

SENATE

Thursday, October 20, 2016

The Senate met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

**VACANT SEAT**

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

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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

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

TO: MR. GERALD HADEED

WHEREAS by the provisions of paragraph (e) of subsection (2) of section 43 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the President, acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, is empowered to declare the seat of a Senator to be vacant:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, ANTHONY THOMAS AQUINAS CARMONA, President as aforesaid, acting in accordance with the

UNREVISED

advice of the Leader of the Opposition, in exercise of the power vested in me by the said paragraph (e) of subsection (2) of section 43 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby declare the seat of you, GERALD HADEED, to be vacant, with effect from 20th October, 2016.

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 20th day of
October, 2016.”

SENATOR'S APPOINTMENT

Madam President: Hon. Senators:

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND
TOBAGO

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

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

President

TO: MR. GERALD RAMDEEN

In exercise of the power vested in me by paragraph (b) of subsection (2) of section 40 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, I, ANTHONY THOMAS AQUINAS CARMONA, President as aforesaid, acting in accordance with the

advice of the Leader of the Opposition, do hereby appoint you, GERALD RAMDEEN, a Senator, with effect from 20th October, 2016.

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 20th day of October, 2016.”

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Senator Gerald Ramdeen took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.

CONDOLENCES

(ALLAN ALEXANDER SC)

Madam President: Hon. Senators, as you are aware, former Senator, Allan Joseph Alexander SC, passed away on October 01, 2016. I now invite Senators to offer tributes.

The Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development (Sen. The Hon. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus): Thank you very much, Madam President. On behalf of the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago, I rise to join the multitudes who, over the past few days, publicly and privately have been paying immeasurable tribute to our deceased distinguished son of the soil, legal luminary, Mr. Allan Alexander, a former Senator of this Honourable Senate.

Madam President, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, a member of which I am humbled and privileged to be part, do sincerely and wholeheartedly add our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of our most distinguished brother on the occasion of his recent and regrettable passing. From time to time, I wonder whether civilization does not have it all wrong, Madam President. For

some unexplained reason, we honestly and sincerely shower recognition and appreciation of the unquantifiable contribution, which so many of our leaders and exemplars make in creating a better way and a better life for all of us, only after they have passed to the great beyond.

We do so at this finite hour when they are not around to savour the well-deserved wealth of accolades, which we so selfishly sometimes stifle within ourselves, deliberately concealed or find opportunistic to withhold from public acclaim for reasons unknown. It is that one real moment of truth, Madam President, when we find difficulties sometimes in restraining ourselves, and come to terms with the dictates of our own consciences.

When I reflect upon all that has been said so far about the man, the man that was called Allan Alexander, one description keeps reverberating in my mind, any unadulterated vision of the depth, the height, the latitude, the longitude and the magnitude of the contribution, which Allan Alexander has made in advancing the welfare and well-being of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The region and the world, at large, could only lead to one conclusion, Allan Alexander was a man among men.

Allan Alexander was a great friend of the labour movement of Trinidad and Tobago. Whether it was in his capacity as lawyer or lawmaker, advocate or adversary, moderator or mediator, his knowledge, his wisdom and his understanding flowed effortlessly. Whether he was protesting or protecting, defending or defying, confronting or conciliating, he did so with flare, flavour and finesse. The wealth of his involvement in the affairs of our beloved country knew no boundaries. Whether he was commenting or officiating in the sapphires of economics, law or social endeavour, fighting for the inalienable rights of others, or for freedom and liberation, whether it was in trade unionism or the plight of the

poor, the vulnerable or the dispossessed, or for better social and just conditions for his people, or in seeking to revolutionize the way in which we ordered the institutional framework of our multidimensional society, Allan Alexander came, he saw and he conquered our collective hearts. He walked the talk, and was never afraid to confront injustice and those who sought to abuse power and authority over those who were unable to defend themselves.

He played leading roles in governance on state boards, in civil society and in his professional bodies, locally, regionally and internationally. His brilliance was surpassed only by his love for his fellow men. I do believe, Madam President, he had the honour of serving not only as an Opposition Senator, but as an Independent Senator of this honourable Senate. His life was endowed with indelible marks of achievement and distinction, which many of our young citizens will do well to emulate.

Above all, Allan Alexander was among the few who provided counsel and guidance to those in need, regardless of their status in life. He was a teacher, a leader, a philanthropist and dedicated attorney but, most of all, he stood out as a nationalist and a patriot of no mean dimension. He was to all who were close to him, a genuine and trusted friend. These extraordinary qualities which he possessed and so willingly shared with others would be surely missed, but will always be remembered by those who were fortunate enough to have known him and to have benefited from his God-given talents.

Madam President, this is just a minute's snapshot of this man, among men. We in Trinidad and Tobago owe Allan Alexander an enormous debt of gratitude, which we can best repay by walking in his footsteps having left behind the proud and powerful legacy, so magnificently stamped in the annals of the history of our beloved nation.

Madam President, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago wishes to thank his family for having so generously shared him with us. May his soul rest in eternal peace. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I too, rise to pay tribute to an individual who has carved his name and his contributions to humanity in the hearts and minds of many, whose legacy will forever remain etched on the consciousness of the leadership and membership of many trade unions, both here at home and abroad.

His well thought-out contributions in this Senate will forever remain stencilled on the mental sheets of unfolding generations. I speak of a great and extraordinary attorney-at-law, a staunch advocate for social justice, equality, self-determination and self-reliance.

What an absolutely remarkable, awesome, extraordinary and outstanding citizen of our great Republic. Of course, he now belongs to the ages.

1.45 p.m.

We speak of a former Opposition and Independent Senator, Allan Joseph Alexander SC, who died on Saturday October 01, 2016. A father of six, a grandfather of 13 and a great grandfather of eight. The former Independent Senator epitomized all the values, principles and moral standards which the ideal citizen ought to encompass and strive towards internalizing.

Allan Alexander served his country selflessly, and anchored all his actions and thoughts in a deep philosophy rooted in social justice, equality and humanity.

Madam President, Allan Alexander served as an Opposition Senator in the first Republican Parliament during the period of September 1976 to March of 1978, in the capacity of the Leader of Opposition Business in the Senate representing the United Labour Front, and as an Independent Senator from

January 1987 to November 1991, in the Third Republican Parliament.

Comrade Allan Alexander contributed richly and immensely to several critical pieces of legislation, inclusive of amendments to the Industrial Relations Act, Integrity in Public Life Act, Constitution (Amdt.) Act, the Dangerous Drugs Act, the Judicial and Legal Service Act, and several appropriation Acts amount a slew of other critical pieces of legislation. Allan Alexander was focused and disciplined and an exceptionally brilliant lawyer. He represented the people in matters related, as my colleague said, in labour, civil rights, human rights as well as constitutional matters.

Born in the borough of Point Fortin in 1928, Allan Alexander worked in the oil industry at an early age, prior to migrating to London to pursue his law studies. Upon being called to the Bar, Allan returned to his beloved country and became an advocate attorney for justice and human rights. Allan Alexander above all was a humanist, genuinely interested in social justice, equality and social progress for all of the people of this great country and, indeed, the people of the entire wider Caribbean.

Allan, of course, was the legal advisor to the powerful Oilfield Workers' Trade Union for several decades, as well as advisor to several other prominent trade unions in our country. A past President of the Trinidad and Tobago Bar Association; a past President of the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the President of the Organization of the Commonwealth Bar Association. Allan Alexander, for the record, was one of two senior lawyers who, we are advised, were sworn in as members of the Regional Judicial and Legal Service Commission which had been tasked with the responsibility of selecting the first panel of judges for the Caribbean Court of Justice. A true and outstanding legal giant.

Allan Alexander, a real—not a fake—a genuine patriot of this country, must be described as a national hero in our land. Madam President, he defended and represented critical forces and individuals at crucial moments in our development and history, not only in our country but throughout the Caribbean. Not only did he defend some of the leading officers of the army involved in the 1970 mutiny, but he defended and successfully represented the late Tim Hector of Antigua and Barbuda whose newspaper came under ferocious assault by the then Bird administration.

Allan Alexander also served as a temporary judge in our country. He was a wonderful, marvelous and outstanding human being. Today, on behalf of the leadership of the United National Congress and on behalf of all of my colleagues on the Front Bench of the Opposition, we pay glowing tribute and homage to a legal icon, as my friend said, a legal luminary and an outstanding citizen of our nation, who served our country with pride, loyalty, honour and unstinting commitment to humanity.

As I said earlier, he now belongs to the ages. We extend our collective condolences to his family, his friends and loved ones. May his great soul find eternal peace and perpetual happiness in the great beyond. He will be deeply missed. May God bless the memory of the late Allan Joseph Alexander.

I thank you, Madam President.

Sen. H. R. Ian Roach: Madam President, this is probably one of the rare occasions that I must say I endorse the Government Sen. Baptiste-Primus and the Opposition Sen. Wade Mark's remarks concerning deceased Senior Counsel Allan Alexander, in toto, as we would say in law.

Before I commence, really and truly my short contribution, I would just like to share with the public, with this Parliament my first encounter—not meeting—

my first encounter with deceased Allan Alexander. I was about 14-years-old and my father then was an officer, head of Fraud Squad or in Fraud Squad, and he was giving evidence in a fraud case in Arima. Allan Alexander was the defence counsel. I sat in the back of the court, which I would have done during summer vacation when this was going on, along with my father, and he was in there giving his evidence.

I remember this tall, slim guy in the best of English “bouffing” my father, I mean “bouffing” him. “Officer I did not ask you that.” He had a way of pronouncing his words, “ED” and his “TH’s” and so forth. After about half an hour or an hour of that, I could not take it, I left the court almost in tears, because I had never seen anybody “bouff” my father before. So at the end of the matter I came outside and I was waiting on my father. I saw Allan Alexander with my father, “Ay, Hugh, Hugh, Hugh, what is going on, what is going on?” And he was referring to my father by his first name. I could not understand why my father would want to talk to this guy who was just “bouffing” him left, right and centre.

So when he came to the car, he said, “No son, that is one of the best counsels in the country and he was just doing his job.” Lo and behold—I was 14 years then—40 years after that, I would find myself in Allan Alexander’s chambers as a junior counsel. He had invited me. I gave him the account I am giving here of what happened, and he had a hell of a laugh. He explained to me at that point in time, “Your father was one of the most decent officers that one could have encountered. He was just doing his part and I was doing my part, and as a young attorney now you would understand what I mean”, and he laughed.

Therefore, this is the second time I have been privileged in this Chamber to give an account of two persons who I would have known and worked with personally. The first was the revered, iconic figure of Nelson Mandela and in this

instance here Allan Alexander, who I called Senior from day one to this day.

On behalf of the Independent Bench, Madam President, it is a sincere pleasure and honour for me to give these remarks on the passing of the mentor and highly esteemed citizen of our beloved twin Republic. Senior, as he was called by many lawyers of my time, and Allan by his colleagues and friends, was of a rare group of professionals who put service on behalf of country and of the ordinary man before himself. I say this with resolute conviction and not a single word can be said in contradiction of that.

Former Senator Allan Alexander never allowed high office to alter his character and the pursuit of social justice for those without access to power and/or wealth. Those qualities are a challenge to find in today's get-rich-fast, materialistic world.

He has departed us physically, but his spirit and legacy will live on in the hearts and minds of those he touched in his lifetime. A distinguished and enlightened statesman who encompassed the spirit of justice for all, regardless of colour, creed, race, religion and most importantly today personal persuasion. His legal service was truly a dedication in the delivery of blind justice, while his political contribution was geared to achieving a united and socially progressive society remarkable in all human facets of life.

To the trade union membership all over our country and the wider Caribbean he was their David against the Goliath of the mighty establishment. Allan Alexander SC has left his footprints in the legal fraternity as a pinnacle of impressable integrity, industry, astuteness, dedication to excellence and compassion for the ordinary man. His robust submissions delivered with measured articulation, annunciation, is a compelling example of advocacy at its finest.

He was also a mentor to many. I can share with you two sacred principles

he left with me from the very first day of my legal career. One was to read my brief as soon as possible upon receiving it and thereafter familiarize myself with same, so much so that I would know it inside out. The second was to write any letter or opinion as if it would end up in court. Those two principles I have never strayed from and now I also pass on to younger lawyers I work with.

Yet another impact he had on me as a young attorney-at-law, fresh out of law school and green as it comes, with little or no real practical experience in court, was his open-door policy to approach him for guidance at any time on any issue or matter.

2.00 p.m.

I was amazed that the senior counsel who was, as busy as he was, always made time without fuss to lend an ear and give guidance as needed. He made you feel, while serving as his junior, that your input in the case was important and respected. He would never finish his cross-examination or address to the court without first asking you if there was anything he had not covered or needed to say. In other words, as a senior he was full of respect for his juniors, encouraging you all the way, but always demanding excellence without excuse.

He was highly respected by his peers who knew that when Allan gave an undertaking, it could have been relied on without a doubt. To his immediate family and their friends he will be severely missed, but will not be forgotten. May his ageless virtues and uprightness in public affairs be deemed ideals that are worthy of adoption and mastered whenever possible.

Our country as a whole has been fortunate and benefitted tremendously from having had former Senator Allan Alexander as an honest and respectful Member of the Senate whose contribution in debates brought sober reflection and incisive focus on any issue at hand.

To the wider Caribbean he played his role as a true comrade in the region's political and social struggles. Senator Allan Alexander has gone not too soon, but in the rightness of the Creator's time. A giant of a soul among his era, a father not only to his six children, but to many he surrogated; a trusted friend in word and exceedingly so in deed; a just and wise man in times of injustice and a calamity; a stern teacher, but never lacking in comparison. May Senior Counsel Allan Joseph Alexander rest in peace and may these few words find favour and comfort in your hearts and minds of

those who knew and loved him dearly. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Hon. Senators, I had the privilege of attending the funeral of the late Allan Alexander SC. Merely sitting there and looking around at and listening to the attendees felt like a lesson in history. There were politicians from the past and present, members of the labour movement, attorneys-at-law, judges and former judges. It was an education and an experience that I would not forget.

I did not know Allan Alexander in the way that those who paid him tribute that day did, or indeed in the way that some of us who have paid him tribute in this Chamber today did, and that perhaps is the greatest indication of how truly inspirational a human being he was. For although faith denied me the privilege of knowing him in his life, what has been revealed about his character after his death, to me and the whole country, has brought us all, and me in particular, to a stark and indelible realization that in Allan Alexander there had walked among us a supremely gifted and giving man.

We have heard today in this Chamber stirring tributes to Mr. Alexander and what has struck me about today's tributes is their consistency and resonance with one of the tributes I heard at his funeral, that by Mr. David Abdulah. Those who heard that tribute were treated to a virtual history lesson in social, political and

constitutional development not only of Trinidad and Tobago, but of the Caribbean.

I was privileged to have heard it, as I am privileged to have heard the tributes in this Chamber. All of the tributes tell us that Allan Alexander played an important part in Trinidad and Tobago's history. They all tell us that his contribution was not limited to law or to Trinidad and Tobago. They all tell us that he was clearly sought after and respected as an attorney and so much more throughout the Caribbean.

What I found to be a particularly fascinating piece of the history, was Allan Alexander's service here in the Senate as an Opposition Senator in the First Republican Parliament and as an Independent Senator in the Third Republican Parliament. These are, of course, very different roles. The appointments to those two very different roles were made by the late Sir Ellis Clarke who in 1987 clearly did not feel that Allan Alexander's service as an Opposition Senator during the period 1976 to 1978 disqualified him in any way from serving as an Independent Senator. To me, that is an extremely powerful lesson. It speaks volumes about Allan Alexander's integrity and character and the exemplary citizen that he was. It also harkens back to an era when perhaps service in politics was viewed as just that, service, as opposed to the harsher more bitter and more partisan views taken of political service and participation today.

Personally, it makes me a little sad that that age might never return, although if only in the way of meaningful remembrance of the kind of man Mr. Alexander undoubtedly was, I will continue to hope for its reappearance and for the servility and courtesy that underlay that age.

I also listened at the funeral to the loving tribute paid to Allan Alexander by his grandson and I observed the closeness of his family. And so it is that I was and am privileged to be part of the tributes deservedly paid to a man who not only

served his profession, his country and the Caribbean, but his family as well and it seems all in equal measure.

We in the Senate thank him and his family for his service here just as the rest of the country and the rest of the Caribbean doubtless will continue to thank him for years to come for his contributions there.

Hon. Senators, I have instructed the Clerk to convey to his beloved family the sentiments that have been expressed today and the deep condolences of the Members of this Senate.

Hon. Senators, could we stand and observe a minute's silence.

The Senate stood.

Madam President: You may take your seats.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2017) BILL, 2016

Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2017, brought from the House of Representatives [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam President. In accordance with Standing Order 62(1)(d), I beg to move that the next stage of the Bill be taken later in the proceedings.

Motion made: That the next stage be taken later in the proceedings. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

Question put and agreed to.

PAPERS LAID

1. Draft Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2017. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
2. Draft Estimates—Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the financial year 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

3. Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the financial year 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. Draft Estimates of the Development Programme for the financial year 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
5. Draft Estimates of the Revenue for the financial year 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
6. Public Sector Investment Programme—Trinidad 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
7. Public Sector Investment Programme—Tobago 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
8. Social Sector Investment Programme 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
9. State Enterprises Investment Programme 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
10. Review of the Economy 2016. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2017) BILL, 2016

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam. President. I beg to move:

That a Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2017, be now read a second time.

Madam President, this is a money Bill which was approved in the other place on October 19th, 2016, yesterday. The Bill provides for the issue from the Consolidated Fund of the sum of \$45,970,000,000 under various Heads as indicated in the Schedule to the Bill. This is traditionally considered to be the budget.

As I present the budget to this Senate, I think that it is necessary that I give some background. I would first like to look at the world economy. The 2016 budget was presented against the background of a very difficult world

environment. Real economic growth in 2015 was estimated to be about 3 per cent, the lowest since the crisis of 2008. The severe economic and political uncertainty caused by Brexit put a damper on consumer confidence—and let me just correct that, the 2017 budget. And business sentiment, both in the UK and in EU and the strong US dollar and a slumping energy sector, constrained activity in the United States and depressed oil and commodity prices impacted on Latin American economies. China is expected to grow by only 6.6 per cent, a far cry from the double digit growth rates of a few years ago.

With respect to energy prices, after averaging US \$93 per barrel in 2014, that is West Texas Intermediate, oil prices fell to almost one half, to US \$56 per barrel in the first half of 2015. At the time of last budget in October 2015, the price of a barrel of oil was US \$47, but the decline continued unabated in fiscal 2016, it was as low as \$27 per barrel in January 2016, a 12-year low.

Oil prices have since recovered, but the average price for the period 2015 to July 2016 was in the order of US \$40 per barrel. Since the budget was presented, statements made by OPEC and other producers such as the Russian Federation, with respect to cutting production and restraining output, has pushed oil prices up to the \$50 mark. And the last time I checked it, a little while ago, a few minutes ago, the price of WTI was just above US \$50 per barrel.

Domestically, real economic growth is projected to have declined in Trinidad and Tobago by 2.3 per cent in 2016; this would make it the third successive year of GDP decline. The decline in 2016 was caused largely by a 10 per cent decline in the petroleum sector and in particular a 25 per cent decline in the petroleum services sector. The economy was also affected by sharply reduced government spending which would have impacted the construction, manufacturing and services sectors.

One of the positives in 2016 was the fact that notwithstanding the removal of many food items from the zero-rated VAT list and the increase in fuel prices and the 6 per cent depression in the TT dollar, inflation remained very subdued at 3 per cent. The increase in food prices was 6.8 per cent which compares very favourably with 12 per cent in the comparable 2015 period.

2.15 p.m.

Unemployment increased only slightly from 3.4 per cent to 3.8 per cent, however, the external current account deficit increased significantly because of the sharp decline in the value of energy sector exports. Notwithstanding all of this, the level of foreign reserves remained at approximately US \$10 billion. The figure at the end of September 2015 going into October 2015 was US \$10.3 billion, and the figure at the end of September 2016 was US \$10 billion. So that our foreign reserves remain more or less constant. However, fiscal year 2016 was a very difficult year for fiscal management for many reasons, one of them being the significant drop in energy revenues. I have said in other places that when you look at the revenues from petroleum for 2014, and that is as defined by the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, which would be revenues from natural gas, revenues from oil. The revenues in 2014 were of the order of \$19 billion; the revenues from petroleum in 2016 were less than \$2 billion, \$1.7 billion to be exact. So, there has been a \$17 billion reduction in revenues from petroleum over the last two years. In fact, a \$17.4 billion reduction.

There were also significant commitments brought over from 2015 into 2016. These included public sector wage arrears, which is now estimated at somewhere in the vicinity of \$6 billion, and arrears to contractors estimated at somewhere between \$1 billion to \$2 billion. So, we had an overhang from 2015 going into 2016 of some \$8 billion. We had also reached the limit in terms of our statutory

borrowing limits, which is why I came to this Parliament in fiscal 2016 to seek an increase in the borrowing ceilings, and that is the only way we were able to manage the economy in 2016. We also had significant difficulties in rescheduling short-term loans for a number of Government agencies, taken out just before the general election which became due shortly after the general election, shortly after the presentation of the budget of last year.

Faced with all of this, the Government took a number of steps to start the process of fundamental restructuring of the Government finances: we reformed the value added tax; we reverted or restored the system that had been in place with the introduction of VAT in 1990 by reducing the list of zero-rated items to a small list of basic food items which was the original philosophy, while also reducing the rate in VAT for 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent. We increased the price of fuel to begin a process of reducing the energy subsidy; we increased the personal income tax allowance from \$60,000 \$72,000 to help the vast majority of persons at the lower end of the income scale who may have been affected by some of the adjustments that had to be made; we increased the cap on pensions to assist the elderly from \$4,500 to \$5,000, and this is the cap for persons who are in receipt of both the NIS pension and the senior citizens pension, and also to deal with chronic non-payers of tax, we increased the Business and Green Fund Levies.

In the mid-year review, I came to this Senate as well as the other place, and we recalibrated our revenue estimates based on lower oil and gas prices. We also increased the price of super gasoline and diesel over the increases that we made in October of 2015, and we imposed luxury taxes on luxury vehicles, and we mandated an initial 7 per cent cut in budgetary allocations to all Ministries and Departments. As a result of the very depressed situation in the energy sector, and as a result of tax measures introduced by the former administration, which now

allow oil and gas companies to write-off 100 per cent of exploration expenditure in the first year, and also write-off development expenditure over a three-year period as compared to the previous system where these expenditures had to be written off over a five-year period, so as a result of depressed oil prices capital expenditure write-offs of 100 per cent, and decreasing production, revenues were significantly lower than originally estimated, and energy sector revenues in particular, in 2016 were \$11 billion lower than 2015, and \$17 billion lower than 2014.

This had a corresponding effect on the economy, resulting in lower VAT revenues. Our one-off capital revenues were lower than anticipated because of lower dividends from the National Gas Corporation as a result of lower natural gas prices. We were able to reduce expenditure significantly, and as I have said in another place, I will say again, we were able to cut expenditure by \$11 billion, from \$63 billion to \$52 billion without the country collapsing, and I think that is quite a remarkable achievement. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, expenditure was 17 per cent lower than the original approved budget of October 2015. And just let me digress, Madam President. You know there are people outside there who were saying loudly, cut expenditure. When one makes these statements, and I have to call them loose statements, these statements are made in a vacuum, because the country has become accustomed to running on an expenditure from the Government of \$63 billion. We have managed to shave \$11 billion off of that, 17 per cent, and if we were to cut further there would be massive unemployment, retrenchment, and collapse of business activity.

In fact, I am amazed at the business institutions that are saying that the Government should cut spending because the major purchaser of goods and services from the private sector is the Government. So that if the Government were to go below the \$52 billion level, all of these private businesses would suffer,

and they would have corresponding problems in terms of balancing their income and expenditure, and dealing with their employment levels and so on. So, it is a very short-sighted statement. It is easy to say, cut expenditure. That we have managed to cut out \$11 billion, as I said was a remarkable achievement, without the country rioting, and I do not think we can cut more lower than the \$52 billion. Of course, as we go forward, it depends on what happens in terms of the fiscal outturn, we will have to cut our cloth to suit, but at this point in time we expect to be able to maintain that \$53 billion figure that we have for fiscal 2017.

Capital expenditure was cut from \$7 billion to \$5 billion. We were able to generate some savings because the fuel subsidy was lower than anticipated, because of the lower oil prices which caused corresponding lower fuel prices so we had to subsidize less, so we paid less in subsidy than anticipated. However, one of the problems the country now faces is debt service, because the debt service in 2016 is twice the debt service of 2010. So, over the 2010 to 2015 period, into 2016, we have doubled our debt servicing obligations. We also were able to significantly reduce transfers on subsidies with the exception of social programmes. So, as we go forward now, Madam President, our strategy, our medium term strategy is grounded in our Vision 2030 plan, which will be rolled out shortly. It is almost ready. It will be subject to public consultation over the next few months, and that project will be handled by the distinguished Minister of Planning and Development. But economic diversification must be the central pillar of our plan going forward, our strategy going forward, and in the context of diversification we need to look very carefully at fiscal and monetary stability.

We will have to have an increased level of collaboration between government, business and labour, if we are to survive as a country. We as government must provide the necessary infrastructure and incentives to increase

productivity, and to stimulate investment by the private sector. We have a risk averse private sector; we have to change that. The private sector has to change its mindset from commerce. In other words, from being mere traders to industry, with a focus on manufacturing, and a focus on exports. In fact, we want to urge every manufacturer to become a net earner of foreign exchange, and we will be developing a fiscal regime designed to motivate the manufacturing sector to become net earners of foreign exchange. And that in due course should deal with any foreign exchange issues that currently exist.

With respect to labour, their role is critical. There must be an upgrade in skills and an improvement in work ethic and productivity. So, everybody has to put their shoulder to the wind. In terms of our fiscal consolidation plan, this budget represents the second year of a five-year fiscal consolidation plan. Our object is to achieve balance by the year 2020, so revenue and expenditure must be in balance by 2020. The plan involves the following:

- a series of fiscal and institutional reforms aimed at reducing dependents on energy sector revenues;
- containment of government expenditure;
- redirecting expenditure away from subsidies and discretionary transfers, and towards economic and social infrastructure.

We expect to have a resumption of economic growth in this year 2017, increases to 2 per cent in 2018 and beyond, based on the following assumptions, that we can do what is necessary to have a recovery in oil and gas production. And let me speak about that: our oil production in the year 2006 arising primarily from the field brought into production by BHP off the east coast of Trinidad was as high as 145,000 barrels per day. By 2010 that had dropped to just over 100,000 barrels

per day, and the last time I checked the figures for August 2016, our oil production had dropped to about 66,000 barrels per day. If you know anything about oil prices in Trinidad and Tobago, you will know the last time Trinidad and Tobago had oil production of 6,000 barrels per day was somewhere in 1950, over 60 years ago.

So, one of the things we must do as a country, is do whatever we need to do in terms of incentives, in terms of our new approach to recover oil and gas production. We must do it as a country, because diversification is a buzz word. People say you must diversify. It is not easy to do, you know. And it is not easy to do in a small open economy with a risk-averse private sector, but diversify we must. But, while we are diversifying we must deal with the engine of our economy, the oil and gas sector. We must increase production, and that is why we are focusing on Trinmar. Trinmar and Petrotrin, land and sea, represent the best option in the short-term for increasing oil production in Trinidad and Tobago.

So, we will be having discussions with the company and with the trade union to see what can be done to increase oil production from Trinmar and Petrotrin. In terms of gas production, we have a situation where our gas production has dropped from about 4.3 billion standard cubic feet per day in 2010 or thereabouts, to 3.2 billion standard cubic feet per day in 2016, a significant decline.

2.30 p.m.

We are hoping that this trend will be reversed. BHP has just brought in three wells from its Angostura Field. BP will bring on Jupiter and we will resolve the issue with respect to Angelin to allow them to make that investment decision.

So with all of the projects that are on stream and due to come on stream, in terms of the existing producers bp, BHP and so on, we expect to reverse this

decline in gas production and we expect to be able to recover the situation and bring it back close to the 2010 situation. Then we have the new initiatives, negotiation with Venezuela for the purchase of gas from the Dragon Field which is just 15 or 18 kilometres away from Trinidad and Tobago. We are also going to be looking at the fiscal regime, with respect to stranded oil and gas and marginal fields, and also looking at motivating producers to produce from mature fields using secondary recovery. All of these things have been given lip service for many, many years, but this Government intends to deal with these issues systematically. [*Desk thumping*] Secondary recovery, increase oil production, increase gas production. We must do that if we are to survive over the next three to four years as we seek to diversify our economy.

Going forward, we have estimated oil prices for this budget to be \$48. There has been a lot of old talk about that by persons who know very little about oil prices. And I just want to let this honourable Senate know that oil prices are affected by a multiplicity of factors, one of them being the cycle, where we have been in a downward cycle for a very long time, one of the longest downward cycles. But all of the experts tell us that we have reached the bottom of the cycle, we have hit a floor as they call it, and we are coming back up, because oil prices are affected by all sorts of different things.

Oil prices are affected, as I said in the other place, if the Saudi Arabian oil Minister makes a positive statement. If he just gets up one morning and says, we are going to cut production, as we saw just a couple of weeks ago, he said that, oil prices jump \$4 in two days. Then you have the Russian President, Mr. Putin saying that we will follow OPEC and oil prices jumped another \$2. So oil prices were at 44, the Saudi Minister spoke, they went to 48, Putin spoke they went to 50. And as I came into this Senate today, oil prices are somewhere around \$50. But

they are affected by all sorts of things. They are affected by the strength of US dollar because oil is priced in US dollars, so as the value of the dollar versus other currencies fluctuates, oil prices fluctuate.

Then you have outages. You have outages in Nigeria based on a rebel activity from Boko Haram and so on; you had a recent fire in Canada that caused an outage; you have other areas, war-torn areas where you have problems with oil production; you have inventory. For example, there is a lot of inventory in tankers all over the world and even though that represents a small percentage of oil in storage, there was a report coming out of the US just in the last seven days that the amount of oil in floating storage in tankers around the world had been reduced and that caused a \$1 jump in the price of oil.

You have the number of drilled rigs in active operation in United States. These are all the things people look at. Drilling activity, strength of the dollar, the sentiment coming out of OPEC, the sentiment coming out of Saudi Arabia and all of these things affect oil prices. And based on a totality of factors, the IMF, the World Bank, the US Energy Information Administration, the International Energy Agency, which is a European agency, the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries in Trinidad and Tobago, bp, Shell, and myself have determined that \$48 is a reasonable price for oil going forward into 2017. And the predictions now that oil will hit a ceiling at about \$60 in 2018 and there is a reason for that. Because that is the price at which shale oil producers in the United States will begin to re-enter the oil market in a big way. And that will increase production outside of OPEC, outside of Russia and Iran, Iraq and so on and cause a temporary ceiling in the oil market.

So we are satisfied that based on all of the expertise available to us that our \$48 price is a reasonable price. We are also hoping that revenue from petroleum,

and we expect that it will recover from \$2 billion in 2016 or \$1.7 as it was, to somewhere in the vicinity of \$14 billion by 2020 and that is reasonable when you compare that with petroleum revenues of \$19 billion in 2014. That will be based mainly on increased production and a very moderate increase in price.

We also expect, based on diversification, driven by my hon. colleague to my left and others, that we should have an increase in non-energy revenue by \$8 billion by 2020, so that we can get our, what I call our core revenues, which is revenues from taxation, royalties and so on, customs duty, up from the current \$37 billion to, in the vicinity of about \$55 billion which is where it was in 2014. In 2014 the core revenues outside of one-off revenues and extraordinary inflows, such as the sale of assets and so on, was in the vicinity of about \$57 billion. So, this is the plan that going forward we will be able to recover Trinidad and Tobago's core revenue, sustainable revenue that is, to a level of about \$55 billion by the year 2020.

