

SENATE

Thursday, October 26, 2017

The Senate met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Madam President: Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. Allyson Baksh and Sen. Wade Mark, both of whom are out of the country, and to Sen. Saddam Hosein who is ill.

SENATORS' APPOINTMENT

Madam President: Hon. Senators, I have received the following correspondence from His Excellency the President, Anthony Thomas Aquinas Carmona O.R.T.T., S.C.:

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By His Excellency ANTHONY THOMAS
AQUINAS CARMONA, O.R.T.T., S.C.,
President of the Republic of Trinidad and
Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of the
Armed Forces.

/s/ Anthony Thomas Aquinas Carmona O.R.T.T. S.C.
President.

TO: RONALD HUGGINS

WHEREAS Senator Allyson Baksh is incapable of performing her duties as a Senator by reason of her absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

UNREVISED

NOW, THEREFORE, I, ANTHONY THOMAS AQUINAS CARMONA, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, RONALD HUGGINS, to be temporarily a member of the Senate, with effect from 26th October, 2017 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said Senator Allyson Baksh.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 25th day of October, 2017.”

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By His Excellency ANTHONY THOMAS AQUINAS CARMONA, O.R.T.T., S.C., President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

/s/ Anthony Thomas Aquinas Carmona O.R.T.T. S.C.
President.

TO: MR. JABEZ JOSHUA SELFORD JOHNSON

WHEREAS Senator Wade Mark is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, ANTHONY THOMAS AQUINAS CARMONA, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me

by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, JABEZ JOSHUA SELFORD JOHNSON, to be temporarily a member of the Senate, with effect from 26th October, 2017 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said Senator Wade Mark.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 25th day of October, 2017."

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By His Excellency ANTHONY THOMAS AQUINAS CARMONA, O.R.T.T., S.C.,
President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

/s/ Anthony Thomas Aquinas Carmona O.R.T.T. S.C.
President.

TO: MR. JAWALA RAMBARRAN

WHEREAS Senator Saddam Hosein is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, ANTHONY THOMAS AQUINAS CARMONA, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section 44(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, JWALA

RAMBARRAN, to be temporarily a member of the Senate, with effect from 26th October, 2017 and continuing during the absence of the said Senator Saddam Hosein by reason of his illness.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Office of the President, St. Ann's, this 26th day of October, 2017."

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senators Ronald Huggins, Jabez Joshua Selford Johnson and Jwala Rambarran took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2018) BILL, 2017

[Third Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 23, 2017]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Madam President: The list of those who have spoken in this debate is as follows: On Tuesday the 23rd of October, 2017, Sen. The Hon. Allyson West, Minister in the Ministry of Finance and mover of the Motion; Sen. Wade Mark; Sen. Taurel Shrikissoon; Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat, Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries; Sen. Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir; Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries; Sen. Anita Haynes; Sen. Stephen Creese; Sen. Nigel De Freitas; Sen. Paul Richards; Sen. Daniel Dookie; Sen. Dr. Lester Henry.

On Wednesday, October 24, 2017, Sen. Saddam Hosein; Sen. David Small; Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister of Trade and Industry; Sen. The Hon.

Dennis Moses, Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs and Minister in the Ministry of National Security; Sen. Melissa Ramkisson; Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan, Minister of Works and Transport; Sen. Gerard Ramdeen; Sen. Sophia Chote, SC; Sen. The Hon. Faris Al-Rawi, MP Attorney General; Sen. Allyson Baksh; Sen. Obika; Sen. Foster Cummings; Sen. Avinash Singh, Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. All Members wishing to join the debate may now do so at this time. Sen. Roach.

Sen. H.R. Ian Roach: [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Madam President. I may just wish to add a few words to a quite robust debate that has taken place over the last three days concerning this budget.

First of all, I would just like to extend again warm congratulations to the Opposition Senators and the Government Senators who are newly appointed. In particular, I would like to say a few words concerning Sen. Allyson West, the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, a colleague, an attorney-at-law, someone who I have known for some time and has distinguished herself firstly in the public service before turning her efforts into the private sector and now has returned to do public duty. I know that her work has been of the highest standard wherever she has gone, and I think having her in the Ministry of Finance is a great asset to us and our country. I know she is a tax expert and certainly will be seeking the interest of Trinidad and Tobago. So welcome, Minister West. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, so much has been said before the commencement of this debate in these Chambers, as we are outside of the Chambers, and almost every aspect of it has been reviewed, turned over, stripped apart and put back together. So, I do not think that there is much in regard of the nitty-gritties of the financial numbers, and so forth, that I will comment on, but basically I would like to share a few words or my concerns on the policy of the Government.

I would like to extend congratulations to the Government again for putting together the team of Government officials who would have participated, a lot of them faces we may never see, in making this budget and other fruitful or a successful one to bring it for our scrutiny. It is a budget that is supposed to guide the policy of Trinidad and Tobago for the rest of 2017/2018. To the ordinary man and woman in the street, the technical things that are discussed in the budget sometimes leap over their heads, and so I will try to keep my contribution to what I want to speak as very simple. [*Electronic device goes off in Chamber*]

Madam President: Hon. Members, we have been through this time and time again. Will the Senator with the offending device please leave the Chamber and you can return in 10 minutes. Continue, Sen. Roach.

Sen. HRI Roach: Thank you, Ma'am. Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I sat and I listened to the debate and the focus of the Government. The Government, of course, is tasked with a very difficult one, which is to present a budget that would cater for all of Trinidad and Tobago. It is a challenging time we are in, as we all are becoming more and more aware of it, as the information becomes more available, that the resources that were available to us before, over the last decade or so, and certainly over the last seven years, are no longer available to us and, therefore, we have to be much more prudent in our financial affairs in the country.

Certainly, the Government is tasked. They undertook the responsibility of guiding us through these difficult times. It is a Government, as I said in many of my contributions, if the Government succeeds all of us succeed and I am willing to see, I would like them to succeed. We all have a part, our role, to play. In times of good and plentiful and abundance we all participated in it, some more than others,

and in the times of difficulties we also have to share in the burden. I know it is not an easy task to try to please everybody. You can never please everybody. You cannot please everybody all the time and you could only please everybody sometimes, if at all.

But having said that, I think some of the focus, I have a little bee in my bonnet when it comes to, first of all, my situation. I am the only differently-abled person in this Parliament consisting of 30 Members or as the case may be. So I feel as though I am the lone soldier battling on behalf of the others who are absent from here. And that, for the time I have been here, I have been lamenting on the progress that I think would have been made here first as an example of creating an atmosphere that I may feel more welcomed and equally treated. That is still absent, notwithstanding that some effort has been made in trying to make my tenure here one that is reasonably accommodating. But still, I am dissatisfied over what has been done.

If I go outside the Chambers, as I said, and go in the wider community, it is still woefully inadequate for differently-abled persons to get around in our society and they also can have a very valuable contribution to make. You may be differently-abled from your neck down, but there are some of us who walk around here who are differently-abled from the shoulders up, you know. And I think that, as a caring society and as a society that is progressing and modernizing we need to take this more seriously in making the necessary policies and also implementing the necessary legislation and setting an example that our society could quickly come up to speed with what is required in the 21st Century in dealing with a society that is all-inclusive, for even the differently-abled and the poor, and so forth.

Trinidad and Tobago is a society—I am not sure, because of the lack of

reliable data from our—we do not have a CSO. I do not know what has become of the CSO. The last time in the budget, there was a CSO. There was a team that was put together, assembled by the Minister of Finance in modernizing and equipping a new CSO. I do not know what has become of that, because I know in making determinations for your policy, reliable information is very, very, very necessary. I do not know what has become of that. I would like to hear something on that.

Because, in order to move forward we need to know what exactly we are doing. We cannot act on “vaps”. We cannot act on emotions and we cannot act on ignorance. We need to act on credible information that is reliable. There is always a difficulty between what is produced by the Ministry of Finance, in terms of financial information and the status of the economy, as well as coming from the Central Bank. So, that is something I think that I hope would be addressed by the Minister in her winding up, with what is the situation with our CSO.

Because, listening to the contributions of one of my friends to left, Sen. Small, which was quite enlightening to me, is that I think it was necessary as we chart and we try to inform the public, the Government try to inform the public that resources are challenged because of the decline in revenues. He was able to inform us that figures of oil prices in the 90s and the 100s, and so forth, were an exception to the rule. That was not the norm. I do not want to say I was not—I lived outside of Trinidad to understand that. But that was credible information.

I do not know how many people outside really appreciate that fact, that significant fact, to understand that given the spread of oil prices over a decade or two, it was usually in and around the 40s and the 50s, beyond the 30s. So, to have something else, revenue, in the 50s is quite a healthy one. It is not an unhealthy one to say that we have declined, as he said. If I am misquoting him, you know, I

would appreciate his correction, that the price of oil circling around 50-something is not really a perilous state of affairs. Am I right? Yes.

And, therefore, I think we as a country have to readjust our thinking, our expectations that the new norm may be around that and as we talk fancifully about innovations and engaging in new diversification of the economy, which has been going on from time immemorial, little has come to fruition where that is concerned. And I have looked, over the last week, intently. I have been looking at the People's Republic of China in their 19th conference. I have been looking at them intently. China is coming and taking its rightful place as probably the new geopolitical leader as America is seeming to recede and take the opposite direction in every aspect.

I also found myself reading the budget, the 2017 budget of Canada, and also recently, again, had my eyes trained on the Saudi Arabian situation. And what I took from them that was interesting for us is that they are all dealing with innovation. They are all dealing with technology. What do you call it, smart technology? They all are ramping up their societies, geared towards science and technology in moving forward.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, they have put aside I think something like US \$500 billion to start a new hub in Saudi Arabia to take away their emphasis from relying on oil, to something else now. And they are the largest exporter of oil in the world, which is very interesting.

In the case of Canada, our closer neighbours, Canada, in their budget presentation by the Minister in March earlier this year, he spoke about making special effort in attracting internationally young minds who are disposed to science, technology and mathematics. It is the way they see—in moving to have

Canada placed as a cutting-edge modernized society. And I think this was what we in Trinidad and Tobago, in dealing with our challenges that we are faced with now, economically, we need to make that type of adjustments as well. We need to have a lot more focus on science and technology in moving us forward.

We were pioneering when we introduced liquefied gas. I think we were the first nation to do that and everybody has now caught on, so we were the first to benefit from such an endeavour, such a scientific advancement. Right? And I think we need to continue in that vein in trying to recalibrate our society and our economic revenue sources, and taking us out of this little dark period that we are experiencing, in terms of downturn in available resources.

I looked at some of the budgeted items that the Minister had shared with us concerning in particular the Ministry of National Security. As I said, I am not going to talk on everything, just talk on things that I believe are very close to my heart.

Over the last decade or so, I saw something like \$3.8 billion or eight point something billion dollars being spent in the Ministry of National Security and I do not think, and this would have probably spread over two different administrations and yet still we have not been able to grapple successfully or reasonably successfully with the crime situation in Trinidad and Tobago. It is a fundamental concern for us. In order for business to thrive or any other endeavour of reasonable living and attracting business in your country, you have to believe that the environment in which you are going to operate is one that is safe and secure.

And I think a lot of the money has been geared towards the end product, which is we are trying so much on the aspect of trying to fix, rather than to prevent. I have been an advocate for one, in spending much more money in the social

services in strengthening families, the family sector, the schools, having social workers, more social workers than probably we should have policemen at this point in time because certainly policemen are not doing a good job in keeping the bandits from, you know, what we have in our society right now.

I am urging the Minister of Finance, through you, Madam President, that if at all he is going to tweak anything out of that budget, if any difference is going to come is that instead of again pledging and allocating is it \$6.8 billion to the Ministry of National Security, that, about that? If half a billion extra could be given to the Ministry of Sport.

There is, on page 72 I think of it, they speak about sporting activities. Just give me a second, please. Yes, on page 72, Madam, of the budget statement, the Minister speaks about plans to focus on three major revenue-generating areas: sport services, sport events and sporting infrastructure.

Now, I happen to visit the Hasely Crawford Stadium, as well as the larger complex. What is the name of the complex again?

Hon. Senator: Jean Pierre Complex.

Sen. HRI Roach: Thanks, the Jean Pierre Complex, and it is woefully in a dilapidated state. It is woefully unkempt. I mean, and if you go down there on an afternoon, there is a large number of young people that go down to that facility to practise sports from various schools and the wider community around there. To me, it is a disaster. It is shameful to see that. So, I do not know how you are going to boast about infrastructure. It is not just putting up the new infrastructure and then forgetting those infrastructures that are already in use that could be refurbished, re-equipped and put back in proper functions.

I have been asking, since about four years ago, I have been to the

inauguration of the President and I was not able to be accommodated in the stadium. I was unable to go there because there was no means. There was no elevator or anything for me to get in there. That is four years, five years or almost going into five years now and the elevator has not been repaired, still has not been repaired. I do not know how much money it is going to cost to replace or put in a new elevator there.

You talk about elite athletes. There is a gym for elite athletes. When you go into that gym you cannot use the elite athletes' gym right now. Do you know why? Because it is full of mould. I was told recently this week that it will take about \$100,000 to clean it and refurbish it. You are exposing your children. You are exposing the children of the nation. You are exposing their coaches to go in there and work there and to end up being ill? What is the end product to that? If you are in the United States, you turn around and you sue the government. This is unfair. This is not right. Some money must be allocated in order to fix these things. These things are low-hanging fruits. They do not require any gigantic pledges. These are simple things that need to be done.

So is it apathy? Is it an indifference? I mean, I do not know what standard it is. I have tried to speak to the Minister of Sport on more than one occasion and I "doh ever get him". I see him very often taking pictures. As you come back with a gold medal, he presents himself. I will like him to present himself in the stadium, with somebody, with some cement or with a road paver, paving some of the roads [*Desk thumping*] and showing that something is being done to prepare the very same athletes that you want to pose with at the end of the day. And it is not a joke. It is not a joke. Right. It is not a joke. Right. It is not a joke. I feel very peeved about it because I do not want in any way to embarrass him, but since I cannot get

him I need to talk to him here. Right? And I am talking on behalf of all those persons, all those people who have their children going down there, including my daughter who goes down there and represent Trinidad and Tobago. You want to get the best but you are not giving them the best opportunity, the best facilities, to do what they are doing. That is not right. It is not right.

So that is something I would like the Minister and the Prime Minister to take on very seriously because I know he is a person that is interested in sports and have the welfare of his community and would like to see Trinidad ambassadors, male and female, represent us; as they have been doing for this year, with distinction.

When you go aboard, people do not ask you “who is de Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, oh know or who is de Minister of Sport yuh know. Dey does ask you who is Brian Lara? Who is Dwight York? Who is Ato Boldon? Dey never ask you yuh know.” I got stopped by a police one day. He wanted to know: “What is yuh accent? Yuh accent sounding—yuh have dis strange accent.”

I was driving, making a turn where I was not supposed to make a turn and this white cop stopped me. Stop, you are violating. I said: “What?” He said you are turning and you are not supposed to be in there. You are supposed to be on this side. I said: “Officer, I am really sorry.” He said: “That accent, where is that accent from?” I said: “From Trinidad and Tobago.” He said: “Dwight Yorke? Brian Lara?” And that got me away from getting a ticket. I got away from a ticket. He said I wished I had stopped you so that we would talk a little longer. But I mean, really and truly, I try not to make it too severe.

This is not—I am not trying to be disrespectful. I am not trying to disregard whatever the Government is doing but I am saying these are some things that sometimes if you are on the ground and you are face-to-face with it, these are some

things I would like to highlight that need to be addressed. And I hope that the next time the next budget, when it comes too I would be saying something, praises about it. I would be saying well look, we have one of the best Ministers of Sport because he has rectified these things that have been woefully unattended to for so long.

2.00 p.m.

Madam President, I know a lot has been said about the different taxes that have been raised by the Government. You need to get money somewhere, that is true, and it cannot be just tax, tax, tax, I know, but the taxes some of the taxes that have been imposed. I have heard some people saying they are justified with the circumstances. As a matter of fact, I thought the Minister of Finance was going to raise the online tax to about 20 per cent because people seem to deal with that quite easily and it is something that will not visit you if you do not buy. So it is not a coercive tax; if you want to buy you pay the tax. That is something I think I was expecting to come.

Now, having said that aspect of it, we all must pay our fair due in terms of taxes, but at the same time, also there must be accountability for the collection of taxes. There must be accountability how you disperse with people's taxes, handling taxes that they pay and that is a—there is a big—there is a gulf between collection and the responsible disbursement of our taxes. You have heard governments, successive governments speak about the pilferage, the misspending on all sides and yet still as my learned friend—as my friend here Sen. Small likes to say “nobody cut a jail yet”. Lots of money have gone, mismanaged. We are in a small country and I always question: Why it is a country with 1.3 million people, with disposable income and sometimes a budget of \$6 0 billion, what do we have a

show for it? What do we have to show for it?

I travel extensively and I am telling you compared to other Caribbean countries which is not a fair comparison, we are well advanced of them. But compared to other countries with less resources than we have, better managed than we are, we are way behind. We do not have—our roads are not First World, first class and we have pitch, we have all the things here necessary to make our roads some of the best roads you can get. I was away in South Africa for a month. I drove there extensively for a month and I did not come across one pothole, I drove from the stadium to my home in Maraval and I count 21 potholes. I started counting when I came out of the stadium, if I had counted in the stadium, I would get probably about 40.

Right. So it is to tell that something is wrong and that means that something is going wrong because you will see efforts being made by the Ministry of Works and Transport or whoever to pave the road. The road pave today, and by tomorrow morning or a week after, you see the same hole with the pave and it is sunk. So it means something is not going in there that is not—something is going there that is not supposed to be there. Either it is inferior material, either it is short material, or something is there, so there has to be a level of corruption in that. Because where is the accountability? If you, I have paid you to repave the roads and they are not properly paved, within a week it deteriorates into a state of disrepair again, something is wrong. Who is responsible for that?

We all are responsible in this society. We have to reflect first of all as individuals the change we want to see. We cannot just leave it up to the Government, or the police as the case would be, to police your children. We have a responsibility, we have to start being what we want our society to be, and simple

things, simple things will help us to achieve the type of paradise that Trinidad can be.

Madam President, I do not want to lose focus on the roads, as the case may be and so forth, but I am saying that the Government, I am hoping, will provide some sort of a light, guiding light, to the society because we do need at this point in time we need innovative thinkers to help us to meet the challenge that we meet successfully. We need the encouragement, we need a Government that we can trust, we need a Government that we know that even in difficult times that what they are going to do or what they are doing, is trying to get all of us out of a situation of challenging circumstances to more prosperous and a reasonable state of life.

I commend the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, who I have grown to have a lot of respect for, because I think his heart is in the right place. I think he has done quite a bit with what he has inherited, to take it to where it ought to be. Because agriculture is very critical in our society. For too long, agriculture has been a basket case in most Ministries. In most other developed countries, agriculture is a significant ministry and if we can start by being able to feed ourselves, that is one of the ways of tackling this foreign exchange, forex difficulty that we have. Because we are now a significant importer of all our needs in terms of food and other services, but I think if we can certainly get the agriculture sector motivated and on the right keel, I think we can solve a lot of our problems beginning with simple things like that.

I will be looking at a programme again, I was looking at the Chinese conference this week, and the President—the present President, he lived in a number of communities around China as an agriculturist, labourer, building—they

build their leaders, so he understands what is poverty, he understands what is necessary, what is required to take China where it is. And he has now been raised to the level of Mao Tse-Tung, in terms of respect because of what he is doing for his society and he is taking his society because if you watch, the geopolitics is changing, and I am sorry that the Minister of Foreign Affairs is not here, because I think in tackling our difficulties now, foreign affairs ought to play a critical role in our present circumstances.

Geopolitics is changing and no longer is America the leader—the moral leader or any leader at this point in time, be it in commerce and marketing. We have China; we have India running close behind; we have—*[Interruption]* Sorry, and we have Russia and a forgotten place, I know this because it is at the bottom, but my learned friend—my recently appointed Sen. Obika, who had the opportunity, who had the privilege to live in Africa, I think for three years or so he lived in Ghana, he can tell you about the abundance of opportunities that lie on that continent.

And if you look at what goes on on the African continent, you look at America, you look at Europe, you look at all the major, including China and India, they are all in Africa, in a big time. When I first went to Africa in 1994 in South Africa, you did not have a China Town. Five years after, you have a massive China Town, and they have an embassy and a consulate huger than the Red House that is still under construction. That is to tell you the importance that they place in Africa, the opportunities that lie there.

We have a lot of synergy. We have natural synergies that we can build on immediately. I can tell you that so when we focus our attentions all in towards, what I call the marginal markets, which is the North America, the traditional

markets, we can only, we spend a lot more to eke a little advantage. So if we had 8 per cent, just how we might get a half per cent, 9½ per cent or when you go down to a yawning opportunity like Africa, there is a lot to get. There is a lot, you can start off getting 60, 50, 70 per cent and they want to do that kind of thing. They want to see—they want to deal with the people from the diaspora, they want to see of their own kind, they want that type of synergy. So I think the Ministry of Foreign Affairs got to get very active and start dealing with that—I am sorry. I hope that his colleagues will let him know what I am saying.

Hon. Senator: We have a Minister that is responsible for that area.

Sen. H. Roach: Well, it is good to hear this. Right, so I am saying Madam President, through you to the Government that foreign affairs ought to become very much more aggressive in looking at alternatives markets, looking at the opportunities that lie there, the connections that are already and the foundations that have been laid over the many years, through good relationships with leaders, that we can put ourselves there and we will be able to build and maximize the opportunities.

In terms of our services, in terms of education, in terms of twinning, the universities, I mean, when you go to a university, you do not just only go for an education; you pick up a lot of cultural, social and a whole host of other things. There is a big spin off to come from that. I think, so there are a lot of areas in which we can work to bring about that. Trinidad—during my time in 1995, I was trying to promote that South African Airways and BWIA at that point in time, share, do a code share to have people being brought from Africa to Port of Spain and then go up because South African Airways used to come over Port of Spain to drop off in Miami. So if you could have Trinidad as a point of first stop, there are

lots of persons that are going to South Africa now. A lot of people are going into South Africa. They realize it is now the flavour of, the yaw flavour of the last five years since President Mandela, even though his demise unfortunately.

Right, so if Trinidad could start up that; we do a stopping in South Africa, from South Africa to Port of Spain once a week or twice a week, we again will attract tourists, serious tourists. Because we need to break that sort of, as I call it, the triangle, trade triangle, which you have to go to North America or Europe and come down here and come back there before just going across here. Going from Port of Spain to South Africa is eight hours; going to London is about nine hours or so; and then going from New York is about 14 hours and then you come back down. So you can cut all that out and come direct. And there are goods and services. I just—one of my friends just gave me an avocado, a zaboca. The zaboca big like this. I have never seen a zaboca like that in South Africa. If I go with that in South Africa, they will think it is a diamond. Their zabocas are this small and they use avocados throughout the year. They are small, they are rough and they are not as flavourful as what we will get in Trinidad and Tobago.

That is another opportunity. That is a massive opportunity there in terms of agriculture. So, Mr. Minister of Agriculture, there is an opportunity down there. Also recently, when I was down in South Africa, I realize that goats, the Arabs, they import a lot of goat from Zambia. I do not know if it is because it is kosher, but a lot of goats and they pay something for a goat, I think between one to \$300 for a goat. We could get into goats here. It is an opportunity. It is an opportunity so these are opportunities; these are the things that right there for us, you know.

But, Madam President, before—as my colleague who is not here today said in his contribution when he was winding up “he does not want to detain you and

further". I too would not like to detain you nor the rest of the Chamber any further with my ranting, okay. But I do, I do want to give the Government the encouragement that they listen to the contributions that have been made. I know all politics aside, there are certain contributions that have come from many persons, many Senators inside here that I thought had merit in it, excluding the political banter that ought to go in helping to make your management of the economy for the next year a little better. I know that as I said before, you cannot please everybody, but I know the effort is there. The effort must come out; people must feel that you are trying to please everybody even though it is not possible. And if you do err, you err on the side of doing what is best for Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, with that I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

2.15 p.m.

Sen. Jwala Rambarran: Thank you, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me to join in this debate on the 2018 budget. At the outset, let me state I am grateful to the political leader of the United National Congress, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, for giving me this rare privilege via this appointment to the Senate, to make a contribution in this honourable Chamber on the 2018 budget debate. I would like to congratulate Mrs. Persad-Bissessar on her budget response in the other place. She condemned the 2018 budget as an act of terror against all citizens, one that traumatized the country and betrayed the trust of the people.

I must also congratulate the Leader of Opposition Business in the Senate, Sen. Mark and my other UNC Senate colleagues for their well-researched and excellent contributions to this 2018 budget debate. They all pointed to the growing inability of the Rowley-led PNM Government to present new ideas to fix the problems facing our country. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, quite frankly, I too found the 2018 budget to be uninspiring, underachieving and it left me unimpressed. As an economist and a citizen, I am disturbed to see the direction in which our country is heading under this PNM Government, and where we could be within the next three years. As an economist who started working at the Central Bank more than 25 years ago, and went on to become its Governor some five years ago, [*Desk thumping*] my journey as an economist has actually paralleled our country's economic journey from one of our lowest points at the end of the 80s to now.

