

*Leave of Absence**Friday, July 30, 2010***HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Friday, July 30, 2010*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, the hon. Errol McLeod, requesting leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Member seeks is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Third report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the financial statements of the Public Transport Service Corporation for the year ended December 31, 1999. [*The Minister of Housing and the Environment (Dr. The Hon. Roodal Moonilal)*]
2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Consolidated Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Unit Trust Corporation for the year ended December 31, 2009. [*Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal*]
3. 2009 Annual Report of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal*]
4. Audited financial statements of the Deposit Insurance Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2009. [*Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal*]

Papers 1 to 4 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.

5. Audited financial statement of the Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2009. [*Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal*]
6. Audited financial statements of the Metal Industries Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2007. [*Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal*]

Papers 5 and 6 to be referred to the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.

7. Annual report of the Taurus Services Limited 2009. [*Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal*]
8. Annual report of the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended June 30, 2009. [*Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal*]

Papers Laid

Friday, July 30, 2010

9. Annual report of the Ministry of Public Administration for fiscal year 2009. [*Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal*]
10. Administrative report of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for fiscal year 2002. [*The Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs (Hon. Carolyn Seepersad-Bachan)*]
11. Administrative report of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for fiscal year 2003. [*Hon. C. Seepersad-Bachan*]
12. Administrative report of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for fiscal year 2004. [*Hon. C. Seepersad-Bachan*]
13. Administrative report of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for fiscal year 2005. [*Hon. C. Seepersad-Bachan*]
14. Administrative report of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for fiscal year 2006. [*Hon. C. Seepersad-Bachan*]
15. Administrative report of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for fiscal year 2007. [*Hon. C. Seepersad-Bachan*]
16. Administrative report of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for fiscal year 2008. [*Hon. C. Seepersad-Bachan*]
17. Report of the Elections and Boundaries Commission on the Parliamentary Elections held on Monday 24th May, 2010. [*Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal*]

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

Sport Company of Trinidad and Tobago (Findings of Financial Systems Audit)

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, there are some statements to be made by some of our hon. Members. We have the hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs who will now make a statement and subsequently we may have to return to this item later on in the proceedings.

The Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs (Hon. Anil Roberts): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hope that I am not looking like a "mook" as I make my first presentation to this august House. Today I rise, as I do surely expect we all, even the Members opposite, will rise; maybe not simultaneously, but certainly individually, we will rise.

I would firstly like to extend wholeheartedly my best wishes to the entire population as we commemorate our emancipation from physical and mental slavery. I would also like to thank the hon. Prime Minister and Member of Parliament for Siparia

for emancipating our people, our nation, from the political slavery of the PNM. It gives me great pleasure—well, it actually does not give me great pleasure but I am glad to be addressing this House. Unfortunately, I have in my hands a financial systems audit of the Sport Company of Trinidad and Tobago that I received on July 14, 2010, the scope of which deals with cash payment systems: purchases; award of contracts; salaries and wages. Cash receipts system: revenue receipts; subventions; statutory compliance; Board of Inland Revenue compliance, and the like.

I must, at this juncture, commend the former Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs for finally becoming aware of the possible breaches of good corporate governance at the Sport Company of Trinidad and Tobago. After two long torturous years in office, the goodly minister requested this systems audit by the Ministry of Finance. I am certain he did this on his own volition and not due to any excessive pressure placed upon his good self by a certain radio talk show host and television presenter or by the public at large.

As fate would have it, the goodly Minister was saved from the possibly stressful embarrassing and/or painful act of having to receive and read this damning report. Suffice it to say that I myself, as silly as it may sound, am at a loss for words by the revelations in this systems audit. I now find myself somewhat in a quandary as to figure out how to condense the multitude of errors, omissions, impropriety and downright corrupt practice that littered this audit in a 10-minute statement in this honourable House, but I will try.

From the Caribbean Games—which never actually came off—to the legacy flag at the Hasely Crawford Stadium that was supposed to instill in citizens national pride, to the hiring of interns, the leasing of expensive SUVs, the duplication of duties and responsibilities at extreme cost to the taxpayers, to the creation of a ghost roof at the Hasely Crawford Stadium. As impossible as my task may now seem, I shall attempt to give this honourable House and the wider citizenry, a synopsis of what can only be described as madness at the Sport Company of Trinidad and Tobago.

Let me begin with the Caribbean Games that never came off. The former Cabinet of those on the other side bestowed upon the Sport Company of Trinidad and Tobago the responsibility of upgrading sporting facilities to the sum of \$55 million. Of the \$55 million of works undertaken in preparation for the Caribbean Games 2009, \$30 million or 54 per cent of the said works were "awarded" to contractors without the use of a tendering process. Of that \$30 million of works undertaken and supplies and services executed without the use of the tendering process, \$20 million of those transactions were via the use of single quotations.

Sport Company of T&T
[HON. A. ROBERTS]

Friday, July 30, 2010

I am not too bright but I will try to explain what single quotations are. If you request goods and services you would want to see who has the best price, so you would ask or you would put an invitation to tender for goods and services; a committee would evaluate the incoming quotations and choose the best one. The Sport Company did not understand that and they went about their business on single quotation. In other words, somebody calls a friend and says, "Aye, I need this, boy, send me a quote." And they were given it and paid. I would not go further there because this will go further in another place.

In the financial range of \$500 to \$20,000—so if we are looking for goods and services between \$500 and \$20,000, the goodly gentlemen and ladies of the Sport Company conducted, for the Caribbean Games alone, 123 transactions on single quotation to the value of \$973,000.67. If you thought that was bad, it got worse. In the financial range of \$20,000 to \$100,000—for poor people like myself, that is big money; I think, you know, they would have taken care to handle the situation—the Sport Company conducted 127 transactions between the financial range of \$20,000 to \$100,000 on single quotation. "Johnny." "Yes". "Ah need a truck at \$99,000. Send a quote. Take your cheque." That is how it was run.

But the saga continued. In the financial range of \$100,000-plus, you would think that these goodly gentlemen would take careful consideration. The higher the money went up that they would ensure propriety and good governance and equal opportunity to all. Not so, Mr. Speaker. In the range of \$100,000 and above, the Sport Company conducted 129 transactions with single quotation, totaling \$57 million. I think I will have to repeat that: 129 transactions—let me give you the exact figure for the record—\$57,387,122 by single quotation.

Hon. Member: Calder was there?

Hon. A. Roberts: Well, no. This is a baby Calder. Calder Hart was not there. I clear him on that one. He was never a member of the Sport Company.

The Caribbean Games alone, a period which spanned mere months, over 379 transactions were conducted by the Sport Company to the tune of \$65,376,946, yet in the other place we have an Independent Senator stating to this Government that we should not dwell on the past.

1.45 p.m.

I would love to agree with my learned colleague upstairs that we must in fact deal with the past, especially the recent past, or else we may be doomed to commit the same errors as those across there.

In the short sometime that I have been in this August House I enjoy this seat on this side rather than that side. "De air condition does blow stronger on dis side."

Mr. Speaker, it is a very good thing that you are seated at this time because the saga continues further. If you feel "ah done trile, dey have more." Despite not having a tenders committee—wait, "wait, leh meh go back." I am going too quickly. Of the \$55 million of works undertaken, only \$25 million or 46 per cent of the said works were awarded through the tendering process. However, none of the said \$25 million of works was approved by tenders' committee. In fact, the systems audit done by the Ministry of Finance states that no evidence, I repeat, no evidence, was available to suggest that a tenders committee ever existed prior to March 2010, that is prior to the commence of the audit exercise. No tenders committee. "Audit come, dey put together ah little tenders committee."

It gets even worse so remain seated please, Mr. Speaker. Despite not having a tenders committee, these appointees of the People's National Movement had the audacity to send 26 notes relative to the award of contracts to the ghost committee. Logically, these notes were obviously never signed. I have never seen a ghost hold a pen.

Mr. Speaker, I clearly remember that the Member for San Fernando East, in a different capacity seated a little closer to your exalted Chair, I distinctly remember him stating "jail eh nice, it eh nice." Seeing that there was no tenders committee, this could not stop these boys. These boys were out to have fun. One of these 62 notes to the ghost tenders committee was signed by and "approved" by the then Executive Director, I shall not call names now because this is going to a different place, as you are well aware by this point. Of the other 61 notes to the notorious ghost tenders committee, they were signed and approved by the then Executive Chairman. From himself to himself, by himself about himself for himself. That is why they are over there and there they shall remain.

When men "eating ah food they must follow with dessert and these fellas were no different". Less than \$2.5 million or 5 per cent of the \$55 million were noted in board minute. "So dem spend out \$55 million and de board only approved", or it was minutes in a meeting that they discussed \$2.5 million of that \$55 million. Clearly, that board had to be bored because they had no work to do.

Mr. Speaker, unless you feel it was all about the Caribbean Games, let us move to a topic that is close to my heart and I am certain to yours. The legacy flag that was designed to make people like me who represented my country in swimming, football and coaching, to make me feel proud, so I have to take

Sport Company of T&T
[HON. A. ROBERTS]

Friday, July 30, 2010

interest in that flag. In preparation for the Caribbean Games 2009, the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited undertook to install a 150-foot flag pole at the Hasley Crawford Stadium. That is a big pole.

The note to the tenders committee—let us follow the story, which did not exist—whereby a certain company that I shall refer to as the fortunate one, recommended for award—the recommendation for award is dated May 04, 2009. "Nothing wrong wid dat". Letter dated May 04, 2009 to the fortunate one. Nothing wrong with that at all, except that by letter from the fortunate one, the company that was awarded the contract to build this legacy plant accepted receipt by letter stating that the confirmation letter was date April 29,2009. Five days before the letter of award went out, they accepted. I am sure prophetess Pena would be proud of this company. They are so good, they write an acceptance five days before they win. I think I would like to put them on the Olympics 2012 team, so we can predict gold before the event. Clearly, this confirmation letter of award was issued by the Sport Company prior to the fortunate one even being recommended. Amazing!

To add salt to the wound, the projects administrator of the Sport Company stated that the person who signed the letter of award had no authority to bind the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited.

You may can recall, in a Public Accounts Committee right here in this august House chaired by your good self of which the Member of Parliament for Mayaro was also a Member of that committee if my memory is not failing me—I do not live by a smelter so I think my memory is quite good. In that committee you will remember the former executive director trying to justify the cost of that flag, while being grilled by the Member for Mayaro.

Mr. Speaker, have you ever heard of a company called Prabha Sports? Prabha Sports sent a quotation to the Sport Company stating that they could erect the big legacy flag at a cost of US \$183,500, roughly TT \$1 million. They could do it in 48 days with a down payment of 50 per cent, even though the Prabha Sports bid was nearly \$1 million cheaper than the fortunate one who, interestingly, also required 50 per cent down payment. They both required 50 per cent down payment. Do you think the story ends there? No, when it comes to those Members opposite, the winning bidder, the fortunate one, got the bid and the Sport Company said that Prabha Sports could not win the bid because they wanted 50 per cent down. The fortunate one also wanted 50 per cent down. They said to Prabha Sports: "You want money in US. We doh pay in US." Mr. Speaker, at the exact same time they had paid out over US \$700,000 for different things, but all of a sudden, paying the

US became a criteria for selection of a winning bid that was \$1 million higher than the losing bidder. "It eh done dey. Dese boys are gluttonous. When dey eating ah food dey doh stop." They keep going.

Mr. Speaker, the fortunate one, in the bid at \$2 million, presented a plan for 200 cubic meters of concrete. All the engineers, Member for Oropouche West, please pay attention. You all would understood this. "Dey ah doing bid. Dey say it will require 200 cubic meters ah concrete an ting. You know how many cubic meters dey actually use? Take ah wild guest from over day nah. Yuh feek dey use de 200? Nah" They actually used 30 cubic meters. Three truckloads? Dey shudda use 20 truckloads, dey used three. "Did the price come down? No, the elevator was stuck at the top; same \$2 million. They used 15 per cent of the concrete but the price stayed the same. Only on that side could this happen. Calder Hart is not the only one. They also estimated the butt size. You know what the butt is, right? The butt, not that but, to be 20' X 20'; an estimated budget. That is a big butt, but how big do you feel they built the but? Let us check, 10' X 10'. They cut the but in half and charged the same price.

But they were not finished cutting corners, not at all. The original estimate by the fortunate one included driving six piles to keep this big flag. Guess what? No piles. So, no butt, no piles. No but, no piles, no preparation H. I am glad we could all laugh because this is taxpayers' money.

Mr. Speaker, keep in mind that I am just sharing tid bit with this august House, but it will be remiss of me if I did not share this one with you. The area of the Hasley Crawford roof, our national Olympic hero, our sports ambassador, at the stadium is 2,055 square meters, easily verifiable. It has been so since it was constructed in the late 1970s. The Sport Company had to fix the roof. If your roof is 2,055 square meters, I think you should fix 2,055 square meters. But, suddenly and miraculously the Hasley Crawford roof started to grow. It grew, eating veggies and pork and getting proteins, from 2,055 square meters to 3,147 square meters. Do you know something? The original single quotation price that was in before, when the roof grew, it somehow brought the value to exactly what the single quote was. Coincidence? I think not.

We continue. This led the auditors of the Ministry of Finance, not me or a Member of this side, auditors, independent people, to conclude that this appears to indicate—I think to any reasonable person it would be quite clear—that there was collusion between the contractor and the Sports Company. I am going to call Hasley Crawford when I finish here and tell him congratulations, his stadium has grown.

"Ah sure meh time up and ah only reach page 6, ah not telling fibs." So I could go on for much longer and it just gets worse and worse.

Sport Company of T&T
[HON. A. ROBERTS]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Mr. Speaker, there are also glaring incidents of impropriety with regards to the lack of documentation, no evaluation, redundancy, duplication of duties abuse of office and downright unfair and corrupt practice. For example, the Sport Company was desirous of hiring interns, nothing is wrong with that. We like young people. The Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs is very young, so hiring interns is a good thing. But nothing done on that side could remain good, it always have to go somewhere else. They advertized and 37 applications were received, absolutely nothing wrong with that. The Sport Company then hired eight interns; nothing wrong so far. There was one problem, none of the eight that were hired apply "for de wuk". None of the eight that were hired applied, Mr. Speaker. I see you look perplexed, so am I, Sir.

As we go on, I know that you enjoy some perks of office. You are in, of course, one of the highest office of the land. I humbly suggest to you that you demit office forthwith and take up a position in the Sport Company, Sir. Because despite the compensation packages of the Executive Chairman and the Executive Director, including a monthly transportation allowance, these goodly gentlemen, aided and abetted by the former Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs accepted the transportation allowances while leasing 2 BMW X 5s at a cost of \$17,000 plus VAT for one and \$40,055 per month while cyclists could not get a \$300 track suite to go to the Pan Am Junior Games, when Mr. Darren Ganga would not get one red cent to feed some poor children in rural Trinidad and Tobago for his cricket camps. These men leased 440,000 per month x5s to drive around. Mr. Speaker, I am serious, consider moving from that chair and going over there. The perks are better.

One final note, before I sit. While all this was going on, single quotation and no invitation to tender, no evaluation process, questionable award of contracts, changing scope of works, ghost roof and no tenders committee, the Sport Company had on its books employed a procurement specialist at \$16,800 per month. While all these breaches of procurement and breaches of good governance going on, the Sports Company had a specialist in procurement, Sir at \$16,800. You all are not really impressed by that. Maybe you would be impressed by this, they also had a procurement consultant at \$35,000 per month while all of this was going on, \$51,800 of procurement expertise and they got nothing right.

Mr. Speaker, with this, it is recommended by the auditors that all breeches of good governance be further investigated for possible breaches of the law. I just gave you a synopsis of this to show this august House that while we move forward, it is incumbent upon this Government to revisit the past, to never, ever treat taxpayers' money with such discourtesy; to treat people with respect. To get

Sport Company of T&T

Friday, July 30, 2010

value for money, we must know where they went wrong to be on that side so we would never again be on that said. We enjoy the view from here.

We must also be able to let the population know why we have to make decisions going forward which may be not as swift as we may want, because we have to ask, especially the new twelfth man. Twelfth man does bring water. Ah go drink water now. The Member for San Fernando East, we just have to ask him: Where de money gone?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2010 Bid Rounds

The Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs (Hon. Carolyn Seepersad-Bachan): Mr. Speaker, I have been authorized by the Government to make this statement to the honourable House on the 2010 Bid Rounds.

By Legal Notice No. 114, dated April 08, 2010, the Competitive Bid Order inviting tenders for seven blocks in the North, East and West Coast marine areas of Trinidad and Tobago was issued. The Order which was cited as the Petroleum Regulations (Competitive Bid) Order 2010, stipulated the following:

- The marine areas which are subject to competitive bidding comprise Blocks NCMA 2, NCMA 3, NCMA 4, NCMA 5 located in the marine area off the north coast of Trinidad and Tobago in water depths of 200 to 300 metres, Blocks 4(b) and 5(d) located offshore east coast of Trinidad and Tobago in water depths of 400 to 800 metres and the North Marine Block located off the West Coast of Trinidad and Tobago in water depths of 25—50 metres. The payment of the pre-bid application fee, which is a prerequisite for the submission of a bid and entitles the prospective applicant to a data package for the relevant block from the Ministry, this package includes:
 - a model production sharing contract 2010 for shallow marine areas;
 - a model production sharing contract 2010 for average water, deep areas;
 - a model joint operating agreement;
 - the point system for use in the evaluation of bids received; and
 - Trinidad and Tobago energy sector local content and local participation framework.

2010 Bid Rounds
[HON. C. SEEPERSAD-BACHAN]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Bids are to conform to the provisions of the model production sharing contracts and are to contain proposals for the following:

- a commitment to a work programme, (the minimum work programme) and expending such funds as are necessary to complete the work programme;
- the sharing of petroleum produced from the contract area;
- twenty per cent carried participation in the obligatory phase for the State for Blocks NCMA 2, NCMA 3, NCMA 4, NCMA 5 and the north marine area. Blocks 4(b) and 5(d) are excluded in recognition of their more challenging water depths;
- a signature bonus which will be payable on the issue of the contracts for Blocks NCMA 2, NCMA 3, NCMA 4, NCMA 5 and the north marine area. Again, Blocks 4(b) and 5(d) are excluded in recognition of their more challenging water depths.

Bid proposals are to be evaluated on the basis of the provisions outlined in the model production contracts and the point system described in order. To this end, successful bidders wishing to be granted production sharing contracts are being asked to execute the production sharing contract within one month of notification of the successful bid. This should avoid the lengthy negotiations and result in timely execution, register under the Companies Act or be incorporated under the act before commencing petroleum operations; deliver to the Minister on the effective date of the contract guarantees for the minimum work obligation and financial obligations; and participate in the oil spill contingency area.

Initially, successful bidders will be issued production sharing contracts for a period of six years but, upon the achievement of commercial discovery, the contract may be renewed for the portion of the contract area, on which the discovery was made, for a term of 25 years from the effective date of the contract. Where a commercial discovery is not achieved within six years, the contract will terminate automatically.

The closing date for the bids was August 11, 2010. To date, the Ministry has received a total of TT\$4 million by companies interested in bidding for the blocks on offer. The new companies coming forward include RWE DEA AG, a German company and Apache Corporation, an American company. The other companies include Centrica Energy, Repsol and Voyager. Most of the local operating companies already have the data and so are at liberty to pay the bid fee whenever they choose, we therefore expect the number of companies interested will rise before the closing date for bids.

Mr. Speaker, the People's Partnership Government recognizes the importance of our hydrocarbon resources to the country and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. In our manifesto, which has been approved as the Government's policy document, we undertook to guide the exploration, the exploitation, utilization and monetization of our hydrocarbon resources for the benefit of current and future generations, while safeguarding and protecting the environment.

Our natural gas reserves have continuously been declining as evidenced by the 2009 Ryder Scott Reserve Audit, which estimated our 3P reserves at 28.15 trillion cubic feet and our reserves to production ratio at 10 years. Our crude oil production has fallen to approximately 100,000 barrels per day, from a high of 228,000 in 1978. We are committed to arresting the decline in our oil and gas reserves by encouraging increased and periodic exploration of our resources. This will engender greater energy security and prove-up reserves to maintain a healthy reserves to production ratio.

Therefore, on the assumption of office, this Government supported the proposals for bid rounds for the exploration of our hydrocarbon resources. However, given the changing global market dynamics, with a very abundant gas potential from Shale rock, a lowering of oil prices forecast following the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, it is important that the terms and conditions be globally competitive and that the industry is aligned with the risk and reward of continuing deep water exploration in Trinidad and Tobago. Accordingly, a committee comprising energy stakeholders, the Ministry of Energy and Energy Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, including the Board of Inland Revenue, was established to solicit the views of the sector on the bid round proposals.

Arising from the consultation with the energy industry, two major issues surfaced. These were, the form of production sharing contract and the effective tax rate for the average and deep water blocks.

In the case of the Production Sharing Contract, a decision was taken to forego the taxable PSC which was utilized in the 2005/2006 bid round. This form of the PSC removed the feature of fiscal stability that contractors enjoyed under the 1995 PSC regime and thus proved a disincentive to companies and investors. In its place a new concept, in which the Government's share was in lieu of taxes and impositions of the contract was proposed. However, it was determined that the proposed new concept would not qualify for tax credit in other jurisdictions and therefore would negatively impact on the project economics.

2010 Bid Rounds
[HON. C. SEEPERSAD-BACHAN]

Friday, July 30, 2010

In the circumstances, it was agreed to revert to the successful 1995/1996 production contract model adjusted as follows:

1. open and biddable profit share matrices;
2. a flexible work programme;
3. ring fencing of expenditure;
4. 20 per cent carried participation, which is applied to shallow acreage only;
5. higher cost recovery provision;
6. fixed financial obligations; and
7. fair market value computation in line with the provisions of the Petroleum Taxes Act.

Mr. Speaker, while the majority of blocks in this bid round are in shallow waters, our future hydrocarbon reserves lie in the average and deep waters, which represent our new exploration frontier. Our own technical analysis suggests that there are fields in this region with potential resources in the order of 1.8 billion barrels of oil or 6.7 trillion cubic feet of gas as an upside.

Blocks in the average and deep water environment, as represented by water depths in excess of 400 metres, incur higher exploration and production costs as much as three to five times the cost of exploration in shallow water. In the Gulf of Mexico, deep water is classified as water depths in excess of 400 metres and drilling costs are in the order of US \$90 million per well and lifting costs average US \$9—10 per barrel.

Our analysis indicates that given the high cost structure for exploration and development in the average to deep water depths, that companies at the current tax rates will be unable to achieve the rate of return commensurate with the exploration risks for blocks in this environment.

Based on statistics provided by noted tax consultants, Wood Mackenzie, Trinidad and Tobago under the current fiscal regime has a Government take of 83 per cent, compared to other jurisdictions such as Angola, Indonesia and Brazil, which have a Government take of approximately 71 per cent.

2.15 p.m.

The terms and conditions of the current fiscal regime have been a deterrent to further investment in our deep waters. In the recent past, interest shown by companies in at least four deep water blocks was negated by the poor project economics due to unattractive fiscal regime.

Given the risk involved, and the fact that our deep water province is largely untested, it is important to create the conditions that will ensure the positive interest of the energy industry; both from the commercial and technical perspectives. The feedback from companies is that technical evaluations of the deep water are encouraging, but in order to test the reservoirs systems, the fiscal package must be complementary.

Accordingly, a review was undertaken of the fiscal regime comprising the uplift provisions on expenditure, supplemental petroleum tax, petroleum profits tax and unemployment levy. Various scenarios were analyzed with a view to ensuring the following:

- A government take in keeping with international norms and which would meet the taxes and impositions of the contractor.
- A rate of return on the contractor commensurate with the risks involved in deepwater exploration.

Based on this review, it was determined that a reduction of the Petroleum Profits Tax to 35 per cent would achieve this objective. Government has, therefore, agreed to reduce the petroleum profits tax to 35 per cent for blocks in water depths in excess of 400 metres. This compares with the taxation applied in other competing jurisdictions such as Ghana and the Gulf of Mexico, and will bring Government in line with other deep water jurisdictions. In the current bid round, this will be applicable only to the East Coast blocks which are in water depths of 400 to 8,000 metres.

Mr. Speaker, there is strong interest in the deep water blocks. The companies, in response to a request for nominations, have expressed interest in 24 deep water blocks. Based on the revised fiscal regime, it is anticipated that this interest will be translated into production sharing contracts for deep water exploration.

Concomitant with any oil exploration is the attendant risks involved in drilling activities. As a Government with a respect for the environment, we are taking steps to mitigate such risks. The measures include the review of the following:

- Our well control regulatory framework to determine whether the current regime requires upgrading so that the necessary safeguards are in place for the protection of people, assets and the environment.
- All aspects of any well, including the possible well controls measure and blowout preventer specifications.

2010 Bid Rounds
[HON. C. SEEPERSAD-BACHAN]

Friday, July 30, 2010

In addition, there is inspection of the drilling rig, including the BOP to ensure that it is fit for purpose and that its maintenance records and standard operating procedures have been certified by recognized certification bodies.

More recently, we have appointed a committee to review our National Oil Spill Contingency Plan, to ensure that the necessary response and recovery mechanisms are in place in the event of a major oil spill. This review will not be limited to addressing oil spills, but also chemical spills, liquefied natural spills and gas leaks and releases. The committee was given five weeks to report and is expected to report shortly.

Trinidad and Tobago is a hydrocarbon province with a history of oil and gas exploration. To date, there have been no major environmental incidents with respect to our exploration activities and the above measures are designed to maintain this record.