Now we are going to have to contain expenditure over the next several years. We need to get accustomed to this as a country. And one of the good things about this new system, in the other place, where you go through every Head, there are thousands of them, is that you get to see areas where there is expenditure that is unnecessary. I am amazed at some of the things that I myself, because of the questioning, I am seeing some areas of expenditure completely unnecessary. So that we are going to have to contain expenditure and restrain it, we will have to restrain salary and wage increases, we will have to reduce expenditure on transfers and subsidies. As I said, we have a three-year plan to eliminate the fuel subsidy and so on.

Going forward now, our financial policies will have to be supported by appropriate monetary and fiscal policies. We have had a situation with private

sector activities impacted by occasional shortages of foreign exchange. But what we have decided to do is to let the Central Bank, for the time being, manage the exchange rate. We are not going to interfere, we will keep an eye on them, because according to the Exchange Control Act, the exchange rate regime is subject to the direction of the Minister of Finance. Very few people know that, that is actually section 3, I believe, of the Exchange Control Act. But, we are going to leave it up to the Central Bank for now and we will just keep a watching brief on them and we expect that with a disciplined and professional approach from the Central Bank in terms of injection of foreign exchange into the market, that we will be able to continue to stabilize our foreign exchange supply situation and also we are going to motivate our manufacturers to become net earners of foreign exchange.

In terms of national savings, because this is an area that we really need to push, we are introducing savings bonds or reintroducing savings bonds. The savings bonds will be in three different maturities, three years, five years, seven years with competitive interest rates, 3 per cent, 3 1/2 per cent and so on, far more than you will get in the bank, so that will provide an opportunity for ordinary people to get a good return on their savings.

With respect to the energy sector, and we have three types of bonds coming, we have general savings bonds; we have education bonds, where the proceeds of the bonds are used for education and housing bonds where the proceeds of the bonds are used for the purchase of housing and each one will have its own regime and its own interest rates and its own concessionary system to encourage people to invest in these types of bonds. More details of this will come within the next several months.

With respect to energy, we have completed our study of the energy tax

regime with the assistance of the experts at the IMF and they have recommended that we replace our existing supplementary petroleum tax with a profit based tax as opposed to a revenue based tax. Let me explain what that means.

At the current time Trinidad and Tobago has a supplementary petroleum tax that kicks in when oil hits \$50. It is a tax on gross off the top. So it is actually less profitable for companies to produce oil at \$51, \$52, \$55 and so on, than it is for them to produce oil at \$49 and \$48. Because the SPT is additional tax that kicks in at over \$50. The world is moving away from these, what they called volume based, revenue based taxes towards profit based taxes. So that the, just like the existing petroleum profit tax, we are going to change the supplementary petroleum tax, from a tax on gross, to a tax on profits.

I have already sent the recommendations of the IMF to the energy sector, to The Energy Chamber, to the various oil companies for their comments and we started to get feedback already and over the next six months we will come to a consensus with them; hopefully we will arrive at a consensus so that we can reform the SPT and remove that disincentive production. Because SPT was created when oil was \$25. So if oil suddenly jumped to \$50 with no investment by oil companies it was a windfall, a true windfall and that is why SPT was put in like that. But now with oil averaging at \$50, the \$50 is no longer an appropriate threshold to have this kind of additional tax. It is no longer a windfall tax. Oil at \$50 is not a windfall for anybody. In fact, many companies lose money at \$50 oil. So the entire philosophy of the SPT has been defeated and we will deal with that.

We are going to introduce a special system of incentives for small and marginal fields and stranded oil, and incentives to promote greater use of renewable energy. Madam President, could you just tell me how many minutes I have.

Madam President: You have until 2.54 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay, so, 12 more minutes, no problem. Going forward, I will just give some very brief details of our plans and programmes. It is very difficult to get all of this into 45 minutes, I will try my best. Some of the projects that we are targeting, the construction of the Caribbean Gas Chemical Limited project, it is a joint venture between Mitsubishi, Massy Holdings and NGC. This is an investment of US \$1 billion. It is expected to create hundreds of long-term quality jobs, as well as significant jobs, could be as much as 900 to 1,000 jobs in the construction period.

We will be pushing hard to enhance market access to Latin American countries. We signed a Partial Scope Trade Agreement with Panama. We are currently negotiating with Chile, Cuba and Venezuela as two other markets that are opening up to Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers. We are also improving trade and business facilitation and we are creating a revolving loan facility to assist exporters to access new markets in Latin America.

In terms of infrastructure—well, let me just deal with agriculture. We are going to reorient the School Feeding Programme, buy local and eat local. We are going to set a target, I think it is 80 or 85 per cent. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries could confirm that for the food that is given to our children in the School Feeding Programme. We also expect with a new tourism trust that there will be a greater demand for local agricultural products. We are also going to place emphasis on upgrading drainage and irrigation, modernizing land records.

We have already granted duty and tax exemptions on agricultural inputs and so on. And two of the areas that we are targeting right now are the coconut and cocoa industries. I am advised that almost 1,000 acres on the east coast are being repurposed through a Coconut Rehabilitation and Replanting Programme and we

are collaborating with the UWI through its Cocoa Research Unit to process our Cocoa into fine and flavoured cocoa. I will expect the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to give further details on this.

In terms of tourism, we see as a very important driver of diversification. We plan to start work on a modern new international airport terminal. Let me make it clear, it is a terminal not the entire airport, because the runway is fine, at Crown Point and we are intent on facilitating the construction of a Sandals Resort in Tobago which we expect to employ up to 2,000 persons during construction and provide over 1,500 long-term quality jobs on completion. These mega resorts also bring increased airlift, purchases of local goods and services. In fact, the economic footprint of Sandals has been estimated at some \$500million with at least \$100million in purchases from local farmers and other producers, direct purchases, in addition to all the spin-offs in terms of tour operators, transportation, entertainment and so on.

In Trinidad we will be focusing on niche tourism, focusing on meetings, convention tourism, events tourism and ecotourism. We are also focusing on provision of back office services through the International Financial Centre in accounting, information technology and law. We have a major emphasis on maritime services, including ship repair and dry-docking. We are focusing on the creative industries through specific fiscal incentives and we also plan to exploit our advantage in energy services. We are currently in discussion with the governments of Ghana and Guyana.

In terms of collection of taxes, it is my intention to lay in the Parliament a Bill to create a revenue authority which we hope will get the support of everyone, and the reason being that currently our revenue collection agency suffers from a communication problem. We have the Customs operating in its silo, we have

Board of Inland Revenue operating in its silo. There is not enough communication between the two and that is why we feel for greater collections and greater efficiency we need to have one single overarching revenue authority. And I hope to get the support of hon. Senators opposite when I arrive in this place with that legislation.

We have suffered for years from data which has been challenged by so many people as being inaccurate, so that we plan to lay in 2017 legislation to establish an independent statistical institute. We also intend to split the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund into two components. So you have a separate heritage component which would be preserved and a stabilization component which will be used to stabilize the budget and also deal with any external shocks that we might get. I also intend to present the Insurance Bill and the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill to Parliament in 2017.

We have also planned to fully operationalize the new procurement system in 2017. The process involves the appointment of a board of procurement regulation and a procurement regulator, as well as the establishment of a public procurement units in all public bodies. Our target is the end of March 2017 at which time we expect, barring unforeseen circumstances, all public bodies will be required to carry out public procurement in a manner consistent with the public procurement Act.

With the few minutes available to me, Madam President, let me just go now to the fiscal measures. In 2017, as I have indicated in the other place, one of the fiscal measures, let me just indicate the budget numbers, Madam President, just give me one second. [*Interruption*] It is all right, I know what they are. The expenditure for—[*Interruption*]

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

Hon. C. Imbert: No problem. The expenditure for 2017 is estimated at \$53.4 billion, with a revenue at \$47.4 billion. We are therefore anticipating a deficit of \$6 billion, just about 4 per cent of GDP at this point in time.

The fiscal measures for 2017 will include, starting off with foreign yacht repair services. And for those who do not know what this means, foreign yacht repair services have been VAT exempt since 1995 for 21 years until 2016 when this PNM administration decided to impose VAT on foreign yacht services and we had representation from the industry who told us that this would cause significant adverse consequences in terms of employment and in terms of revenue generation in this very important sector.

Foreign yacht services are services provided to persons who are neither citizens nor residents of Trinidad and Tobago. So that no Trinidad citizen or resident can benefit from this exemption for foreign yacht services. And the reason why we are doing this, is that Trinidad and Tobago is a haven during the hurricane season for foreign yachts and as a result a huge industry has developed in Chaguaramas which we wish to continue with.

We are engaging the Inter-American Center of Tax Administrations to assist us with the legislation for transfer pricing, which I intend to bring to Parliament by the end of fiscal 2017. Transfer pricing as you will know is a huge area of leakage, where multinationals charge expenses to associated companies and avoid tax. The property tax will be fully implemented in 2017 as we populate the valuation rolls during 2017. As I said, the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill we are hopeful, it is the identical Bill laid in this Parliament by the former administration, no changes whatsoever. So we are hopeful that this will be approved by Members opposite.

We are continuing the incremental removal of the fuel subsidy. We have

increased the price of diesel by 15 per cent as of September 30. The price of diesel is now \$2.30, which represents about 75 per cent of the true market value. We have increased the duty of locally manufactured tobacco products and alcoholic products by 15 per cent and 20 per cent. Those measures took effect today. We have proposed to introduce a no-tax bracket of 30 per cent on millionaires whose chargeable income exceeds \$1 million per annum or companies with chargeable profits in excess of \$1 million. So that for the incremental income in excess of \$1 million for both individuals and companies, the chargeable income or chargeable profits, there will be an additional tax of 5 per cent over the 25.

And today, we impose a 7 per cent charge on purchases that arrive in Trinidad and Tobago through courier companies by airfreight. We also propose to exempt persons whose monthly electricity bill is \$300 or lower from 25 per cent of their bill. This will help approximately 120,000 households. To stimulate the agricultural sector, all approved agro-processing operations will now be tax free, that will be subject to legislation that we will bring in. And the last two items will provide tax relief to businesses that can mobilize private sector funding, to provide public infrastructure through a partnership with the State.

Finally, we intend to introduce a national competition whereby citizens will be invited and encouraged to present innovative business ideas for evaluation by a panel of accomplished business persons and entrepreneurs and the first five winners of this competition will receive cash in the sum of \$1million, but subject to management by the Government. We will not just willy-nilly give people \$1 million. The million dollars will have to be used to take the idea from a concept into commercialization so it will be managed.

And with those few words, Madam Speaker, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, let me just indicate that I have given Sen. Mark leave pursuant to Standing Order 42(11).

Sen. Wade Mark: [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much. Madam President, the budget of 2017 represents a golden diadem for the rich and powerful and a crown of

thorns for the poor and the vulnerable. [*Desk thumping*] The Minister of Finance budget statement was long on words but very short in ideas, and completely devoid of relevance to the fundamental problems confronting our nation. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, a cursory glance of the review of the economy paints a clear picture of the unbelievable position in which the people are now entrapped because of the horrendous economic mismanagement by the Rowley-led administration during the past year. Let us make it clear from the outset that the national budget must be measured in the context of the resolution of the critical problems confronting the people and the country.

Madam President, we therefore begin from the premise that all development is about people. People must be the centre of our focus. Their sustain well-being must be the object of our work and political actions. The 2017 budget has undoubtedly bifurcated our society by making the rich richer and the poor poorer. [*Desk thumping*] The annual budget ought to be the Government's fiscal plan that should communicate to the people several issues that are critical to the growth and development of our nation. For example, what are the objectives the Government hopes to achieve over the next year? How much will the Government spend to achieve those objectives? And from where will the revenue be generated?

Madam President, the budget failed spectacularly to communicate to the people what are the Government's objectives. So like the previous year, they

spend money without any objectives guiding their propensity to spend freely, irresponsibly and recklessly. Maybe that explains why the Minister of Finance set out to deliberately avoid explaining to the nation exactly on what was the \$60 billion spent and what objectives were objectively and ultimately achieved.

Madam President, the objectives of the budget should be consistent with the medium-term plan or the policy framework of the Government. The objectives of the budget should be the Minister's stepping stone to achieving his medium-term plan. However, substantial amounts of resources are being consumed without the people knowing what would be the short-term and medium-term benefits. We live in challenging economic times and for this Government it appears as if it is business as usual.

3.00 p.m.

Madam President, the present economic storm, raging, made landfall in Trinidad and Tobago as early as 2008. It abated considerably in those halcyon years of 2010/2015, and as if by demonic vengeance, it raised its ugly head in the latter months of 2015 and continues [*Desk thumping*] with raging ferocity, not unlike Attila the Hun swept through Europe.

This challenge is not new to Trinidad and Tobago and not new to an earlier manifestation of the PNM Government. What is new is the PNM's inability to manage the economy with declining energy prices, resulting in painful structural programmes of adjustments and conditionalities inspired by the dictates of the International Monetary Fund. It is absolutely clear that the present Rowley Administration does not have the capacity nor the ability to deal with the current economic challenges. [*Desk thumping*] This is evidenced by the fiscal measures contained in the budget.

Madam President, the 2017 Budget has no vision for the country, no hope

for the vulnerable, no comfort for the law-abiding citizens and no incentives for the small and medium-size businesses. [*Desk thumping*] The 2017 Budget is clearly inappropriate, in that it lacks direction, incentives, compassion, relevance and consistency. The budget punishes the working people, the middle classes and the small and medium-sized business entrepreneurs, while providing sustenance and succour for the rich and the powerful. [*Desk thumping*] It is clear to everyone that this administration is totally incompetent and clueless and lacks the financial skills and knowledge to lead the economy out of the present crisis. [*Desk thumping*] The Government clearly does not possess the requisite skills, talent and vision to restore growth and promote development.

Madam President, a budget is not simply a matter of balancing income with expenditure, or having favourable balance of trade, or a surplus of balance of payments, or even figures relating to the GDP or to fiscal deficit. A budget is about people. It is about men, women and children who make up our society. It is about the hopes, the dreams, the fears and the aspirations of our youth. That is what a budget is about. Any talk about a brighter future is meaningless unless the fiscal measures can alleviate the fundamental problems which our people face on a daily basis. A grim and dark picture emerges from the data the Minister has so generously provided to us. After one year in office, the picture is a sad and sorry one. The PNM is seeking to cure the ills of our society but is actually killing the patient. We need to change our doctors quickly [*Desk thumping*] or we may all soon end up in a comatose state, extinguishing all hope of rejuvenation.

What, therefore, Madam President, ought to be the priorities of this Government? Let me enlighten them because they sadly do not know. Was it not the great Kautilya who once said that the security of the king lies in the welfare and happiness of the people? The priorities of the nation are: crime and law and

order, with it, physical security; agriculture and food security; health services and health security; economic growth; job creation; competitiveness; innovation, which amounts to economic security, and poverty reduction and human capital development leading to overall security. In other words, Madam President, the issue is simple. The responsibility of all governments, as was so eloquently demonstrated by the People's Partnership administration, is the security and well-being of the people. [*Desk thumping*]

According to the *Review of the Economy*, it is stated that the economy contracted for the third consecutive year by 2.3 per cent in real GDP, followed by smaller contractions of 0.6 per cent in both 2014 and 2015. Madam President, both the petroleum and non-petroleum sectors contracted by 9 per cent and 1.8 per cent respectively. The non-petroleum sector is expected to register negative growth of 1.8 per cent in 2016, which is a deterioration from the sector's 1.2 per cent growth recorded in 2015. And that goes for manufacturing which declined by 5.7 per cent, agriculture by 6 per cent and the construction industry declined by 7.6 per cent.

Madam President, these alarming developments are all taking place during the first year of PNM in office. The Rowley-led administration removed some 7,000 goods which were zero-rated and placed a new 12.5 per cent rate of VAT on these items and fooled the people into believing that they were merely going to reduce VAT [*Desk thumping*] from 15 to 12.5 per cent. This action led to the escalation in the cost of living for ordinary people of our country.

Madam President, the Rowley Government depreciated the currency by 6 per cent, the largest depreciation since the dollar was floated in April of 1993. [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, the currency moved from \$6.36 in September/October to \$6.74 in August, not to mention it is now being traded on the black market at \$8. The dollar depreciated by 6.8 per cent against the Canadian

dollar and 5.8 per cent against the euro. This Government increased the prices of super gasoline and diesel by 15 per cent, automatically increasing the transport and cost of basic food in our country.

Unemployment, according to the *Review of the Economy*, rose from 3.5 per cent to 3.8 per cent, but this, of course, is an under-statement of the reality. We have estimated close to 20,000 people having been thrown on the unemployment junk heap in the last period under this Government. There is a kind of strangulation taking place in this environment. It is murder, psychologically, to deprive a citizen of a job or an income. [*Desk thumping*] What the Government is indeed saying to that individual, is that he has no right to exist. In real terms, we are depriving him of the right to pursue life, liberty, happiness and security. Madam President, this is happening to tens of thousands of citizens who are poor and who need help in this country. The dispossessed lives in a cruel and unjust society. We must recognize this. We need to lift the load of deprivation and poverty from the backs of the poor, disinherited, dispossessed and vulnerable masses.

The public debt, on the issue of this question of the debt, I would like this honourable Senate to note that the public debt is expected to increase by 16.2 per cent, from \$74 billion in fiscal 2015 to \$89 billion by the end of 2016. Each citizen is now liable to a debt obligation amounting to over \$68,000 per citizen. The Minister has borrowed some \$12 billion up to August of this year. He has raided \$2 billion from our HSF, and he has warned us that further billions will be drawn down in this fiscal year, 2016 to 2017.

Madam President, to satisfy the Government's voracious appetite to spend, spend, spend, this Rowley-led Administration has decided to tax, tax, tax, [*Desk thumping*] and they are reducing expenditure at the same time on critical areas.

What the Government has decided to do, they have decided to privatize a number of state enterprises to raise revenues for the 1 per cent ultra-elitist in this country. [*Desk thumping*] They have decided to further privatize TTNGL, FCB, TGU, Lake Asphalt, Industrial Estates. TSTT is on the chopping block and Petrotrin is also on the chopping block. The PNM has imposed, or is about to impose, the dreaded property tax at 3 per cent to take effect after the local government elections. We are predicting that the Government is going to increase the rates for water and electricity in 2017.

Madam President, they have instituted major expenditure cuts on the CEPEP and URP. Hundreds of workers have been sent home thus far and more are to be sent home. Petrotrin, because of this bullet payment over the next three years of US \$1.2 billion, this Government is going to cut operating costs, according to the Minister. That means further retrenchment at Petrotrin, and the OWTU has begun to rumble as you saw today.

More borrowings and further incursions are expected. The public sector debt, according to the IMF, is expected to increase close to 78 per cent of GDP, according to their forecast by the end of 2020 if we continue along the trajectory that we are pursuing. We expect the foreign exchange reserves to further decline. We expect further depreciation of our currency in this period and ahead.

Madam President, the Government has imposed a 15 per cent and 20 per cent duty and tax on alcohol and also tobacco products and a killing, literally, has been made by those persons who import these products because they have been importing those products since April, expecting, as we know, the price to go into effect yesterday. So they have made a killing, Madam President. Stockpile, courtesy this Government.

Madam President, the PNM, as the Minister has indicated, has instituted a

salary and wage freeze in the public sector which will have implications for the entire country. They have reduced WASA's allocation by \$500 million and there will be major job losses arising of that disruption and slashing of the allocation. We expect that there is going to be an outflow of capital to take place, given the tardy approach by this Government in dealing with fiscal incentives. Shell has already gone to Guatemala and BPTT has served notice on this Government, "If you do not provide a proper incentive, the \$5 billion will not be invested in the Angelin Field". A word to the wise is enough.

Madam President, what is also taking place, we anticipate that the Government is going to borrow more money in order to complete the Ultra Low Sulphur Diesel Plant at Petrotrin. That is going to add to our public sector debt.

3.25 p.m.

Madam President, when you look at the measures to stimulate this economy, we realize that the Government is absolutely devoid of thought and substance and creativity in their measures. Apart from the two measly paragraphs in the 95-page document, one is tax relief for agro processing operations, and the other deals with the PPP—private/public partnership.

I want to warn this Minister, do not behave like the proverbial ostrich and "bury your head in the sand" and leave yourself completely exposed—because he is hoping for early restoration of oil prices. No sane or rational individual should attempt to run our economy like this. The country is not accustomed to this type of voodoo budgeting, after five years of prudent and responsible [*Desk thumping*] fist financial management. This is an economic dance of the macabre. It is almost like a "jab molassi". The working class has been impacted very negatively by this measure.

ou saw, Madam President, where it comes to health care there is little

evidence of improvement in the health care system. You look at this tax online shopping, the Government has imposed that on the population, taking away the people's right to choose and rational behaviour in terms of choice. That has now taken effect according to the Minister from today, but we understand that certain legal matters are still to be addressed.

Madam President, Trinidad and Tobago has now become the seventh most murderous country in the world. Brazil is better than us; Kenya is better than us; and we are ranking with places like Venezuela and Nigeria because of this Government's incompetence. Over 500 murders since they came to power and the Minister said, "Doh blame me".

Food security: \$4 billion and rising, but we have no evidence of what is being done to increase food production, food security or food price affordability. These issues were not addressed.

I want to turn to Petrotrin, and I know the drums of war have begun to sound at Petrotrin. An industrial action is now in full swing, but, Madam President, there is a particular situation occurring at Petrotrin which we need to bring to the attention of you and the population. There are allegations that the Andrew Jupiter Board of Petrotrin may have irregularly employed the company's Chief Executive Officer in 2015. The CEO selection process at Petrotrin may have been less than transparent with a selected candidate who may not have followed the standard and acceptable recruitment process by a well-respected and well-established human resource expert. The entire process was severely compromised and contaminated by the Andrew Jupiter Board of Directors. Information reaching us revealed that over 40 candidates responded to a public ad posted by a professional headhunter, and there is evidence to suggest that the selected CEO who was not among those who applied and his name was not included among the six short-listed candidates,

submitted by the headhunter, and we are in possession.

Madam President, we have the evidence here in this file with the names of all the short-listed candidates. [*Senator displays file*] We have the evidence in this file with the 40 names of the persons who applied and Fitzroy Harewood name does not appear, and I am going to make this available to all Members of this Senate and to the media. [*Desk thumping*] This is a matter of grave importance. Where did this time traveller from space arrive on earth? And he arrived at the portals of Petrotrin. This is indeed a mystery.

We all know everything about this Government thus far is mysterious. In light of this scandal, we are forced to enquire whether the Chairman should not be invited to inform the nation of what exactly transpired in this sordid affair. The nation demands answers from Andrew Jupiter on this particular matter. In the meantime, we are demanding an independent investigation into this national scandal involving the present CEO of Petrotrin, Fitzroy Harewood. [*Desk thumping*] We have also been advised, Madam President—and we call on the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries to make a statement and to investigate this matter.

Madam President: Hon. Senators! Sen. Mark. May I just remind you of Standing Order 51. The noise level is rising. Okay.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, thank you very much. We have been advised that there was a hacking of the server at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. We understand when the IT investigated this matter it was traced to a high-ranking official in the Office of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. This is a serious compromise of very sensitive information by that particular office, so we call on the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries to clear the air on this matter whether the server of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries was

hacked and by whom, and whether this matter was reported to the police.

Madam President, I want to tell this honourable Parliament that the Government has a plan to sell out TSTT to their financiers. They are very quiet. No information on TSTT and its future. We know that Liberty Global owns the 49 per cent, but we are hearing that there are certain people lined-up to take control of the 49 per cent. We understand the Massy Group has lined up, we understand ANSA McAL has lined up and they want the 49 per cent of those shares. We want to know what will be the role of NEL if ANSA McAL, or Massy, gets the 49 per cent, whether the Government will instruct NEL to grant the 2 per cent to McAL, or to Massy, to give them majority ownership of our national security telecommunication sector that deals with national security?

Madam President, we want the Minister to tell us what the Government's policy with respect to the telecommunication sector in this country and its relationship to economic diversification and national development is. We want the Government to tell us whether they are going to direct NEL to dispose of any part of its 51 per cent shareholding to any local private sector entity which may be successful in securing 49 per cent. Will the PNM Government be encouraging Liberty Global to dispose of the 49 per cent stake to local institutional investors such as UTC, NIB, occupational pension fund plans, credit unions and the trade unions; or will the Rowley-led administration encourage Liberty Global to dispose its 49 per cent stake in TSTT, to their friends and financiers such as the Massy Group and the ANSA McAL. These are questions we want the Government to answer. Very serious issues.

Madam President, it is very clear that the allocation to WASA, CEPEP, the PTSC, the National School Dietary Services, the Industrial Court and even our Parliament have been chopped and slashed. In the case of WASA, \$452 million;

CEPEP \$106 million; in the case of PTSC, \$57 million; in the case of the School Nutrition Programme, \$4 million; in the case of the Industrial Court, \$8 million; and in the case of the Parliament, \$10 million. These are going to have severe consequences for employment, nutrition and quality service. So whilst they are cutting and chopping essential areas of operation, this Government allocates a million dollars to the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association and the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce. These are profitable federations. Why are we allocating a million dollars to these two entities [*Desk thumping*] and you cutting and chopping from different areas? Whilst they are cutting and chopping here and there, they spent \$3 million on Cazabon paintings. Whilst they are cutting and chopping all over the place, they spend \$120 million to buy equipment to spy on the Opposition. What is the priority of this Government? What is their priority?

Madam President, the Minister spent three hours and seven minutes in delivering his budget speech. He has not placed any emphasis on Agenda 2030. He has not said anything about the survey on living conditions which deals with the issue of poverty in this country. Over 318,000 people live on less than \$985 in this country. What is the Minister of Finance doing to deal with this rising poverty level in our country?

Our information, based on our research is that less than 1 per cent of our population controls 70 per cent of the wealth in this country, and therefore, we have to come better than what the Minister is doing in order to equalize and to bring about justice for the majority of people in this country. So, Madam President—how much time I have again, Ma'am?

Madam President: Eight minutes.

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President, I want to tell this Government they cannot

continue to take from the poor to feed and to give to the rich, and that is what the Government is doing. In spite of all the challenges that we are faced with they put \$500,000 to repair the residence of the Prime Minister in Tobago, and I am predicting that that will go from \$500,000 to maybe \$5 million. That is what they will do. So their priority is the issue. Their priority is the issue.

Madam President, I want to tell you, or I would like to tell you, that the PNM build houses to control people. We build and create the environment so as to enable the people to build themselves. [*Desk thumping*] The UNC strategy for sustainable people centred-development is anchored on the premise of people's empowerment and building this nation from ground up. Our approach to development is rooted in the philosophy of independence, thrift, self-reliance, respect for the rule of law, and the emphasis on the welfare of the next generation and generations to come. Our approach will guarantee an improved standard of living, sustainable growth and development, creation of full-time, permanent, productive and well-paying jobs; systematic development of the non-energy sector; targeting crime and particularly hot spots and developing sports as a business, as the alternative Government.

The time has come for the people to wake up, [*Desk thumping*] the time has come for the people to stand up, the time has come for the people to take a position and get rid of this albatross around their necks called the PNM. [*Desk thumping*]

As the alternative Government, the UNC wishes to remind the PNM Government that the rights of the people come not from the generosity of the State, but from the hand of God. I want to remind them of that.

We, in the UNC, are prepared to pay any price, bear any cost, meet any challenge and oppose any force to ensure the freedom and liberty and liberation of our people. [*Desk thumping*] I want to serve notice on them.

3.30 p.m.

Madam President: Five more minutes.

Sen. W. Mark: Thank you. Madam President, the bonds of mass misery must be broken. The chains of poverty that enslaved our people must be cast off and a revolution of hope must eternally prevail in the hearts of our people. The long twilight struggle of the masses for true freedom, over the past year, will soon come to an end. Local government elections is around the corner and the people will get an opportunity to deal with this administration in a very decisive way. The struggle against the PNM by the masses to overcome crime, poverty, hunger and oppression, along with discrimination, is at hand. Indeed, Madam President, genuine freedom is at hand.

I want to tell you, Madam President and remind you, that freedom is indivisible. When one man is enslaved, no man is free. This Government has completely lost its way. In the midst of the piercing darkness, there exists a ray of light. The sun is about to rise once again in this country extending its glorious rays of protection to all and discriminating against none. The time has come for the masses of people in this country to wean the PNM Government off their backs and shoulders. The nation cannot afford, the nation just cannot afford to carry this heavy PNM burden any longer. They must take action and they must take action at the local government elections. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam President, I would like this Government to recognize that they have been able over the last year to mamaguy, fool, mislead the population. Their measures and policies have not been in the interest of the masses and the poor. They represent the 1 per cent of the population. They represent 1 per cent of the population.

Mr. Imbert: Madam President, Standing Order 46(1).

Sen. W. Mark: They represent 1 per cent of the population. We represent the masses of people in this country.

So, Madam President, I want to indicate in closing, the good book says weeping may endure only for the night but joy cometh in the morning. I want to tell this country, through you, Madam President and this honourable Senate, the sun will rise again. I want to indicate that the balisier will wither and die eventually. The balisier will wither and die eventually and the sun will rise again. So I want to let them know that; that we are here as the alternative Government and we assume our duties and responsibility seriously.

Finally, Madam President, I call on the Government of this country to release immediately the survey of living conditions in this country. We are talking about poverty and this Government has in its possession, since February of this year, three reports: one on poverty and one on the survey of living conditions. Somebody leaked a copy to a journalist recently but we need an official copy from the Government and have it tabled properly.

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

Sen. Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir: Thank you very much, Madam President, for this opportunity to contribute to the 2017 budget debate. I wish to thank Members, my colleagues on the Independent Bench, for granting me the honour of leading off the debate, the first time I have had such an opportunity in the Parliament. I have never led off a budget debate before—on the budget—and I am grateful to all Members on the Independent Bench for allowing me to do so.

Madam President, let me dispense with the preliminaries as early as possible because hopefully, there are some substantive matters that I wish to cover. As a preliminary, we know that 2017 represents the ninth consecutive year of budget deficits in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. We started with deficit spending

in 2009 under one administration, the Manning administration; we continued in a second administration, the Kamla Persad administration, and now we are in deficit financing under the Keith Rowley administration. So it is crossing administrations and it seems as though the budget deficit is a feature of Trinidad and Tobago's fiscal stance.

The problem with budget deficits is that they lead to some unpleasant consequences, one of which the Minister has alluded to. In order to finance the deficit, we have borrowed, we have drawn down on savings, on the Heritage Fund and we have sold assets—the FCB assets and the national gas assets are being sold. And the problem with deficit financing for such an extended period is that at some time, we will run out of assets to sell, we will have drawn down our stock of savings and the problem that the Minister is going to encounter up to the year 2020 is a growing stock of public debt which has to be serviced. 2016, Madam President, was the year in which the budget was said to have come into balance, now we have pushed that to 2020 and the stock of debt is going to rise. The Minister will have to be prepared for a debt stock in 2020. The servicing of which, contingent of course, at the interest rate at which he contracts the debt, the servicing of that debt can become perilously close to how much he will be spending on the entire public service, wages and salaries bill. And that means that the more he spends on debt servicing, the less he has to spend on the social welfare.

Madam President, we need to place Trinidad and Tobago in a particular context. The context is that oil production has fallen from the 145,000 barrels per day in '05, '06 to around half that. On a good day, I was told, we produce some 80,000 barrels and it means that we are really a very small, tiny, bit-player in the world market. When we look at companies in the world, we see one operating

here, bp, a market cap in excess of 300 billion, very large. When we examine some Canadian companies, there is one called Suncor, a market cap of 65 billion and I looked at another Canadian company called Peyto Exploration, market cap of 6 billion. And what surprised me about Peyto Exploration with a market cap of \$6 billion is that that small oil company recently is producing 100,000 barrels of oil per day which is significantly larger than the entire output of all of Trinidad and Tobago. It means that we are really inconsequential, we have no control over the international commodity prices and my concern is that Trinidad and Tobago, being a price-taker in this industry, will be vulnerable for a long time and that deficit financing may be with us for a while.