I have seen the growth of our precious foreign exchange reserves from zero, zero dollars in 1987, move to the highest level ever of US \$11.5 billion in 2014 under my watch as Central Bank Governor. [*Desk thumping*] It took 27 long years to build back up our stock of foreign exchange reserves to its highest level and now our reserves, the lifeblood of our economy, are haemorrhaging. That is why, Madam President, I stand here today. I have a vested interest in what happens to my country. It is my sincere hope, despite politics, those in Government could move past pettiness and ego and listen, hear and take action before it is too late for all of us.

Madam President, I have observed the economic policy of this PNM administration is based on fear. It preys on our fear of ending up with our backs against the wall and our noses against the glass of the doors of 700, 19th Street in Washington DC. That is the home of the International Monetary Fund, the dreaded IMF. [*Desk thumping*]

In his first address to our nation on December 10, 2015, Prime Minister Rowley warned and I quote:

“If we fail to adjust now, we will find ourselves as we did in 1986 with an

economy with insufficient foreign exchange reserves and having to restructure our debt under a series of IMF programmes. This administration will not take this country back to that kind of situation.”

Just over one year later, in his address to the nation on January 11, 2017, the Prime Minister said, and I quote:

“Let me end by reaffirming my commitment that this Government will do all that has to be done to keep our country out of the grip of the lender of last resort, the IMF.”

And at the Spotlight on Trinidad and Tobago’s Financial Circumstances held just one month ago, the Prime Minister again sought to use one of our country’s lowest economic moments to show his Government is doing what is best for the country. He said:

“...in this period of significant decline in foreign exchange inflows it will be unreasonable and dangerous to use up our foreign reserves as we were accustomed to. This would be paving our way into the arms of the IMF and that is something this government is NOT prepared to do.”

Many of our citizens remember the trauma we endured in the late 1980s and early 1990s when we were forced into the arms of the IMF. Many public servants still remember the 10 per cent cut in wages and salaries. Many persons still remember losing their jobs, and some still remember padlocking their homes and taking the keys to the banks because they could not meet their mortgage payments, and many of us in here, all remember, the exodus of our family and friends who fled mainly to Canada because they were looking for a better life.

We basically forfeited our national sovereignty to an international institution, because successive PNM Governments failed in their duty and

responsibility to our country. Prime Minister Rowley, early into his administration has set this ominous economic benchmark of our country returning to the IMF, and I think he preys on our fear of being trapped by the IMF. He is using our traumatic experience as a benchmark for his performance as a Prime Minister and his Government. His strategy, set the bar so low and use the fear of that low point, so then anything a little higher is considered a win and you come out looking like a hero. [*Desk thumping*]

The Prime Minister is using the fear of the IMF to drive support for his flawed economic policies—we have to do this, so we do not end up at 700, 19th Street. He is dangling the IMF like the Sword of Damocles over our heads. Madam President, I therefore find it extremely ironic that the economic impotence of the Prime Minister, his army of economic advisors and, of course, the engineer turned economist, the Minister of Finance, is pushing us even closer into the arms of the IMF rather than keeping us far away from the IMF dragon.

Let me explain why I say so, Madam President. It is uncanny how there are three similarities about our situation today in 2017, which resonate with the late 1980s when our economy went into a tailspin and ended up at the door of the IMF. First, there is a new incarnation of the PNM in power; second, our deteriorating economic conditions resemble those of the late 1980s; and third, we have the strange presence of a trinity of persons who continue to play leading roles in economic policymaking. Let me deal with the political situation first.

Back in the 1980s, the Chambers PNM Government was simply waiting for a crisis to erupt. They had gotten advice from William Demas who headed a task and wrote a report called the “The Imperatives of Adjustments”, since 1982, yet every single recommendation made in the Demas Task Force Report was ignored.

If those recommendations were implemented, this country would have been prepared well beforehand since 1982 for the collapse of the oil market in 1986, and we would not have had to endure seven consecutive years of severe recession, significant unemployment.

The unemployment rate back then went to a peak of 22 per cent as measured. One in four was out of a job. Food prices skyrocketed and we had to implement harsh austerity measures. And, naturally, a frustrated electorate would eventually vote out the PNM in a landslide defeat in December 1986, bringing in the NAR Government, but they would have no choice but to eventually approach the IMF and the World Bank for funding and to help administer the bitter medicine of structural adjustment.

Today, our collapsing economy under the Rowley-led PNM Government, shows up the glaring incompetence of an engineer playing economist, a Prime Minister who prefers economic “jamentry” to economic strategy. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Rambarran, just have a seat. Again, I am always reluctant when Senators are making their maiden contributions, but there are some words that will not—let us leave it out of this Chamber please. Okay?

Sen. J. Rambarran: I am guided, Madam President. I move on. Madam President, I did not mind too much when the NAR Government took away our apples and grapes, but this Government is hurling us back into the Flintstone age. This brings me to the second similarity, the economic reality.

Back in the 1980s, our official reserves were virtually exhausted within six years. There was not a single US dollar available at the Central Bank. Today, our reserves are haemorrhaging, falling from a peak of eleven and a half billion dollars in December 2014 to eight and a half billion as at September of this year. That is

the lowest level in a decade. At the present rate of depletion, our reserves are expected to fall to about \$3 billion by 2021. Think about that. Within the next four years, we would only have US dollars available to pay for three months' worth of imports. How could a country survive in that situation?

Back in the 1980s, the fiscal accounts had moved from significant surplus into deficits averaging almost 10 per cent of GDP, and it would take 10 years before the Government will be able to regain some level of fiscal balance, and even then that would prove fragile. Today, fiscal deficits have averaged nearly 7 per cent under the PNM Government, for the first two years, and the Minister of Finance is overly optimistic that his fiscal deficit will be about 3 per cent to GDP next year. But, strange enough, he has not given us a timetable for returning to fiscal balance. So it is likely that this administration will run fiscal deficits for each year of its five-year term.

Madam President, back in the 1980s, our public debt mushroomed from 10 per cent of GDP in 1981 to 56 per cent to GDP by 1988. This meant that we could not service our debt and meet our international obligations. We had no choice but to eventually undertake what is a most embarrassing situation for any country, to undertake a debt restructuring and we had to do that under the auspices of what we call the London Club group of creditors and the Paris Club group of creditors, but the thing is this. We could only undertake that restructuring once we were inside an IMF programme. It was not allowed to do it on your own.

Today, public debt sustainability is a major issue. Our public debt now stands at over 62 per cent to GDP. The real question is: this money that has borrowed in the last two years, what has it gotten us? Where are the real returns? Where are the benefits or are we simply just borrowing to artificially keep this

economy alive? We have already experienced one major causality of high debt. Both Standard & Poor's and Moody's have downgraded us and they have warned of further downgrades unless we can stabilize the public debt burden.

Madam President, this brings me to the third point, or on the third similarity, the trinity of economic experts. Back in the late 1980s, there were three persons who featured prominently in the negotiations with the IMF and in the actual monitoring of our IMF programme. Today, those three persons hold senior positions in this administration. The first is Dr. Terrence Farrell. He was the Director of Research at the Central Bank and, today, he is Chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Board, and let me say something. Despite all the negative things that Dr. Farrell has said about me, I still hold deep respect for him, because he is the person who recruited me into the Central Bank in 1990 and introduced me to the world of central banking and economic policymaking. [*Desk thumping*]

The second person is Ewart Williams, who was seconded from the IMF to be an advisor to Governor Demas and he would, of course, go on to become a Governor of the Central Bank, and today he is the economic advisor to the Minister of Finance.

The third and last person in this trinity is Alvin Hilaire, who was then a senior economist in the Central Bank and today is the Governor of the Central Bank. Madam President, one would think with such esteemed economic firepower, this Government would be firing on all cylinders when it comes to managing our economy, yet in 2016 we experienced the sharpest economic contraction in 33 years. [*Desk thumping*] Let me repeat that. Last year, our country under this PNM Government experienced the worst drop in economic

performance in more than three decades, and I do not expect 2017 to be any different. So it seems that the firepower of this economic trinity seems to be more smoke than fire [*Desk thumping*] or as the old people say, “three boar rats can’t live in one hole.”

Madam President, let me explain why I think the PNM’s economic strategy is not working, and the first reason is obvious. This Government is ignoring the advice of its very own economic experts. Dr. Terrence Farrell writing in the *Trinidad Express* on January 03, 2015 outlined a seven-point economic plan to the then PP government on how to stabilize the economy in the face of failing energy prices. The Government began to implement some of those elements of Farrell’s plan, but demitted office two years ago. The question is: did the incoming Minister of Finance follow the advice of his own Prime Minister’s chief economic advisor? Let us look at the record.

Dr. Farrell’s seven -point plan were as follows:

“1. Act quickly and decisively, and avoid the IMF.”

Instead, the Minister of Finance has failed to act quickly and decisively and, as I have made the case, we are moving even closer to the IMF.

“2. ...achieve external balance”—in the shortest possible time.

Instead our official reserves are depleting. And third, this is extremely important:

“...stance of fiscal policy must be dictated by the requirement of achieving external balance, not vice versa.”

Instead, the stance of fiscal policy is based on generating revenue not protecting our external position. The fourth element:

“Fix the timeframe for achieving external balance...The timeframe should NOT be more than two years.”

Instead, two years have passed and we have achieved no external balance. [*Desk thumping*] His fifth point:

“The”—HSF—“should NOT be touched.”

Instead, the HSF has been raided twice so far. The sixth point from Dr. Farrell:

“Monetary policy should cooperate by raising interest rates.”

Instead, the Central Bank has kept its policy rate unchanged for the last two years. The last interest rate hike by the Central Bank was done under my watch in December 2014, mere days before I was removed from office. And the seventh point that Dr. Farrell made:

“Wages and incomes policy should cooperate”

Instead, the tripartite agreement is in shambles and the trade union movement is ready to rumble. [*Desk thumping*] So, if the Minister of Finance continues to ignore the advice of the Prime Minister’s chief economic advisor may be he is following the advice of his own economic advisor, Ewart Williams. Let us see.

Speaking at the Demas/Rampersad Seminar Series at UWI, St. Augustine on November 14, 2013, the Minister’s own economic advisor offered six basis preconditions that must be met for economic diversification in a country like Trinidad and Tobago.

- “First...a macro-economic policy that ensures economic stability”

Instead, the economy is in recession, fiscal deficits are large, the public debt is rising and our reserves are depleting. The second pre-condition:

- “A high quality physical infrastructure...roads, power water, ports and...communications”

Instead, our physical infrastructure is suffering with senseless budget cuts, and poor implementation of the PSIP. Just look at the recent widespread flooding.

Simple example. The third pre-condition:

- “Third, high human quality capital as reflected in the output of our...tertiary education system, complement by flexible system of training institutions.”

What do we have? Instead, GATE has been cut and the training institutions have lost their way. [*Desk thumping*] Fourth pre-condition:

- “Four, adequate investment in research and innovation, supported by both the public and private sectors.”

What do we have instead? Investment in research and innovation is negligible, near less than half of 1 per cent of GDP.

- “Five, a business-friendly environment that is attractive to both foreign and local investment.”

Instead, what do we have now? A plethora of taxes that would now hamper business investments. [*Desk thumping*] And, finally:

- “Six, an effective, and modern and transparent system of governance”

What do we have instead? Many of our important national institutions have come under assault. Just look at the Central Bank, look at the Integrity Commission and look at the Judiciary. After two years in office, this Government has not met even one of the six basic pre-conditions for economic diversification put forward by the Minister’s own economic advisor. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, apart from ignoring the advice of his own economic experts, the Minister of Finance does not have a concrete plan to stabilize our economy. Just look at the confused themes of his budget statements, a wish list of the latest buzz words: budget 2016, “Restoring Confidence and Rebuilding Trust—Let’s do this Together”; budget 2017, “Shaping a Brighter Future—A Blueprint for

Transformation and Growth”; and budget 2018, “Changing the Paradigm—Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path”. There is no economic logic that ties together these three successive budget statements. [*Desk thumping*] The only constant among these budget statements is the narrative of “blame Kamla” of which this country has become tired after two years. [*Desk thumping*] The PNM has ruled this country for 41 out of the 61 years since general elections were held in September 1956, squandering three energy booms in the process yet “blame Kamla” is the only mantra that we can come up with to the many solutions and ills facing our country?

We have no idea what milestones the Minister of Finance has in mind to restore confidence and rebuild trust. What are the milestones to regain fiscal balance, to stabilize public debt, to stop the haemorrhaging of official reserves and to bring the economy back on to a part of growth? Come tomorrow, we do not know where the exchange rate will be. We do not know whether we will have a job, and we do not even know if we will be faced with another harsh tax.

So why did the PNM announce in budget 2017 it is going to build a blueprint for transformation and growth and then decide to change the paradigm in this budget. [*Desk thumping*] Where is the logic? Where is the economic logic? So, the Minister of Finance is ignoring his own experts, he does not have a plan. He has not articulated a path to economic stability. What else could he be doing wrong? Well, the Minister is implementing his fiscal policies at the wrong speed and in the wrong order.

Madam President, what confuses me as an economist is: How could the Minister of Finance and his army of economic advisors when they were crafting the PNM’s 2015 manifesto fail to take into consideration the need to properly

sequence and pace these economic policies? The Minister of Finance has introduced VAT on food, mixed it with a few dashes of higher fuel prices. He has attempted to introduce the controversial property tax. He plans to tax the life out of the gambling and gaming industry and he has thrown in an online tax for good measure. What has happened? He is implementing all these taxes with a “big bang” effect which means they are working against each other. They are cancelling out the intended revenue benefits. It is no surprise the Minister continues to fall short of his revenue targets but, then again, he is short on logic and his policies are short-sighted. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, the Minister of Finance does not have “barrakat”. Barrakat is an Urdu word that many of the old folks use to describe the ability to earn wealth and to keep it. This Government continues to show their hands are not blessed to create wealth. The result of not having any “barrakat” is that the Minister has shamelessly raided our HSF, our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and while the conditions exist legally to access the HSF, borrowing from the HSF must be a last resort measure, not a first resort measure. [*Desk thumping*] Borrowing must take place only after significant expenditure cuts have been made, and after all financing options have been exhausted. This has not happened.

This Government has drawn down \$625 million from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. That is more than one-tenth of the balances in the fund at that time. Think about that for the moment. It took about four years for the HSF to build up a balance of \$625 million and this has been consumed in one year, and by 2020 when general elections are due, it is quite likely this Government could eat up eight years’ worth of savings from the HSF. [*Desk thumping*] Talk about having no “barrakat”.

There is a whole question about—the Government says these drawdowns from the HSF are going to be used to finance the PSIP, but they are deliberately vague about what are these high-priority projects that require this financing. The Minister should tell the country whether our HSF funds were used to finance completion of the Brian Lara stadium. What about the Prime Minister's house in Tobago? Will our HSF funds be used to finance the extension of the Churchill Roosevelt Highway to Manzanilla, a project now mired in controversy or will or funds be used for golf courses? [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, maybe the Minister could redeem himself in the economic management in another area, exchange rate policy, but I doubt very much. He and the new Central Bank Governor are running down the country's reserves. They have unleashed a devaluation genie amongst our people prompting fears that 10 to one is murder in this country. [*Desk thumping*] Since this Government has assumed office, the TT dollars lost officially 6.5 per cent of its value, but on many foreign exchange transactions, banks are adding on a service charge that puts the selling rate at \$7 to one, and at the black market the selling rate is at least \$8 to one. That means we have had a de facto devaluation of our currency by over 25 per cent in two years. [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, 25 per cent in two years. How can this population adjust to that magnitude?

The Minister of Finance, when he was wrapping up the budget debate in the other place, talked about expert syndrome. In his October 2015 budget statement, the Minister decided to revert to the old foreign exchange distribution system and that would clear the backlog. Of course, we have seen that that has not happened. Despite reverting to the old system, and the Central Bank selling over \$3 billion to commercial banks between January 2016 to September of this year, many persons

and many businessmen are still complaining about who gets foreign exchange, how much they get and when they get it.

The sales of foreign exchange continue to be concentrated among the bigger business entities, [*Desk thumping*] the 1 per cent super elite and that is why I had made changes to our foreign exchange distribution system, Madam President, so that it could become more accessible and widely available. Those changes were made well in advance of the decline that would come in the commodity super cycle and the fall in global energy prices. It was meant to give the economy a time to adjust.

2.45 p.m.

Today, if those changes were made, everyone would have gotten an opportunity to more equitably share in our shrinking national foreign exchange pie. Instead, the supra elite 1 per cent business group continues to receive 80 per cent of the US dollars sold by the Central Bank, [*Desk thumping*] and 22 months after my removal as Governor the blame for foreign exchange shortages has moved from blame Jwala to others. Dr. Terrence Farrell, when he spoke on September 26th at the Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business said, the foreign exchange availability issue is a self-inflicted wound by the Government. That is your own economic advisor saying that. The Prime Minister, not to be outdone, at the TTMA Awards Ceremony on October 3rd said, foreign exchange hoarders are now causing the foreign exchange problem. And the Minister of Finance in his wrapping up on the budget debate in the other place went on to blame casino owners for leaking foreign exchange out of this country. So, as usual, they have no idea of the source of the problem, [*Desk thumping*] how can you solve the problem.

Madam President, small island economies like ours require exchange rate stability, not exchange rate uncertainty which we have now, and there have been a lot of textbook discussions about the need to rapidly depreciate our exchange rate. Any suggestion that we should do that is terribly misguided. Most of what we import cannot be produced locally, we do not manufacture laptops, we do not manufacture mobile phones, we do not manufacture motor vehicles or spare parts, and even if we did many of these inputs would still need to be imported. Why are we harping on significant depreciation of our currency? And it is strange, Madam President, despite the uproar about foreign exchange shortages, no one has called on the new Governor, Alvin Hilaire, to explain why we still cannot get foreign exchange.

It seems it is only the Minister who is doing the talking about foreign exchange. Somehow the new Governor is held to an imaginary standard.
[Interruption]

Madam President: Sen. Rambarran, you have five more minutes.

Sen. J. Rambarran: Thank you, Madam President. Somehow the new Governor is held to this imaginary higher standard and that his appointment seems to be more sacred than all the other governors, yet his appointment has turned out to be the most tainted in the history of the Central Bank. *[Desk thumping]* Alvin Hilaire is no sacred cow. Madam President, let me just say a few words about the sale of Clico assets. The Minister is depending on the sale of these assets to almost close his budget gap. He is looking at \$5billion from the sale of Clico assets to close the budget deficit this year. This is not a prudent approach. Why do I say that? Because the sale of Clico assets is now mired in legal issues; the Government has placed CL Financial in receivership, Clico is under legal control of the Central

Bank, CIB is in compulsory liquidation supervised by the High Court. Ownership and sale of these assets is a legal matter for the courts to decide, not a matter for the Minister of Finance. The courts do not work according to the Minister's schedule, and it is quite likely that the budgeted financing of \$5 billion that is expected to come from the sale of these assets will be again delayed this year, leading to a larger than budgeted deficit, and that it means the Minister would have to borrow an additional \$5 billion, [*Desk thumping*] or, again, raid the HSF to finance his deficit.

One more point on the sale of Clico assets, I urge this PNM Government to conduct itself in such a manner that it avoids any perception of a fast sale of these assets of Clico, and that deals are being made to dispose of these assets to a select few, because it seems this Government has a warped sense of what constitutes openness, transparency and accountability [*Desk thumping*] when it comes to the sale of these assets.

And as I wrap up, I ask these six questions related to the sale of Clico assets: was the January, 2017, sale by Clico of its Buccoo Estate in Tobago, more commonly known as No Man's Land, done in an open, transparent and accountable manner? No; did the Central Bank announce the sale on No Man's Land to the public? No; was the September, 2017, transfer by Clico of almost 30 per cent of its shares on Angostura to Corporation Sole done in an open, transparent and accountable manner? No; did the Central Bank announce this transfer of Angostura shares to the public? No; was the September, 2017, transfer by Clico of around 16 per cent of home construction shares to Corporation Sole done in an open, transparent and accountable manner? No; did the Central Bank announce this transfer to the public? No.

Madam President, let me thank you for allowing me the opportunity to make my contribution to this 2018 budget debate, and I would like to close with this last point. Just like the electorate called upon the NAR to rescue our economy from the PNM in the late 1980s, so too the political storm clouds are gathering and the real paradigm shift will soon take place when the electorate will call upon the UNC in 2020, or even before to rescue them from the most incompetent, spiteful and vindictive incarnation of the PNM yet. I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Hon. Senators, let me congratulate Sen. Rambarran on his maiden contribution. [*Desk thumping*] Minister of Public Utilities. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Utilities (Sen. The Hon. Robert Le Hunte): Madam President, I feel privileged to stand before you today to make my first contribution in this House as Minister of Public Utilities in support of the 2018 national budget. As a proud citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, I also feel a deep sense of responsibility that comes with this opportunity to serve my fellow countrymen and women and to deliver results that will progress this country forward at a critical time when more is required with so much less. Madam President:

“There are times in the development path of a country when extraordinary challenges demand an equally compelling response. Trinidad and Tobago is now in such a time.”

That statement, Madam President, which I quoted from the *Vision 2030, National Development Strategy*, is a powerful acknowledgment of the magnitude of the development challenges that we now face as a country. It is also a resounding testimony to the commitment of this Government to confront this reality with

skilful and level-headed determination.

The economic situation in which we now find ourselves requires nothing less than a paradigm shift that the Finance Minister called for. A paradigm shift in every sector and every level of our society, and by each and every member of the national community. The change must condition every aspect of how we conduct our lives in this country. The philosophy underlining the Government's response insists that all share in the burden, and, if I might add, it also requires all of us to own up to the part that we played in creating this situation. I cringed when I heard the young Sen. Hosein, in his maiden address like mine, talking about corruption and deficit budgeting. But then I stood here today and I heard an even more illustrious new Senator coming into this Chamber and talking about deficit budgeting by the PNM like if this is something that he has never seen before. [*Desk thumping*]

The reality, Madam President, is that we are here because of the reckless spending of the UNC-led Government [*Desk thumping*] over the period 2010 to 2015. At a time when oil prices averaged US \$100 per barrel, we incurred expenditure that reached as high as \$63 billion, the majority of which, as we are now seeing, was spent on financing overpriced projects and engaging in activities which were currently brought to the public's attention by my colleague, the hon. Stuart Young, Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, which I will not elaborate, but I am sure we all read about. Madam President, when we look back and we talk about deficit we talked about over a period, and we talked about some advisors and strategic advisors, and we went ahead, our learned Senator, our Senator on the other side talked about the advisors that the PNM has. During that critical period

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when the country had abandoned a lot of money all the advice that that particular Government got was to spend, spend, spend, spend, and more spend, and thief, thief, thief, thief. Madam President, during that time—[*Interruption*]

Sen. Ameen: Madam President, 46(4) and 46(6).

Madam President: If I am not mistaken the Minister did not refer to anybody by name, he said—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Senator: The guilty ones jump up. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Continue, Minister. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The. Hon. R. Le Hunte: Madam President, you know, there is a song from Bob Marley, “Who the cap fit, let them wear it”. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, it was clear to all and sundry all over the world where our economy was going. It only seems to be in 2004 in the last quarter of 2014 we moved from 2.5 growth rate to one of a mere 0.2 per cent in the last quarter. Not a word was said, not an advice given by any of the advisors who are now coming into this Chamber and speaking. It appears that some people have come with vindictive minds to take advantage or to settle scores.

Sen. Baptiste-Primus: And they have grievances.

Sen. The. Hon. R. Le Hunte: And grievances. The reality is, Madam President—

Madam President: Minister, let me just ask you to rephrase what you just said. Just be very careful in making reference to other people’s contributions. Okay? Thank you.

Sen. The. Hon. R. Le Hunte: I apologize, Madam President. Madam President, when in the midst of all that was happening, all the negative things that the world was seeing, all the adjustments that everyone was making, the then Minister of

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Finance in 2015, I suppose, being advised by certain individuals actually—
[*Interruption*] I would not say that—actually stood up and said, the economy is not declining contrary to the figures, but the economy is actually on an expansion path.

Madam President, clearly we were ill-advised at the time, and the actions that were needed to be taken at the time, so that when we came into power in 2015/2016 the situation that we had to confront us and what we had to deal with was so chronic. If it was addressed before we would have not had to be in this position that we are in. Madam President, you have to remember that in 2010 this Government started with a credit balance of over \$10billion. That is what it was. By the time we came in, you would recall, we had to run quickly to the Parliament to increase our borrowing limits. You know why, because there was no money in the Treasury, all the money had ran out. [*Desk thumping*] And if that was not enough too, the money was not only run out in the Central Bank under the stewardship of certain people who I will not call, at that point in time they had also raked the National Gas Company of close to \$16billion. [*Desk thumping*]
[*Interruption*] Twelve billion, 16 billion. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Senator: It is sixteen, “doh worry with him”. [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Ameen: Madam President, I just want to ask the source of the information, please.

Madam President: Minister, continue please. Members, please, I want to just—
[*Interruption*] Members, may I remind you, please, let us listen to the Minister of Public Utilities. Okay? Continue, Minister.