Mr. Speaker, several companies have indicated an interest in the shallow, average and deep water blocks. However, given the review of the draft production sharing contract and the fiscal regime for average blocks, contractors have sought an extension of the deadline for the submission of bids for the blocks that were offered under the Legal Notice No. 114 of April 08, 2010.

The Government has agreed to the request by companies and has extended the date required for submission of bids from August 11, 2010 to 12 noon on September 08, 2010. It is also proposed to launch the bid round for the deep water blocks on September 08, 2010. The date of announcement of successful bids for the shallow and average blocks will be no later than November 12, 2010.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

Commission of Enquiry (1990 Attempted Coup)

The Prime Minister (Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar): Mr. Speaker, the Government has decided to respond to persistent and numerous calls for an enquiry or investigation into the so-called 1990 attempted coup. Mr. Speaker, 20 years after what some of us may describe as that fateful or rather fearful or horrific day, the Government of the People's Partnership has decided that there will be a commission of enquiry into the July 27, 1990 attempted coup.

The commission is to be appointed in accordance with the provision of the Commission of Enquiry Act, Chap. 19:01. Mr. Speaker, I am sure that I echo the sentiments of citizens when I say that it is the hope of the Government that the enquiry would bring closure to a most dramatic period in our nation's history.

There are many who suffered damage and loss as a result of the coup. The distress and anguish is a part of their lives, and they have to live with it. The memories of this bloody coup are neither lost nor forgotten.

You may know that the hon. Attorney General is taking steps to recover \$2 million in damages awarded to the State last September for the attempted coup. Several properties owned by leader of the Jamaat will be sold via public action on August 17, 2010 at City Hall in Port of Spain at 10.00 a.m. I am advised that this sale is not in respect of the Mosque and school, as they are not captured by the order made by the court.

Mr. Speaker, there are some who say that a lot of time has elapsed and whether this enquiry is too late. Mr. Speaker, this is not the case, for there are several international examples where the lapse of time has not been a deterrent to the efficacy of a commission of enquiry. For example, in Northern Ireland, the Saville Enquiry, chaired by Lord Saville of Newdigate, was established in 1998 to investigate the infamous "Bloody Sunday" in Northern Island.

Bloody Sunday, sometimes called the "Bogside Massacre" was an incident on 30th January, 1972 in the Bogside area of Derry, Northern Ireland, in which 26 unarmed civil rights protesters and bystanders were shot by members of the British Army. Mr. Speaker, 13 men, seven of whom were teenagers, died.

An enquiry was launched some 26 years after the event. Lord Saville's Report was made public on June 15, 2010 just last month and contained findings of fault that could re-open the controversy and, potentially, lead to criminal investigations for some soldiers involved in the killings. The report found that all those shot were unarmed, and that the killings were unjustified and unjustifiable. On the publication of the Saville Report, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, made a formal apology on behalf of the United Kingdom.

Canada, on June 23, 1985, a Boeing 747-237B was blown up by a bomb whilst in Irish airspace, at an altitude of 31,000 feet and crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. In all, 329 people perished, among them 280 Canadian nationals, mostly of Indian birth or descent and 22 Indians. The incident represents the largest mass murder in modern Canadian history.

Mr. Speaker, 21 years later, the Governor General-in-Council in 2006, appointed a former supreme court justice, John Major, to conduct a commission of enquiry. His report was completed and released on June 17, 2010. It was found that a cascading series of errors by the Government of Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service had allowed the terrorist attack to take place.

Commission of Enquiry
[HON. K. PERSAD-BISSESSAR]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Similarly, with war crimes and crimes against humanity, in recent history, many persons have been successfully prosecuted for crimes against humanity and war crimes that were committed decades ago. Only last week, for example, a UN-backed tribunal has found the former Khmer Rouge chief jailor Kaing Guek Eav guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity and ordered him to serve 19 years in prison. That was the first verdict to be handed down against a senior member of the genocidal regime blamed for the deaths of 1.7 million people during their 1975—1979 reign of terror. The court sentenced Duch to 35 years in prison, but shaved off the 11 years which he had already spent in detention and five more for cooperating.

Closer to home, in Uruguay, former dictator Juan Maria Bordaberry was sentenced to 30 years in prison for violating the constitution when he led a 1973 coup that began 12 years of dictatorship.

In Suriname, another member state of Caricom, rocked by the coup phenomena and struggling to cope with challenges from drug trafficking and gun-running, Desi Bouterse, is openly demonstrating regrets and seeking public forgiveness for his involvement in a 1980 coup against a civilian government, while denying personal culpability in the 1982 murder of 15 political opponents. Mr. Speaker, of course, this is in stark contrast to the lack of apology and absence of remorse from the Jamaat al Muslimeen.

Mr. Speaker, it is hoped that many unanswered questions which have bedeviled our nation over the last two decades would finally be addressed and the country can begin to heal when this enquiry is completed.

I note that, former President Arthur NR Robinson, who was shot in the leg during the coup, fully endorses this Government's decision and has recently said this commission of enquiry into the event is long overdue.

While it is easy to say that this enquiry has taken too long, I am of the view that the memory of the trauma inflicted upon our nation is intense and alive. Those who were directly affected have not forgotten the shock, horror and pain they felt when armed insurgents stormed into this very Parliament and held elected representatives hostage. These events have left an indelible impression and will not be easily forgotten.

Indeed, on July 27, 2010 in this very Parliament in the Rotunda, I met the young son Jasper of one of the persons who had been killed in the coup. There are many citizens alive today who can clearly recall the events of that fateful day in detail. It is imperative that this Government move quickly to capture this information as it would be a tragedy to lose those persons, without having a

thorough investigation into the events of July 27, 1990 and thereafter. I think I can safely say that the country considers this very important for us as a people and a young nation to determine what went wrong. I ask: how could this have happened?

This was an event that wreaked so much havoc on this country, leading to billions of dollars of loss. We must never forget it also cost the lives of 24 persons including a former Member of this hon. Chamber, Mr. Leo Des Vignes. Perhaps of equal or even greater significance, is that it was a direct attack on the seat and heart of our democracy, this very Parliament.

Surely, with billions lost, lives lost, people traumatized, our very way of governance threatened we, as a people, must know what happened. How did this happen? Why did it happen? Is there a relationship between what happened then and the present tsunami of gun-related crimes?

It is common knowledge that during the attempted coup, firearms were illegally brought into the country. Today, we are plagued with a proliferation of arms and firearms, which in no small way is contributing to the high crime rate, especially gang-related crimes and murder. Who is supplying these weapons and how are they coming into the country? Is there a link?

There are too many unanswered questions and the time for answers is now. This commission of enquiry into the attempted coup is also necessary to help us understand the extent of our institutional breaches and failures so that we can take steps to prevent such from happening again. It will allow the Government to take steps to avoid the possibility of a repeat of such an armed insurrection. Perhaps, this enquiry may unearth the truth behind the conspiracy that led to this coup.

Several issues require clarification and we therefore need to enquire into:

- (i) The cause of and circumstances surrounding the attempted coup on July 27, 1990;
- (ii) The possibility that the coup could have been averted;
- (iii) The *raison d'être* of the attempted coup;
- (iv) The mastermind of the attempted coup;
- (v) The role of the Jamaat Al Muslimeen and what motivated its involvement;
- (vi) Identification of local and international associates as well as affiliates of the Jamaat Al Muslimeen at the time of the insurrection;
- (vii) All details on the intent and extent of the plan to commit a coup;

Commission of Enquiry
[HON. K. PERSAD-BISSESSAR]

Friday, July 30, 2010

- (viii) The ability of the insurgents to enter Parliament with weapons;
- (ix) The reasoning behind the conflagration of specific buildings;
- (x) Identification of all persons harassed, held hostage, injured and killed as a consequence of the insurrection;

2.30 p.m.

- (xi) The existence of information or findings of fact pertaining to the involvement of government officials and public officials in the conspiracy to overthrow the duly elected government of the day;
- (xii) The extent of the involvement—if any—of members of the protective services, the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, State officials and any other persons who were or are in the employ of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago;
- (xiii) The identity of any specific agency, entity, body and/or individual; local, regional or international, as being implicated in, who incited or had foreknowledge of the attempted coup and the extent of that implication, incitement or knowledge;
- (xiv) The financing of the attempted coup;
- (xv) The illegal acquisition, supplier/supplies and importation of weapons used during the coup;
- (xvi) The status, existence or destruction of those firearms referred to above;
- (xvii) Any correlation between the coup and the present trafficking, supply or possession of illicit drugs;
- (xviii) The failure of the intelligence and law enforcement authorities to detect the intended uprising;
- (xiv) All matters pertaining to the negotiations, preparations, execution, removal and effect of the amnesty;
- (xx) The response and performance of the protective services, the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force and other essential services during and after the insurrection;
- (xxi) The response and actions of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the media and foreign services during and after the insurrection;

- (xxii) The financial losses—for both the public and private sector—diplomatic implications, and social as well as sociological effects of the attempted coup on the country, its citizens and criminal activity;
- (xxiii) Criminal activity, including but not confined to looting, during and after the insurrection;
- (xxiv) Identification of those living members of the Jamaat al Muslimeem who were charged with treason, murder and arson;
- (xxv) Identification of those deceased members of the Jamaat al Muslimeem who died—well deceased or would have died—the date of death and the cause of death;
- (xxvi) The efforts of the Government of the Trinidad and Tobago to counsel its citizens, rebuild the nation, activate social systems and develop national security.

With respect to expected benefits and recommendations: It is hoped that the Commission would make recommendations and observations arising out of its deliberations, as may be deemed appropriate, to ensure that:

- (i) Counterterrorism policies and measures are clearly articulated;
- (ii) Terrorism is identified as a national security concern;
- (iii) Systems are in place to detect and counter intended criminal activity against the Government and the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago;
- (iv) The Ministry of National Security and by extension, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, has the ability and capabilities to manage the evolving security challenges of the country;
- (v) Appropriate mechanisms are in place to thwart and/or manage an insurrection;
- (vi) Diplomatic and media responses are appropriate in the circumstances;
- (vii) There are mechanisms established to identify and treat with social and political matters that can decide insurrection;
- (viii) The need for continuous strategic intelligence as well as paramilitary planning and operations;
- (ix) Immigration and customs controls are fortified;
- (x) Borders are impermeable;

Commission of Enquiry
[HON. K. PERSAD-BISSESSAR]

Friday, July 30, 2010

- (xi) Emergency responses as well as social services delivery are at an optimum;
- (xii) There are coordinated defence, intelligence and law enforcement activities;
- (xiii) There is effective public diplomacy;
- (xiv) The national security legislative framework is current; and
- (xv) State buildings are protected from threats.

We recognize that there have been varying degrees of trauma experienced by citizens in different institutions directly and indirectly as a result of that fateful day in our nation's history.

As a responsible Government, we hope that this enquiry would also bring psychological relief from the results. Why an enquiry was not instituted years ago, outside of the court proceedings remains a mystery. This enquiry is in keeping with my administration's commitment to transparency and accountability. It is important to have this enquiry so that we can take steps to avoid such a thing ever happening in this country again. It is time to shed some light on this dark period in our nation's history.

It is my respectful view that Government has decided that once the enquiry reveals any evidence of wrongdoing, consideration will be given to prosecuting those culpable. Of course, it will depend on what evidence is found by the commission of inquiry. Murder, for example, is not a statute-barred offence. This Tuesday of this week, July 27, 2010 marked the 20th anniversary of this attempted coup. I say unequivocally that whatever is found, no one would be above the law. Therefore, if there is evidence of wrongdoing, where ever it may be, that will be addressed in our courts of law.

With respect to the composition of the commission: This commission of enquiry will be a public enquiry. But the Commission will have the absolute discretion to determine whether to sit wholly or from time to time in private having regard to the matters under enquiry and the exigencies of same. The commission would, of course, after its enquiry and deliberations, submit a report in accordance with the Commission of Enquiry Act to the President.

The details, including the terms of reference, of this Commission of Inquiry has been approved by the Cabinet. The Commission will consist of five members as follows:

- (1) Retired Justice of Appeal, Mustapha Ibrahim. He was a former Court of Appeal judge here and he served as Chairman in the Bahamas as well;
- (2) Former Independent Senator and social activist, Mrs. Diana Mahabir-Wyatt;
- (3) International Security Consultant and US war veteran, Dr. H. A. Mohammed;

- (4) Leading criminal lawyer from Barbados, Dr. Richard Cheltenham, QC; and
- (5) Former Independent Senator, Dr. Eastlyn Mc Kenzie.

Mr. Speaker, if I may say, there were some causes for concern in selecting persons to serve on the Commission. In an effort to avoid perceptions of bias we had to check with persons who could have served on this commission to ensure that they may not at one time have said and been involved in comments or expressions of matters relating to the coup or had been involved in any way, so there were many distinguished persons who could have served. We did spend a little time and effort in trying to avoid that from taking place.

May I say that retired Justice of Appeal, Mustapha Ibrahim, will serve as Chairman of the Commission.

Government is cognizant of the fact that there is a cost factor. It is an important factor in the holding of the enquiry. But we are of the respectful view that cost in human suffering, and indeed the cost to our democracy is greater in this instance than the dollars and cents for the enquiry. In any event, this enquiry is long overdue.

We must guard against any person or groups of persons who feel that the way to express their views is to use terror and violence. This enquiry will bring some closure and expose any conspiracy that there might have been which led to the temporary overthrow of the duly elected government of the day. We, the Government, say the time for action is now before it becomes much too late; an expression, "Better late than never".

I thank you.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, permit me to acknowledge the presence, on the Speaker's platform to my left, of delegates from various Parliaments of the region, including the hon. Speaker of the Cayman Islands. [*Desk thumping*]

SENIOR CITIZENS' GRANT (AMDT.) BILL

Order for second reading read.

The Minister of the People and Social Development (Hon. Dr. Glenn Ramadharsingh): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move,

That a Bill to amend the Senior Citizens' Grant Act, Chap. 32:02, be now read a second time.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure today to stand before this House to move a Bill.

Clause 1 of the Bill provides for the short title. This Bill may be cited as the Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill, 2010.

Clause 2 amends the name of the Act and includes a definition for pension. Also clause 2 repeals subsections (1) to (5) of section 3 by creating a new subsection (1) which establishes a scale to determine the amount of monthly pension. I refer to clause 2(d) Item 1:

“With effect from September 1, 2010 a person who satisfies the conditions specified in section 4 and receives a monthly income in the sum specified in the first column of the Schedule is entitled to a monthly Senior Citizens' Pension in the sum specified in the second column—of the Schedule as follows:”

Clause 3 provides for the increase in the senior citizens pension.

The Bill formalizes our commitment to the senior citizens of this country to reinstate a pension—it will no longer be a grant—to senior citizens and the value is increased to \$3,000.

Mr. Speaker, it is unprecedented that in less than 30 days of convening the Tenth Parliament, one of the first major decisions of the Government of the People's Partnership is keeping its promise by tabling this Bill. [*Desk thumping*]

This Bill ensures that our senior citizens are taken care of in the twilight of their years. History will record and it will be etched in the *Hansard* that senior citizens will once again be entitled to a monthly pension. Although the People's Partnership has been in office for just over two months; we have begun to re-assess, re-organize and re-energize a social strategy for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Oscar Wilde, writer and poet said:

“When I was young, I thought that money was the most important thing in life; now that I am old, I know it is.”

The quote may sound like a joke, but when we examine that many gainfully employed citizens of our country struggle to make ends meet; when we consider the fact that our senior citizens, who are not receiving a pension but a retractable grant, one which depends on a host of criteria before their needs can be met, we are better able to understand the significance of this senior citizens' pension.

Hon. Members and Mr. Speaker, pension is not an arbitrary handout. It is a right, a right that is given to our senior citizens who qualify for it.

In our manifesto entitled, "Prosperity for All", the Government promised and intends to adhere to the principles of social justice by ultimately ensuring that a war is carried out against poverty through the provision of safety net measures for the most vulnerable in our society.

Mr. Speaker, we have also affirmed that every human being is important. You would remember that we just trounced the Opposition in the polls with our manifesto platform, the flagship of human development.

We are committed to looking after the most vulnerable and giving priority to the care and protection of senior citizens, to children at risk and to persons living with disabilities. As you know, we adhere to the biblical admonition, to "Honor thy mother and father so that thy days will be long in this land."

Mr. Speaker, today the Ministry of the People and Social Development is happy to assume the role of torchbearer as the Government of the People's Partnership, led by the charismatic and dynamic Prime Minister Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, brings to our beloved nation a Bill that will close the gap between the haves and the have-nots. It will bring light to the darkened lives of many in Trinidad and Tobago who suffered for eight long years and were victims of a government's malign governance practices and misplaced priorities.

Mr. Speaker, I am sure that you will recall in 2007 the former administration amended the Old Age Pension Act, Chap: 32:02, to give effect to a Senior Citizens' Grant. This measure caused the senior citizens in our country severe trauma. It was widespread trauma that was running through the veins of Trinidad and Tobago by a so-called caring government that said it was a love thing. There was mass confusion regarding whether the payment now called a grant could be flinched from the pensioner at any time, could be withdrawn. There was mass confusion as they went from month to month.

2.45 p.m.

It reminds me, Mr. Speaker, of a 4th Century BC tyrant who was an obsequious courtier in the court of Dionysius II, a man of great power and authority. Dionysius was truly fortunate. In the evening a banquet—*[Interruption]*

Dr. Rowley: Who write that?

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—was held, where this tyrant very much enjoyed being waited upon like a king. Only at end of the meal after being courted with all the foods, wines and drinks in the world, he looked above his head and saw the sword of Damocles hanging by the thin thread of a horse hair, and he

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

gave it all up. [*Photo was displayed*] Similarly, the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago with that grant felt as if they were under the sword of Damocles, and at any point in time the sword would have had its way with them.

This Government will not place our citizens under any sword of Damocles. We state categorically and without reservation that a pensioner is no longer receiving a grant. We give back the pension to the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] An additional \$500 may not mean much to contractors benefiting from multi-million dollar projects, but it means a lot to a 65-year-old grandmother from St. Augustine supporting her three grandchildren whose parents have migrated. This represents the ability to maintain an appropriate level of nutritional security in the household, to assist in, and a little more help for the grandchildren.

Mr. Speaker, the United Nations has placed great emphasis on social security for our senior citizens. This Government is committed to ensuring economic security for the growing cohort of older persons whilst preserving their independence and dignity.

A 1989 PAHO publication titled, "A profile of the elderly in Trinidad and Tobago" noted that the most important issues that confront older persons, 60 and over in their daily lives, pertained to economic and health matters. The PAHO study also found that the majority of older persons, who had a regular income mainly through pensions, perceived that their basic needs were not being met adequately by their financial situation.

Mr. Speaker, a decade later, a 1999 survey by Dr. Acton Camejo, commissioned by the Ministry, found that older persons had concerns about their declining health and their ability, both physical and financial, to continue performing activities related to daily life. It is these fears that older persons have themselves expressed, which this Government sought to allay through the provisions of an increased senior citizens pension, and other social programming initiatives that I will outline in this presentation.

The Division of Aging within the Ministry of the People and Social Development continues to work, and promote work through a network of NGOs—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Browne: By the PNM.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—to ensure that our senior citizens can enjoy an active life, learn new skills and keep up with the advances in technology. We have and continued to modify, redesign and rebuild what is called the senior activity centres.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: All in two months.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Mr. Speaker, we have launched some of these and we intend to do many more in the fiscal 2011. The need for our senior citizens to enjoy good physical and emotional health in their post-retirement years is very important, since it not only enhances the lives of older persons, but also benefits the wider community by reducing the burden on the healthcare system as well as on their relatives.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to announce that in the coming months, we are going to set up more senior activity centres, modify them, change the environment and increase the comforts that exist. We also intend to have inter-senior activities centre sports day and family activities, that will bring senior citizens together in competition in what they do at the activities centres. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Browne: That has been going on years.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: The national plan of action was borne out of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging 2002, which is a commitment that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is committed to upkeeping.

Mr. Speaker, let us examine very briefly the context in which we are doing this and, implementing this campaign promise and manifesto obligations. I refer to the contributions of my colleagues Minister Dookeran and Minister King very briefly. In their contributions, provisional estimates for the economy showed a decline of 3.2 per cent and the economy is expected to remain flat for 2010. Referring to inflation, by April 2010, headline inflation rose to 7.3 per cent, with recent figures published by the Central Bank showing that inflation has increased further. Headline inflation rose to 13.7 per cent in June 2010.

Mr. Speaker, through wastage, corruption and mismanagement of the economy, what the past administration has left for us is an economy whereby inflation and unemployment is increasing with a declining GDP. If this persists, it could provide a recipe for disaster, but this will not happen under our watch as we will re-engineer the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker I want to share with you, Luke 21:1. He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the Treasury, and he saw also a certain poor widow putting into it two mites and he said, truly I say unto you that this poor widow has put in more than all. For all of these out of their abundance of putting offerings to God, but she out of her poverty has put in all her livelihood that she had. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, they ran the country with billions and billions of dollars, and when you look at the commensurate assistance to the poor, needy, the elderly in society, they are lagging behind, this administration and in its previous

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

incarnation. It is not that they did not know about the poor and the suffering. It seems as if they simply did not care [*Desk thumping*] for the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, as they did for big buildings that we see in the skyline of Port of Spain. It seems as if they did not care for the senior citizens as much as they cared for a private jet. It seems as if they did not care about the senior citizens as much as they cared for illegal constructions of churches in this country.

Hon. Members: Ooooh!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Mr. Speaker, it seems as if they did not care while they were in air-conditioned cars and houses, living off the creature comforts, the lures and trappings of ministerial office and ministerial power, they forgot about the poor. The rudder of *SS Trinidad and Tobago* after their reign was almost skewed, it was as if just before the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and also in their own party was singing like my colleague, "Captain, the ship is sinking. Captain, the seas are rough."

However, I wish to refer to my erstwhile colleague, the Leader of the Opposition, who sits across from us and, had so eloquently stated in the election that it is was not time to abandon ship, not time to throw the captain overboard, when the ship docked in, it would be time for court martial. Well, we all know what happened to that ship in the last election. It was licks for captain and licks for crew. [*Desk thumping*] However, I wish to express to my colleague, that while the rudder is difficult to adjust on that side and maybe the wind is blowing in one direction, the Government of the People's Partnership will now adjust these sails slowly and methodically, to put the ship on the right course towards prosperity for all.

Mr. Speaker, the 19th Century French writer, Alphonse Karr said:

“Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

Apparently, this applied to the PNM policies. What we have accomplished and what we said that we will do, we will. We will keep our promise to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that elected the People's Partnership by one of the largest majorities, but we looked at their response when we performed and we are very disappointed. We thought that they would have been happy for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Listen to the Member for Parliament for Diego Martin West after we made a statement about the pensions:

“Only a few persons 65 and over will receive a pension of \$3,000, Opposition Leader, Dr. Keith Rowley said”.

Speaking at the public meeting in St. James, Dr. Rowley said:

“The Government’s promise of a \$3,000 was a hoax, since most persons would never see a \$3,000 pension. The promise was that once you are 60 years old and over, you would get \$3,000, whatever your means were. But he noted that the Government did not lower the pensionable age, nor did it remove the income qualifications.”

Furthermore he said:

“What the Government is offering is a \$500 increase.”

There are nine bands Rowley explained. He said persons in the \$2,500 band would receive \$3,000, but for the rest, their pension will be lower than this. Those currently receiving a pension of \$1,950 will now get \$2,350. Those receiving \$1,850 will now receive \$2,200. Those with current pension of \$1,700 will get \$2,200, et cetera. Stating that the United National Congress deceived people into thinking that they would get \$3,000 plus, whatever they were currently getting, Rowley said:

“Nobody is getting that. The Government is lying to you.”

3.00 p.m.

“He added that Social Development Minister, Dr. Glen Ramadharsingh, looked at MPs boldly in our eyes and said, ‘We kept our promise.’”

Ria Taitt, The *Express* headline, “Pension Promise Misleading”.

Dr. Moonilal: He said that? Shame.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Mr. Speaker, I wish now to give you the facts. Promise one, as part of the People’s Manifesto, page 8, contained in the section, “The First 120 days”, number 17:

“We will replace the Senior Citizens’ Grant with Old Age Pension and increase it to \$3,000.”

However, I am advised that there was an advertisement which indicated the People’s Partnership Government to lower the pensionable to 60, and that is our intention, as we have said. However, it is to be stated that the specific promise we made which we are committed to deliver in the 120 days is to remove the grant, replace it with the pension, and increase the value to \$3,000. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Browne: Shame.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: According to MP Rowley, the UNC deceived people into thinking that they were getting \$3,000 plus; whatever they were getting. He said we were lying. I have read the exact promise made in the manifesto. The evidence is clear who is lying. Now, it is easy to forgive someone who utters an untruth when one does not know the truth; but when one knows the truth and still persists in lying, that is tantamount to misrepresentation, Mr. Speaker.

Further to that, Mr. Speaker, the numbers. According to the numbers provided by Mr. Robert Johnson, Applications Specialist, project IHRIS, Ministry of Finance, we see that the total number of persons who will now get more money in their pensions, because this increase has caused a cascade of increases throughout the railway pensions, head of missions, judges pensions, legislators, naval and military, statutory boards, VTEP, firemen pensioners, 19,781 officers will now get increased pensions. [*Desk thumping*]

That works out to 28 per cent or more than one in every four pensioners who will now be receiving a higher pension. Let us look at the other side of the facts, Mr. Speaker. What is the PNM's position on pensions and pensioners?

