

**Address by Senator The Honourable Allyson West,
National Budget 2023 Senate Debate,
Thursday 13 October, 2022**

As I rise to contribute to the debate on the national budget, I must add my sincere appreciation to the Hon. Minister of Finance and to congratulate him for his steady-handed stewardship in guiding the country's finances over the last seven years. I also wish to thank the Minister of Planning and Development for assisting us in securing across the GoRTT (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago) a PSIP (Public Sector Investment Programme) budget that is \$2b more than it was last year. This will allow us the opportunity to really focus on our development programme, which

should go a long way in stimulating the economy, and assisting Trinidad and Tobago to continue its road to recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and other disasters impacting us and the rest of the world.

As a government, our frame of reference is that our country, like virtually every other one in the family of nations, is facing increasingly complex challenges in governance. The exact manifestation of these challenges may vary from country to country, but there are certain underlying characteristics and, I venture to suggest, that for small countries like ours, these have an intensity and an urgency that is not as immediate in bigger countries, with more resources of space, population, and wealth.

The key manifestation of this complexity is that citizens in every country have rising expectations of their governments and are making increasing demands on them. As the population is exposed to more information; as it sees the threats in the modern world - crime, climate change, international insecurity, food shortages, rising prices - the need for answers, for a greater sense of personal security and for the security of their families is increasing.

Madam President, in this environment, people want quick answers and immediate solutions to their problems. And this is very understandable.

In this regard, it bears repeating that the vision that Prime Minister Rowley has articulated and that those of us who have the honour to serve in his Cabinet share, is that we cannot be distracted by shiny, flashy objects; by the “fad de jour”. Governance in this time of increasing complexity requires astute, level-headed and visionary focus.

Madam President, an important factor that we must always bear in mind is the enduring reality that as a small open country we are subject to forces that we do not control - supply chain interruptions, underproduction of basic foods and other necessities, increasing global demands as the world continues to emerge from Covid to name a few. These lead to scarcities and inflation.

Another one - The Russian aggression in Ukraine has fuelled an increase in energy prices, which has given us a bit of fiscal breathing space.

But that sword cuts both ways, Madam President, because as quickly as energy prices rose, they can fall. That is why we recognise that we cannot fall into the trap and squander this modest windfall. Rather, we have to balance relief with policies that speak to and contribute to sustainability.

So, some of the questions that we have to address are

- How can we balance satisfying our needs with the limited resources that we possess?
- How do we ensure that we manage our expenditure but at the same time remain mindful of those at and below the poverty line?

- How do we limit our debt as a country while satisfying the needs of our citizens?
- How do we protect and secure our future while seeking to meet present needs?

One of the hard lessons of economics and of life is that unless one has unlimited resources, it is impossible to satisfy all needs. And there are a slew of factors limiting our resources. This confluence of circumstances requires us to prioritise, to have a plan, to successfully implement and to make and enforce tough, often unpopular, decisions.

Our approach to the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates this administrations' fundamental approach:

- We clearly demonstrated that our priorities were, and continue to be, first, protecting lives and livelihoods while at the same time charting a course for a sustainable future. Post pandemic, we continue to seek to provide relief to our most vulnerable members while at the same time seeking

to create opportunities for our youth and for the future.

- We have a plan. It was Vision 2030. It is now Vision 2030 as enhanced by the Roadmap to Recovery committee report.
- We are implementing that plan – a significant part of it being digitalisation of the public service and the country.
- And while many governments avoid making tough decisions as it impacts their popularity and therefore puts the next election at risk, this government has demonstrated that its first priority is not about winning elections, but about securing the future of T&T. So, where there are tough decisions to be made for the preservation of the country's future, we are prepared to make them. Senator Mark is still bleating about Petrotrin. It's like he can't get over the fact that we dealt with Petrotrin, we dealt with the debt in a way that didn't cripple the economy, we provided for the

workers and we now have two profit-making entities that are not a drain on the State, but contribute to our income. So, this government is not afraid to make tough decisions and face the bleating by the likes of Senator Mark and his cohorts, because we know that the right-thinking citizens of this great land, which God has blessed with so much, will listen to and understand the rationale for those decisions.

Tough decisions

- Reduction of the gas subsidy;
- Reduction of the subsidy on air and sea fares to Tobago.

In the context of limited resources, the question of balance comes into sharp focus. In seeking to balance our income and expenditure we will always have to answer the question “what is the opportunity cost of doing x over y”. Some economic purists say that subsidies and transfers are a drain on the economy and should be avoided at all costs. We are not of that view.