Sen. The. Hon. R. Le Hunte: So, Madam President, it is critical and important that we must always put everything into context, and, yes, we could hear nice talk and it sounds well but you have to understand where we came from.

Madam President, before I move, because I have a lot to talk about where we want to go in WASA, you know, and I really had a long contribution planned to let you know what I am doing, but I had to be side tracked because I had to put this facts straight. The contribution was about the foreign exchange and the stabilizing of the system, and the controls put in place; Madam President, the legacy of the last regime and the last Governor was a total disruption and mashing up of a system that was nicely in place [*Desk thumping*] for a very long time, the effects of which we are still experiencing. We are trying to fix a problem that you created.

In addition to that, there was a time during that time, I was a banker at the time and, as a matter of fact, I cringed when I realized about a banker supposed to be a confidential person, and confidentiality was the hallmark of what I stand for as a banker. And I remember writing and saying, but what is this, how could my Governor—how could my Governor, my head banker at the time, go out and make people's public information outside there. [*Desk thumping*]

You know, it is fate that I have the opportunity to say this now in this House, because I remember at that time I was in Africa but I remember reading it, and I am part of this noble profession, although I know Sen. Small does not think my profession is that noble, [*Laughter*] but I was part of this noble profession that stood ourselves on confidentiality, and you broke the trust. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Senator: A statutory conversation.

Sen. The. Hon. R. Le Hunte: A statutory—

Sen. Obika: Madam President, 46(6)—[*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: I am asking everyone, let us just take the temperature down a little bit. Minister, continue please. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The. Hon. R. Le Hunte: Madam President, I know there is a certain amount

of protection I also need in tradition in making my first contribution. It seems to have gone through the window like everything else. But, you know, it is important for us to remember these things. All right? It is important for us to remember these things at a time, as I said, when our profession was supposed to be so noble, the things that emanated out of the Central Bank, and the ulterior motives or demotives, whether they were ulterior or not, that was driving those things. During that time, all of a sudden, we recognized DFL, a company that has majority shareholdings or owning significant contributions by certain people that are financiers of the other side, they were the ones who benefited tremendously from this so-called change in—[*Interruption*]

Madam President: Minister, I will have to caution you a little bit, Minister, in terms of what you are saying, and I am going to caution you now. I really do not like interrupting maiden contributions. Continue now, Minister.

Sen. The. Hon. R. Le Hunte: Madam President, if I might just highlight this point, so I have made that point and I would stop there and apologize. Madam President, to highlight this point further, the PNM Government, under the astute stewardship of the Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, has been able to reduce expenditure to a level in the vicinity of \$51 billion [*Desk thumping*] without creating major disruptions and displacements, and still was able to bring 9,000 new pensioners onto the payroll, pay arrears of salaries to public sector workers, and settle a number of unpaid bills left by the previous administration. All of this, Madam President, on \$51 billion. It truly begs the question what the difference of \$12 billion was used on.

Madam President, the way the People's Partnership Government, at the time, was spending money wild all over the place without regard for process and order

reminds me of an old calypso by the Lord Kitchener at the time when he bought his first Jaguar car, and, you know, it said, “I will park meh PP any place, anywhere”; they were just dealing “without no regards” for any process and just spending money wild, or as some people else will say, doing other things with the money.

Madam President, in crafting—enough of that—our response to the prevailing economic challenges we could have adopted several measures to treat with the situation, such as increasing VAT or raising personnel income tax levels, or the much debated issue of devaluation, which I see some people are also advocating. Instead, we decided that the preservation of jobs and the sharing the burden of adjustment across all sectors were of paramount importance. And we make no apologies for stating that, that in our approach going forward and in dealing with this situation, we place the preservation of jobs as a paramount pillar in our restructuring.

As a responsible Government that is intent on putting people first, we cannot and will not contribute to the further erosion of the social fabric of our society. It is with this interest that I note the response of some who, whilst acknowledging the need for adjustment, continue to fend it off from themselves and onto others. I have also noted the contributions made by other interest groups, some claiming that the Government is mistaken in its attempt to direct the economy while others assert that even more direction is needed, yet, others call for market forces to be given free rein. The model of contributions has the frustrating effect of immobilizing actions. As a responsibility Government our duty is to find workable solutions and act. We listen, we reason, and then we take decisions that we consider to be in the best interest of the society as a whole. In so doing we have

delivered a series of initiatives which we believe will guide this country to calmer waters, provided all of us make significant adjustments to our attitudes and consumption patterns along the way.

The truth is that over the years, Madam President, we, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, have had the good fortunes of benefiting from heavily subsidized energy prices and public utility services, specifically water and electricity. But the sad reality of our current situation is that the Government is no longer in a position to foot the bill. As I have said in another place, the gravy train has no more gravy. Madam President, allow me before going forward, and before going any further in my contribution to extend my congratulations to Minister of Finance for his commendable budget presentation, [*Desk thumping*] and his clarion call for all of us to play our part in changing the paradigm and putting the economy in a sustainable path. One of the fundamental goals outlined in Vision 2030 is that of transforming our institutions, including those delivering public utility services into organizations that are better managed with improved access for all. This is indeed the overarching goal of the work done by the Ministry of Public Utilities. As we pursue this vision, the current reality demands that we change the way our public utilities conduct the business of delivering service to the population.

Pivotal in this regard would be the provision of a high and consistent quality of service to the population and the promotion of high levels of productivity and operational efficiency, which drive costs down and allow us to do more with less. In this regard, we must ensure that the workplace culture promotes proper work ethics, high service quality and supports the tool to drive efficiency. Madam President, our citizens as users of these services must also themselves change. Efficiency and conservation must imbue our consciousness and our actions as the

residents of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, these are the themes on which my contribution will hinge, but before I proceed I will like to provide a summary of the budgetary allocations of the Ministry of Public Utilities. Madam President, the Ministry of Public Utilities has been allocated a total of \$3.5 billion in the 2008 budget, which is marginally higher than the \$3.2 billion for the financial year 2017. The last year the Ministry performed well under the public investment programme, contrary to what was just last said. And I will dare say that this Ministry, basically, we spent over 84.4 per cent of our allocations. This reflects commendably on our capacity to deliver positive outcome for the people of this country. I want to place on record my congratulations to the two former Ministers of Public Utilities, Minister Antoine and Minister Hinds, [*Desk thumping*] whose drive and passion made this achievement a reality.

Before I outline the areas of focus of 2018, I wish to speak on the critical matter of debt financing, of the debt faced by WASA and T&TEC. And the reality, Madam President, last year we came and we talked about the fact of how much of those debts were impacting those institutions, but we were not able to quantify the levels of debt because they were coming from all over the place. I come before you and I stand before you today to say, having done some more research over the year the debt faced by T&TEC and WASA is in the vicinity of \$13 billion, with over 7.1 billion to WASA and 5.6 billion to T&TEC. The reality, Madam President, is that those two institutions are technically insolvent carrying those levels of debt.

3.15 p.m.

Madam President, in addition to the high debt burden, these organizations

are also challenged by inefficiencies in their operations and service delivery, as well as in their corporate governance system. Madam President, we just cannot go on this way. Business as usual is not an option; transformation is an absolute imperative.

In recognition of these challenges, I have set four areas, for the financial year 2018, of priority: one, debt management; two, operational efficiency; three, robust corporate governance and, four, enhanced customer service. On these four pillars the transformation process will be built, which will result in greater access to public utility services by all citizens at competitive prices, in keeping with global standards.

In describing the transformation process that is before us, I often use the analogy of fixing a fleet of planes while they are in the air. It will have to be done incrementally and with precision, as these agencies must remain fully operational while we reshape and reengineer them.

Madam President, I now turn my attention to the Water and Sewerage Authority, WASA. Four key issues continue to challenge the Authority in fulfilling its mandate of providing efficient water and water services to the people of this country. First, WASA has an annual operating deficit, due in part to the existing tariff structure, of approximately \$2.4 billion, which is heavily subsidized by the Government through an annual allocation of approximately \$2.5 billion for recurrent expenditure and \$500 million for capital expenditure.

Secondly, the corporate governance system is inefficient and cumbersome, which has precipitated a vicious cycle of cost increase, questionable procurement practices, imprudent borrowing practices and the deterioration in the efficiency of its operations. Thirdly, WASA is burdened with a high level of non-revenue

water, that is, water lost through leaks and other means which is estimated to be in the vicinity of over 50 per cent. And, fourthly, Madam President, too many of our citizens have had to endure the Authority's slow response time and the relatively poor customer service.

These chronic issues cannot continue unabated, but the fixing of WASA cannot happen overnight. It would require a series of incremental moves, innovative thinking and an intensity of focus on the part of the leadership of the organization. My commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago is to work in conjunction with the board of WASA to resolve these issues, with the singular focus of providing a high quality and reliable supply of water to the citizens of this country, which is what they deserve.

Madam President, WASA's programme of work for 2018 will build on the foundation laid in 2017. It will aggressively address some of the core issues that require our attention in relation to the transformation of the organization, and the delivery of a secure and reliable water service supply to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

The reality is that as a country we distribute and consume more water than we actually require. A study done by a Canadian consulting firm in 2014 provides figures that speak for themselves. The average person in Trinidad and Tobago, according to this study, uses 87 imperial gallons of water per day. Tobago follows closely with a daily consumption rate of 83 imperial gallons. These figures exceed the United Nations' recommendations of 11 imperial gallons per person, by more than 70 imperial gallons. In other words, the average Trinbagonian utilizes more than seven times the recommended amount of water on a daily basis. That is why even as we attempt to fix WASA, we must also actively work to change the way in

which we use this most precious resource. We need a paradigm shift throughout the country in everything that we do. But there is more.

WASA produces 230 million imperial gallons of water per day—230 million imperial gallons per day. Given our population size of 1.3 million people, and assuming the astronomically high per capita consumption rate of 87 imperial gallons, we as a nation utilize only 113 million imperial gallons per day. Where then does the extra 117 million gallons of water produced by WASA go, and why does only 38 per cent of the population receive water on a 24/7 basis?

Madam President, these statistics point to two factors that lie at the core of WASA's inability to provide a reliable and secure water supply to all of Trinidad and Tobago. They are: one, the untenable water consumption habits of all and sundry; and, two, the loss of water via leaks and illegal connections referred to as non-revenue water. At the same time, the Authority's revenue earning potential is hampered by an extremely low tariff structure—\$3 per household per day at the highest level.

It is at this point that I will just like to correct one small—and I refer to the *Newsday* of today, October 26th, where it outlines clearly the responsibility of the RIC and their role in ensuring who sets the rates for water and the work that they are doing to ensure that a proper rate is done, a proper rate is set, after their evaluation. Of importance too, I just want to draw to our attention Mr. Lee Young's comments in the newspaper, where he said:

So far in the current process this Government has been hands off. So there was a certain statement being made when the debate started by Sen. Mark, to give the impression that I or this Government was going to increase water prices. That is far from the truth. We do not have the responsibility to do that. It

is being done by the RI C and they will give their evaluation after going through an elaborate process.

That being said, I must point out that WASA's last rate review was since 1993, and a similar exercise happened for T&TEC in 2006. It should also be noted that we have the second lowest water rate in the western hemisphere. What this means is that the Government, and by extension the taxpayer, is heavily subsidizing the nation's water supply, resulting in a culture that exhibits little or no respect for this most precious resource. The majority of our citizens we know do not get water every day, 24/7; that is a known fact. But the other reality is that those who do get the water, they waste it.

So how do we treat with these challenges? The Government, through the Minister of Public Utilities is committed to a plan for improvements in the water and sewerage quality, and its attainment of financial viability based on the following core strategies: one, a reduction in the level of non-revenue water from its existing level of 50 per cent to a level of about 20 per cent within the shortest space of time.

We will be launching this year a rapid response team—we call it the “red team”—of over 500 persons that will be working around the clock to eliminate leaks throughout the country. Of course, they will be working closely with my colleague, the Minister of Works and Transport, to ensure that the roads are properly fixed, once the leaks are addressed, thus minimizing any inconvenience to the population.

The present level of leaks reported that I have on record is in the vicinity of 2,000, and working in conjunction with an aggressive communication strategy we intend to significantly reduce this number and correct any new leaks brought to our

attention by the general public in an expeditious manner. And I will say that this particular approach would require the assistance of all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, because I cannot see it all. So we will be creating new communication channels that will allow you to bring that information to me, and together we will bring and deal with this leak problem in this country, once and for all. A team will also be established for the purpose of identifying persons who steal water, with the aim of bringing them before the law. I think we are looking for a name. I think we might call that team the “yellow team”. [*Laughter*]

Number two, the next plan is an expansion of our metering network. This will be implemented with an aim of providing metres to 100 per cent of the Authority’s industrial and commercial customers this year, while increasing the percentage of metered residential customers from its current level of only a mere 3 per cent. Our goal, financing permitting, would be to have the majority of the country metered within the shortest possible time.

Three, an aggressive education campaign focusing on the importance and the need for conservation of our water resources. The figures that I stated earlier made it evident that there is significant wastage of water resources by those who receive a supply. We believe that this is due to a lack of awareness about conservation practices and their potential impact on the sustainability of this resource.

In this regard, WASA, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Utilities, will embark on an aggressive water conservation education programme, using the diverse media to raise citizens’ awareness of the need to use water resources in a sustainable manner.

Finally, we will be embarking on a drive to increase the overall production of water, because we recognize that there is a gap, and we still need to provide

water in some places while we fix what is happening.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte: In 2018, WASA will be drilling 13 wells in the Tucker Valley, and then they will be doing another 10 wells that are presently under the management of Petrotrin. So that we will be bringing at least, that is 23 wells, and we will be increasing the number of gallons of water onto the system by 10 million gallons per day.

We also recognize that we have to fix WASA internally, and therefore we have an exercise that will be geared towards looking at the internal structure of WASA, looking at their procurement processes, looking at the things that they are outsourcing. We recognize that we need to fix WASA externally and internally.

Madam President, this Government, we are moving steadfastly to fixing the port under our Minister of Works and Transport. I am confident that my Minister, Minister West, will deal with the revenue leakages, and I am making a commitment here, together with my professional team at the Ministry and my Cabinet colleagues and the board of directors at WASA, that we are going to address the WASA situation and fix WASA once and for all. [*Desk thumping*]

As I conclude my maiden address in this House, I must point out, as I did at the beginning of my contribution, that we are in tough economic times that require us to do things differently, to shift our paradigms, as it were. That shift must involve everyone, and we must do it together as a society. For the line agencies under my purview, it means significantly reducing the financial dependence on the Government, achieving realistic levels of efficiency in the operations, ensuring that customers are satisfied with the quality and reliability and affordability of the service; developing and implementing robust corporate government systems to

ensure better management, accountability and transparency.

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

For the general public, it means utilizing these utility services more efficiently and finding innovative ways to conserve. These measures, once taken conscientiously, will not only save money, they will also produce an environment that will be a win-win situation for all and that will allow us to save money on our energy and our gas bills.

As the Minister of Public Utilities, I can attest to my Ministry's commitment to the necessary transformation. We are fully aware that it will take time, but we have no doubt that the programmes and initiatives outlined in my contribution will get us there. The longest journey starts with a first step. Even as we enact the necessary changes, we invite our fellow citizens to join us on this journey towards transformation. It will require changes in attitudes and behaviours, and a certain amount of sacrifice from all of us. But even as we embark on this change, we will do well to remember the following words by Machiavelli in *The Prince*:

It must be realized that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more uncertain of success, more dangerous to manage, than the establishment of a new order of things. For he who introduces change, makes enemies of those who derive advantages from the old order and finds but lukewarm defence among those who stand to gain from the new one.

With those words, may we find the wisdom, courage and strength needed to change course, thus securing the future of our beautiful Republic.

Mr. Vice-President, I thank you and the esteemed Members of this House for your time and attention, and I wish you good day. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Hon. Members, permit me to congratulate the Minister of

Public Utilities on his maiden contribution in this honourable House. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Jabez Johnson: Greetings, Mr. Vice-President. I am deeply honoured to be afforded the opportunity to be in this august Chamber, to address you, Mr. Hon. Vice-President, and the Members of this honourable House, and through you, the national community. My contribution to this discussion will be about the challenges and possible solutions to the problem facing the gaming industry.

Mr. Vice-President, before I get into the substance of my contribution, please allow me to put on record my deepest and sincerest appreciation, and that of the more than 9,000 direct employees and the 30,000 indirect employees, to the hon. Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, Leader of the Opposition, for affording me the opportunity to be here today. [*Desk thumping*]

I am here today to speak on the issue of the proposed 100 per cent tax increase and the massive dislocation it would cause. Sita Ram, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, and may God richly bless you.

Like Esther in the *Bible*, if I perish, I perish, but I come to you, Mr. Vice-President, to beseech you for help. Sen. Rambarran, thank you for your contribution. I know that you are correct and that it frightens me a great deal. Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Vice-President, do you know what the atmosphere was like at the headquarters of our union, the Union of Member Clubs and Lottery Workers, the night of October 02, 2017? Let me tell you, Sir. There was weeping and wailing. The general consensus was one of betrayal, bewilderment and horror. The workers, the majority of them PNM voters, felt as though they were used for votes and then in turn they were reproached. They were red, but surely they were not

ready for this. They felt as if hate was being meted out to the ordinary woman and child. My comrades felt disappointed in a failed government. The perception of the people was the effects of a bait-and-switch, a creeping dictatorship. Yet again, it appears that the small man in society is being squeezed by a parasitic 1 per cent.

The Union of Member Clubs and Lottery Workers believes that the enforcement across the entire industry is the key to more tax revenue from the gaming industry—not 100 per cent increase in taxes to the private member clubs that currently pay their taxes.

My discussion points will be as follow: the flawed information from the Minister of Finance to this House; the 10 per cent tax on all NLCB games; illegal roulettes and the consistent increase in taxes to the gaming industry.

Mr. Vice-President, it was never my intention to visit these hallowed Chambers, to direct public policy at these hon. Senators gathered here today. Actually, I was content to be the poor little employee that works at a private members' club as mentioned by the hon. Minister of Finance in his presentation on the Appropriation Bill. However, due to the imminent danger proposed by this 100 per cent tax increase, I am coerced to be here today.

My comrades are being sent home. My comrades are crying and they do not know where their next meal will be coming from. The situation we face is very grave. Sleep has left my eyes. My blood pressure is high and I cannot find peace. Sir, before I came here today I understand that a lot was said about me suffering from expert syndrome.

Mr. Vice-President, my full name is Jabez Joshua Selford Johnson. I have been gainfully employed in the gaming industry for the past 16 years. I started off as a part-time cashier working two days for the week, eventually I was hired as a

full-time staff. Apart from cashing I would sweep the gaming floor, mop the bar, toilets and the cash cage, because I am not a proud person. Over time I was promoted to a supervisor and then to a club manager. Currently, I hold the position of General Manager. [*Desk thumping*] I am the holder of nine CXC passes, some of which are distinctions. I have four A Levels, some are grade A's. I have certification in supervisory management, general management and managerial accounting. I have an associate degree in management, distinction. I also have my first degree in business administration with a concentration in human resources and finance. I am still at University. My grade point average last term was 3.72. I recently returned from a short-term student exchange programme in the States, where I even checked out a university to begin arrangements for my PhD in an area of study very close to my heart. I am the alternative compliance officer with the Financial Intelligence Unit with the club where I work. I receive internal and external compliance training, yet I am described as suffering from expert syndrome.

Mr. Vice-President, I have listed my academic qualifications. Please allow me to list for you the human qualifications which I possess. I was born and bred in Factory Road, Diego Martin behind the factories. We had no running water and I used to tote water with my hands and on my head, to provide my mother with water to cook and for me to bathe to go to school. I used to use a latrine or an outhouse, because we had no plumbing. My parents died nine months apart when I was 17 years old, leaving me orphaned with three siblings to take care of.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

There was a drug block in my area and people would steal to survive. In other words, Madam President, I am from the ghetto or a slum. I was born destitute poor

and in abject poverty. I come from a PNM family, as most of my comrades gathered behind me here today. But the only place we found refuge was on this side of the House—[*Desk thumping*] this side of the House. Look at where you all have me and have us standing.

My Member of Parliament, because I said I am from Diego Martin, is the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. Every five years he would come for votes and every year things remain the same. That was until I got my job working full-time at the casino. I was able to run water to my deceased parents' home. After a few months of working at the casino I was able to fix the leaking roof and, gradually, little by little, I was able to lift myself from the ghetto. Eventually through working at the casino I was able to get married and purchase my own home. I have a beautiful little girl and a son to take care of.

Madam President, I am a good, law-abiding citizen. I am a God-fearing citizen. Please tell me why this Finance Minister wants to send me back to the ghetto, why is he disturbing my way of life with this over taxation, why he wants to put me on the block to sell drugs. Madam President, I beg you and the good office that you hold to take away the evil tax increase that wants to be unleashed on us.

My story is not unusual. This is a story of nearly all the employees in the gaming industry. We are from the ghetto. Criminal hotspots they say, PNM areas. We are working honestly—honestly in an industry for an honest salary.

Over the last few days, I received several letters from my comrades. Please permit me to read parts of two letters that were sent to me. Akeem N wrote:

I was always hoping and praying for better days to come. Most of my friends are either dead or are in jail. I grew up in the ghetto. I ain't perfect.

I ain't no saint. I did my wrong. I was unemployed for two years straight.

I almost got locked up.

He called the casino name where he worked. He said they changed him. He has been working for almost one year now and he has not been in trouble since. He will always be loyal to the casino, he said. Without his job he would have to go and check his old friends. He said:

I will have to go back to crime. Everybody has to eat a food.

Another comrade wrote, her name is Betty. She said:

This casino gave me hope when I was at a stage of giving up in life. I was unemployed from the hotel industry. I had no food to feed my seven children. I had determined to commit suicide.

She said in her letter:

I got dressed and decided I was going on the bus route and jump in front a maxi to end it.

Whilst on her way, she said she got a call from this casino to come for a job. She said she went to the Bus Route, but instead of jumping in front the maxi, she jumped in the maxi and went to Ma Pau on Ariapita Avenue. Having this job has enabled her to take care of her children. She said it is very tough, and we can all appreciate it is very tough being a single mother of seven children.

Madam President, we have to be careful that this Chavez type budget might unleash more crime as has happened in Venezuela. Look at the economy there. Is there a legacy of this hard-working Minister of Finance going to be the memory of how he started us down the streets of Caracas? I ask you, Madam President. Does he want to turn our beloved country to that island or that state, Venezuela?

Madam President, as a woman, I appeal to you. I appeal to the two leading

ladies in our beloved country, Mrs. Reema Harrysingh-Carmona and Mrs. Sharon Rowley. We beseech you, ladies, please help us. To Mrs. Suzan Williams-Imbert, thank you for all the help you gave to the casino ladies from Le Platte Village and Long Circular Road on Divali day.

I appeal to all the women of Trinidad and Tobago. These women who work in casino are just as you, they have children. Look at what evil would be visited on them with this 100 per cent tax increase. Is it right that we put Betty and her children on the streets?

Due to the constant threat on our jobs, we the employees of the casino formed the Union of Members Clubs and Lottery Workers. After much insistence from my colleagues, my comrades, I agreed to hold the position of Vice-President of the union, a position I hold with high esteem. But today, we feel like Jesus running from King Herod. We believe that the king should be looking for the five star casino in the east, instead of trying to eliminate an entire industry. Public perception, Madam President.

3.45 p.m.

There are many persons who have watched casino-type movies that involve extortion, money laundering, heavy rulers, nudity, exaggerated stories of both winning and losing, sensational stories of the problem gambler. That is an infamous person right now. A lot of people believe that everybody who visits a private members' club is a problem gambler.

Miss Janne Nikkinen, in her working paper, "The Global Regulation of Gambling: a General Overview", noted that the majority of studies portray gambling problems concerning individuals and not society. Jim Oxford also noted in percentage terms the incidence of gambling-related problems in the population

is considered low.

However, as a union we do not throw caution to the wind. The Union of Members' Clubs and Lottery Workers has heard the voices of the religious leaders. Yes. We have listened to the concerned persons and the Bankers Association, to the NGOs that provide support for families. As a union, we recognize that there could be a fallout from gambling. As a union, we are fully in support of the enactment of the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill, 2016. Actually, Madam President, for the past 12 years we have been advocating the need for regulation of our industry.

We understand that some persons are opposed to gambling in any form and your opinion is respected. However, the truth is, Madam President, gambling has been part of our society since before I was born. We have had "wappie" and "bush whe-whe". In the United States of America and in other parts of the world, they have legalized the appropriate gaming houses. They have legislation and have allowed them to contribute towards the public purse as tax revenue.

The difference between the United States and Trinidad is enforcement, diligent enforcement, Madam President. Trinidad and Tobago, contrary to popular belief in the media out there, has already been collecting taxes from this gambling sector.

Now, Madam President, not next year, not March 31, 2018, but now is the right time to enact the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill, 2016 to regulate our industry. This Bill will allow for transparency, accurate data gathering; it will address the social ills; it will give the Government of the day predictability; it will provide an orderly approach for the receipt of tax revenue.