What is the outcome of the deficit? The Minister will be able to spend less and less on social welfare. He knows that, we know that. And for me, the challenge is how in this time of limited resources do we still protect the interest of the poorest people? That is his concern, it is our concern as well. The rich will always be able to look after themselves; the middle class, we hope, will be able to hold their own, but what is happening to the poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago, the people who are looking to us to make decisions for them, so that in this time of great uncertainty, when the Minister is collecting as hard as he has tried, he is only collecting \$37 billion. As hard as he has tried, he has been able to reduce spending down to the mid-40s and it means that he is going to have to try continuously over the next few years to restore balance to try to raise his revenue to 40 and to spend 40. There are spaces but it is going to become increasingly difficult over the next few years for the Minister to cut. In this environment, what could we now recommend so that the vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago are not in any way adversely affected?

First, let me provide some commendations. The good thing is the Minister

is listening and I know we have crossed swords sometimes but who has not crossed a sword with the Minister. [*Laughter*] In fact, I feel honoured when we have these tussles, it is all for the public good. But the Minister has to be commended for putting into effect measures so that the population of Trinidad and Tobago can participate in a Government-bond programme which was put in abeyance in the 80s and now we are reviving. What does that programme do? It allows the ordinary citizens—we have argued for it on this Bench. My colleague Sen. Small has argued for it, I think he will have more to say on it. But we are seeing it come into reality. We are seeing three-year bonds, five-year bonds, bonds of maturities, and we are providing instruments now for people with discipline to take advantage of the interest rates which are going to be offered by the Government and not by the commercial banks and this is a step in the right direction.

Let me see if I could pursue the Minister further. The Unit Trust Corporation, in my mind, is one of the finest institutions, indigenous institutions, ever created in Trinidad and Tobago. It gives the smallest person an opportunity to save. But currently, we have two schemes in the Trust. One, a money market fund which pays a negligibly rate of return and the second, an equities fund, stocks and shares, which has a great level of volatility and risk and I put for the consideration of the Minister that the Trust should, in fact, have a third fund, call it the bond fund. It may require legislative changes. A bond fund where the Trust can purchase bonds from the Minister and then the little people with \$100 and \$200 or so can then purchase units in this bond fund to obtain a rate of interest higher than the money market fund and a level of risk lower than the equities fund, and if you can have a third fund, it will allow the small people an opportunity with \$100 to also benefit from his bond programme which he has reintroduced.

3.45 p.m.

Let us now ask ourselves the second question, and we are trying now to provide to the poor and the vulnerable an opportunity to begin to lift themselves out of the poverty that they have. Because as it is said in the calypso, “oil money come and oil money go, poor people still living on the pavement and de ghetto”. That is Lord Stalin, and we want to escape that. How? How do we now use the budget debate to provide some courage to the people? Because we are in, after nine years of deficits, an environment of uncertainty. We are small. We are small in oil production, smaller than a small size Canadian company like Peyto Explorations. So, it means we have no control whatever over our prices of our commodities.

Madam President, it is always said that poor people cannot save. Savings is a function of income. That is the old Keynesian argument and that if you have no income, regardless of the interest rate, you will not be able to save. But, Madam President, I think we have forgotten our background. We were not always a rich country. We did not always have such a large middle class. We came from a stock of poverty. There are people in this Senate who came from poor families. How was it done?

There is an old, old principle. It was developed in West Africa at the time of French colonialism. It was called the sou sou system. What is the sou sou system? The sou is half a franc, half a French coin. With one sou, you could do nothing. But with 12 sous you are able to do something. That is the smallest currency. People hold the view that microcredit and microfinance and microenterprises belong to the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, not so. It started amongst the people seeing money for the first time in West Africa, getting the French francs and the men and women of respect telling their people start saving your sous; sou sou, half

a cent. In 12 months you will be able to have six sous.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we need to tell people that there was such a system and how we could start one. How could we start a sou sou club? As long as there is someone of trust in the community to whom you can give that small sum. My recommendation is the price of a box of chicken and chips is \$25, if every month you could provide \$25 to someone of trust, when you get your hand at the end of a year, you are collecting \$300. Because the leader takes nothing. He is just a person of trust. Do you know what that does? It bypasses the commercial banks of which I want to make recommendations to the Minister. Banks are not now poor people friendly. If you have less than \$50,000 in one bank, a very regal institution, every month they are charging you \$25, no interest you know, \$25 as a tax, simply to have an account.

Let us rediscover and let us tell our poor people it is possible that they can start their sou sou system in the public service, in a party group, in a sporting organization. Wherever there is someone of trust who will hold that money and who will give it to somebody on a monthly basis, we have such a club. And when you get your hand, what do you do with it? What you do with it? You take it now and you can place in in the Unit Trust, and the Minister indicated that he has legislation coming to the Parliament, that is, insurance and gambling.

I want to put forward for the consideration of the Minister that he also considers putting priority on the Credit Unions Bill as well, because we do need to strengthen the credit union, the people sector, so that we do not run afoul of—yes, Minister is pointing to one of his colleagues who is going to do something so that, right, yes credit unions, and so on.

Madam President, it is said we have to do this together. We have to get Cabinet colleagues to agree with the Minister on prioritizing some of the

legislation. And I am making a plea for the Credit Unions Bill to come to this Parliament so that we could establish rules and regulations and have a people-sector, the sou sou club, the Credit Union Movement and the Unit Trust as the ground organizations for the poorest people in this country who would like to lift themselves up on their own knowing that the State cannot provide the type of assistance that it provided in the past.

Sen. Baptiste-Primus: Not that old Bill, a new one.

Sen. Dr. D. Mahabir: A new one. And we are getting encouragement; a new superior Bill. So we look forward to the new and superior Bill. And while we are on this, Madam President, let us look and see how we could protect, again, the poorest people in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, the foreign exchange of Trinidad and Tobago is largely earned by the export of oil and gas. The Minister is exhorting the business sector to start earning some more. But right now the commercial banks are in charge of distributing. When a poor person goes to purchase foreign exchange, he is in competition with the business class and I would recommend that we the people, the poor people and the ordinary people who are not considered poor, be given an opportunity to also access the foreign exchange earned by the country.

I put for the recommendation by the Minister, the following: the 80/20 rule. Let the commercial banks allocate 80 per cent of the foreign exchange to the business class, but could they not allocate 20 per cent to we the people as well, so that when I want to travel I will get more than the \$400 that I got two weeks ago? I pleaded and I begged and all I could get was \$400 and I am travelling, not only for my own benefit but to learn things, which will be of benefit to the people as well. So that, I think if we could, the Minister can work with the Governor of the Central Bank to put pressure on the commercial banks. In the bad old days of the

80s, Madam President, the commercial banks took directions from the Central Bank. The Central Bank determined the allocation. Now the banks are determining the allocation based, not on equity or social need but on pure profitability and, in that scenario, the poorest people will get little or no Forex when they approach the commercial banks.

So, for the consideration of the hon. Minister, the 80/20 rule, work with the Central Bank, not only for bank service charges, which we have asked for, for them to look at, which are now becoming onerous, exploitative and rapacious, but really let us look at a more equitable allocation of the foreign exchanges, making at least 20 per cent available to the people. Right now I understand it is around 5 per cent for people who want to travel and so on and the businesses get the majority of the Forex.

Madam President, more measures to help the poor people. I raised it before, and now we have the committee of assurances and we hopefully will get the assurances that certain things will be done. Poor pensioners, old-age pensioners still have to present themselves to the old-aged pension office on an annual basis to show that they are alive. This archaic system was dispensed with a year ago, at least, by the National Insurance Board, and my recommendation is, let us ease the old-aged pensioners. The only difference between the old-aged pensioner and the NIB pensioner is that the old-aged pensioner is a poorer person, pensioner nonetheless and if the NIB can have a system where it has dispensed with life certificate and it uses death certificates instead, why do we not simply ask the PS in the Ministry in charge of old-aged pension to work with the NIB to implement a system so that by January 01, 2017, life certificates for bedridden people who are old-aged pensioners will be a thing of the past.

We have, in the past, done away with a lot of Government measures which

were onerous. Now, I think this is one of the last things which certainly would go ways. It will cost the Minister nothing and it will certainly alleviate a lot of the hardship of some of our most vulnerable immobile bedridden elderly citizens. Let us use the Parliament so that we can speak for that group as well.

Madam President, in the past, we were told that there is a shortage of CDAP drugs and that people will go into a public health institution with a prescription and they cannot get the requisite pharmaceuticals, and we are told that there is a global shortage of drugs. But when I look in the Caribbean, I see there is one country that is a world leader in the production of pharmaceuticals. That country is Cuba. And I would recommend that, because I have done the research and I have seen Cuba provides generics for a lot of countries in Latin America, including Venezuela. True, it will be labelled in Spanish but many of us can now translate and we can get the drugs labelled in English. But do we not simply further Caribbean trade by having a dialogue with the Cubans, the Cuban pharmaceutical sector? The drugs certainly will be cheaper. We can sign a contract with them. We can further and deepen Caribbean integration and we can ensure that we have a Caribbean supplier supplying high quality pharmaceuticals continuously.

It would be left, of course, for the Minister of Health, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who are here in this House, to look at that initiative to determine whether we are going to pursue that line so that we can ensure in times of financial scarcity an adequate supply of pharmaceutical drugs.

Madam President, more recommendations. There are things we can do which would not cost too much money because money is getting scarcer and scarcer. How do we change the way we do business? How do we change the way we procure pharmaceutical drugs? We have to do it. And we have to look at low-cost suppliers and we have to take advantage of whatever opportunity we have to

provide benefits for our vulnerable people, while minimizing our cost.

We have heard, Madam President, that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is placing an imposition on the School Feeding Programme that perhaps 80 per cent of the inputs should be locally produced and I think it is an excellent initiative. It should have been so for quite a while. But my concern is this: we need to protect the health and welfare, not only of our children who will be consuming local goods but our citizens at large.

We are told that vegetables are good for us and fish consumption is beneficial. Few will challenge that. But we know that vegetables laced with pesticides cannot be good. The rate of prostate cancer in Trinidad and Tobago, I was told by colleagues, Sen. Raffoul and Sen. Small, at one time, is perhaps among the highest in the world. I was surprised to learn that. Is there a nexus between the chemicals in the food that we use and the disease, the cancer, that we have? It is alarming. It is alarming and we need to correct it. So, I would recommend that while fish is good to eat and vegetables and local fish and veggies should be part of the School Feeding Programme, an important part, and an important part of the diet of the population, I would strongly recommend that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries liaise with the Minister of Health so that the Chemistry Food and Drug Department can be operationalized and efficient. We have to do this thing together. We have to do it as a Cabinet, as a parliament, as a country.

I would not take one Minister because it is one economy and one society just subdivided and you do need to interact and it is important for Chemistry Food and Drug to undertake the sampling, and if it is found that the fish we eat is contaminated too much with mercury and Corexit, and veggies that we have are laced with pesticides which do not meet international standards and they come from an independent health lab, then I think we will not only expand our

agricultural sector, but we will ensure that the health status of the population is protected and it may reduce the need of the poor people over time to purchase expensive pharmaceuticals and for us to have so much need on medicines.

4.00 p.m.

Madam President, many recommendations—we have a full year of Parliament to speak about them, and this budget analysis that I have, is very different from the ones that I have given earlier. This is my 25th budget and in the past it was all about fiscal policy, and monetary and exchange rates and diversification. On this there is nothing because this budget of 2017, reminds me very much of the first one I analysed in 1992 by then, former Minister Wendell Mottley, that he entitled, *From Stabilization to Growth*.

If we could look at a little similarity, we had come out of nine years from 1983—1992, nine years of deficits, and Wendell Mottley at the time presented *From Stabilization to Growth*, and he had also gone on the international market to borrow some US \$200 million. Our good Minister has borrowed \$1 billion. So I see many similarities between the '92 budget and the budget 25 years later. After 25 years of analyzing the same thing, you have to be a little bit more original. Let us be a little bit more original on this one. No monetary, no fiscal, no interest rate, no exchange rate, no rates of growth, no nothing like that, the poorest people in society.

How do we protect the environment for the poorest people? Madam President, for the rich people, the golf course is always clean. The country club is always spotless, but for the poorest people, the rivers, Caura River, the beaches, the places that we inhabit, the streets that we walk on, it is always an environmental nightmare. For the recommendation of—well, the Minister who will talk, because I assume since the Minister is divvying up money, he is

supposed to have a “lil clout” with his colleagues, and what I would recommend is this. Why do we not look at three Caribbean countries, which have taken the lead in the area of environmental control? They are two of the poorest, Haiti—unfortunately, another disaster in Haiti, but Haiti, Guyana and Jamaica. What do they have in common? They have all banned styrofoam containers. You cannot produce them or import them any more in those countries. Let us give some consideration, maybe set up some sub-committee, to look at the possibility of doing that in Trinidad, and use biodegradable paper cups instead.

Second, we have introduced measures in the recent past in this Parliament, to make certain cars, hybrid cars free of duty. That is going to control CO₂ emissions in Trinidad and Tobago, but, Madam President, it is costing the Minister something. What we need to do is really look at environmental measures, for the country as a whole, but in particular, the environment for the poorest people, so they can have a clean river. They can have a very—a pristine beach as well, and we need to start the programme on the ground where the people themselves, will place a lot more emphasis on respect and regard for the environment.

In addition to the Credit Union Bill, I think there is another Bill called the Beverage Containers Bill. Well, that Beverage Containers Bill is an old, old Bill. It was in the Tenth Parliament. It is now in the Eleventh Parliament. We have heard about it. We have heard talk about it. It has been drafted. Madam President, if we are serious about the environment, let us bring that Bill in the Parliament as a matter of priority. Let us see how we are going to deal with plastic bottles, the PET bottles. They are new in Trinidad and Tobago. In the early '80s they were not there. The first one I recall was one known as the “jalitre”, a two-litre bottle of soft drink, and then it spawned a plethora of plastic bottles. Now, some 30 years later, we have to solve that problem.

The Beverage Containers Bill is something we should be looking at. Let us see what are going to be the rules and regulations of producers of these PET bottles. It is responsible for a lot of unsightly garbage, but it is also responsible for a lot of flooding in Trinidad and Tobago, which affects the poor people in an inordinate way, and which destroys their property. Sometimes on TV, I see a family experiencing a flood, and the value of the flood damage is some \$50,000, and I say to myself, “How are they going to recover given the wages they make”—because a \$50,000 loss of a poor family, is a \$5 million loss of someone else. Let us—Credit Union Bill, I am asking for, Beverage Containers Bill; place emphasis on the environment. It certainly will satisfy the Private Members’ Motion of Sen. Mark, when we talk about the Millennial Goals that we have debated.

In that vein, Madam President, I think it is important, visiting a foreign country sometimes is a good thing, because you see how they live there, and how you could implement it here. I think in every school, there should be three containers now of garbage, one for plastic, one for paper and one for glass or metal or bottle; glass. And if we get the youngsters in schools to start to separate the garbage in school, and we start a recycling programme, we have changed the mindset and the culture, and we will get a next generation respecting that environment.

So it would mean a collaboration with the Minister of Education and the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, because you will need local government equipment to come and take the three types of containers, so that they could be recycled. Ministry of Education, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government working in collaboration. This will go a long way towards ensures that we could have a cleaner environment for the ordinary people, and it

would not cost the Government much.

Madam President, I do not know how I am doing for time. Time, because plenty to talk about. I am now enjoying the talk, you know.

Madam President: Nine more minutes.

Sen. Dr. D. Mahabir: Nine more minutes! Oh, Lord, Madam President, “you sure you cyar give me a couple more? You cyar give me”. She is absolutely sure.

In the nine minutes I have, let me—I want to cover two more areas. I want to cover the issue of justice for poor people. [*Desk thumping*] Madam President, I agree with my colleague Sen. Small, there is no white-collar crime in Trinidad and Tobago.

Sen. Solomon: It does not exist.

Sen. Dr. D. Mahabir: White-collar crime does not exist. We do not need a Securities and Exchange Commission. The FCB IPO was not in violation of the Securities and Exchange Bill. Nobody “cut ah jail” for Clico and HCU, which could have bankrupted this country. So there is no white-collar. There is only crime amongst the poor people and the find themselves in Remand Yard. I asked a former Minister of Justice to visit “ah jail” once, and he told me, he said, “I like you too much for you to go jail, to see what it is like there”. So I could only imagine.

Madam President, let me put forward this recommendation. We allocate—I have the document here on how much we allocated to the Judiciary. It is a large sum. I know there is a separation of powers, but I am recommending using this medium to the Attorney General, that he has a discussion with the Chief Justice. Let us finally have a night court. A night court using the same facilities, no need for anymore buildings; 5.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m. In that night court using retired judges, magistrates or lawyers who can serve in the capacity of judicial officers.

Let us use the night court to clear the Remand Yard. Justice delayed is something that is only experienced by the poorest people. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, let us use the night court to charge for gun offences, “ah gun court, ah drugs court, ah small claims court”. There is economics in there. I know nothing about the law, but I can tell you, with five more hours of judicial time, that is a 50 per cent increase. We are going to do a good thing for the poor people who are in Remand, and at least we will be sending a signal that we are concerned about justice for the poor as well. A night court—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Young: Madam President—Senator, would you give way?

Sen. Dr. D. Mahabir: I will give way if—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Young: Thank you. Very, very briefly to answer that question. That has already been done. One of the first things we did as we came into office in September of last year, is engage the hon. Chief Justice and the Judiciary, in a conversation that includes the use of the courts beyond the normal times.

Sen. Dr. D. Mahabir: Hon. Member, and, Madam President, I am hoping very soon, by January 01st, we have the assurance that night courts will be in existence, and that we see tangible evidence of the backlog on Remand, gun court—and I understand that Jamaica has been a pioneer in this area, and that in Jamaica, they already have the issue of a gun court is there already. So let us implement and we need to do that in the interest of justice. Let us not delay justice any further, particularly only because poor people are the ones in Remand. I really would like to know who are—how many rich people of maybe \$1 million or more are in Remand? It could only be the poorest.

A last point and, Madam President, timing? I need to make one last point; four minutes?

Madam President: Five minutes.

Sen. Dr. D. Mahabir: Five minutes! Thank you, Madam President. “Ah have five minutes.”

Recently this Parliament presented—not this Parliament, the former, the Tenth Parliament approved a piece of legislation called the Anti-Gang Bill. I was told that is was not very good. It did not meet with the approval of the Independents, and there were some 80 gangs in this country. Well, I would like to recommend, I think 80 gangs happen to be too small. Maybe that is why the legislation did not go very well. I think 800 gangs may be too small. I would like to see a country with 8,000 gangs, and I would like to see in each gang, four young men from an urban area with—it used to be long time a white B14 Sentra. Now, let us say a white 10-year old car, “ah Tiida”. “Ah white Tiida”, 10-year old, and every day these four young men go out in the country and “dey put dong two wuk”, one in the morning and one in evening and I think we will develop.

Madam President, each [*Interruption*] young man I want “ah man” to be an electrician, “ah plumber, ah mason and ah labourer”, and every day they get a contract in the morning to go to this Government office, and to make sure the washroom is operating efficiently, and in the evening they take their little car and they go to another job site, and they do two jobs in the day. Where do they get the money to do that?—because we already offer the training, John D and UTT. We offered the training, but they get the money initially from the sou sou, Madam President, because they need tools for it and the credit union, to allow them to borrow “ah lil” \$20,000 to buy “ah 10-year-old car”.

So the people sector can work, but only if the Minister introduces now, something I have asked for the last 25 years for and I have not gotten it, a public-sector maintenance programme. We cannot build infrastructure in the manner in which we built in the past, but let us maintain what we have, and let us give the

urban youths an opportunity to avail themselves of Government maintenance, by the formation of small maintenance firms because that is what “ah gang” is, a combination of a few people coming together to do wonderful things, making a profit in the process.

I come back again to the issue of women. It may be that women do not want to engage in construction work. I have seen some of them, but what kind of opportunities do we have for women? We need to get them into microcredit, looking at the Grameen Bank experience. In the Grameen Bank experience, this is what occurs. Women get together and every 100 women who get together, only 1 per cent will default. It is as if women when they borrow, they are programmed to repay, and the one who does not repay, is going to be pressured by others.

Let us—final point—for the young women in Trinidad and Tobago, the young men forming gangs. Suppose there is a young girl and she is someone with a little talent. She can sew. She joins a sou sou, \$25 a month. She has \$300 at the end of the year or when she gets her hand. What—and there are no fees in the sou sou, eh? No fees, just trust with somebody. What can she do with \$300? Well, I will tell you what a young—if I were in that position what I will do with \$300. I am poor. I am desperately poor, Government cannot give me anything anymore. I go to the nearest cloth store and I buy 30 yards of soft cotton. I take 30 yards of cotton, Madam President, and you know how much “baby merino” I could make? Long time it used to be called “ah merino”. Now, is “ah baby vest”. You could make “ah few 100 vest, wid those 10 yards ah cotton”, you know. And, you know, what I would do if I were that young girl, starting with my “lil \$300”? I will ask the matron in charge of the maternity hospital, “Could I come on a few days and speak to new mothers?” And I will sell them baby vests and baby things cheaper than all the stores in this country.

Before long, those young men who have a contract to maintain Government buildings, will be owning their own firms, and that young girl who holds the view, that all she could do is look at the fancy merchandize in the magazines like *Harper's Bazaar*, she will be able to produce the items.

Madam President, we now need at this time to understand that the macro economy is going to be volatile for quite a while. I know that. I have seen it. We are right back where we were in 1992, but it gives us a golden opportunity, an opportunity for us in this country, to remind the people of what we have always known, that with one step at a time in the right direction, one \$20 at a time, it is possible. For too long people have been told, "They cannot do it". I am telling them, the biggest journey starts with a step, but a step in the right direction.

Madam President, I thank you for your indulgence in the extra 30 seconds.

[*Desk thumping*]

4.15 p.m.

Sen. Dr. Lester Henry: Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me to continue in this debate, now started today in the Senate on the 2016/2017 fiscal package. I want to start off by just responding—before I get into my contribution proper—to some of the things I heard coming from the other side there through the voice of Sen. Mark.

I listened quite unattentively to what he was saying, but he is so loud, it comes through still. So when I heard the Minister talking about the situation in WASA, and I looked at what happened in WASA during the period 2010 to 2015, they should be ashamed to even mention that entity based on what happened over their reign in that five-year period.

He made reference to cutting of the budget, I think. He accused the Minister of cutting the budget for WASA, the allocation, and a lot of that had to do with the

back pay that was—[*Crosstalk*] \$420 million which does not have to be paid in the upcoming budgetary period. So, that would explain the shortfall in the allocation to WASA.

The only other thing that actually stuck with me after 40 minutes of his diatribe that sounded like, you know, sounded like a 1970s rabble-rouser, you know, one of those people who “does” just go and talk, talk, talk, and they just figure, well they talk long enough, people might think they say something. And also, the hon. Senator had the gall to mention that the PNM has implemented a wage cap or a wage freeze or something to that effect.

So what was the issue in 2010/2011 under the UNC, where we had all these problems with a 5 per cent wage cap? The unions were screaming up and down the country that there was a 5 per cent wage cap. They accused the then Minister, Minister Dookeran, of implementing a 5 per cent wage cap. Is it not the same UNC who did this? [*Crosstalk*] Or, okay. I wonder if it was a different group. We have done no such thing, but yet you come here talking about this in complete ignorance, or pretend ignorance of your own track record.

The issue at WASA, again, I stood on the other side when the then Minister of Public Utilities, in around 2012 or so, came here and berated the PNM in an extended presentation about what the PNM did at WASA—that the number of employees at WASA used to be 4,000 or so and it had gone down to about 3,000. Under the PNM it went back up to 4,000, you know and talked about how wicked and deceitful the PNM was for creating so much employment at WASA. Do you know what the numbers at WASA is now? I have been told it is about 5,000 as of 2015.

So the same UNC that berated the PNM for having increased staffing at WASA, they came and made the whole situation worse, and this is on top of the

fact that they told the country that they went and implemented a VSEP—borrowed money from the IDB to send home 900 or a thousand workers. So if we were at 4,000 and you sent home almost 1,000, then your staff should be down to about 3,000, simple maths. How did it get to 5,000, the same Water and Sewerage Authority? What did you do? That is the irresponsibility of the UNC that you cannot run from. So that is it. I have no more to say about anything else that he had to say.

Now, let me talk about the budget proper that was presented by our Minister of Finance. You know, there are two strands of criticisms of the budget that was presented by the Minister, two main points. One of the main points is that the budget is too big, it is too big. There are a whole slew of people—I have listened to many, many commentators talk about the Minister is spending too much. He is supposed to cut. He did not go far enough. He should cut this, cut that—\$52 billion it should have been down to \$47 billion. In fact, I was in a forum where one of my colleagues asserted that that would have been the more prudent figure to aim at. So he accused the Minister of being about \$6 billion or \$5 billion short in terms of his cuttings. [*Crosstalk*] Yes.

So I have listened to this, and as the Minister himself has explained, when you go and cut indiscriminately and recklessly, you run the risk of doing significant damage to our social structure. This is what you have to deal with. You cannot get away from it. We are not irresponsible. The Minister should cut this, cut that, cut all kinds of things. So the number one critique of the budget is that the Minister presented a budget that was too big, \$52 billion.

Do you know what the second criticism of the budget is, according to many commentators, and especially those on the UNC side? The budget is too small. That is the next big comment. That is the next big criticism of the budget. I have a

note here saying, UNC. So they said, okay, the budget is too small. The other side come, you know—so there is a whole set of them saying it is too big, a whole set of them now, mainly UNC and their supporters, saying the budget is too small—you are supposed to be spending more and stimulate the economy like we did—and that is their next victory, the 2020 election. They will claim a victory too. [*Crosstalk*] That is what I am saying, it is a typical UNC victory. So they are saying it is too small.

I listened to some of them in the committee stage of the budget during the last few days: why are you cutting this? Why are you cutting that? Why are you cutting OJT? Why are you cutting GATE? Why are you cutting anything, because it will cause harm to the people, and you would lose jobs and so on and, you know. So how do you make sense of this? One big criticism, the budget is too big. The second big one, it is too small. Do you know what that usually means? The Minister got it right. [*Desk thumping*] That is what it usually means.

Some of the other secondary criticisms of the budget that was presented by our Minister, another one is that the oil price that he set was too high. I think he dealt with that adequately, a little while ago, in his presentation in terms of what is happening in the global market. Since the budget, things have moved in a direction which has proven, to some extent, at least so far, that it was a prudent decision to set the price that he did. So I will not go over some of what he said, I would just leave that there.

Then, again, I listened to several commentators at various fora all over the country in terms of what their comments were on the budget. A typical comment also was one of that there is nothing to do with diversification of the economy. And, again, in today's presentation, the Minister dealt with that. Now, this whole question of diversification, let me just divert a bit to address this issue, because

many people who talk about diversification, as the Minister said, do not realize that it cannot happen overnight. Many commentators make that point that I just made, so that is nothing new. I am not saying anything new there. But what I am concerned about is the lack of historical perspective and the lack of knowledge in terms of what was tried in this country before.

Since the 1950s, late 50s early 60s, there has been significant attempts to diversify this economy, and people talk today as though nothing has happened. You know, like if we had just sat on our laurels and did not try anything. And going back to the 1950s, if you read the late honourable Eric Eustace Williams, if you read his textbooks properly and paid attention, diversification was a constant theme in a lot of what he talked about. He did try. This country tried import substitution, industrialization back in the 1960s and early 70s. [*Crosstalk*] How you got to get to the point of all the local manufacturing that was done? We tried import substitution. In a significant way, we had developed significant screwdriver industry.

So some of you are trying to fool the young people. Most of us in here were alive, and we knew of the products and the problems associated with the import substitution industrialization. Many people benefited from those programmes. There was a time when we used to assemble cars and TVs and microwaves. What was that? That was an attempt at diversification.

Hon. Member: That was NAR.

Sen. Dr. L. Henry: No, that was in the 70s. [*Crosstalk*] This is how the country became self-sufficient in things like chicken and ham and so on. People used to wait on a ham to come from abroad for Christmas [*Crosstalk*]—and given 20,000 acres of land for agriculture in the Wallerfield Area. All of these things were attempts at diversification. So to continue pushing this notion that nothing was

tried or nothing was ever done is just falsehood and foolish.

There is a lot of things that were tried. Some were partially successful and many local businessmen benefited from the efforts, Nutrimix in particular. The chicken magnate developed under the IDC. These things are things that young people should know, and stop talking as though we have never made any attempt to diversify the economy.

The problem is that, yes we do not live in a vacuum, and just like Barbados and Saint Lucia and many of these other countries who tried to get into textile manufacturing, back in the 1980s with the American one, CARICAN and the name escapes me now—the Caribbean Basin Initiative, CBI. All of those things. Do you know what happened to them? China rose and started to produce textiles much cheaper than they could. The same thing happened with Jamaica. Jamaica tried to diversify.

Madam President: Sen. Henry, I think you are going to speak a little longer. Right? So we will take the tea break at this stage. This sitting is suspended until 5.00 p.m.

4.30 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

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

Sen. Dr. L. Henry: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for allowing me to continue, as I go through some of the serious points that we need to know about and to address on this topic related to the 2016/2017 budget. Before I continue in terms of what I had prepared to say, I also want to just end the diversification piece I was discussing before I was interrupted by the tea break.

There was a lot of efforts to try to diversify, as I was saying. Many of them achieved some measure of success. Some of them were abject failures, as has been

the case in most countries who have tried to diversify their economies, including countries with much more material wealth than us, and many others without anything at all. So it is a difficult prospect. I was saying that you are not living in a vacuum, you are living in a competitive, globalized world, so when you make a move to do something, you cannot keep another country from doing it, and sometimes they end up doing it better than you, and you find yourself still falling behind. This is what happened to a lot of Caribbean countries.

The noise I was hearing from the other side about PNM did not do this and this did not work—there is a whole list, I have a whole slew. In fact, one of my research assistants did a full masters' thesis on this project. She came to me and said one of the things she did not like about the PNM was that they did not do enough to diversify the economy. And I said, "Is that so? Where did you get that from?" She said, "Well I do not know; that is what everybody said and everybody keeps saying it." So I said, "All right, you come work with me, go and study this, go back to the 1950s and 1960s and do your masters' project on this topic." In the end she came back with a masters' project thesis of about eighty-something pages long. She went into all the five-year plans from way back in 1958 coming forward: 1958, 1962, 1964, 1968 and the Point Lisas strategy and all these things. So to come and say that the PNM did not try anything or did not do anything to diversify the economy is just absolute falsehood and a historical nonsense.

In fact, the young lady is now pursuing her Ph.D. in economics under a Fulbright scholarship, which I helped organize. She is at an American university, now moving into the final stages of completing her doctorate in economics in Washington. Her name is Cassandra Rattan, if you all want to look it up. She was one of my last three research assistants who all were awarded Fulbright scholarships and are doing PhDs in the US on various topics relating to the

Trinidad and Tobago economy. So I do not stand here and just talk about things I do not know. This is my job; this is what I do.

Mr. Vice-President, in the end, to sum up the overall budget itself, it was a balance between austerity and stability. Because just as how some people were saying it was too big and other people were saying it was too small, it was a delicate balance to try to bring down the level of expenditure while maintaining stability in your society. We have seen what happens in different countries with rampant austerity measures. We have seen what happened in Greece; what happened in Latin America back in the 1980s. Those economies deteriorated very rapidly when they engaged in very extreme programmes of austerity, to the point that growth was stymied and the decade of the 1980s became known as the “lost decade of development”, and a lot of that was through rampant austerity measures inspired by IMF structural adjustment programmes. So we do not want to go down that road, and we have to maintain the prudence of balancing cuts and revenue generation.

As I have said before on many occasions, the other side seems to think when they come with a budget it is all about expenditure, and I stood there year after year asking, “Where is your revenue?” Now you have a Government that is biting the bullet and trying to raise revenue through taxation and other means, you are complaining because you did not do it in five years. So the responsibility that the Minister has shown is what is needed in this critical time.