We recognise that some subsidies and transfers are desirable. However, they have to be manageable in the context of the economic circumstances of the country. Economic sustainability and viability in the medium to long term must be always borne in mind.

In the case of fuel subsidy, we recognise the need to slowly transition our citizens to other forms of transportation that don't require as much fuel such as hybrid and electric vehicles. To facilitate this transition, we have removed taxes on hybrid vehicles and electric cars. Over time we should see the movement to such vehicles. At one point the subsidies for fuels amounted to 7 billion dollars. What is the opportunity cost of spending money on subsidies for fuels? Perhaps we can use that money to further invest in our young people, or healthcare, or fixing the roads for example.

Senator Viera spoke about the lack of hope. Reason – the naysayers. “The country crashing, failed State, depleting forex resources, Chicken Little – the sky is falling!!!!” But rest assured that your government continues to rally, to work in your best interest and to take the country forward.

We have tried to provide relief from these adjustments to the most vulnerable:

- \$1000 grant;
- Increase in personal allowance;
- School-to-Work Apprenticeship allowance;
- Increase in VAT registration threshold;
- Housing and Village improvement programme;
- Gate adjustment.

Other incentives to stimulate the economy:

- Manufacturing tax credit;
- Energy investment tax credit;
- SPT reduced rates;

- Electronic payment providers and e-money issuers tax credit;
- Tax rate reduction on deep water PPT profits from 35-30%;
- Extended tax-exempt period for approved small companies;
- Renewable energy VAT waiver for manufacturers.

Our citizens remain our top priority and the allocations in this year's budget demonstrate that - Education, Health, National Security, Social Grants and Works and Transportation. We recognise that these investments are critical to relief for and the advancement of our people.

Even as we currently benefit from higher oil and gas prices, we must recognise that nothing lasts forever. Therefore, we must invest in our future and we are doing so in various ways, not the least of which being the allocation being provided to MYDNS.

In this regard permit me to address an issue raised by Senator Seepersad when she said that GoRTT is doing little or nothing to address students with special needs and that this important cohort of our population is being ignored. Madam President, let me disabuse the Senator of this misconception. We are very mindful of our students and citizens with special needs and the relevant Ministers have programmes and plans in place to treat with them.

Let me outline some of the things we are doing and plan to do in this regard:

- The budget for children with special needs of - \$15m – total;
- Money for school repairs;
- Funds identified for private special schools;
- SSSD programme (Student Support Services);
- Staff costs not included – for approximately 700 officers including clinical psychologists, special

education instructors, developmental specialists, student aides etc - partnership with OJT to supply student aides;

- Planned expansion of the Wharton Patrick School this fiscal.

Can more be done? Undoubtedly. **But rest assured that our special needs children are in our sights and receiving our attention and we are determined to continue to put things in place to ensure that they are not left behind.**

It is in light of the all of this, Madam President, that my team and I at the Ministry of Public Administration have been approaching our work in transforming the Public Service to meet these growing needs and expectations of our citizens in a dynamic and rapidly changing operating environment, an environment in

which, while we control some things, there are so many factors that we have absolutely no control over but the impact and effect of which we have to cater for.

The Legal Framework for Public Service

Transformation

In going about the required transformation of the public service, the objective cannot be to change things just for the sake of changing them; the ultimate goal has to be the provision of an improved service to the public. The citizens deserve no less. This cannot be achieved by running *helter skelter* after shiny objects. An example of this is the much touted “work-from-home” policy. If you listen to some commentators, it appears that this can be done by the wave of a magic wand or by

wishing it to be so. While we recognise that work-from-home has the potential to positively impact on public service productivity, citizen engagement and satisfaction and other factors, we are also aware that if not properly executed, giving due consideration to all the relevant factors, the unintended consequences could be nothing short of disastrous.

But, Madam President, we are not just talking about consequences here, we are also talking about processes, defined and fixed legal and regulatory issues. Madam President, in this place last year speaking on the Appropriation Bill for 2022, I had cause to refer to the fundamental constraints that we face in addressing serious public service transformation in Trinidad and

Tobago. I really must remind this House and the wider national community that we have a constitutionally divided Public Service governance system.

And let me remind the public of the import and implications of these arrangements. As Minister of Public Administration, I have a gazetted mandate and responsibility for the transformation and modernisation of the Public Service, but even in respect of that overarching objective, the Service Commissions and the Personnel Department have responsibilities and as Minister, I have only indirect influence over these agencies. More specifically for issues related to recruitment and selection and performance management, no minister has any direct control. This

divided governance structure will impact the structure and implementation of a “work-from-home” policy.