As part of the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill there is the

Rehabilitation Fund. This fund will address in a holistic and coordinated way the issue of the problem gambler. There is also the Development Fund that is part of that Bill. That fund would provide support services, social programmes, charitable causes and money for education and culture.

In that Bill as well, Madam President, there are regulations that will support the work of the Financial Intelligence Unit and assist with dealing with money laundering and the financing of terrorism. Again, Madam President, as a union, we fully endorse the passage of the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill. However, the Minister of Finance through his Ministry, the Ministry of Finance, of which the Inland Revenue Division is part and parcel must do his part to collect his taxes. He must collect his taxes from the industry as a whole and not just from the private members' club that pay. Increasing the tax burden on a few private members' clubs that have been honest and forthright and paid their taxes is not the way.

Shivanan Deopersad, tax manager from the Lloyd Accounting Firm noted that non-compliance should not be the reason to raise taxes. He is an expert, Madam President. He said, if taxes are too high it could provide an incentive to be clever in noncompliance. It can actually push the activity of gambling into the hands of organized crime. That was quoted in the Business Day, *Newsday* newspaper, Thursday, October 19th. Enforcement in the industry, as a whole, would provide more tax revenue for this Government.

Madam President, could I be allowed to explain my first point with flawed information. We have to look at this budget and be sure that the hardships contained within it are justified and based on sound economics and facts. We have to be sure of that, Madam President.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2018)
Bill, 2017 (cont'd)
Sen. Johnson (cont'd)

2017.10.25

The Finance Minister in his 2016 contribution claimed that the gambling industry is a \$16-billion industry. So that was last year he claimed \$16 billion. That was reported by Miss Ria Taitt in the *Trinidad Express* newspaper. In May this year in the mid-year budget review in the other place, the exact date was May 10, 2017, he said:

Notwithstanding the arguments by some players in the industry to the contrary, he knew that the gambling industry is a \$10 billion industry.

So one year it is 16, next year it is 10.

In this budget, Madam President, in the same year, 2017, he is saying that he knows for a fact that the gambling industry is estimated at 15 to \$20 billion. So he is changing his figures. One year he is saying 16, next year he is saying 10 and within the same year he is saying 20. Madam President, he is guessing. [Interruption] He does not know for certain. [Desk thumping]

Madam President, I am saying, and we support that the Finance Minister— [Interruption]

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. J. Johnson:—thank you, Madam President—that the Finance Minister gets his fact right. The only way he can get his facts right is by passing the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill that will put a gaming commission in place that would provide him with accurate information. [Desk thumping]

Madam President, something very “kicksy” happened or very funny. As we know, based on me being someone who suffers from expert system, apparently Google is a popular search engine on the other side. If you were to do a search of the profit made by all casinos last year you would realize they made \$979 million. Since the Finance Minister is stating that we are a \$20 billion industry, that means

that our little casino industry made nearly three times that of Las Vegas.

Madam President, that is preposterous, that does not make sense. At the end of the day, if that were the case and we were three times as profitable as Las Vegas, then there would be no need to tax anyone in this budget. All the Finance Minister will have to do is to open casinos—full stop. That is all he has to do in this country, open casinos. [*Desk thumping*] And since he is an expert and has not set a foot in a gambling house, then could be a Minister as well of casinos because, at the end of the day, his figures are wrong.

I believe that he also erred in his record, his checking of the number of private members' clubs in Trinidad and Tobago. But, before I even get into that, Madam President, do you know that the private members' clubs are governed by Acts and agencies of the State in Trinidad and Tobago? They are governed by the Registration of Clubs Act; the Financial Intelligence Unit; the Board of Inland Revenue; the police service, Customs and Excise Division. People in the public domain have been stating that the clubs are illegal. Madam President, if we are illegal, how are we governed by so many Acts and so many agencies of the State?

The Financial Intelligence Unit uses the following laws to govern the activities of private members' clubs: the Financial Obligations Regulations 2010/2011; the Proceeds of Crime Act, 2009; the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2010/2011. They even used something from the Central Bank. The Central Bank Anti-Money Laundering and Combatting the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) Guidelines. They also use the Financial Action Task Force 40 and 9 Recommendations.

Madam President, before a club could even receive their licence from court they must present the court with their receipt from Inland Revenue Division showing that they have paid their taxes. They must present a receipt for their

\$500,000 bond as part of the process of being a club, a private members' club with gambling, a licensing committee must come from the court and visit the establishment; they must visit the building. They will review that all the taxes have been paid and that all the books are in order. Before a club is even anywhere near opened they must be compliant with the Financial Intelligence Unit.

Madam President, private members' clubs with casino-style games are not illegal in this country. What we are saying is, push for increased regulation, bring the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill in effect. [*Desk thumping*] It was very amusing to learn that the hon. Minister requested from the police commissioner that he goes and check and see the number of private members' clubs in the country. Obviously, the good and astute police commissioner would have requested from each police station the number of private members' clubs in the country.

The Prime Minister has said—not the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance has said—over and over, that there are hundreds and hundreds of private members' clubs. Madam President, that is not correct. What we have learned is that the police in their deliberation went and counted every building that said they are private members' club and say, okay, private members' club, private members' club, yes, tick, tick, tick, when, in fact these private members' club do not have gambling. For example, in St. Clair area they said there were seven private members' clubs. They said Harvard's Sports Club, the Trinidad Cricket Club and so forth. You know, none of the seven members' clubs that they listed for St. Clair actually has gambling on it—not one. So, clearly, the information from the hon. Minister of Finance is incorrect.

Also, Madam President, I went and I checked the Financial Intelligence

Unit—their website—to see, okay, probably he did not check the clubs with the police commissioner, he went to the Financial Intelligence Unit. They have 91, Madam President, 91 registered private members' clubs on their records as of September 30, 2017; and this also is not correct. The reason why this is not correct is because some of the clubs have no gambling. Queen's Park Cricket Club; the Clydesdale Club; the Trinidad Yacht Club; the Trinidad Union Club, these clubs have no gambling—none whatsoever.

Also, Madam President, of that 91, several clubs have been closed. Britta Recreation Club; Fantasy Members' Club; Pegasus Members' Club; Royal Vegas Members' Club; Sands Private Members Club; Sportsman Private Members slots all are closed. So, again, the information recorded by the Financial Intelligence Unit is not correct. Yes, all casinos are members' clubs, but not all members' clubs are casinos. [*Desk thumping*]

It is clear that hon. Minister of Finance received wrong information. We believe as a union he was kidnapped by those technocrats in the Ministry of Finance, and now we, the casino employees, have to pay for his ransom with our jobs, with our jobs and that is not correct. [*Crosstalk*] At the end of the day, did you know that he had the financial accounts for two casinos up to 2015—two casinos?

Madam President, we are asking that the Finance Minister adhere to the tenets of good faith, equitable treatment that he conforms to the true statesman that we believe that he is. He has partnered with us in the Joint Select Committee meeting. We have sent letters outlining our position on critical issues that affect our comrades. We are saying that he has promised, yes he has, with that grin on his face. He has promised to enact the legislation because—

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Madam President: Senator. Senator

Sen. J. Johnson: Oh, sorry, Madam President, forgive me. I am sorry.

Madam President: Senator, once again, I have to interrupt a maiden contribution, but that is out of order. We do not speak about Members of Parliament in any sort of that derogatory manner.

Sen. J. Johnson: Please, forgive me, Madam President.

Madam President: Yes.

Sen. J. Johnson: I apologize, Madam President. I stand corrected. At the end of the day, we believe that the passing of the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill will allow the gaming commission to be enacted and it will allow for the receipt of accurate and unbiased information.

My second point, Madam President, the 10 per cent tax on the NLCB cash winnings. Do you know that the National Control Board only enjoys 40 per cent of the “Play Whe” market? In his speech, the Minister said that foreign Chinese and nationals are involved in gambling in this country. I will go further to enlighten this House, that the illegal “Play Whe” market is controlled by foreigners.

In his budget statement, the Finance Minister said that there will be an introduction of a 10 per cent tax on all cash winnings and it will be effective by December 01, 2017. It is expected that he will receive \$370 million from the NLCB annually; however, no consideration was given to games that do not pay cash. Now, the Ministry is scrambling to figure that one out. What about the small winners? If you win back your five or 10 dollars you will have to pay tax on that. Do you know that with this 10 per cent tax the NLCB is set to lose 70 per cent of its revenue annually?—that was quoted in the *Sunday Express*, October 22, 2017,

page 7. How much tax revenue would you really make if you lose 70 per cent of your revenue?

What is the purpose of this tax? Is this tax supposed to drive the “Play Whe” business further away from the National Lotteries Control Board? At every corner, there is an illegal “Play Whe” booth, illegal “Play Whe” person paying 34 to one, 37 to one. The “Megaball” pays 70 to one. Do you know why this error occurred? To use the words of the esteemed chairman of the NLCB, Mr. Marvin Johncilla, they did not consult.

This is what he is saying—the cousin of our hon. Prime Minister, who worked on the campaign with the hon. Minister, he is saying that he did not consult him.

Madam President: Member, “Senator”, please. Do not bring the relatives of Members into the debate.

Sen. J. Johnson: No problem.

Madam President: All right.

Sen. J. Johnson: Sorry again, I beg your forgiveness. I am a bit new, so please, forgive me. Thank you, Madam President. We do not believe in this tax, this 10 per cent tax on everything. What we are saying, tax the instruments or the products of the NLCB that pay huge cash winnings, the Lotto, the bigger cash pay-out items, tax those. And we are also asking that the hon. Minister consults with us. We are not against him, we are not against taxes. What we are saying, meet with us and treat with us and allow us to live, allow us to be in existence.

Madam President, we are talking about GTech. Do you know that \$350 million scarce US dollars is paid to GTech for blowing balls. GTech \$350 million scarce US dollars is paid to them for blowing balls out of a box. The Minister of

Finance made a contribution in the other place and said that foreign exchange is being leaked out of this country daily by casino owners. I was told that the major leak of foreign exchange through this \$350million, unfortunately, it is the Government.

As part of the substantive contract with GTech IGT, they were supposed to transfer technology. Up to now, not a single calculator has been transferred to this beloved country; all that has been transferred is US \$350 million annually.

Illegal roulette machines, they are everywhere. As you may have noticed, I have a cold. I was a bit frightened yesterday on going to the hospital that I would have seen an illegal roulette machine in the hospital. I was scared, they are at every corner, every bar, every restaurant. The hon. Minister in his presentation said that he is going to apply a flat tax of \$120,000 to these roulette machines. He said that they are amusement machines, and I am paraphrasing.

Madam President, vulnerable, vulnerable persons, children go to restaurants to buy food, yet still we have illegal roulette machines in restaurants. We need to remember the children of our society, roulette machines are not amusement machines. By definition, an amusement machine which bars are allowed to have a capped pay-out of \$5,000. The roulette machines, these illegal roulette machines, the Chinese illegal roulette machines do not have a capped pay out, they can pay anything, they are not for amusement. These roulette machines have contributed to the decline of the private members clubs' income—decline, Madam President, because at the end of the day everybody, including children, is running to play them.

Madam President, the Minister of Finance did not consult us before making his edict about this \$120 flat tax. We are asking, who stands to benefit? It is not

the casino employees. Who really stands to benefit from all these institutions or buildings—with illegal roulette machines becoming de facto casinos? We talk about proliferation in industry, it is unchecked, it is wild, it is crazy, but by legislating and by saying, as the hon. Minister said, \$120,000 flat tax he is going to make these houses, casinos. That is not what we want. What we are saying, bring the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill to the House and the legislation and control the industry.

Madam President, the club I worked for paid \$15million in taxes this year—\$8 million machine and table taxes, \$7 million in PAYE, VAT, customs duties, et cetera, plus \$2.5 million in bonds. This year has been a very hard year for us due to the economic downturn and sluggish growth. We do not know who caused it, but economic downturn and sluggish growth. Now, we are being asked to pay an additional \$8million. Madam President, 100 per cent tax increase to our core components of our operation.

When the tax started on gaming machines, electronic gaming machines it was \$500. Consistently, the tax has risen, it is now \$12,000, over 2,400 per cent increase. The hon. Minister wants to double that figure. Madam President, that would mean 4,800 per cent increase in taxes to the core components. It is no wonder that these smaller members' clubs have started shutting their doors.

Madam President, we have a recent example in Venezuela where the hon. Mr. Chavez increased the taxes by 40 per cent and that killed off the entire industry, 100,000 workers lost their jobs. We do not want to be like that. Dr. Darren Conrad he is an expert, he is a lecturer and deputy dean at the University of the West Indies, he said in his UWI post budget forum that we have gone on to implement a very poor fiscal consolidation plan. We are taking a limited one

dimensional approach: increasing taxes and lowering expenditure. He went on to say, what we are doing is very dangerous and could have a significant impact on poor households; households we come from. It will constrain investment and will have a long lasting negative impact. He said, look at the example of Zimbabwe.

Madam President, everybody believes, and that was mentioned by another expert in the gaming industry Mr. Eugene Christiansen, he said: everybody believes casinos are super profitable; they are the magical money pumps; they are not government by economic laws. Madam President, casinos are closing around us every day. He mentioned that as taxes increase, capital investment falls. What we are saying, do not, do not increase taxes to our industry.

In summary, Madam President, we are saying, simply, we want to keep our jobs, we want to feed our children. We have tried to access farming lands and agricultural loans and have been repeatedly turned down by all agencies of the State. We are in a recessionary period, jobs are hard to find. We do not want to become dependent on the State for social services, we do not want, as an industry, to be a drain on the country's resources. We want to remain as productive citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

We advocate the enactment of the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill. This would correct flawed information received by the Minister of Finance and anyone in the House. Tax only the Lotto and large cash pay outs; do not squeeze the small man. Do not encourage the unhindered proliferation of the de facto casinos by legislating roulette machines, illegal roulette machines. We are asking the Minister of Finance and his representative, consider reducing the current gaming tax to encourage employers to rehire staff that was released or dismissed earlier this year prior to the budget and post budget. We are saying, push

enforcement and collect taxes from the entire industry.

Hon. Members, putting aside all jokes, all picong and facets of our debate, please remember when you sign this law, this repressive, repressive, Madam President, excessive and regressive 100 per cent increase taxation to our core competencies, our core facets of our operation with the stroke of your collective pen on December 31st this year you will contribute, yes, Madam Minister, you will contribute to putting thousands of young persons on the street.

Madam President: Senator, you have five more minutes.

Sen. J. Johnson: Thank you, Madam President. We are saying that by signing that collective pen you all will contribute to putting thousands of young, productive people, young people on the breadline. We are saying, we are casino employees, yes, Madam President, we are proud casino employees, we are people too.

Madam President, I did not want to take any time from my contribution, but if I have a few more seconds I will reply to a contribution made earlier, I believe, it was yesterday by the Hon. Faris Al-Rawi. He said that we are coerced into coming before you or protesting. Madam President, I ask that you will look in the public gallery and you will see that it is full of young people who are here of their own free volition, they are not coerced in any way. Many of them came from since six o'clock this morning getting ready just to be here in this honourable House to pay support to this contribution made on their behalf. I will like to express my sincere thanks to them and I will like to let you know that they are in no way coerced. I am here on my own free, free choice because I value my job. I do not want to be unemployed.

And, Madam President, I thank you. You are very gracious. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Hon. Senators, let me congratulate Sen. Johnson on his maiden contribution. [*Desk thumping*] Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development (Sen. The Hon. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus): Madam President, it is indeed my privilege to rise and address this honourable House in this third debate. I have listened with great interest to the various contributions made by my fellow Senators—some I may agree with, others I definitely do not. But it is undeniable that this Government—Government led by Hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley—is, in fact, delivering on commitments and promises made.

But, Madam President, before I get into the gist of my contribution I would like to take just a few minutes to respond to certain statements that Sen. Jwala Rambarran would have placed within the records of the honourable House. I want to take the opportunity to remind my senatorial colleague that the problem that this country is experiencing with our foreign exchange began with him, it began with him [*Desk thumping*] when he interfered with the distribution, the distribution system of foreign exchange in this country. And I would like to ask him whether or not he did that to facilitate DFL, the owner of which is a well-known financier of the UNC.

Sen. Obika: Madam President, 46(6), imputing improper motives.

Madam President: Minister, you will have to present that in another manner.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you, Madam President, I shall rephrase it. It is very well known in this country that our foreign exchange problems began with the former Governor of the Central Bank [*Desk thumping*] who has joined us in this august Chamber, and we still suffering the effects of his

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tinkering with a system that worked.

Sen. Ameen: 46(6).

Sen. Obika: Madam President, 446(4), offensive language. [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Ameen: No. And 46(6), she is still imputing improper motives, Madam.

Madam President: Actually, Members, the Minister is making a statement about something that has happened. I do not think she is imputing improper motives at this stage. She is merely making a statement of fact. [*Crosstalk*] You seem to be interrogating me, Sen. Ameen. I think she is speaking about the changing of some foreign currency regulations. That is what I understand. Okay.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you, Madam President. I also want to ask the goodly Senator if he recalls defying and disobeying an instruction of the Cabinet of this country.

Madam President: No. Minister, please. Take a seat. Listen, Sen. Rambarran has made a contribution as a Senator in this Chamber, and, therefore, the Standing Orders apply. So that the way your contribution is being made is against the Standing Orders. So, I would ask you, please, to either present your—make your contribution in a different way.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: I am guided. Madam President, I think I have made the point that persons must not come to this august House with a holier-than-thou attitude accusing this Government.

Madam President: Minister, Minister, please, please. That is not in accordance with the Standing Orders and, therefore, I ask you to move on, please.

4.15 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Madam President, I am guided. Madam President, you know, I am convinced that our detractors on the other side would

stop at nothing to tarnish the work of this Government. I am convinced though that in the spirit of the recent festival of lights that we all participate in one way or the other, so that the PNM's shining light will continue to dispel the forces of darkness of evil. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, I am sure that many of us will be familiar with the old expressions our grandparents always taught us, that in these hard times you have to cut and fit the things to work. There is another familiar saying, do not hang your hat higher than your hand can reach. Those were principles upon which we were all brought up. And, Madam President, this statement is very apt when we consider the budget presentation made by the hon. Minister of Finance.

Madam President, permit me to congratulate my esteemed colleague, the hon. Minister of Finance and his team of honest, hard-working and loyal public officers; [*Desk thumping*] public officers who run this country. And many of us would recall when there was an 18-18 tie in this country, and there was a flux existing, it was public officers that kept the wheel of governance rolling in this country. So, we must be very careful how we castigate public officers. All these persons in suits in this august Chamber, they are all public officers.

Sen. Johnson: 42(9), Madam President, misrepresentation of speech of a Member.

Madam President: Sen. Obika, please! The Minister is making a contribution. She has not done that. Okay? And also, what you are saying, you are not standing on a Standing Order. Okay? Minister, continue.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you kindly, Madam President. Madam President, public officers, in my former incarnation I represented public officers. I know how hard they work. In my present capacity as Minister, I work

with the finest bunch of public officers, hard-working, they go beyond the call, and I felt really pained sitting here and hearing the new Senator talking about the public officers kidnapping the Minister of Finance and encouraging him to place certain burdens on them. So I would just want to caution my friend in that regard.

Madam President, I would also like to take the opportunity to commend our Minister of Planning and Development and her team for their input into this budget. I also wish to commend the hon. Prime Minister for his resilience that he has demonstrated in steering the ship of State through these turbulent times. He has been a beacon of light through which over the last 24 months as we as a people collectively, we have weathered the storms, and I wish to commend him for his continued, sober, steady and courageous leadership that he offers this country. [*Desk thumping*] I am also grateful for the confidence that he has bestowed in me in the capacity as Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development.

In that context, Madam President, I would be focusing my contribution on five platforms. Madam President, the engine behind the success of any organization, we can all agree, is really the employees. According to Steve Jobs, the only way to do great work is to love what you do. This powerful statement reflects the dedication of the staff at the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development who have been working tirelessly with me to re-engineer our core functions as we improve service delivery to all our stakeholders. I also wish to place on record my deepest appreciation to all our social partners, to business, to labour, and to the international labour organization, without whose collaboration we would not have been able to cross many of the mountains that we have crossed.

Madam President, I want to look very briefly at the state of the labour market. The last two years have posed significant challenges to our economic,

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undoubtedly. We have witnessed first-hand the impact of the declining world energy prices on our economy and by extension the labour market of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, the decline resulted in the closure of industries in the energy sector, and has contributed significantly to the slowdown in economic activity in the non-energy sector. Due to the concerted efforts of this Government to simulate job opportunities through the Development Programme and other avenues, we have seen a progressive decline in the unemployment rate from 4.4 per cent in the second quarter of 2016 to 4.0 per cent in the third quarter of 2016, and then to 3.6 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2016. We are not contented with these figures as we know that our consistent efforts can improve the unemployment situation even further.

Madam President, we are also seeing a glimmer of hope, a light at the end of the tunnel in the retrenchment rate where I have received, in accordance with the law of this country, once an employer is retrenching five or more workers that employer has a legal responsibility to inform the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development. Madam President, I have received notices of 1,134 persons to be retrenched over the period January '17 to September 2017, compared to 2,384 persons for the same period in 2016. For the period September 2015 to September 2016, I have received official notices to date of 4,829 persons to be retrenched. So that, Madam President, I was a bit confused when I heard the Member of Parliament stand in the other House and make a statement that 25,000 persons have lost their jobs already. It is very deceitful to mislead this House or the other House with data for which the source is not quoted and therefore cannot be verified. Nonetheless, Madam President, for me, one job lost is one too many. Madam President, we have therefore committed to assisting unemployed and

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retrenched workers through the implementation of a 10-point plan on unemployment, details of which I would share with this honourable House shortly.

But, Madam President, our difficulties in the labour market, it is not unique. In its World Employment and Social Outlook Report for 2017, the International Labour Organization estimates that the global unemployment rate would rise modestly in 2017 to 5.8 per cent, up from 5.7 per cent in 2016. This represents an additional 3.4 million persons unemployed globally, bringing total unemployment to just over 201 million persons in 2017. And yet, despite all these massive dislocation taking place all over the world, not only in Trinidad and Tobago, we here under the astute leadership of Dr. Rowley, we have managed to claim a notable success. We have not, as a Government, indicated that we can no longer maintain the public service. We have maintained a steady level of employment in the public service unlike all over the world. [*Desk thumping*].

Madam President, this Ministry of which I have the honour to lead, has a very clear legislative agenda. But I want to point out, that this country when it comes to increased innovation, we have improved. Let us not knock ourselves too much. Let us look at the positives also. We have improved in one year from a ranking of being number 94 for the period 2016 to 2017 to number 83 for the 2017/2018 on the World Economic Forum's Global Competitive Index. It is my sincere belief that with the recently constituted National Productivity Council, which is tasked inter alia with promoting and developing greater productivity, quality, competitiveness, we are well on our way to improve our lot. And at this point in time I would want to make a call to everyone in this country—we have a serious problem with productivity and also work ethic, and I want to make a call for all us to put our collective shoulders to the wheel and to work harder if we are

to get out from where we are.

Madam President, there is still a long way to go, but with every challenge comes opportunity, the opportunity to innovate, to improve efficiency, and to work together for the national good of this country. The Ministry which I lead is committed to seizing these opportunities to effect our core mandate of industrial peace, decent work, small enterprise development, and equal opportunities for all. In this context, I wish to briefly share on a few areas of work which the Ministry has been undertaking to place our economy on a sustainable path in keeping with the National Development Strategy, Vision 2030. And these I will address, if time permits me, under five broad areas:

1. Labour Legislation Reform;
2. Employment Promotion;
3. Small Business Development;
4. Promotion of Industrial Peace; and
5. Promotion of rights and responsibilities in the workplace.

Madam President, whenever I address the topic of Labour Legislation Reform in Trinidad and Tobago, I am explicit to state that it is a process which requires stakeholder engagement in a very genuine manner at each step of the process. This consultative approach which has defined our Government's approach to legislative policy reform as well as decision making, is diametrically opposed to the method used by the previous administration. And, Madam President, this was evident when the other side introduced the Industrial Relations (Amdt.) Bill on May Day in 2015, without absolutely any form of consultation with labour or business, and that stirred a great deal of protest. I think it was history making where you had business and labour protesting against the action of

the last administration. That was an insult to the working class of our country.

Madam President, one of my colleagues on the other side in the other House mentioned that I am hiding. I do not know at five feet, nine and a half, how much I can hide. But perhaps he would feel better if I shouted from the rooftops that in 20 months I have held 13 stakeholder consultations, and on nine out of 10 pieces of priority labour laws identified by this Government in this current term. How many did he host as Minister in the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development? My friend on the other side might feel better if I boasted that arising from these consultations we have submitted to Cabinet four draft policy position papers which would inform the amendment of the Industrial Relations Act of 1972, as amended; the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act; the Cooperatives Societies Act; and the Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperatives Studies Act.

Madam President, together with the competent team of public officers at the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, we have been working quietly and diligently to fulfil our legislative mandates—

Madam President: Minister. Hon. Senators, at this stage we will suspend. We will return at 5.00 p.m. Minister, you have utilized 20 minutes of your speaking time, so you will have 20 more when we return. So, we are suspended until 5.00 p.m.