Mr. Warner: Zero.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: By not supporting our increase—increasing the old age pension to \$3,000—what the MP for Diego Martin West is telling you his position is, he is trying every reason why the increase could not be done: What has been his Government's position.

In *The Express*, November 8th, 2006, the headline was:

“Warning: Save More, Spend Less. Too many citizens ill-prepared for retirement.”

The Governor of the Central Bank warned that too many persons were unprepared for retirement. This prompted the Central Bank Governor to undertake a study of the elderly in the very next year. The data collected in July to August, 2007 was eventually released in January, 2008.

The *Express* of January 23rd 2008 reported:

“Almost half of this country's retirees do not have enough money to give them the standard of living they hope to have in their retirement, according to a National Literacy Survey conducted by the Central Bank between July and August, 2007. Central Bank Governor, Ewart Williams, revealed some of the findings of the survey at the bank offices in Port of Spain yesterday. Based on the survey, Williams said that one in three persons over the age of 60

continues to work because they need additional income, and some 54 per cent of retirees do not have occupational or personal pensions. Many of them said the reason for this was primarily a lack of money.”

Mr. Speaker, listen to this:

“A substantial percentage of respondents, 69 per cent, are relying on Government’s pension, NIS and old age for their retirement income, the Governor said. He added that 70 per cent of the persons surveyed were under stress to manage their finances, and a significant per cent of the people also had problems making ends meet.”

The *Express*, 23rd January, 2008, “Broken and Old, Too Many Retirees in Financial Hell”.

That was in 2007. Did the Government heed the suffering of these pensioners at this time? Were they alarmed about the severity of the conditions the elderly were living under? Did they rush to increase the pensions?

Mr. Roberts: No.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Remember, Mr. Speaker, this was in 2007 and the energy prices were high. Things were nice. Really, really nice. Did they feel sorry for the persons who responded to this survey? No, Mr. Speaker.

I come to the point of madness. When we announced our intention to raise the old age pension to \$3,000, there were a lot of prophets of doom and gloom. Mere days before the general election, the *Trinidad Guardian* reported that the stated desire of the People’s Partnership to give pensioners a higher pension was madness. What they said was that this was impossible to do. But, Mr. Speaker, I want to tell the nation state of Trinidad and Tobago, we have done it, and we have done it in 30 days on the resumption of Parliament, and within the 120 days, as promised. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, you will be aware that in times of crisis, it is always the vulnerable that suffer first. Older persons find themselves in this group. There is a phenomenon in this country of "barrel children", which results from parents going abroad to work to provide a better standard of living for their families. A provision that does not always materialize.

Unemployment and underemployment also place many persons, even in my age cohort, in a disadvantaged position. These are some of the social situations, Mr. Speaker, that are currently impacting on our population; and more so, on the older persons who must stretch and exhaust their reduced incomes as they seek to

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

honour their financial commitments. In this context, we are happy to provide this increased pension of \$3,000 to sustain a decent life for our elderly.

Mr. Speaker, this measure is part of an advanced payment structure that has benefits for all, ensuring that no one will receive an income of less than \$3,000 per month. In effect, Mr. Speaker, the income of persons who qualify for the senior citizens pension and the quantum of the pension will not be less than \$3,000 at the lowest end, and up to \$4,000 at the upper limit.

This is so because we are very concerned about the vulnerable and we are reviewing the landscape of social programming to ensure that no one is marginalized or left out of development in Trinidad and Tobago. In our bid to ensure that no one is left behind and made to subsist on a monthly income lower than \$3,000, we again examine the new payment structure proposed by the recently approved amendments to the Senior Citizens' Grant Act, and recognize that there were older persons whose income is in excess of the ceiling criterion of \$2,800 per month, but below the maximum pension quantum of \$3,000.

In effect, these persons would be living on an income below the maximum value that we are striving to address across the board. In order to address this disadvantage for this category of persons, Mr. Speaker, Cabinet yesterday approved the expansion of the payment structure of the senior citizens pension so that the monthly threshold for meeting the qualifying income is \$3,000 per month, on par with the quantum of the pension. It is a little bit technical with some of the banks. Basically, what we are saying is that yesterday, we foresaw that a certain group might not have gotten the minimum quantum, which is \$3,000, and we took measures to ensure that every single citizen, no one will get less than \$3,000. [*Desk thumping*]

This will also mean, Mr. Speaker—[*Interruption*]

It does not at all mean that this measure is an end in itself. Unlike former increases that were very close to elections when they were made, this measure, together with the concomitant increase, comes with a little bit of love for the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And so, we shall be endeavouring to provide further support to the senior citizens through the Ministry of Health, housing, transport, and social services itself.

Mr. Speaker, within the region, if we look at the case of Barbados and Guyana, we will see that in Barbados, the receipt of a non-contributory pension is not automatic. Barbados has a similar system as exists in Trinidad and Tobago. The quantum of the pension is Barbados \$86 a week, which is the equivalent of US \$176, which is almost TT \$1,108 per month.

While the non-contributory old age pension in Guyana was administered under selective criteria, once a person's monthly income exceeds Guyanese \$75, this person is not entitled to a pension. Guyana, however, has shifted to universal principles, and income is no longer used as a criterion for pension. Effective January, 2006, once the age and residential criteria are satisfied, a pension of \$3,500 Guyanese dollars is payable. This is the equivalent of US \$17.50, or TT \$109.91.

Mr. Speaker, this Government will continue to take social safety net levels way ahead of the rest, as we continue to protect our senior citizens. The Social Welfare Division of the Ministry of the People and Social Development will also provide further support to our elderly in the society. Our elderly, our weak, our sick, our differently abled, will continue to get support from the Public Assistance Grant; the Disability Grant, which is \$1,300; the Household Items Disaster Grant, \$4,500; the Housing Assistance Grant, which is for emergency repair or completion of a house, \$10,000, can be accessed once in your lifetime.

Medical Equipment Grant; Domestic Help Grant. Mr. Speaker, we also have at the Ministry, at the present time, a dietary grant for those who need extra money to buy food. We are committed, and have already started working on modification, redesigning and making these grants, Mr. Speaker, more poor-friendly. But in the interim, they are good grants, in substance; and so, we continue to undertake a review, as is stated in the manifesto, of all of these grants as we go along the path of nation building.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of the People and Social Development believes that resources idle are of no benefit to the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago. The Government must act as a facilitator of growth and development, and also as a connector between the powers of Parliament and Government and Cabinet, and the poor people on the ground of Trinidad and Tobago.

The best surgical equipment in the world is worthless if not given to a good surgeon; and grants are absolutely useless if not given to the needy. Therefore, they serve no purpose locked away in a vault in the grandiose buildings in Port of Spain while the indigent and poor go to sleep hungry in Blanchisseuse, Fishing Pond, Sobo Village and Caratal.

Mr. Warner: Chaguanas.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Therefore, my Ministry embarked on a nationwide outreach appropriately called "Direct Impact". [*Desk thumping*]

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Mr. Speaker, the current services of many of the state agencies must be given to the vulnerable. We must go to the nooks and crannies of Trinidad and Tobago and give social protection, not only to our elders, but to the weak, the sick, the differently abled. In these 14 venues that we had done in one week, close to 10,000 persons had been in attendance. This programme was received with love and hope. Throughout Trinidad and Tobago, we have been to 14 destinations, and we have made arrangements in partnership with the THA to go to Tobago.

With more than 6,000 requests for various services of the Ministry of the People and Social Development, Mr. Speaker, it must be emphasized that after seven years of misplaced priorities, over 5,000 persons came to these outreaches to make desperate pleas that they were unable to meet their daily nutritional requirement. These requests are currently being processed to ensure that the Government responds to these people in need. Mr. Speaker, in comparison, the past administration processed only 3,500 persons for the entire 2009. We doubled that figure in one week by going to the people. [*Desk thumping*]

As I said, Mr. Speaker, these services serve very little in vaults in the capital city. For too long, Mr. Speaker, the elderly of Trinidad and Tobago have considered these programmes to be urban-centric, city driven, and the access has been inaccessible. My Ministry is now appropriately named "The Ministry of the People", and that is where we intend to go; to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, it is symbolic that this debate takes place on the cusp of Emancipation, and I take the opportunity to wish all of you, my African brothers and sisters, the best at this time. Emancipation is, indeed, a very emotional event that represents a people becoming free. The freedom of emancipation, we hope, will also spread to the people of Trinidad and Tobago as we attempt to provide the goods and services as we do here today with this pension.

For too long, our people have seen sophisticated buildings and sophisticated machinery, and they continue to remain outside the verges of these industrial estates to beg in alms. Mr. Speaker, it is our duty to provide our senior citizens with a respectable standard of living. What is the use of boasting that we are the world's largest exporter of ammonia and methanol, while our elderly live in squalor? What is the use of the revenue from LNG if we cannot lift the standard of living of the socially displaced on the streets of Port of Spain?

Mr. Speaker, our people are becoming more and more bored and uninterested in billions of cubic feet of gas, and how much oil reserves we have, and which big international exporting company is coming to the shores of Trinidad and Tobago,

and which smelter plant is going to be built, when some of them do not know if they could pay their rent, or if they could buy food or send their children to school. It is patently clear that there is a disconnect between the collection of our oil and gas rents and its redistribution under the former administration.

The average citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker, were unable to share in the wealth that was generated from Galeota, Point Lisas, and Point Fortin. It is a stark irony that where we have the extractive industries is where we have the greatest poverty in Trinidad and Tobago. In Point Fortin, La Brea and Galeota. No one is saying that anything is wrong with an oil and gas economy. The challenge, Mr. Speaker, is to use it to effect social change and to uplift or people.

In his book, *Trinidad and Tobago Industrialization Policy*, former PNM Minister of Finance, from 1991 to 1995, Wendell Mottley, comments on the dualism in the Trinidad and Tobago economy. According to Mr. Mottley:

“There is also a nexus between the growth of a criminal economy which feeds on drug proceeds and recycled government rent, leading to cascading levels of corruption at the base of state administration, thus creating pervasive perceptions of personal and national insecurity.”

Mr. Speaker, these are not the words of Dr. Glen Ramadharsingh. That was Wendell Mottley; a man who had long seen the light and abandoned the PNM ship which ran aground on May 24th, 2010. [*Desk thumping*]

What Mr. Mottley is saying here is that government money went towards the growth of the criminal economy. So, Mr. Speaker, we must ask ourselves, who really benefited from the largesse of the State in the period, December, 2001 to May, 2010? While the Opposition was in the Government, instead of giving the oil and gas rents to the grandparents, they gave it to the gang leaders. So the rents paid by the oil and gas companies were collected by the Government and handed through a churning process, almost like a beaker, while it was big stirred; crystallized instant millionaires who happened to be bigwigs and friends and families of senior members of the PNM. This must no longer continue.

Mr. Speaker, while some pensionable persons, such as energy czars, benefitted from the PNM, sadly, the average pensioner in Trinidad and Tobago did not see that kind of support from the Government. It begs the question, "What is Development?" We need to change our paradigm of development in Trinidad and Tobago as regards the concept of development. To answer that question, we must not turn to the former administration. It is well known how they define development. Tall buildings across the capital city.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

For a proper understanding of development, we must turn to the Nobel Prize winner, Prof. Amartya Sen, whose work provides the conceptual framework for the United Nations Human Development Index. The aim of that index, as designed by Pakistani economist, Mahbub ul-Haq, is:

“To shift the focus of development and development economics from national income accounting to people-centred policies.”

Mr. Speaker, there is a growing concern among our citizenry that the treatment meted out to them is less than acceptable. I propose to embark on an aggressive campaign of retraining or human resource capacity. One of the reasons, Mr. Speaker; that I went out on direct impact is that for whatever reason, there is a psychological feeling in the poor, indigent and suffering in the society, that the social welfare doors and the Social Development Ministry's doors are not open and warm and welcoming.

And so, we have taken the position that we are going to rearrange the physical infrastructure of the offices of the Ministry of Social Development and redesign them so that persons can enter properly with their wheelchair and with their medical aids; and they can feel comfortable and have some water, and possibly washroom facilities and other comforts that are deserving to our weak, our poor; the most vulnerable of society.

And whilst we are doing that, Mr. Speaker, we are also engaging the services of a person to deliver customer service training to the people who serve at these facilities. Mr. Speaker, I assure you that we will no longer put the person who is not capable of running a desk or being a proper clerk, to go to the front desk. We will put at the front desk, a person of high quality, a person of high knowledge and high capability, to assist to poor of this country. [*Desk thumping*]

This is a people-centred Government, Mr. Speaker. We are a People's Partnership. We know that the poor are suffering, and we heed the words of Gandhi, who said that poverty is the worst form of violence. Gandhi also said that there are people in this world who are so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of food and bread. Sometimes God uses you to provide the bread; the bread that feeds the people who would otherwise starve.

Mr. Speaker, he also said that the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others. We believe that in the process of assisting, as the Bible says, "God helps those who help themselves." We believe in the empowerment of people. We believe that we have to empower our people. We do not have to give them a handout, but we will redesign these products so that they become a hand

up; because Mandela said, Mr. Speaker, that education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world.

Mr. Speaker, we are convinced that the key strategy to achieve sustainable poverty reduction is the concept of teaching people to fish. The preparation of family members for employment or self-employment will be one of the foundations of the programme. The programme will promote hard work. Nothing, Mr. Speaker, works like hard work. Nothing.

Hard work will be a core principle. In this context, persons who can work will be encouraged to do so. It is expected that families' capacity may expand within the programme, where they may be able to explore more challenging opportunities for development. The new approach, Mr. Speaker, must not only encourage families to improve their income, but to improve to quality of their lives.

We will embark on an aggressive campaign to ensure that our poverty reduction strategy has the greatest impact. A committee will be appointed in the shortest possible timeframe to review and assess all programmes. All programmes. And we have it in the manifesto. All programmes that are targeted towards poverty alleviation, we will bring them all together and harmonize and synergize these grants so as to more effectively deliver to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, with the Ministry of the People, it is almost like a syringe full of adrenaline that has been injected into the Ministry of Social Development. Through the Ministry of the People, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago will introduce emergency interface at every public health institution in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

3.30 p.m.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago will introduce emergency interface at every public health institution in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] It will allow for a multi-modal communication for you to email, text, buzz and send a video message to a centre that will monitor and evaluate how your complaints and your issues are treated with; very much like the 911 system in America.

This Government will ensure that managers are leaders in providing frontline customer service. This Government will do all of these things and under the distinguished Leader and Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar. [*Desk thumping*] Just imagine the temerity of the Opposition, trying to poke holes and to engage in semantics, trivializing issues while at the same time going to the population in a local election without a plan of action, without a manifesto, yet they are attacking us on

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

whether we are implementing manifesto promises. What are they conveying? Is it that they are saying they have no plans? Did they not know what to do? Or is it that they just gave up before the election? Or is it all three?

They asked the population, would you believe, to give them a chance. To do what? If you do not have a manifesto what do you ask the people of Trinidad and Tobago to give you a chance to do? We shared our plans and vision with you. We called it "The Flagship of Human Development", and the people of Trinidad and Tobago further endorsed the People's Partnership. [*Desk thumping*] It is very difficult for people to follow a party that does not provide direction. As you would know from Alice in Wonderland, it was said that "If you do not know where you are going, any road will get you there."

Our Government has demonstrated quite clearly an undeniable obligation to ensure that older persons maintain a decent standard of living. We give our commitment to continue to be vigilant and scan the landscape to ensure that our response to all senior citizens continues to be relevant and can increase their chances of enjoying the highest quality of life.

Let me at this point indicate that the Ministry of the People and Social Development has already embarked on a comprehensive review of the policy regarding the senior citizens pension. Extensive changes will be proposed in this honourable House in the shortest possible timeframe to ensure that the senior citizens pension is more responsive to the growing needs and realities of older persons.

Mr. Speaker, you would know that there are serious problems that people face. Some of us have relatives who have faced many problems with regard to the senior citizens pension. We intend to look, and have looked at the residential qualification for the Senior Citizens Grant and this would be revised to be more responsive to the senior citizen.

We will be revisiting the current system of the life certificate exercise. You know that every year they have to search, these elderly persons, whether they live in Matura, or whether they live in Woodlands and they are very sick and weak and they need this money. They have to hire a car; they have to go in the heat and stand up in the line and wait, and wait outside the office and plan a whole day, and sometimes they need their medication; sometimes they are unwell. The whole exercise is stressful and it creates even more suffering and medical ailments as they are stressed out for the entire day. Sometimes it is a grandmother and a grandfather and the children have to endure this pain also to see their grandmother and their grandfather suffering all day in the heat and not being attended to.

We intend to revisit this. Changes will come. In some parts of the world this is done with an officer going out and simply using a simple device and doing a retinal scan and, therefore, ascertaining that this is the person. We can also look at other methods, such as a JP in the area or other persons of high standing to certify that these persons are alive. We will look at it; we will revise it and we will change it for the benefit of those old persons who have suffered for too long in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, though Trinidad and Tobago has made a quantum leap in the area of information technology, there has not been a corresponding response in the administration of various grants. We intend to explore all opportunities. We will survey the technological applications that are available and we will try to synergize them in a way that will benefit the delivery of social services in Trinidad and Tobago.

Sweeping reform is coming with regard to this Pensions Act; sweeping reform that will bring smile, after smile, after smile on the faces of pensioners over Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, we will revisit the calculation of income and the use of savings and lump sum payments in determining the income, thus allowing older persons the ability to save. I do not want to give away all the goodies here today. We will come back to the Parliament with some of these reforms.

Mr. Speaker, to give further comfort to the peoples of Trinidad and Tobago, I want to let you know that a Ministry of the People is coming to every region of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Here, issues will be raised by the people and we will go from the Internet with emails and chat, to knocking on the doors of the persons who live furthest away from that centre. This will provide the people of Trinidad and Tobago with an opportunity to raise issues, gain information and give information like never before. This Ministry of the People will be chaired with a committee comprising of persons of the level of director or higher from every single Ministry in Trinidad and Tobago and, therefore, will respond to the issues of people of Trinidad and Tobago on a timely basis.

This Ministry will give people a form of expression. Where before the voices were lost because it was too high to reach the ears of government in the ivory castles and palatial buildings and the blimp, here now is a government that will bring the voice of the people to the highest levels of government in the shortest possible time. [*Desk thumping*]

We promised and delivered a sister ministry, the Ministry of Justice to demonstrate our commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, who have

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

been promised the delivery of justice in the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago under Chap. 1:01, section 4, which states that:

“It is hereby recognized and declared that in Trinidad and Tobago there have existed and shall continue to exist, without discrimination by reason of race, origin, colour, religion or sex, the following fundamental human rights and freedoms...”

We promised the Ministry of the People and the Ministry of Justice and we have delivered these ministries to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I wish to wind up. [*Crosstalk*] It is said that youth is said to be a beautiful thing. It is said that you cannot be young twice. It is also said in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë that:

“There is no folly so besotted than the idiotic rivalries of society, the prurience, the rashness, the blindness of youth...”

Some even say that youth is such a great thing that it is wasted on the young.

Mr. Speaker, for too long ageing has been seen as a decrease and a decline in productive effort. We, of the People's Partnership, intend by our policies and programmes to lift the spirits of the elderly. [*Desk thumping*] We have lifted the pension and we said that the pension is, in some cases, \$500 more, but it comes with a little bit of love. And I described the programmes and policies and how we will expand them and how we will take them to the people and how we will demonstrate our ability and capacity to care of the old, the weak, the sick and the differently-abled.

We believe that by all of these activities that we will have streaming towards the elderly, that we will inject new life and hope, re-energize and re-invigorate their aspirations and creative energies. We, in the People's Partnership, intend to usher a renaissance in the life force and lifestyles of our elderly and their engagement in building Trinidad and Tobago. This will usher in a new day, a new dawn, because we hold steadfast to it.

Today, we had promised to give back the pension and take away the word "Grant"; we have promised to raise it to \$3,000; that no one will get less than \$3,000. Today, we have done it and with all our promises, we shall do it again. For under the leadership of the hon. Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, we are all committed to serve the people, serve the people, serve the people.

Mr. Speaker, I beg to move.

Question proposed.

Dr. Amery Browne (*Diego Martin Central*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Caroni Central, the Minister of the People and Social Development for his maiden presentation in this honourable House. I think he acquitted himself quite well and I want to congratulate him on this initiation of his service in this Chamber. [*Desk thumping*] It was quite a spirited effort.

I believe he tried to quote the *Bible* and many other sources—misquote or quote the *Bible*—of wisdom and I genuinely hope that Members of this House and even those outside of this House were edified by some of the truisms and the clichés that were shared with us.

3.45 p.m.

Today, I heard nothing works like hard work; God helps those who help themselves which, incidentally, is not in the *Bible*. That is a misquote. I do not know if I heard onward ever backward never, but that may have been included; nothing succeeds like success and other things that may inspire us. I want to commend the words of the good Minister to all who are listening.

Mr. Speaker, considering the point of the calendar in which we find ourselves, I want to join with the very exuberant Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara in wishing every Member of this honourable House and all members of the national community a very peaceful, joyous and blessed Emancipation. It was Bob Marley who said: "none but us can free our minds", and every single son and daughter of Trinidad and Tobago really can stand very tall and proud of the knowledge that freedom exists and strives in our hearts, souls and spirits. No one can take that away from us, unless we chose for that to happen.

Emancipation gives us all the strength to rise above every challenge and every obstacle that we might encounter. It strengthens our faith that tomorrow can be even better than today and it serves as a constant reminder of God's enduring love for each and every one of us so, happy Emancipation. I join with my colleagues on the other side in wishing the nation a joyous Emancipation.

Mr. Speaker, while we are on some of the more pleasant tasks, I also want to join others in congratulating our hon. Prime Minister, Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, on her elevation to the esteemed position of Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and to wish her very well in her tasks, because she is my Prime Minister as well, as this Government is also my Government—

Mr. Warner: Who is your leader?

Dr. A. Browne:—and these Ministers are also my Ministers, and I would hope the Ministers of all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. We genuinely wish you well, despite the very uncharitable utterances from one side. We genuinely wish you very well, because if this Government and its team does well, the country of Trinidad and Tobago will do well.

Mr. Speaker, the next five years on paper or academic years on the future of this country will be years that we would never be able to gain or retrieve again and, therefore, I genuinely wish those on the other side a very blessed term in office. We want you to do well.

Sometimes what we want and what we receive are two different things. I sincerely feel it is too early to come to any complete conclusion or judgment on the performance of this very new Government, but what we can judge is the start that they have made, and the initial signs and signals that they are sending to the population of Trinidad and Tobago, and there is where some of us are becoming very concerned.

It would appear that some Members opposite have already, in a very short space of time, become quite bloated and arrogant in the election successes that have been noted, and some of the utterances have become very harsh, caustic and not in keeping with what the citizens would have expected and voted for, in addition to the dignity of this honourable House.

Mr. Speaker, I was very disturbed—I know the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara is very exuberant and he has a bit of a talk show persona—in my very first sitting on returning to this House to see Members doing things like chewing gum and conducting themselves in a manner, I am sure their seniors who are looking on would be very disappointed in. [*Desk thumping*] I just want to say that we will do our best to uphold the standards on this side of the House.

So while we are exuberant, some of us might be new, we all knew at some point or the other—

Dr. Moonilal: We will learn.

Dr. A. Browne:—I agree with the very wise Member for Oropouche East that they will learn. They say time is the best teacher, but time also destroys its students. So, be careful as you learn not to be destroyed.

Mr. Speaker, we have been taking very careful note of the utterances of the hon. Prime Minister and the Minister of the People and Social Development on the issue of pensions, and the issue of financial support to the senior citizens of

Trinidad and Tobago. There is something about the public record and there is something about the *Hansard* record that makes it very difficult to evade, to throw up smoke and to avoid what one has said; what one has committed to; and what one has promised to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

I believe there are many citizens, particularly those over 60 years of age, who would have sat today and listened to the hon. Member for Caroni Central with a great deal of disappointment, alarm and disturbance, because it is clear that this Government is not keeping its word to those citizens. [*Desk thumping*] It is obvious. So, while we cannot cast full judgment, we can already begin to mark our concern in fulfilling our role of holding this Government to account and also ensuring that they fulfil what they have committed to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

We have a statement from the hon. Minister which was made a few weeks ago, and we now have his words in the honourable House today, and it is clear to me that there is a clear, deliberate and carefully crafted strategy to clamp down or dismount from some of the very ambitious and reckless promises that were made during the election campaign. It is obvious and they cannot hide from that fact. They made commitments to cause citizens to cast their votes, including citizens over 60 years, and with this statement and his presentation today, it is obvious they have no intention of keeping their word to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] They must be disappointed.

The irony of it is that there was actually some degree of chest beating and celebration and posturing as if the Minister and the Government is bringing a gift to all the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, we will take our time—we will not take all the time—and look at what has been said; at what has been committed and what is not being delivered here today to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. It is a very woeful tale, despite the exuberance; despite all the clichés and despite all of the references, French philosophers et al, there is a very woeful tale to be told, and I am confident that the senior citizens are paying careful attention.

Mr. Speaker, it would be remiss of this Government to underestimate the intelligence of our senior citizens, because they pay very close attention. They monitor the media very closely; they listen to every single word that is said, and when you step out of line, believe me, they will hold you to account, and some of us know that very well. What is being said here in this Bill and what was delivered in that opening speech will cause great concern amongst some of our senior citizens.