Last year, I quoted from a very timely judgement from the Honourable Justice Frank Seepersad, which had been delivered a few days before my contribution at that time. It bears repeating today. The Learned Judge said:

The Court appreciates that the PSC may be inundated with paperwork and constrained by the lack of human and financial resources.

However, given the current size of the Public Service and the plethora of issues in relation to promotions and disciplinary matters which fall to be determined in 2021, the antiquated post-independence supervisory structure which

defines Service Commissions and their fitness for purpose, may require re-evaluation.

Concerns as to the inefficiency and lack of effectiveness of Service Commissions have and continue to engage the attention of the Court and within the recent past, issues in relation to these bodies have garnered significant national attention. It may well be that as a developing society, there is a need to evaluate and assess the utility and relevance of the Service Commissions and more modern management systems may be required.

A Strategic Approach to Human Resource

Management in the Public Service

I will now like to turn, Madam President, to what we have done in the last year to get maximum

movement at this important moment when the need to transform our Public Service is so urgent.

We have divided our transformation work programme in the Public Service into two broad categories. Those areas over which as a government we have full control and those for which we have a shared responsibility with constitutional constraints.

We have taken an overarching approach of strategic human resource management. We have asked ourselves what is the best way that the Government can deliver the services that our citizens expect and so rightly deserve.

Madam President, we recognised that there is a lifecycle for a public officer as there is a lifecycle for any employee. We recognise too that if we want to get maximum benefit from the investment that the country makes in its public servants, all the components that affect the lifecycle must be operating optimally. At the same time, we realise that it is not possible to address them all simultaneously. Accordingly, it is necessary to make strategic decisions about what we will tackle and in what sequence and that is what we have been doing at the Ministry.

For reference, the components that affect the public servant lifecycle are:

- Recruitment and selection

- Performance Management
- Learning and Development
- Succession Planning
- Compensation and benefits
- Human Resource Information Services – to ensure that the best services are delivered to the public officers themselves
- HR Data and Analytics – using data to understand the overall effectiveness of the public service and to develop evidence-based policies and management strategies.

In the last year, while scrupulously observing constitutional propriety, we have engaged the service commissions to determine where the responsibilities

intersect and how the work of transforming the public service can be advanced without encroaching on the prerogatives of the respective institutions. This is probably one of the areas that you are damned if you do and damned if you don't, because I well expect that the uninformed and mischievous will try to accuse us of violating the provisions of the constitution.

In pursuing this path for effectiveness, we have reactivated the National Strategic Human Resource Management Council. The Council is made up of the Ministry of Public Administration, the Personnel Department and the Service Commissions Department. These three you will recall are the core agencies that are responsible for the governance of the Public Service in

Trinidad and Tobago. In addition, to these the Council will call upon other government entities to be involved as the need requires.

We have examined the mandate of the Council as originally proposed. The proposed objectives of the Council are:

- i. to achieve cohesion and alignment for HRM across the Public Sector;
- ii. to provide the strategic and policy direction for a more coordinated and effective HRM function;
- iii. to guide the HRM meta strategy by prioritising and appropriately sequencing initiatives, projects and activities as guided by a defined roadmap;
- iv. to monitor the HRM function and meta strategy to ensure desired results;

- v. to provide accountability and transparency of the HRM function and meta strategy through timely and frequent reporting.

Within this framework, all the components of the system will be aware of what the others are doing and how it all fits together. It will also give us the opportunity to respond to changes in this very dynamic environment.

For the Ministry of Public Administration, we have identified some priorities that we will be focusing on in the immediate future and I would now like to touch on them. These are:

- i. Performance management, with particular focus on performance management at the most

senior levels of leadership in the public service;

- ii. Workforce planning;
- iii. Citizen engagement and accountability;
- iv. Capacity development.

Recruitment and Selection

Madam President, repeatedly we hear about the unacceptable number of vacancies in the Public Service. We know that this is as a result, in large part, of the way the system is structured. All first-time appointments in the Public Service must be made by the Public Service Commission. But the Public Service Commission is a part-time body, and this is not a criticism of that body.

It meets once a week to consider applications for every position in the Public Service. A backlog is inevitable.