4.30 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

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

Mr. Vice-President: Hon. Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development.
 [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you kindly, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, as I was saying before the tea break, Cabinet approved the policy position on the amendment of the Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperative Studies Act, and it was referred to the hon. Attorney General for the preparation of a Bill. A first draft of which we have received at the Ministry, and it is being currently reviewed by the legal team. A team of which I am very proud. A team that met its legislative agenda for the last year by 100 per cent, by a very hardworking loyal and committed team led by our senior legal officer.

Mr. Vice-President, if being in hiding could produce such results, then perhaps the Member of Parliament for Couva North who had the opportunity to serve for a time as Minister in the Ministry of Labour, should have availed himself of the posture so that today we would have remembered at least one action he would have taken to improve the labour landscape of Trinidad and Tobago. Labour legislative reform remains a top priority to all of us at the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development. We are committed to reviewing and modernizing the labour legislative framework, recognizing that it is the lynchpin of an effective industrial relations system, and we have been delivering. It is my commitment that by 2020 the 10 pieces of labour legislation we have identified for review or enactment in the current term of this administration will be addressed.

Mr. Vice-President, on this note, let me briefly address one point that was raised by the Member of Parliament for Couva North, concerning the simplification of the process for certification and recognition of trade unions. That issue is embraced in the draft policy paper with regard to reducing the time frame to at least six months. Additionally, the Registration, Recognition and Certification Board I understand, is working on streamlining its operations for

greater efficiency. It is anticipated that in the coming months more draft policy position papers will engage the attention of the Government, and draft legislation amending existing labour laws will be tabled in Parliament at the earliest time subsequent to further rounds of consultation.

Mr. Vice-President, I now turn my brief attention, given the fact that my time is limited, with regard to employment promotion. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is committed to promoting decent work for all in Trinidad and Tobago. Decent work encompasses job creation, the promotion of the fundamental principles and rights at work, social protection and social dialogue. This, Mr. Vice-President, is a commitment which is enshrined in the official policy framework, and in the National Development Strategy, Vision 2030. It is also in keeping with goal eight of the sustainable development goals which speaks to promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth employment in decent work for all. I want to spend just a brief—some few minutes on the 10-point plan on unemployment. I know that unemployment and the implementation of the 10-point plan have been foremost in the minds of my colleagues on the other side, and citizens. We would wish to remind that it was this Government that swung into action after being in office a mere six months into our term to develop the 10-point plan on unemployment in response to the increasing numbers of persons who were being retrenched and becoming unemployed at that time. This plan, the first of its kind in the history of this country was approved for implementation by Cabinet in April 2016. It seeks to assist unemployed persons and retrenched workers by empowering them towards reintegration into decent work including through job placements and support in establishing small businesses and cooperatives.

Mr. Vice-President, in keeping with Vision 2030, the Ministry has adopted a

whole of Government approach in order to achieve the employment objectives of the plan. We have been implementing the 10-point plan on unemployment through a programme known as Adversity to Opportunity. The programme includes strategies such as provision of seed capital and start-up business finance, operationalization of training programmes, and support for the formation of small businesses and cooperatives; the development of a marketing campaign to solicit new job opportunities, and the provision of psychological and financial counselling for unemployed and retrenched persons.

Mr. Vice-President, another critical aspect of the plan relates to an unemployment register. The register was launched on March 18, 2016, and it seeks to capture unemployed persons and retrenched workers, their financial obligations, job experience, skills and interest. The register is accessible via the website of the National Employment Service, which is a unit of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development. As of October 19, 2017, 1,300 persons were on the register. A quick profile of the register show that there were more women on the register, 61 per cent, than men. The majority of the registrants, 56 per cent, were non-unionized, and more than one-half of registrants indicated that retrenchment worsened their emotional well-being and household financial situation. In this context, I am deeply appreciative of the assistance of all our partners and stakeholders who continue to work with us in assisting unemployed persons in this country.

Mr. Vice-President, I turn my attention to the restructuring of the On-the-Job Training Programme, popularly known as the OJT Programme. This programme which has been making a great impact on the employment and employability of young persons in Trinidad and Tobago through a two-year training programme,

nationals of this country between the ages of 16 years and 35 years are afforded an induction into the world of work, and a foothold into the labour market. I would like to take the opportunity to recognize the visionary leadership of our former Prime Minister, Patrick Augustus Mervyn Manning, who introduced the OJT concept into Trinidad and Tobago, to ensure that young persons in this country are afforded the opportunity to obtain the necessary work experience during their two-year sojourn.

Mr. Vice-President, with effect from September 23, 2015 this programme which was formerly under the Ministry of Education National Training Agency, was placed under the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development. Since that time we have been focusing on restructuring the programme where the emphasis has been shifted from quantity of placement to the quality of training afforded the trainees. With effect from September 01, 2016 the stipends of the OJTs were increased by 10 per cent, which represents the fulfilment of a promise made by this Government in the 2015 to 2016 budget. A total of 5668 trainees have benefited from this increase in stipend. Of that total amount of trainees, 5109 are assigned to the public sector, with 559 being assigned to the private sector.

Mr. Vice-President, within the OJT Programme, we are doing more with less. Yes, the allocation for the programme has been reduced, but this is as a result of greater efficiency, and focus, and value for money. And, I want to take the opportunity here to point out, that nothing, no organization, no structure in this country has escaped the corruption of the former administration. [*Desk thumping*]
Mr. Vice-President, we have found ghosts even in the OJT Programme, ghost trainees, ghost bank accounts, totalling millions of dollars. That is an investigation that I launched last year, and that investigation continues. Millions of taxpayers'

dollars cannot be accounted for, and therefore we had to restructure the programme and put it under the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, as directed by Cabinet.

So that, Mr. Vice-President, when my colleagues on the other side want to talk and throw words, they have to be very careful. Those who live in glass houses ought not to throw stones. The OJTP was integrated as a division of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development with effect from 31 May, 2017, and it allowed us a critical review of the organizational structure, ever mindful of the need to streamline our operations so that those ghost OJTs that have been weeded out of the programme, totalling millions of dollars, we can now fill those places with real life OJTs, many, many young people. Young persons out there who do not have a job, who employers will not employ because all employers want you to have experience.

All those young persons can find a place in the OJT. We encourage young persons out there, who, you are qualified, you have your subjects, you have your diploma, you have your first degree, you have your Masters, there is an opportunity for you with the OJT, but you have to go in and register. We have discontinued for a short period online registration because of the contamination and the corruption that we have discovered in this programme, Mr. Vice-President. So that a lot of adjustments would have been made and would have to be made to the programme, and in that context we have undertaken a clean-up and verification exercise to ensure that all trainees on our system are real live trainees and not ghosts in the system benefiting a few persons. But, Mr. Vice-President, I will come back to this House and share the results of that report into the ghost in the OJT.

In this context, Mr. Vice-President, in the fiscal year 2016 to 2017, 5100 trainees were placed throughout the five regions, including Tobago. We project a similar placement level for 2017/2018. I foresee great achievements under the restructured OJT Programme in the course of this fiscal year and in the future. I therefore want to publicly commend the director of the OJT Programme for her tireless, loyal and honest service to the Government and by extension the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago.

5.15 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President, I turn my attention to the promotion of the National Employment Service. The Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development continues to focus attention on facilitating both employers and job seekers through our free employment service, known as the National Employment Service, popularly known as NES. NES is key in the implementation of our ten-point plan. And through its network of offices located throughout—*[Interruption]*

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

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President—throughout Trinidad and Tobago through this unit we have been assisting thousands of job seekers in finding jobs and preparing for the world of work and improving their employability. As a matter of fact, we also prepare secondary school students for the world of work and for the period September 2015 to August 2017, 3,042 students participated in world of work seminars conducted by this unit.

Mr. Vice-President, a key programme under the purview of the NES is the Commonwealth Caribbean Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme, popularly known as the Canadian Farm Programme. This programme involves the temporary employment of Trinidad and Tobago nationals on Canadian farms in the

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provinces of Ontario and Alberta, from January 01st to December 15th in any given year. Close to 1,000 citizens of this country participate in this programme each year and I am advising all interested parties, we are in the process of preparing another batch to go off to Canada and therefore they can submit their application to the acting Permanent Secretary of the Ministry to be considered for the next batch that leaves in January 2018.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: How many people?

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Up to about—we take 1,000 every year. Mr. Vice-President, this programme has afforded participants with both the skills and income to become independently successful. We at the Ministry are particularly proud of this programme because of the skills that these workers inculcate, they come back here. We know of one of our—one such worker who became an entrepreneur in Central, Mr. Dipsingh. I paid a personal visit to his highly successful hydroponics farm. In December 2016, we have showcased what it is he is doing and the benefits that one can derive, through the assistance of the Government Information Services. They developed a documentary and that was aired on television in 2017.

Mr. Vice-President, there is so much to say about the cooperative development and strengthening the programme; so much to say about the youth junior cooperatives that have been established and working very successfully; so much to say about small business development and NEDCO, which is being led by the former executive director of the Unit Trust, Mr. Clarry Benn, who is transforming the National Entrepreneurship Development Company Limited.

Mr. Vice-President, so much to talk about the FairShare Programme and the National Integrated Business Incubators Systems at the Ministry; so much to talk

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about the National Tripartite Advisory Council which was established by the hon. Prime Minister on March 15, 2016, just six months into our term. There have been problems within the National Tripartite Advisory Council, those problems have been resolved with the intervention of the hon. Prime Minister and NTAC has its work, its programme to look at productivity and work ethic; to look at the issues of socio-economic impact of retrenchment, including retrenchment and its impact on the industrial relations landscape; to look at initiatives to bring outstanding public sector wage negotiations up-to-date; to focus on government bureaucracy and its impacts on competitiveness and to also focus on income inequalities.

Mr. Vice-President, NTAC has a very clear plan upon which it would continue to build. So much to talk about the Ministry engaged in the rights and responsibilities at the workplace. The fact that the Ministry—we have in place a revised HIV/AIDS policy for the workplace which was launched in Trinidad and which was launched also in Tobago.

In conclusion, Mr. Vice-President, amidst the challenging economic climate and labour market challenges, the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development will continue to do its part in changing the paradigm, in inculcating a culture of value for money, in bringing about a change in the mindset of higher levels of productivity and performance and in establishing strong work ethic.

Mr. Vice-President: Minister, your time is up.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President.
[*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Jennifer Raffoul: [*Desk thumping*] Thank you all so much. As always it is such a pleasure to be here and to have this opportunity as a young person and as an economist to contribute to this debate. I want to really commend everybody that

spoke before this. I feel like the atmosphere has changed in a really good way, especially the first day of the debate. I feel like there is a lot more collaboration and, you know, sometimes we can see that a deficit is something to be so afraid of and then, in other ways, it really helps us to change the paradigm—no pun intended—and to really start changing the way we operate as a society, as a Parliament. So I welcome the changes. No one likes uncertainty and we do not like not knowing exactly what this year is going to bring. But I welcome that this can bring—be an opportunity for us to do better for our country.

So, in my contribution, today I want to go into four segments. The first, why a budget matters in the first place; second, give my interpretation of what the economic numbers are showing; third, give my commendations and also comment on where I see some risks that were presented within the budget; and, fourth, my technical recommendations on what I would like to see done differently in the future. I know we have covered economic debates in the past so I do not want to repeat everything I have said in the past and not add anything new. So, I am going to touch on some of the things I have said in the past and elaborate on some other projects that I see as opportunities.

So, the first segment of what I want to talk about, why a budget matters? How we spend money dictates so much in our quality of life. There is one part of Vision 2030 that I like. A lot of it I did not really like, to be honest, but the one part that I did like is around page 50 and it goes into the quality of life. There are things that you cannot always quantify and that Vision 2030 tries to quantify in some ways and there is overlapping stuff with the sustainable developing goals. But this part around page 50 was really, really, useful because it showed that our goals as a society are to make sure that all of us have an improved quality of life,

that we can all achieve our higher potential. And that sometimes it is a bit hard to quantify, it is a bit intangible, but I like that it was really all about community, family, spirituality, having the environment, not just the economic environment, but a social environment that we can all achieve our highest—[*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: I said, holistic.

Sen. J. Raffoul: Yeah, exactly—our highest holistic being. [*Crosstalk*] That is okay. I sometimes not sure exactly if the crosstalk is being directed at me or somebody else. So my apologies for the pause.

Sen. Ameen: “Doh let them disturb you.”

Sen. J. Raffoul: Okay. So I really like that part of Vision 2030. It was all about us as individuals achieving our higher potential. I also really like that we emphasize on local production and a lot of the phrases that were bandied about on Tuesday, the first day of the debate, like, the honourable—well, Sen. Vice-President, forgive me because your terms changed—when you had said that the same thinking that went into creating the problem cannot be used to solve the problem. That is something that I think is so poignant how situation now—how we can change things in the future.

I love that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries said that it is not about how much we spend but about the quality that we spend. And the example that he used with the farmers markets, I thought that was really fitting. I also love the emphasis on local production. I am a huge fan of local chocolates. I bring chocolates to every single sitting, so I always have chocolate with me and I am a big fan of anything that is locally produced. Sometimes we often think that things that are imported are better for some reason and I think chocolate is something we have so much potential to export internationally, so those are a lot that I like.

Regarding the diagnostic, my interpretation of the economic numbers; I prefer to use revenue and expenditure data numbers rather than GDP, because GDP can fluctuate really widely especially for an economy like ours. So in terms of the revenue and expenditure data, the IMF data which is all available on their website, I looked back to 1990 and I am going to focus on 2000. So 1990 was 27 years ago, so it is not particularly, you know, it is not in recent memory. But I chose that year because that was the year that we have had the first year of positive increases in revenue, year upon year upon year up until 2008. And as a student in econ, studying, learning that we were one of the few economies in the entire world to do that, from 1990 to 2008 completely unbroken positive growth; that, to me, was an interesting year. Of course, in the 70s we had the oil boom and in the 80s we had the deficit and the restructuring, 1990.

So I looked back, our revenue in 1990 was only \$5 billion and we have had successive increases since then, 1990 to 2000—2000 I remember, 1990 I barely remember. I was six years old. But in 2000, only 17 years ago, I remembered that because I was a student, I was in school, everyone remember their school days. In 2000, our revenue was \$12 billion; 2008, it was \$56 billion. We had slow and gradual increases but positive, strong predictable ones from 1990 to 2000 and then 2000 to 2008 massive increases. So now we are talking about \$50 billion in expenditure and these entrenched expectations. So it is interesting to go back to such a recent time period and see when did these entrenched expectations become entrenched and are they or are they not?

So 2008 is an anomaly year and I do not really like to refer to it because it was not expected. We did have increases in the expectations for 2000 to 2007, a windfall which is the opposite of a negative shock. So a negative shock is when

we have a decline and it is not expected. A positive shock is also called a windfall. So we have an increase and it is not expected. But there was an element in which we did have an expectation because we knew that the Atlantic LNG streams, one to four were coming on stream. So we were expecting that they would come on stream, we were expecting some increase in revenues and we had expenditure that was in fitting with our expectations. So that is the important point to note. And then we were expecting some of this windfall and then some of it was not expected.

So I think it was about 50:50 in the sense of—we were expecting the increase in oil and gas revenue, but it was happening at a time when global oil prices were increasing unexpectedly. So some of it was expected and some of it was not and that is the era, if I remember correctly when the HSF was created to make sure we had a buffer in the future. In 2007, our revenues was \$40 billion. So from 2000 to 2007, our revenues more than tripled. That is unprecedented. And you know sometimes we say, “God is a Trini”—I am sure that God has a little piece of land in Tobago and he is a chocolate producer on the side. Like, we are so lucky in so many ways.

So 2000, our gross revenue was \$12 billion; 2007, it was 40; 2008, massive anomaly year, \$56 billion; 2009, went back down to about 40. Technically it was 39.5, but just about 40. So 2008 not expected. Everybody else in the world is panicking and we are lucky. Everybody else in the world, you know, banks are crashing and yet we are gaining. So 2008, an anomaly year; 2007/2009, about 40. So if we used that \$40 billion as a benchmark and not the \$56 billion as a benchmark, for expenditure, I think it is more apt and fitting to use that. I mean, even then, you can say anywhere between \$12 billion, which is a 2000 year

revenue stream, to the \$40 billion. So it is a good benchmark to use, to compare where we are now to where we were then and that was only 10 weeks ago.

Also to say that, we had these massive increases in revenue but also it does not necessarily mean it was spent well. I remember that era being, the era also when there were massive grants to State-owned institutions; the murder rate went from 99 to 200 and something and then, gradually, three hundred and something and then it crossed over to 400 more recently. But I remember that era as being a time of mismanagement despite the fact that we had this massive revenue stream. And that was the era of the kidnappings, when everything started and massive crime and everybody was afraid. So, even though we had good economic numbers, we did not have good management. And then, more recently, we saw from 2009 to now, that we were expecting, again, this was after the 2008 financial crisis; we were expecting declines in revenue, but we were still experiencing increases somehow. So we had \$40 billion or so in 2009, and then we went basically up from then till about 2014, if my memory serves me correct—if not I can pull up the IMF data—and then that is when we started having declines in revenue.

Now, a point I had made before we had two things happening simultaneously. We had revenues declining just of the last two or three years, but we had deficits happening from 2009 onwards. So even though we were still increasing our revenue stream, we were overspending that. And I am glad now that we have this awareness over the last year or two that we can change the future. But when I think of the tone of panic that sometimes happen in the media, I think it is a bit unwarranted and I think we are actually not horribly off. Yes, we have a major deficit and I think we have a plan going forward, but I do not think that we

should be sending the tone of alarmism and panic to our population. I think that does us more of a disservice than a benefit. [*Desk thumping*]

Specifically, I speak to so many people who say that their kids are going to university and they tell them, “Doh come back home; Trinidad is nothing for you”. I am almost 34, I am here, you know, but for young people who are going off to school and they are being told by their parents, “doh come back”. And every time you turn on the news there is drama, there is negativity and the numbers are not necessarily in line with that need for alarmism. I think there are some strategies in place that are good, but I just wanted to give macro perspective of how the numbers now are different from 10 years ago and they are drastically not that different on the revenue side. It does baffle me a bit, how, on the expenditure side we had \$40 billion 10 years ago and that was being spent badly and that we had \$50 billion in expenditure and I am not necessarily seeing value for money. So there are a few things I would not go into.

I would like to give my commendations on a few things I saw in the budget that I thought were good. The pre-budget forum that happened a week before, I was not there in person but I really liked it. I watched the entire thing afterwards online. We only got the invitation the day before, so I do not know about the rest of you all, if you were there or not. I could not make it in person, but I really liked the tone of it because, to me, it was all about being straightforward and about genuine collaboration. That is the impression I got watching it.

I also want to commend the entire Ministry for their service; yourself as a new Minister as well as Minister Imbert. I know that it cannot be easy, the number of long hours and the fact that there is always this psychological aspect in the sense of everyone is afraid, because money deals with survival. I think that there must

always be a sense of urgency and a sense of fear from the population and having to deal with the technical, as well as that, must be a huge task. I do not agree with all of you and as a citizen I appreciate that you all are not responsible for creating the problem but are trying your best to solve the problem and I appreciate that and I commend that.

I really like—my favourite part in the entire budget was the grants for entrepreneurs. It was \$50million, I think it is great. I really like Sen. Creese's suggestion also, that we make it partly repayable by the entrepreneurs so that it goes back into a rotating fund and that it does not kind of imbue us with a sense of dependency going forward, as well as the fact that, then we are more careful for the entrepreneurs who are applying because we know we have to pay some of it back or a lot of it back depending on the conditions. I would like to see the criteria for this to develop further, you know, in combination with entrepreneurship agencies and entities. Start-up Chile, you know, was fantastic in its impact. Start-up Dominican Republic is trying to emulate it. There are start-up programmes that have done really well internationally, you can look at those as well as just have discussions about what the drawbacks are to being here in Trinidad and Tobago and how we can go forward.

The money that is being spent on culture as an economic industry, I really like it. At first—I would be honest, I was a little bit hesitant because I thought, you know, a live music district. I love live music, Trini music, but if we cannot run a ferry, how are we going to run a live music district? And I had this skepticism, not because of any reason other than this public/private collaboration mechanism in Trinidad, but then I learnt more about it and what I have learnt is that because the financing allocation is so small the programme is going to be

working with private sector hand in hand. And on Ariapita Avenue, in particular, as well as the other venues would have gone noted. So when I heard that aspect of it, it is how I really loved it and I just want to give my commendation for that also.

The overall emphasis from the budget I really like, in the sense that it was all about emphasizing, a rebalancing and reducing subsidies overtime. And again I want to commend the stopping of the rapid rail project that was—a decision that was made two years ago and I think that it takes a lot of courage to say, you know, we looked at the numbers again and they do not add up so I am not going to go through with it. Sometimes it takes more strength to not go through with something than to create a new project. And again I think it is worth commending. So those are the things I really like.

There were some things I see as risky. As I mentioned about the tone and the alarm that was given in the budget speech, the potential brain-drain impact that could come from it, as well as, capital flight. A lot of people—I also hear of selling their assets and investing overseas and I feel like if we do not change that tone that that could be a major risk for our country. Also I saw a lot of—I heard mixed messages in the budget. So, on one hand, I heard we are going to reduce subsidies and then the expenditure was the same as last year, \$50 billion.

I thought the statements about the RIC, the Regulated Industries Commission, to be a bit incomplete in a sense that what we were told is that, yeah, we are going to reduce them, but it is up to the Regulated Industries Commission, that is part of our Constitution. And yet when other things that were constitutional matters were relevant over the last two years, we change the Constitution. So we had a debt ceiling of 60 per cent of GDP, we increased it to 70. We change the Constitution. The Constitution is a tool in which we support our country's

development and there are safeguard mechanisms to make sure that there is no inherent risk to our population. But I feel like saying that the Regulated Industries Commission in charge may leave it completely up to them, was just a little bit too incomplete because it is our responsibility to say, we can change the Constitution, if need be, or we can work with them, but I feel that is something that we need to do and not just be dismissive of.

In terms of the diagnostics that were presented in the assessment of the economic numbers over the last five to 10 years, the reference to us experiencing a negative shock—as an economist, I disagree with that. A shock by shock by definition is something that is unexpected. We expected this. We have seen declines internationally in every sector and especially in oil and gas crisis, the entire world is going towards renewables. China is building, I think, a windmill every hour. I mean, there are solar panels in the Deserts. The entire world is changing and we just said, it is okay, it is okay, God is in Tobago. Like, we good. Everything will be alright and while maybe that is not, necessarily, a bad thing because it is a rationale behaviour if things are doing great now and we are a small country, how much human resources do we allocate to changing the paradigm, right? But that said, the definition of a negative shock we saw this coming, this is not a shock, we did not plan adequately for it.

And then on a slightly more positive note, I find it always interesting whenever we start a speech with looking at the problems and without looking at the strengths of our country and our economy. I love it, sitting here for the last two and half days, I have heard different, prayers and sayings and songs from all different languages and religions, reference and it is something that we all embrace and I think that the most beautiful thing we have about us is our country and our

society. The fact that we all come from different religions, races, beliefs and there is so much strength here, there is so much music in creativity and peace and tolerance and love and I feel like that is something no one else in the world really has. And speaking with the business who come to Trinidad and Tobago and they kind of see it and experienced it—maybe we take it for granted because we are from here, but I feel like we have so much unity and compassion towards each other, maybe more outside of this Chamber than inside of the Chamber, but I feel that is something that is really evident and the strength in our society. We always talk about problems but that is also acknowledged. I was trying—also creativity and music, local jewelry, local industries, local food, I have mentioned chocolate already; the only country in the world to create a musical instrument in the last century, steelpan, soca, calypso, rapso, I mean, there are so many beautiful things about our country.

One thing I did not like about Vision 2030, there was a part that was comparing us to Japan because in Japan electronic export is such a big facet of their economy. I do not think we necessarily need to compete with that. I think we have other things and other strengths we can compete with. And now they are, you know, they had their first carnival this year. So there are so many positive things we have we do not necessarily need to compare ourselves to other countries in the world when it comes to the negative that we do not have. So just because Japan has a high per cent of electronics in their export does not mean that we have to start targeting ours, if it is not part of our natural comparative advantage.

One risk that I did not elaborate on, I feel like there was some mixed messages within the budget statement. So, on one hand, we are being told that it is all about strengthening private sector and then other things I heard coming through

were still mega projects and constructions projects, in particular, and desalination plant in Tobago and in the post-budget forum, that was the day after, the statement that we cannot pull out of retail sales, example, was cars, because then the entire car industry would collapse. Things do not need to be done overnight, per se, yes, we do not want to have negative impacts on the private sector from Government reducing its over expenditure, but the mix messages, to me, were a little bit of a concern as a citizen. I feel like a lot was said that was later contradicting. I just want to make sure that we are keeping that emphasis on private sector being the engine of growth and public sector being more the regulator and facilitator. Right now, the Government is kind of both—it is a regulator and facilitator weekly and a project manager executor weekly. And I think that, in the private sector might be rent-seeking, you know, taking revenues where they can. And there is an innovation but there is also some distortions in the market because of that imbalance.

