generated by AI, and I think what she was trying to say, and I think this is what Sen. Allahar was trying to get to, was that her documents that the Parliament would produce, it would have been easier if it could have been used by AI. I just want to clear up that misconception because I do not want people to think that any of the documents—because it also betrays the hard work, and Sen. Al-Rawi spoke about that, I think, no, sorry, Sen. Dhanpaul, that the hard work the public officers did in producing these documents, all of it was done through the hard work of the persons in the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development. I do not want in any way to diminish their work. None of these were produced by AI, and I just want to make that very clear.

The second thing that she alluded to was the NIS. Let me state emphatically for the second, third or fourth time. When Minister Tancoo became Minister of Finance, and Sen. Dhanpaul knows this very well, an actuarial report on the NIB sat in the Ministry of Finance since 2019, if I am correct, Sen. Dhanpaul, I know, since 2019. An actuarial report that said that if we did not do anything to the NIB, that the fund will go defunct by 2031, 2032, if my memory serves me correctly. Yeah, that is around that time. And that is why—

Sen. Dr. Rose: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I do not want to hear you right now, you know. I am talking about what Sen. Ettienne referred to.

Sen. Dr. Rose: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I do not want to—

Sen. Dr. Rose: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Do not distract me. Do not distract me. The fund, the last fiscal, the Minister of Finance intervened, raised the contribution because the fund required two things and again, Sen. Dhanpaul can correct me. My memory might be a little bit hazy. You required increased contributions, but you also required raising the retirement age. The Minister of Finance, in the last fiscal, raised the retirement age to 65 over a period of seven years starting from 2028. So, even though we passed it now, the 2028 will go to 61 and so on until 2035.

Now, what that did is give the fund life until 2049, but there may be further interventions required in order to give the fund, and that fund serves thousands of persons. That was one of the brave things that the Prime

Minister and the Minister of Finance did last fiscal. This fiscal, we have topped up the social grants, old age pension and disability grants and so on. Last fiscal, we also reduced super by a dollar and Sen. Attzs, when I gave my response, that was what was projected and what you would have is the actual.

I want to turn now to Tobago. Now, my colleagues, my colleagues would have spoken to the Tobago airport. Now, anybody in the tourism sector would know that you do not build an airport if you do not have room stock. You cannot bring people to an island if you do not have anywhere to put them.

One of the reasons why airports, in many parts, you look at, go to Sangster in Jamaica where those resorts have thousands and thousands of hotel rooms. In Barbados, Sandals invested $100 million into a resort for 400 rooms. In fact, they did two resorts. If you go to Grantley Adams, you see the airport is full and thriving because all of those rooms, all of those flights come with persons who already have space on the island. When the last administration built that airport, first and foremost, they built an airport for a throughput of three million passengers. Three million passengers. When Piarco today is doing 1.5, am I correct, Minister? 1.5. Nobody will deny that Tobago is in need of upgrade, the airport that is. But you do not need a Rolls-Royce for a Toyota problem. But who has to pay for that? The taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago. It is in the life of this Administration that we were finally able to give the CEC to the hotel developers for Tobago. We did that.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And when Sen. Roberts-Radgman talked about what is Tobago's allocation, we are funding developments for the airport. We are funding from central government, a desal plant. We are funding subvention for the air bridge. You just got a flight from Toronto that we are paying for.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: It is not ideal, but it is much more than Tobago ever got. And so, Sen. Radgman, when you say zero in 2030, it is zero more seats for the PNM. And you could ask "Blue Soap", he and all.

9.45 p.m.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But make no mistake, Sen. Radgman-Roberts—

Sen. Baig: You wish you could afford this.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:—we will continue, under the leadership of this Prime Minister and all the colleagues on this side and all those in the other place, to make sure that both Trinidad and Tobago succeed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: You know you all made a lot of heavy weather over my colleague, the Minister of Finance, admitting to the error. I have never heard any of you all admit to anything, always deflecting, always—I mean, I saw a clip of the former Minister of Finance at a post-budget consultation—

Sen. Roberts: Former, former.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Former, former—and somebody got up and said, after he finished, they said they could not ever remember a time when they were treated with such condescension and ridicule and disrespect. This Minister of Finance—sometimes, you know, people mistake kindness for weakness, mistake integrity for foolishness. But my colleague, this Minister of Finance, was man enough to say, "Hey, you know what? That is a mistake." Because this Government has nothing to hide.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: This Government is transparent, is honest and is making sure that we fix even our own mistakes.