Mr. Vice-President, before my time runs out I want to touch on a subject that both speakers mentioned before me, that is the issue of the exchange rate and what is going on with our foreign exchange situation. Many people I have heard in different budget fora talk about the exchange rate, that it should be depreciated or devalued, whichever term you use. You can use them interchangeably, because we

are not really sure whether we have a fixed or floating exchange rate. It is described as a managed float, but for many years the IMF considered us as having a fixed rate, because our rate was not moving for quite a while—for quite some time.

Now, a lot of the rhetoric that I have heard—I will take this occasion to perhaps condemn some of my colleagues—have been very, very irresponsible when talking about something as serious as the exchange rate, because usually people are a lot more cautious. When you care about your country, you do not go out there calling for the exchange rate to drop to 10 to one and 15, and just bandying about all kinds of crazy numbers. That in old time days used to be called “debauching” your country’s currency, and it used to be considered a crime in many countries. When people went about talking about the currency in such a way that would negatively impact the value of your currency, that used to be considered a crime, and people are doing it now, as though they have no responsibility. They do not understand that you could create a self-fulfilling prophesy and cause a lot of havoc. Some of them are supposedly trained economists who should know better.

When you look at the experience of countries that have rapidly devalued or allowed their currency to depreciate, it is not very nice. Again, this Government has been showing a very cautious approach to the whole matter. When you look at what happened in Guyana and Jamaica, when they liberalized their currency—I was in Guyana around the time when the official exchange rate was 10 to one, ten Guyanese dollars to one US dollar, and the so-called black market or parallel market rate was 35 to one. In those days they had a place called Wall Street in Georgetown, where you used to go and you could exchange your money. You walk with a few US dollars and you come back with a whole wheelbarrow full of Guyanese dollars.

You know what the powers that be encouraged the Guyanese Government, through the Central Bank, to do? They devalued and said, “Look, look, look, the real rate is more like 35”, so they devalued to 35. Do you know what Wall Street rate went to? It went to 70—Wall Street in Georgetown I am talking about, not in New York. Then, you know, they tried it again. So they said, “No, no, no, the real rate of the Guyanese dollar is more like 70, because that is what it is trading for on Wall Street. That is the free market.” You know they devalued to 70. You know what happened to Wall Street? It went to 100, and the dog kept chasing its tail. Until long after, many years, the Guyanese dollar is settled now at around two hundred Guyanese dollars to one US dollar. So the question I have for the people who are pushing that type of argument: should Guyana go and devalue to 300? You want to know what will happen?

The same thing happened in Jamaica. I was in Jamaica around the time when they started their liberalization programme as well, back in the early 1990s. Jamaica in fact started a little bit ahead of Trinidad and Guyana. So a lot of the policies that were implemented in Jamaica were implemented in Trinidad and Tobago with a lag of about a year or a year and a half: the devaluation, the floating of the currency, eventually allowing people to hold US dollar accounts and these things. So what happened? In Jamaica, the same thing. The official rate was around 10 Jamaican dollars to one US. They devalued, because there is a parallel market or black market rate around 20. It was trading for 20 Jamaican dollars and then they devalued to that, and the Jamaican dollar went to 30, and the same experience that obtained in Guyana happened in Jamaica again. Now their currency is stabilizing at around one hundred and something, about one hundred and five or so—120. I am told it is around 120 now.

So you went from \$10 to \$120, and you have seen the consequences of what

happened in Jamaica. I go to Jamaica—well, I used to go; I am no longer the Chief Examiner for CAPE for the Caribbean. I went on CXC business; I was Chief Examiner for economics for many, many years. So many of you who have students who did CAPE Economics, they did my exam. I go there and you can see the suffering. I mean, you do not have to do any research, you just have to show up and look around Kingston, and you can see the effects of structural adjustment policies; no rocket science.

5.15 p.m.

And many people are quoting this thing about, well the currency is overvalued. I have been studying overvaluation for 25 years since I was doing my PhD dissertation, because I had to confront it when I was studying capital flight.

Sen. Sturge: I thought you were a medical doctor, you know.

Sen. Dr. L. Henry: And overvaluation is a very loaded concept, it is very politically, potentially politically loaded, let me describe it as that. Because it all depends on a base year and you get a different result which, depending on which base year you choose. You could say the currency is overvalued this year based on which ever base year you pick. Right? So, some people like to say it and they think it sounds technical and they think well, oh that sounding good and they could back it up with some quote from the IDB or some IMF, right, without understanding that you could manipulate the base year to say anything. Right? And I have studied this for quite a while, it was one of my topics. Right?

Now contrast that with what obtained in Barbados. And recently, just last week the Governor of the Central Bank of Barbados and I think a business delegation, they were here in Trinidad. There is an article in the *Guardian* about it. Right? And where they stressed there will be no devaluation in Barbados and they have been consistent over 30 years with this. And you know why they can do it?—

because they have national consensus on the issue. Everybody in Barbados does not want this to happen, from the taxi driver, the bartender, the beach bum, everybody is united, Opposition and Government have stood firm and said, we do not want the Barbados currency.

And the businessman who was here, I cannot recall his name, from Barbados who made the presentation talked about well, he was very dismissive to some extent. He said, but wait, our type of economies, devaluation does not make any sense because we do not have any exports to become more competitive when we devalue, which is supposed to be the point of the devaluation. Right? We do not export anything really. In Trinidad and Tobago's case, of course we export oil and gas—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Imbert: Petroleum products.

Sen. Dr. L. Henry:—petroleum products. But then we do not set the prices as everybody knows. Again that is not rocket science; that is common knowledge. Right?

So, Barbados has a social cohesion that allows them to maintain. And you know, the reason why Barbados is interesting is not that they have the social cohesion to keep their currency stable, all right, because Barbados consistently ranks as one of the highest, the number one developing country in terms of human development index. And they maintain a fixed exchange rate over the past 30 years plus. So what is all this nonsense about small countries cannot have a fixed exchange rate or that somehow as soon as you run into trouble you have to let your currency float away? To please who?

So, Barbados on the other hand, has stuck to their guns and they consistently rank above us with a lot less resources than we have. When you go to the United Nations Human Development Report, Barbados quite up here and we somewhere

down there, and they have no money. [*Crosstalk*]

But their society has not paid the price like how Jamaica and Guyana has paid for rampant structural adjustment and implementation of austerity programmes. They have used other means to adjust. Of course, we know that they are in difficulty because—and that did not start now, eh? That is almost 10 years Barbados is in trouble, but because of their commitment to maintain their exchange rate and other things and other social policies and their tripartite arrangements, which is very important, they have been able to weather a lot of storms. When the IMF wanted to come down on them, the same way they dealt with Barbados, sorry, with Jamaica and Guyana, they stood firm and they told the IMF, we will do anything else but devalue. And they went through a series of cuts, they did some adjustments and they weathered the storm. Their first real difficult period was around 1989 to early 1990s. So they stood firm—[*Interruption*]

Sen. Sturge: Thank you for the history but we are talking about this budget, forget history.

Sen. Dr. L. Henry:—to show you that some of the people that are calling for this type of policy, right, you have to question whether they really pay attention to the consequences of such policies when implemented. And many of them, I know some of them quite well, they are my colleagues, some of them are supporters of UNC and they are still my friends.

Hon. Senator: You have good friends then?

Sen. Dr. L. Henry: No. I have a mixture of friends, seriously. So, yes, when you—before, I think I have about five more minutes—[*Interruption*]

Sen. Sturge: Oh God. So much?

Sen. Dr. L. Henry:—one of the things I would like to stress on is the global environment. I did not talk much about that. And one of the best reads I found in

recent weeks is the UNCTAD Trade and Development Report 2016. I have been reading these reports since the 1980s and even what was obtained before that. The Trade and Development Report 2016 is quite interesting. It is actually one of the best ones I have seen that the UN has put out, and they cover things like the environment in the global economy and so on, and they are talking about the global economy. They described 2016 and the year running up to this period as a year of living dangerously. That is how the UN UNCTAD reports.

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

Sen. Dr. L. Henry: Yes. Okay. So I just want to point out that in terms of global economy, they start by saying:

“The world economy in 2016 is in a fragile state, with growth likely to dip below 2.5 per cent”—that was—“registered in 2014 and 2015. The mediocre performance of developed countries since the 2008—2009 economic and financial crisis is set to endure, with the added threat”—of—“the loss of momentum in developing countries...”

This is a very serious thing and a lot of people have not caught on to what—they spent a lot of time warning about in this report. That is the emergence of a new international debt crisis. The debt of developing countries, well now they are referring to them as a larger group, as emerging economies, have spiralled quite out of control since 2009—2016. And that is not being reported heavily in the press as yet. All right?

And they talked about several factors since—I have a whole set of quotes here to emphasize the point. But they talked about sovereign debt bond issues for emerging economies went from \$2 billion in 2009 to \$18 billion in 2014 and they have some frightening figures about the amount of overall debt of the emerging economies rising.

And one of the things they mentioned, in my last two minutes, several times even in the executive summary of the report, is the dangers of excessive depreciation of the currencies. In fact they said one of the contributing factors to the worsening situation in emerging economies has been excessive depreciation of their currency. Right? And it is actually quite a good read and when they come to the recommendations about what countries should do to:

“...shift towards manufacturing and industrialization or...more sophisticated services”—sector—“governments need to adopt policies with the following objectives:”

And they list a set recommendations. And do you know what was number one on that recommendation?

“Ensure high levels of aggregate demand, high levels of investment, and a stable exchange rate...”

That was the number one recommendation. And they go on, I cannot go through all of what they suggested, but I will just mention one more as my time is up.

“Avoid adopted export strategies that rely on compressing wages; labour is not just a cost of production, but an important source of demand and tax revenue.” Okay?

So my time is almost up, but I wanted to stress that that is a very—that is one of the best analysis I have seen of the current state of the world economy and it is very gloomy in terms of what is going happen in the emerging markets and we have to be wary of that because we would be caught up in neighbourhood effects; if a lot of countries around us go down, we will go down too. So that is why stability, austerity with some stability is the correct way to go. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. H.R. Ian Roach: Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Vice-President, before I commence my contribution, let me first of all, I want to get off on a positive note. One of the things that as a young democracy we all here in this Parliament should feel somewhat proud that in the last 24 hours in the Court of Appeal in Trinidad and Tobago a decision was given against—in determining the election petition that was filed.

It was done in a very efficient and competent way, proving the fact that we have a reliable judicial system. It has come in for ridicule in recent times. I think we can boast that we have competent judicial minds here in the Chief Justice, Justice of Appeal Mendonca and Justice of Appeal Peter Jamadar who deliberated and decided in quick time the matter that was before the court. [*Desk thumping*] It was a matter of national importance because the very reason why we are is through an electoral process, and rightly or wrongly, it was brought into question and we showed that we have the institutional capacity, we have the integrity and the competence to make our own determination. Again, without it having to go overseas to the Privy Council. I think this a very positive and proud moment that we can all feel for the judicial process [*Desk thumping*] as well as for our independence.

Having said that, Mr. Vice-President, I would like to thank first of all the hon. Minister and the number of public servants who would have participated, again, in preparing this year's fiscal budget for 2016/2017 which I have paid close attention to. I have also listened to the Opposition in the other place diligently so that I can get the Opposition's take on it. I will make no comment on same for now.

I have also had several opportunities to engage members of the public who would be largely impacted by this budget and its proposed measures for better or

for worse. The numerous commentaries in the electronic and print media also did not escape my attention. In the end, Mr. Vice-President, I have heard much about little. I cannot as a result claim to be particularly enlightened by most of the discourse. The national budget is simply a financial statement which states the Government's projected income and expenditure in a nutshell.

It seeks to also lay out the areas of concern both for income generation and for expenditure and therefore, should spell out the Government's policy behind same. I must say early on that I am cognizant of the fact that the Government of the day has a daunting task in trying to please as many people as possible with a significantly reduced purse. With that dilemma comes objective realities for us all as people hoping to eke out a living and, at least, sustain a reasonable quality of life for ourselves and our families.

Let me from the onset declare that it is not my intention to use my given time to speak on every area or aspect of this budget. There are 70 Senators in this Chamber and I am—sorry, there are 30 Senators in this Chamber and I am positive, given the history of debates in this Chamber, that no area of the budget will not be captured for examination by the time the course of this debated had ended.

5.30 p.m.

Therefore, Mr. Vice-President, with your indulgence I shall focus most of my contribution on the budget as it impacts the lives of the marginalized persons with disabilities and the areas affecting the differently-abled persons in our society. There are 29 other Senators, who I am sure will talk on every other aspect of the budget, so I will focus my attention where the others may not.

As regards the budget overall, what many of us want to know is, exactly what is the Government's policy moving forward? What are their immediate, their

mid-term and their long-term objectives being pursued? What are the objective measures to be employed to determine success or failure? In other words, Mr. Vice-President, the public wants what are the in-your-face low hanging fruits or objective we are ready to look forward to from the Government. Plain and simple, minus the economic dragon and the political posturing or over promising and canvassing.

Mr. Vice-President, it is a public outcry that successive governments have wasted, misused, abused and spirited away taxpayers' billions of dollars with no, to-date, apparent consequence or prospects of recovery of their tax dollars and patrimony. The lack of accountability by those overseeing the national patrimony is totally unacceptable, and angering to an already displeased public with public officials across the board. Go into the public and survey a wide cross-section of the country, and the results may shock only the naive and the disbelievers. This must be put into its proper context against the fact that the Government is seeking to raise taxes as a source of income so as to meet its fiscal obligations.

Mr. Vice-President, you may realize that if the postulated estimates of government officials' misappropriation of funds hold true, it is in the billions of dollars, and this can go a very long way in reducing their tax burden and closing the budget deficit gap, if recovered. There possibly may not even be a need to touch the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. The public remains agitated for action to back up their endless talk thus far, but I will not say more on this, save that without the trust of the very same people who either directly or indirectly caused us to be here, the progression and navigating of these economic times will be even burdensome, more burdensome, and arduous to achieve.

Mr. Vice-President, I have read through pages 1 through 95 of the budget statement 2017, entitled, "Shaping a Brighter Future, a Blue Print for

Transformation and Growth”, and unfortunately there was absolutely no mention of any specific provisions for persons with disability. That being so, it cannot be shaping a brighter future for persons with disabilities at all. I then pursued the *Social Sector Investment Programme* statement and found at page 51, paragraph 4.3(ii) and itemized this from A to F dealing with persons living with disabilities. None of the areas listed gives me any hope for a brighter future in Trinidad and Tobago as a person living with a disability. How long will it be before this policy informed legislation is brought before this Parliament? Will the Ministry drafted policy be available for public scrutiny? Item (b), the elderly and the differently-abled mobile service ELDAMO, E-L-D-A-M-O, with the greatest of respect, does not enable greater mobility and a higher quality of life.

A case in point: The wheelchair bound man last week fed some food by a most compassionate, civic-minded, young citizen Lilian Williams, who knows how long he was waiting for the lone bus service to transport him home after grocery shopping. The situation should not be satisfactory with any authority charged with making persons with disabilities more mobile and to have a higher quality of life. To accomplish the human rights aspiration the Government will have to make it a national policy and law that all public modes of transportation be outfitted to accommodate the differently-abled members of the public.

I have experienced that level of civility and civic responsibility in the United Kingdom, a country and culture, we continue to maintain deep political and legal ties with. There was no special bus, or black taxi, or tube that I did not have easy and ready access to. No one time did I have to call a special service for the differently-abled for transportation, and that is what is required here, and I demand same on behalf of persons with disabilities in our society. And those of you who may very well in the future become persons with disabilities— as my grandmother

used to say, “what eh miss you eh pass you”.

After Miss Williams did her part as a caring soul for the differently-abled, how many politicians did you see on the television or in the newspaper parading with her, not missing the opportunity to glorify themselves when they should be hanging their heads in shame, every one of them, for they are in a position to do much more for so many persons but have done very little, if anything at all, in alleviating the plight of persons with disabilities in our society. “Do unto others as you would want others do unto you”, as the scripture says or as Mother Theresa once said, “Why not live simply so that others may simply live”. After another glaring example of the blatant neglect and indifference right here in this very Parliament Chamber, we all frequent in the service of the people, from the looks of things to me, and to those who have unfettered eyes to see, it may seem to be in the service of some people and not all.

After three odd years of being an independent Senator, one would have thought that some proper physical arrangement would have been made by now for the differently-abled Member, or staff, or visitors to be able to have unrestricted access to all areas in this Chamber. But this is not so. Mr. Vice-President, if for one reason you were to be absent, the Leader of Government Business to be absent, and I am in the chair of the Leader of the—coordinator, who will take your place, how would I get there? If you were to, for some reason, tomorrow, God forbid, be forced to be in a wheelchair, how will you get to that stand? You cannot. If I want to have a conversation with any Member of Parliament on the other side, unless they indulge me in coming to me, I cannot go to them. Same to the Opposition. This is totally unsatisfactory in 2016. I am here three years, I am here three years and nothing has been done. It has been a full year since the last budget when I invited Members of Parliament to come to work in a wheelchair and

experience for themselves how challenging it is to go about their daily activities while being in such circumstances. To date, I am yet to see anyone in such circumstances take up the challenge. It has not been done because it will be an inconvenience to all. If right here in this Parliament this attitude of utter indifference is shown to the public, what can one expect to go on outside these Chambers?

Let me now turn to the *Social Sector Investment Programme* as reflected in the budget statement again. Geared towards shaping a brighter, what is the policy and the intention of the Government to treat with the inadequate and abysmal roads and pavements in order for same to be used by persons with disabilities? What of the housing stock is set aside for persons with disabilities? And what of the environment where these estates are concerned? Can persons with disabilities have access to those houses where they may wish to visit or reside with family and friends? What is the time-line, if any, for the transformation of all government and public spaces to be differently-abled compliant? What is the standard of compliance to be used in the infrastructure outfitting of a person with disabilities? As you can see thus far, Mr. Vice-President, I have much more questions than answers from the budget.

I perused the American website and the White House website on Obama's policy concerning the differently-abled persons, and with your leave I would just like to read an extract that I was able to pull from it. It is whitehouse.gov/issues/disabilities. He said:

“The President is committed to nurturing a society that values the contributions of all of our citizens and residents, including the approximately 50 million people in this country living with disabilities.

At a Glance”—he said:

Nearly a quarter-century ago”—America—“became the first nation on earth to comprehensively declare equality for its citizens with disabilities. With passage of the ADA, we enshrined into law the promise of equal access, equal opportunity, and equal respect for every American.

Today, 19 percent of Americans (56.7 million people) live with disabilities. President Obama and his Administration are dedicated to ensuring that people with disabilities have the same access to the American Dream as every other citizen.

That’s why this Administration has worked to toughen the protections against disability-based discrimination, increases accessibility in our communities, expand employment opportunities and increase financial dependence for people with disabilities.”

I will read:

“Increasing Employment Opportunities”—

Obama has mentioned his focus—“on providing Americans with disabilities, with access to the resources and training necessary for them to succeed in the workplace.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIAO)

President Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIAO) into law, placing significant new responsibilities on several Cabinet-level agencies that have the responsibility for increasing the employment of individuals with disabilities, particularly the Department of Labour and the Department of Education. These agencies will take the primary lead in furthering various initiatives within their departments designed to advance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.”

Then lastly I would just read this part here, section 503 of the regulations:

“New rules under Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act have taken effect and mandate that all federal contractors must take affirmative action to recruit, hire, promote, and retain individuals with disabilities. These regulations established a 7 percent utilization goal for individuals with disabilities and also require increased data collection and record keeping to improve employer accountability.”

Mr. Vice-President, what I am saying is that nowhere in this budget, I mean, this budget covers a significant amount of areas, and concerns, and needs for our society, but little attention has been paid or articulated of a sector of the society that are differently-abled are to be attended to. I looked at the contribution in the other place of the hon. Minister Crichlow-Cockburn, and she said in her contribution on the 11/10, she said, “I now turn my attention to the more than 52,000 persons living in Trinidad and Tobago with disabilities”. Therefore our population is 1.3 million people, it means 4 per cent of our population at this point in time, if this figure is correct, are living with disabilities. That is not a small amount for a society that is 1.3 million people. I am not sure if this Government or any government thus far has put aside or has created such a policy of which I have just articulated or just read from, in the terms of the United States of America which has made it law, that some percentage of opportunities in terms of employment are made available for persons with disability.

One of the reasons when I accepted the offer to be an Independent Senator, it was not just based on the fact that I was a disabled person—and I would hope that was not the reason alone—it was articulated that I will have had some other, based on my experience and my qualifications, I will be able to bring some sort of visibility to the plight of the otherwise disabled persons who are seen to be

operating in the shadow of the society. And I can tell you the level of discrimination that exists in the workplace knowingly and unwittingly is significant, because I personally have experienced it since I have been disabled. I have been disabled now five years last month, and in my practice as an attorney at law, I have been to a tribunal last year, and it is still going on, where a tribunal head had discriminated against me, and I now have the matter in the Equal Opportunity Commission, on my disability, seeking that I be replaced on account to somebody else because of my disability. This is real.

And I am an attorney, and it is known that I am a Senator dealing with certain matters that concerns the public, but yet I am still treated in that way. Not that I require any special treatment. I go to the stadium on a regular basis to exercise, to date after three years I still cannot access the stadium to get in to view anything that is being conducted there as a patron. I cannot, because the elevator is not working, and every time I raise the question, I raise the issue quietly with certain members who can do something, I am told it is being done, it is being done. It is not a favour for me. I want nothing for me. It is for all those persons outside there who are currently in a similar circumstance, and those persons who very well might end up like that in the future. It is totally unacceptable. If I were to leave my premises where I am living without my vehicle, I would not get far past 100 metres in the road, because there is no proper pavement, there is no proper guttering. I cannot traverse, like a person who could get up and walk. Let me give you the most atrocious and distressing experience I have had most recently, last weekend.

5.45 p.m.

I go around the savannah from time to time to exercise, and I am proceeding around the savannah on the eastern side, coming out from Cadiz Road, outside

there, around the St. Ann's Roundabout. There is an establishment called Apsara or Tamara, something like that, and apparently like they now have another additional entertainment thing. On that side of the savannah—apart from being parked on the other side where exactly is the footpath, where people would run, walk, be it strollers with babies, whatever it is—that was blocked with at least five or six cars, parked in the middle of that. So I was now driving around to park, but the only place I can park to get out to walk on the savannah, because there is no proper disembarkment for me or anybody who is paralyzed. And all these cars are parked there, impeding access to the normal person, far less for me. So had I started coming around there I would have no way of even going into the road to become another statistical accident victim, could have passed. Total indiscretion. So I had to call 999. Fortunately, they responded rapidly and had those cars removed, otherwise I would not have been able to get around the savannah.

Now, that is a very prominent part of the savannah. I was taken aback that police, if they were doing their patrols did not see that, observed that and do something about it. So those are the types of difficulties that a person who is differently-abled find themselves faced with on a regular basis to access leisure, exercise, sport and even work, socializing as well.

For me to socialize in Trinidad, in any public establishment, I have to do what is called a reconnaissance. I have to either go myself, personally drive by, send somebody to find out whether they have access or they do not have access where I can go. There are few restaurants I can go in on my own. If not, I will have to be lifted up or something like that, like one disparaging comment came from the President of the NAAA Ephraim Serrette said I wanted to be lifted up like a baby. That was his remark. Unlike Lillian Williams who came to the rescue of that individual. That is the type of comments you will get.

So how can you feel part and parcel of a society that is supposed to be for all. Where is it? That man who was fed by that young girl, no one knows where he came from, where he is going, what are his circumstances? Does he have the opportunity to make a living? If he is seeing about a family. To wait on one single bus designated for that is an insult. It is a gross insult. Every single bus should be outfitted to accommodate any person with a disability. That is not charity. That is human rights. Now if I were to take this up from a legal perspective I will be in court every day. I will even have to sue the Judiciary.

I went into another matter that I have suing some individuals that have me paralyzed at this point in time. And you know what is my situation? I cannot even as a lawyer go and sit by their bench with the attorneys. I have to sit in the passageway basically. I cannot be even accommodated. So if I were to go to court to practise as an attorney in the High Court, apart from getting into the building which there is access, I cannot get into the court to do nothing. I do not know where I will place my books, I do not know what I will do.

So there is woefully inadequate facilities for persons who are differently-abled. And if after three years I am here and nothing significant has been done, I feel that my presence here has been futile. Really. I am not here to gain friends, I am not here at the same time to make enemies. I am here to do something which is to advance the cause of the population, generally, but more so those persons who lack a voice. If you look around here, of the 30 Senators in here, I am the only differently-abled person here. So it is easy for me to fall in the cracks and be forgotten if I do not open up my mouth.

Why is it in our society now it seems that people, the only time you will get an address is if you insult somebody, you burn some tire, you block some road or you have a total day of policing or you have a total day of disability or something

like that. I do not know what is necessary to be done. But this cannot continue like this. This is three years and I have been saying this every budget, every budget. The three budgets I have been here for, I have expressed this concern, I have asked, I believe in what they call quiet diplomacy. I learned that when I was in South Africa from dealing with President Mandela and that whole ANC clan. Apart from being just rousing and agitating things you deal with things quietly that things will be done. But it seems not to be gaining any traction at all.

I am seeing a policy here, there is a policy that is being debated, there is a national policy on persons with disabilities. This started since 2004, where in 2005 it was adopted by whatever the Government was at that point in time. Today, we are in 2016, no law has been passed. We are still talking about discussion; we are still talking about setting up a committee; we are still talking about circulating. Nothing has passed. And as the old people say, “while the grass growing, the horse starving”. So we are not being attended to. I cannot leave here now and leave from here and say I am going to the Queen’s Park Savannah or I am going anywhere on my wheelchair, because either I will be killed, knocked down or I will have to be asking everybody, “excuse me, help me nah, you could help me get up on the pavement, please; you could help me come off the pavement, please”? It is a travesty; it is injustice; it is inhumane; it is an undignified way to live.

Is it that I am to migrate and go to the United States or to England where they cater for people like me? Or am I to be a stranger in my own house, feel like an unwelcome guest. I am not trying to be dramatic about this, you know. This is real. I would not have been able to express this type of lamentation had I not been in this situation, because before this, five years ago, I walked a tall and proud person. Having empathy, yes, to some extent, of persons in similar circumstance, but never understanding the real plight of them. So not only is it difficult for you

to get by, it is difficult for you to even earn a living. Because if I cannot get to the—like we are seeing in the Government's policy, they said they are going to make certain government buildings accessible and thing. Okay, the building is accessible, but how I am getting to you? What road am I passing on? What transportation am I taking? What street am I going down?

Mr. Vice-President, this cannot be right. This cannot be right. So I am asking those who can do something and who have promised to do something, it is time to stop the promising and start delivering.

There are other aspects of this budget that one could comment on, as I said before, I understand the challenges that this Government has faced. There are a lot of things to be done. The world economy is not at the best situation it can be at this point in time. Life is cyclical, what goes up must come down, things goes around, eventually you sustain your life, things will change for the better. But what goes on is how we manage our affairs.

And in order for people to have confidence in what is being done by whoever in stewardship at this point in time, people have to have confidence in you and people have to see that you are doing things that they understand. It must be brought in a way that people could appreciate, can really identify with. I am paying tax for this, I am not paying tax for this. I am getting this, I am not getting that. People want to know really and truly what it is about. After the length and breadth of this debate is gone and you ask the ordinary man outside there what it matters to him, he will tell you "he have to pay more for cigarettes or he have to pay this and he not getting this or we less this". People want to know really and truly in a simple way, what is this budget, how is it going to affect them? How is it going to improve their lives, as simple as it is.

Now, I come to another area which is a sore point. It is a sore point in our

society for a long time, and it is national security. Let me just state this obvious fact, that the public is not getting the value for their money spent on national security. [*Desk thumping*] They are saying that there are only a few corrupt police officers now. It has now changed to the public saying that they are now only a few non-corrupt police officers. People for some time now consider the police as part of the problem and not part of the solution.

Mr. Vice-President, I see no justification for investing substantial tax dollars into the Ministry of National Security with major reorganization and policy adjustments in order to change the national security architect, as the case may be. Let me say here again, and not be mistaken, I want this Government to succeed as much as I also want the Opposition to succeed in keeping the Government to its mandate, to uplift the welfare of all its people. Too much time is wasted in these Chambers with petty politics and very little constructive engagement on policies and measures that will benefit all of our people. I do not want my earlier contribution on persons with disabilities to fall on deaf ears or become lost by the time several other areas of concerns are addressed in this debate. I want it to be focused on the basis of its substance and merit, not lost due to monotony and irrelevance.

In closing, Mr. Vice-President, before I close, I just need to make one correction of my learned colleague on this side, Sen. Mahabir, when he spoke about the sou-sou. Again, I came from a background where my mother carried on and conducted a sou-sou for many, many, many years. [*Interruption*] I do not know if she still does at this point, given her age, but it did help out a lot of households and the communities around. There were policemen involved, nurses and all kind of thing like that. People would save their money to buy things for Christmas, to buy things that they really need, get a hand early or get a hand late.

And again I will correct him. They did not charge money but they give something called a “box”. A box was just a token appreciation for the saving that you did. So I just want to put that on record to assist him in the point in which he has done.

Sen. Dr. Mahabir: He wants a box.

Sen. Baptiste-Primus: It is \$25 in the box.

Sen. H.R. Ian Roach: Twenty-five, you see. So that was it. So it is a good measure, it is something that I know, probably I do not know if it is African, but when I was in South Africa it was called a Stokvel. And you will be surprised that there are Stokvel with people who are lawyers, doctors—a big thing among the black community in particular, a Stokvel.

So in closing, Mr. Vice-President, I wish I could say now that I will take my seat but I am already doing so. So I will just say that these are my contributions and I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for allowing me to join the debate on the Bill brought before the house by the hon. Minister of Finance. Unlike Sen. Roach I reflect on the decision on the Court of Appeal yesterday. And let me be the first one on this side to congratulate the Opposition front bench, as Sen. Mark referred to them, to congratulate the Opposition front bench on successfully losing the petition. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Ameen: Like how you successfully lose Mayaro.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Yes. In the same way you successfully lost Chaguanas West and the engagement that was part of it. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Vice-President, I will divide my contribution in seven parts. The first part, of course, is to reflect on the contribution of Sen. Mark and address one issue raised by Sen. Mahabir. In short, we had the usual Sen. Mark and I will just

remind you of some of his expressions: “horrendous economic management in the last year”; “making the rich richer and the poor poorer”; “demonstrating a propensity to spend freely and recklessly”.

Mr. Vice-President, anybody who has been in this country, the last six years, would know that we found ourselves in this position today on account of horrendous economic management, propensity to spend freely and recklessly and general mismanagement demonstrated by the side that Sen. Mark represents. In summary, Sen. Mark’s contribution shows a total detachment from reality—the usual whimsical contribution on something new that clearly Trinidad and Tobago can herald the arrival of its own Donald Trump.

6.00 p.m.

Let me just refer to one thing Sen. Mark mentioned about agriculture, and in reference to the *Review of the Economy 2016*, made the point that agriculture declined by 6 per cent in 2016. Let me just read exactly what the Review says, on page 27:

“A contraction of 6.0 per cent is forecasted for the Agriculture sector in calendar 2016...”

Forecasted, Mr. Vice-President. In fact, the truth is this: The *Central Bank Economic Bulletin* released in September 2016, Volume 8, number 2 on page 13, refers to the growth of 14 per cent in the agriculture sector, which follows a growth of 1.5 five per cent in 2015. And on page 20 the Economic Bulletin also refers to the fact that there were declines in the importation of certain agriculture commodities on account of the increased availability of those commodities locally.

And then Sen. Mark, interestingly, got to the point of suggesting the development of sport as a business. And you know, Mr. Vice-President, whenever the United National Congress or People’s Partnership, or whatever they call

themselves, whenever they talk about sport, the public hears one thing and one thing only.