Government, I think, should just kind of go back to its core place as a regulator and facilitator and strengthening the private sectors ability to really be the project implementation in Trinidad and Tobago. In terms of the fiscal strategies that were suggested, there were three in particular that I wanted to briefly comment on. One was the change in tax rates for corporations, as well as banks and the gaming industry. And although, yes, it was noted that tax collections would be enforced, I have been hearing this for a very long time. I think it has been in 36 budget statements now, I could be wrong, but since I started reading budget statements 15 years ago they have been in every single one. That is, the emphasis on restructuring and strengthening Board of Inland Revenue.

5.45 p.m.

What I feel like we did instead was increase the rates of taxes on the industries which are being profitable and that is—it is an easier overnight option, but it is negative because it is unfair. It places a burden on the people who are already tax-compliant rather than on the people who are not paying their taxes. And the other negative is that it is a disincentive because if companies are now actually being—companies and other industries—are now being profitable, they might not want to show that they are being profitable. They might not declare their taxes accurately because, then, for them, if they show that they are doing well, that particular sector might then experience an increase in the tax rate next year. So we are having increases in tax rates on profitable industries and that might serve as a disincentive to other industries in the future.

A number that came up before that I wanted to reiterate is from the EITI. They did a seminar about a year and a half ago for parliamentary Members and the EITI is the Extractive Industries Transparency—Institute—Initiative, and they said that when they started tracking the quarry companies that the revenues collected in taxes from the quarry companies was only \$34 million that year, and the year after, because of the EITI initiative, the revenues collected in taxes from quarry companies is now \$1,050 million. So the quantity of tax leakage is huge. The AG said in a seminar that was to the Chamber of Commerce, June 2016—it is on the Chamber of Commerce's website—that the volume of tax leakage in Trinidad and Tobago is pretty much on par with the volume of tax collected. I think the hon. Minister made the same comments during her opening speech on Tuesday, that there is \$12 billion to \$18 billion in uncollected tax revenue. That was a study done by UWI, if I remember correctly.

So I would like to see that we really implement what we say we are going to

implement about the Board of Inland Revenue and increasing enforcement to tax collections. Because to increase tax rates just does not feel fair and, to be honest, it is not equitable. What is the private sector getting for the increases in taxes?

I really like—congratulations again to Sen. Haynes who spoke on Tuesday. The emphasis on the social contract and knowing that, yes, citizens have to play their part in paying taxes, where, you know, we are responsible to each other—there is a social contract—but also the Government in collecting taxes and spending it on our behalf, that there needs to be a two-way relationship and making sure there is quality and good expenditure. Now, I am not saying anything yet that is rocket science so I will try to be a bit more brief in my points in future.

So that was one of the fiscal mechanisms that were in the budget speech. The other one that I really wanted to comment on was the over-reliance of construction as being the solution to stimulate economic activity. To me, the way I see this is that it is completely wrong for Trinidad and Tobago. It is the wrong medicine for the problem. So in developed countries—I am thinking of the United States after the Great Depression—the increase in government expenditure was used as a way to stimulate the economy because the problem was lack of aggregate demand, i.e. there was not enough spending; there was not enough circularity of money flowing in the economy, and there was the recognition that this could be a solution and it worked. Trinidad, we do not have that as the problem. The problem is too much spending. So if we try to do the same thing we are going to spend more and, not necessarily, stimulate the private sector.

The other problem with this is that every time we spend public sector revenues, 80 to 90 per cent of that is spent on imports. So that affects the foreign exchange imbalance even further and that does not really stimulate local flow of

money. So it is the wrong medicine because it is not going to stimulate aggregate demand. It is going to stimulate over-expenditure and then it is going to have a negative effect on the foreign exchange.

Thirdly, under the category of fiscal risks is choosing golden sectors for diversification, in Econ there is a first-best mechanism for stimulating economic activity and a second-best. So the first-best is, it is hard; it is complicated and that is why we have a second best. So the first-best is having an economic environment that is conducive to growth. You cannot do this overnight, and that is why we have the second best. So that would be things like a functioning port, educated labour force, excellent education system, proper air bridge, you know, lack of major traffic restrictions and, you know, you have everything that is working—ease of doing business with the public sector. I think those are some of the things that Sen. Shrikissoon brought up in the World Economic Forum, Global Competitiveness rankings, that the environment for growth is pivotal to stimulating economic activity.

The second-best set of mechanisms is when we say, okay, let us have an incentive. So let us incentivize tourism or agriculture, or yachting or electronics; ICT, things that we have on our White Paper and our Green Paper on investment. So this second-best is somewhat rational in the sense of saying, okay, we know that if we stimulate food production, it is a strength for us. There is an impact underlying it, and that will impact other sectors. It impacts, because, you know, food security, better health, et cetera, as well as impact on other industries that are close by.

So the incentives that we have currently, sometimes they are hard to access. For example, when it comes to cultural incentives, if you are doing a feature length

film, you are eligible for the incentives, but if you are doing short films, you are not eligible. So you then would have to go through the effort of repackaging your short films into a feature length film to be eligible for the incentives under Film TT. If you are applying for the cultural incentives—it is a quite substantial incentive, I think it is 150 per cent tax allowance for your expenditure—the criteria for that, it will fund publications but it would not support websites. And, in 2017, websites and social media are really critical to doing growth-oriented industries in an international forum.

One colleague pointed out recently, Barbados does not necessarily promote itself to its regional neighbours but what they do is they have Rihanna as an ambassador and, you know, she posts stuff on social media and it is seen by an international audience. So not using social media and not having social media and even websites, which are kind of within the category of social media; not having updated mechanisms of international dissemination be eligible for these incentives, is a deterrent to young entrepreneurs that are within these sectors.

I was also a little bit concerned about the housing sector incentives that were mentioned in the budget. The day after the Chamber of Commerce had their very controversial budget forum—post-budget forum—the Minister said during the Q & A regarding the housing incentives that he spoke to colleagues in housing and he said, “What can we do as a Government to help stimulate the housing sector”? And colleagues said, “Nothing.” They said, “We do not need anything.” I think, if I remember correctly, he said that it was more about—they referred to more the Town and Country approvals and being able to strengthen the entire system, but not requiring financial incentives as much. And yet one of the main things that was pointed to in the budget was this financial incentives for housing development

companies.

So maybe there was more that was not elaborated on, but when I watched the forum, as a citizen, I thought, well, was this a one-sided set of incentives from the Government? How did these incentives come to be? What was the process? And are they needed? Are they going to make a difference? Or is it going to be contributing to further leakage, further FX imbalances, because they are going to be importing construction materials? Is it going to be more of a negative and is it going to be causing a distortion in the housing market so that costs might not come down after all?

On the expenditure side, I wanted to talk about the waste-to-energy plants briefly. How much time do I have left, Mr. Vice-President?

Mr. Vice-President: You have just a little bit over six minutes.

Sen. J. Raffoul: Okay. Wow. Time flies. Well, I have about four or five more points to make so I have to be extremely brief.

Sen. Richards: Welcome to the club.

Sen. J. Raffoul: I know.

Hon. Senator: One point a minute.

Sen. J. Raffoul: Okay, I gotcha. So waste-to-energy plants, SWMCOL recently did a really great recycling initiative with the Tunapuna Regional Corporation and I learnt a lot more, after seeing this, about exactly how waste management and collection works. This is something I am really passionate about because I have had a lot of health issues in the past. In addition to studying Econ, I also study Yoga and Integrative Nutrition and my entire family has had major health issues. My mom has an auto-immune disorder and my dad and his entire family have had cancer and, a few years ago, I was diagnosed with an auto-immune—a precursor to

an auto-immune condition.

So I have had to really learn a lot more about environmental chemicals and environmental toxins and how they impact on health and how they can be removed from the environment without necessarily having such a negative impact on us. In a way, I was lucky because my parents could tell that I was sick about three years ago. I just looked sick, and I kept saying, “Oh, it is fine; it is fine; I will figure it out.” And they dragged me to the States to go to a functional medicine doctor and I did a variety of different tests and one of those was on heavy metal toxicity, and I found that I have heavy metals in my body, which I was surprised at because I was eating an impeccable organic diet at the time. At the time I was vegan so I was not even eating fish, like, you know, no high sources of anything. And I just learnt from that, that organic food is usually affected by mercury if it is imported from the States because of coalmines, and a lot more about health and the impact of environmental chemicals.

Given that I have a very short amount of time, forgive me, I am just going to make this point quickly. So SWMCOL right now receives \$75 million in allocations annually. They received the same value since 2009, and what they are in charge of is waste disposal. The regional corporations, though, get \$280 million every year and they are in charge of waste collection. So we do not have one entity doing both. We have two entities working collaboratively doing different things. I think, too—and SWMCOL is underfunded. Their waste management expenditure works out to about US \$17 a tonne per waste, and internationally the benchmark for proper waste disposal is 40 to 100. Now, it will be fine if we were doing it effectively at \$17 a tonne, but there has been waste leachate leakage and contamination of the environment. In the 80s and 90s there was a massive problem

with lead contamination in Arima, which I did not know until recently. And then also, CEPEP and URP getting, in total combined, \$1 billion in allocations.

So SWMCOL is being underfunded and because of that they cannot dispose of waste properly. There is a major risk then to fires as well as leachate contamination of our food and our water supplies. And that leads to more long-term health impacts in the future and that is what I am really concerned about as a citizen. The water supply and the food supply being healthy and clean is of utmost importance.

The Minister of Finance said in his budget speech last year that when there are cancer patients, it costs the State \$500,000 per patient. And then, you know, there might also be loss of life and trauma to the family, loss of productivity, but that is just the treatment alone. And, you know, in fitting with the broader theme of Vision 2030, it is about us being able to achieve our highest potential and not being prevented from that because of health and wellness concerns.

What I wanted to quickly conclude with was what I would recommend going forward. I have a bullet point list. I am going to try to be extremely succinct. Because we are taking loans, what I would recommend is that we look at loans from development finance institutions. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Senator: Go ahead.

Sen. J. Raffoul: Because we are taking loans, I would recommend that we take loans from development finance institutions, specifically the IDB and the Latin American Development Bank. We have taken a TT \$2 billion loan from the Latin American Development Bank and we have loans available from the IDB that have not been taken up yet. So the policy-based loans, the conditions are excellent—2 per cent interest and thereabouts—and they are based on a conditional policy being

brought forward by the governments. And the conditions are normally very much in line with the country being able to have full control of the negotiation process and the conditions being something that is already within the Government's stated objectives, so for example, a reduction in subsidies or renewable energy policy, or procurement reform. So things that are positive and things that are beneficial. So this is an easy and lucky thing that we have these opportunities; apply for these loans because of our current economic climate—policy-based loans.

Briefly, I would also recommend further cutting expenditure, innovative financial instruments for development, PPPs and social impact bonds, and a mixed-bag approach to the foreign exchange regime where we look at fiscal changes i.e. reduction in expenditure, as well as monetary policy changes, and taking a mixed-bag approach.

Because I have—I think—finished my time. I am very grateful to all of you for your time. If anybody needs chocolate, you know where I sit. [*Laughter*] And thank you all for your work and service to our country. I am very grateful to be here and to have this time with you all. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President: Who is next? Sen. Ameen. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Khadijah Ameen: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. Mr. Vice-President, I want to commend those—I want to begin by congratulating young Sen. Haynes, Sen. Obika and Sen. Hosein for their maiden contributions on this Opposition Bench, as well as to congratulate the two temporary Senators today. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President, I cannot begin my contribution without a thought for the hundreds, or rather thousands, of citizens affected by flooding in south, central and north Trinidad, as we speak. The Government's lack of action is really appalling,

to say the least. We have seen a real lack of interest led by the Prime Minister, whose excuse was that he had to be in Parliament for Budget Finance Committee. And that excuse, Mr. Vice-President, it really reeks of disdain, of a lack of care and compassion, and we got a sense that he really did not know what to do or what his job entailed. And today makes it, perhaps, seven or eight days—I think it is eight days—since we have seen these life-threatening floods. We have had 11 out of 14 corporations severely affected; thousands of homes under water; thousands of citizens without food and water, trapped in various places.

In fact, I read, I think it was yesterday in the *Express*, Kashib Ali, age 52, whose body was found in the Lengua River at Cunjal Road in Barrackpore is suspected to be a victim of floods having—until they do the autopsy, but he is suspected. And I want to express condolences to his family and to ask the Government to take note that this flood has, in fact, taken at least one life that we know of. And sadly, Mr. Vice-President, the response from the Prime Minister—you know, first he blamed having to be in Parliament for the budget; he blamed the ODPM; he visited one place and ignored the rest of the country and the very next day he was flying out. And I saw, I think it was in today's *Express* where—and I want to quote the Prime Minister where he said, some “idiot suggested that” he was flying out for his birthday.

Well, I want to take the opportunity to wish him a happy birthday and a safe trip, and I am happy that, ironically, the conference that he was attending, or is attending, rather, is for Co-operation for Prevention and Treatment of Natural Disasters. And I am certain that the Prime Minister has quite a thing or two to learn about disasters and coordinating a national and effective national response. But this has been PNM leadership, Rowley style. And we cannot help but compare

that to the reaction of the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, which really is, boots on the ground and action and reaching the needs of the people. [*Desk thumping*]

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Perhaps, Madam President, if some more of this Prime Minister's Government's focus was on cleaning watercourses rather than grooming golf courses, we would be in a better situation. [*Desk thumping*] On that note, I want to take this opportunity, Madam President, to wholeheartedly condemn the statement of Prime Minister, Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, in his budget contribution in the Lower House, in his outrageous defence of a \$3 million allocation for the upgrade of the Chaguaramas Golf Course, where he inappropriately and distastefully likened golf courses to women. Madam President, any society where women are disrespected is bound to lose its way. [*Desk thumping*] The statement of the Prime Minister is demeaning and disrespectful to the women and girls of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Senator: Shame!

Sen. K. Ameen: It contributes to an attitude towards females that leads to abuse, affects mental health and self-esteem; it lowers the female gender in the eyes of the nation. And while I am on that topic, incidentally, the budget presented to us is totally silent on gender development [*Desk thumping*]*—totally silent.* But given the numerous misogynist utterances of the Prime Minister and the apparent amusement of female Members of the Cabinet, gauging from their reaction when he made that famous comment—well, I should say infamous—can we really, then, expect any policies to come out of this Government to develop and empower women and girls? When women are empowered, families are empowered. Future generations are elevated. [*Desk thumping*] And in saying so, let me also say that

we must not leave our men and boys behind.

But I want to get back to the current disaster, the flooding—not the PNM—the flooding—that is facing our nation, [*Laughter*] and let us look at the difference between the leadership under this Rowley-led Government and Kamla Persad Bissessar when she was Prime Minister. Madam President, this is what the last government had in place to deal with disasters, and this was scraped by the current Government. There was the National Operations Centre, which was a centralized agency to ensure that all agencies could respond in realtime and without delay, so that there would be no glitches, no communication glitches, no response glitches or otherwise. And you know, it is so sad that—it is petty politics and perhaps a lack of knowing what to do, or a combination of both, that has caused the NOC to be watered down and turned into a subdivision of a spy agency.

The roles and responsibilities of the NOC were to control and coordinate the activities of the response agencies, the regional corporations, the fire services, the army and so on; to provide operational direction and support to incident managers; to arrange for logistic support; plan ahead to meet the requirements that would follow the incident and to supervise the direct implementation of the various ministries and agencies in this operation plan. And the ODPM would receive notification of incidents and potential incidents; assess regional or national implication and determine the need for the ODPM's intervention.

And so, we have seen the resignation of the acting CEO of the ODPM. But, quite frankly, I feel that the lack of response from the ODPM must be attributed to the person who sits at the head of the National Security Council, which is the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, because ODPM falls under National Security. [*Desk thumping*] What we have seen instead, we have seen the PNM

Government's response, which is really a sort of disdain, but I note a sense of cluelessness.

The day hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar was sworn in as Prime Minister, I remember that day she wore a green suit and, as soon as she took the oath, her first act was to remove the Coat of Arms from on the Prime Minister's vehicle and her second act was to put on her boots and go out there and meet the citizens who were affected by flood.

Hon. Senator: Diego Martin, eh. Diego Martin.

Sen. K. Ameen: And she went to Diego Martin, incidentally.

Hon. Senator: "Doh forget dat." [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. K. Ameen: Yet, the present Prime Minister said it was not feasible for him to attend. The ODPM said that their communication was not what it should have been. And, Madam President, based on releases and photographs, I understand the Balisier House has a cookout and a lime.

Hon. Senator: "Wooooo!"

Sen. K. Ameen: Perhaps it is something that the—are you still Chairman of the PNM?—might want to look into, because I wonder if that is the response of a political party that is the Government that is supposed to care about what is facing the country. And that is the stark difference between the PNM and the UNC.

And, in fact, I want to go further, beyond Government and Opposition, in terms of the political parties themselves. While the leader was out there meeting people, I also want to indicate that even without the resources of Government, the United National Congress was able to launch a flood relief team to do several things: to deliver hot meals to those who are trapped in floods; [*Desk thumping*] to facilitate the donation of grocery items, clothing, baby supplies, sheets, towels,

drinking water to those most in need; to assist with the clean-up of homes. And many, many volunteers, even school children—secondary schools—have been offering their service to help clean the homes, and particularly homes of the elderly, the differently-abled and the most vulnerable. [*Desk thumping*]

And I want to take this opportunity to thank—even yesterday I saw that a secondary school—Chaguanas Secondary—their Forms 5 and 6 were baking bread to deliver to those affected. [*Desk thumping*] That Form 5 and 6 class are probably doing more than the Government doing right now for the flood victims.

Hon. Senator: Shame.

Sen. K. Ameen: We also have a mobile medical clinic for the distribution of pharmaceuticals to persons with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, who may have lost their medication in the floods. [*Desk thumping*] And the response, Madam President, has been heart-warming. The outpouring of love and of help from the ordinary citizen is really noteworthy. And I say to the PNM, I say to the Government, hashtag that, #UNCwork, #TeamUNC. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, I agree with Sen. Rambaran who was former Governor of the Central Bank, and others before him, who indicated that this budget is devoid of inspiration. It really does take the country further into the abyss of—I mean, this sort of PNM hopelessness. This budget tramples on the middle class and the poor by denying them housing, health care and basic amenities.

6.15 p.m.

It fails to invest in diversification and to create new income streams. It puts further pressure on the already stressed population by reducing jobs, contrary to what I know the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development indicated. It raises taxes, it is raising the price of fuel, for example, which, in turn, leads to

increase in prices of most of the commodities and basic services. This budget also, Madam President, fails to address the rising crime, the failing public health care system, and further dismantles the social safety net which protects the most vulnerable in society.

This Government, as we have seen, continues to pull itself up by the handles while standing in that proverbial bucket, and Winston Churchill, President of the UK in the 1940s and 50s, has a very famous quote attributed to him:

“I contend...for a nation to tax itself into prosperity...”—[*Interruption*]

Yes, you know it.

“is like a man standing in a bucket and trying to lift himself up by the handle.”

Sen. Khan: You said that last year.

Sen. K. Ameen: I mentioned that, yes. That is my next point.

Sen. Khan: You could say it every year.

Sen. K. Ameen: I mentioned that quote last year, and this year, because we have not seen any change and any difference in the PNM's approach to its budget—
[*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: Say it next year too.

Sen. K. Ameen:—and if the Government continues I may have to use this quote next year. Quite frankly, Madam President, all jokes aside, the fact is that we really would have liked to see some innovation in the PNM's approach to budgeting. But this type of budget, this philosophy of the PNM budget is not unlike what they would have used in the past, and the PNM continues to approach fiscal management with measures which are proven to increase hardships and fail to stimulate growth and development.

The Government has taken official action during a time of adverse economic conditions to reduce budget deficit, using a combination of spending cuts and increases in taxes. That, Madam President, is the basic definition of austerity in A level basic economics, contrary to what, Sen. Lester Henry—who is not here at the moment—said in his contribution yesterday. In fact, he criticized those who were saying that the Government was implementing austerity measures when, quite frankly, what we are seeing and what he said is very different from each other.

On the other hand, we saw elements of stimulus being infused in the Partnership's approach to budgeting and we really had attempts to use monetary or fiscal policy, or stabilization policies, in general, to stimulate the economy, and it included measures such as lowering interest and quantitative easing which is proven to kick-start growth during recession where Governments use it. However, what we have seen from the Government in this 2018 budget is no different from last year's budget, and the philosophy seems to be tax, tax, tax, to impose stern harsh measures on the citizens. And while it has been said, time and time again, by many of our contributing Members here on the three Benches, the question is not whether you need to cut. The problem comes in terms of where you are cutting, and there are big questions with regard to this Government's priority in their spending.

Madam President, I want to use two very simple basic examples of how this Government's policy to cut funding negatively affects people's everyday lives directly and how it cost more in the long run. One, is garbage collection services—something many of us take for granted—and, second, is a reduction in spending on drainage. A couple of months ago, the Minister of Local Government instructed all regional corporations to reduce the number of days garbage trucks

service their areas. Some complied; some did not. Well, first of all, that instruction or decision was rather premature. The Minister, or in fact the regional corporation, ought to wait until they see the allocations in the budget to make decisions for the upcoming financial year. To anticipate cuts and to rush to take such actions was premature.

Secondly, it was improper for the Minister to instruct corporations. It is for the corporations to decide, and coming from a Government who has spoken about local government reform, spoken about empowering local government, I am surprised to see that the Minister would make such an intervention. But fast forward a couple months—and what you have in some regional corporations is that corporations had to find extra money to pay overtime, to engage additional staff to deal with a horrible garbage pileup, and to avert possible public health hazards and, of course, in areas where drains and so on would be clogged, to clean up those areas.

The second example is in Drainage and Irrigation, and on page 26 of the *Draft Estimate of Expenditure* programme, under Head 43, Ministry of Works and Transport, in 2007, \$34.5 million was allocated to Major River Cleaning—well to that Vote alone. You had \$34.5 million being allocated and \$4.5 million being spent. Unspent balances of \$30 million under Major River Cleaning Programme, Infrastructural Rehabilitation and Flood Mitigation, and Flood Alleviation and Drainage Programme. This, Madam President, represents a gross inefficiency by the Ministry of Works and Transport. The neglect of watercourse maintenance, flood alleviation, pumps, drainage, results in flooding which is affecting thousands, and even with the unusual rainfall certainly there is no denying that poor maintenance of our watercourses has a role to play in the excessive losses we have

seen—losses for businesses to the tune of millions, hundreds of families displaced, and millions of dollars in loss and damages due to the flood.

Last year, perhaps, I did mention in my budget contribution that we had a similar instance of unspent balances, and I know that the Minister of Works and Transport—I am sorry he is not here. I do not know where he went to, but the Minister of Works and Transport have had his hands full with scandal after scandal. You have the inter-island ferry. You have so many other issues with regard to inappropriate awarding of contracts, and relatives, and all kinds of things, and there are enough reasons for him to step down. I want to urge Minister Rohan Sinanan, wherever he is—I served as a councillor when he was an alderman at Tunapuna/Piarco Corporation—to save himself from this PNM before he drowns in their ineptness. On the other hand, I want to commend him for delivering on a number of projects which were initiated by the People's Partnership Government. He has been under pressure to deliver, and he mentioned in his contribution the highway to Toco.

You know, I found it so ironic that the Minister would point out the local craft industry, the cuisine, the village culture, he spoke about surfing, and the truth is that all of these things will be destroyed if you take a highway and build a port in Toco. You think that if you have a port there, you are going to have surfing going on? I want to ask if the Minister or the Government has had any consultation with the people of Toco, and if you are going based on your feasibility study, that is something you should share with us. The port in Toco will completely change the way of life in Toco. So the Minister is misleading us when he makes it appear—*[Interruption]*

Madam President: You cannot say that, Sen. Ameen.

Sen. K. Ameen: All right. Thank you. Well, it is misleading for us to believe that the port will somehow enhance the local craft industry, and the cuisine, and the surfing, and all those things that were mentioned. I want to move on because, quite frankly, the buck stops with the Minister. No matter who is advising you, no matter what studies you are going by, the buck stops with you! You are responsible for these decisions and you are responsible for these failures.

Madam President, I want to move to another area. I really find that this budget is another step in undermining or working against the institutional strengthening that empowers the average citizen, the small man, the middle class, and the PNM's approach and their philosophy toward governance has always, for decades, been one about creating a dependency to preserve their voter bank. The Vote has always been more important than the value of the life of the voter. [*Desk thumping*] And while the People's Partnership approach has been one of empowerment, and creating self-reliance and self-sustainability to work on hand ups rather than handouts, the truth is that many, many of our programmes were in areas where we traditionally do not get votes. Our approach was not based on where the Vote would be. It was based on improving the quality of lives of every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, and there are some institutions which bring about economic independence, which bring Government closer to the people that I think this budget fails to empower.

Credit Unions—with regard to economic independence for the small man, local government which brings Government closer to people, and the Land Settlement Agency. When we want to talk about a landowning democracy and earning your fair share of what is the state, the state really is the people and the sum of the citizens, and the Housing Development Corporation (HDC), and when

we speak about empowerment through creating a home owning society.