Mr. Speaker, this administration is actually teaching the nation a lesson that they should never forget. The lesson is, there is a difference between campaign

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

logic and the logic that can govern a country. There is a clear and graphic difference. There is a difference between platform gimmicks and the reality of daily life in any country. We have a stark example in this very short Bill, which is six pages long. When one looks at the clauses, it is actually two pages long; very short, very deceptive. I do not want to use the word lazy, but in the two months in office, if this is the best package that can be delivered to senior citizens, well it does not bode well for the future; it really does not bode well.

This Government—Mr. Speaker, you have to give Jack his jacket and give credit where credit is due—is brilliant and outstanding but already they are showing signs they are going to be atrocious at the reality of governance. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, let me give him a cliché, the more things change, the more they stay the same. We saw the same thing with the NAR administration; we saw the same thing with the last UNC administration and it is the same, once again promises, promises; promises and talk, talk, talk and absolutely no delivery to the citizens who need delivery. And we will cut through all of the smoke and all of the mirrors today—myself and my colleagues—and expose this Government for the sham that they have brought to this honourable House, smiling, boasting and beating their chests that they are delivering gifts to our golden generation; absolutely not.

They promised to restore public trust and faith in good offices held by Government, but they have done absolutely nothing to support that. The Press Secretary—I believe that is his position—Mr. Garvin Nicholas, when asked to characterize this term in office in one of the morning programmes, he responded: "What I would like to see is that people would see that this Government keeps its word." These are surprisingly profound words from Mr. Nicholas.

We are going to ask a question today and then we are going to answer the question: Does this Government keep its word and by bringing this Bill is it keeping its word? The Minister made a certain representation, but I put it to you that is not the accurate picture at all, and I am being very diplomatic in how I am phrasing it, and we are going to get down to some of those details. What the people of Trinidad and Tobago would like to see is if you make a promise, you keep the promise.

Many persons over 60 years are following this debate right now and what they would have heard, thus far, is a lot of statistics and quotations, poetry, French philosophers and loaded language, all adding up to one thing; they are not getting what they voted for.

On May 24, 2010 a contract was entered into between the citizens and this Government, and it is clear that the Government is breaking that contract today.

They have been hoodwinked, deceived and bamboozled and they casted their vote with a certain understanding, but now the tune has changed and the mask is beginning to slip. We are not giving you what you expected, but we will still smile, beat our chest and pretend this is a gift to the nation for our grandparents and our parents. The mask is beginning to slip.

Mr. Speaker, our seniors are fully aware that at some point or the other, they will fall under the kind attention of any one of the Ministers opposite. Some of them have already been commenting with grave concern on some of the utterances of the Minister of Health on the other side, and woe betide any senior who might fall under her direct purview, given some of the pronouncements she has already been making. I am wondering if the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West might be wishing to go back and lend a hand in that Ministry seeing that he spent a few moments giving assistance on that side, but I understand he is also needed very badly at the Ministry of the People and Social Development as well.

Mr. Speaker, there is story of a gene in a bottle. There was once a gene that was trapped in a bottle and the gene said if you grant—[*Interruption*]—Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, you are no longer on a talk show. You can no longer consider yourself so, and you will do well to sit and listen in this honourable House. I heard someone call in recently and said that a steel muzzle needs to be put on you. I would not agree with that, but I would just ask you for the respect that we all grant to one another. Welcome to the Lower House of Parliament. [*Desk thumping*]

4.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, genie in a bottle. The genie told the person who found him, "If you release me I would grant you three wishes." They opened the bottle, released the genie and the genie then laughed and said, "You are very foolish to have believed in a genie in the first place." None of the wishes were granted. There is some irony in that story because the UNC [*Interruption*] has found itself trapped in the bottle of Opposition for many years. Some would say, for too long they have found themselves trapped in the bottle of Opposition and they are determined to say and do anything possible to get out of that bottle. [*Crosstalk*] Say and do anything possible to steal a vote or two from the hearts of our dear citizens. [*Interruption*]

Well, I will show you. [*Interruption*] Three of the wishes that they said they would grant to the citizens if we let them out of that bottle of opposition: I will give \$3,000 automatic and guaranteed to everyone over 60 years of age; I will lift the minimum wage to \$20 per hour; and I will not live in that symbol of

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

extravagance, the Royal Palace. Three wishes! Now you will laugh; you will chew your gums; you will sit back in your chairs, but now that you are out of the bottle what are you telling the population? [*Interruption*] You should not believe in campaign logic. You should not believe in platform gimmicks and now that you are out, clearly the tune has changed. That is the strategy of the United National Congress. That is the strategy of this Government.

Mr. Speaker, this six-page Bill, I am sorry to say, is actually bad law. It is ill-conceived; it is deceptive; it is very simplistic and it is actually going to create serious inequities with regard to retired public servants, and public servants who will be retiring in the future. This is actually—I know you take it as very simple and you have two pages of clauses. This is actually a very dangerous piece of legislation, particularly as it is clear that the Minister does not fully comprehend what he has laid in the honourable House today. I do not think he comprehends the full implications.

Miss Hospedales: He does not know.

Dr. A. Browne: But I must credit my friends on the other side, they have put a brave face on it—I believe they have been advised by the hon. Member for Tunapuna; a very distinguished Minister of Finance—that many of the things they have said before simply cannot hold water, and the strategy now, is how can we climb down from those positions while maintaining a facade of keep the promises.

This Opposition will never sit back and allow that charade to occur, and that is why we are here today to expose the Government and expose this Bill for exactly what it is. [*Interruption*] Even worse than breaking the promises, they have begun denying that they even made those promises in the first place.

Miss Hospedales: Yes. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. A. Browne: What audacity when there is a record and we will go deep into the record today to demonstrate, not only that the promises were made, but also that the promises are being denied. What a tangled web we weave when we practice to deceive, and this UNC team has had very great practice in deceiving the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I am not singling out any particular—

Mr. Peters: You all deceived the teachers.

Dr. A. Browne: The teachers? You all called them criminals, why are you talking about teachers today? Leave the teachers out of this. We would talk about that later on—and this is my good friend from Mayaro.

In trying to decipher what the commitment that this UNC Government has made, there are three very good sources of content:

1. The media coverage, and there was extensive media coverage, particularly during the build up to the general election date;
2. There is also the very expensive and beautiful manifesto, which we shall take a look at. Now, we have not torn up the manifesto. It is here in all its beauty. Very expensive document and we would be relying on that today.

Mr. Roberts: Oh yes!

Dr. A. Browne: Oh yes, definitely. They were critical of our manifesto. They tore it up. We have kept theirs and we shall absolutely hold you to your word today.

The third source in deciphering, in cutting through the smoke and deciphering exactly what was promised to our senior citizens, is the fact that this team—the UNC actually paid money to the media to place ads in the week leading up to that moment when our senior citizens, those 60 years and over would have walked into that voting booth to exercise their democratic franchise. Paid advertisements! Not something interpreted by a reporter, or an editor or a journalist. Money paid, the exact and direct word of a team seeking office a few days before the general election. [*Crosstalk*] So we will take a look at all three of those sources.

I would want to begin with an article from the *Newsday* newspaper; the people's newspaper. A very interesting name for a newspaper. On July 17, 2010 written by Mr. Sean Douglas—a journalist by the name of Sean Douglas—and he has made extensive reference in this *Newsday* article to the Government pronouncements on the senior citizens issue. At one point the article said:

“No-one earning over \$2,800 in private-income would receive a pension, reveals the Bill.

The Bill also proposes a range of pensions”—not a \$3,000 pensions—“in relation to the range of incomes, therefore, a pensioner who has private income of \$500 a month would receive \$3,000”—that part sounds familiar—“but the person who earns \$2,800 a month would receive \$1,200. Currently persons who earn up to \$100 receive a \$2,500 grant and those with a \$2,800 income get \$700.”

Mr. Douglas goes on in his article, he was referencing the statement made by the hon. Minister in this House and I quote:

“Ramadharsingh did not spell out the cost of these changes.”

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

I am sure when Mr. Douglas writes about today he would say the same thing or make any reference to the cost of these changes.

I continue to quote:

“However he apparently quashed a wide-spread view that the eligibility age”—
[*Crosstalk*] I am sorry I have been influenced by another—“would be reduced to 60 years as he repeatedly referred to a pension age of 65 years as currently obtains.”

I have a question to ask those opposite. How did that view with regard to age 60 years come a widespread view? How did that become widespread? What is the source of that view? Did our senior citizens conjure that in their dreams? [*Interruption*] Did your talk show colleague make that up? Is that what I am hearing on the other—be careful what you are saying you know. Is that what I am hearing? Because is the Government denying that Members on that side are the source of that information? [*Interruption*] All right, I have seen you have withdrawn.

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Douglas goes on in this article and I quote again:

“A few weeks ago, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar denied ever promising to lower the pension qualifying-age.”

I want to repeat that, Mr. Speaker, and this article was on July 17.

“A few weeks ago, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar denied ever promising to lower the pension qualifying-age.”

I am not sure where the hon. Prime Minister is at this very moment, but was she here I would ask her if this is accurate reporting or is she contesting the veracity of this particular statement? Did she deny ever promising to lower the pension qualifying age for the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. Speaker, these are very serious matters, because as we have already indicated a contract was entered into between the citizens and this team on May 24, 2010 and I am very sorry to begin to conclude that there is no intention of honouring that contract.

Mr. Douglas is not the only source of reference in this particular issue. He is not the only source! I want to quote from a letter to the editor written by Mr. M.F. Rahman [*Interruption*] a name that should be very familiar to those on the other side. In no way can he be referenced as a PNM advocate or someone who might be biased against the Government. This letter was written on July 21, 2010. It is a very wide-ranging letter to the editor. Mr. Rahman begins:

“The campaign promise of the People's Partnership to abolish the PNM contrived Senior Citizen's Grant...and to reinstate Old-Age Pension...as an

unqualified right for 60 year olds is now on the brink of revision that renders it a virtual clone of what it purports to replace.”

He goes on:

“All it now appears to undertake is to increase the existing grant from the PNM's last minute \$2,500 figure by \$500.”

Miss Hospedales: That is true.

Dr. A. Browne: He ended his letter by stating and I quote:

“Now it can be said that the PP”—he said PP, but I think he means People's Partnership. I would hope that is what he means—“made rash promises without understanding the art of finance, or that it deliberately lied to the electorate.

The PP is advised to revisit this promise in a holistic context and to make good on its pledge. They can do it and will rise for their integrity and wisdom.”

Well, these are very wishful words and wishful thinking, but it is clear today—and maybe he is listening right now—his heart would have fallen on the words of the Member for Caroni Central because it is clear that this Government is resolute in not keeping the promises that they made. He might be a potential recipient, and it is clear that they are intent on not keeping those promises.

Mr. Speaker, let us look at these references again, because we are trying to cut through the smoke and mirrors that were laid out. I refer to the *Guardian* newspaper of Saturday, July 17, 2010; an article written by Mr. Richard Lord:

“Recently, Persad-Bissessar denied claims that the pension hike would be applicable for senior citizens 60 years and over.

Meanwhile, Ramadharsingh said the pension was an entitlement and not a grant that could be withdrawn at anytime.”

Mr. Speaker, we are cutting through some of the smoke and mirrors. It is clear from some of these articles that there is something amiss.

The next source of information is this well designed, pretty document. [*Holds up People's Partnership manifesto*] [*Desk thumping*] Keep your thumping hands ready because you are going to hear your words in a few minutes. Keep those thumping hands ready. Mr. Speaker, again, the chest beating, the table beating, the smiling and the arrogance; does it sound familiar? [*Crosstalk*] That is what they were accusing the other side of and that is exactly what they are demonstrating in this honourable House. [*Crosstalk*] But these words are going to continue to haunt them.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

4.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I turn to page 41—we are so happy that we did not tear this document up because it is going to be very useful today—of the manifesto, and look at the title.

Ms. Cox: Let us hear it.

Dr. A. Browne: "Aging population: Life begins at 60". [*Desk thumping*] So, Minister, you and I have not started living as yet. That is obvious. These are serious words. This is the contract you entered into with the citizens and the potential voters. Here is the promise, Mr. Speaker: "A fair deal for older people." A fair deal is not what we have on our hands.

Mr. Speaker, this is one of the promises under a fair deal for older people: "Ageing population: Life begins at 60."

"Remove all restrictions and qualifications for people to receive an Old Age Pension, and thus every citizen will automatically"—Mr. Speaker, are you hearing—"receive a State-funded Old Age Pension upon attainment of pensionable age."

Every citizen! [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Dr. A. Browne: You know the saying about hurriedness. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your protection. They thumped their desks just now, but you realize they are protesting at their own words that have come back to haunt them.

"Remove all restrictions"—it is English: it is not French: it is not Latin—"and qualifications for people to receive an Old Age Pension and thus every citizen will automatically receive a State-funded Old Age Pension upon the attainment of pensionable age. [*Interruption*]—Increase the value"—hold on!

Mr. Speaker, it seems you are being called into action. You are protecting the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara. Okay—of the monthly old age pension to an entitlement of \$3,000.

But when you listen to the Minister today, there is no old age pension entitlement of \$3,000. Some of those over 65 years will receive \$3,000; many of those over 65 years will receive less than \$3,000; and none of those between 60 and 65 years will receive a single cent in complete violation of the promise that was made to the potential voter. [*Crosstalk*] No, No, we are coming to that.

Mr. Speaker, there is a third source because again, they are here denying their own words. Look at this beautiful, beautiful ad, and I have to credit the Member for Chaguanas West. They know how to spend their money. Look at this beautiful ad. [*Ad displayed*] A lovely smiling pleasant face of someone whom I assume is a senior citizen. He looks very healthy and strong.

Miss Cox: What did the ad say?

Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Speaker, let me tell you when this ad was run. The ad was run in the *Daily Express*. They chose several newspapers strategically to run this ad and the sinister nature of this UNC cabal. The *Daily Express*—that was before you took office, Sir. I will not trouble you, Member for Moruga/Tableland—Wednesday 19 May, in the year to our Lord, 2010, a smiling happy gentleman, probably the subliminal message, come and vote.

Under this smiling gentleman—Member for Moruga/Tableland, I would advise you to settle in your seat because this is an ad you paid for. This is a paid ad placed by the UNC, and I want to read it into the *Hansard* record:

“Upon reaching pensionable age (60 years)”—[*Interruption*]

May 19, the Prime Minister subsequently denied— They are here in this House today denying— You want to hear it again?

Mr. Speaker, it is English; it is not Latin. The gentleman is smiling at us. He probably wants our attention.

“Upon reaching pensionable age (60 years), every citizen will automatically qualify for a state funded old age pension.”

Member for St. Augustine, I see you squinting. Your eyesight is probably as weak as mine. Thump the desk now, Member for St. Augustine.

Upon reaching pensionable age of 60 years, every citizen—I am reading that very potential voter will automatically qualify for a state funded old age pension.

Now, I would like to be very kind to the hon. Member for Caroni Central, but he really stepped afoul today when he attempted to make the Member for Diego Martin West eat his words, when the only words that will be eaten today are the words that were pronounced by the United National Congress with regard to this pension. [*Desk thumping*] The Member for Diego Martin West was absolutely correct in what he was accusing you of, and those accusations will continue to stick. Let us see

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

what he said. God bless them. *Newsday*, Wednesday July 21, 2010, headline: "Rowley: PP making false promises", an article written by Sean Douglas and I quote:

“Rowley said that the PP had changed its tune on old-age pensions. He said the PP had promised that every person reaching age 60 years would qualify for a \$3,000 pension.

'They way they put it across, they said there will be no qualification.'...All you have to be qualified is to reach age 60'...

He said the PP Government was now offering only about \$500 monthly extra to pensioners, if they have no other source to income.”

I want to say, Member for Caroni Central, you owe the Member for Diego Martin West an apology here today. [*Desk thumping*] Would you wish to proceed? Clearly, he has changed his tune. I do not want to be accused of overkill, but evidence falls to hand, it must be used.

Mr. Speaker, another ad—when was this ad run? Saturday, May 21. These were heavy days. These were the days when our seniors were considering who they should vote for. Look at this ad; this one is truly sinister: "Prosperity for all: Manifesto 2010." They reproduced the paid advertisement as a section of this ad, and now they are denying that these things were mentioned in the manifesto. It is the identical ad: Senior citizen grant replaced by an increase to \$3,000 old age pension. Your entitled right restored. Upon reaching pensionable age 60 years, every single citizen will automatically qualify for a state funded old age pension. Shame on this Government.

Hon. Members: Shame! Shame!

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Dr. A. Browne: Talk about hoodwinking the population.

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Speaker, it has started. Look at their attitude today.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, may I ask you to have some order so that when the hon. Member for Diego Martin Central is speaking, I would like to hear him? So could we have some peace and silence? Continue.

Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Speaker, I salute you. They were thumping their desks and beating their chest a little earlier. They try to make a deceiver out of the Member for Diego Martin West, but their words have come back to haunt them

today. We had the newspaper articles which were very clear, and which also had some accusations directed at the hon. Prime Minister. We have their manifesto in black, white and yellow, and we also have their paid advertisements in full smiling colour. What we had today, is a very—*[Interruption]* No, I am not accusing the Minister of anything—carefully constructed effort to climb down from those very clear positions, to deceive the public and the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. There is no way around it.

Mr. Speaker, I accuse this Government of deceiving the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago on this issue of senior citizen. *[Desk thumping]* I accuse this Government of breaking its word to senior citizens age 60 and over. *[Desk thumping]* I accuse the hon. Prime Minister of not being forthright in continuing to deny having made those promises. *[Desk thumping]* It is on the record. I accuse the hon. Minister opposite of coming today and boasting about bringing a gift to senior citizens, when in fact he has produced a simple six-page Bill that actually stabs many of them in the heart because *[Desk thumping]* they are expecting something they shall not get.

In bringing this Bill and these measures today, this Government is actually disenfranchising tens of thousands of the citizens that it has pledged to serve. *[Desk thumping]* Senior citizens and their families, children, their grandchildren, all of whom—*[Interruption]* Well, you want to say they thief the vote. I will show you that it is exactly over 100,000.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. *[Miss M. Mc Donald]*

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: It is almost 4.30 p.m., I would like to at this time suspend the sitting of the House until 5.00 p.m. at which time the Member for Diego Martin Central will continue.

4.30 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Speaker, I think we spent some time making it very clear on what was promised and what is being delivered, and also registering our deep concern and deep disappointment in the Government in coming here today and pretending that they were keeping their promise when, in fact, they are absolutely doing no such thing.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Mr. Speaker, I even recall a phrasing that within 30 days of the election, our senior citizens can walk out to their mailboxes, check their mailboxes, to see their \$3,000 cheque. Now many of them are realizing—

Miss Hospedales: Disappointing.

Dr. A. Browne: Well, they are disappointed. They are realizing they will find no such \$3,000 cheque. Some will find \$3,000, some will find less; and many of those who would have expected—being exposed to the material put out by the UNC, would have been expecting some cheque when, in fact, they will get no cheque. And the words, "automatic" and "without qualification" would be ringing in their ears. And, of course, the words, "60 years" will be ringing in their ears and they will realize that something has gone horribly wrong with regard to this particular issue of financial support for senior citizens.

Mr. Speaker, there are different levels, just as before. Different bands of payment; and it is no such automatic \$3,000, as was advertised; as was put out; as was celebrated time and time again; and as was the case when persons were making a decision as to whom they should vote for in the general election of 2010.

Mr. Speaker, when you tell senior citizens of this country that at age 60 years they will automatically qualify for a \$3,000 full pension, no matter what country they reside in or what their income is, that is what they will expect, that is what they will vote for, and it is on that basis that they would cast their ballot. And they did say all seniors. In fact, the reference was all citizens, but clearly it meant all seniors over 60 years.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister also mentioned in passing, the ravages of crime and gang violence and other crimes; but in doing so, he highlighted yet another broken promise of the UNC's manifesto on page 12 when they say that they will:

“...prepare an immediate action plan for containing criminal activities and reducing the number of murders—the first phase will be from June 2010 to December 2010.”

Mr. Speaker, if I check the calendar, we are just about in the month of August, 2010 right now.

Remember the first phase they promised would be from June, 2010 to December, 2010. We are just heading into August, 2010 and I have yet to see such a plan. Member for Couva South, have you seen the immediate action plan? First phase? What date did it start? Was it June? Thank you, Member for Couva South. Mr. Speaker, the Member for Couva South has no clue about this plan. *[Laughter]* He is a very pleasant person, but he does not want to incriminate his colleagues with another false promise. Incriminate might be a sharp word.

Mr. Speaker, the reality is despite all the talk of plan and no plan, and so forth, the murders continue to rise very sharply in Trinidad and Tobago. That must be a concern for the Government. It is certainly a concern for all Members of the Opposition. I do not want to trouble my dear friend from Chaguanas East at all. He is a very distinguished Member and Minister, but I wonder if he might be thinking that it might be time for another death march sometime soon. I do not know. Maybe the change of position may have changed his orientation in that regard. Mr. Speaker, when one tells seniors that they might be able—[*Interruption*]

I am glad to make you smile, Mr. Speaker. When one tells seniors that they will be able to stroll on an evening without being worried about their safety or without being worried about being murdered once they vote out the PNM, that is what they would expect. It is on that basis that they would cast their ballots. And then, our seniors would open the newspaper today and see headless babies and mothers, and slaughter in garbage dumps, and so forth, and an increase in the homicide rate. I know the Government will be saying to our seniors, it is the police and not the Government that must stop this activity, but that is not what they were saying two months ago, or for the last eight years, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister also referred to a 1999 survey of older persons, way back in 1999, which flagged health care and health considerations as another area that deeply concerned senior citizens. But in doing so, I think he inadvertently flagged another broken promise of this Government. When you tell seniors just before they vote that they will not have to wait in corridors for a hospital bed, and that environmental threats to health will be reduced; and then they see that it continues to happen in the healthcare system and you hear the Minister of Health talking about the aetiology of dengue and pinning it on the winds that are blowing in South Trinidad, it must give cause for concern, that maybe even with regard to the health of our seniors, we are not really heading in the right direction.

Mr. Speaker, it is relevant, because the two age cohorts that are most at risk from dengue haemorrhagic and death due to dengue fever are the very young and the very, very old. Mr. Speaker, the Minister also referred to the issue of seniors providing care and nutritional support for the younger ones, the extended families, and the young ones in their care. In doing so, he again inadvertently flagged another broken promise of this Government.

When you tell seniors that after they vote, you will make food cheap again, and when they look at the continued escalation in the food inflation rate—food inflation has skyrocketed in this country—and the Government is not saying

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

anything that will bring any comfort to any citizen or any senior citizen. Mr. Speaker, there are a litany of broken promises, all of which would concern the senior citizens.

Shockingly, the Minister also made reference to the issue of employment and under-employment, placing citizens in a disadvantaged position and driving some abroad to work. But when you have told seniors and their children and their grandchildren that family members will be less dependent on them, the seniors, for a living, because you will provide higher wages, you will provide better job security—you remember those promises, I hope?

You will provide maternity benefits and all those other things—and, of course, a higher minimum wage, a better benefit—that is what they will cast their ballots on, and that is what they will use when they go into the voting booth. Unfortunately, the reality in a very short space of time is that there has been a consistent process of firing workers right across Trinidad and Tobago. On-the-Job Trainees; persons in contract positions; Local Government staff; employees of Government ministries; and other categories of citizens, Mr. Speaker. Who will have to pick up the slack from these activities? Who will have to pick up the slack? [*Interruption*]

Ask the Member for Fyzabad. He will have to answer some of those questions. It is the senior citizens who will have to take up the slack and assist some of their younger ones, Mr. Speaker. Many persons returning home, if they had a mortgage to pay.

Mr. Speaker, it is clear from all indications that this Government has been working very hard to enter the Guinness book of broken promises, and that is nothing new for the United National Congress. This Bill that the good and noble Member for Caroni Central has brought is yet another reminder that this Government, honestly, though they must be given a chance, they must be looked at very, very closely, as we are not sure that they can be trusted at all. We are not sure that this Government can be trusted because it is clear that this Government does not keep its word to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, they may ask the question, "Why did the PNM not do all these things with automatic qualification, removal of criteria, removal of residency, and so forth?" The fact of the matter is, Mr. Speaker, the PNM never promised to do these things. We never put out those promises to induce a vote. We never made those promises of benefits to seniors and then take them away, and then deny promising them in the first place and then boasting about giving them a gift. What kind of behaviour is that, Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara? Very disappointing.

Mr. Speaker, there are three choices for persons in authority or public life. We can elevate the public discourse; we can simply mirror the public discourse; or we

can, in our actions and words, lower the public discourse. There are many complex issues that we have to treat with, and the Government will have to treat with. Corporal punishment in schools. There are a number of urban legends about the issue of corporal punishment; because it is a complex issue. The issue of hanging is a complex issue; school violence; condom usage; and many other things. And the issue of financial assistance to seniors is also fairly complex.

What the Minister failed to say, Mr. Speaker, he neglected to tell us a number of things. He neglected to tell us the financial—the cost of these measures being proposed. He did not do so in a statement. He did not do so today. But I am sure in his winding up, he will make those indications, and also let us know, with a supposedly empty treasury, the source of those funds; the origin of those funds.

Mr. Speaker, there are other things the Minister failed to tell us in his opening presentation. He failed to say that a fairly consistent programme of financial assistance for seniors has been in place in this country for a very long time; since 1939, beginning with the Moines West Indian Commission. You see, you have to understand that to know what you are doing in the future, and he made no reference to that. [*Interruption*]

Well, you know, it is interesting. Because you promised change and now you are saying nothing has changed, and this Bill is really a demonstration that nothing has changed. You are keeping the same measures in place. So I am glad you are making that point, my dear friend, sitting very close to us on this side.

