



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

MINISTRY OF FINANCE

SPEAKING NOTES

By

The Honourable Colm Imbert

Minister of Finance

At the opening of the

Government Plaza

Tuesday 9th May, 2017

Salutations

Dr. the Honourable Keith Rowley, Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad
and Tobago

Members of the Cabinet and other Members of Parliament

His Worship the Mayor of Port of Spain, Alderman Joel Martinez
and other Members of the POS Council

Senior Government officials

Chairman and Board of UDeCOTT

Other specially invited guests

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning.

Allow me the opportunity to congratulate the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago on this milestone. I am delighted to stand here with you today to be part of the official opening of the new Government Plaza.

This much-needed project began under a PNM Administration and it is timely that under another PNM Administration this Plaza is finally completed. The new facilities provide for tremendous cost savings to the Government, especially at a time when we must be prudent in terms of our spending.

I am confident that the new facilities will radically improve the quality of service and infrastructure for citizens and staff both in the immediate future and in the years to come.

I am especially proud to say, that two of the four Government Campus Buildings, will be home to two Divisions under the purview of the Ministry of Finance – namely the Customs and Excise Division and the Board of Inland

Revenue. The amenities that these buildings offer are a step in the right direction for growth through productivity.

The Government Plaza has come at a significant cost but it was absolutely necessary to improve the accommodation and working conditions of public servants, many of whom have worked for years in old and cramped offices. At the time of the conceptualization of this project 15 years ago, it was felt that it was appropriate that where feasible, the Government should own and occupy its own buildings, rather than continuing to pay millions of dollars in rent. This premise is even more relevant today, especially in view of the significant sunk costs in this project.

The construction of the Customs and Excise Building commenced in 2004 and was completed in 2011, at a construction cost of \$113M. Outfitting of that building was completed in March 2015 at a cost of \$102M, and after many years of renting, the Customs and Excise Division finally had a place to call its own, when in April 2015, they were the first to occupy any of the buildings at the Government Plaza, having been relocated from Nicholas Court to their new building located on Ajax Street.

The Customs and Excise Building offers 119,523 square feet of office space and features ten (10) floors, with underground parking facilities. It currently houses approximately three hundred (300) members of staff, with the capacity to accommodate a total of six hundred and fifty (650) members of staff. The building features executive offices, a library, cafeteria, conference rooms, state of the art access control and security system, workstations, storage areas and a gym.

The move from rental to ownership realized an annual cost saving of \$6M for the Customs Division.

Construction of Inland Revenue Division's Building also commenced in 2004 and was completed in 2014 at a construction cost of \$461M. The outfitting for this building was subsequently completed in this month, May 2017, at a cost of \$233M.

It is noteworthy that the Board of Inland Revenue currently occupies five (5) office spaces in Port-of-Spain, including Trinidad House, Victoria Courts, ANSA Building, the Training Centre on Wrightson Road and on Level 2 of the

Finance Building, totaling 150,000 sq. feet of office space, of which 130,000 sq. ft. is government owned.

It should also be noted that the site on which the soon-to-be-vacated old Treasury Building stands has borne witness to many important events in Trinidad and Tobago's history. On August 1st 1834, thousands of slaves stormed into Port of Spain and gathered in front of the site to protest being given "apprentice" status, rather than freedom from slavery. Four years later, in 1838, at this same location, the Emancipation Proclamation, announcing the beginning of the end of slavery, was read. In 1966, the old Treasury building became the first home of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. In 1985, crowds once again returned to the front of the Treasury building on August 1st, but this time to commemorate Emancipation Day, as a national holiday. So, with this move to the Government Plaza, we are again making history.

It is expected that the Board of Inland Revenue will commence moving into their new building by the end of this month. The twenty-three (23) storey tower, which comprises 270,000 sq. ft. of office space, will house six hundred and fifty (650) Inland Revenue staff members, with a total capacity to house 1,044

employees. Apart from saving on rent, this consolidation of office space will make 130,000 square feet of Government-owned office space available for other public sector agencies.

The new building offers improved staff security and safety, two (2) commercial grade banking vaults, bullet proof cashier counters and motorized mobile filing, in compliance with the highest possible building standards.

The staff at the Inland Revenue Division can soon look forward to their very own gym and a beautiful cafeteria and there is even space assigned for child care facilities. For the taxpayers, they will finally be able to discuss their queries in privacy, in enclosed rooms. There will also be improved facilities for CCTV monitoring to ensure staff safety as well as the safety of the taxpayer.

The new facilities for the Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue Division will also facilitate accommodation for the proposed Revenue Authority, which is intended to minimize leakages of tax revenues and realize cost savings through shared administrative processes, across these two vital revenue collection agencies. We the Government, believe that this proposed new

arrangement will be of great benefit to the country. Soon, we will be going to Parliament to implement the new Revenue Authority.

To the staff of the Customs and Excise Division and the Inland Revenue Division, we trust that you enjoy your new and modern facilities.

As I conclude, I wish to express my thanks to the staff at UDeCOTT, and to the Ministry of Finance's own in-house architect, who worked tirelessly to ensure that the Government's best interest was pursued at all times. Congratulations.