Credit Unions. I know there has been some talk in the manifesto and on previous occasions about legislative reform to improve credit unions. I do look forward to that when it comes, and I know that falls under the responsibility of the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, which I found weakened again the economic independence of the average citizen. What we had in budget 2018, on page 107, there was one paragraph really that, in summary, said:

“Corporation Tax for Commercial Banks

A new tax bracket of 35 per cent for commercial banks...”—effective 1st of May 2018.

So everybody goes yeah, finally.

These big banks who have all these profits going to pay 35 per cent corporation tax. So we are going to all pretend that the banks would not pass this down to the customers, and until there are proper regulation for bank fees and bank charges the banks will continue to dig out our eyes. [*Desk thumping*] Independent Senator Small referred to this as daylight robbery, and it is my firm belief that strengthening credit unions and co-operatives and friendly society is key to ensuring economic independence of the small man in this country, and some of you may know, and it is well in the public domain, that I myself am a firm believer in sou sou.

Madam President, local government. Local government reform has been promised in the PNM Manifesto, on platforms and here in the Parliament. The PNM hosted 14 consultations. I am hesitant to call them consultations because I attended several of them and what they really were—and I mean this humbly—they really were glorified town meetings because the majority of the

contributions—and Mr. Khan, you know this—were really complaints from citizens who felt that they did not get good service, that their drain was clogged, that they had potholes. Town meetings are good. I myself engaged in many of these as a local government representative, and later as a Chairman of Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, but I say that it is not a consultation because there was no draft legislation for people to comment on and, to date, two years later we still have no draft legislation for people to— You have been in office for 27 months—I am keeping count because the countdown is on—and in the budget under Head 42, Rural Development and Local Government, there is absolutely nothing to reflect the Government's stated intention to empower local government bodies, or to decentralize power, or to conduct any type of report. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, we have seen the hiring of some municipal police officers. Hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, I think you will see some challenges when it comes to the hiring of those officers. Even though it may have been done with good intent, several police officers were hired. Now, people would have put in their application, there were no interviews. To date, months after they were assigned to different corporations, you have had no training of those officers. So they are in effect acting as security guards, and I think this is an embarrassment to those municipal police officers, and an embarrassment to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. That, Madam President, is a feeble attempt, it is not good enough, and it is not local government reform.

I also want to suggest, you see the two words “rural development” in front of the name of that Ministry, just take it off, just take it off. We have not seen

anywhere in budget 2018, or in fact since 2015 since this Government came into office, any real thrust to develop rural communities. In fact, it has been the total opposite, and I say this because I really believe as the People's Partnership believe in decentralization—and it is not just about the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, but every single Ministry must be able to deliver to every part of Trinidad, as well as Tobago. But even in the absence of local government reform, it takes political will for work in local government to be done, and I recall being the Chairman of Tunapuna/Piarco Corporation in one year we had unspent balances of \$8,000—this is out of a DP of \$17 million—because we did our estimates even before the budget was read. As soon as the budget was read we put in our application for funds. So by December we were awarding contracts, work started in the dry season and we had projects delivered on budget, on time, to the people of this country. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, we also have LSA. I want to ask the Government to stop labelling squatters as just random lawbreakers. The Land Settlement Agency distributed numerous certificates of comfort during the term of the People's Partnership. Under the PNM we have had zero. The LSA is not about giving squatters free land. It is about bringing law and order, human decency, nurturing communities, and what we have seen under this Government is no regularization, no containment, no development. Today, I want to remind the Government of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25(1), which speaks about decent housing and a decent quality of life. I feel that LSA and its role as an agency in our society contributes to empowering citizens to earn, own and grow through homeownership, and landownership, and financial independence

I move to the public health sector. Madam President, my time is running out

faster than I expected, and I just want to briefly say that the allocation in the public health sector, there is not really much change and, to me, this is a loss because there are no drugs in the hospital, or in fact there are many occasions when people do not get pharmaceuticals in hospital, yet there is money unspent to purchase pharmaceuticals. This is not a savings. This is mismanagement, this is inefficiency, and it reflects incompetence on behalf of the Government to deal with the public health sector. Somebody is not doing their job.

Just today the CNC3 had a story where patients are required to carry their own glucose monitors and strips to the San Fernando General Hospital. There is a shortage of doctors and nurses, and the Partnership had initiated the Academy of Nursing and Allied Health in El Dorado, which had the capacity to train up to 500 graduates. With the dismantling of GATE and the dismantling of so many other training institutions, I trust that this will stay in place. But the waiting time for surgeries is way too long, and the external patient care programme which allowed people from the public hospitals to be treated privately in private facilities was stopped. From what I understand, the Government squashed the programme.

Sen. West, in laying the Bill, referred to a Couva medical facility, I am not too sure, but the name is the Couva Children's Hospital and it was built by Kamla Persad-Bissessar. [*Desk thumping*] I think maybe that is a reflection of her own conscience that she, too, believes that the hospital should be open.

Madam President: Sen. Ameen, you have five more minutes.

Sen. K. Ameen: All right. Madam President, I must speak about crime.

Sen. Ramdeen: We reached 400. We just reached 400.

Sen. K. Ameen: Madam President, while we have many sick children going before the Children's Life Fund for money for lifesaving surgery under the PNM

and being rejected—at least two babies we know off eventually died. In the meanwhile, the nation was informed that the bill of over a quarter million dollars for heart surgery for a Government Minister, a man of considerable wealth and the recipient of several Government contracts in the past under the PNM—
[*Interruption*]

Madam President: Sen. Ameen, please.

Sen. Khan: You speaking in—[*Interruption*]

Sen. K. Ameen: No, no, no. In fact, let me say that sickness has no political eyes eh, and I genuinely wish the Minister a speedy recovery. I will not call any names. I genuinely wish the Minister a speedy recovery and I am happy that he was able to get that lifesaving surgery, but here is the problem. Here is what is in poor taste. What is in poor taste is that applicants for GATE had to be subjected to a means test, babies who are in need of surgeries are screened and denied and then they die, but quarter million dollars for one person surgery.

Madam President, again I say, that the issue is not in the quarter million dollars for a Minister's surgery. The issue is the fact that babies are dying because they cannot get funding from the Children's Life Fund to save their lives. This disparity is an injustice and, in the eyes of the average citizen—in addition to that, you also have a lot of other inequalities, and double standards, and hypocrisy that will lead to people becoming agitated. You have still an unresolved, the Minister who is the guardian of justice, the Attorney General, who is under a police investigation for attempting to bug the office of an Opposition Senator. We do not know what will come out of that. That same man is alleged and widely—
[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: That man?

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Madam President: Sen. Ameen, please.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: 46(4).

Sen. K. Ameen:—reported in the newspaper. I could provide the articles of the children who were photographed posing with high-powered weapons and, to date, nothing. The perception is that the PNM is protecting criminals, protecting those responsible for corruption, and I am so sorry my time is out and I will deal with it another time.

To the Minister who talk about rape of the Treasury and thief, thief, thief, all I have to say, UDeCOTT ,under Calder Hart, who were the directors, and I have several papers with highlighted information. I am sorry that my time has come to an end, and I want to thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Madam President. I am delighted to rise in this House today to participate in the Appropriation Bill for the financial year 2018. I want to thank the Minister of Finance, and also the Minister of Planning and Development, for putting this together for this project. I want to say a special thank you to the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, Miss Allyson West, who is a southerner like myself [*Desk thumping*] for just falling in into the Ministry. Madam President, I never thought in my life that I would end up in a place like this. Never! It was never in a place like this.

Before I go further, Madam President, I want to say thank you, to you, for being a balanced President in this House [*Desk thumping*] and if I may say you are a southerner again. [*Desk thumping and laughter*] [*Crosstalk*] Only good people from south. [*Desk thumping*] You see, Mr. Khan, Mr. Khan is a south man too,

you know. Minister Khan.

Madam President, I want to say this evening here that I want to thank Almighty God for giving me this opportunity. As I said, I never thought I would have reached a place like this. I used to only watch on TV, television. I have not been in office one year now—at the end of this month would be one year—and I also want to say thank you to the hon. Prime Minister for giving me this opportunity to be here and also to serve as the first citizen in the City of San Fernando where I served as a Mayor and as a councillor.

Madam President, I started off almost as a labourer in the San Fernando Borough Council in 1980. When I left Naparima College, I went to San Fernando Technical School, and from there I went into the corporation. In those days, some of you all might know they had rubbish trucks with roll top. They never had compacters. You had to push one side through the rubbish and empty. I worked in that department. I started off working with rubbish trucks, then I moved to different departments. I worked in the personnel department, the health department, the audit department, the engineering department, the sanitation department. I worked in almost every department at the San Fernando City Corporation.

As I said, I then became a councillor in 2003, and then I became the first citizen which was the Mayor for the last three years, and then I ended up in this honourable House. I intend to serve the citizens of this country, and I intend to work with all the Mayors, all the chairmen, all the councillors and all the aldermen in the 14 corporations. [*Desk thumping*]

They have my full support and I know I will have their full support. I am in contact with them on a regular basis and we intend to work together to serve the

citizens of this beautiful country.

6.45 p.m.

Madam President, I am not ashamed to say where I started and I want to go one step further to say, and what inspired me to say this is I heard Sen. Johnson say he used to sweep and mop the casinos or where he worked. I started off cleaning the former Prime Minister's office, Patrick Manning, in 1971. I used to get up in morning, five o'clock, with a bucket—in those days it was galvanize bucket—"gazette paper", a mop and a broom. And when the hon. Patrick Manning, who has passed away, may his soul rest in peace, come into his constituency office, I used to clean that office and then walk to school from Coffee Street to Naparima College. So I know and I understand what service is like and I appreciate what Sen. Johnson said because I connect with him, because "me being in ah jacket here" and in this honourable House does not make me better than anybody else on the outside. [*Desk thumping*]

I had no intention to say this but I went to the washroom just now and I saw the newly appointed Sen. Obika and I was mentioning to him where I came from and he said I have a story to tell and I intend to tell this story so young people and people who feel that they cannot reach anywhere could reach somewhere. Because I said I never expected—I used to walk down on Harris Promenade and watch City Hall and never knew I would have ended up there and end up as the first citizen up there. As I said, I used to watch this on the television. So what Almighty God has for you and me, nobody cannot take it away, nobody. Nobody. And we must struggle in our lives to reach somewhere.

I remember—I mean, it is kind of personal, but my father did not have money for my mother to buy milk for me. I lived in a house where our living room

set was a car seat. Because my father came from Rio Claro and came into San Fernando and we started in San Fernando. So I want to let the public know this and know that you have a dream to follow and people will help you to get there, and when you get into a position, you must use your position to help people to get somewhere. [*Desk thumping*]

And as I said, I never dreamt about it and had no intention. I never knew the Prime Minister, I never knew Dr. Rowley before 2010, and he embraced me and he saw my work because my work speaks for me. “I am nobody special. I do have nothing to offer what nobody else cannot offer.” But one thing I know is that when I set my mind out to do something, I will get it done and I am sure the way you treat, people will treat you, and I come across people every day in my life and I have tried not to make no enemies because we need everybody in this world to survive. Everybody. Do not say a harsh word to anybody. Love your neighbours, love your wife, love your husband. [*Interruption*] Love God.

I went to a funeral. I mean, I have a speech here, eh. I went to a funeral where three people died on the highway. The funeral was a Saturday. One of the biggest funerals I saw. The “fella” died on his birthday. Three young guys. And I always tell people when you leave home, you do not know if you would come back. Hug up your mother, hug up your wife, hug up your children. You do not know when you leave home what would happen; you do not know. I watched that mother bawl and cry and I sympathized with her because you do not know what happened the morning when he left home. So do not take—comrades, I mean colleagues. Yeah, I was in the union too, I forgot to tell you all that. [*Laughter*]

Sen. Baptiste-Primus: Which one? PSA?

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: No, no, no, I was a daily paid. [*Interruption*] I was

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Contractors and General Workers Trade Union and I was a shop steward for 10 years so I know how to fight for people and so on. So, ladies and gentlemen, I just wanted to say that. [*Interruption*] Madam President, sorry. Well, I am new, so the President will give me a little leeway. [*Laughter*] [*Interruption*] “And I from South.” [*Desk thumping and Laughter*]

As I said, I intend to say this, so I will motivate other people because if I could come from working in a garbage truck in the San Fernando Borough Corporation then before it became a city, anybody could reach anywhere. Have a good heart and love everybody. Love, you must love, and love your parents most of all. [*Desk thumping*] Because the blessings you will get from your parents, you could get from nobody, and teach your children the same thing.

Madam President, today, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government continues to build on the foundation of all those previous Ministers of Local Government who have gone before. From 1962, where we started with Mr. Saied Mohammed and all that followed him after until Minister Franklin Khan. We had Kamaluddin Mohammed; we had Mervyn Assam; we had Suruj Rambachan. We had many but I intend to build on all the work that they have done. I am not going to sideline or go against anybody.

Madam President, I listened to my friend, Sen. Khadijah Ameen and she sounds very passionate because she was a local government representative and I am admire her for that. But I want to say to the Senator that I heard two remarks you made there and they were not correct. I never gave any instructions to cut down any working days from the corporation; that was not true. I usually try to be very honest in my undertakings so I could defend what—

Sen. Ameen: “Well, all ah them lying on yuh boy. They lying on yuh

then?”

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Well. But I do not want to get into that part because I never came with the intention in this House to attack anybody. I came to build in this House here. [*Desk thumping*] And what you said about the police was not right neither but I will explain that later on.

Madam President, I want to say a special thank you to my colleague, Sen. Franklin Khan, who held the portfolio that I am holding now and I have wholeheartedly taken up where he has handed over. He did a lot of work at the Ministry of Rural Development, as all the previous Ministers who have gone before. But I want to say a special thank you to him because he has stood by me and anytime I called him for any advice, he will respond immediately. So thank you, Sen. Franklin Khan and I know you will do good at the Ministry where you are now. But I think I will do a better job in the Ministry of Local Government [*Laughter*] because I have the experience, Senator. I have 37 years' experience in local government. I worked with the people. And Vision 2030 is putting people first but you know, when I was the first citizen in San Fernando, I put up a saying in my office, a phrase when I first became the Mayor and it was “Putting People First”. And I encourage all the councillors, all the aldermen, even the CEO and the administrative staff to put people first because that is the job of a local government representative. [*Desk thumping*] You must connect with the people.

Madam President, local government reform continues to be on the front burner and we will allow municipal corporations to plan better for their towns, villages, maintain their schools, clinics, social services and sporting facilities. In the coming financial year, 2018, the Ministry will use its estimated budget of \$2.381 billion to do prudent, transparent and specific spending habits in the

communities. As you may recall, the draft budget statement for fiscal 2018 provided the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government with estimated recurrent expenditure in the sum of \$2.99 billion; development programme in the amount of \$231 million; development programme expenditure funded from Infrastructural Development Fund in the sum of \$51 million. Indeed, these funds will go a long way to add value to the citizens through the many public sector investment programmes by the municipal corporations.

And, Madam President, I want to say people take councillors for granted and mayors and chairmen, but anything that happens, the first call they make is to a mayor, a chairman or an alderman and they work very, very hard in the community. I want to give a special acknowledgment to all the mayors and chairmen and councillors and aldermen of the 14 corporations. No matter what party you belong to or what corporation you belong to, they work very, very hard. I have here so much to go through, all the work that was done in each corporation, whether it is drains, whether it is roads, whatever it is. There is so much that they have done and I appreciate all what they have done and the public has to know what they have done too.

Madam President, in the second week of November here, as we finish at this level here, I have asked the Permanent Secretary to call a meeting with the 14 corporations and we are going to deal with productivity [*Desk thumping*] because for far too long, we have been hearing that “everybody want ah corporation work”. Why? Because they want to come to work for seven o’clock and leave at nine o’clock. [*Interruption*] [*Desk thumping*] I want to have discussions with all the trade unions, with the administrative staff and the meeting is carded for the second week of November. And as Sen. Ameen just said there, when they were in

Tunapuna, they put all their projects were done—projected and so on—done before December and supposed to be completed in next year.

So I am going to put that in place now, call out everybody, let them identify all their projects, interact with the community, find out what they want and give it to me in writing, because all the time, they get \$100 million to spend or \$12 million or whatever it is and you still have unspent balances going back. I want them to spend out all the money that is given to them and that is one of the major factors facing local government. They want to wait last minute to spend the money. You need to spend out all the money. “The people want drains, they want roads, they want sidewalks, they want things done in dey community.” [Interruption] Play parks, whatever. Yeah. We need to have—that is why I am calling this meeting. And one thing I must say too, I had a very good relationship when I was the Mayor of San Fernando with the CEO and the administrative staff and I am employed now at the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, I have the same relationship with the Permanent Secretaries and all the staff at the Ministry. So they work with me and we will get the job done.

Madam President, also—imagine I came with a speech, eh, but I am just getting confused with it so I will talk—[Interruption]—Yeah, yes, yes. I want to talk a little bit about the flooding that took place. It was plenty rainfall; a lot of rain came down, excessive rain and the community felt it. From as early as Thursday, I was not well, I was suffering from the virus and so on, but I made it my business because people want to see you, “they doh want to know yuh ha the virus or yuh ha the cough or de cold or a headache or fever, they want to see you”. And I wanted to go because if I did not go, “I feel like I was missing something”. So we went out there and I visited areas like El Carmen, Madras, Barrackpore,

Moruga, Woodland, Penal/Debe, Mayaro, parts of central. Where I could not visit, I called each chairman or mayor and got an update and I was getting updates every hour. So I was able to tell anyone who wanted information, whether it was the media or anybody, I could have told them exactly what was happening where and when.

Madam President, I want to say that we speak about love but what I saw out there that people coming together from nowhere, you did not have to ask them for anything, “they coming and they bringing food for you, they bringing water”, whatever—you cannot even imagine. I am walking in water four, five feet high and people—hmmm. I was so hungry someday down in Woodland and people bringing food in trucks, cooking it, I had to even take one and eat it myself six o'clock in the evening I ate lunch in Woodland from a Councillor in Siparia or somewhere. [*Interruption*] Well at my position, I do not see UNC or PNM, I see councillors and aldermen.

So they did all what they had to do and I must say a special thank you to all those corporate citizens and “even self” the ordinary person who came and made sure that somebody had something to eat. I remember seeing two girls in Woodland around 18 and about 16 and they were walking almost half a mile in the water four feet, five feet sometimes to get to somebody's home to go for food, and I stopped them and I asked them and I say “way you all going?” and they said “they going for food”. And you know, it breaks my heart to know that this exists. When you think you seeing trouble, “it have people seeing 10 times worse trouble than us you know”, and I asked the army truck to take them half a mile, somebody was cooking for them and bring them back home. And when they were coming back in the army truck, they were sending kisses for me and telling me thank you

and so on. People appreciate kindness. [*Crosstalk*] Yes, Sen. Ramkissoon. “You know ah never really talk to you yuh know” but—[*Crosstalk and Laughter*] She from south. [*Laughter*] “Well ah hata be careful how ah talk, ah hata watch in de audience and to see if ah see anybody in the background there”. [*Laughter*] So, Madam President, a lot of people gave back and I must say that we were out there and we were helping: the Ministry of Works, the Ministry of Agriculture. We had National Security, and—well Social Development, the councillors and the aldermen doing the assessment to see who need appliances and so on, and by next week, who bring in their claims, the councillors will interact with them and they will be getting their fridges, stoves, mattresses, whatever.

But a lot of corporate people—look like, at the Ministry, I made a call and people called me and they gave mattresses; Kiss Bread gave me about 3,000 loaves, we took it around to the community. Tomorrow morning, I am going out again. It is only because I had Senate, I am not going out, I prefer to out there than here. I really like being out there with the people—[*Crosstalk*] Yeah. So tomorrow, we will be out there again, first thing in the morning and trying to assist people and CEPEP is coming now to help people clean up and power-wash; help them move their old furniture. The corporations will be coming around because now is the time people need disinfect, and I am making an appeal—and I know people watching here—to give disinfect, bleach, garbage bags, mops and brooms. Please give it to the corporations or to the people who are affected. And I must say people show and they give. You know, there is a joy in giving than receiving. You all know that? There is more joy in giving than the one who is receiving. I know that and the people out there feel so happy when they get something. You must always give.

Madam President, one thing when I was at the Ministry, when I now came in there, one thing I decided to do was to form a volunteer network in each corporation and it worked. Because when I was the Mayor of San Fernando, I formed a volunteer network there and it really worked. When Haiti was seeing trouble, I put one container in front of City Hall and I asked for the community to help and people came from all over Trinidad. And you know how many containers I filled? Fourteen containers, 14 40-foot containers. [*Desk thumping*] People came from Toco/Sangre Grande, Penal, Cedros, anywhere you could think about, Diego Martin and they just wanted to give and give and we just had to get containers and containers. And the people who gave the containers volunteered so it did not cost us nothing.

So I came up with the idea—not knowing that I would end up in this Ministry—to use that same template to get that done and the last volunteer network I launched was in Princes Town and they filled almost a container to Dominica. And the volunteer network is not only for helping the less fortunate and so on—yeah, it is for that too but I remember we did something else again where we had a “Day of Care” for the homeless people and I know because some—I remember Sen. Ramdeen saying that he “does cook food for the homeless people in south on ah weekend” and we did this “Day of Care” in San Fernando and you would be amazed to know how many senior doctors and nurses came out and gave of their time for two days, a Saturday and a Sunday, in San Fernando and people cut the hair of the homeless and gave them clothes and so on. It was something so beautiful to see that, you know, “people take these people and see them on the road and you throw food for them on the ground and—yuh doh treat human beings like that”. So we did that.

And out of that “Day of Care”, something came up in San Fernando where businessmen came together and decided to put up a place, a building, something like a soup kitchen, and four or five contractors came together and we put up this building in San Fernando, so people would not throw food on the ground and give you a soft drink on the ground and you have to lie down on the ground. I did like that so I decided to do that. But what I intend to do because it is one year now and nothing has happened with the building so I want them to use it and I am going to call a meeting with the Mayor of San Fernando to ensure that they get that building into the action because people need help.

Madam President, when I took up this office in November, it was just after the local government election and you know how the saying goes. “Everybody say they doh see they councillor” and I know that because when I was a councillor and I use to go and see everybody every weekend, try and visit every household. “I used to take a month and do that.” But you go for the whole month and “they still saying they eh seeing yuh”. Right? [*Interruption*] You will know that. Even Members of Parliament, that will happen to

So I decided to do a national clean-up campaign in Trinidad and I started in January of this year. I made a call to the business community and contractors and the corporate citizens to donate their equipment and their time to come and help Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, I could not believe the overwhelming support that the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government got. We got backhoes, excavators, we got dump trucks. I could not believe the amount of equipment we got. We went around the whole of Trinidad and Tobago and did the most we could do. All corporations were involved: mayors, chairmen, aldermen, everybody. Even Members of Parliament on both sides were involved because this

had no discrimination with anybody. “Yuh come out” and I was glad to see that the Members of the Opposition came and took part and were a part of this clean-up campaign. “Yuh know, dais wah we want.”

I heard Sen. Richards said something, his closing-off comments, and it reminded me, if we come together in this country for the people, we will really achieve something, you know; we cannot fight all the time. [*Interruption*] Yeah, we could achieve it. Because I am in this House here and I am not going to fight nobody, I am going to fight for the people of this country, and I am not going to fight the Opposition. I will use this office and this House here to fight for the people who are out there because the people need us.

So the national clean-up campaign was very successful. I never boasted about it. I never told anybody anything because schools were involved, NGOs were involved, religious organizations were involved. No matter what organizations, everybody was involved. So the first time I am going to say today, I am going to reveal to the national public that with this clean-up campaign that we had, it saved this country over \$150 million. [*Desk thumping*] It is the first time that I reveal these figures today. Over \$150 million.

Madam President, we dealt with derelict vehicles. We picked up over about 5,000 derelict vehicles throughout Trinidad and Tobago and I am sure there are 10 times that amount still outside there. We dealt with dilapidated buildings across the country and we dealt with tyres. Tyres that people had all over the country, just throwing them all over the place there. We cleaned up tyres. We cleaned open lots, we cleaned drains. And I must say everybody took part. I cannot believe in some areas, people just came out and was helping put up “they old stove and fridge” on trucks and so on. The last time this happened I think was in the

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NAR time. How many years ago? That was—*[Interruption]*

Sen. Ameen: We had one in 2010. Clean and beautify campaign for the whole country.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Well, I remember this on a large scale was with NAR. *[Laughter]* Under Robert Mayers, I think.

Sen. Khan: NAR in '86.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yeah, NAR in 1986. And you know, this was so successful that I used to look forward to going to these corporations because we used to do the clean-up for the week and I miss it. So what I am going to do now—because everybody was involved. What I am going to do, I am going to ask—the dry season is coming up, I am going to ask each corporation to do it individually now because it will give them a chance to interact with the people who put them in office. It will give them a chance to be—

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

7.15 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam President, I have 30 pages here, “I ain read one yet, yuh know.” I want to say something, Madam President. Municipal police plays a very significant role in each municipality. The Ministry continues to work in close collaboration with the Ministry of National Security, Service Commissions Department and the Statutory Authorities Service Commission to develop and implement a system that will expand our municipal police. Cabinet approved for recruitment, selection and filling of 1,107 municipal police positions in June 2016. This initiative will ensure that municipal corporations are staffed with no less than 100 municipal police.