Mr. Speaker, there are other things the Member failed to tell us today. He failed to say that over the years, since 1939; before I was born; before the Minister was born; clearly, before you were born, Mr. Speaker—[*Interruption*] Mr. Speaker, I will not allow D'Abadie/O'Meara to distract me. For all those years, the same three—and this is important—the same three criteria have been used: age, 65 years; residency, you have to spend the bulk of your life in Trinidad and Tobago; and income; since 1939.

All that has been done since then is adjustments being made, particularly with regard to the income thresholds and increases in the quanta of the grants over the years. The Minister also failed to say that this financial assistance to seniors has always been means tested. That is not something that was just introduced. It has always been means tested. Whatever the name of the programme has been, qualification depended on satisfying particular criteria; and that is very important.

Mr. Speaker, over the years, governments have increased the ceiling amount and they have increased the quanta, but no commitment has ever been made or was ever made that all criteria would be removed. No commitment has ever been

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

made. And if we look across the Caribbean region, Guyana is the only country that has made that step to remove all the qualifying criteria except for age. So in Guyana, everyone gets that automatic pension when they attain pensionable age, but because it has to be spread across such a large segment, rich and poor seniors, the amount that is provided is only very small.

The Minister referred to some very dated statistics. He said in Guyana, the amount is about TT \$109 per month. Minister, unfortunately, your facts are outdated. As of January, 2010, the Guyanese Government increased its income support for senior citizens, so now it is just about TT \$215 per month. So it is double what you gave us as of January, 2010, and that is the only territory in the region that provides that type of income support; but clearly, if that approach is taken, only very, very small amounts per senior can be provided.

So, since 1939. No commitment has ever been made that all the criteria would be removed and that one would get a cheque in the mailbox based simply on one's age. That has never been done until election 2010—May the 24th, 2010—until the UNC decided they wanted to get out of that bottle of opposition. Until the Member for Caroni Central decided that he wanted to bring measures that would somehow induce particular votes; and that was platform logic, Mr. Speaker, and not the logic of good governance. It is clear that that is the case.

They have not kept their word. What they have done is brought some smoke and mirrors, and instead of creating a true pension by making qualification automatic once one reaches 60 years, as is promised, they keep the age at 65; they keep the residency criterion; they keep the income qualification criterion; they keep the nine different payment bands which the PNM put in place.

They ensure that only a minority—that is what they are doing. They ensure that only a minority of the expectant seniors; only a minority of the seniors who would be expecting that cheque in their mailboxes would actually get the promised amount. And they simply bring a Bill to change to name. They take the population to be that gullible, and tell you that you now have a guaranteed pension for all seniors, when, in fact, you have something that is very, very, very far from that.

They have a grant that applies to a minority of seniors that has now been relabelled a pension that still applies only to a minority of seniors, and we know that this Government believes in relabeling. There are a million examples. Mr. Speaker, the United Nations World Population Ageing Report tells us that in 2010, there are 156,000 senior citizens in this country over the age of 60 years. One hundred and fifty-six thousand seniors, 60 years and over.

Mr. Speaker, with this six-page Bill, this Government has disenfranchised about 71 per cent of these persons; because 71 per cent of these 156,000 persons would have been expecting their pension, as we now call it, and will not be receiving. And we demonstrated quite clearly that those expectations would have been well founded, because that was the consistent word of this Government, until something happened; until the votes were cast, Mr. Speaker. Very, very disappointing behaviour by this Government; and they really need to steer away from campaign logic and more towards the logic of governance.

The Minister also said he was taking steps—very dramatic announcement—to make the programme evolve.

“Embark on a comprehensive review of the policy so that the senior citizens’ pension is more responsive.”

A lot of words. I do not know if the staff may have told him, but that work has already been done. So I do not know if there is some double counting taking place, but if he looks into his office, over the last several months, a lot of work has taken place; specific recommendations coming out of the Social Welfare Division, collaborating with the Division of Ageing. It is there. I know what you are trying to do. To come in a few weeks or months and say "Tada! We have done it!" But I just want to whisper to you, it has already been done. Your work has been made very easy for you and there is no need for further smoke and mirrors in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, a lot of work has been done. There is talk about outreach programmes; and again, the announcement, as if this was something new. Over the last year or so, the Hon. Minister of State—the former Minister of State in the Ministry—has been working very closely with the staff, rolling out exactly these same outreach programmes, reaching tens of thousands of citizens. So do not try—[*Interruption*] I did not call any name.

Do not try to pretend, Mr. Speaker, that—[*Interruption*] They are telling me to ignore you. Do not give you any credibility at all. To try to pretend that these are new measures. Not at all. Training of staff, and so forth. All the curricula are there. The training has already been initiated. So these dramatic announcements that something new is being done really carry no weight, Mr. Speaker.

He mentioned in passing, the issue of persons with disabilities. You know what some of the disabled persons are saying? Now, the disability assistance grant has been increased several times in the past, including within the last two and a half years. Mr. Speaker, some of the disabled community are saying that two

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

months ago, senior citizens got their largest increase in the history of financial support to that sub-population; to senior citizens. The largest increase.

They are saying that if this Government really was compassionate and looking to do something comprehensive, when they are bringing this additional increase, they would have simultaneously considered the issue of the disabled, and maybe topping up their grant as well. So they are also a little bit disappointed, but I am sure when the good Member for Tunapuna completes his budget reviews, they may have some hope, maybe at budget time? Yes? At budget time, Minister?

He said no? All right. Hopefully, we will get there, but I am just reflecting for your knowledge, and maybe you will respond in your winding up, that persons from the community of disabled persons have also expressed some concern that this is the second fairly close together increase in this financial assistance where they have not gotten an increase since last time; so that is another concern on which I would like to reflect.

The Minister also failed to mention the many other measures being taken to treat with seniors and to improve their lives in Trinidad and Tobago. I want to tell them it is not just about money, despite his quote from Oscar Wilde—a shocking quote in this House—saying that money is the most important thing in life. Could you imagine that, Mr. Speaker? Money is the most important thing in life. A lot of seniors, having lived many years and have gained wisdom, might tell him, "Young man, not at all. Money is not the most important thing in life."

It is not just about financial measures, but the other measures that have been taken to help improve the lot of the seniors in this country. There are many things. The establishment of a Division of Ageing. He referenced the Division. That was a PNM creation to drive policy for senior citizens. [*Desk thumping*] You might want to at least consider the origins of some of these things. You mentioned the Disability Affairs Unit. That is a PNM creation to drive policy for persons with disabilities. [*Desk thumping*]

I wonder if the Minister is aware, there is now an Older Persons Information Centre, Mr. Speaker, where senior citizens are calling for guidance and advice. He might announce in a few days he has created that.

Mr. Imbert: Yes.

Dr. A. Browne: That is a PNM creation again. Non-financial measures that do not involve a cheque coming into your mailbox, but they are all aimed at creating a more holistic and caring environment for senior citizens. The GAP programme.

Guess what administration created the GAP programme, Mr. Speaker? The PNM administration again. [*Desk thumping*] We are not starting from scratch, and I am just suggesting to the goodly member that there is a lot to be built upon. There is a very good foundation to be built upon, and also, he has excellent staff at his disposal and the way is really paved for good.

With respect to Senior Activity Centres, I heard an announcement, we are going to build Senior Activity Centres, but there are Senior Activity Centres across the country. It is just a matter of continuing what the last Government has done. [*Desk thumping*] And if you look at what they are doing, Mr. Speaker, besides the criticisms and the analysis, and so on, it is very little that is being done differently. That is a sign that once you dispel with their campaign rhetoric and their campaign logic, they are actually relying on the good old-fashioned PNM principles to try to put what they [*Inaudible*].

Mr. Speaker, the development of a national policy on ageing. When did that come about? And that is what is guiding some of these very measures that the staff will be bringing before you, and guiding some of these outreaches that are taking place. Training and sensitization of staff; recruitment of more professionals; training of personal assistants for the differently-abled. I know they are going to make that announcement very soon as well. All of these things were done already and are in train, so forget the empty politicking; forget the one-upmanship; the empty PR; the blame game, and so forth. There is still a lot of work to be done, Mr. Speaker, and many people are willing to help, both within the Ministries and in civil society.

Mr. Speaker, just a few tips to end off. Whenever there is a debate on the senior citizens—[*Interruption*] I am glad to please you, Member for Chaguanas West. Whenever there is a debate on senior citizens' issues, there tends to be many more visits to offices across the country. Social welfare offices and other social development offices. The Minister would do well to be aware of that. All seeking assistance and requesting application forms, and so forth.

In fact, I received several calls this morning and some of the offices have run out of forms because persons are very anxious. They know debate is taking place. Many of them are trying to get applications in. The forms ran out. Also, when going to the media—[*Interruption*] Just giving some tips to wind up, Mr. Speaker. When going to the media, please ensure, through you, Mr. Speaker, that you have the correct phone numbers to give to members of the public. That is something I guess we all learn as we go along.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. BROWNE]

Friday, July 30, 2010

It would seem that the Minister has been accused of giving out the Permanent Secretary's number, as well as the cell number of clerical and secretarial staff to callers when they call in for information; and that is not something that any Ministry would want to encourage, at all. And the numbers are 800-OPIC for the Older Persons Information Centre; because many people will want distinct information on this Bill. Do they qualify? Do they not qualify? How much they will get. It is 800-OPIC; 800-6742. So it is about focusing on communication, as opposed to just empty PR.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, this debate begs the question, "Who will administer this programme?" Who will administer this grant as it moves forward, and these pension arrangements? It is going to be the staff working in district offices right across Trinidad and Tobago. A lot of work has been done over the last several years to expand the staff, Mr. Speaker; and there is a point I want to make, based on something the Minister said. With the global financial downturn, right across the world, there is a trend taking place in social sector ministries, globally, to focus more on vulnerable populations. [*Interruption*]

You see, if you do not listen, you will not learn. The day we stop learning is the day we start dying, so be careful. The focus is more on vulnerable population. It is about targeting the social sector and the resources to persons most in need. What has been done, unfortunately, in the case of this Government, is that they have taken a Ministry that was being targeted more and more to the vulnerable populations and they have expanded it to deal with all the problems of Trinidad and Tobago by saddling, by burdening the Ministry of Social Development, with this creation in your campaign of Ministry of the People. Who came up with that idea?

Mr. Roberts: Ken Valley.

Dr. A. Browne: You? You do not even want to claim your own idea. Mr. Speaker, that is another example of an atrocious campaign promise. They have now saddled the Ministry of Social Development, which was being focused on the vulnerable, to deal with roads, complaints about water, complaints about drains; and the people are writing in to the same staff.

Mr. Speaker, I saw the Minister on a media programme telling the public that in order to save some of the taxpayers' resources, they were using some of the existing staff and systems within the Ministry.

Miss Hospedales: Madness.

Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Speaker, I do not want to say that is lunacy, but that cannot work. That is doing exactly what countries are avoiding at this time;

restricting financial resources targeted to those who need it most. Do not strain the staff. Do not strain the offices with dealing with all of these various problems. "Somebody thief my chicken last night. I am calling the staff." That is what is happening. Do not saddle the Ministry with that.

I hope I heard the Minister promise a separate Ministry of the People. It is not a good idea to create this Ministry in the first place, but it is an even worse idea to burden the Ministry of Social Development and the hard-working staff of that Ministry with those same issues. They might have it clear in their heads but the population certainly does not, and they are putting a very heavy burden on the very same staff that we are relying on to serve these senior citizens; to serve the disabled community, and the other vulnerable population.

Mr. Speaker, the last thing I want to say is do not try to create the impression that all our older persons are bedridden, decrepit or dependent. That is not the case. There are many who are vibrant, just like the man in the photograph, and they are healthy, strong, and living productive and happy lives right across Trinidad and Tobago. They are not all decrepit and bedridden. This is not good law because it is not based on any policy at all. When we look for a policy behind the law, we see something different. Smoke and empty promises that they cannot keep.

Over 70 per cent of our nation's seniors have been prepared by their Government. They have been prepared by our Government to receive something that they are not getting; over 70 per cent of them. Do not act like you are doing them a favour when, in fact, you are disappointing most of them. You have broken the contract made on the 24th of May. We do not have the votes to stop you in this House, but the Opposition will monitor your records closely. We will check what you have committed to do and we will always hold this Government to account.

Mr. Speaker, I wish this Government well; I wish this Minister well; I wish all the Ministers well. We need you to do well for our country. We are happy if a grandmother or grandfather gets \$500 or \$450 more each month, but do not promise what you cannot deliver. The Minister ended by saying, "Serve the people; serve the people; serve the people." By his actions and the actions of this Government, they have been demonstrating that they intend to fool the people; fool the people; fool the people. This Opposition will always monitor, will always hold them to account, and will not allow them to get away with measures like this.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

5.30 p.m.

The Minister in the Ministry of the People and Social Development (Hon. Dr. Lincoln Douglas): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour and a privilege to be here. I consider it a great privilege and an honour to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I am very grateful for the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, the hon. Persad-Bissessar, who has advocated on behalf of this nation that service is the most important and critical thing to the people of this nation. I want to thank the Minister in the Ministry of the People and Social Development for the demonstration of thought and wisdom in his presentation and the amount of information that he has put out in terms of this very high ideal of serving the people.

Of course, serving the people and what we have said and what we have written, we have stated the ideal of what we want to do as government. We are on the road to make that a reality in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] I thought that when I was asked to respond that I would, you know, have to rebut some great insights and that I would have to make some long speech, but I will be short. I do not harbour the need to talk long and say nothing. [*Desk thumping*]

Before I came to Parliament, I taught Communications. I would bring my students; they would sit right over there and they would listen to speeches like this that was just delivered and they would come away most disillusioned and ask me, "Well, Sir, what is this about?" I would say I really do not know. So I have no need, really, to try to discredit the Minister for Diego Martin Central or anything of that sort. What I want to say is this. The Minister for Diego Martin Central has made one point.

Hon. Members: The "Member".

Hon. Dr. L. Douglas: The Member. [*Crosstalk*] He has made one point. I want to summarize his whole speech and that is this, that this Government cannot be trusted because we have not kept our promises. That is what he said. [*Desk thumping*] He is thumping really hard now. If that is the case, then, I mean, they should not even be close to this building at all; they should be somewhere out in the Gulf of Paria. [*Desk thumping*]

This Government is on the road to fulfilling all its promises. [*Desk thumping*] You know, the Member's speech is tantamount to a man who says that he is going to walk from Arima to Port of Spain and he starts walking and after five minutes he reaches, you know, two streets away, and you come up to the man and say, "But ah thought yuh say yuh was going to walk from Arima to Port of Spain and yuh only reach here." Well, everybody knows that is ridiculous. We have set off on a process to bring relief to the seniors in Trinidad and Tobago and we have

already addressed the issue. The Minister has clearly said that everyone, on reaching the pensionable age, which is clearly stated in our manifesto, will receive \$3,000, and that is what is before us today. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, that is what is before us today, that everyone, on reaching the pensionable age. What is the pensionable age right now? That is the pensionable age and that is where we are starting.

Hon. Members: No, no. Shame! Shame!

Hon. Dr. L. Douglas: Now, you want to talk about shame, Mr. Speaker. In the manifesto it says we would protect the right of the elderly. What are the rights? The rights to freedom; the rights to social justice, health care, housing, mobility, safety and security, recreation and leisure. In this nation in the 21st Century, in the year 2010, these same elderly people cannot enjoy these rights because of the past administration. Meanwhile they are spending money wildly on all kinds of things, senior citizens cannot enjoy safety; they cannot enjoy security.

I have visited quite a number of people in some of these Members' here constituency. I was up Morvant recently. A man is living in a house—an old man who could barely see; the thing falling down a hill; falling down a hill—senior citizens. I have pictures I could show you. I visited so many senior citizens in my constituency. There was a lady living in a plastic house. Hundreds of senior citizens come to me when their pension cheques are not even reaching them. They are getting stolen and this past administration made no effort to secure senior citizens. They have to stand up around the bank that goes all the way down; no main effort to relieve them of these kinds of stresses; of these kinds of burdens, and they come here to argue against us giving senior citizens \$3,000.

These are the things that I do not understand and so, today, I want to reiterate what the Minister has said and the commitments that we have made in our manifesto, that we would protect the rights of the elderly. We would provide incentives for them to be taken care of; their health, their safety; their well-being; opportunities for recreation; leisure; social justice and advancement based on their ability.

I want to come here and reiterate what our Government has said, that we will reinstate the old age pension, not as a grant but as an Act; that is what is before us today, not as something that they are doubtful and skeptical about, but something that they could have confidence in. It is their right.

I want to reiterate that we would amend the pension laws; that this is a work in motion and we will continue to do that and make it more accessible. [*Desk*

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. L. DOUGLAS]

Friday, July 30, 2010

thumping] We will make it more accessible! And the Minister has rightly said that we have been to, so far, 13 different areas in this country where we have had thousands—over 10,000 people coming to us—so many of them—just to be able to access their pension or to have an understanding.

If you read the application form to get the pension grant you will understand how complicated this is. It is not a simple process. Yet this Government has decided to take it to the people and make sure that they can have access to that. Is that not the right thing to do; make this more accessible to the people?

I reiterate what the Minister has rightly said. We will remove all restrictions and qualifications for people to receive, and we are in the process of doing that. So that upon reaching the pensionable age, our senior citizens can receive, not the grant but the pension that they so rightly deserve.

Finally, we will increase the value of that pension—that entitlement—to \$3,000. These are the things that we are saying. What is betrayal about that? What is disenfranchising about that? What is hard about that to understand? To me, that is the beginning of a good process towards addressing and increasing the value that we place on the contribution of our senior citizens, and I do not understand why it is Members must try to discredit a government in order to prove that the good that they are doing will not be good. You understand that? That does not make any sense to me. After two months you come here trying to discredit a government because we are attempting—that we have begun to address the issues of our senior citizens. That, to me, only spells of political lies; what we call, miseducation, missing education, misinformation or disinformation, those kinds of things that politicians like to do to pretend that they are saying something significant. But probably that is the only option they have, to say and pretend that they are saying something. [*Desk thumping*]

So we are committed to addressing the needs of our senior citizens. We have begun to do that and doing it in a timely fashion too, and to demonstrate that our commitment is to serve the people, serve the people and serve the people.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Miss Alicia Hospedales (*Arouca/Maloney*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour for me to join this debate to speak on a Bill to amend the Senior Citizens' Grant Act, Chap. 32:02.

Mr. Speaker, I sat here in disbelief listening to the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West when he sought to give us a lesson in communications. Before making

such a tedious attempt, he could have asked me to provide him with a lesson in literacy, because I really do not think he understood what a debate is all about.

Hon. Members: Try to be nice, eh.

Miss A. Hospedales: Try to be honest, right? Mr. Speaker, although you have heard earlier from my colleague, the Member for Diego Martin Central, the hon. Dr. Amery Browne, with regard to this debate and the broken promises that have been made to senior citizens by the UNC government during their election campaign in May, I think it is necessary for us to revisit. Because I really was not planning to; I was going to speak on other issues, but when the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West stood up here and went back to the promise stating that that is what they are dealing with today with respect to, one, ensuring that every citizen 60 years and over will automatically receive an old age pension or state-funded old age pension. I mean, you know, that really, really got to me, because he knows that is not the truth and I would think that the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West should know better. He should know better. I mean, this is the ad—Dr. Amery Browne showed an ad earlier. [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. Rambachan: Make a new point! You are only repeating!

Miss A. Hospedales: No, we need to repeat it; we need to reinforce it, because it is not the truth. It is not the truth that they are telling. Right? Earlier we heard of the promise that was highlighted in the ad; that was highlighted in the manifesto; that was highlighted in newspaper articles. We heard of the promise and this Member had the audacity to stand up, rather than come here and apologize and tell the truth to the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—this Member had the audacity to stand up here and tell us that this is what the debate is all about; that they are actually fulfilling the promise to ensure that senior citizens or persons who are of pensionable age, will today, or automatically, receive an old age pension. That is far from the truth.

One thing that really gets me is the fact that people are not telling the truth. Role models, people who are supposed to be setting the example for young persons in Trinidad and Tobago, are standing up in this House and not telling the truth.

I will move on. I think it is necessary, as I said before—

Dr. Rambachan: You talking "bout" truth?

Miss A. Hospedales: —for us to revisit or re-highlight the promises that were made to our esteemed citizens in an attempt to woo them. And to woo persons 60 years and over, the UNC manifesto, as we have seen, made several highlights in

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MISS HOSPEDALES]

Friday, July 30, 2010

terms of things that they actually promised. One thing that was asked by Dr. Amery Browne of the Members on the opposite side was: Are you really giving senior citizens a fair deal?

5.45 p.m.

I must ask that question again: Are you really giving senior citizens a fair deal?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member for Arouca/Maloney refers to the Member for the particular area, rather than this person or that person and if you would address me, there will be less cross talk.

Miss A. Hospedales: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will indeed, address you. Again, the question was asked to the Members on the opposite side: Are you really giving senior citizens a fair deal? Let us revisit the promises. We have heard, we have read, we have seen visuals of that promise or the promises. As I have stated earlier every citizen will automatically receive a state funded old age pension upon the attainment of a pensionable age.

Secondly, the promise is that they will remove all the restrictions and qualifications for people to receive an old age pension. Every citizen will automatically qualify.

Is that the truth?

Thirdly, that they will increase the value of the monthly old age pension entitlement to \$3,000.

The first thing I want to address is the way in which the UNC took advantage of our senior citizens. They reneged on their promise. I am addressing you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I would like hon. Members to pay attention to Standing Order 40. Continue Member for Arouca/Maloney.

Miss A. Hospedales: I really hope they would not interrupt me again. Again, they reneged on their promise. The other thing that they would have done is the fact that they did not even remember what they had written. The Member for Caroni Central did seem aware that they had actually written or had documented a promise or those promises in their manifesto. Members on the other side sat amazed denying that was actually written, the visuals were there or the media recorded what they said.

Just imagine, in a newspaper article written in the *Express* and reported by a political editor, Ria Taitt, the Member for Tunapuna, in an interview with this political editor said:

“Speaking to the Sunday *Express* the Member for Tunapuna conceded that there might have been the expectation that this increase would have been applied across the board to all pensioners including pensioners who currently receive \$2,000 per month. I am not sure what they believed the expectations of the senior citizens to be when they came and made a promise in their newspaper. They had it in their manifesto and it was reported all over. Yes, I need to reinforce it. I am not sure what they expected the seniors 60 to 64 years to be when they stated that every citizen—that was the key word—*[Interruption]* “What is dis, all yuh give meh time tuh finish!”

Mr. Speaker: Members are seeking the protection of the Chair. Again, I want to ask hon. Members to pay attention to Standing Orders 40 please, so we can hear the contribution of the Member for Arouca/Maloney. Continue Member.

Miss A. Hospedales: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your protection. Let me go back again. They said every citizen, not some citizens, or only those persons who qualify, who are of age 65. They said every citizen of pensionable age. That was the promise; every citizen of pensionable age will automatically qualify for the old age pension.

If you heard or even read such a promise would not your expectations be raised? One must ask the question: Were the Members on the other side misleading our senior citizens in an effort to get their votes? They know the answer and I am sure our valued senior citizens have already gotten the point.

This promised posed increase of every person of pensionable age also creates another expectation. We have an expectation among those that are categorized as vulnerable; the vulnerable groups in our society who, because the senior citizens have now been given an increase, will also require or demand an increased amount in their social welfare support.

Without properly thinking things through, without measuring the sustainability of this initiative, the UNC, like it did in the past, made another decision that was not logical.

Another issue I have to raise is the UNC's claim regarding the removal of restrictions and qualifications. Let me go back. I want to make sure that I find the right thing. They said that they were going to remove all the restrictions and

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MISS HOSPEDALES]

Friday, July 30, 2010

qualifications for people to receive an old age pension. Every citizen will automatically qualify. I would like to asking the Member for Caroni Central and even the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West to tell Members of this honourable House that income is not a qualifying criteria used in determining how much a senior citizen receives. This was not explained in the presentation of speech made by the Member for Caroni Central. He did not go into the explanation of the Bill. What the Member for Caroni Central failed to state was the can amount that people would receive on their senior citizen pension. For example, a person whose income exceeds \$500, but does not exceed \$1,450 will only receive \$2,550 not \$3,000.

A person whose income exceeds \$1,450, but not exceeding \$1,650, will receive only \$2,350. We see that the Member for Caroni Central has been misleading the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

What we know for sure is that age is a criterion. We are heard from the Member for Caroni Central that residency still remains a criterion. I do not know if the Member for Caroni Central, who sought to defend the issue of the pension increase by \$500, when it was raised is willing to tell senior citizens that they have not been telling the truth and the senior citizens have been taken advantage of and will not all get \$3,000. It is stated in the Bill. Just to reinforce the point, a senior citizen who receives an income of again, \$1,850 from a known source will only get \$2,000 and not \$3,000. They were told they were entitled to. Hear the word "entitled". It is an entitlement; your entitlement restored. They use so many entitlements, I am sure the minds of some people may have been confused.

The reality is that they are simply changing the name, that is all they have done, from grant to pension. When it comes to to the eligibility criteria, all that remains the same. The only thing that has been done is there has been a \$500 increase and not what they have proposed to actually present to the senior citizens today; an entitlement of a pension that is \$3,000.