Mr. President, I think everybody is tired. So, I tend to bracket the contributions from Sen. Rose—"I cyah—I bracket dat". I need to leave that alone, Mr. President, because I will run my blood to water. But I have to say one thing that she would have spoken about. I am very proud of all the colleagues who would have gone to the other place to defend their Heads and their budget. And one of—I think the hon. Attorney General spoke to it before, and I will say it again. Our colleague, the Minister of Land and Legal Affairs, is an exceptionally bright, an exceptionally competent and an exceptionally capable person.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And I refuse, Mr. President, to have his integrity questioned by anybody on that side, especially Sen. Rose or Sen. Cummings. Because as far as I am concerned, Sen. Rose, you can say what you want. but your business partner, and you and your procurement

company—

Sen. Dr. Rose: Come outside and say it.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: No, I am saying it here. You said it here, I am saying it here too.

Sen. Nakhid: I will say it outside.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Well, I do not have time to deal with you right now. But you and your colleague—

Sen. Jeremie SC: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Of course. But there is a reason why you are always talking about procurement, because you have a procurement company. And your business partner when—because I asked. I called the Minister and said, what does Sen. Rose—and I went back and I looked at the debate. What could he have said that would have raised such an ire? And it is because he would have questioned the integrity of your business colleague.

Sen. Roberts: "But she question it too. She said he might have questions to answer. But she come out".

Sen. Dr. Rose: I never said that.

Sen. Roberts: "Yeah, she drive de bus over him like Dhanpaul drive over Colm and Amery. Remember dat?"

Sen. Dr. Rose: 49, again please, Mr. President.

Sen, Nakhid: "Nobody eh studying you".

Sen. Roberts: "Nobody eh studying you. St. Ann's close yuh know".

Sen. Dr. Rose: "But if yuh not studying me why yuh"—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Because I have to defend my colleague. You cannot come here and attack my colleague. You cannot do that. I will not let you do that.

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

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But one of the things I would suggest to Sen. Radgman-Roberts as well is that part of what we are trying to build in Tobago is a bigger private sector investment involvement, especially for projects, such as the marina and other things.

Hon. Senators: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. K. Swarathsigh: So, those are not things that will be funded centrally. So that is why the hotel start-up—and there are going to be other things that will come as well, even as part of the revitalization; looking at Magdalena and seeing how we can revitalize that aspect of Tobago's tourism as well. Because the more you develop Tobago's tourism is the more you develop flights and services through the airport in order to gain greater visibility. So, when you look at funding for Tobago, it is not just central, not just for allocation for the House of Assembly, but also the work that we will do with the private sector as well.

Mr. President, I have really tried to be very constructive, and I have tried to answer some of the concerns and questions that my colleagues would have raised. But one of the things that I have to also deal with, Mr. President, and I think the last thing I would say, my colleagues opposite also cast a vile aspersion that talks about us not being able to be a voice of reason in our Cabinet or out of Cabinet. I can tell you—and I think Sen. Cummings

talked about it—that I have never once been disrespected by my Prime Minister. My Prime Minister has never once issued any colourful language towards me.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Roberts: "Yuh eh know Rowley does cuss all ah dem? Yuh didn't know dat? Ask Foster how much cuss he get".

Hon. Senators: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And I know who my leader is, what she stands for, the principles that she has asked us to live as Members of her Cabinet and senatorial Bench. And I am very clear that my leader is a person of integrity, of kindness—

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:—of love for this country. I have nothing to fear. I have nothing to hide and I will stand by her side until this journey is completed.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: I want to thank my colleague, the Minister of Finance. It is not often, Mr. President, that a person of his ilk comes along who is selfless in nature, who continues to give of his best, notwithstanding the limitations that he has inherited. And in spite of all the things that they threw in our face, in spite of all the aspersions that they would cast, and the false narrative they would promulgate, that Minister of Finance have moved our economy from depression—

Sen. Cummings: To recession.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:—to progression. And keep your foul

mouth out of his business.

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

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And notwithstanding anything they say, the only way this country would have gone into recession is if they would have gotten back into government—

Sen. Nakhid: Correct.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:—where another half a billion dollars would have gone missing. That is what would have carried the country into recession. But because the people of Trinidad and Tobago put this Prime Minister and this Government in place, we now have progression. So, Mr. President, promises made, promises delivered, more to come. I beg to move.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Rose: Mr. President, please allow me to rise on 42(9)?

Mr. President: No, no.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Mr. President: The hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Senators: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Mr. President, in accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2027, 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.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. President: Leader of Government Business.

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Sen. The Hon. Darrell Allahar): Mr. President. I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 9.58 p.m.