I am happy to report that in fiscal year 2018, we will have new police

constables trained and ready to assume duty. In February of this year, we advertised for the position of municipal police constable and received over 4,000 applications. After shortlisting, 541 of those candidates were selected to write the examination, with a total of 488 passing and moving into the interview phase.

In the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service they are supporting us in the interview process. Once these candidates are cleared to begin training, the Office of Law Enforcement Policy will start a rigorous four-month training process, which has been tailor-made to suit the responsibilities of municipal police. Interviews for these 488 candidates began on Wednesday, 9th August, and continue throughout this month with a panel consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, National Security, OLEP and the Service Commissions. So, Madam President, I want to say that this is ongoing and we will have these municipal police in the system for sure, and just like how Sen. Ameen spoke about the local government reform; local government reform was promised on or before 2019. It is in the legislative process right now at the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and, Madam President, and Members I want to say that there will be local government reform. [*Desk thumping*] So we will enter into the next local government election with local government reform.

Madam President, I just want to say that it is a privilege for me to be here to work with you and all the Members in the House present. I want to remind myself and remind all of us here that this job is a temporary job. You do not know when it is your last day, because you have a leader and you have your family, and I want to encourage you all to put your family first. Because after this job you have to go back to your family. Right?

I want to say before I close, I want to thank Sen. Johnson—you were out when I was speaking—that I connected with you because “just as you used to sweep and mop and clean” that is where I started off. And right now, I am cleaning and sweeping the whole country. [*Desk thumping*]

I started off cleaning in 1971 and this is 2017, and I am cleaning and I would not stop cleaning because that is my calling. So to the young Senators, the three new young Senators there, I want to say congratulations to you and I wish you all the best and always look for the positive in people and the good that they have to offer. Madam President, it is a pleasure working here and when I heard Sen. Raffoul speaking just now—

Madam President: Minister, I am sorry, but your time is up. [*Desk Thumping*]

Hon. Senators, I am sure you are going to join with me in congratulating the Minister on his maiden speech. [*Desk thumping*]. Minister in the Ministry of Finance.

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, like my colleague from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, I too never expected to be here. But I welcome the challenge, and I look forward to serving the country.

Madam President, I was fortunate that many of my colleagues addressed a lot of the issues raised, so that has limited what I have to address and I will try to address the outstanding issues, with time permitting.

Before I do that, Madam President, I too would like to congratulate the new Senators and the temporary Senators. I would like in particular to congratulate my colleague, the Minister of Public Utilities who I thought had a very outstanding maiden contribution. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, Sen. Wade Mark, who is not here today, I do not remember if he is ill or out of the country, but he raised a couple of issues. He raised concerns regarding the use of the foreign exchange by Republic Bank. I would leave Republic Bank to deal with the veracity or otherwise of that, but if there is a genuine concern, I would suggest he raise it with the Central Bank, which is where we have a Governor there who is interested in and committed to controlling the foreign exchange situation, and I would recommend that he go there.

The oil and gas price, I would like to thank Sen. Khan and Sen. Small for, I think, very adequately dealing with that. The Government is confident that we have identified a very realistic price and we think that the budget is soundly based on that.

Increases in super and diesel: Madam President, the Government has no desire to put undue burdens on the population. But I recall, shortly after your last Minister of Finance came into power he indicated to the country, via a presentation to the TT Chamber that he recognized the need to remove the subsidies on gas. He said he would start with premium, which he did, but it seemed he did not have the fortitude to follow through. This Government was left to take on that difficult task because we do not have a choice. We are spending \$800 million on gas and oil subsidies. We cannot afford it. So it is not being irresponsible. It is in fact being responsible. It is allowing us to retain some of the funds that we will otherwise spend, to direct them to specific purposes which would benefit those most in need. So I do not see how you can responsibly challenge that position.

Sen. Roach—I am sorry that he is not here—asked the question about the status of the CSO reform, and I would like to indicate to him that the National

Statistical Institute is to be launched by the middle of next year. The project to get it off the ground is currently being undertaken by Dr. John Prince leading an implementation team, which includes labour, business, public servants.

I feel his pain with respect to the Hasely Crawford and the Jean Pierre facilities and I undertake to speak to the Minister of Sport, so that when he comes back next year he will not have to repeat it. I also feel his pain regarding the differently-abled and he was not here for the AG's contribution yesterday when the AG said that the Bill to deal with that issue is going to come before the House shortly.

Sen. Dhanayshar and a couple of the other Independent Senators raised some interesting suggestions. We always welcome suggestions. We pay attention to them. We listen. We may not agree that they are all workable or that they are all relevant for this time, but we will take them on board, we will consider them and we will determine what we would use.

I liked Sen. Richard's reference to looking at a more social-media-type approach to the TTT concept and certainly something we are focusing on. Because we are using a nostalgic name does not mean we will operate TTT the way it was operated in the past.

Sen. Small raised the issue and a couple of other Senators raised the issue of the bank passing on the increase in taxes. I know that is a concern. I would just like to let you know that consideration is being given to addressing the issue of the escalation in charges and we will advise you after determination is made.

Another pet peeve you have is the electronic payments. I know that. My colleague, the Minister of Works and Transport, I understand assured you that we are fixing the problem before the end of the year in the Licensing Authority. I am

committed, when the Revenue Authority comes in, to ensure that electronic payments are properly on board at that time. It makes no sense for me, that in 2017, the Board of Inland Revenue is still receiving millions of dollars in the personal cheques. The time it takes to certify that and to get the cash flow in the Government's hands makes no sense. We are dealing with that, and it is an issue that all of the Ministries are dealing with.

Sen. Chote, the issue of the seed funding and ensuring that people are able to access it, know how to use it, are properly trained, we are dealing with that. The Minister of Trade and Industry is looking at her constituents in that context and ensuring that where they need help in beefing up their business skills, that is going happen. So, hopefully we will not see a repeat of the prior experience.

Processes and efficiencies, we are also seeking to address that. I am hoping that you will see a transformation in that regard, when the Revenue Authority is introduced. I go back to that because it is a particular passion of mine. But just to indicate that it is an issue that we aware of, and we are working to address it.

Petrotrin restructuring, what does it mean? It does not mean the sale of assets. We have a board, a new board in which the Government has confidence. They are going to look at the issue of Petrotrin and determine how best to treat with it. So when that determination is made, we will inform the citizenry as to what the plans are.

Sen. Obika, you mentioned the under-collection of VAT and income tax. Sen. Hosein—that it is a taxing budget. A lot of other people referred to this “taxing budget”, and I do not see the basis for that conclusion. What taxes have we introduced? We have made a deliberate decision to not increase the tax burden of the majority of the citizenry. We have gone, we have looked at collecting taxes

which we need, because we have to replace the mass of taxes lost from the energy sector and elsewhere. So we have no choice but to seek to increase our revenue. And what we have tried to do was ensure that the vulnerable are not touched. An option, which many countries impose in a situation like this—increase income tax, burden the employees more. We have stayed away from that. Income tax remains where it is.

So what taxes have we in fact imposed? We have imposed a 30 per cent tax across the board on companies. But that means an additional tax burden, maximum tax burden on companies, of \$50,000 a year, full stop. That is all that measure will generate in taxes. We have imposed a 35 per cent tax on the banks. And, yes, that it is a significant increase, but we are of the view that the banks can pay the increase. And if they can pay the increase then it will benefit all of us, why not? So that the—I am of the view that that is a reasonable measure in these difficult times and I really would like to see you being responsible and accepting that position.

We have imposed a 12.5 per cent royalty on the oil companies. Again, who can dispute that the oil companies are able to bear the burden of an additional tax, especially having regard to the fact that for the next five years, unless we do something we are not expected to pay any tax of consequence. So why should they not, when they are extracting our wasting resource, make a contribution to the coffers? [*Desk thumping*] That cannot be seen to be unreasonable. [*Interruption*]

Exactly, thank you, Sen. Small. We would be irresponsible if we just let them take the wasting resources and not receive any benefit for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So what is the problem with the imposition of these taxes? I cannot understand it. “We taxing de poor.” “We cannot tax our way out of this.”

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What is that about? The next—

Hon. Senator: You have not dealt with the—[*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: I am getting there. I am getting there. Give me a minute. I am sorry, Madam President.

The next group of people that we have taxed, the gaming establishments. Sen. Johnson, I feel your pain. I feel the pain of Betty, or I think that is the lady's name who you chose. As I said, the Government made a deliberate decision not to interfere with the tax burden on individuals. So we were trying to protect that group of people. I am astounded that the entity on whom we placed the tax is threatening the employees with bearing the full burden of that tax. Why are they saying that you must go home because they must pay more tax?

You indicated, you gave me an example of the fact that they already pay tax—\$18 million, you said. Eight million was on the gaming tables and a lot of the balance was on PAYE. The gambling establishments do not pay PAYE, Sen. Johnson. That comes from your salary. You pay that PAYE. So why, in light of that, can they not contribute a little more? What taxes do the gaming industry members pay? They pay import duty on the machines that they bring in. Everybody who brings anything into Trinidad and Tobago pays import duty and VAT on the importation. They pay a portion of the NIS due, in respect of each of the employees.

Hon. Senator: Hopefully.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Hopefully, you are right. All employers in Trinidad and Tobago pay that. They pay VAT on their purchases. I would be surprised if anybody could convince me that they do not pass on that VAT when they sell their alcohol or whatever it is. So what burden do they actually bear and why are they

seeking to have you bear that burden? [*Desk thumping*] If every employer in Trinidad and Tobago adopted the position that they have adopted, where would we be? The energy employees are not coming out and saying, oh, their employers are sending them home. The bank employees are not coming out and saying, oh, their employers are sending them home. So why does the only industry in Trinidad and Tobago that does not pay corporation tax on their profits threaten their employees with sending them home? That is not the Government's fault. [*Desk thumping*]

So Sen. Johnson, as I said I feel your pain. If your employer does follow through with this threat—

Sen. Baptiste-Primus: Report it to the Minister of Labour.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: The Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development suggested that there was an employment programme she is very excited with, she would be able to assist. But we are seeking to protect people like you and Betty. That is what we are trying to do.

And what surprised me as well, Madam President, is the fact that—
 [*Interruption*]

Sen. Ameen: Madam Minister, thank you for giving way. Sen. Johnson in his contribution pleaded several times for the Minister or, perhaps, yourself, to meet with the representatives. I want to ask if you would be willing to meet with them?
 [*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Members.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Madam President, Sen. Johnson also referred to the fact that they are looking forward to the introduction of the legislation on the gaming commission because they think that will help solve the problem.

The PNM Government is quite prepared and quite eager to introduce this

legislation. The legislation which we are bringing before the Parliament was drafted by them ages ago. [*Desk thumping*] When I met with your members—because you are saying you need consultation—I met with some of your members last week and one of the people attending that meeting asked me: why, if we are moving forward with legislation drafted by the Opposition, is it taking so long? I could not give him an answer, but I suspect I know what the answer is. They are not concerned about it, like they pretend, because it has gone to the Joint Select Committee. They did not attend. They did not attend—they were not available for the meetings of the Joint Select Committee called by the Minister of Finance. We need a special majority to pass that. So we need their support. I do not know that we would get it. We will find out. The history has indicated to me that we are not likely to get it unless, like the banks did when we were trying to get FATCA through the House before the country shut down, the people come out and protest and put pressure on them. So you will judge during the course of the debate on this issue where your support lies, who is actually protecting your position.

[*Outburst in Public Gallery*]

[*Visitors of the Public Gallery depart in disruptive manner*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, that was unfortunate, but I trust, I really hope that Sen. Johnson got my point.

[*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Minister, please just have a seat. Members, please, let us listen to the Minister in silence as she winds up. Minister, continue.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Madam President, I really hope that Sen. Johnson understood that I was saying and he can share it with his colleagues, because they really need to understand that the taxing measure is not the problem that would

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lead to their termination. I really hope, and that the Government is not seeking to penalize the workers. I hope you understand that.

Sen. Hosein, who is not here as well, he is ill, asked about procurement.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): Madam 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 2018) BILL, 2017

Madam President: Minister, continue.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, as I was indicating, the new Senator, Sen. Hosein, raised the issue of procurement. It seems to be a burning issue for the Opposition, all of a sudden.

The Opposition was in power from 2010 to 2015 and procurement was a burning issue. So, one would have thought that having a special majority, they would have passed the procurement legislation early enough in their term for it to have some impact. It was not passed until November of 2014, just at the twilight of their term. And then they had nine months or 10 months, and what did they do to operationalize this legislation? It appears, nothing. So, I do not know why all of a sudden it is a burning issue. Maybe if we had it during that period we would have avoided things like LifeSport, EMBD, the Beetham Waste Water Project, the slew of contracts that were issued just before they exited office in 2015. [*Desk thumping*] Maybe we could have avoided that. So, in my view, the Opposition has no moral authority to ask anything. [*Desk thumping*]

However, for the benefit of the Independent Bench and for the benefit of the

public, who I am happy to learn, really pays attention to the Parliament Channel, we will indicate to you, Madam President, that the Government has done what it needs to do to get this legislation operationalized. It has put measures in place in the Ministries and Departments and other procuring entities to be in a state of readiness. All have access to the draft model handbook and draft special guidelines to guide preparations.

On the 6th of July, the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago approved the structure of procurement units for Ministries and Departments, which would allow for completion of the staffing exercise and 73 change agents were trained in the issue to be addressed in procuring entities.

The only thing we are waiting on, Madam President, is the appointment by His Excellency the President of a Procurement Regulator. We have communicated that His Excellency would have advertised the post, and so on, and so we expect an appointment shortly. As soon as that is made we are ready to run with procurement legislation. We are committed to doing it. [*Desk thumping*]

You asked about the sale of assets and—who raised this issue? Sen. Shrikissoon asked about the sale of assets and what we are doing when we are wasting assets or depleting assets. Sen. Shrikissoon, I am sure you would have, it would have registered with you that we have a significant shortfall in income. We cannot—imagine a family getting up one day and losing 93 per cent of its income. It cannot just go from that position to being able to live with what is left. It has to get there gradually and responsibly. It cannot say to its children: “Well, you need to stop going to school”, or “you have to stop eating”, or “we have to move from this house into a shovel”. We need to move. We need to move there slowly. So, in moving there slowly, we are looking at the options of how to finance the gap in

the revenue.

And one of the things we have to do is sell assets, but we are doing that in a responsible manner. The Minister of Finance, in the other place, would have said, Madam President “that he intends to ensure that these assets are not lost to Trinidad and Tobago”. The intention is to transfer the assets to citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. He is setting up a fund—a mutual fund where—parts of the asset will be transferred to that and individuals in Trinidad and Tobago could invest in that fund.

7.45 p.m.

The economists among us will say—

Hon. Senator: No details.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: The economists among us, including Sen. Raffoul, I hope I pronounced your name correctly, would say that Government should be a facilitator. And how do we facilitate? We have to get out of areas where we are not supposed to be involved. Divesting these assets to members of the society of Trinidad and Tobago will accomplish that objective, will give us the money that we have to earn, while we get to a position where our core revenue equals our expenditure, and this Government is committed to doing that.

I had spoken about Sen. Small's comment on the bank charges already. One of the Senators, I believe it was Sen. Ramdeen, raised the issue of MHTL, and the fact that we have frittered away that asset. I would like to remind my colleagues that the sale of MHTL was not done under the PNM and I would like to remind my colleagues that when the PNM came into power, we had to try to unravel the issue that arose from that sale. We are still involved in litigation to sort that out. So just to remind you, just to remind you, that we still trying to clean up messes that were

made when we were not in Government.

Hon. Senator: That is what happened before 2010.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Sen. Ramdeen also asked about the status of the unfinished headquarters of Petrotrin. Again Sen. Ramdeen, not something that the PNM can accept responsibility for. In 2010, the then board—and who was in power in 2010—approved the termination of nine construction contracts in progress in Petrotrin including the new corporate headquarters. That was followed by claims made by the contractors—a couple of the contractors and are we still involved in litigation dealing with those claims in respect of the termination of those contracts which appear to be arbitrary. So, and it is only recently that the Petrotrin board said "Okay, having regard to everything that has transpired, it will abandon the project of upgrading the headquarters". It may be that the new board may come to a different decision, but the genesis of the issue with respect to the headquarters did not come out of the decisions taken by the PNM. So how could you in good conscience ask about the status of the board?

Sen. Shrikissoon, again, urged the Government—recognized, thank you for recognizing that the Government under the leadership—the Government through the efforts of the Minister of Finance has been very successful in reducing the expenditure of the Government. A significant reduction in a short time, from the wastage of \$63 billion down to \$50 billion. [*Desk thumping*] So I thank you for recognizing that and for giving us credit for that Sen. Shrikissoon. But you said—you asked quite reasonably, “What are we doing about the revenue?” Because there is still a gap and we recognize there is a gap. But unlike the previous Government who spent more, the more they got. We are taking a responsible approach to bridging the gap between expenditure and revenue.

What are we doing? We are ensuring that we receive at least an acceptable medium amount of income from the energy sector. And we are doing that through the 12.5 per cent royalty. We are introducing the long abandoned Revenue Authority, the legislation was almost ready in 2009. The discussions have been held, decisions had been made, we were ready to go. The country made the dire mistake of putting another party in power and we are left today with two agencies, which the bulk of Trinidad and Tobago will admit are not efficient. They do not collect all the taxes that are there, as I told you during my presentation that there is an estimate of between \$11billion and \$18billion outstanding in taxes from the populace. If we had that today, we would not have a gap. So we now have to come back and restructure and reengineer and reintroduce the Revenue Authority, but we are committed to doing it; 2018 is the time when it will be done and that will assist in bridging the gap in the revenue, because there are simple measures that we can use to go after the people who are not paying their taxes.

I was part of the VAT administration when we introduced VAT, and we did simple things. We sent out mystery shoppers to go to the hardwares and when they said to you, "You want an invoice or you do not want an invoice", that would determine whether you pay VAT or not, we would send in somebody to assess them. We would go to the fetes and count the number of people going into the fetes and say you owe me the price of the ticket by the number of people by 15per cent. We did that with people—I will not call any names—but we did that and it was very effective.

And what happened? The VAT office that was treated as a separate arm operating efficiently was reintegrated into the whole and everything fell apart. So, we do not have to do difficult scientific things to ensure that we increase the

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revenue. We just need to have the right attitude. We need to be able to make people accountable which they are not really now in the Public Service and introduce those simple measures and we will make a difference and we are committed to doing that; 2018 is the year.

We are also reintroducing the long abandoned property tax. [*Desk thumping*] This is another pet peeve of mine. The Government of 2010 came in on the mantra "Axe the tax", scared the population beyond belief that they were going to die, and collapse, and starve, and turn into paupers from the introduction of this property tax. We have been paying tax on property since in the 1940s. Nobody has died; nobody has lost their property; and nobody has starved as a result of the payment of property tax.

Sen. Ameen asked, "How could we be stopping garbage collection?" That is one of the things that the property tax should pay for. My colleague said that did not happen. But that is one of the things that property tax should pay for.

Sen. Ameen: The corporations collect it.

Sen. The Hon. A. West: It does not matter who collects it. That is one—Madam President, I am sorry I will address you. So, having abandoned the property tax for five years, done away with all the information that would have been collected, so we have to restart, so we have lost another two to three years. We are now seeking to introduce this property tax. As I said earlier, what we have done with the property—let me tell you what the problem with the land and building taxes was. We had Land and Building Taxes and Municipal Corporations Tax, which was a land and building tax, but collectable by the municipalities. So under the second Act, what happened was that the municipalities were given the authority to choose their rate of tax up to 10 per cent, and do their own assessments. So that in Port of

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Spain, the last assessment was done in the 1940s, in Point Fortin it was done in 2000 and something, in San Fernando it was done in 1990-something. So you have different assessments, on different times, with different results. So you have a mansion in Goodwood Park, where the owner is paying \$300 and you have a normal family sized home in Point Fortin where they are paying \$5,000; that was inequitable. We needed to bring back a uniform system of Land and Building Taxes and also we needed to update the valuations. That is what the land and building tax—the property tax is about. That is all it is about, Madam President. That was all the property tax was about; it was not about penalizing people, imposing undue burden.

So that, the fear that was engendered in the population was unbelievable. Madam President, what the property tax seeks to do is it seeks to uniform the process. You have all the valuations done at the same time, so there is no inequity, you impose lower rates so we use to pay 6½ per cent on the value of the property. Now, we have agricultural holdings paying 1per cent, residential properties paying 3per cent, commercial properties paying 5per cent, the only people who are paying more than 5 per cent are the industrial properties, and the rate is not higher than it was previously. So the difference will come from, the current values of those properties, and the properties should have been revalued periodically in any event. So the monster that is seen to be the property tax is not a monster. Let us wait; see what our valuations are. There are bases in the legislation for challenging it if we think it is unreasonable, but it is reasonable for people to pool what services are in the communities, to pay for those services. Let us be responsible; support it; stop bringing frivolous court action that will delay the implementation of the process. Let use move forward so that we can serve

Trinidad and Tobago better. [*Desk thumping*]

And the final thing we are doing to bridge the gap, as I said earlier, is that we are seeking to collect some additional taxes from those people who we think can best afford it. The banks, the casinos, the oil companies—all reasonable, and we have a plan to in the medium term bridge that gap and get us to go out of this place, and do not get back to the place of irresponsible spending. That is the plan.

Madam President, on the property tax issue, you would—yes, there are individuals with houses who are concerned about what it will cost them and I am convinced without seeing any valuations that it will be bearable. But you know where we have lost the income? We have lost the income from the industrial properties; Atlantic LNG, the BPs of this world, the Shells of this world, MHTLs, those are the people who would have been making a decent contribution to the coffers. We have lost seven years of that income, irresponsible, Madam President.

Sen. Khan: They thief millions over the last seven years.

Hon. Senator: You were planning to bring individual first so that is not accurate.
[*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. A. West: Madam President, my time please.

Madam President: Hon. Minister, you have five more minutes.

8.00 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. A. Lewis: Thank you, Madam Speaker. So, Madam President, I am running out of time. Let me say to the Independent Senators, I appreciate your contributions. As I said, I have heard them, I have noted them and we will take account of them and see what measures we could introduce. From Sen. Dhanayshar—all of you—I thought were thoughtful and gave valid

recommendations that we will consider, and we hope to come back next year and show you how your suggestions have helped us to get to the right place.

The Spotlight, in particular, I am happy that you appreciated the effort. The Prime Minister is committed to moving this forward because we also saw the benefit of it. Yes, it would have been better received, I think, if it had happened earlier, but I think the Prime Minister said on that occasion, the budget is not a one-time thing, it is something that is developing and growing. So the fact that we learnt of the suggestions late does not mean that we will ignore them.

To the Opposition, I appreciate that your role is to oppose, but I beg you not to oppose for opposing sake. Challenge us, ask us questions, call us to account, because this is what the citizenry require of you, but please do it in a responsible manner, please. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, we have tough times ahead and it calls for sacrifice of all of us, it calls for responsibility from all of us, but together if we do it right we could get this done, we could benefit the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Is that not why we are all here, to ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago benefit? [*Desk thumping*]

The theme of the budget debate in this House, Madam President, seems to be based on different calypsoes, so I have one. I am not going to sing [*Laughter*] but it is the Mighty Sparrow, and he said:

You put ah hand and I put ah hand and we will see

For big or for small in no time at all, prosperity

There is no other way to do it

Show your patriotic spirit

Unity somehow

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If Trinidad ever needed you is now. [*Desk thumping*]

Thank you very much, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West):

Madam President, in accordance with Standing Order 57(2), I beg to move that the Bill 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.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, just permit me to say that seeing that we have come to the end of this budget debate, I want to thank all Senators—both on this Bench, on the Independent Bench and the Opposition Bench—for their contributions in making this debate the success that it has been. With that said, Madam President, I now beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, before I put the matter of the adjournment and because I have a captive audience, I want to raise two issues with you. The first issue is, I have had cause to circulate procedural bulletin No. 1 and I ask all of you, as we are adjourning to a date to be fixed, to read it and digest it, and let us put it into action at our next sitting.

The second issue I want to raise with you is that on Monday the 30th of October from 10.00 a.m. we are hosting our 15th National Youth Parliament. It

starts at 10.00. We are going to be having lunch at 12.30, and Members are invited both for the sitting and for the lunch.

Now, we have sent out notices and we have received an indication of who has said they will attend, and it is not very encouraging. I want to just put in a little plea for the young people, they want to meet the Members of the Senate and the Members of the House. It is a big thing for them, and it is an opportunity. The theme of this year's debate is: "The Root Causes of and Solutions for the Radicalism of Youth towards the Establishment of a Counter-Radicalism Youth Policy". It is a relevant issue, and I think, you know, we would like to hear what the young people have to say.

So I invite you to rethink your Monday schedule. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the young people would love to meet you; [*Laughter*] Sen. Haynes, the young people would love to meet you; Sen. Raffoul—Sen. Richards you have said that you will be attending. Sen. Mahabir and Sen. Small—I can all out everybody's names if you want, but I would not do that. So I am just asking if you can reconsider your schedule for Monday, please.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.08 p.m.