Mr. Speaker, could you imagine Miss Dorothy, a senior citizen in Arouca/Maloney and all the other senior citizens throughout this country having to hear that they are not all going to get \$3,000 as promised by the Members of the UNC Government? Mr. Speaker, what they will be faced with and what they are faced with today is the reality that \$3,000 is actually a \$500 increase on the existing sum received on the senior citizens grant that was presented under the People's National Movement administration.

Mr. Speaker, why did the Members of the UNC not tell the population the truth about the senior citizens pension? I sat there a little disappointed to hear the

Member—not so much the Member for Caroni Central, I believe he is being led astray—for Lopinot Bon Air/West who should know better. I know why I am saying what I am saying, stating the untruths or presenting falsehoods to this House.

Mr. Speaker, you know why they would not do it. When thinking about this particular debate, I remember a phrase that was coined in this House during my maiden speech. Many Members on the opposite side actually used it, false lies. They just chose to engage in falsehoods and perpetrate false lies to members of the population. I must advise them that whatsoever a man sows—I want the Member for Lopinot Bon Air/West to listen carefully because he knows it and where to find it as well—that shall he reap. I want to give them advice. Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he reap. If they continue on the path that they are going down, the harvest will surely come.

Persons 60 to 64 years should demand that they get the pension that is entitled to them. Again, the pension that was highlighted in the media and in their manifesto—

Dr. Moonilal: Point of order. Tedious repetition, it is not only the same argument, it is the same picture.

Mr. Speaker: I know the Member knows better and she is going to get to her point as she moves on.

6.00 p.m.

Miss A. Hospedales: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Taking a closer look at what the UNC proposed, another question I must ask is: Prior to making this promise to every citizen who would have reached the age of 60, did they consider the cost of that promise to pay state funded pensions to every citizen in this specified age group?

According to several economists, when they proclaimed that they were making this promise to the public, several economists commented on this proposal. They said that the UNC's proposal was unsustainable and fiscally irresponsible since it will drain the economy of considerable resources, and would be at odds with the objective of eradicating poverty. It was estimated that if you pay \$3,000 to 134,542 at age 60 years and over, it is going to cost \$403.6 million a month or \$4.84 billion in the first year. Mr. Speaker, is this the reason—after hearing what the economists had commented on and the concerns that they have expressed—the UNC has a sudden change of heart or mind and decided to exclude persons 60 to 64 years?

Again, reflecting on this promise that they have reneged on, I decided to look at a few quotes, and I found one which makes much sense. Robert Service who is a poet and a writer said: "A promise made is a debt owed or unpaid". [*Interruption*] Mr. Speaker, the UNC Government owes it to the people 60 to 64, who they promised the

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MISS HOSPEDALES]

Friday, July 30, 2010

senior citizens pension. They owe it to them or apologize. You owe them an apology for not telling them the truth. I am encouraging the Members of the UNC on the opposite side who has a conscience to restore the entitled right to those citizens that they have made the promise to.

Mr. Speaker, another question I must ask is whether the public service pension will be brought on par with the senior citizens pension. Could the Member for Caroni Central please inform this honourable House—this question was asked by the Member for Diego Martin Central—what is the estimated cost of this initiative?

The Minister has not told us what the estimated cost would be, so I would really appreciate if the Member for Caroni Central can provide this House with that response. Could the Member also tell us how the Government intends to raise revenue to sustain this initiative? Are they going to close down OJT? Is this the reason they have stopped taking in new OJTs? Are they going to close down the GAPP programme and all the other youth-oriented training programmes that were established under the PNM government? Mr. Speaker, do they plan on raising the revenue through laying off thousands of contract workers across the country? Is this the reason contracts are terminated or people are being given a month-to-month contract?

Hon. Member: No.

Miss A. Hospedales: I would not be surprised if contract workers are laid off, because the hon. Prime Minister does not recognize that contract workers are professionals who would have gone through rigorous interviews and would have been selected based on their qualifications, experience and ability to perform their assigned duties. They are rather described by her as people who do not have independent thought and action, because they are on a string. On a contract, they could be fired at any moment.

Mr. Speaker, studies by the United Nations Development Programme and Help Age International, provided very sound advice that I would like to share with Members on the opposite side that could be considered. What these organizations noted is that although cash value, social pensions are a significant source of income for older persons, non-cash social support programmes and services are just as valuable and should become a major part of the assistance that is provided to them.

Mr. Speaker, this recommendation is reflected in the PNM policies, programmes and services that sought to provide additional support to elderly persons throughout the country, especially in the area of non-cash support such as CDAP, free health care, free ferry water taxi and bus passes; and free companion and care support for the elderly through the GAP programme.

Mr. Speaker, I heard the Member for Caroni Central talk about the establishment of senior activity centres, which sought to foster independence among older persons. Mr. Speaker, the PNM sought to develop a social safety net and the Senior Citizens Grant was only one aspect of the support provided to senior citizens. So, there was a wide range of social support services that senior citizens actually benefited from.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Caroni Central spoke about the Division of Ageing as though this was an initiative under his Government but, unfortunately, I must inform this House that the Division of Ageing was established under the PNM administration in August of 2003. Under the PNM administration, there was considerable work done trying to improve the services and programmes that were actually delivered to the older persons in Trinidad and Tobago.

In 2004, a nationwide survey was done on homes for older persons in collaboration with the Ministry of Health which led to the establishment of comprehensive database.

In 2005, there was a launch of the Older Persons Information Centre (OPIC) to provide information and/or referrals on products and services related to older persons. So, older persons were able to visit the Division of Ageing, and they could have received information on a range of products and services.

In 2006, there was the launch of four senior activity centres: St. James, Maloney, Chaguanas and Rio Claro in collaboration with NGO partners. I heard the Member for Caroni Central talk about their collaboration with the NGOs, but that is nothing new. There is a policy which was presented in the year 2000, in terms of strengthening the partnerships with NGOs.

Mr. Speaker, again, in 2006, there was the inaugural observance of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day and the Division of Ageing was awarded the Prime Minister's Innovation for Service Excellence Award, making a difference to people, for the senior activity centre initiative in the social inclusion category.

Mr. Speaker, in 2007 the Homes for Older Persons Bill, 2007 was submitted to both the Lower and Upper Houses, and a fifth senior activity centre was launched in Pleasantville.

In 2008, three additional centres were proposed to be established. I know that this year two of the three centres were launched.

Again, sanitization workshops were conducted on the policy of ageing throughout the country to increase public service awareness of the importance of

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MISS HOSPEDALES]

Friday, July 30, 2010

social support services for older persons. World Elder Abuse Day was observed with media campaigns. Mr. Speaker, I can go on and on with the initiatives that have been initiated under the PNM government. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, the PNM presented a range of other social welfare grants which were revised for the benefit of our senior citizens. I am going to go through them.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: List all.

Miss A. Hospedales: I am providing a lesson in social sector support. We increased the house repair grant from \$5,000 to \$10,000. Under household articles, we increased this grant from \$3,500 to \$4,500; for medical equipment, this was increased from \$5,000 to \$6,000; home help aid was increased from \$350 to \$1,600; the dietary grant was increased from \$115 to \$600; the clothing grant was increased from \$200 to \$500; the funeral grant was increased from \$3,450—the funeral grant was not increased. I want to make sure that I am stating the correct thing. Mr. Speaker, the education grant was increased from \$140 to \$300; the special child grant was increased from \$300 to 800; pharmaceutical grant was increased from \$700 to \$900; house rent was increased from \$2,500 to \$4,500; education book grant was not increased so it is still \$500; and the urgent temporary assistance grant was increased from \$120 to \$200. Mr. Speaker, all these grants have been provided by the PNM. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, we also had housing repair grants provided through the National Self Help Commission as well as the Housing Development Corporation. Several senior citizens are also beneficiaries of the Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme or Food Card as many of the Members on the other side will know. I need to ask one question and that is: Will the increase in the Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer—

Mr. Speaker: Continue. [*Desk thumping*]

6.15 p.m.

Miss A. Hospedales: One question I want to ask, will the increase in the Senior Citizens' Grant result in a call-back—it is a serious question I am asking—of the targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme cards or the food cards that were distributed to senior citizens? Why I am asking this, if I could recall the income level for a qualification for that particular food support card was actually \$2,500.

So I am asking whether or not those cards will be taken from the senior citizens who are now receiving an increase in their grants or pension. While I am on this point I would like, through you, to ask the Member for Caroni Central to explain to Members of this House, what was the criteria used in the distribution of food cards during the UNC's local government campaign? [*Desk thumping*] What

were the criteria used? Another question I want to ask, how many of those cards were actually given out before and on the same day? How many of those cards were distributed and why the proper application procedure, which includes a visit to the applicant's home was not followed? [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, these are questions we need to get answers for, this sort of action that is a reflection of the indiscipline of Members on the other side who have no regard for policies and procedures. As you have heard earlier by the Member for Diego Martin Central, the Ministry of Social Development spent months, spent a lot of time working on ensuring that these cards were given to vulnerable persons. Persons who are indigents. We spent months cleaning up this list to ensure that only persons who are eligible to receive food support are holders of the card. We spent months doing that, and you know what they have done? Because they have not followed the procedures and simply went distributing these cards, they have taken that whole process back, right back to the beginning. [*Crosstalk*]

What they have done again, is caused backward step in this programme that was well on the way to targeting the very vulnerable and indigent people in this country. They govern with no discipline and order. [*Interruption*] One question that must be asked, does this initiative that they are proposing really guarantee that elderly the in this country will be cared for and protected? I am asking because I come into contact with senior citizens on a daily basis and I hear their concerns. Would it result in fewer senior citizens being diagnosed with malnutrition, having the care that they need at home? What measures are put in place to ensure that the cheques are not stolen? [*Crosstalk*]

The Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West talked about soon to come the senior citizens will get their pension in the bank. We have been negotiating for a long while. We have had several discussions about getting the senior citizens to open their own bank account so that their pensions—their grants at that time—would go straight into their bank account. He is presenting it as though it is a new initiative, but it really is not a new initiative.

The Member for Caroni Central, I am sure, would have heard before—he used—and let me see if I can find the quote. He said, "Money is the most important thing in life."

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: He said that?

Miss A. Hospedales: Yes, that is what he said—"Money is the most important thing in life"—but I would like to tell him and, probably he would have heard it before or may have heard it from a senior citizen, that money does not solve everything.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MISS HOSPEDALES]

Friday, July 30, 2010

What the People's Partnership Government could have looked at are ways to expand the food card; they could have looked at ways in which they could have expanded the food card programme which guarantees that senior citizens have food and will be provided with the food necessary to comprise a balanced diet. They could have expanded the CDAP to ensure that drugs that are not yet available on the CDAP are made available free to the elderly.

Mr. Speaker, there are other non-card services that can or cannot be made available and I am just giving some recommendations that you all could think about. Can they make available to senior citizens: Meals on wheels; providing food for senior citizens who live by themselves and do not have anyone to cook for them; dial-a-ride, especially to accommodate visits to the doctor, bank, grocery and hospital? Additionally, the number of hours GAP caregivers stay with their citizens can be extended. They can consider the establishment of day-care centres to facilitate free day-care services for the elderly and assist in live-in to nursing home care.

Mr. Speaker, for the information of Members on the other side, particularly for the information for the Member for Caroni Central, love is not felt through the amount of money received but through the little things that cause us to experience more fulfilled lives, and I am sure a lot of senior citizens will agree on that. Many seniors' lives would not be completely enhanced because their expectation of the People's Partnership ability to meet their needs would be dashed. For instance: The health care system continues to be in shambles; food prices have increased drastically with headline inflation at 13.7 per cent, so the increase in pension is already spent. *[Interruption]*

The promise of the minimum wage that can provide more money for Mr. Mohammed's son and other members in my constituency to support the cost associated with running a home has not been fulfilled. I am not sure if the members of the People's Partnership know that this could have also assisted the senior citizens family. While I am on this point, what about—the Member for Diego Martin Central highlighted the pay increases to the URP and CEPEP workers. Another point, and I continue to make points because I want them to actually get it.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Tell them, you have all the time in the world, tell them. *[Laughter]*

Miss A. Hospedales: What comfort would senior citizens in Maloney receive—and Maloney is a part of my constituency—when they have heard nothing from the Minister of National Security regarding the construction of their police station for that particular area which was scheduled to be built under this PNM administration? *[Interruption]*

In this coming fiscal year, yes. I am not sure that he is even aware that there are approximately three to five police officers on duty to police a housing development with over 20,000 persons, a great number of them being senior citizens. Violent crimes have increased over the past two months, what comfort does this bring to senior citizens with the most brutal murders ever to be seen taking place under the nose of the People's Partnership Government.

Mr. Speaker, three to five murders are committed everyday and I am probably underestimating the numbers "eh". [*Interruption*] Today the number of murders is ranging between 200 to 300. The number of murders today, within the last two months, has escalated. If I can recall, every time I hear the Member on the opposite side talk about promises, I can tell you it makes me want to puke.

Mr. Roberts: What? What?

Miss A. Hospedales: Because they flatter me with their tongues. I am being honest. Mr. Speaker, they flatter with their tongues perpetrating falsehood. Tell the "honest" truth and this is a message that I am giving to you all from my heart. Tell the "honest" truth; the truth shall set you free.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the Member for Arouca/Maloney has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Miss M. Mc Donald*]

Question put and agreed to.

Miss A. Hospedales: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again I am sharing a message from my heart to the Members on the opposite side, tell the "honest" truth; the truth will set you free. I am encouraging you to pay the debt that you owe to the persons 60 years to 64 years. Do not make excuses, because that too, would not be believed, because an excuse is only a reason that is stuck with a false lie.

I hope Members on the opposite side will apologize to all the persons between the ages of 60 years to 64 years whom they have misled and have not fulfilled the promise they made to them. I would say to the Members let your consciences guide you and do the honourable thing.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak on this Bill.

Mr. Speaker: Before I call on the Member for Chaguanas West, the Minister of Works and Transport to speak, may I in the richest tradition of this House extend congratulations to the Member of Parliament for Lopinot/Bon Air West on his maiden contribution.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Jack Warner): Thank you Mr. Speaker. I would like this honourable House, and I am talking particularly to those on the other side, to be regaled by a high level of discourse where research has been done, where there is a contribution made by Members that Members can learn after they leave here and they can say in the true tradition of this Parliament that we have left here richer than when we came.

I rise here to speak on the contribution first by the Member for Diego Martin Central and as much as I would not like to, the Member for Arouca/Maloney. The Member for Diego Martin Central, the learned Dr. Amery Browne, said that the People's Partnership Government has not kept its word. He described this Government as being reckless, mischievous. He said this Government has no intention of keeping its word to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. He said and I quote:

“We will take our time to look at what has not been delivered and to look at exuberance of your speakers there and then comment.”

He continues by saying:

“This administration”—referring to us—“is teaching the nation a lesson that it will never forget and that is that campaign logic and logic that governs a country are two different things.”

One would have thought for a person who runs away from a campaign, for a person who refused to help his leader win a campaign most recently—

Dr. Moonilal: Who is that?

Hon. J. Warner: The Member for Diego Martin Central.

Dr. Moonilal: "Aah, oh", shame on you!

Hon. J. Warner:—to come to this House and talk about campaign logic boggles the mind. [*Desk thumping*]

A man, who has abandoned his leader in his time of need, comes here today to talk about campaign logic. Where was he, when he could have spoken to the leader on how to run a campaign to save Diego Martin?

6.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, he talked about the promises which we have not kept. I wonder whether I should dignify that piece of nonsense.

Dr. Moonilal: No! Do not.

Hon. J. Warner: Should I tell him about the promises we have kept with the children life fund—should we do this thing—and the fact that we have been able to give this country a commissioner of police. We have been able to appoint a Police Service Commission. Every day, every week, our Prime Minister is keeping the promises the Government has made. [*Desk thumping*] As late as this morning, our Prime Minister gave 75 vehicles to the police service to fight crime. [*Desk thumping*] The very first day, our Prime Minister refused to travel in a car with a Coat of Arms. [*Desk thumping*] What promise? Worse yet, the Member for Diego Martin Central says that we did not keep our promise by bringing this Bill. He says that we hoodwink the people. He speaks about a genie in a bottle. I would not be unkind to tell you that I thought you were speaking about something else in a bottle. He says that the genie said: "You are very foolish." None of the promises I made, I will keep.

He went further to say that the \$3,000 that we have said that we will pay senior citizens as a pension, that was not a promise and we are fooling the people. He accused us from somewhere of promising \$20 an hour as a minimum wage, and says that we say that we will not live in the palace. I do not know where he gets his stories from. At the end of the day, I want to say to him, that if he is judging us by how they have behaved in terms of promises, then I can understand his weakness.

Mr. Speaker, do you know what is bad? While he was speaking, we had some foreign dignitaries here, who shook their heads in disgust and walked away. That is the image they have left here with; the low level of contribution from the supposedly erudite Member for Diego Martin Central. It goes further to say that the six-page Bill is bad law; a dangerous Bill because it has six pages. So if it has ten pages, it is a good Bill? [*Laughter*] It is a good Bill because a Bill is judged by how many pages it has. How could one come to this House and treat Members that way?

Look at our public gallery. We are seeing less and less people here every Friday. You come here Friday after Friday, hoping to talk for 75 minutes and say nonsense. Nothing out of foolishness you come here with and, believe that when you talk for a one hour and 15 minutes you would make sense and, somehow you would tell your constituents how good you are. You can tell your constituents how good you are when you stay in Diego Martin Central and help the Member for Diego Martin West to win an election which he never won in your collective lifetime.

Furthermore, the Member for Diego Martin Central says that a few days before election we fooled the people. He brought out an ad and said that we fooled the people and so on, which again, is nonsense. I will deal with that in a while. But if we did that before election, what did your party do before election?

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. J. WARNER]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Let me remind what your party did. Your party signed contracts on the eve of the election for billions of dollars; your party rented buildings that never existed for billions of dollars; your party took away vehicles which should have been given to our policemen, and sent them to Grenada before the election; and the list goes on and on. That was done before election.

Mr. Roberts: That money could have been used for the old people.

Hon. J. Warner: What promises you made? He then goes to the newspapers and referred for 15 minutes to an article written by Sean Douglas. Did Sean Douglas write the manifesto for this party? If he did it for yours, not for us. For somebody who is supposed to know about research to come here with a newspaper article and use that as the basis for your argument, I am disappointed. Do you know why I am disappointed? Because he has in the Front Bench, some Members who have not spoken as yet and they may use that as the basis to speak in the future. I am dying to hear the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West speak, I am dying to hear the Member for St. Ann's East speak, but they cannot learn anything from today's contribution.

Mr. Speaker, he says, "Shame on you! Shame on you all!" I ask the question: Shame on whom? If it is shame on us, how come we are here and you are there? If it is shame on us, why are we here with 29, overflowing on that side and, you are there? Why? Shame on whom? The public has spoken and if by chance you believed that they made a mistake, they did it again a couple of days ago. They spoke again, so shame on whom?

Miss Hospedales: On you!

Hon. J. Warner: That is why you are there and we are here. [*Desk thumping*] Then the Member for Diego Martin Central says, and I say to him: "Government disenfranchised tens of thousands of senior citizens and their families by this Bill." Is this the same Member for Diego Martin Central, who for one month did not pay senior citizens their grant? As an MP for Chaguanas, I was forced to call the people to give them money to buy their and drugs and so on. Is this not the same Member? Would that not disenfranchise them? It could not be the same person. You did not pay the senior citizens, and you talk about promises.

In 2002, your Prime Minister, your government, promised to raise the minimum wage from \$9.

Dr. Browne: That is my Prime Minister.

Hon. J. Warner: She is your Prime Minister? In 2002, she was not your Prime Minister. Do not try now to disown your Prime Minister. [*Laughter and desk thumping*] In 2002, your Prime Minister at the time said, that he would increase the minimum wage to \$10. Eight years later, the wage has not been increased. Who has kept promises? Who has broken promises? Who has done that?

Dr. Browne: He was not your Prime Minister?

Hon. J. Warner: Mr. Speaker, he also said: What pensioners will cast their ballots for a Government like this? And again, he goes on about broken promises.

Let me tell you something my dear friend. When the bridge in Caroni fell and killed someone, this nation was promised that in one week we would get a report. My predecessor said in one week we shall get a report. I am in the Ministry two months now and I cannot find the report. So, of course, I said yesterday in a press conference that I cannot find the report. Today, a Good Samaritan sent me the report. Look at it here. [*Report displayed*] This is the report: Broken Promises. Did he give this to the nation? Did he give this to anybody at all? Did he say how the bridge was broken and why the person died? Did he after a week as promised? And he comes and talks about promises.

I will tell you this. Mr. Speaker, in Chaguanas West, I have a 63-year-old constituent who takes her grandchild to the taxi stand every morning. The grandchild goes to school at St. Augustine Girls'. I said to her: "Why are you doing this every morning? Do you want help?" She said to me: "No, my pension is helping her to travel to St. Augustine Girls' High School. But Mr. Warner, when I get my \$3,000, I will save for her to go to university." [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: It is free.

Hon. J. Warner: At the age of 63, she understands what the Member for Diego Martin Central and the Member for Arouca/Maloney will never understand. I am saying to you, that I cannot understand how—Mr. Speaker, the Member for Diego Martin Central had said that because of the fact that it is costing so much money, we have changed the age from 60 to 65. We have not done that, and the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West explained it quite clearly. If they were not so corrupt, we could possibly have dropped the age to even 55 [*Desk thumping*] and pay \$5,000 instead of \$3,000.

Mr. Speaker, let me say something. I want to tell you some of the things that they have done and, tell you why we cannot go with what they have said. There is a place called Tamana InTech Park, do you know where that place is? A

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. J. WARNER]

Friday, July 30, 2010

document was signed by Ken Julien. It was marked agreed, agreed, and agreed. It is here. I will tell you why we cannot pay it and, why we on that side are struggling to meet the demands. Listen to this. Claim on structural steel—now this is UTT signature buildings in Tamana Park. This refers to the money spent in Tamana Park and signed, of course, by Ken Julien. It says claim on structural steel, \$60 million. That is all. No explanation whatsoever. It goes further: linked to library commons, \$19.9 million; public safety and security building—a three-storey building called public safety and security building—\$56 million. "All yuh ain't shame to come here and talk about the senior citizens whom we are helping."

I will go further: design coordination and improvement for landscaping—in other words, put this plant here, put that plant there. No, no, put it here. Put this one across there. No, no, put it here and so on—\$14 million. That is why we cannot pay. I will go on. [*Interruption*] Hello, that is just for the design of the landscaping to put those plants here, do not put them there. A plan for the landscaping, \$14 million. Look it here. "But doh worry!" To redesign the auditorium, \$3.5 million. Listen to this one. To redesign is \$3.5; to construct it is \$13.5, and the cost is subject to adjustment upon final design. The list goes on and on and on.

Mr. Speaker, the Bill for that InTech, Tamana Park, has moved from \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion.

Mr. Roberts: Ken Julien still in the country?

Hon. J. Warner: There are two companies, one call Hype Construction and the other Bhola Construction which were formed by the workers in the same InTech, who they are feeding contracts to and, we shall give you the facts later on. I am merely telling you this—In fact, let me give you one. UTT was paying rent for one year, for Reverend Pena on Bruce Procope's estate—

Hon. Members: What?

Hon. J. Warner: One year! Say no! [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. Moonilal: Member for Diego Martin West, did you not know that?

Hon. J. Warner:—and you are coming to talk about senior citizens. How have you come so passionate and concerned? Why were you not concerned about these things when it was happening? Why were you not? [*Desk thumping*] You are coming here to play Pontius Pilate, and we here are robbing the senior citizens for five years and so on. You robbed this country; you robbed a generation; you robbed young children. That is what you all have done and, coming to talk here about promises and so on.

6.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, you know, I do not have much time this afternoon, because I cannot spend time answering nonsense. But I want to spend a few minutes with the Member for Arouca/Maloney.

Mr. Roberts: No, no.

Hon. J. Warner: I have to. I have to.

Mr. Roberts: Feel sorry for her.

Hon. J. Warner: Not much. A few minutes. The Member spoke about false lies. Right? And, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Arouca/Maloney began by talking to the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, the elegant Dr. Lincoln Douglas. [*Desk thumping*] She told him that she would like to give him a lesson in literacy because we have not paid a "dept". We have not paid a "dept". You see? So you will give him a lesson in literacy, because D-E-B-T is not "debt"; it is "dept". And you will give him a lesson in literacy? Dr. Meyers, I apologize, Sir. [*Laughter*] You see? Dr. Lincoln Douglas, sorry.

The point is, if the Member from Arouca/Maloney had looked to her left—well, to her left does not have much. [*Laughter*] But if she had looked to her left, and then to her right, which has much less, she would have realized that the lesson in literacy is not needed in the back. It is needed in the front. She rehashed the same nonsense. Mr. Speaker, she spent, I mean, almost an hour rehashing the same nonsense that was spoken to by the Member for Diego Martin Central.

Mr. Speaker, she accused us of not telling the truth. We are telling false lies. But the fact is, I asked her, if we are not telling the truth, then tell us the truth. You tell us the truth about the Guanapo church. If we are not telling the truth, then you tell us the truth about what PM means. Project Manager or Patrick Manning? If you are telling the truth, tell us the truth behind the Tarouba Stadium. If you are telling the truth, what is the truth behind the Petrotrin expenditure? And the list goes on and on. What is the truth? What is the truth, Member?