Efforts were made, Madam President to delegate some of the responsibilities for recruitment to permanent secretaries and heads of department. But if you look at the performance in this regard, we will observe that the responsibilities of delegation have not been taken up in a satisfactory manner. And the fault lies on both sides of the spectrum (e.g the PRES D hire). I venture to suggest that this is a reflection in part of the leadership culture that has developed in the public service over the years. A part of any leadership position is risk-taking; but for whatever reason there seems to be an abundance of caution among our public service

leaders. One of the changes I am going to try to bring about is the creation of a culture of risk assessment and responsible risk taking in our public service leadership. No business can thrive and progress without it. But note that I say risk taking not recklessness. Yes, you may make a wrong decision in an HR matter and the court may decide against you when that decision is challenged. But did you follow all relevant procedures, did you do it for the benefit of the organisation and the clientele it serves. Did the performance of the organisation improve as a result of the action? Then in my humble view, you have done your job.

Performance Management and Leadership of the Public Service

Madam President, in January of this year, with the assistance of the Inter-American Development Bank, the Ministry of Public Administration held a seminar for permanent secretaries, focusing on the leadership required for the transformation of Trinidad and Tobago. At that seminar, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Dr Keith Rowley, shared with permanent secretaries his vision for the Public Service. Permit me to quote from the Prime Minister's address to that audience:

Today, I want us to envision a transformed, digitalised public service:

- A service in which the duty of care our citizens deserve, constitutes its very design and defines every aspect of our work – a harmonised service which acknowledges the challenges our citizens and country face and responds with relevant, impactful and sustainably coherent solutions.
- A service where its institutions are designed and driven to develop the capacity of its workers, to not only be effective leaders and technocrats within the service but to give them the opportunities to excel in academia and the local and global private sectors – we have the very resources and challenges to create a crucible of continuous learning and development to create a cadre of elite professionals in their respective fields.

- A service where it is a source of privilege and pride to be a part of rather than an object of scorn in the eyes of the public.

The Prime Minister ended his address by providing permanent secretaries with the assurance that, “As Prime Minister I want to reaffirm my commitment to partner with you the leaders in the Public Service to achieve our digital transformation and national development goals”.

Madam President at the core of effectiveness and efficiency in any organisation is monitoring and evaluating performance at the institutional and the

individual level. Performance management in any public service is not an easy task.

With the constraints of the governance arrangements in mind, we are determined to address the design of a robust performance management system.

We propose to start with the senior leadership of the Public Service because we believe this will be the most impactful approach as making the leadership tier more accountable will propel them to better manage the troops they lead and on whom they rely to deliver.

It is important to note that there are structural and logistical issues involved in assessing the performance of public sector leadership, especially permanent

secretaries. On a day-to-day basis, permanent secretaries report to and work with ministers. However, in what is really an artificial and illogical reality, there is no role for ministers in the present performance management system, if it can be called that. The only position that has an input in the performance, for the record, of permanent secretaries, the Chief Personnel Officer and the Director of Personnel Administration is the Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister.

But Madam President it is even more intriguing that the Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister conducts this exercise in his capacity as Head of the Public Service. However, there is no position called “Head of the Public Service”. In collaboration with the

Public Service Commission and the Personnel

Department we intend to address these anomalies. We are targeting the design and implementation of a robust performance management system for senior public officers before the end of this fiscal year, including rationalising the situation of the “Head of the Public Service”, subject of course to Cabinet approval.

In the first meeting of the National SHRM Council, we had a preliminary discussion on this important issue and we agreed in principle that the performance management system must be multi-layered with input from the respective minister and the “Head of the Public Service”.

Madam President, in the last fiscal year we also partnered with the Inter-American Development Bank to conduct a training needs assessment or TNA of the Public Service. Some six thousand public officers participated in this survey. This has provided us with a robust data set that will inform evidence-based demand-driven training. We will supplement the results of the TNA with a survey of permanent secretaries and heads of department to gather their perspective from a more institutional standpoint.

Madam President, the information gathered from these exercises will allow us to design new curricula for developing the capacity of public officers to deliver a higher quality of service to our citizens. Moreover, it is

our intention to use information technology as a force multiplier in both the design and delivery of training for the public service.

We have also embarked on a programme for the modernisation of the Public Service Academy, which is the principal vehicle for in-service training in the Public Service, the intention being to provide a more effective platform for training interventions.

Accountability to Citizens

Madam President, we are all aware that our citizens very often have concerns about delivery of public services in the country. As we would all recall Theme II of the National Development Strategy (Vision 2030)

emphasises the imperative of excellence in service delivery. We believe that citizens' frustrations are multiplied when they believe that no one is listening, that they have no voice and their opinions do not matter.

So, the Ministry of Public Administration is currently working to implement a citizens' engagement system. This system will allow citizens to share their concerns with and challenges in interacting with government ministries and departments. The system will enable citizens to file reports, anonymously if they choose, and will have a back-end investigative capacity.