Hon. Members: LifeSport.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: And I do not know if in the development of business in sport, Sen. Mark was referring to the businesses that his administration developed in sport, like the \$34 million payment for which no work was performed, the millions in catering business that LifeSport generated, the millions in grass-cutting business that LifeSport generated and the millions in corruption and theft. Those were the businesses the United National Congress generated in sport. It is the only sport they developed, and Sen. Mark has the audacity yet again, Mr. Vice-President, to come and lecture us in this House about what we should do in relation to managing the economy?

I congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance, like many people across the country, on making do with what hand we have been dealt with and presenting a budget that, however you feel about the politics, we recognize that he is operating in difficult economic times. [*Desk thumping*]

And in response to Sen. Mahabir, I agree with you. It is something you have raised before about school feeding. We have spoken about the school feeding policy and to reverse the UNC—I do not think I will call it a policy; I will call it a habit of permitting the importation of food that ends up in the school feeding programme, a programme designed for two reasons: one, to place healthy meals in the hands of schoolchildren across the country, but secondly, to create an outlet for farmers around the country to find an opportunity to sell their primary products. And the PNM has not only reversed that practice by initiating this policy and setting a target initially of 85 per cent, but as I—in response to Sen. Mahabir before—I have said that that policy is not just to take food but to take primary

production from farmers that is safe for human consumption. [*Desk thumping*]

Let me then, Mr. Vice-President, go into my contribution on agriculture, land and fisheries and let me point to four elements of an overview of the past fiscal year. The first thing I would say, Mr. Vice-President, is that the PNM made 16 commitments in its manifesto in relation to agriculture, land and fisheries, and the first commitment was a very powerful commitment. It was to create a unified structure for a Ministry to oversee these aspects of economic activity in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Government created the Agriculture, Land and Fisheries Ministry and the intention was to give and put into the Ministry everything that is required to properly run a Ministry that oversees, in the main, agriculture. And that Ministry had to be built out of two previously existing Ministries: the Ministry of Food Production and the Ministry of Land and Marine Affairs. And the Ministry also was built out of component parts of previous Ministries: Water Resources and the Environment—several parts of that—including the Forestry Division and parts of the former Tourism Ministry.

And I am saying that to say, Mr. Vice-President, when you look at the details of the allocations for the Ministry on both the recurrent and development programme side, you would see that in some areas there have been reductions and in some areas there have been increases, recognizing that the Ministry is a Ministry that has been put together by several segments, and in some cases we have had to reposition resources, and on account of that, increase the allocation, and in some cases we have deprioritized certain aspects and we have reduced or removed the allocations for that area.

The second point I want to make in relation to the past performance—I have heard a lot of things, and every year we face this question about reduced

allocations or whether the money is enough. And, in fact, last year I made the point, it is not a matter of how much money you are given, but what you do with it. And, in fact, last year the allocation we were given at the start of the fiscal year on the recurrent side, had to be reduced. The Government mandated a 7 per cent reduction. The Ministry, in response to that request, offered an 18 per cent reduction on the recurrent side. We were able to operate in 2015/2016 with this reduced allocation, and even though we were working with a reduced allocation in 2015 and 2016, we were able to deal with some liabilities that we inherited from the last administration, and I will point out to you four in particular.

We managed to deal with the vexing issue of moneys owed to farmers based on incentives that are offered, or rebates that are offered to farmers on equipment and vehicles and so on that they purchased, and by the end of the fiscal year, Mr. Vice-President, the backlog which was cleared by the Ministry was in the amount of \$30 million, notwithstanding the reduced allocation.

We were able in the last fiscal year to settle long outstanding payments due to rice farmers and fees due to the National Flour Mills, which is the miller of local rice in the country. We were able to deal with the final elements of moneys owed to cocoa farmers, when the last administration decided, in one line of a piece of legislation, to remove the 60-year-old system that existed for overseeing the relationship between the State and cocoa and coffee farmers around the country. And finally, we were able to deal with long- outstanding compensation payments that relate to flood compensation and compensation for damage to equipment and other things in the form of compensation which had been suffering at the Ministry for a long time.

So, Mr. Vice-President, there is no argument that we all now have to deal with an even further reduction in the allocation, and it makes sense. There has

been a 35 per cent, or more, reduction in the revenue stream and on account of that less is available and all of us are required to deal with less, but I say very clearly that since last year the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has become accustomed to dealing with a reduced allocation and to manage its resources in a prudent manner.

On the Development Programme side, Mr. Vice-President, again, what I inherited in the Ministry—and if you recall, from the moment after—between the election victory, the appointment of Ministers and the reading of the budget, there was not enough time for Ministers to go through the details of the budget allocations. In my case, when I eventually went through on the development side, what I found was that there were more than 100 development projects listed under our Development Programme. Many of these projects, if not all of these projects, were long-standing projects listed in the Development Programme year after year. Many of these projects, on examination, were not real development projects. Many were projects which should have been part of the recurrent expenditure. In fact, many of these projects involved the payment of wages, the purchase of non-recurrent, or non-permanent or non-development consumables and other activities which really form part of the recurrent expenditure. But perhaps the most distressing things on the development side is that many of these projects were conceived in silos and were difficult to implement because they were not developed in a way that used the resources across the Ministry and they were not developed in a way that made them implementable.

So we have made some changes in this fiscal. The first change is to reduce the number of projects from 100 to just about 60. The second thing is to design the projects which form part of the Development Programme for this fiscal, design it in a way that they can be implemented. We have removed everything that relates

to recurrent expenditure and what we have ended up with are projects which are cohesive, coherent and implementable in this fiscal year.

The last point I would make in relation to the overview of the last fiscal is to look at the Development Programme in terms of the numbers. The initial allocation was \$243 million. After the 7 per cent cut which was requested, we projected to do development works in the value of \$199million. And when I took—paid closer attention to the details of the projects as I just described, some decisions were made in relation to EMBD. The decision was made to halt any further development projects until the works which have already been done, or said to be done in EMBD, were audited. And towards the end, Mr. Vice-President, I will get back to EMBD. So \$65 million allocated in the Development Programme for EMBD was deliberately not spent in the last fiscal.

In relation to NAMDEVCO, when I looked at what had been committed under previous development programmes, I was not satisfied and I had concerns about whether NAMDEVCO had gotten value for money on those projects, and in discussion with the board of NAMDEVCO a decision was taken to stop those projects and, again, go into a comprehensive audit of the projects to first identify what was contractually required, to identify those things which have been done, to identify those things which have not been done and to determine whether the taxpayers of the country have gotten value for money on those projects. As a result of that, we deliberately suppressed on the development side, expenditure of \$15 million.

The third area was the Moruga port which was listed on our Development Programme, but it is really a project of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and the \$10 million identified for that was not obviously spent by this Ministry. And the last area is in relation to the zoo where there is a \$5

million allocation but we were able to achieve the works which were to be done on the recurrent side of the Ministry.

I am saying that to say, Mr. Vice-President, through the deliberate decision not to pursue certain types of development projects, we removed \$120 million from the Development Programme and at the end of it in the last fiscal, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries embarked on a development programme valued at \$123 million. At the end of August 2016, we had incurred expenditure in relation to \$43 million on those projects and in our Development Programme for this fiscal year, many of those projects are continuing into a phase two.

6.15 p.m.

Mr. Vice-President, a year ago, I made the point that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, in order to achieve the objectives of the Ministry, and in order to achieve the objectives of government policy, would set three priorities for itself. Those priorities were the structure of the Ministry, the issue of good governance and the issue of people, and I just want to report to the Parliament and to the country on those three issues. The first issue of structure, Mr. Vice-President, is a very important issue. What I have found, and what I reported to the Parliament last year when I spoke, was that the Ministry in its operations had not reached the entire country.

The Ministry operated in a system where a lot of activities were concentrated in the head office in Port of Spain, and a lot of activities were concentrated in other offices, regional offices, but the full services of the Ministry were not being delivered across the country, in particular in the rural parts of Trinidad and Tobago where the majority of the Ministry's clientele in agriculture and fisheries and the usage of state lands reside. An important part of dealing with

the issue of the structure was the shift in the headquarters of the Ministry from St. Clair to Chaguanas, and based on discussions, Mr. Vice-President, with the project managers and the contractors and so on last year, I made the bold statement that by January 01, 2016, the Ministry would move to Chaguanas.

In fact, yesterday when I was in the other place, before the Standing Finance Committee, I heard some Opposition Members towards the far end saying, "After one year you can't move". Mr. Vice-President, I have been very careful in dealing with this issue. I myself was completely shocked because as far as I knew an opening ceremony was held some months before last year September, an opening ceremony was held to commission that building, and when I went behind what appeared to me to be a complete building, I was shocked that not only were there issues internally, not one statutory approval had been obtained for the construction of that building.

Most importantly, Mr. Vice-President, I was shocked. In 2012, this country introduced a new seismic code, and I would think that my friends on the other side who come now to advise us on prudence and good governance and doing the right thing would have understood that in constructing a building of that magnitude and at that cost, the least you could have done was to obtain the appropriate statutory approvals. The reason the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has not moved into that building is because we have spent a considerable amount of time and resources, and now we are in the midst of spending financial resources in ensuring that that building meets all the requirements for the statutory approvals and the building is retrofitted in such a way that it meets the requirement of the seismic code. And I was very hesitant to raise this issue, except that I am merely responding to a view which was expressed that we have deliberately not gone to Chaguanas.

Mr. Vice-President, we expect that by mid-January 2017, once these final works are completed we would be in that building, and there have been several other things we have done on this issue of structure. For example, moving the headquarters of the Praedial Larceny Squad from St. Joseph to El Carmen, moving it in a more centralized location and giving it a more appropriate environment in which it can operate. In this fiscal year, recognizing that when this Government came in last year, the Praedial Larceny Squad operated on one-half of Trinidad. From Matelot right down to Moruga, there was absolutely no coverage of the Praedial Larceny Squad, and what we have provided for in 2016/2017, the Minister of Finance has provided an allocation which will allow us to place offices of the Praedial Larceny Squad in south-west Trinidad, in south-east Trinidad in the Ecclesville area, and in north-east Trinidad so we can have coverage across the country. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President, there are a number of other structural changes. Some of them to physically reach areas which we do not currently reach, and some of them internal organizational structural changes which ensure that we do our business in a most efficient manner because I have identified on the issue of structure. I have identified in two areas: the repayments to farmers which I mentioned before, that there are too many stops along the way for requests for compensations and requests for reimbursement that farmers make. Between the county office where the application is initially made and the head office where the application is eventually approved finally and processed, there are too many steps along the way; and in dealing with structure, those intermediary steps will be removed so that the application can move from a county office to a head office.

Likewise in land administration, a very simple thing. When I moved in this last fiscal year to tackle what I believe is a backlog of 75,000 state lands files

awaiting attention, a very critical element of the long delays in getting applications processed, again, is the many steps that a file must pass through, many times a step that is totally unnecessary and bureaucratic; and in some cases a move from step two to step three consumes as long as three years because the files are not attended to in an expeditious manner, and I will speak on lands separately.

On the issue of governance, Mr. Vice-President, I said to the Parliament previously that these state boards within the Ministry, these state entities like NAMDEVCO, ADB, Seafood Industry Development Company Limited, the Cocoa Development Company, those entities must be brought in line with government policy. Last year I referred to the Auditor General's Report on ADB in relation to certain audit findings, and I said that we must ensure that boards in state entities understand government policy first and are accountable to the line Ministry. I also made the point, that as line Minister, I will issue to each of those entities under my watch a letter of expectation outlining to each entity, in many cases, what are their statutory responsibilities, and in all cases outlining to them what I expect from them in the fiscal year, and I ended each letter by saying to them, "You would be measured on that basis".

And throughout the last fiscal year, Mr. Vice-President, as Minister, I have not merely received the Minutes from these various state entities. In almost every case I have followed up the receipt of the Minute with a letter to the Chairman, either making recommendations, providing guidance, or asking questions. I believe that is the way it is supposed to be done; that is the way it is supposed to be operated so there is complete alignment between government policy, Ministry and state entities under the watch of a Ministry.

The third area was in relation to people, and I made the point about people in two different ways. One is I identified, and over the fiscal year it became more

and more frightening, the extent to which this Ministry, in particular, has lost its capacity in terms of the technical capacity which is normally performed through human resources or through employees. Over an extended period of time vacancies were not being filled, persons to fill vacancies were not aggressively sought after, and over a period of time the Ministry inevitably lost its capacity to deliver in certain areas. I will give you an example.

There was a time in this country's history when the Planning Division of the Ministry of Agriculture was said to be superior to the Ministry of Planning within the government structure, and today we have a situation where you have 50 positions in the Planning Division and only 13 of them are filled. There were positions which were deliberately "suppressed", to use the language of the public service by the last administration, with the intention of filling them by contract, hiring on contract, and in many cases the positions were suppressed but the contract hiring was not executed, and I said that in dealing with the people issues we must address and aggressively work to filling those critical vacancies.

Some of them are within the direct control of the Ministry, being contract positions, and some of them are public service positions which have to be filled through the Public Service Commission. But I also said that part of the structural changes in the Ministry were meant to address the issue of permitting people within the Ministry to work closer to where they live, and again I am happy to report that we have done some work on that. We have achieved some of it and the most significant thing we would do is in moving to Chaguanas; in January 2017, we will be moving a significant portion of the Ministry's head office staff much closer to home and we have done it in other parts of the country.

Mr. Vice-President, I just want to identify three critical development priorities for this fiscal year, and these development priorities are reflected in the

way we have configured the Development Programme. When I spoke about lands previously—I do not want to go into the details—I have used the word “collapse” to describe the state of state land administration in this country. In the PNM’s manifesto, which is now public policy, we have made a clear statement and a commitment to deal with the issue of state land administration so that eventually we can provide long-term land tenure to all the users of state lands and we can have a more efficient system, not only of dealing with applications, but more importantly a more efficient system of collecting rents and reviewing rents as many of those leases provide.

So in our development priorities—and the three development priorities are IT, water resource management and research extension and training. You would see in the PSIP, the Development Programme, we have committed just over \$10 million to IT infrastructure and that is split into two areas. Mr. Vice-President, in order to function more efficiently, in a Ministry like ours that is spread across the length and breadth of the country, we must have in place a reliable and modern IT infrastructure. Part of what we have committed to do in the Development Programme is to upgrade that IT infrastructure across the country so that we could have connectivity, that we can move to a point where we place less reliance on paper, and we could move to point where information can be communicated from division to division and within divisions in the Ministry. But, Mr. Vice-President, the more important part of the IT work we intend to do under the Development Programme in this fiscal year relates to land administration.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

Since 1962, Madam President, every administration has pursued some element of a programme or a project on expenditure aimed at improving the efficiency of land administration in this country. We have not made a lot of

progress, and, in fact, based on the decisions—in one case a decision to split Ministry of Agriculture from the land part of the state bureaucracy, and also some of the decisions which were made in the absence of policy in the period 2010—2015, I would describe it as the final state of collapse of land administration in the country.

6.30 p.m.

So the Government, in this Development Programme, for this fiscal year, has committed at least \$5 million to do several things. One is to establish an electronic management system for tracking and managing state land leases. We are going to improve the resources we have in the GIS Unit of the Ministry to be able to gather, store and provide and share information within the Ministry and across Ministries, providing all the details on land parcels including acreages, the current use of the acreage, the state of the lease, provision for renewals, the state of the rents and all of that, that we can properly administer the various aspects of a parcel of land in relation to proper land administration. The second area, water resource management, Madam President, is very critical—[*Interruption*]*—thank you very much—and we have committed more than \$8 million in that regard. The final area in terms of the development priorities is in the area of research, extension and training.*

I want to close on just going to the point I made earlier on the EMBD, and you know I listened to Sen. Mark earlier about the financial management and economic management of the People's National Movement in one year, and it brought back to me this EMBD scenario that I have inherited as a Minister and I will tell you this. I think it is the first time, in dealing with any form of contracts, I have seen some of the things which have emerged out of EMBD, and that is what the Government is grappling with right now. In one state enterprise, in five

categories of contracts, EMBD contracted to do works valued at \$3.4 billion. One state enterprise in just five categories. The bulk of which related to the development of land for former Caroni workers. Madam President, on those contracts, on just those five categories, one state enterprise, EMBD managed to go beyond the \$3.4 billion that was contracted into close to \$5 billion on account of variations and in many cases, not one of those contracts has been able to deliver what they were contractually required to do, not a single one and this is just one state enterprise.

Madam President, as I close, in dealing with EMBD, there is something that is completely amazing and incredible and when I listened to Sen. Mark, I could not help but reflect on this. In one particular category of contractors, involving a particular contractor, could you believe that it is possible to award a \$67 million contract and have \$334 million in variations on that contract? Would you believe it is also possible to award a contract for \$66 million and incur \$659 million in variations on that contract? Madam President, to incur on a construction contract, variations which are 10 times the amount of the original contract, and it is in that context, I say part of the reason why a Ministry, like the one I lead, is required to manage in this fiscal as it did in the last fiscal, with a lower allocation, is because in this fiscal, \$100 million is committed to deal with loans incurred by entities like EMBD for this sort of corrupt work that they engaged in; and it is that sort of behaviour that has gotten this country to the position we are in. [*Desk thumping*] That is the reason why I continue to congratulate the Minister of Finance for actually being able to come up with a plan to get this country out of the position it has been put in. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Taurel Shrikissoon: Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me the opportunity to give my perspective and thinking on the fiscal package for the

financial year 2016/2017. I know currently that our economic climate is quite turbulent, it is one that is quite demanding, very challenging and I do know that it would require some drastic measures in order for us to return this country back to a path of growth. And in saying this, I would like to take this opportunity to commend the hon. Minister of Finance and his team and Members of his Cabinet and the Government for preparing a fiscal package like this for 2016/2017. [*Desk thumping*]

I wish to commend the Government for managing its expenditure in the year 2015/2016 and actually bringing it in lower than initially budgeted, some \$11 billion lower, but I do note that there is some outstanding expenditure that was not accounted for there, that is still yet to be paid. I wish to commend the Government as well for managing the expenditure or indicating their interest to manage the expenditure on social programmes and subsidies. I know it has taken its effect on Trinidad and Tobago's economy; and in making some decisions, it will be hard decisions that the population would have to get accustomed to.

I would also like to commend the Government for its \$10 million loan facility at the Eximbank and for the agro-processing park in Moruga, very close to where I live, the commitments of this Government to renewable energy and a comprehensive framework and information technology architecture for the educational system, and very importantly, presenting this fiscal package in the context of returning growth to Trinidad and Tobago's GDP, a projected 1 per cent in 2017 and 2 per cent by 2018. For these areas, I really commend the Government for taking such initiatives.

But as I look at the arithmetic of the budget, Madam President, as we get into the fiscal package, I have looked at the expenditure and the revenue that was projected for this financial year. Expenditure \$53.4 billion, and revenue—and I

want to use the term recurrent or earned revenue—\$37.71 billion, bringing a deficit before financing of \$16.4 billion. And the revenue that I used was the revenue presented in the budget minus the one-off revenue sources and that is why I got recurrent revenue or earned revenue as \$37.71 and an initial deficit, before financing, of \$16 billion.

I want to say this, that as Sen. Mahabir said, nine consecutive years of deficits, and that cannot be a strength for the Trinidad and Tobago economy. It could not have positioned us well in order to manage this ship in these turbulent times. And because of this consistent deficit budgeting, we no longer have the resources to finance the size of the deficits that we are incurring; we are drawing down on our HS Fund; we are increasing our borrowing; and for the second consecutive year, we are having a sale of assets programme. These are signs that things are not well financially for Trinidad and Tobago. As I said last year in my budget contribution, the runaway horse on expenditure has to be captured and bridled and I know the Minister of Finance has been trying but I know that the initiative has to be continued into the future.

But I want to ask myself this question: How is it, at a time like this, when revenues or commodity prices have fallen for the past two years or three years thereabout, how is it that we got to this financial position so quickly where the economy is not as resilient as it should be to respond to these changes? How did we actually get here? And in the budget statement, there have been references and many have said it in the House, five years of mismanagement, five years of corruption, five years of everything; and it is almost as though it is the jargon of the economic plan for Trinidad and Tobago that, because of these five years, we are in this position. And what I really wanted to know is what actually happened?

And so, I refer to the Exchequer and Audit Act, 69:01, which says here:

“An Act to provide for the control and management of the public finances of Trinidad and Tobago...”

That Act governs the account of the Government. It has the Consolidated Fund which means the Consolidated Fund of the State, and the Minister means the Minister responsible for finance. What happened in this account—the account of the Government? And I go back to 2002 when this account was positive with \$400 million in it; that was 2002. But by 2003, the Government’s account went into overdraft by \$500 million, half a billion; 2004, \$2.2 billion; 2005—and these are negative figures, overdraft figures—\$3 billion; 2006, \$4.7 billion; 2008, \$5.6 billion; 2009, \$10.7 billion; 2010, \$13 billion; 2011, \$20 billion; up to 2015, \$33 billion in overdraft.

The reason why I am going back to this is to state that the reason why Trinidad and Tobago has found itself here is because the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has been spending more than they have been earning since 2003; it is not a five-year project that occurred over the last five years. The increases on this overdraft have been more in the last five years, agreed, but it is a problem that successive administrations, successive Cabinets, successive Prime Ministers, they have all looked at and overlooked and continued to exaggerate a problem without addressing it financially and that I have a concern with.

Sen. Khan: I just want to make one point, please. The problem really lies when you still had deficit budgeting in times of high oil prices; that is where the problem was.

Sen. T. Shrikissoon: Correct, correct and I will get to that, Sen. Khan—thank you. But what is worse, if you understand how the accounting works, while the Exchequer Account was in overdraft, there were special-purpose funds that actually had money in it. So the Government, irrespective of the regime, actually

had access to funding because the special-purpose accounts had more than the overdraft, so the net position was a positive one and that is the account that hon. Minister of Finance, as he was saying today, it is also in overdraft. So what is the real issue?

We had 10 years or 13 years of consecutive overdraft on the Exchequer Account with no one taking note of it. We now have a situation where the net position, which is the current account, is also in overdraft. And as Sen. Khan rightly said, over the period 2003—2015, we have collected more than \$600 billion. How is it that stewards of management for an economy like this could start off with an overdraft at \$500 million, collect \$600 billion later and we still at \$33 billion owed in overdraft? And that I have a significant problem with.

If I was running a business and I have \$500 million in overdraft and I collect \$600 billion, there is no way that account could be in overdraft still. And the leaders of our land have allowed this to be perpetuated for more than a decade. What is going on in Trinidad and Tobago? Something is wrong. So to now have a collapse of commodity prices and everybody is saying period of adjustment, harshness, the people have to bear the burden, increase taxation, it is as a result of mismanagement that has existed for more than a decade in Trinidad and Tobago. “Bench, ah thought yuh woulda commend meh fuh dat.” [*Desk thumping and laughter*] Thank you.

So this is fiscal irresponsibility. And then what we have at this time, if we are to sum it up, an Exchequer Account which is the bank account of the Government in overdraft, maybe by a tune of \$25 billion—maybe because I do not know what the figure is—a current account that is overdrawn—and I do not know what the figure is because the Minister did not give it to date—and budget deficit spanning nine years. A style of Government. It is as though we could just incur

expenditure with no consequence and hope that at some great day, revenue will show up from some place and all our problems would be fixed. But everybody knows that in order to get to a particular point in time into the future, we have to plan. We do not know what the future holds but we could chart a course and determine the outcome.

6.45 p.m.

And we have not been doing that as a country, successive administrations. So it is not that I am directing a comment to any particular person or political party but a general comment over the state of affairs and how expenditure has been incurred in the country over the last decade-plus.

Now, while the expenditure ran away from us, what occurred was the debt profile of Trinidad and Tobago. In 2011, net public sector debt, \$48.4 billion; 2016, \$89 billion, a period where oil prices shot through the roof and we earned supernormal profits per barrel we have a situation where debt almost doubled. Net public sector debt almost doubled. How? [*Interruption*] But we are not financing the deficit and that is the problem.

If the debt level—if the deficits were coming down on the account well fine, but as the debt profile grow also the deficits grew. [*Desk thumping and interruption*] Exactly. So I am really perturbed and confused as to what is going on in Trinidad and Tobago. And then we divide the population and we say PNM/UNC but we are all living here and we have to face the consequences for it. [*Desk thumping*]

And then we have a situation now, when we have a commitment from the government on December 8th, I think it is, when we debated the loan ceilings and an increase in the debt ceilings. The hon. Sen. Khan, I remember you distinctly telling me that you would manage the debt profile of this country up to 65 per cent

of GDP, if I am correct. What is the first thing we saw? I did say we do not know what GDP would be if you are using the measure, and look what happened in 2016. CSO adjusted the GDP downward. So if the denominator decreased, then the denominator is the same, the ratio is going to shoot and that is exactly what happened. So the debt profile of Trinidad and Tobago shooting through the roof as well. And what do we do? We borrow more. We borrow more. And so that too has its impact.

Now we are saying that we want to manage debt to GDP at 65 per cent. But let us do a little calculation. If at \$88 billion the debt profile is 60 per cent, contingent liabilities, as in Petrotrin and the RHAs, which the Minister mentioned in his budget statement that has to be paid is \$30billion. That takes us up 88 plus 30, 118. What about the Exchequer Account that is in overdraft that has to be repaid in order to access the special purpose funding that was used to collateralize that overdraft, \$25 billion by guess? We are \$140billion. What about government-to-government arrangements that are not hitting the books, \$4billion probably, \$140 billion. What is the GDP of our country? Reported \$145 billion. We are almost maxed out. And the debt ceiling debate when Sen. Ramkissoon likened us unto Greece, the response was we are comparing apples to oranges. But our GDP almost at 100 per cent. Our debt ratio almost 100 per cent of GDP.
[Desk thumping]

And in keeping with that same debate on the loan ceilings I specifically asked for a statement of debt. The Minister of Finance gave the assurance at that time, and it is in *Hansard*, that a statement of debt would be provided to this Senate at least every year, once a year. He gave a commitment and that has not been done and that is why I have to speculate with some of the figures, because I do not know what it is.

What is it are we managing in this situation? We are seeing that expenditure is through the roof; deficit budget after deficit budget, debt flying all over or just shooting through the roof. The ratio that we wanted to use to contain debt in this country cannot really be used, if you check total debt. No, it cannot be. And this is the situation that we find ourselves in. And the debt problem is something that we need to consider because we are seeing continuous downgrades on our ratings, which is saying that the outlook for the economy is not a positive one, not even stable, because we went down further this year. So something is radically wrong with the way in which this economy has been managed over the past years, and that is why we are here. We are not here because of the points of corruption that existed only. There are bigger issues, the style of governance that has governed our land. And I am very much concerned about this.

Our competitiveness: Madam President, in my contribution last year, in the budget debate at that point in time, I made specific reference to the Global Competitiveness Report, which ranked Trinidad and Tobago as 89th out of the 140 and I challenge the Government before their end of term, let us see if we could get Trinidad and Tobago into the upper half. And the main pitfall at that time was that of institutions, and everyone would know when I get up to speak I always refer to building the institutional framework in Trinidad and Tobago.

But last year 2015/2016, our ranking was 89. This year our ranking is 94 out of 138. So two countries were not used and now we have moved five places down. And out of the 12 pillars that are used to come up with this analysis and I want to just read what they are: institutions, infrastructure, macroeconomic environment, health and primary education, higher education, good market efficiency, labour market efficiency, financial market development, technological readiness, market size, business sophistication and innovation. Why am I saying

this? These are 12 pillars that our economy is being evaluated on, in terms of its competitiveness. What caused Trinidad and Tobago to move from 89 to 94 in one year? And the answer is, the macroeconomic environment with a score in 2015 of 54 moved 60 places downwards to 114. Here it is we have a world governing body evaluating the competitiveness of the Trinidad and Tobago economy and sends the macroeconomic indicators of Trinidad and Tobago, downgrades it by 60 points, bringing us to a value of 114 out of 138.

What is it that they are looking at, at the macroeconomic environment? Government budget balance as a percentage of GDP, 128 out of 138. Gross national savings as a percentage of GDP, inflation of 128, inflation annual percentage change, 96, government debt as a percentage of GDP, 74 and country credit rating, 100. The macroeconomic variables of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago is indicating that the health of our economy is not good. And I am saying that this is now published worldwide so everybody knows. It could have been hidden but it could no longer be done so because it was a style of governance that existed in Trinidad and Tobago since the turn of the new millennium. That is why it is not a quick fix. It took us a long time to mismanage the economy so it will take a long time for us to fix it and it will take a longer time when revenues are suppressed. We have a challenge before us.

So, Madam President, in keeping with the UN goals 2030 Developmental Agenda, which we debated in this House, how can we, according to goal 8, promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth when we are mismanaging what is before us? We all signed on to this commitment and we are saying we are working towards it but our style of governance, our style of expenditure, the way in which we handle things are not in sync with goal No. 8 according to the UN Developmental Agenda. Something is wrong. Something has

been wrong.

Systematic financial risk: in 2014, there was a report, the Financial Stability Report done by the Central Bank, which highlighted some vulnerabilities. Vulnerability No. 2, high level of household indebtedness. Our households have been highly indebted. There has been a build-up. The report says there has been a build-up in consumer debt resulting from increased lending to finance real estate mortgages, home improvement works and to finance motor vehicles.

What is the point? The point is, as household debt increases, or I should say as government sets a culture of increased borrowing, it sets an example of culture for our consumers. Consumers also increase their debt level. When Government is faced with external shocks over their revenue and ability to pay, it suppresses the disposable income of an individual through higher interest rates, through unemployment and individuals are now unable to service their debt. So the high level of consumer debt that existed in 2014, might present some challenges to Trinidad and Tobago's economy, through its impact on the financial sector if there is default, the risk of default on consumer debt and it is very real, in the context of increasing interest rates and rising unemployment.

In 2008/2009, that was the debacle that caused the collapse of the US market and so in Trinidad, what we are doing is feeding it. So while the economy is in risk or while the economy is positioned where revenue is tight and expenditure is running away from us, we are now faced with a systematic financial risk due to the debt created by households in this country. Problems. Problems. We need to address it.

So as I move away from the macroeconomic aspect of the economy, I just want to touch on a few points of the budget itself, in terms of the policies that the Government would have indicated, the first being that of the online tax. In my

budget debate again last year I was one that highlighted the drawdown on foreign exchange, with respect to the use of credit cards for online purchases. I am saying, in the context of declining reserves, financial reserves, in the context of declining financial reserves, I will continue to support this initiative of the online tax.

There is a measure, a benchmark or statistic in the Financial Stability Report of 2015, issued by the Central Bank which says that credit card purchases, online purchases in Trinidad, which is local credit cards used for foreign purchases against foreign credit cards used for local purchases, so you have an outflow and an inflow, local credit cards online purchases, which is the Trinidad public and then foreigners using their foreign credit cards to buy local, \$ TT, what is the impact on the foreign exchange? And by 2015, locals were consuming US \$500,000 more than foreigners purchasing in Trinidad, which says that the net foreign exchange position on online shopping has a US \$500,000 deficit. And so it is signalling to us that online shopping is a consumer of foreign exchange. And, therefore, I will support the initiative of the Government for this online tax. But I want to ask the Government, as I indicate my support, that at the soonest time when supply of foreign exchange becomes more closely aligned to the demand for foreign exchange, that this policy be revisited. Because I am saying that I am supporting this policy in the context of declining reserves that we need to understand and manage.

In keeping with the Forex position, I have checked with Central Bank statistics to determine what the balance of our foreign exchange reserves are and at July 2016, it was \$9.2 billion. In August 2016, it was about \$10.1 billion. What caused the significant increase? The significant increase was caused by foreign direct investment and increased borrowing on the international market. Therefore, I am saying when we present the reserve position of Trinidad and Tobago, as of

September 2016, as exactly or almost equal to that of September 2015, that care and caution must be exercised in presenting the balance on the foreign reserve account as having the same value, given that the reason why it has the same or similar value is that we had foreign direct investment and a significant loan in foreign currency supporting that reserve position.