Then the Member said, Mr. Speaker, that the UNC has taken advantage of senior citizens. UNC? The UNC has done that? It is not us who did that. Your present leader did that when he, of course, undermined the Member for San Fernando East. That is what he did. We did not do that. We have come here today to make the lives of senior citizens better. We have come here to improve their lives. [*Desk thumping*] And that, too, is a promise of our Prime Minister. Everything we have said that we shall do, we have either done or are doing, Mr. Speaker.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. J. WARNER]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Then we get a litany of increases in grants. A litany. If those increases in grants were so effective, why are you there on that side, and we are here?

Hon. Members: Exactly.

Hon. J. Warner: If those increases have benefited the people so much, why are you there? You should be here.

Mr. Roberts: In such small numbers.

Hon. J. Warner: I just do not understand. And worst of all, to ask us to apologize. We will apologize, possibly, when you apologize to the country. To this country. You have to apologize to this country for bringing this country to what it is today. You have raped the Treasury. You have taken \$300 billion and have not bought one hospital bed; you have not bought one pump to pump out the floods that have taken place. You have built tall buildings with nobody.

You have not paved one road in Naparima; in, of course, Cumuto; in Siparia. Not one road you have paved and you are asking us to apologize. Do you know where Papourie Road is? You know where, of course—what trace, Ma'am?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Cuchawan Trace.

Hon. J. Warner: You know where Cuchawan Trace is? Do you know where Samahie Trace is? Do you know where those traces are? You do not know.

Mr. Roberts: Reid Lane.

Hon. J. Warner: Reid Lane in D'abadie? You do not know. And you are asking us to apologize? What did you do with the \$300 billion which you had? If you had taken care of the people, we today would not have to do what we are doing here.

Mr. Roberts: Where is Calder Hart? Apologize for him.

Hon. J. Warner: So, please, all I ask, when you rise to make a contribution, let it be edifying; let it be elevating; let Members learn something after they leave and then say, of course, this is a speaker who did good research. So having said so, I will continue.

Mr. Speaker, I really did not plan to speak. You know something? I had even forgotten this ministerial statement given by the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs. In the statement, he showed \$55 million spent for Caribbean Games which never took place.

Mr. Roberts: Apologize.

Hon. J. Warner: Apologize? Which never took place. I recall fully well. I was sitting there, Member for Laventille East/Morvant, where I will never sit again. [*Laughter*] [*Desk thumping*] I was sitting there when the former Prime Minister said that jail is not nice. He was sitting right here. And the time will come soon when those words that he said will prove to be propitious. Jail is not nice. Wait. Having said so, Mr. Speaker, I chose to speak because I believe seriously that this Bill touches on a very significant part of our population; our fathers, our mothers, our uncles, our aunts and grandparents. For that reason, if not another reason, I believe that I should make a small contribution.

Mr. Speaker, I realize that it is often said that a true measure of any civilized society is calculated on how they care for their senior citizens. A civilized society can be measured on how you take care of the old people; the senior citizens. Because if you do not take care of the old, and by extension, the young, then you are not civilized. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, today, like all my colleagues on this side, I have come to bat for our seniors, because they batted for us yesterday. [*Desk thumping*]

And, in fact, in some ways, I, too, am approaching the time to be a senior citizen. Just a few months and days to go. In a sense, therefore, I consider myself to also be a senior. Mr. Speaker, therefore, I am saying that this legislation will impact on me as well. To understand how our seniors feel, put yourselves in their shoes. Put yourselves in their shoes and you will see how they feel; and when you do that, you will really understand. Very soon, too, I want to add, you will get some senior citizens over there. The Member for Diego Martin West could have a bald head for the next five years, he will still be a senior citizen. Still will be a senior citizen, as the Member for San Fernando East. The fact is—

[*Mrs. Mc Intosh indicates*]

Yes? Sorry, you mean you too? You are a senior citizen? Yes, that is true. I am sorry.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: She does not look it.

Hon. J. Warner: You do not look it. In fact, Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, you should not be on that side. You should be on this side. [*Desk thumping*] Your elegance, your charm and your brain, which is rare on that side, fit this side. But I am saying that I am talking for my seniors and my colleagues here, because I said that we have a right to take care of them.

Mr. Speaker, we are where we are today because of the contribution which our senior citizens made for us yesterday. That is why we are here. [*Desk*

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. J. WARNER]

Friday, July 30, 2010

thumping] Never forget that. Never forget what our seniors have done for us yesterday. That is why we are here. As such, therefore, our senior citizens are the ones who must always say thanks for fighting for our independence as a country; as a nation. They are the ones who have toiled for adult suffrage; the right to vote. They are the ones who worked and toiled in our cane fields and our oilfields. They are the ones who have laboured and, therefore, we must not let them die on the roads, or on the floors of our hospitals, or have them suffer without medication, food, clothing or shelter.

Mr. Speaker, the importance of this Bill, which my colleague from Caroni Central outlined so eloquently—and to which some people objected because it is six pages. This Bill is important, and you can see this Bill's importance if you look at one picture only. I take no pleasure in showing this picture now, and nobody on this side will repeat this picture a second time. On this side, we do not do that here. We are original. Right?

I am saying, Mr. Speaker, this picture sums up how those on that side treated the elderly when they were here. This picture here. It tells you, of course, how you treated the elderly when you were on this side. Mr. Speaker, this is the picture that stunned the nation. This picture came out in 2008. We were on that side. This picture is about Cynthia Ramcharan and her companion, Sylvester Joseph, living on the streets. Where? In Harris Promenade, in the constituency of the Prime Minister at the time. Living in San Fernando. They were living there after their house was destroyed by fire.

When this was put in the newspaper, what did the Prime Minister at the time do? Nothing. What did you all do? Nothing. And do you know what is worse, Mr. Speaker? What is worse is that these people in south had nowhere to go. Nowhere to seek comfort, except on the streets. After this picture was taken, Cynthia died. She died, and shortly after, Sylvester died; and that must remain on your collective conscience for life.

That is the legacy of the PNM. That is it. Not some foolish picture from the *Express* to show, of course, a fella smiling. He is smiling, yes. Do you know why he is smiling? Because there is hope. [*Desk thumping*] He is smiling because there is a new dawn; a new era; a new dispensation. That is why he is smiling. He is smiling because he welcomes change. He embraces change. That is why he is smiling. Foolishness; and coming here with a picture from the *Express* to say, of course, we fooled people. Fooled people? If we fooled people on May 24th, did we fool them on July 26th? Did we? [*Laughter*]

I tell you, Mr. Speaker, I want to make the point that this Bill represents the promise we made to deliver to our senior citizens. The People's Partnership made that promise. Mr. Speaker, we deliver our promises, unlike the PNM. We on this side deliver. You on that side demoralize. [*Desk thumping*] And that is our big difference, you know. Besides 29/12, 29 of us delivered. You demoralized. We have kept our promises. The pay cut for the Prime Minister and the Ministers was a promise. Did we keep it? We kept it.

As said before, Children's Life Fund as promised. Did we keep it? We kept it. Farmers who were flooded were promised compensation. Did they get it? They got it. After one month. [*Desk thumping*] After one month, they got it. I told you just now, the Coat of Arms was removed, in one day. Laptop for every SEA child. Every child who passed the SEA, a laptop for everyone. The tenders were closed today. My colleague for Caroni East?

Dr. Gopeesingh: Yes.

Hon. J. Warner: Yes, today tenders closed. Delivery will be given to them in September. A promise, again, we shall keep. And, my friends, we promised to disband the Old Age Grant and to put in place a pension for the elderly, and that promise is being delivered now. [*Desk thumping*]

What is the main purpose of this Bill, Mr. Speaker? What is the objective of this Bill? Let me teach you how to debate, so when you talk, people could learn at the same time. You see what I mean? Stick break in your ears. You cannot listen. What is the purpose of this Bill? [*Interruption*] It is not my fault if you cannot listen. What is the objective of this Bill? Mr. Speaker, in a nutshell, this Bill seeks to amend the Senior Citizens' Grant Act, Chap. 32:02; to change the name of the Act to the Senior Citizens' Pension Act. And to make such changes from the Senior Citizens' Pension within the Act.

Mr. Speaker, this Act would also increase the ceiling for monthly pensions to \$3,000, and set the various income ranges so they would be the criteria to show one's eligibility. You see, I did better than you? I could pronounce it better than you; eligibility. [*Laughter*]

Dr. Browne: FIFA.

Hon. J. Warner: Mr. Speaker, the PNM did little—almost nothing—to provide by way of pensions. The PNM on that side discriminated against our senior citizens. They plunged our senior citizens into hardship. They caused many of our senior citizens to live their golden years in misery and to die in destitution.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. J. WARNER]

Friday, July 30, 2010

On that side, the PNM deprived thousands of our senior citizens of the basic things of life. Things that would have made their lives more comfortable.

Mr. Speaker, by having a grant, it meant that they could give who they want and deny also who they want. A grant, Mr. Speaker, which they changed it to, meant that they could discriminate further. The same way they could give a road to whom they want, and none to Naparima, Siparia, Oropouche East, Oropouche West, Chaguanas West, Chaguanas East, and so forth. Discriminate. The grant allowed them to discriminate.

Member for Diego Martin North/East, do not watch me too much. This is the report I could not find, so do not watch me too much. I will lend you a copy.

Mr. Imbert: It is all right. I have one.

Hon. J. Warner: Mr. Speaker, many senior citizens had to hide, and they had to go and work in all kinds of places to make ends meet. Many of them had to work with CEPEP and URP and labour in the hot sun. Mr. Speaker, after today, that has to stop. It has to stop. The grant which the PNM passed was an injustice, and today, thanks to the People's Partnership, that will stop.

Mr. Speaker, when we change the grant to a pension, what is there to gain? What would the senior citizens gain? You see how to debate? When you change the grant to a pension, what do the senior citizens have to gain? I will tell you. It will give our senior citizens more independence. They would not have to rely on others as much as before. Three thousand dollars would give them some more economic independence, and they would not have to rely on others as before.

Mr. Speaker, it gives them a sense of security and hope; and most of all, it will help them to live in better comfort in their later years. That is why it is a pension and not a grant. [*Desk thumping*] And that is what we said in our manifesto; the manifesto of the People's Partnership. Mr. Speaker, the second pillar for sustainable development in our manifesto deals with poverty eradication and social justice. We said in our manifesto, because the Member for Diego Martin Central believes that our manifesto can only be subsumed on page 41; but we said, and I quote:

“For an energy-rich nation, poverty is totally unacceptable. Social justice demands that abject poverty be reduced and ultimately eradicated. All or citizens are entitled to a sustainable livelihood, and the gap between the haves and the have-nots must be closed.”

We said that, Mr. Speaker, and we are delivering on that today, thanks to our hon. Prime Minister. [*Desk thumping*]

Social, political and economic justice demands that abject poverty be removed totally from our society. All our citizens, all of them, are entitled to happiness; and all of them are entitled to the basic amenities of life. We told this country that the Government of the People's Partnership would follow a philosophy that this country's development is based on how we develop our people. Our development is based on how we develop our people. Mr. Speaker, we gave the commitment to ensure the protection of the rights of the elderly. We said the elderly must be given a fair deal, and today, we are doing just that.

Mr. Speaker, we gave a commitment. We said that we are going to increase the old age pension to \$3,000; and we said so before the Member for San Fernando East called the election. We said so.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Several times.

Hon. J. Warner: Several times.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Right there.

Hon. J. Warner: Several times. Our Prime Minister today said so several times before the Member for San Fernando East called an election. An election that has put him in political oblivion. It is nothing new. That was no gimmick of any kind.

We have chosen to remove "grant" to ensure our fathers and our mothers are now entitled to and guaranteed a monthly pension. They are entitled to that. You, the PNM—you, of course, you like "grant". You like the word "grant" in the PNM. I am only sorry the population did not grant you some more votes. The population should have granted you some more votes.

A grant is temporary. A grant is temporary. A pension is permanent, under law; and we on this side want to permanently take care of our folks; our senior citizens. And in any case, our senior citizens are yours as well. We have decided on this side to bring comfort to our senior citizens. Gandhi once said that poverty was the worst form of violence, and I ask you today, let us not be violent to our senior citizens.

Mr. Speaker, today, we bring comfort to our people. We seek to bring this country closer to a civilized existence, and the Member for Diego Martin West would have pains to do that, because he is busy plotting the end of the days of the Member for San Fernando East—and also northeast; but on this side, we are spending time to take care of our senior citizens. We do not have to plot. Nobody here on this side wants to undermine, at all, our leader. We do not have to do that. Nobody has to plot. The fact is, we are spending time to help to improve the lives of our people.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. J. WARNER]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Our Cabinet has agreed, Mr. Speaker, to the introduction—[*Interruption*] We said we should have a permanent structure, and therefore, we gave a scale where, of course, our senior citizens shall receive the difference to make up the \$3,000. I would not spend time going through the scale as our last speaker from Arouca/Maloney. Our leader and Prime Minister has said that our three tenets are, "Serve the people; serve the people; serve the people." And that is what we shall do.

Mr. Speaker, just a few points before I close to help my two friends for Diego Martin Central and Arouca/Maloney. I want to refer you to the UK; and the UK means United Kingdom. Mr. Speaker, in the UK—[*Interruption*] Yes, I have to be sure you know. There are Government concessions for senior citizens, and these concessions fall into several categories: health, transport, heating, education, and so forth.

Mr. Speaker, in the UK, all senior citizens over the age of 60 are entitled to free prescription, free drugs, free eye tests; they are entitled to loans for hearing aids, free batteries, and so on. And eventually, Mr. Speaker, we will be working towards those kinds of benefits for our senior citizens. But, Mr. Speaker, if what we have done in two months—if what we have been able to do in two months is any indication of what the future holds for our senior citizens, we have a very bright future. A very bright future. [*Desk thumping*]

In the UK, there are, of course, discounts for those senior citizens who want to take adult education classes. There are discounts, Mr. Speaker, for those persons who want to go to university or college. In fact, they encourage them to study and get degrees, and we will do the same for our senior citizens. As the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West said, this is a first step; a first measure. We have done this in 60 days. In 60 days. Therefore, I am saying there is hope. I hope our senior citizens will understand and appreciate the fact that we shall deliver not only this, but much more.

Mr. Speaker, as I conclude, I want to say at present, there are 143,000 persons—a little less than PNM owes for the PTSC buses. At present, up to now, the bill has not been paid and the bill is close to \$200,000. But do not worry. So at present, there are 143,000 older persons who are over 65. We are not coming here to talk in any vacuous terms, you know. One hundred and forty-three thousand persons. Did you all include yourself?

Mr. Hypolite: By all means.

Hon. J. Warner: Mr. Speaker, that figure—

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member for Chaguanas West has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Hon. A. Roberts*]

Question put and agreed to.

7.15 p.m.

Hon. J. Warner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank my colleagues on this side who supported me. As I was saying, at present there are 140,000 older persons in Trinidad and Tobago who are over 65 and that figure represents 11 per cent of the population. One hundred and forty thousand persons who are over 65, that figure represents 11 per cent of the population. That number will grow to 20 per cent by the year 2020. And these figures, by the way, came from the CSO, the 11 per cent.

These are the people who built this nation. These are the people who built our democracy. We must now care for them. We must treat them well. We shall rise, we said, at every point. This party, the People's Partnership, under our distinguished Prime Minister, we remind people that we shall rise, and this Bill is designed for us to rise. We cannot rise without our elderly members. We cannot rise. Therefore, I would say that this Bill, when it becomes law, is a Bill that will allow all of us to rise together.

I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Colm Imbert (*Diego Martin North/East*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the Member for Chaguanas West for being brief.

Hon. Member: I hope you will too.

Mr. C. Imbert: I will be. Now, in listening to the contributions in this debate I noticed that the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West attempted to tell us that the pensionable age referred to in the UNC manifesto was not 60 but 65. I listened very, very carefully. The Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West spoke quite briefly; just for a couple minutes, but in that contribution he sought to tell us that what they really meant, or what these words meant was that the pensionable age that they promised this \$3,000 thing to, was 65. Yes, this pension of \$3,000 was 65.

But the Member for Diego Martin Central was able to bring evidence into this Parliament that the UNC had made it very, very clear in their published advertisements; in their public utterances; in the statements that they made on their public platforms, that in their manifesto highlight, that the pensionable age that they referred to, that they promised a \$3,000 pension to, was 60. I notice as the debate evolved, the

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MR. IMBERT]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Member for Chaguanas West conceded that the UNC government or the People's Partnership, whatever you call it, could no longer honour the commitment that it had made to the electorate to give everyone who had reached the age of 60, regardless of income; regardless of their residency situation and regardless of any other conditions or criteria; I observed that the Member for Chaguanas West conceded that the UNC/COP Government was no longer willing or able to honour its commitment to give—

Mr. Roberts: Point of order.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: He did no such thing.

Mr. Warner: I never said that. I never conceded anything. In fact, I said if there was not so much corruption and squandermania, we could have even carried it to 55 and pay even \$5,000. I said so. I said that.

Mr. Roberts: Pay attention. "All yuh doh listen."

Mr. C. Imbert: Yes, I took note of that; it is one of the notes that I took and I will deal with that in another section of my brief contribution tonight. But the fact of the matter is that the Government has agreed, through the words of the Member for Chaguanas West that they are not going to implement their campaign promise to give everyone 60 and over, regardless of income, class, residency, et cetera, a pension of \$3,000. They have agreed. The Member for Chaguanas West has stated this very clearly.

It did not matter whether he said it or not, because talk is cheap. What we need to do in this Parliament is to go to the Bill before the House and I noted certain amendments before the House circulated just a short while ago, the list of amendments that I presume will be moved by the member for Caroni Central, and they really do not make any significant change to the Bill before the House and the effect of the Bill and the amendments are as follows: That with effect from September 01, 2010—so it is not even immediate; it is not now; it is several months from now. But with effect from September 01, 2010, a person who satisfies the conditions specified in the section 4 and received a monthly income in the sum specified in the first column, is entitled to a monthly senior citizens pension in the sum specified in the second column of the schedule to this Act. And the amendments have replaced the schedule with the following schedule which states as follows—and this is why, whatever the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West said was irrelevant and the concession from the Member for Chaguanas West, was unnecessary, because the documents before the House state as follows: That if your income does not exceed \$500 you will receive a pension of \$3,000.

However, if your income exceeds \$500 but not \$1,450, you will receive a pension of \$2,550. And we do not have to have a PhD in mathematics to be aware that \$2,550 is less than \$3,000. It most certainly is. [*Desk thumping*] And if your income exceeds \$1,450 but not \$1,650, your pension will go down to \$2,350 and it keeps going down, to \$2,200; \$2,000; \$1,800; \$1,600; \$1,400; \$1,200.

So some of the persons who were referred to by the Member for Chaguanas West will receive a pension as low as \$1,200 and the age condition—because if we go back to what is before us; what is written and not what is said, it says a person who satisfies the condition specified in section 4. One of those conditions would be attainment of the age of 65.

So the effect of this Bill before the House and the amendments is that only those persons 65 years and over and who meet the conditions of residency, of income, will receive this increased pension and the increased pension starts at \$3,000 for those who receive less than \$500 and goes down to \$1,200, to those who receive between \$2,600 and \$2,800 per month, which would, of course, include persons who receive the national insurance pension.

So what this means is that—let us deal with those in particular. It says: Exceeding \$1,800 but not exceeding \$2,000. They will be receiving a pension of \$2,000; persons who receive national insurance. At this point in time the aggregate sum that is paid to persons receiving national insurance is \$3,550 and that has come about because of an adjustment made by the PNM government in this year, 2010 when we increased the grant from \$1,950 to \$2,500 and also adjusted the aggregate sum that a person can receive if they are in receipt of a national insurance pension of \$2,000.

So we made it a new total of \$3,550. And if you look at that particular individual, in this schedule that person who gets the \$2,000 NIS—exceeding \$1,800, not exceeding \$2,000, will now get a pension of \$2,000, so they will get a total of \$4,000, which means they are only going to receive an increase of \$450 a month.

Those are facts. You can talk all you want. You can talk until midnight; it does not change the facts. And what your Government, your party—you were not in government at the time; it was an election campaign—what you promised is that everybody who was 60 years and over, regardless of income, would get \$3,000 a month. And I have some information here on the numbers of persons involved. There are 55,000 people between the age of 60 and 65 who are not in receipt of an old age pension or Senior Citizens' Grant; you can call it what you wish, and I will come to that in a while. And if you were to pay those 55,000 people \$3,000 a month, you

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MR. IMBERT]

Friday, July 30, 2010

are looking at \$165 million a month, and if you multiply that by 12, you get close to \$2 billion additional expenditure on part of the Government.

So that the UNC/COP alliance made this promise, either being aware of the economic implication of it; being aware that this would put an additional burden of at least \$2 billion on the Government, per annum, or not aware, and just made a reckless promise. It does not really matter. Either you knew that this thing would cost billions of dollars additional expenditure per year, or you did not know, but now you know, and now that you are faced with the cold, hard reality of governing a country, it is clear that the UNC has decided that it cannot spend—or maybe it is the COP, I am not sure which section of the Government has decided that it would be reckless to spend the \$2 billion.

But the fact of the matter is, you promised citizens \$3,000 and we on this side demand that you give it to them. Because it is sanctimonious in the extreme to say that you care for old people and that elderly people should be treated correctly—it is sanctimonious in the extreme to say that—make a promise that you would give them \$3,000 and then renege on your promise. This is what you are doing. And the effect of what the Member for Chaguanas West has said, is that the Treasury is empty. That is that old NAR strategy. When the NAR came into power in 1986 that is what they said. That is the excuse that they gave, why they could not implement their campaign promises. And you are essentially saying the same thing. But we on this side demand that you implement your campaign promise; stop the semantics. It is simple semantics on the part of Lopinot/Bon Air West to pretend that the pensionable age was not 60; it was 65. That is just semantics. And it is also, as far as I am concerned, sanctimonious and hypocritical in the extreme for the Member for Chaguanas West, on behalf of the Government to say you cannot pay because you have no money.

Well, you should have known that before you made the promise. You know, I have looked at this administration over the two months they have been in power and they have made a number of reckless statements. The Member for Chaguanas West in particular, as far as I can see, is still stuck in an opposition mode, because the statement that he makes, inside and outside of this Parliament, are reckless; absolutely reckless. I mean, I listened tonight to some of the reckless statements made by the—not a single road in Cumuto. Now, the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla will know that is not true. His father, who was the—

Mr. Partap: Not a road! Not a road!

Mr. C. Imbert: Your father did not deny it. When we came into this Parliament and we listed every single road that we had repaired or upgraded in

Cumuto/Manzanilla, your father did not deny it. You could deny it if you want. But, again, the facts speak for themselves. So these are reckless statements. I know that the Member for Chaguanas West knows the infrastructure work that was done in the Chaguanas area; that was done in the Cumuto area. I know you know; you have the figures; you have the facts. You are in the Ministry now. You know.

7.30 p.m.

It is Opposition politics to be coming here and making these reckless statements. I would not spend too much time on that. Let me come back to why we are here today. We are in this Parliament today to give support or not, as the case may be, to this Bill. What this Bill does is—give support or not, as the case may be. One of the things that we on this side are entitled to do is vote for, vote against or not vote at all. We are entitled to do that. What we are about here tonight is debating this Bill, which has exposed the hollowness of the promises made in this 120 days of immediate action. This is day 60 or whatever day it is, with 60 more days to go. At 17, you speak about replacing the Senior Citizens Grant with an old age pension of \$3,000.

The other point I wish to make is that the Member for Chaguanas West, very good with words I would give you that. People say that you have a speech impediment. People say that the hon. Member for Chaguanas West has a speech impediment, he stutters. He speaks in a strange way. I would say that you have away with words, Member Chaguanas West. You could say all kind of things, you have a way with words, I would give you that. I am complementing you.

One of the points that he sought to make in this House tonight—it is a crime to fool old people. "Yuh does get licks fuh dat". In the Finance Act of July 2007, if you were paying attention. I do not know where you were in July. I do not think that you were here, but in the Finance Act of July 2007.

Mr. Warner: I was in Europe.

Mr. C. Imbert: I do not know where you were—football business.

Mr. Warner: I was in Europe by you.

Mr. C. Imbert: It nice eh. In the Finance Act of July 2007, the then Minister of Finance changed the terminology for these payments that we are debating tonight, from pension to grant; just the terminology and the words that gave the entitlement, these particular words, "is entitled to," were, the first time, inserted into the legislation by the PNM government in July 2007. "Is entitled to" is in the existing law. The entitlement was created then. All that Finance Act of July 2007

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MR. IMBERT]

Friday, July 30, 2010

did was to change the word "pension" to the word "grant", but it improved upon the legislation by including the words "is entitled to". In the past the legislation said that persons who have attained the age of 65 meet the conditions, shall be paid an old age pension. In the Finance Act of 2007, which was an omnibus Act, which amended a number of different pieces of legislation; it changed the words "shall be paid" to "is entitled to" and changed the word "pension" to "grant".