But the system will be concerned with more than just receiving complaints. It is our intention to tie it back to accountability – accountability at the ministry and individual levels. The system will also inform improvements in the design and execution of public services in the country.

Workforce Planning

In a review of workforce planning in the Irish Public Sector, it was noted that “Strategic workforce planning is fundamental to capacity building in organisations. It facilitates the development of competencies in public servants and it promotes greater efficiency and quality in the delivery of services”.

To this end, Madam President, it is my intention to:

- Mainstream strategic workforce planning as a discipline within the public sector;
- Ensure the value proposition of strategic workforce planning is understood across the public sector; and to
- Work with the appropriate institutions in the public sector and academia to assess workforce challenges in the public sector and to design shared approaches across institutions to common problems.

Madam President, it is really important for us to understand what is involved in workforce planning and why it is so important to public service effectiveness. If

we agree that effectiveness is a measure of whether a system “is doing the right things” then as we plan the work of the public service, we need to bear in mind the central consideration that public service work and the skills required of public servants are changing. In particular technology, demographics and economics are impacting the shape and nature of public services. The public service work environment is characterised by the need for ongoing reform and innovation and this needs to be emphasised.

Productivity Management

Madam President, I want to talk about the eight-ton elephant in the room – productivity. Madam President, almost everybody in our country is a productivity

expert. Everybody can tell you what is wrong, especially with regard to public sector productivity. As usual, Madam President, the answer is more complicated than those that are usually spewed. An author called Dallas Willard has said in essence “when an organisation is functioning poorly it is usually functioning exactly as it was designed to”.

It is my view that the public service was not designed to promote productivity and that we are seeing the results of that. So, I must agree with Senator Viera who said that our regs are not designed for efficiency, our processes are inefficient and that there is unnecessary red tape. I agree even more that the regs, processes and policies must exist to serve citizens, not

the other way around. That has been my mantra since I was appointed to this portfolio. That is why I keep saying to the staff at MPA that the work we are doing must be citizen centric. Not “change for change’s sake”, but change to improve the service to our people.

As I mentioned previously, we are treading carefully because we do not have all the leeway to address these important matters. As a government, consistent with the vision for digital transformation, we expect as we engage in business process reviews in the public service and then IT-enable the re-engineered processes we will see improvements in productivity.

In much the same vein, we understand the loss of productivity as a result of long commutes in traffic jams

that could be debilitating and depressing from a work stand point. Early in this contribution I referred to the calls for a work from home policy. The passion is understandable, but the zeal must be tempered with wisdom.

There are multiple moving parts for a work-from-home policy. The first is the process by which this has to be introduced. It requires consultations with workers' representatives as it will affect terms and conditions of employment.

Second, there is the nature of the work to be addressed. We have to ensure that the work can indeed be performed remotely. I am sure we will all agree that

not all public service work can be performed remotely.

There is a flip side to this concern which is, would a worker whose work is determined not to be appropriate to be performed remotely be able to claim unequal treatment. This is part of the reason why workers' representatives have to be involved in the process.

Third, Madam President, there are infrastructural and resource implications. Who will bear the responsibility for ensuring that the worker who wants to work remotely has the relevant resources – computer, broadband, software etc. – to perform his or her duties.

Fourth, what will be the safeguards for confidentiality and security and related issues.

Fifth, what are the processes for accountability and performance management.

These are just some of the issues that are involved in developing a work from home policy and I suggest that it has to be more than just a policy, it has to be an agreement to ensure that the interest of the employer and of the employee, and very significantly the citizens, who we serve, are protected.

However, with these constraints firmly in mind, the Ministry of Public Administration has started framing this issue and has started a process of benchmarking and assessing the experience of other jurisdictions with

regard to remote work. We note that the experience has been uneven and that while some employers in both the private and public sector have settled on forms of remote work, others are demanding that their employees return full time.

You will note that one of our PSIP projects for 2023 is to craft such a policy, which we propose to do in the shortest possible time, with a view to promoting early implementation of a well thought out, effective and mutually beneficial work from home policy.

Other PSIP projects

- eHRM
- MPA digitisation
- Arima and Pt Fortin Admin Complexes
- Change management

- Process re-engineering

Conclusion

Madam President, I have sought to share with this House, and by extension the national community, the challenges of and the responses to human resource management in the Public Service. We at the Ministry of Public Admin are committed to effecting real, positive and enduring changes to the performance of the public service for the benefit of all citizens and residents and others, whose access they serve.

(End)