If we had left the market alone to regulate the foreign exchange or the foreign reserve position we would not be here. So to say that, while the fact or the number, the nominal value is true, we have to look at the rationale for it being where it is. And so we must be very guarded in how we present this statistic, with respect to Forex.

7.00 p.m.

With respect to GATE funding, again in my budget contribution 2015/2016, I asked the Government to consider doing an analysis of GATE expenditure, and provide, or some element, that is one of my recommendations, fund projects that will contribute to development of Trinidad and Tobago. I am pleased to see that in the report presented by Mr. Errol Simms, a former lecturer of mine, that postgraduate-level degrees would be funded in the context of developmental goals for Trinidad and Tobago. I really want to commend that initiative.

However, students are being asked to pay some element of their tuition fees. For example, households earning less than \$10,000, their tuition would be paid—all of it would be paid, but homes or households that earn between \$10,000 and \$25,000 or \$30,000, would be asked to pay a certain percentage of their fees, which would be 25 per cent. Here we are seeing a formula being used household income or income per household. That is correct. Income per household as the means or measure to determine how much tuition has been paid.

I am saying a tertiary-level programme usually lasts minimum three years,

four years, some people would take five years. There are some families in Trinidad and Tobago that would have two children or two students at tertiary level at this time. So we need to be careful with the measure of income per household and probably I ask the Government to consider, when calculating the ratio, income per household per registered student at the tertiary level. So that if there are two children in that home or two students at that home, consideration would be given, if the household income—brings them into a different category. So it is income per household, per registered tertiary-level student. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senator: That is an excellent point.

Sen. T. Shrikissoon: Thank you. Sen. Roach referred to national security and he said in national security, “Why are we giving this—why are we continuing to pump money into the national security like this, when we cannot get results”? As citizens, do we feel safer? Clearly that answer is, no, but over the last 10 years, we have spent over \$50 billion to \$55 billion in national security; \$50 billion to \$55 billion per capita. I could employ a security force to take me wherever I want to go for a long period of time. Why is it that we are spending so much money, and citizens in this country are not safer?

We have a situation with the disappearance of a young lady. I believe her name is Ria Sookdeo, and that person—there is, to my knowledge and I could be wrong, no information as to what has happened to her; SSA legislation and all. [*Desk thumping*] What is going on? We have brought SSA legislation and we have presented it in a context of saving society. We had one Independent Senator who is saying, “I willing to give up some element for privacy for security”. Well, SSA legislation is gone, and are we safer?—“people still missing”. What is wrong? Something is wrong.

At the JSC on National Security, which I was a Member for the last year, we

have a situation of Day of Total Policing, May 2015, the report cannot be submitted, and to my amazement one—listen to this Trinidad and Tobago—one of the reasons the report could not have been tabled was because they needed help and the help was for a typist. How could a Ministry of National Security and a Government with so much money—I mean, how could you be in a situation where—and a state entity or enterprise or commission, is requesting a typist for a report that interfered with the whole of Trinidad and Tobago?

Sen. Solomon: Shame!

Sen. T. Shrikissoon: Something is—*[Interruption]*

Madam President: Sen. Shrikissoon, may I just ask?

Sen. T. Shrikissoon: Sure.

Madam President: May I just ask a question? You are talking about a joint select committee on national security. Has a report been laid? Or is that these are matters that have been dealt with in camera? You see, there is a distinction, I just want people to be very careful when you are talking about deliberations before a joint select committee.

Sen. T. Shrikissoon: Thank you, Madam President, and I am so guided, and I do apologize if I would have infringed any aspect. But I mean, I have said it already, and I am just saying we need to be wise. We need to be careful. We need to manage the expenditure that we are utilizing. Why are we not getting value for money?

I refer to the Judiciary, a comment made by Sen. Roach as well, and understanding the separation of powers, I am just going to say this, that in the 2015/2016 budget, there was the recommendation for financial autonomy for the Judiciary. I did not hear of anything in the 2016/2017 budget, with respect to financial autonomy for the Judiciary, and I just ask the question, what is going on

there?—because the Judiciary has its challenges of its own, and I would really like to see an improved judicial system for Trinidad and Tobago. This is keeping with Goal 16 of the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals:

“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”

Madam President, I turn to agriculture, and then there is just one more point I think, or two points again. Agriculture: the performance of the agricultural sector, Sen. Rambharat gave an overview, and I am saying, the statistics on agriculture, the performance of agriculture, real performance, has been the lowest since the turn of the millennium. A sector that we are looking to for prosperity, a sector that we are looking to for food security, and the trend is a downward trend, indicating that the performance of the agricultural sector leaves a lot to be desired.

I have been in this House for quite some time. I have listened to the hon. Senator’s contribution, and a lot of his contribution dealt with the management aspects of the Ministry. Where is the practical output to measure the performance of the sector? [*Desk thumping*] This is in keeping with Goal 2 of the UN 2030 Agenda:

“End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”

Productivity: another major issue we have in our country is the low productivity. According to the Index Table, I think it is Table 11 in the Appendix of the *Review of the Economy*. If you go back to a couple editions, you would recognize that the productivity index that is used, that has a benchmark of the year 1995, has recorded a consistent reduction in output in terms of the productivity per worker. How is it that we are spending all this money, we are educating a

workforce and we are seeing a situation where our worker productivity is actually decreasing? What is going on in Trinidad and Tobago is that there is a type of culture that is creating a poor work ethic. The Global Competitiveness Report cites that the poor work ethic among Trinidadians and Tobagonians has been a factor, a problematic factor in doing business, and having been the fifth most problematic factor in 2006, has risen to the number one factor in 2016, carrying a score of 19.8 out of 20. Something is wrong even with respect to the productivity of our people. I want to believe that the words that the Minister used, “a culture of entitlement probably has affected us that way”, and it is something that we have fed.

The last point that I want to speak on is that of the state sector. The Minister of Finance has indicated that we need to look at the state sector. In my mid-year contribution—on the financial—on the mid-year financial review, I indicated that there were problems at Petrotrin, but I did not have to say it then for anybody to know it, but I am just saying it was said in this House. Petrotrin has problems. TSTT has a staffing problem. WASA has a staffing and inefficiency problem. CAL has a problem, these are state sectors. Why it is that state enterprises, which are supposed to support the Government, some areas even bring in revenue, are loss-making, and the taxes on the private sector has to be increased to sustain the Government’s revenue? Something is wrong again.

We need to look at our own state sector, and one of the problems I believe in the state sector, is the politicking of the management of those state sectors. Every five years a new regime comes in and we have a new administration. [*Desk thumping*] Why is it that we are having state enterprises which are supposed to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago, their guidance being influenced by which political party is in power? If any strategic turnaround is going to occur in any of

these companies, it is going to take more than five years. And what happens? A new administration comes in, the entire top executive is changed, and can there be continuity in the strategic plan? If you are changing the top level, it is difficult. So we cannot reap the type of benefits that we need from the sector. We need to move away from politics trumping economics in the state sector, and bring these companies back to operating efficiency and good service. [*Desk thumping*]

In conclusion, Madam President, I have said a lot with respect to how I feel about this Trinidad and Tobago's economy, and how we got here. I am asking the Government, as you have presented and you want to chart a course of development of Trinidad and Tobago for Vision 2030, I am asking that you bring a comprehensive financial plan to address the shortcomings of Trinidad and Tobago. The key areas of ill-financial health which is runaway expenditure, a high debt profile, continuous deficit budgeting and expenditure and debt commitments; very important. I am asking that a plan for Trinidad and Tobago for the next 15 years be constructed, using the organizations and institutions such the Central Bank and the Economic Development Board, to chart a way forward in addressing the concerns of Trinidad and Tobago. It cannot be that we are depending on annual budget statements, that really give figures one year to the next, when a plan that is required to rescue Trinidad and Tobago's economy, is a very long-term one. We need that.

I want to ask—I am saying that careful attention needs to be given, or needs to be paid, to the level of indebtedness—to the households—careful attention needs to be paid to the level of indebtedness of consumers and household debt. This can present a systemic risk to the financial sector of Trinidad and Tobago. While I do support the online tax, I ask the Government to reconsider this tax at a time, at an appropriate time, when demand for foreign exchange is more closely aligned to

supply.

I ask the Government to be very cautious in presenting statistics on foreign reserves, as your current reserves have been funded by loans or foreign loan. I commend the Minister and the Government for their initiative with respect to GATE, but do ask that the recommendation of income per household, per registered student be considered.

The agricultural sector, you need to get—you need to manage that sector and have output from that sector, rather than just an appreciation of improved management.

The Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, you need to look at productivity in Trinidad and Tobago, and get the indices that measure performance up, and I am asking to be very careful in considering the leadership of state enterprises and statutory authorities, because their inefficiencies and poor financial health is taking a toll on the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam President, with these words, I have presented my findings and my recommendations, in the context of Goal No. 17 of the UN 2030 Agenda:

“Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”

I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Before I recognize the next speaker, I just want to direct Members’ attention to Standing Order 103, and I would ask that Members pay attention to that, when making contributions; Sen. Baksh. [*Desk thumping*]

Let me just say as well, that I have granted Sen. Baksh leave pursuant to Standing Order 42(11).

Sen. Allyson Baksh: Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity once again to contribute to the national budget debate in this honourable House. Since

election to office, the Government has set about with the job of reorganizing a nation that had flipped within recent years on standards of good governance. This situation was exacerbated by the international fallout in the price of oil and to a lesser extent the price of gas. The importance of responsible and prudent leadership cannot be underscored, and we know that there were vacuums over our recent history, hence the absence of policy prescriptions and programmes essential to remedy our situation which could have been deployed.

7.15 p.m.

As such, when we contextualize the background to the preparation of the national budget 2016/2017, the nation can appreciate the challenges that Trinidad and Tobago faces. Therefore, the theme of the budget, “Shaping a Brighter Future—A Blueprint for Transformation and Growth” is most appropriate for 2017, as we chart our nation back on course.

Madam President, given the challenging international and domestic macro-economic environment, and given the massive reduction in revenue between 2014 to 2016, in terms of the petroleum revenue decline from \$17.6 billion to \$1.7 billion while total current revenue fell from \$57 billion to \$37 billion, the Minister of Finance has produced a pretty good budget, and he and his team at the Ministry of Finance should be commended for the work undertaken. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, my contribution today will focus on the all-important area of public administration. The hon. Minister of Finance, in his prolific fiscal presentation, outlined several measures aimed at ensuring the resilience of the public service and ensure it works better to serve the needs of citizens. These include the introduction of the Revenue Authority, the statistical institute, the operationalization of the procurement system and greater collaboration with labour; all constitute part of the institutional strengthening of the public sector.

Madam President, the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications understands that their mandate is to focus on the transformation of the public sector to ensure that every citizen is satisfied with the services provided by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. It is my view that this approach is a good one to adopt.

Madam President, what does public sector transformation mean? According to UNDP research, it incorporates the following:

1. Civil service reform which is concerned with the human resources in the public sector such as capacity, wages and conditions;
2. Increasing the efficiency and responsiveness of the policy-making system;
3. Reforming the machinery of Government which is concerning the rules of institutions; and
4. Reformation of the public sector, revenue and expenditure management system.

Madam President, Trinidad and Tobago should consider having this conversation in context of its geopolitical position as it affords us to better understand the issues before us.

Let us take, for example, the perspectives for the Global Centre for Public Service Excellence. Examination of the complexity in Small Island Developing States offers insights into areas of commonalities—meaning the similarities of issues we face here in Trinidad and Tobago are common in other territories with a similar make-up like us. These are, for example, limited capacities and capabilities at both the levels of the public and private sectors; limited opportunities for highly skilled employment; limited economic diversification; volatility of the GDP; market distortions due to monopolies; dependence on a narrow resource base; cost

of doing business is higher, to name a few.

Another fact being the migration of the highly skilled. For our region, that number is as high as 83 per cent and 86 per cent, Guyana and Jamaica respectively. Madam President, in looking at the requirements for ease of doing business, that is a World Bank Report published annually, but I would look only at the years 2009 and 2015 accordingly. There is a story for Trinidad and Tobago to pay attention, and that has to do with our rankings amongst Small Island Developing States which stands at 17 and 18 on the global index. Singapore stands at one on the SIDS global scale. Mauritius, a country similar to us, with a population of 1.296 million persons, ranked No. 2 of the SIDS scale and 24 globally.

Interestingly, for our regional counterparts, such as St. Lucia, Antigua and Bermuda, the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Kitts and Nevis, Dominica and Belize are ahead of us. In the 2015 report, Trinidad and Tobago is 79 globally. Madam President, Singapore remains at No. 1 and Mauritius now stands at 28 with our Jamaica brothers and sisters at 58, a clear sign of steady improvements. I believe that the long and short of all of this really underscores the urgent need to bring our public service on par with the standards aimed at engendering excellence.

Madam President, the question for Trinidad and Tobago is: what do we need in these times of low commodity prices and volatility in the energy and financial markets? Well, the answer is clear. We need to focus heavily on transformation of the public sector and systems of Government. As it stands, without such, we are at risk of being left behind, not only on the global level, but at regional levels where our comrades are ahead of us on the ease of doing business.

Madam President, as one of the leading democracies in the region, Trinidad and Tobago should not have to be playing catch-up. We can use these key

indicators that are central to the reengineering of the public service as tools to encourage governing improvements as part of the wider sectorial reform.

There is a need, Madam President, for the accelerated transformation of the public sector, and even the private sector to a lesser degree. The emerging questions that some quarters are asking themselves is: how can the private sector operate as a full big-business sector away from the heavy reliance of governmental interventions? That, Madam President, is a larger conversation that I will not venture there today.

We must ensure, as a collective body that the citizens get value for their taxpaying money, both at public and private sectors. We must ensure the highest quality of service delivered to the people of the country be the hallmark of our future behaviours. Madam President, fundamentally, as a society and people, we have to make sure that public officers are given the best treatment through the provision of quality facilities that meet the standards of work.

We have the example of the PNM Government, prior to 2010, working hard to build state-of-the-art accommodation that meets basic dignity for our public officers. The lack of careful planning for the health and safety of public officers led to the shutdown of the CSO and immigration department due to “sick building” or non-OSHA compliance. In answering the call of 2015 to “Let’s do this together”, citizens ensured that a PNM Government continued its just and fair approach by effectively managing the transition to make the Government Campus functional so as to satisfy the needs of public officers.

Care, Madam President, is not a mere word, but an act of demonstration of commitment in keeping with our value as being a party that truly puts people at the helm of everything we do. Just like FATCA, the many critical reforms that the Government proposes, whether it is Revenue Authority, police service reform,

reform of the teaching service, et al, it is critically important that citizens understand these are not novelty actions, but essentials to survive and function effectively and efficiently in the modern world. As such, there is a need to guarantee a more adaptive thinking being acutely aware of the challenges and allow such to guide policy decisions.

Given the measures in fiscal 2106/2017, the question of ease of doing business is indispensable, in particular, to the conversation around diversification of the economy. Given our circumstances, diversification is predicated on the premise of a robust and resilient private sector, and it is mediated by a smartly organized and transformed public service.

Furthermore, for a small economy such as ours, a key strategy perspective should be to create an environment that would increase micro-enterprise operations. If we consider, very carefully, in the context of the approach outlined for agro-processing, emphasis on tourism, public/private partnership, then we can appreciate that to support these successful critical aspects the public service must function effectively. It is, therefore, a tall order before Trinidad and Tobago and the approach of this PNM administration, under the astute leadership of Dr. the Hon. Keith Rowley towards the transformation of the public sector. It is a timely move in the right direction.

I am, therefore, appealing to all stakeholders to ensure that the Government gets the required support to serve you better. Already, Madam President, we have seen a totally different approach to how this country's affairs are being managed. We have been speaking with all sectors, including labour. Citizens can rest assured that their best interest and the nation's common good will continue to be the only guiding influencing factor that drives a PNM Government's actions.

Madam President, as I seek to bring to a close my conversation of the

national budget, specific to public administration reform, I want to proffer the following perspective. Trinidad and Tobago should be viewed as a company: the Government as executive management, the shareholder being the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Therefore, the citizens as shareholders must get value for their money. The return on our taxpaying money should yield returns, else the company is failing. The Dr. Keith Rowley administration is of the profound position that this must change.

Madam President, it is imperative that we do not repeat the mistakes of our recent past. Trinidad and Tobago, at present, seems to be 10 years behind, and surely we are at a place of playing catch-up. Remarkably, the electorate of Trinidad and Tobago recognized that 2015 presented yet another opportunity for corrective action to stem the moral and ethical decline and return the nation to steady leadership.

Madam President, it is against this background that the public service for the PNM remains the bedrock to leading the development agenda around matters such as globalization, the governance process, accountability and transparency, thus ensuring Government uses its resources wisely to the greater benefit for all citizens.

7.30 p.m.

Fundamentally, the public service must remain non-political. We on this side with the establishment of the statistical institution seek to reinforce such abiding and guiding principles of institutional development and politico administrative relations, as opposed to control, manipulation and emasculation.

The PNM perspective on continued decentralization of the public service and local government reform, are central aspects to ensuring a modern and pragmatic approach to governance. I believe it is important to state that the PNM's

position on this does not mean moving a Government Ministry or agency from Port of Spain and dropping it into central and calling it decentralization. Our approach will be predicated on the basis of planning and scheduling in an organized fashion, conducive to the interest of all stakeholders involved.

Madam President, before I conclude I must provide some information on the changes which this administration brought to the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications during the last fiscal year. On the issue of public administration, the focus of the Ministry continues to be on the transformation of the public sector to ensure that every citizen is satisfied with the services provided by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. As such, they continue to provide the following specific functional support: public management consulting, strategic human resources management, public service training and public service transformation initiatives. At the departmental level, the removal of the Scholarship Division from this Ministry to the Ministry of Education represented a significant change which is aimed at greatly improving the delivery of service to our national scholars at home and abroad.

In 2016/2017, the aim is to continue to improve the delivery of service to the public. On the issue of communication, the focus of the Ministry continues to be on the coordinating, monitoring and guiding policies and standards that facilitate access to public information for citizens and the media. In addition, the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications continues to exercise responsibility for the development of regulation of information, communication, technology, policy and strategy. Notwithstanding the above focus, it is apparent that urgent sectoral reform is required in the state sector.

Madam President, in closing, I am confident that the PNM Government is on the right path and the right government is in office, at this crucial time, to navigate

our country from its dangerous path set on from five years of recklessness, poor governance and immoral pilferage of the national patrimony. [*Desk thumping*] It is my hope that henceforth the nation has seen the last of such wild, unsavoury and biased approach to governance. My optimism stems from the fact that our track record is long, distinguished and for over 60 years we have led every facet of development that is consummate with our nation's fortunes. The measures contained in the 2017 budget provide an effective Blueprint for Transformation and Growth in Trinidad and Tobago. Let us do this together as one people.

Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Hon. Members, I have also granted leave to Sen. Ramkissoon pursuant to Standing Order 42(11).

Sen. Melissa Ramkissoon: Thank you, Madam President. Before I start my deliberations on the budget, I must say that exactly one year ago I stood in this very same Chamber and gave my maiden contribution on my birthday. So the Parliament is forcing me to start a new tradition in my life, so I am happy to be here on my birthday, [*Desk thumping*] to share my findings on the budget. Thank you, thank you.

It is good to keep with this theme. It is consistent with growth and new beginnings, to discuss the 2017 budget which is "Shaping a Brighter Future—A Blueprint for Transformation and Growth". As always, I ask everyone to be open-minded. I was one of those who went through all of the six books that were laid in Parliament, so I will just take you through. There is a lot I want to say, Madam President, and I will just have to be on time. So I will be looking at the *Review of the Economy*, the *State Enterprises Investment Programme* and the *Public Sector Investment Programme*.

When the budget was formulated it should have been looked at in terms of

meeting the needs of our public, our citizens. What they want—or maybe what they need more than what they want. I do know if we looked at that in 2015, and looked at how the budget in 2015 was able to achieve that and really meet the needs of our citizens, majority speaking, and if we have a mechanism in place or a system that is set up that will really measure the performance of our budgets.

I believe we have committees in the Parliament that look at the spending of our budget, but we need to ensure that we have specific mechanisms in place to say, “Okay, yes we are meeting our vision. This is our 2030 vision milestone and this is what we are meeting.”

Madam President, the total revenue budgeted was \$47.4 billion. The total expenditure budgeted was \$53.4 billion, which is a negative \$6 billion, and Sen. Shrikissoon really did an excellent job explaining that. I am not exactly sure why we went with a deficit at this time. If we look at the CSO data, which had the current decrease between 2014 and 2016 in our annual revenues from petroleum of \$17.6 billion or a 92 per cent fall. So we already have our major source of income or revenue as our petroleum aspect, and we know it is declining. We are actually seeing a decrease but yet we look at a budget and we are already having a debt. I am not exactly sure why we went that way.

A simple, simple way to explain it: when we change jobs and we get another job with a lower salary, do we not change the way we spend? Do we not look at what we need as opposed to what we want? That is how I would like our Government and our country to think. Yes, we are telling people to tighten their belts; I feel we cannot breathe at this point because we have been tightening since 2008, but at this point we need to look at what our country needs and the majority. So focus should be placed on high impact projects where a large number of stakeholders would benefit directly from the outcomes of projects, and where there

is a high turnover.

It was stated in the budget package that the overall deficit of \$7.3 billion was financed by \$2.5 billion from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. This was said to be due to domestic and foreign borrowing. But if we have less, should we not prioritize our projects and cut expenditure? I am not one of those who believe that we need to attack jobs first. I believe we can look at our needs assessments and go with projects that would be in line with that at this time in the economy.

Looking at the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, it allows for withdrawals if the petroleum revenues fall below the estimated by at least 10 per cent. That is in the legislation, that is when we are allowed to touch the fund. I honestly thought when we have the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, it would be there to assist us in times of natural disasters, when our country really has lost its footing and really needed to touch this fund.

It was good to see on the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management's website, the ODPM website, that it actually states that the purpose of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund does not speak directly about the use of the fund in the aftermath of a disaster. It is not dedicated for the provision of disaster relief funding, however, this may be a source of relief assistance after a disaster. In order to access the money in this fund, authorization must be gained by the Prime Minister in consultation with the five-member management board placed in charge of the fund. So it was good to hear earlier today the Minister of Finance say in his introduction in the Senate, that they were looking at splitting the fund so they could use it for stabilization of the economy and as well as having it for the heritage in the future. I do support that initiative, but I would like to know how we really would be splitting it. *[Interruption]*

Madam President: Leader of Government Business.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (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 10.00p.m.

Question put and agreed to.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2017) BILL, 2016

Sen. M. Ramkissoon: Madam President, in May 2016 the Government withdrew US \$377.5 million from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, which to date the Parliament was not given an outline of the utilization of these funds and it remains unknown to us. We had a debate where we came, and they did not outline it. But in the *Review of the Economy* on page 40 it says that the funds were withdrawn to support the economic stabilization. But what does this really mean? What does stabilization of our economic situation really mean to us? Again, we need to have some information before we actually just take out our money from our funds and use them.

There was a recent incident that happened on October 6, 2015. There was a short period of heavy rainfall—and this is in south Trinidad and Tobago—and every single drain was clogged. There was water everywhere. The Creek was impassable, and that was just from mini showers. What would happen if there is a hurricane or an earthquake? What is in place, what have we done or what are we doing? So we cannot fail people by ignoring these issues or these signs.

Madam President, let us look at the *Review of the Economy*. The official source of the national statistical data is the Central Statistical Office, but, however, in that same document given—the *Review of the Economy*—there is a conflicting article published from the International Monetary Fund that questions the accuracy of the data presented due to limited resources. It seems a bit concerning to me that

we are using data to conduct analysis, and yet your analysis is only as strong or as weak as your data provided. So we should really look at this if this is what we are basing our data on at this time.

We have many ideas within the booklets and packages about plans to regenerate operating fields, increase supply and demand, but we need to ensure that when we are doing this and highlighting areas for improvement, we invoke that discussion and we really have areas to improve. For example, on page 39 of the budget statement the Minister recommended that Petrotrin needs to reduce operating expenditure by \$500 million over the next four years, or increase profitability. That is a very high expectation knowing that we are cutting cost.

This system is a very strong, strict hierarchy system. In order for you to get something approved, you need to go through a very long level of signatories that may not understand what the necessity is. So, for example, in the state enterprises booklet presented, there is a cry for installation of 60 minimal landings. Our minimal landings are basically what we access the platforms on—if you want to know—so in order to access them you need to get on to these minimal landings. So there is a project here crying for 60 minimal landings in two years for a budgeted \$30 million. But in 2017 we have only allocated \$10 million.

7.45 p.m.

I am not sure that we are going to give them \$20 million in 2018, but the fact is, with \$10 million, these projects take time. I do not know how we can expect 100 per cent completion if we are only giving them this. So, again, we need to ensure when we have these projects in these booklets, unless the board is approving the cost and it comes to the Minister of Finance, they need to ensure what is the need and if this would happen in the expected time because it will affect your expenditure.

Now, Madam President, labour has a critical role in the diversification efforts of every right person and can be an asset, and once you have the right strength, they can either build the organization or destroy it. Now, outdated systems and procedures should not be used as an excuse for poor performance or lack of accountability.

So there was a statement that was published in the booklets and I believe, Madam President, when we have data, we should use quantitative findings. So there was mentioned that we have no salary cuts, which is a good thing, and there was a significant back pay, we were able to pay some significant back pay. But what is significant? What is significant?—1 per cent, 2 per cent, 3 per cent? What is that? So, I have a little concern about that. When we have data, let us use the information so the citizens of the country can be aware of what the Government is doing for us.

In terms of the salary cuts though, I am not one of those who support that with workers, unless your CEO and managers and your permanent secretaries are taking salary cuts, then you shall do the same. So workers should continue however to upgrade their skills and improve their work ethics and impact.

Now, I have to commend the honourable Senator from the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, I hope I got that right, on her 10-point plan. [*Desk thumping*] I do like it. It has, you know, where there is a register where all the persons who are unemployed can go onto this listing and persons could snatch them out. Also, it has where they can develop and, you know, get new job opportunities, but I am not sure if this has started. [*Crosstalk*] It has started and if it has started for all persons who have been retrenched, such as the cuts that we have on CEPEP, are these persons included in the 10-point plan? Yes? [*Crosstalk*] All right. That is an area of concern because this plan deals with

your psychological issues, it deals with finding new means of employment and really just developing your skills. So you would want all persons to have access to this 10-step programme. So I do not know how it is, if they go to the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development and they access there, I am not exactly sure because I tried to find it online and I could not find it. So maybe during your delivery you could probably explain to the public how they can access it.

Madam President, I just briefly spoke about CEPEP and URP workers and I was looking at that in terms of how many hours they work. They work six hours with a 30-minute break and I am not exactly sure if that is totally correct because I saw this in a published article in the *Guardian*. So if I am wrong I am free to get corrected in really the hours of work. But really six hours, Madam President? They have no facilities to use. They have no hospitality areas so they do have to leave the site. So, I was thinking of instead of cutting staff, a proposal, it is just a recommendation, just to look at it in terms of a shift system where you have persons rotated because they cannot stay on a site for very, very long and that way you will have more persons employed or getting some source of income before they find a new job. Because, I mean, they have been removed from the system due to cutbacks and due to—you are just not able to sustain it anymore as the budget has said. So this is a means that you can keep your staff right now and just have them for less hours or maybe just look at rotating them and that way they can get some time to search the job market.

Madam President, I want to speak now about the *Review of the Economy* booklet page 34 which deals with airline arrivals. And this came about after the initiatives expressed by the Minister of Finance on the development of Tobago. And yes, the Tobago airport really needs development. And when you look at the statistics though, the number of visitors to Tobago fell by 14.3 per cent and that is

22,435 persons which is lower than the island's share of air arrivals which was 5.1 per cent in 2015.

So the leading reasons why people come to Tobago is to, one, visit friends and family which was 38.1 per cent, then there was 21.6 per cent who did it for leisure and 14.7 per cent who visited for business. So, we have 38.1 per cent of the persons visiting Tobago for visiting friends and family. So I believe that they would stay by their friends and family and not in hotels.

Because I can share an incident what happened to me when I visited Tobago in September and I went to the Magdalena Grand and the hotel staff was very friendly, it was excellent service, but the rooms were not all booked and the maintenance, Madam President, of the hotel was degrading. So what measures or initiatives are being placed now to advertise or to draw persons into this hotel? Because now you have a higher cost now to maintain your hotel. Because if you do not maintain it, you are going to escalate and that is what is happening. So your quality of your maintenance is not there. So, I would like to know if anybody has the answer to that, how we plan to maintain this.

Now in terms of the Point Fortin Hospital, the construction. And this project is designed to hold 75 beds and in the booklet they said that it is 70 per cent complete, well that is the construction design is the 70 per cent complete with a completion date of January 2018. And I want to ask, Madam President, is this a realistic deadline? If you drive past the construction site, all you see is foundation works or trying to get foundation works. Now having unrealistic deadline dates will affect or impact on your expenditure and the way you budget, so this is why I am asking.

Also, I am very happy that Sen. Khan walked back in. I would like to know about the NIDCO project for the highway to Point Fortin. They have an estimated

cost of \$7.5 billion where \$4.9 billion was already spent and I really would like to know when the works will restart. Unfortunately, every single time there is a drizzle, Madam President, a drizzle, there is flood on the Creek. There are pumps trying to pump out the drains, but it is not working and the traffic is unbearable and persons have to go to Port of Spain and all different areas for school and it is difficult because persons would fall asleep behind the wheel because it is bumper-to-bumper traffic.

And on touching on the Creek, there is the Godineau Bridge which is right there by the Shore of Peace and we have noticed that there is a new paving that was done there, Madam President. I do know if you have gotten the opportunity to visit it, but there are about six speed bumps on the bridge. It is alleged that they paved over the expansion joints of the bridge, which I hope they did not do. Because expansion joints, Madam President, allow for the vibration and the movement of the bridge to ensure that you have a structural integrity, right, and it also for your turnpike expansions and everything like that. So, I really hope they did not pave over the expansion joints on the bridge. Right? And not only that, it is not a nice drive, Madam President, it is bump, bump, bump. So again, I do not know who initiated that project, what was the need. Again, can we get some answers as to what is what we are doing? Thank you. All right.

So let me just move quickly to sports and this was highlighted on page 47 for those who would like to follow and the technocrats who would like to look at this afterwards. They have embarked on five projects as part of the national programme funded by a loan facility from the CHINA EXIM BANK. And that amounts to \$532 million. That is five projects. Right? Of the five projects highlighted in the booklet, there was no mention of the Diego Martin sporting complex which is budgeted for, to an estimated cost of \$292.31 million.

Madam President, why do we need to do this at this time? We already heard from Sen. Shrikissoon of our debt that we are climbing into. We have heard from other Members talking about the budget and our vision and where we want to go. We have five projects, we have a loan to pay off of \$532million. These five projects are not yet completed and yet we are going to start another one. What is the justification for this at this time, Madam President?

So let us move now to the public sector investments. And there is a talk about the National Street Lighting Programme which continues in the 2016 with an allocation of \$6 million to T&TEC. And this is an effort to improve security to citizens, enhance the quality of life to the programme and activities for just, you know, having lights throughout. And there is something I would like to add to this programme and I do not know if it has it already, but I do not know if the Minister or Ministries could just look at it. When we have projects, \$6 million, this is—every cent matters and people need to be aware of that, and if they think of that the culture will change in the way that we spend, the way that we behave.

And a simple thing as, we had a street light that was not working. We made some reports, they said that they came and changed it, we said it was not working still. When they came back they, again, said they changed it. One day on a third attempt maybe we happened to be home and we realized that they were changing the wrong street light. So they were doing their job. They are going to change the street light, but which one. So supervision is important, yes. But I think they need to add that they need to have feedback to the person who reported the matter or incident so in that way we could save some money. Every cent counts, Madam President, so hopefully.

In terms of renewable energy and energy efficiency initiatives, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries focused on the promotion of green designs and

technologies with an allocation of \$6 million as well. Now, diversification is not instant and it really should be done when we have a lot of money in the Treasury to get the impact that we want to feel. But there was a really interesting project that I had liked in the state enterprise booklet which is the project for the renewal energy at LABIDCO, the installation of solar lighting for the La Brea Estate which was unfortunately, deferred. And I felt that this project had a lot of potential for us to measure the impact of the performance in an industrial area for having a source of renewal energy, and how we as Trinidad and Tobago can benefit from such initiatives and what would be the impact. So, I would like for that to be looked at, if it could.

Now, let us move to the economy and the economic infrastructure. I would like to commend NGC on completing a pipeline project which was budgeted the lowest budgeted price of 14 per cent, and it is applaudable because that is very difficult to do. I would like to know as we move to the implementation of CNG as this is a new initiative and we are on phase one, would the Ministry like to share with us what percentage of phase one has been completed? Because we have the prices, but we do not have what percentage we have reached.

In relation to the upgrade for the Phoenix Park Valve Station, this project is 94 per cent complete and it is over its estimated cost by \$19.2 million. But no information was given as to why there was a \$5 million allocation for this year, and if this \$5 million will take it to our 100 per cent complete. There is no explanation for this; and that is the Phoenix Park Valve Station.

In terms of there is a—NGC is constructing a liquid fuel pipeline project. And now there is a justification for \$45million variation due to scope, but at 92 per cent completion? We are varying at 92 per cent? I am not sure, but that is what is written.

8.00 p.m.

There are two buildings in Tobago at the cost of \$5 million for recreation facilities, and there is not enough money that was allocated—oh, there was no money, Madam President, I apologize, there was no money in the 2017 budget allocation, there was no money allocated to this project. So, they already purchased two buildings in Tobago but there is no money, so what about maintenance cost? Is it that we are not using these buildings? We just purchased them to have them there? Are we planning to rent them? What is the purpose of these recreational buildings? [*Interruption*] This is in the State Enterprise booklet, if you look at the projects you will see them listed, you will see two buildings purchased for Tobago, at a cost of \$5 million. So, they paid the \$5 million already in 2015.

Okay, so moving on to the national energy, this is the Upgrade of Berth II - LABIDCO. The estimated total cost was revised from 2015, from \$260 million to \$315 million, and in 2016 to \$321 million. So, we move from 2015, \$260 million, then we jump to \$315 million, and now we are jumping to \$321 million, are we going to jump further? What is going on with this project? What is the justification? Where are we? And all of these things, it affects our budget, because this is what we are allocating money to spend to, when we could do other things with our money, because we are already at a deficit of \$5 million, so if you can save this \$5 million, I would be very happy. Another project that I also had an issue with, I hope it is a typo, Madam President—I am really hoping it is a typo—this is the acquisition of Equity Investment in Chemtech. In 2015 the estimated cost was \$10 million; in 2016 it jumped to \$1.29 billion. So, again, this this project is being deferred, so that is good. But what is the reason for that big jump, \$10 million to \$1.29 billion?

In terms of Petrotrin, and I will not dwell too much on Petrotrin because I am an employee of Petrotrin, so I will not touch too much, but there is a project that was listed in the state enterprises booklet, and it was on the FCCU, the main column, and there was a project that they put on hold, and that was the purchasing of a new column. If we had it in our projects listing for 2015/2016 to purchase a new column, why is it that we are deferring it in 2017? Now, is it that we did a risk assessment to say that this is safe for us, because FCCU is right by that Gasparillo area where the residents are? And is it that we did a risk assessment to say that this is safe to continue, because right now it is in operations? Did we do an inspection report? Did we get any consultation to say that this is safe to operate at, and even though we had budgeted for it, we have a hope to change it, can we continue to operate it? I am not sure. So, it is just food for thought.

Also in terms of Trinmar there is a need for the installation of a new bulk line from RP 10 to RP 1, which is justified that there is an increase in production. Now, I know we heard earlier that there is not much drilling activities going on, because drilling costs money, and in order to get you need to have money to drill, and unfortunately drilling, what most people think is when you put a tube in it goes straight down and you find oil. It does not work like that, unfortunately it does not. You start here and you might end up there, or you might go so. It is multidirectional and it cost a lot of money to drill. So, to say that we are drilling, it is good now, yes, because the services are cheaper, but you need to have money. So, what is the justification for doing this RP 10 to RP 1 line, because we have no increase in production, so what is the need for the \$271 million?

In terms of institutional strengthening, and Sen. Shrikissoon always passionately speaks about it, and it is correct, I did not realize we were 94th in our institutional framework. So, it was good to see then that in the public sector

booklet that the Ministry of Planning and Development, they are acquiring certification and digitalization of statistical data from census house. What they did not share with us was what the estimate cost to have this, or to do this project was. So, they have an initiative on page 142 to strengthen the institutions, but they did not have what was the cost, so I am not sure if they are deferring this as well.

Madam President, I just want to touch briefly on the social rehabilitation services. Of the \$20.9 million allocated to facilitate the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of street dwellers, drug abusers, and socially displaced persons, which was like a total of \$9.3 million that we are allocating this time, what is the target number of persons that we aim to assist with this? So, we have this amount of money, but how many? Because, if we look at 2011 Central Statistical Office data on street dwellers, which is 1 per cent of our population, how many of these resources or these initiatives were able to assist or help? And this was not in the information provided, but we have the money that was spent. So, my heart goes out to these people, because, yes, they are not contributing to society, and yes they can be a risk to themselves and to us. Unfortunately there was a case that happened in the industry where this person committed suicide. And, again, we have things in place, we want to make sure that we have the maximum usage of it. So, I just wanted to touch on that briefly.

Madam President, it was touched on before, national security, and this is about the IT programme of equipment, installation and upgrade, and there is a mention of in the Public Sector Programme, there is a Versadex upgrade with the installation of mobile data terminal in police vehicles to facilitate access to police database, query records, patrol development on a mobile system, which I must say I applaud. I appreciate that move to technology and use of technology. However, Madam President, I was on my way home from work and I was stopped in a stop-

and-search situation, stop-and-search where the officers pull you over and then introduce themselves to you, and explain to you that this is a stop-and-search and they would like to ask you some questions. So, they walked around the vehicle, everything was okay, they asked me where I am from, I said La Romaine, San Fernando, they said, well, you are not in our zone but we would still like to update our police database; I said, okay, no problem. I said do you want my licence and registration, they said, okay, yes; so I pulled out my licence and registration and I gave it to them.

It was quite interesting and very sad that 7.00 o'clock in the night we had to look at the lighting from the street light which was working, they had to take out their pen and have a little clipboard, that was to write my name, where I am from, my age, my marital status, the colour of the vehicle that I am driving, my number plate—I was like, this is on the form?

Sen. Dr. Mahabir: Email address.

Sen. M. Ramkissoon:—email address, yes. I leaned over to see what was there—

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

Sen. M. Ramkissoon: Thank you—if this is really on the form, “Yes, ma’am, this is on the form, we want to make sure that we update our database and you are safe”.

So, I am happy that we are going to an IT system, because this was very sad in this age. Everything about me is on my ID card, everything is on my licence, if you want to get my vehicle I am driving, there is a registration office you can check. Why is it that we have to go through this? And then I thought to myself, who is going to enter the data into the database that they are creating? I do not know if they are hiring people. Well, they are creating jobs, so I guess it is a good thing. But, still, I was a bit concerned by that, so I posted it on social media and a

lot of people said that they even asked for their number, they did not ask me for my number though, but they even asked certain people for their number. So, I am not sure what the system that we are trying to improve is, but we just need to be mindful of the resources, because this is allocation of resources, this is what they are doing, so you know what our taxpayers are paying for.

So, Madam President, over the past five years we have spent approximately \$25 billion on national security, and really how has this benefited our economy? How has this benefited our citizens? In the *Express* published on April 12, 2016, “Brace yourself for more murders” was the title. It had a statistics which said 26 per cent—and this is in April 2016—increase in murders in the country over the past year and 28 per cent increase from the rate in 2012. So, something we are doing is not the right thing. We have a lot of money that we are allocating, we have intelligence agencies, we have Special Anti-Crime Unit, we have defence force, we have security intelligence agency, we have special branch, we have SSA, we have Customs and Excise enforcement, we have operations unit, we have integrated threat assessment centre, we have a national coastal radar surveillance centre, we have Anti-Kidnapping Unit, we have a criminal gangs intelligence, and we have a Criminal Investigation Division. We have more divisions and agencies than crime that is being solved, and this is not acceptable. [*Desk thumping*] Something needs to change now. If you want to keep your staff, no problem, put them in one unit and let them all work together. Do something. This is not acceptable. It is not acceptable.

Well, before my time is up I need to speak about one thing and that is the online taxes. I do not support my fellow Senator, but before I go to that, in terms of security, education, there is a new plan for the laptops to be left in schools, and when I had first learnt about every Form One student will be given a laptop, I

thought that was good, and I was thinking but why do they not leave it in school, and then I remember that your book bag goes missing, your shoes go missing if you leave it, if you leave your phone there it would go missing, so I remembered that from my school days. I do not know if it has gotten worse or better, and the thing is, if we are having laptops being left in schools, what security measure are we placing in schools to protect them or to make sure they are not stolen, or taken away? So, we need to look at what measures we are going to put in place for that, because I think they did cut the security measures for schools in the budget.

But anyway, so let us go back to the online purchases, Madam President. So, the popularity of online purchases has increased significantly. I do not know again what significantly means, maybe 1 per cent, and it is stated that the clearance of \$1 billion a year, what is the clearance of \$1 billion? What measures or what is the majority of goods being cleared? Is it clothes? It is medicine? Is it books? What is it? And if it is that we have identified that, then find your manufacturing sector, find your business sector, and let them meet the needs of the people. Give us value for money. I have told this Parliament here before, I went to buy and I recently went to the Dollar Store and I bought 24 boxes for US \$1, that is \$7. I cannot even get one box in Trinidad for \$7. Not even one. So, what is it, what are we doing to our population? What are we doing to our people? If you can provide a market that gives you value for money, I have no problem buying here. Not everybody has the luxury of travelling like myself to go and purchase my goods away and come back, because of health reasons and other restrictions.

So, Madam President, please, I know you cannot change it now, but we have the mid-year review coming up, and I think that we can look at changing it, or you cannot find a market. Madam President, I know my time is almost up.

Madam President: It is up.

Sen. M. Ramkissoon: Do I have one minute?

Madam President: No.

Sen. M. Ramkissoon: No, okay. [*Laughter*] I thank you for this, and on my 30th birthday it is a great joy for me to continue to serve my country in this capacity. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Nigel De Freitas: Madam President, I thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to this, our second budget debate as it relates to the management of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, in a period that for all intents and purposes can still be described as a period of economic uncertainty, turmoil and trouble.

That being said, I have listened intently to contributions of Members opposite, Members Independent and members of the public in various forums post-budget debate. And so, Madam President, what I have gathered from the various debates scares me. Not because the tactic of the Opposition which is to create fear is working, but because of various factors which I will seek to clarify as I move along in my contribution.

8.15 p.m.

The predominant source of my fear comes from the understanding that there are still those in the society, spurred on by the Senators opposite, who in one year, are yet to come to the stark realization of the economic times that this country is facing and thus continue with the same mindset when our very survival may be hinged on the success of the paradigm shift currently initiated by the Minister of Finance.

As such, Madam President, I will now attempt to paint a picture of the situation at hand so that all who are listening to the sound of my voice will come to terms as to how we found ourselves in this precarious position.

Starting in 2014, our situation as relates to the fall in oil and gas prices had been made clear. It has also been said, time and time again, that it is not the fault of anyone in particular, not Senators opposite and not Senators on this side, neither Independent Senators, as we are not in control of the oil and gas prices and whether they fall or they rise. However, it is the response to the falling of oil and gas prices, is where the stark difference between the previous administration and this administration lies. The difference is where the source of the fear I mentioned earlier actually begins.

Madam President, the actions of the previous administration, beginning long before the decline in revenues and continuing after, created a real sense of fear in the population of this country. We have listened to the contribution of the Leader of the Opposition Business after the Minister of Finance would have made his contribution and we would have heard words being put forward in this contribution in relation to the budget debate—words such as “voodoo budgeting”; words such as cut and throat; words such as rope around the neck; other words such as “strangulation”, “murder”, to put people on “unemployment”.

And so what I am saying, Madam President, is that this ideology of creating fear, going forward into this budget debate and into the future in terms of taking us away from what happened in the previous five years is still continuing, they are still trying to create this sense of fear. What I am saying, Madam President, to put it succinctly, under the previous administration the fear that was created, the general population would have felt as though we were moving at bolt speed towards a precipice overlooking an abyss, deep, dark and cold, and what we would have done on September 7th in actuality or what we felt we would have done, is actually stop right at the edge of this precipice.

And what would have happened on September 8th as we came to the stark

realization by the Minister of Finance and other Ministers as they got into the Ministries—and we would have heard the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries mention this in his contribution—is that we had long since careened off of that precipice, falling down into the deep dark abyss, heart beating wildly, arms flailing wildly, and what we would have done is been so scared that we would have hit the bottom and we would have been done for, in terms of the fear that would have been created in that regard.

So, Madam President, what would have actually happened on September 7th, as our arms were flailing wildly into this dark deep abyss and being scared, the wind rushing past our ears and all we are hearing from the previous administration is, we will rise, we will rise. We heard it again in the contribution of the Leader of the Opposition, today, where he said again, the sun will rise in the next few years. And that is just not the case, because what I would like to say is that there is one succinct difference between falling and flying and that is how hard you hit the ground. So in relation to “we will rise”, that is not what is happening.

Madam President, [*Crosstalk*] what would have happened as we were falling into this abyss, like I said, and we would have grabbed on to this olive branch—
[*Crosstalk*]

Madam President: Sen. Mark and Minister, could we desist from that crosstalk.
Mr. Vice-President.

Sen. N. De Freitas: Thank you, Madam President. So as I continue, Madam President, I was indicating that what we would have done on September 8th in grabbing on to this olive branch was beginning the process of climbing back out of this abyss and standing on the edge, albeit, too close to the edge and not out of the danger zone. And for that, this administration must be commended, the Minister of Finance must be encouraged [*Desk thumping*] and must be congratulated for

what would have been a Herculean task over the last year.

Senators opposite and members outside in terms of the public may have mistaken the Minister of Finance based on his stature and his ability to execute this task. But I know on this side, as well as every other member on this side, that the “might of the man resides in the mind of the man”, and for that he must be congratulated.

Madam President, again in the last year, we have heard the Minister of Finance indicate that we have moved from only three days' cash flow, a \$9 billion overdraft facility wiped out, state agencies such as NGC raided to a point where we have increased cash flow as a result of increased borrowing limits and other initiatives. The back pay partially paid out with the rest to come in 2017 as he has indicated. The very same overdraft facility being in the positive in August 2016 as stated in his budget presentation and the process of reduction in expenditure by the sum of \$11 billion, all for spreading the burden of adjustment across the society and maintaining the public sector employment levels. Again, Madam President, for that the Minister of Finance must be encouraged, he must be commended and he must be congratulated.

Madam President, as I move forward, the underlining theme of the Opposition, both in the other place and in this Chamber, has been to compare the tenure of the last five years in governance to that of this administration over the last year. To compare their policy which they have indicated, generated revenue without taxation and without having to reduce expenditure and therefore questioning why this administration cannot achieve the same. Again, like 2010 and their squandermania campaign, it is an attempt to create fear which will not work. It did not work in the 2015 general election and it will not work in 2020 coming forward.

Madam President, if a comparison is to be made it must be apples to apples and oranges to oranges. It cannot be that five years in governance, spanning a period of economic abundance and ending in one of uncertainty can be compared to one year in economic uncertainty. To truly compare the two we must look at policies implemented during times of economic abundance and policies implemented during times of economic uncertainty.

To be very specific, the policies I am referring to under this administration is one of value for money and institutional strengthening. I intend to show that this administration as its previous incarnation as it relates to spending, again focuses on value for money and institutional strengthening as its main policy, ensuring a return on investment to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago or what I call, providing a way out for the citizens of this country to realize their economic potential. Whereas, the previous administration focused on spending without care for value or for money or institutional strengthening and their only intention was to ensure that the citizens remained dependent in the hopes that this will translate to a return to office. To do this, Madam President, I propose to compare as it relates to a period of economic abundance the years 2007 to 2010 under a different incarnation of this current administration of which the Minister of Finance would have been an integral part and thus, the policy applies with the years 2010 to 2013 of the previous administration.

In terms of economic uncertainty, I propose to compare the years 2015 to 2016 of this administration with the years 2014 to 2015 of the previous administration. The years 2007 to 2010 would have seen spending on capital projects that would in essence reduce expenditure in the long run and generate revenue. Projects such as the International Waterfront Centre, completed in 2009, which was an integral part of the plan for Trinidad and Tobago to become an

international financial centre, a revenue-generating project.

Madam President, I would just like to this point to draw your attention to an article in the *Newsday*, April 14, 2016, titled:

“Rowley: Parliament going back to Red House

‘Under this Government they will leave the Waterfront, because the Waterfront was not built for Government offices, and even the Parliament is going to leave there too, because we intend to fix the Red House and carry the Parliament back to Red House’, he said.

Addressing members of the People’s National Movement (PNM) at an indoor meeting on Tuesday evening in Malabar, Rowley said the office spaces will be used for an international financial centre and to earn revenue.

‘We are also going to go back to our moorings of trying to become a financial centre in the region—supplying financial services’, he said.

This will enable the creation of new jobs, he added.”

Madam President, I reiterate, value for money. Again, talking about the previous administration and the fact that they would have come in on a squandermania campaign. I remember that in that campaign they would have indicated as one of the projects that we squandered money on was this International Waterfront Centre. But yet, after winning the election in 2010, in 2011 they then moved this very Parliament to the very same building that they said we were squandering money on. So I am wondering now and I am asking that, if it is that we had squandered money or had we done what they said that we should not have done, where would the Parliament be whilst the Red House is being fixed and renovated? And therefore you can see that the value for money was realized even in the five years that they were in Government.

Madam President, I move on to the project such as the Government Campus

Plaza, officially opened in June of this year under the administration which now houses the Ministry of Education and the Immigration Division and eventually the Ministry of the Attorney General, Legal Affairs and Inland Revenue Division and the Ministry of Finance will be entering the Government Campus Plaza. The Minister of Finance indicated this in his budget presentation. This is also a project with a purpose to reducing government expenses in regard to rent to house Ministries.

You would have heard the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries indicate that that Ministry will also be moving into the building that was built in Chaguanas under a previous administration to house, I think it was the Ministry of Tertiary Education. Again, another value for money proposition put forward by this administration in terms of saving money, in terms of rent being paid out to Government Ministries and I will get into that more as I move forward into my contribution.

It should be noted that these projects were visualized and realized during a period of economic abundance and can be now utilized to aid in our period of economic uncertainty. That is what I actually call value for money. We have a period where there was economic abundance. And we had a PNM Government at that point in time looking forward in terms of vision, not really having to need to put these projects in place, but had the mindset to ensure that we get value for money for these projects, so much so, that 16 years later we could now be looking at these projects and gaining value for money from them. That is what I call value for money. That is what I call a policy that helps out the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, that is what I call vision.

Compared this to the period 2010 to 2013 under the previous administration, again, spending occurring, but instead we had little to no return on investment, on

value for money. Projects such as the San Fernando to Point Fortin Highway. The biggest project under the previous administration which had the potential to add value, but instead resulted in a burden to the country due to a lack of due diligence in its execution, a lack of proper environmental impact putting in. So you had movement such as the HRM movements causing delays in this project and therefore ballooning payments that would have happened. You have the apparent bias to benefit the contractor even after it became apparent that they may be unfit to complete the project.

Madam President, I refer you now to an article in the *Trinidad Guardian* titled:

“Govt stops Point highway project”—May 03, 2016.

“All kinds of adjustments have been made to the original designs and so on. That project, we are having to intervene and it is quite likely that we will have to terminate that contract and start over with new contracting arrangements to get the highway finished.’

Attorney General Faris Al-Rawi further explained that consideration to possibly terminate the existing contract will be influenced by the fact that the existing contractor, Brazilian conglomerate Grupo OAS, is facing bankruptcy and is before the courts facing several serious criminal allegations.

‘We have an obligation to finish the project works. T&T have paid for a highway and one can allege that in some circumstances that they may have overpaid for a highway’, Al-Rawi said.

‘Contractors have packed up tools and shipped equipment to different jurisdictions and sold assets. Our obligation is to make sure we have value for money and project works are completed. Obviously, something severe as

bankruptcy must be considered.”

Madam President, it is not about who chose the contractor or how much was paid to the contractor. It is about ensuring that value for money is received at all stages of the project. It is about realizing that the contractor was compromised and in order to protect the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, an assessment of the project done and a plan that ensures that the project can be completed whilst maintaining value for money implemented.

Madam President, instead the previous administration sought to downplay the issues with the contractor and most likely to manage the political fall-out that would have occurred. Because there would have been political fall-out once it would have come out that this OAS contractor would have been bankrupt and facing serious litigation matters in court. It is this administration that through active steps, in line with its policy of value for money, ensured not only the termination of the contractor but an expectation of recovery of \$1 billion to be utilized in completion of project using local contractors and realizing value for money for the citizens of this country.

8.30 p.m.

Madam President, I move on to another project that did not get value for money implemented under the previous administration, and that is the laptop programme which, as indicated by the Minister of Finance, resulted in \$310 million being spent over a four-year period in the absence of an overarching ICT programme education policy, limited high-speed Internet, insufficient relevant digital content, sparse training for teachers in ICT and no management procedure for ICT projects, thus leading to a loss of value or no real return on investment on such a project.

Again, Madam President, I refer you to articles a year later, two years later

and even three years later, in relation to this project. And what I am basically saying is that if you want to get value for money in projects—and it was something that was missing in the previous administration—there should have been monitoring of these projects, and once you were starting to get this feedback a year later, two years later and three years later, something should have been put in place to ensure that value for money would have been gotten.

I refer you to the article, Madam President, *Daily Express*: “Free Laptops ‘Nightmare’” dated June 11, 2011.

“The gift of free laptops to form one pupils at the beginning of the school term last September was Government’s fulfilled manifesto promise, but, nearing the end of the school year, the initiative is being described as an implementation nightmare.

So it is no surprise to discover that many a schoolchild has not had the benefit of using the laptop in the classroom...

In a Sunday Express investigation, officials within the education sector said while there were many positive aspects to the programme, realistically they face mountains when it comes to incorporating the laptops into the education curriculum.

It goes on to highlight issues such as:

““The approach that the Ministry uses to train teachers is what is called the cascade approach, that is some teachers were called to a training centre and exposed to one or two days of training in terms of how to incorporate the technology into the curriculum and they were supposed to have gone back to their schools and share those competencies with the colleagues. That cascade approach is not always a successful one.””

Madam President, you would note that these are the very issues the Minister

of Finance highlighted in his presentation. This, as the article stated, was in 2011, and one year after the programme started, I now draw your attention to an article a year later, *Daily Express* titled: “Laptop nightmare – parents’ experience”:

“During the first two months all the children were asked to bring in the laptops as the authorisation code had been compromised, and students were passing on the password to others, hence accessing sites that ought to have been blocked.

During the first year there have been at least 40 damaged computers, with problems ranging from cracked screens, keys missing, power button malfunctions and batteries not keeping charge. After one year when the warrantee expires the onus falls upon parents...”—

Imagine that. You are putting a programme that is supposed to give value for money to the citizens and any damage to the laptop, the onus falls on the parents to fix it after one year.

“Some public libraries have commented on the first formers’ usage of laptops and from observation the time has been spent on Facebook, YouTube and games.

On behalf of some concerned form one parents of many schools, I am asking the Ministry of Education to have another look at the pros and cons that have emerged over the past year and consider other options that many people have suggested as giving laptops to sixth formers or university graduates, or using the money to improve existing labs at school so everyone can benefit.

The reality is that the average 12- and 13-year old is not responsible or prudent enough in their thinking to take care of, far less, use, the laptop and harness its power to influence and access the good over the bad. We are being unfair in our expectations, and at the same time curtailing their

opportunity to learn by giving them another technological toy to entertain themselves with, and expecting better results in the long run.”

Madam President, like I said, if value for money was an integral part of the previous administration’s policy, then what we would have seen was a suspension of this particular programme and an implementation of the very five-year plan now being proposed by the Minister of Finance. However, no such thing emerged and instead the programme continued to the tune of \$310 million over four years.

To add insult to injury, in this very budget debate in the other place, the previous Minister of Education is going to say, “So what if children play games on laptops. No big deal.” Again, I reiterate, no value for money in the projects put forward during that period where we compared a period of economic abundance, 2010 to 2013 under the previous administration, and an economic abundance, 2007 to 2010 under a previous administration of this incarnation. Madam President, for that I rest my case under that comparison. I can go on but time will not permit. I think I have shown sufficiently thus far the difference in policy between the two administrations during periods of economic abundance.

I now move to my comparison during periods of economic uncertainty. For the previous administration, this would be between, like I said before, 2014 and 2015 of their last year in office, and for this administration between 2015 and 2016 of our first year in office. Madam President, in times of economic uncertainty, the policy of value for money becomes ever more important, for the simple reason that you do not have money to waste due to reduction in revenue. For Trinidad, this is even more important as the need for diversification of the economy becomes integral to survival. However, the policy of value for money and the stark difference in the ability to execute such by both administrations become more apparent in the two periods compared.

Faced with declining revenues and high expenditure as a result of commitments, the previous administration engaged in the following measures in keeping with the goals stated earlier, of maintaining a dependency syndrome. They had a reduction expenditure of select Ministries by 15 per cent in non-critical goods and services, an increase in recurrent expenditure to the tune of \$712 million for short-term employment, \$606 million for CEPEP and \$717 million for URP, just to name a few. Madam President, the result of this, only a \$3 billion reduction in overall expenditure for 2015, a maxed-out overdraft to meet commitments of increased recurrent expenditure, only days left in regard to money available for the running of the country.

Compare this to the administration which engaged in the following measures in keeping with the goals stated earlier, of changing the mindset from a dependency syndrome to one of creating a way out for citizens to realize their economic potential. Initiatives such as reduction in expenditure of all ministries, not select—all ministries—of 7 per cent; decrease in recurrent expenditure to steps taken to completely eliminate the fuel subsidy, restructuring of the GATE, CEPEP and URP to target those most in need whilst reducing expenditure. The result, Madam President, \$11 billion reduction in overall expenditure for 2016. [*Desk thumping*] In relation to GATE, specifically, an expected reduction in 2017 of \$50 million and a further \$100 million in 2018. And it must be noted that the burden of reducing GATE was not put on those who needed it the most. So what we have done is restructure these social programmes to ensure that it goes back to its original moorings and it actually meets the mandate of taking care of those who are in need.

Madam President, the results speak for themselves. There can be no comparison. This administration has returned this country to sure footing, albeit

still at the edge of the cliff, and we are now attempting to take us away from the danger zone. I have to wonder, Madam President, that given the economic downturns are out of our control and that it is expected to occur from time to time in our history, if for future reference, given the lessons that we have learnt during this period, if a more standardized response to a fall in revenue cannot be enshrined, let us say, within the Constitution, because I shudder to think that had the oil and gas revenues that started to drop in 2011 and the policy of the previous administration of spending without value for money continued for four years, where would we have been. We would not have been able to grab that olive branch. Where we would have been is at the bottom of that cliff, broken and unable to return.

And as such, I am wondering—and I am going to actually concede to the economists and somebody with better knowledge—if we cannot put certain basic principles in place enshrined so that when there is a percentage drop in revenues in the country, certain basic measures cannot be put in place so that the population does not have to wait on a general election for a responsible government, like this one, to come in and put measures in place to return us back to sure footing. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, I now focus on the way forward. It has been stated repeatedly by the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister that the mindset of the nation must change from one of dependence on government to that of government facilitation of growth. And the mindset of government must change from providing and encouraging a dependency syndrome to the citizens of this country, to one of providing a way out for citizens to elevate themselves economically.

I am not an economist by any stretch of the imagination, but I surmise again

that the reason for this will be based on the cyclic nature of recessions. As far as I understand from what I get—an economist can correct if I am wrong—recessions are cyclic. The thing that happens and to make them so difficult is that we do not know how long they are going to last when they do happen, or how long do we have in a period of abundance between recessions. And, as such, because of that, we have to change the mindset of not only the people of the nation, but as Sen. Shrikissoon would have said in his contribution, the mindset of governance. Because the philosophy in life is that it does not matter if you are a man, an organization or a government, you cannot solve a problem from the very same mindset that created it. You must change your mindset. You must look at it from a different objective, a different perspective in order to solve that problem.

Our first approach, Madam President, is to curtail expenditure. The expenditure must change, or the way we spend money must focus on—as I have been indicating throughout my contribution so far—value for money and the creation of opportunities more than obstacles. If a government wants to ensure that the country grows, one of the best ways to do that is to create opportunities for the people of Trinidad and Tobago more than you create obstacles. Secondly, Madam President, revenue must be increased to maximizing the efficiency by which Government collects revenue from all sectors and as the Minister of Finance would have indicated—and everybody else—diversifying revenue streams by investing in other sectors such as tourism.

Madam President, in relation to those points that I have just indicated, I now turn my contribution to tourism, sports and youth affairs and Tobago. This administration is committed to the diversification process and in so doing ensuring value for money. I have said it repeatedly and I will keep saying it because that is the policy of this administration: value for money for the people of Trinidad and

Tobago.

Such initiatives in the tourism sector seek to effectively encourage and increase airline and cruise ship arrivals based on data collected as to the leading reasons why foreign nationals travelled to Trinidad and Tobago in 2015. And I just want to go to the *Review of the Economy 2016* to indicate under “Airline Arrivals”:

“Arrivals to Trinidad”—would have risen—“by 8.0 percent from 386,262 persons in 2014 to 417,314 persons in 2015”—However, with Tobago, it fell—“by 14.3 percent from 26,185 persons to 22,435 persons.”

And I just wanted to respond to Melissa Ramkissoon, because she was indicating, when she gave these numbers that in Tobago, the numbers that were given in relation to leading reasons why foreign nationals would have travelled to Tobago, is not actually true. It was to Trinidad and Tobago. So the numbers that she would have given, and the reasons, would be to visit friends and relatives, which is 38.1 per cent; leisure or beach vacation, which is 21.6 per cent, and for business or to attend a convention, which is 14.7 per cent. So I just wish to reiterate, it is not for Tobago. Those are not the reasons that people visited Tobago. They were the reasons that we had foreign nationals visiting Trinidad and Tobago as a whole.

Madam President, in fiscal year 2016, in relation to beach facilities, which represented the 21.6 per cent of the reason for visits, we had water quality testing continuing at Maracas and Las Cuevas Beaches under the Blue Flag Programme. Additionally, an Animal Welfare Programme was completed in June 2016; ongoing distribution of the Blue Flag Children’s activity book at schools, and other TDC-related events through the Environmental Conservation Green Globe Awareness Programme. And they continued to raise awareness of the Blue Flag ratings. The total expenditure for this was \$0.5 million.

In May 2016, a strategy and detailed work plan for the Maracas Beach facility improvement project was developed to provide immediate relief to users of the facility. The Ministry of Tourism engaged TDC as the implementation arm of the Ministry to execute emergency remedial works at Maracas under the IDF. A contract was awarded for the remedial sewer works to unclog sewer lines which was completed at the cost of \$0.9 million. Additionally, drainage works were also completed in July 2016 at a cost of \$0.9 million. Refurbishing and modernizing of the seating area and kitchen at the restaurant at Las Cuevas Beach is 90 per cent completed and the supplying and installation of a coastal rock armour, completed at a cost of \$0.06 million.

And, Madam President, I say all this to show that based on the numbers that we have gotten back and the reasons in terms of percentages as to why people would visit Trinidad and Tobago, you would see a focus by this administration in the last year in terms of projects that would elevate the standard and the visitor experience that people will have when they visit beaches. So we would have seen these things occurring. And then we see in 2017, we continue under the PSIP for Trinidad, where there are two key plans which will help to improve the sector and the experience of visitors.

8.45 p.m.

Those plans, Madam President, are the improvement of legislation and regulatory framework by reviewing of the existing legislative and regulatory framework and recommendation for strengthening laws for the compulsory licensing of tourism operators and other tourism establishments; engagement of a consultant to review existing best practices regionally and internationally to facilitate the development of a licensing and a regulatory authority model for Trinidad and Tobago. This includes the framework of the authority; roles,

responsibilities, functions, staffing requirements for the development of regulations and adoption of existing standards; creation of a legal entity to oversee compulsory licensing and regulation to a licensing and regulatory authority; licensing to tourism operators, initial licensing based on approved standards and regulations.

Secondly, the establishment of a visitor relationship management programme. The global tourism industry has become highly competitive in attracting and maintaining destinations of increased tourism visitor frequency. The visitor relations management strategy would involve explicit efforts to develop a long-term bond with visitors in order to stimulate repeat visitation, address visitor complaints and recommendations, and take a proactive approach to monitoring, customer interactions and identifying corrective measures. These are some of the initiatives that seek to bring value for money to the sector, however, it does not end there, as I now move on to initiatives that create opportunities more than obstacles.

Madam President, you may not be aware that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, as I was indicating earlier, is earmarked to take up residence in Chaguanas, and we heard from the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries some of the problems we would have had with that, and people would have indicated that a year has passed and this has not happened. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has dealt with that in his contribution and he has indicated that this would happen in January of 2017. The reason I bring this up, it has already been indicated by the Prime Minister that this move will free up prime real estate in Port of Spain, thus creating the opportunity to invest in a hotel which further contributes to Port of Spain becoming a convention city. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, in case you did not know this, I refer you to the *Newsday* titled “Agriculture Ministry moving the Chaguanas”, dated October 01, 2015:

“Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley yesterday disclosed that the Agriculture

Ministry's headquarters will be relocated from St. Clair to Chaguanas. In an interview broadcast on I 95.5 FM, Rowley recalled that under the former People's Partnership...government, a building was constructed in Chaguanas to house the Tertiary Education Ministry.

'The Cabinet has taken a decision that building will be used for something else', he said.

Rowley said Cabinet has decided to move the Agriculture Ministry out of its current location to this building in Chaguanas. The Prime Minister explained that once this move takes place, 'More importantly, we would have freed up probably the primest piece of real estate in Port-of-Spain where that Ministry is now'. He recalled that a previous administration had contemplated using that location as a hotel site and Government will revisit that idea."

He—"hinted that the construction of a four or five star hotel on the site of the current Agriculture Ministry in St. Clair, will help the Government in its efforts to transform Port-of-Spain into 'a convention city' that attracts conventions all year round."

Madam President, you will remember—[*Interruption*]

Madam President: Sen. De Freitas, you have five more minutes.

Sen. N. De Freitas: Okay. Thank you—I stated earlier that one of the major reasons that foreign nationals visit the country is for business and conventions. Therefore, this action by this administration to move the Agriculture Ministry is in keeping with not only value for money in the use of resources, but also the commitment to creating opportunities more than obstacles as it relates to our economic situation.

Madam President, it does not end there and I just want to respond very

quickly to Sen. Melissa Ramkissoon in regard to something that—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Senator: Melissa.

Sen. N. De Freitas: Melissa. Melissa Ramkissoon, sorry—[*Interruption*]

Sen. Ramkissoon: Senator.

Sen. N. De Freitas:—Sen. Ramkissoon, sorry—she would have said in regard to sport and youth affairs in relation to the Diego Martin multipurpose complex. What she had indicated, I think the number that she gave was wrong and I just wanted to correct her, say it was actually \$22 million and not, I think she had said \$222 million. So I just wanted to correct that very quickly.

Madam President, I now move on to Tobago. In last year's contribution I would have spoken in regard to the relationship between Tobago and Trinidad and I would have indicated at that particular point in time that there was increased commitment between Tobago and Trinidad, and there was increased communication that would lead to a feeling of being refreshed. However, in this budget allocation there may have been some misconception in regard to the relationship when people look at the allocation that would have been gotten, and what I would like to say is that in any good relationship there is a third seed that you must take into consideration, and that is compromise. With compromise, it requires a certain level of understanding, and what needs to be understood when taking into account compromise, especially the relationship between Trinidad and Tobago, is that we understand that the economic situation is not good, we understand that cuts had to be done throughout Ministries and across Trinidad and Tobago. And, as such, we in Tobago are committed in this relationship to also accepting those cuts and compromising with the central government of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] in terms of accepting the allocation that has been given.

I just wanted to go quickly to indicate, Madam President, that even though these cuts would have happened, we still received 4.4 per cent of the total expenditure [*Desk thumping*] and I just want to say that it is not because the Minister of Finance tried to give Tobago less money or anything untoward in that regard. He gave us the same 4.4 per cent that we had last year. It is the mathematical equation that ended up with us receiving less money from the Dispute Resolution Commission that indicated we must receive a percentage of the total expenditure. So what would have happened is that the total expenditure of the entire country would have been reduced, and still receiving the 4.4 per cent resulted in less money being received in regard to Tobago.

And so, Madam President, in regard to that, I just want to say that I must commend and thank the Minister of Finance for maintaining 4.4 per cent and we understand [*Desk thumping*] it is the total expenditure that was reduced, and therefore, that is why we would have received less money. But, I am speaking in regard to creating opportunities and I want to point out that the Minister of Finance—despite Tobago actually receiving less money, opportunities would have still been created on top of what we received. Those opportunities speak to the port in Toco, they speak to the refurbishment of the old terminal whilst speaking to building a new terminal in Tobago, it speaks to incentives such as the agro processing incentive put forward by the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to the Minister of Finance. You would know that Tobago has a large agro processing sector, and therefore, what I can say, because of these extra opportunities on top of that, I can say here today with the broadest smiles on my face and the proudest of beats in my heart, that Tobago must now prepare for profit, Tobago must now prepare for prosperity, Tobago must now prepare for progress. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, young persons in Tobago who make the best punches ever can now utilize this opportunity and prepare for prosperity; the young person in Tobago who makes a childhood comfort food, chow, and has diversified her portfolio in regard to producing eggs as well must now utilize the opportunity and prepare for prosperity; [*Desk thumping*] the young woman in Tobago who takes a Tobago confectionary that every Trinidadian ask for when they come to Tobago by way of “bene ball” and can take that and make custom items out of it, can spell Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago with it, must now utilize the opportunity and prepare for prosperity [*Desk thumping*] and that again I must tell the Minister of Finance, thank you very much and Tobago thank you.

Madam President, as I wrap up, as I know time is running short, I just want to say that as we move forward in 2017, we must work together. The founding fathers gave us four words that would have guided us throughout any dark situation, whether it be a precipice or otherwise, that would give us that guiding light to lead us out: “Together we aspire, together we achieve.” Once we work together all is left to be said, no matter what we do in this Chamber, we do for the betterment of Trinidad and Tobago, and all I have to say is May God bless our nation. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Solomon. [*Desk thumping*] No, no. At this stage I will suspend the sitting for 10 minutes.

8.54 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

9.05 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Madam President: Sen. Solomon.

Sen. Daniel Solomon: Thank you, Madam President. It is indeed an honour to join in this debate and it is with great humility I hope to make some submissions of value on this 2017 debate. Madam President, before I begin my discourse I have to

say with some quiet bemusement, I listened to my hon. friend, Sen. Vice-President De Freitas, and I am glad that he has returned. We do enjoy a good relationship outside of the Parliament, but it is with great reluctance that I feel obliged to mention a few of his points and set the record straight and remind the young Senator that he is the Vice-President of the Senate and, as such, he should try to exercise some degree of impartiality and not descend too much into the realms of attacks and political toing and froing.

Madam President: Sen. Solomon, I do think though that you are imputing improper motives to the Vice-President. So try and put your contribution, put it across in another way.

Sen. D. Solomon: Indeed, Madam, I understand that—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Senator: [*Inaudible*] when he is not there. When he is there he is on the Chair.

HSen. D. Solomon: I appreciate that, but during the course of this debate—and I do not mean to impute any improper motives to my friend. I do, however, think that there would be times when he is sitting in this debate and will be ruling over the Members of this Senate, and therefore, I was a bit disappointed to see him go into that degree, but I will leave it at that.

In terms of the misinformation that was coming from the Vice-President, I think that it is important to note when he spoke about the value for money and the laptop programme, he seemed to spend about 15 minutes of his time speaking about the laptop programme and that it was not value for money. He spent a mere three minutes talking about Tobago and that under this PNM administration value for money was a prime objective. Well, we should be proud—should we not—that under the PNM administration in Tobago there were a number of projects that cost hundreds of millions of dollars and no value for money there.

If I could refer to the library complex started in 2003 at \$30 million, but by 2013 was carrying a cost of \$300 million [*Desk thumping*]*—value for money under the PNM; the financial complex again in Tobago started in 2002 at a cost of \$30 million, but by 2012 was carrying a cost of \$116 million— value for money; the Shaw Park Cultural Centre started in 2006 at a cost \$196 million, but by 2016 was carrying a cost of \$1 billion—Tobago value for money under the PNM; and then come into this Chamber and boast that under the PNM administration that young people in Tobago should now be overjoyed and happy that they can sell “toolum” and sell juice—[Interruption]*

Sen. Ameen: “Bene balls.”

Sen. D. Solomon:*—and “bene balls” because they have spent over a billion dollars in over-expenditure on projects. Value for money? If they had taken one over-budgeted, let us say, the library complex, that alone could have paid for the entire laptop programme and put all the laptops for the children in the nation, Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]*

9.10 p.m.

And then to come into this Senate and say that we did a project for seating at Las Cuevas as though that is some accomplishment under the PNM administration when you are facing dire situations? That is diversification? That is attracting tourism? Or you are going to boast that under this PNM administration there was a brilliant idea to move the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries out of Port of Spain and free up that land? It has not even happened yet. Madam President, he has accused this Opposition of fearmongering and we all know that the PNM are, in fact, the ultimate “fearmongers”. Need I refer to the emailgate where false allegations were made against the Prime Minister, the Minister of National Security, of the most horrendous nature and as yet not been proven. Total

invention, total fearmongering.

Now when we move on and the Vice-President refers to the CEPEP programme, does he know that \$106 million has been cut and that thousands of people are going to lose their job? That is not something to boast about. That is a serious, serious situation. A lot of people are going to be losing their jobs and it is not a fact that we must boast about it. We have got to find alternative employment; we have got to create economic development; we have got to create jobs. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, he then went on to talk about GATE and I have to ask the Vice-President: is it that he discriminates against persons and supports persons not getting an education over 50 years? Is that—[*Interruption*]

Madam President: Sen. Solomon, that language “is it that he discriminates”, that is what you just said? Just rephrase that for me, please. That is quite unparliamentary.

Sen. D. Solomon: Is it that the young Vice-President agrees—[*Interruption*]

Madam President: And Sen. Solomon, please, there is no need to refer to the Vice-President as the young Vice-President. He is the Vice-President of the Senate.

Sen. D. Solomon: Apologies, Madam President. The Vice-President, no disrespect intended, I assure you. Is it that he agrees with persons over 50 years not being allowed to get GATE? That is all I am asking.

Madam President, I am joining the debate at a time when the debate has been concluded in the other place and the nation is yet no clearer, confident or comfortable that Trinidad and Tobago is being managed by a vision or a plan, or is not even being operated with some sort of co-ordinated intervention by this Government. What we do have is a nation that is suffering from a great deal more

panic, more despair; sharper concerns over stability and viability of our businesses; growing worry by unemployment, persons are losing their jobs rapidly and the persons who are unemployed are worried about finding jobs. Crime is at an all-time high. Kidnapping has resumed under this PNM Government. Murders, the streets are awash with blood. The murders are the highest that has ever been recorded. Crime against children have been the most disgusting that we have experienced as a nation and we have even seen crimes against the elderly. This is where our nation is at.

Madam President, we have a nation that is living in fear as Divali and Christmas approach. It is a nation of investors who are nervous about the money they have already invested, fearful of investing anymore, worried about the implications of a new dispensation of fiscal taxes. VAT here, VAT there, import duties. It is not fiscal tightening, Madam President, what we have here is economic strangulation. [*Desk thumping*]

If we are truly to debate this Bill, is it built on generating growth? No, it is not. Is it built on generating sustainable development? No, it is not. Is it built on putting our resources to work to generate greater wealth? No, it is not. Is it about keeping children in school and higher learning? No it, is not. Is it about diversification away from oil and gas? No, it is not. Protecting poor and vulnerable? No, it is not. And I have to agree with my colleague, Sen. Mahabir, that there is not enough in this budget to defend the poor and in particular the—
[*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, if the budget is not built on any of these factors, then why is it here? What does it actually achieve? You see what the Government has actually done is we find ourselves, after 13 months of this Keith Rowley administration, is a declining economy, shrinking gross domestic product and a

Government that cannot generate new economic activity, and what it does instead is to tax, tax, tax. In other words, the Government has chosen to shore up its revenue by taking more from the people in order to enhance their income.

The Minister of Finance said in the 2016 Budget that the IMF team were here and certain advices were given and I will list them quickly:

- Implementing a property taxation system;
- Broadening the VAT base;
- Increasing excise taxes;
- Increasing personal income tax;
- Increasing corporation tax;
- Eliminating the fuel subsidies;
- Reducing other subsidies and transfers;
- Introducing wage and hiring restraint mechanisms.

And that, Madam President, is exactly what they have done. [*Desk thumping*]
There is no need for the IMF to come to Trinidad and the promises given by this Government that they will never come to Trinidad are hollow when in fact they are here already and they are taking the measures of the IMF. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Mark: They are here already and they are advancing on the TTRA.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Oh sorry, Ma'am.

Madam President: Sen. Solomon does not need an echo.

Sen. Mark: Sorry, sorry, Madam President, my apologies.

Sen. D. Solomon: Madam President, "A Blueprint for Transformation..." is what this is called. Blueprint for transformation? We, on this side, do not think so. This is not a blueprint for transformation, this is transforming the nation into a

recession-driven nightmare scenario and there is no way out.

Madam President, I want to just touch on 7 per cent online tax. It is our view that this tax will kill small and medium-sized businesses. You see, I am not clear as to what consultation or what data drives the decisions of this Minister of Finance. A 7 per cent online tax would affect small businesses who are actually buying stock, buying goods online. They perhaps cannot get access to foreign exchange as easily as the large conglomerates and they can purchase the goods online and support their small business, whereas the larger businesses can order in bulk and they are coming in containers. So what exactly are we doing to these small and medium-sized businesses by putting on them a further 7 per cent online tax? Well, you are stifling them and you are enriching the conglomerates [*Desk thumping*] because you are putting the small and medium-sized businesses out of commission, and this is exactly what they did with the second-hand car dealers. The same sort of mechanism, the same sort of measures. This is an elitist PNM Government and this is an elitist tax, just as it will put a lot of businesses out of commission just as they did the second-hand car dealers.

Madam President, in terms of tourism, the PNM manifesto, which is now Government policy, did not even have a chapter to deal with tourism. They still do not have a chapter dealing with tourism. There is a vacuum of ideas. There is no cohesive policy or plan or vision of how we are going generate tourism in this beautiful Republic of ours, Trinidad and Tobago, and this is a problem that we are having. Now, I wish that this Government will actually articulate a proper vision because tourism is a massive foreign exchange earner. It actually is the largest employer in the world and it is the fastest growing industry in the world, and to ignore it would be tragic and not to give it the resources to kick-start the tourism sector would be tragic.

Now, a little known fact is that tourism is in fact the fastest growing industry in this region, so this Caribbean destination is, in fact, the fastest growing in the world, and the Caribbean recorded a growth of 7 per cent last year, and just a fraction of that, when you compare that to the world average, was 4.2 per cent. That means 28.7 million people came to this region and they spent over US \$30 billion. Now, unfortunately, Trinidad and Tobago is lacking in that but that shows what is out there and that is available if we could just get our marketing right, get our strategy right and have a plan on how to capture that market because the Caribbean is, in fact, the most dependent region on tourism as well. But what we have here is a complete abandonment of the tourism sector, a “vacuousness” of a plan.

Last year, the PNM announced a tourism growth strategy and that, again, articulated more questions rather than answers. Under the Partnership Government, there were several clusters to achieve diversification. There was sport tourism, and we successfully completed the Wallerfield motor racing circuit which were resurfaced, the National Cycling Centre, the National Tennis Centre, the National Aquatic Centre. We poised ourselves to become the epicentre for sport tourism in the Caribbean. [*Desk thumping*] We also focused on medical tourism and that is where the Couva Children’s Hospital would have come in, the teaching hospital in south. And unfortunately, we all know that they would not open the Couva Children’s Hospital out of political spite and as a result, the children of Trinidad and Tobago and medical tourism is at a zero.

Madam President, we have discussed this before, we have raised it previously but there is a dire need for support for Tobago, not just in terms of selling “toolum” and selling juice. It is about creating proper circumstances for Tobagonians to live and prosper. Now, fishing is a big activity in Tobago and yet

still, the Government cannot provide a proper place for Tobago fishermen to get gas for their boats, to outhaul their boats, to support them in their endeavours. So what you see, you see people in Tobago gas stations, fishermen, with trucks and pickups filling up their diesel and their gas in the gas station, and then going down to the beach, literally the beach, and siphoning this gas into their engines, and the gas is spilling all over, it is affecting the ecosystem. Then they have to rough it and tote the boat manually into the water, “then they go fishing, then they come back”. When they have to outhaul, there is no facility for outhaul. The boats are actually—manually 12 men coming to pull out a pirogue and then they have these wooden stilts that actually balance the boat and that is how they do their outhauling. And they clean the underneath of the boat using chemicals and that goes straight into the Buccoo Reef and destroys the ecosystem. And you want to tell me that that is a caring PNM Government? That is not caring. We have heard that they are going to do marinas, we do not see any action. We hear a lot of talk but there is no delivery and this is where the PNM falls short, no delivery.

Madam President, there is no point talking about tourism or diversification or getting people to visit our wonderful twin-island republic when the crime situation is out of control. Now, how can you invite persons to come to your country and when you go on their travel advisories, see what they tell their citizens? And if I can refer to the UK travel advisory:

“There is a high level of gang related violent crime in Trinidad, particularly in the inner city neighbourhoods east of Port of Spain’s city centre, Laventille, Morvant and Barataria. This crime tends to occur within local communities but can sometimes affect visitors. A British national was murdered after being robbed at gunpoint in the Mt. D’Or area...”—as late as—“10 April 2016.”

And it goes on and it goes on:

“Always drive with your windows...” down.

Do not take taxis or maxi-taxis. That is the UK travel advisory which is used by a lot of Europeans as well. The American travel advisory, and we know that Sandals depends a lot on North American traffic, says:

“...Violent crimes, including assault, kidnapping for ransom, sexual assault, and murder have involved expatriate residents and tourists, including U.S. citizens. The perpetrators of many of these crimes have not been arrested. It is highly recommended that female visitors and residents avoid traveling alone, particularly at night or in secluded areas.

In Tobago, violent crime is an issue, including attacks on expatriate residents and tourists in their residences, many of which involve the use of machetes. There have been reports of home invasions in the Mt. Irvine/Buccoo Bay, and Bacolet areas, and robberies occurring at the waterfalls and on isolated beaches in Tobago where visitors are not in a group.”

And it goes on and it goes on.

So, Madam President, the point is that this is the travel advisories of our originating destinations. This is where we rely on persons to bring in foreign exchange. If we cannot change the crime situation, we are faced with a dearth, a lack of persons coming to Trinidad and Tobago. Why would they come here? We are competing against other nations that are safe, no travel advisories, five-star hotels, good quality of life, good tourism, good services.

Madam President, we need to solve this crime problem.

9.25 p.m.

Now, Madam President, it has been said that we do need a five-star resort and that we rely on tourists to fill these five stars. I want to turn now to the

Sandals Resort. The Opposition is in favour of any initiative that will serve the people of this beloved country. However, be warned, all that shines is not gold. We have been shown a slew of figures in relation to this Sandals Resort and again it begs more questions than answers, and I want to make it very clear that I want to have these questions answered before anything else moves forward, in terms of this Sandals investment.

What is the dollar value of this Sandals investment? Is the Government going to be a major partner or a minor partner? If Government is to be the major partner, why was the search for a partner not transparent, equitable and objective? Sandals is not the only successful hotel chain operating in the Caribbean space or even in the international space. In fact, they may not be the most apt for our needs as the value chain is certainly very decreased. How much cash equity will Sandals be injecting? What is the total number of rooms to be constructed? We have heard 750 being bandied about.

Now, if you take those figures that a capital cost benchmark for a four-star to five-star resort hotel, usually development costs about \$400,000 to \$500,000 per room. The project would have an estimated capital cost of between \$2 billion to \$2.5 billion. What are the room rates and hotel occupancy required for this project and how do they compare historically to what has been achieved in Tobago? Now, let us not forget the Tobago Hilton failed because they could not deliver the room rates and the occupancy required for profitability. [*Desk thumping*] Hilton eventually sold its stake for US \$1.

So I ask today where are the pre-feasibility studies and the feasibility studies that can show that this project can in fact turn a profit? Is the Magdalena full? As I understand it, it is never full to capacity. So what are we going to do to fill this proposed Sandals resort?

If the room count is 750, the estimated of 1,500 permanent jobs of the Minister of Finance is uninformed. As we need to have three to four staff, that would mean per room, which would leave between 2,250 and 3,000 persons. Now where will these workers come from? Unemployment in Tobago is at 3 per cent. So they certainly cannot come from Tobago. Will Sandals be plundering the staff of the existing hotels and thus impair these businesses that families spent a lifetime building? [*Desk thumping*] Or is the intention to import workers? We do not know the answers to these questions but these are pertinent questions.

How will the service quality challenges that have been the bane of Tobago tourism for decades be overcome? A situation created and sustained by the THA through its provision of jobs to a wide swath of Tobago labour force making them unreceptive to committing to the rigours of a quality delivery service hotel owner and guest. Now, do not take it from me, the Tobago Hotel Association has said that one of their greatest challenges is actually getting staff, getting workers to assist in their hotels, and they represent 102 businesses and 95 per cent of the tourism product in Tobago. So one has to listen to what they say to understand that they actually find themselves in position where they are competing with the public sector for workers as a private sector. So how can we be weaning ourselves, as we are told we are doing, off the Government dependency syndrome when in fact what we are doing is competing? It makes no sense.

Now, a large segment of Sandals guests is from North America and there is no direct airlift of note into Tobago from North America and tourists dislike destinations where they have to disembark with luggage. So all the flights that come from USA and Canada are of little value to the Sandals Hotel.

So, Sandals is an all-inclusive hotel. A significant proportion of their operational inputs are premium products, not produced in this country, from

furniture and fittings, to linens, to toiletries, to food and beverage. The Minister of Finance needs to clarify what the net foreign exchange usage of this project will be.

So, of great national importance will be: is this project to be handed over to the THA, which has shown itself fundamentally incapable of executing large capital projects? As I stated before, I need not remind this august Chamber of the Scarborough Hospital, which skyrocketed 500 per cent over budget, from \$135 million to \$735 million, and the Shaw Park Cultural Complex, which I mentioned earlier, which went from \$149 million to \$1 billion. So again 500 per cent over budget. Value for money? PNM style.

We need to understand that once this project secures fiscal incentives from the Tourism Development Act it will enjoy a seven-year corporation tax holiday. Capital allowances and accelerated depreciation, which when aggregated would mean this project would not yield one cent in taxes for 12 to 15 years from the commencement of operations.

So, let us say it takes three to five years to construct, it has been a year and something that the PNM has been speaking about it, nothing has yet happened, no firm plans, so give them another year to finally get a plan and let us say construction takes three years. We are not going to see taxes for another 20 years? Is that value for money? [*Desk thumping*]

So, if I could just sum up the questions and the issues, and we are not saying that it is not an appropriate project but we need answers. We need to know what the arrangement is; what the deal is.

So, the Sandals project may not create significant employment for Tobagonians. We have already discussed that. It has the potential to seriously impair existing hotel operations in Tobago. It may deliver little value-added for

Trinidad and Tobago. There is no existing airlift to support bringing guests to the hotel. No tax revenues for at least 15 years, perhaps more, and an arm of the Government may be charged with its execution that has a dizzying and dismal failure and record of incompetence and no value for money. So what is this? Is this going to be some sort of version of the World GTL project; another multi-billion dollar junk pile?

Now, one final thought on Sandals. Who has done the due diligence on Sandals? I want to remind this House and the people of Trinidad and Tobago that in 2013, Sandals paid a fine of \$12million to the Turks and Caicos Government to resolve allegations of bribery of Government officials and money laundering. Maybe therein lie the answers to know what qualified them but what prequalified them for this PNM administration to so hurriedly get into bed with them.

Madam President, this Rowley-led PNM Government has not been doing anything to attract investment and has in fact been doing the reverse. They have been attacking private investors who would have made significant investment during the period of the Partnership administration. Now, whilst there is a need to review and garner a full understanding of these investments in contacts with planning efforts, the present stance and behaviour of this PNM is sending a clear message that Trinidad and Tobago is not attractive for local and private investment. In fact, we are saying that the behaviour of this Government sends a clear signal that this country is unsafe to invest. With scarce resources there are other options where private investments can pursue outside of Trinidad and Tobago.

So, Madam President, we look at situations like what has happened in the Invader's Bay project, where a major investment is being shut down, one that could create 10 per cent of the GDP. Now they talk a good talk. They talk

diversification. They talk all of these matters but they do not actually deliver it.

Madam President, another example is what actually happened with the Chaguaramas Development Authority. The past administration, the Partnership Government, successfully managed, in the northwest peninsula, to attract \$2.5 billion worth of private sector development into projects in Chaguaramas, under a public/private partnership agreement. This is the largest investment in the non-oil and gas sector, diversification [*Desk thumping*] featuring a regional and entertainment hub, estimated to generate over 10,000 jobs in the hospitality and entertainment sector. All lands are leased and after the leased term, usually 30 years, the infrastructure and the improvements made return to CDA and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Now I dare say that this is more than the PNM has managed to attract investment for the entire country since they have been in power.

There was a vision, a plan, dragon boat centres, vendors' booths, golf academy at night, hotels, restaurants, boardwalks, safari zoo that even included elephants. Now, all of these investments support each other and they, together would make the whole. Now, what we have seen is that entire PNM administration seems to be focused on a national tourism policy that is all surrounded around the Sandals investment. Well, under the Partnership we secured hotels, eco-resorts, boardwalks, far more than one project.

Now, Madam President, if you think, for instance the zip line, the first that is done in this region, the zip line was done by a foreign company that came in to do the training in safety requirements, and now 63 people completely employed from the fence line community run that establishment; highly successful establishment, [*Desk thumping*] first of its kind.

The boardwalk, well it speaks for itself. It is now safe. You go down there at nights, there is CCTV cameras, emergency buttons, police headquarters, new

police bicycles, but that has, of course, been purposely deteriorated under this PNM administration. Where is the innovation? Where is the creativity? Where is the diversification? These have not been done by the PNM.

Then, in comes the PNM one year later and they say they declare all leases null and void, everything illegal. Why? Because they are not in keeping with the 1974 plan that they did “40-something” years ago. You are telling the people of Trinidad and Tobago that you are stopping all these projects and declaring them null and void because they are not in keeping with a 45-year-old plan that the PNM is clinging to? Highly unreasonable. And what it reeks of is political spite, because this does not help anybody. You cannot declare it illegal because you are not judge and jury and it is not illegal because the 1974 plan in fact was overridden by the 1988 plan according to their one PNM CDA board and that leasing policy talks about the 1988 plan. Now, under the Partnership Government, there was a master development plan for Chaguaramas and a national spatial development plan for the country and that did go to Cabinet.

So, Madam President, let us take an example. What is legal for PNM is illegal for everybody else. So you come and you say everything is illegal, all the leases are illegal, because they are not in keeping with the 1974 plan and then the first RFP you put out as a board, unbelievably, it is for a hotel up in tracking station, which is clearly in breach of the 1974 plan. So you are actually acting illegally. I mean, it is preposterous but that is what happened. Then you say the anchor project, the water park, which is one of the anchor projects that will draw in persons and support all the other projects, you say that is illegal because it is not in keeping with the 1974 plan. But when you actually look at the 1974 plan, that area is actually designated for water recreational activities.

9.40 p.m.

Now, the real clincher in this thing is that when you look at the records, the PNM had actually allocated a water park to a company called Sogedis right at that—*[Interruption]*

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

Sen. D. Solomon:—on the same location. So what is legal for the PNM is illegal for everybody else. *[Laughter]* Now, they say that it is no value for money, illegal land grab. That water park that they had awarded at the same spot was for \$87,500. The rent, once this water park is built out, would be \$5 million a year, plus you are creating hundreds of jobs, but because we delivered it, and the Partnership Government delivered these massive projects and small projects, it is deemed illegal, and out of political spite, they are going to try and shut down these projects. So they wage war on the investors.

It is the same way the Chag hotel, which we managed to get an investor, they are trying to shut that down. It does not make any sense for a country to preach economic diversification, to preach job creation, to talk about getting investment and making it secure and providing incentives, when the minute that those projects are actually on the way, the investment is created, the diversification is happening right before your eyes, that you turn around and the Government wages war when they should be welcoming them, that makes no sense. What message are you sending out to the international community? You are sending out that it is unsafe, that the political will can change and then your agreements and your leases and your joint venture and your money that you have invested is no longer safe. That is why, what I am saying is that the PNM is not genuinely interested in the people of Trinidad and Tobago. *[Desk thumping]* If these projects are allowed, the entire Carenage and half of Diego Martin could be employed,

[*Desk thumping*] 10,000 jobs created. [*Desk thumping*] Two and a half billion dollars' worth of infrastructure will revert back to the people of Trinidad and Tobago after 30 years.

Now, we as a Partnership Government, we did not just focus on south Trinidad as the propaganda that PNM tried to spread. We focused everywhere. We did projects in the Diego Martin. For years the residents of Diego Martin were suffering. They were sitting in traffic. They could not get anywhere, so we built a Diego Martin Highway and it is a tremendous difference. [*Desk thumping*] Diego Martin has been suffering, the youths had nowhere to go. We built a state-of-the-art MIC facility, where they train thousands of young men and women in the trades. Is there a problem with that? No. We put a Carenage health facility in Carenage. [*Desk thumping*]

The problem is that the Partnership Government did more for the residents of Diego Martin and Port of Spain than this PNM Government. [*Desk thumping*] What is more offensive is that this in their Prime Minister's constituency. [*Desk thumping*] Do you think the PNM Government went down to Siparia and got two and a half billion dollars' worth of investment for anything? No. So what I am trying to say is that we need—[*Interruption*] this Government needs to have continuity, needs to honour the work of the Partnership Government, and do some continuity. [*Desk thumping*] Stop operating on political spite and victimization and pure—that is not in keeping with what the people of Trinidad and Tobago deserve.

Madam President, if it is that you are serious about economic development, job creation, diversification, then you need to hold hands with the private sector because you do not have the money to do it. The Government does not have the money to do it. They need to form proper public/private partnerships that are

transparent and value for money that would help create this. And sending the messages out to the general public that this is not in keeping with what this Government is about, then you will chase economic development away, not only locally but internationally, and that is not acceptable. The people of Trinidad and Tobago deserve better. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Local Government and Rural Development (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): Madam President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Friday, October 21, 2016, that is tomorrow, at 1.30 p.m. [*Crosstalk and interruption*] My apologies, at 10.30 p.m.—10.30 a.m. [*Crosstalk*] My apologies, Madam President. Let me repeat that.

I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Friday, October 21, 2016, that is tomorrow, at 10.30 a.m.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 9.45 p.m.