What have you come here to do tonight? You are putting the same words back in, that a person who meets the condition is entitled to a pension. What is in a word? I heard the Member say a grant is temporary and a pension is permanent under law. Which law? This is the kind of upside-down logic that we have to listen to. The law as it states says that the person is entitled to a grant. The law now says the person is entitled to a pension. I would like the Members opposite, anyone of you, to produce the law of the Republic Trinidad and Tobago that says when you change the word "grant" to "pension", it becomes permanent and that before it was temporary and now it is permanent. If you can, produce that law for me. I will be happy. Produce the legal authority, produce the precedent, cite the case which stated when you use the word "grant" it is temporary and when you use the word "pension" it is permanent. Really, this is all semantics. It is populism on the other side. The same way that we are amending the law tonight, the Senior Citizens Grant Act, Chap. 32:02 to put a Schedule in and to repeal and replace this particular clause, you could come next week and repeal and replace this law. You have the votes. You do not need a special majority, all you need is a simple majority to amend it. You could come next week and change this. Do not tell me any nonsense about how a grant is temporary and a pension is permanent, you could abolish this whole law if you want to. It has no constitutional flavor. It is not enshrined in the Constitution. It does not require a special majority. All the other side has done is they have fooled themselves into believing that the old law does not have the word "is entitled to." You can go online and check it yourself. Do not have to believe me. Go and check. Pull the law book yourself and you will see that the 2007 law says "is entitled to." All you have done is change it from is entitled to a grant to is entitled to a pension. There is no law in this country that makes that permanent. In fact, the mere fact that you are passing this with a simple majority and if you are not seeking a special majority indicates to us that it is a temporary as that lovely orange—what is the name of it—shirt that you have on. When you leave here tonight you would take that off. This legislation as temporary as that.

Mr. Speaker, the UNC has come here tonight in an attempt to fool old people. You have not given them their pension of \$3,000. There is nobody in this country

who, having attained the age of 60 years on September 2010, who is going to get this pension of \$3,000, not a soul, not a single man, woman or child. I was told that the Member for Chaguanas West spoke about a 63 year old. I was not listening clearly. My understanding is that the Member for Chaguanas West spoke about somebody aged 63. That is my understanding. [*Cellphone rings*] That is not mine. You have to talk to your boys in the back there. That is 63-year-old is not going to get any pension from this UNC administration because you have retained the 65 year old limit. That person who is 65 years old you that they are going to wait until this year when they get their pension, they have nothing to get from you.

What you need to do is admit that you are not implementing your promise, apologize to the country from misleading them, apologize to old people for taking them for granted and stop trying to fool people.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Patricia Mc Intosh (*Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West*): Mr. Speaker, on this the occasion of my maiden contribution in the Parliament I deem it appropriate to preface my discourse by extending certain courtesies.

Firstly, I should like to sincerely thank the constituents of Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West for having elected me as their parliamentary representative thereby reposing confidence in me to represent their affairs and indeed the affairs of the people of Trinidad and Tobago in this august House of Parliament.

Secondly, despite the numerous accolades that the Member for Siparia and your good self have already received, I should like to add my personal congratulations in the first instance to the hon. Member for Siparia on her elevation to the exalted status of the first woman Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and in the second instance to you, Sir on your appointment to the very prestigious position of Speaker of the House. I should also like to the Member for Oropouche East on his well deserved appointment as the Government's Chief Whip.

On my own side too, I should like to extend heartfelt congratulations to the Members for Diego Martin West and Port of Spain South on their appointments of very important positions of Leader of the Opposition and Chief Chip respectively.

Mr. Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I fail to thank the hon. Members on the other side for having extended a hospitable hand of welcome to all the new parliamentarians; a gesture that made us feel at ease and comfortable in this very august House of Parliament.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MRS. MC INTOSH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Last, but by no means least, I would like to congratulate the people of Trinidad and Tobago on the occasion of emancipation.

In my humble opinion, the Government's proposal of an increased pension for the elderly is undoubtedly a laudable initiative. However, having sat and listened carefully to the hon. Members on both sides express their respective views, I should like to focus on three areas of concern, in respect of the proposed Senior Citizens' Pension Bill. My first concern addresses the question of the Senior Citizens' Pension (Amdt.) Bill, 2010 and the changes recommended therein.

Secondly, I would like to address the question of the broken promises made to the public during the recent election campaign.

Thirdly, the issue of how the Senior Citizens' Grants Pension Plan will be funded and how soon it will come into effect is also of grave concern to me.

Mr. Speaker, my concerns reflect those of my constituents, as well as my many friends, acquaintances and associates from all over the country. Indeed, they reflect the concerns of every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. As an educator I feel it is my duty to inform and educate others. I myself would like to be educated on these issues. The Government in turn has a duty and obligation to educate the public on all issues. This is about good governance and I feel confident that hon. Members on both side of the House are about the business of good governance.

In a society such as ours, the reality is that pensions are about sustaining families, where the income of grandparents is often utilized to help supplement that of parents. The provision for increased pension for the elderly is therefore highly commendable. However, the Senior Citizens' Pension (Amdt.) Bill contains, in my humble estimation, many ambiguous and unresolved irregularities and must therefore be ventilated in this Parliament so that the senior citizens of our country may understand exactly how, when and to what extent they would benefits from such a provision.

With respect the Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill 2010, I should like firstly to address clause 2(a) and (b), which proposes to change the word "grant" to "pension" in respect of the long as well as short titles. If those attempting to effect change find the word "grant", we on this side take no issue. What is in a name? It seems to me a question of semantics. The current Act, as well as the proposed Bill speaks of an entitlement which, according to *Black's Law Dictionary* is an absolute right; the right to a benefit, usually a monetary one granted to an individual who satisfies a legal requirement.

7.45 p.m.

What this implies, is having contributed to nation building and having fulfilled certain requirements, namely: citizenship, age attainment and residency, our senior citizens would receive this benefit. An absolute entitlement, as described by the PNM administration, leaves no room for confusion or miscommunication, but rather gives a measure of certainty that the individual must receive the benefit.

The intention of the Act, under the PNM administration, was abundantly clear. Under a caring PNM administration, this grant was given as a thank you by the State in appreciation for the individual's contribution in whatever form to the progress of the nation. Therefore, it is abundantly clear to me and a matter of record for all to see that the PNM administration has never decreased nor discontinued the old age benefit despite the provisions of section 3(5).

As matter of fact, the PNM administration has an admirable track record of having increased this benefit over the years. You see, Mr. Speaker, the service oriented and caring PNM, when it took the reins of governance in this country in 1956 continued along a policy framework—

Mr. Speaker: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, we have a procedural Motion, so just allow the Leader of Government Business to move it.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Housing and the Environment (Hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal): Please forgive me for interrupting my friend, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, in her maiden flight.

Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House continue to sit until the conclusion of the debate on this Bill, the Senior Citizens (Amdt.) Bill, 2010.

Question put and agreed to.

SENIOR CITIZENS' GRANT (AMDT.) BILL

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Mr. Speaker, as a matter of fact, the PNM administration has an admirable track record of having increased this benefit over the years. You see, the service-oriented and caring PNM when it took the reins of governance in this country in 1956, continued along a policy framework of incremental increases almost on an annual basis. The PNM moved the pension from a mere few dollars to a whopping \$2,500 which was one of the highest non-contributory pensions per capita in the world. [*Desk thumping*]

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MRS. MC INTOSH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Furthermore, the request by the hon. Minister of the People and Social Development to remove section 3(5) from the Act along with subsections (1) to (4) needs to be carefully examined. With the removal of the words "decrease and discontinue" from the Act, the even more important word "increase" will also be thrown out concomitantly, like the proverbial baby with the bath water.

In addition, we must examine the intent of the wording of subsection (6) to be renumbered subsection (2) where Parliament may by resolution approve a variation of the income ceiling and the amount of monthly payment referred to in the new subsection (1).

In other words, the proposed old age pension can be varied, changed, altered or decreased and the strategy for doing this would be to manipulate the approved income ceiling. The Government will simply have to change the income ceiling and the pension will subsequently and automatically change. I am fearful that this amendment offers no security to our senior citizens.

People are confused. One thing is said on one day and it changes to another, another day. We have heard changes here in this House today. Mr. Speaker, the impulsive rhetoric of the campaign platform now changes with the stark reality of governance.

Mr. Speaker, hon. Members on the opposite side promised, in the heat of an election campaign, when the hunt was on for votes, that an old age pension would be given to any citizen having attained the age of 60. In addition, the average senior citizen was given the impression that a pension of \$3,000 would be paid across the board. Some of them even felt that they would receive this amount in addition to what they are currently receiving. Mr. Speaker, the reality is the public feels confused and, in some cases, deceived.

My understanding is the pension age remains 65 and not 60 as was promised. The \$3,000 payment will not be issued across the board, neither will this payment be given in addition to what pensioners are currently receiving. Mr. Speaker, this is not at all fair to our populace. People harboured their expectations on what was promised on the campaign platform and voted for that. Several people predicated their financial earnings based on a monthly pension of, at least, \$3,000 at age 60.

One of my constituents, a single grandmother, age 60, approached me in tears over a necessary expenditure she had incurred with the expectation that she would be able to repay the debt from the receipt of an increased pension of no less than \$3,000. She only now finds out that she will not receive her \$3,000 old age pension at 60 as promised. As a matter of fact, she is now painfully aware that she might never receive a pension of \$3,000, and she now finds herself in a financial quandary, since she would be unable to meet her monthly commitments and, worse even, assist in sending her two granddaughters to school come September.

Hon. Members: Ohoooo!

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Mr. Speaker, she is 60 years old. *[Interruption]* What is her position at this time and how many other poor people in this country are in the same or similar position? This is not fair to the people. When they voted, they did so, on the basis of certain promises that today are not being delivered. I am sure the gentleman that the Member for Chaguanas West referred to in the photo—the one that is smiling—he is smiling because he believes that he will receive \$3,000 at age 60. That is why he is smiling. *[Desk thumping]*

As a matter of fact, a *Guardian* editorial—while the Member for Chaguanas West objected to a reference to a newspaper article, I think we must give some sort of credibility to editorials in our leading newspapers in this country. In a *Guardian* editorial dated July 18, 2010, the editor boldly and unreservedly stated: "Pension hike falls short of promise". As a matter of fact, the editor went on to share my expressed concerns. A brief excerpt of this article reads as follows:

“The People's Partnership manifesto promises to ‘remove all restrictions and qualifications for people to receive an Old Age Pension and this every citizen will automatically receive a state-funded Old Age Pension upon attainment of pensionable age’.

This has not been delivered.

In pre-election newspaper advertisements, the party in power also promised to lower the pensionable age from 65 to 60. This has also not been delivered.

In both instances...”

The hon. Minister of the People and Social Development:

“...did not explain why the Government opted not to go forward with the full promise.”

The hon. Minister:

“...also managed to leave out some crucial information in his tabling of the imitative in the House, specifically where the money would be coming from...”

And this is what I am most interested in.

“...to fund this 20 per cent increase in payments to pensioners.

Even without factoring in the other aspects of the Government's plans for senior citizens, the rise in payments from a baseline of \$2,500 to \$3,000 per month is going to be substantial.”

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MRS. MC INTOSH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

The Minister of the People and Social Development:

“...had no figures to offer as a source of financing for what is likely to be a formidable draw down on the treasury.

This niggling matter, in the face of the relief that the change will bring to the aged, is likely to grow in significance given the insistent concern of the Ministers of Finance and Planning about the state of the nation's finances.”

Mr. Speaker, I am forced to query: Why was the promise of an increased pension made to the public when a report on the state of the local economy commissioned by the current Minister of Finance just before the May 24, 2010 general election, described Trinidad and Tobago's increasing national debt as being of grave concern and one of the most disturbing developments in the economy?

The hon. Minister referred to the report written by Prof. Watson, Mary King, Indira Sagewan-Ali and David Walker at a campaign meeting in San Fernando saying that it revealed an economy whose future was uncertain. If so, Mr. Speaker, from whence would the State derive its revenue to engage this process? After all, the Treasury is empty, and the economy is in a terrible state of affairs, according to the hon. Minister of Finance. The source of funding all these laudable government programmes still remains a mystery, not only to me, but many of our citizens.

Mr. Speaker, I would like on behalf of my constituents, on behalf of every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago and, indeed, on my own behalf to seek clarification on the Government's plan to source funding to sustain the increased old age pension as proposed in the Senior Citizens Grant (Amdt.) Bill. I have come here today to ask the Government to tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago: What exactly is the plan to generate revenue in order to keep the platform promise of increased benefits to all old age pensioners? Where is the foreign direct investment?

8.00 p.m.

What is the Government's programme for diversification of the economy? What is the programme for industrialization? The Government has halted the plans for the industrial expansion development under the administration of the People's National Movement; though I am pleased to acknowledge the contribution this afternoon of the hon. Minister of Energy in respect of initiatives being undertaken to develop our hydrocarbon resources we can only hope that this initiative will generate substantial revenue to offset Government's recurrent expenditure. However, hydrocarbon initiatives are part—where therefore, are the alternative revenue streams to shift the economy into the next gear so that the Government programmes could be funded?

Mr. Speaker, the Government says that the Treasury is dry. They have been saying that since the campaign trail. Yet they continue to make laudable but unrealistic promises without informing the public of their plans for growing the economy. What then will the UNC lead coalition do? Will it raise taxes to keep their promise of the increased pension? If we as a nation are to go down the road of increased taxation, my children, your children, Mr. Speaker—I take it that you have children—our nation's children, young, hard working, industrious, vibrant; every taxpaying citizen throughout the country will be saddled with the arduous and discomfiting burden of paying for impetuous campaign promises. The economists, the senior public servants, the independent press, the simple folk of ordinary people, they too, share these concerns.

Mr. Speaker, if raising tax is not financially viable to securing the funding required to keep the campaign promises, will the People's Partnership resort to borrowing, and if so, where from? Local or international markets and at what interest rates? *[Interruption]* One does not have to be an economist to know that borrowing money to pay debt in a non-productive area is not an economically feasible option. There will be no return to the Treasury where in a case of sinking money into a black hole, of digging one hole to fill another, of throwing good money after bad, this could lead our country directly into the mouth of the IMF and then surely as day follows night unreasonable demands would be made on our social services and our people, especially the poor and disadvantaged, our aged and our children; they will be the ones who will suffer the most. On behalf of my constituents, and indeed, on behalf of all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago I must express these concerns and seek the appropriate answers from the Government.

Mr. Speaker, I still must ask, will the Government itself curtail other crucial, important, well-enjoyed essential services programmes, cut jobs or policies to pay for its election promises? Should this be their plan, which services will our people lose; a reduction in grants and benefits to the differently abled in our society? The termination of education programme such as GATE, MuST, HYPE, OJT, YTEPP, MILAT, which provide skills, training, career enhancement, social reform and development to at risk, disadvantaged and marginalized youth?

I am particularly worried about this. Because anytime I think of youth and their education, I think about their personal development and national development in the long-term. So I am concerned. Will we see a contraction of the social programmes such as the school feeding, the textbook rental, the medical programmes. This will be a terrible strain on the pocket of the poor man. What about the mass transportation network and highway systems? *[Interruption]*

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MRS. MC INTOSH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Already water taxis have been deemed a burden on state funds. I am searching, Sir, for answers.

Mr. Roberts: Oh my goodness.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Will the hospital projects approved for upgrade and completion under a caring PNM government administration be abandoned? Will we witness a curtailment of spending on national security? [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker, is this the reason why the OPV vessels are on their way out and a call was made for the return of the trainees? Freeing of the seas is once again for ever gun toting, drug smuggling vessel to go undetected?

Mr. Speaker, I could ad infinitum—

Hon. Member: Go!

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: But the point has been made I am sure—

Hon. Member: Go on.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh:—clear and convincing enough, even for the appreciation of some of those primary school children who may be denied a school feeding meal come September 2010.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the future of our beloved twin island State depends on sound planning and effective governance. I cannot help but be very concerned about the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the issues contained in the Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill. [*Interruption*] I am therefore calling on the Government to answer the question posed and to clarify for the benefit of my constituents, and indeed, for the benefit of all the people of Trinidad and Tobago the issues raised in my address. This I ask, through your distinguished Chair, on behalf of every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, because the time has come for us to put an end to platform rhetoric and press on with the critical business of steering the country along the path of progressive social and economic development.

Mr. Speaker, my distinguished and hon. colleagues, all those present, as well as the viewing and listening public of our beautiful twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, I thank you all for the kind indulgence of your attention.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Keith Rowley (Diego Martin West): You are going somewhere?

Hon. Member: Yes. Stop chewing gum.

Dr. K. Rowley: [*Takes out gum*] Do not teach the young people constriction. [*Interruption*]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for acknowledging my intention to participate briefly in this debate. I find it very disturbing that as I congratulate the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West on her maiden and excellent contribution—[*Desk thumping*]—and also congratulate the Member for Caroni Central on his presentation today, [*Desk thumping*] that an attempt was made by the Minister to curtail this debate while there are Members who want to speak.

Somebody is teaching this Member for Caroni Central some tricks that he ought not to learn and I hope he that would not try that as Minister of Government. As a Minister of Government your intention was very bad.

Mr. Speaker, I entered this debate to make a couple of points, and the first point I want to make is that I do not mind being fooled by the Members on the other side, because many of them are quite bright. Many of them are very experienced like my colleague from Chaguanas West. I want to ask Members on the other side, while you may succeed in fooling me or those of us on this side, we would object if you try to take us for fools. There is a distinction there. Because notwithstanding the content of what was put to us from the Government side, the mover of the Motion, the Minister or the details of interesting developments of the previous administration given to us by the Member for Chaguanas West, but I am sure that a lot of that is quite interesting and we will hear more about it as we go along the way.

I do not want to engage in any of that today, but there is one point that is before us and the point is this: The Government cannot in any serious way convince anybody that it did not make an offer to the population that it would change the status quo with respect to the senior citizens emolument which was called Senior Citizens' Grant, if elected to government, it would change the status quo to give such persons improved conditions. We on this side will support the action of the Government to do that, but in so doing we will hold the Government to give them what they offered. That is all we do. What was offered to the people of Trinidad and Tobago in the build up to the election was a change which said that you are currently getting this Senior Citizens' Grant. The topper which was \$2,500; and if we are elected we will give you \$3,000. Automatically that means that such persons who are affected will anticipate an increase of \$500.

Government did not stop there—in fact, I should not say government—the Opposition at the time, our Government now, did not stop there, they said we will give you that \$3,000, but knowing how the Senior Citizens' Grant is computed,

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. ROWLEY]

Friday, July 30, 2010

they knew that there are certain conditions precedent to earning moneys under that grant, and one of those conditions is, what other income you may have. If you have a parlour, drive a taxi, if you have a salon, somebody who lives in the house is a person with a good job; those things are taken into account and the public officials who assess you determine what your income is, including your NIS income or your public service pension. Those things are taken in as income and you get the difference between that income and that upper ceiling of \$2,500. That is the situation as it existed as we went to the polls.

Our colleagues on the other side, who are today the Government, made an offer which my colleague today described as a contract with the people, that if you elect us we will lift that ceiling to \$3,000 and we will not take into account any qualifying criteria. So in other words, if your parlour gives you \$1,000 a month, we will give you \$3,000, so you will actually get \$4,000; if your son is giving you \$800, we will give you \$3,000, you will live on \$3,800; if you are driving a taxi and you are making \$5,000, we will give you \$3,000, so you will end up with \$8,000. That was the offer. Because they more than once made the point that there will be no qualifying criteria.

I happen to know, Mr. Speaker, that was very attractive to a lot of people, because many persons complained that they were denied access to the Senior Citizens' Grant or all of it because they were evaluated based on some income that they receive, sometimes from their children and by having it be evaluation criteria, they were either denied access to the grant or were given a reduced form of it.

I am very familiar with this thing. I will tell you why. I grew up with my grandparents—

Mr. Warner: You too.

Dr. K. Rowley: Yes, and they used to get old age pension. My grandfather used to get \$14 a month—that was the old age pension then—and a lot of people were denied that old age pension. If you have an acre or two of cocoa or you had a few cows; the public servants would assess that and say you do not need that old age pension. And many of those persons would come to my grandfather, who would write a letter for them to take to Sir Solomon Hochoy, who was the Governor General at that time.

8.15 p.m.

My grandfather having known Sir Solomon Hochoy since he was a tally clerk on the Port, they were associates and, on many occasions I would assist him in writing these letters for those persons to go to Sir Solomon Hochoy. I can tell you, on every occasion he wrote a letter, Sir Solomon would pass it to the public

servant, who would go and re-evaluate the situation, and on many occasions that person would have been granted the \$14 a month. So the valuation, the means test, was always there and that old age pension moved from \$14 in my younger days to when I became a Member of the Cabinet. It was less than \$1,000. If my memory serves me right, when we were in the Cabinet in the—I cannot remember the period, but I distinctly recall how happy we all were to make the pension \$1,000. It was raised to \$1,000; then I think it went to \$1,400; then it went to \$1,800; then it went to \$2,000; and lastly, it went to \$2,500.

Mr. Warner: You were still in the Cabinet?

Dr. K. Rowley: I was in the Cabinet when old age pension went to \$1,000, to \$1,400, to \$1,800 and, I was in the Back Bench when it went to \$2,500. I was in the Government. Good! What those on the other side sought to do is to continue elevating it and, they said we are putting it at \$3,000. To make the point to those who did not hear what was being said on the political platform by my friends, whoever they were, they paid and put advertisements in the newspapers that made it abundantly clear that the qualifying criterion now—it is no longer criteria—is that once you become 60 years of age [*Desk thumping*] you will be able to access this \$3,000. That is what they offered. In fact, that was what was in the manifesto. What was in the manifesto was put in paid advertisements. I am not talking to my colleagues in here this evening, because they have taken the position like Shaggy. Mr. Speaker, you are a man of the world and, I know you know Shaggy's tune. Do you know Shaggy's tune, "It wasn't me"? You know that tune by Shaggy, "If dey catch yuh flagrante delicto, it wasn't me. Just say it "wasn't me".

The Members of the Government now, who were Members of the Opposition, who campaigned on a position to improve the circumstance of people 60 years and over, are now shamelessly and disgustingly trying to say they did not say that. They are saying we did not say that, even though their paid advertisements said that at age 60 you will qualify for \$3,000 a month—[*Interruption*]

Miss Cox: It is in the manifesto.

Dr. K. Rowley:—as per the statement in the manifesto. It was reported in many prescribed works that there will be no— As a matter of fact, I heard the Prime Minister herself, the Member of Parliament for Siparia, saying on public platform that they are removing the qualifying criteria. [*Desk thumping*] So all you had to do once you reach age 60— I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, I must declare my interest in the matter. I was expecting money. I am qualified.

Mr. Warner: Without the hair on your head, you are qualified?

Dr. K. Rowley: You are qualified.

Mr. Warner: All right.

Dr. K. Rowley: I had my concerns about the offer, and I will tell you something. Members on the other side, we are reasonable. We are not taking any position that the Government in eight weeks has not fixed the country the way it said it would on the campaign. The Government has five years to do things.

Hon. Member: Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. K. Rowley: However, we are taking serious issue with the Government for changing its contracted position, by denying its promise to the people. [*Desk thumping*] Because we are saying, whether it is the first week, the eighth week, the first year or the fourth month, if you are going to deny paternity of the advertisements put in the papers, if you are going to deny your own manifesto pledge, that is not a matter that is temporal; it has nothing to do with time and how long you are there. It is a matter of ethics, and you are saying that politics has a morality of its own. You could write in the manifesto, you could put an ad in the papers in English, we could bring it to the Parliament and remind you in case you forget, and you could say we did not say that. That is what the Government is saying: We did not do that; we did not say that.

Miss Cox: Shame! Shame!

Dr. D. Rowley: What is worse, my colleague, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, playing smart with foolishness, is shouting across the floor that, "Well, even if we said that, the law is that pensionable age is 65". I want to tell my friend, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, he is now a Member of Parliament, he is a leader of this country, he is dealing with serious public business, and such flippancy has no place in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, when we look at the Bill that is before us, an issue is made of the fact that they do not like the title of the grant. It is called senior citizens grant and I will come back to that. But one of the changes that the Bill is seeking to make is to change the name from Senior Citizens Grant to old age pension. That is a change in the law that you said you would do, and you are doing that. You are keeping your promise. But when you said you will remove the qualifying criteria and that you will use age 60 as the qualifying age, it is implicit in there that you will change the law so to do. You made that promise. The minute you say age 60, it carries with it a commitment to change the law because the existing law says age 65. That is why I put an amendment before the House to assist you.

I have put an amendment out there under my name, asking you to change the law. The same way you are doing one line here, changing the law to change the name, put an amendment in and all you would see, "change 65 to 60", and you would have kept your promise. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: You believe that?

Dr. K. Rowley: That is the promise you made. I do not have to believe it, and you do not have to believe me. It is those who read you ads, those who heard you and, those who see you now resigning from your campaign promise. You said it is known to everybody that pension is 65, but when you say 60, it could not happen. Yes, it could happen by changing the law. The fact that you could come in this House and say you did not say age 60, it is frightening because what else will this Government deny. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara is saying that nobody on the UNC, COP, MSJ, NJAC or the alphabet side said that. I think he is trying to be the Parliament clown. It has to be. He is giving jokes. I am serious about the interest of the people who are senior citizens. We had an election campaign, and he is saying that nobody on their side said that.

Mr. Roberts: I am asking you to quote who.

Dr. K. Rowley: I am ignoring you now. You are getting out of hand now. Mr. Speaker, when a government does that, this whole matter of trust becomes an issue because people will not want to trust you or trust us, or trust institutions, when you could do something like that. How could you do that in the face of documentation, in the face of recorded speech, [*Desk thumping*] in the face of the memory of those who supported you? You boast about your 29 seats that you won, I say congratulations; you boast about laying the Bill in Parliament to give them what you promised, I say carry on; but then you are saying that is not what we offered. I am saying we do not need you to interpret anything for us. What you said was crystal clear and you are not keeping any promise. You are playing smart with foolishness, trying to deceive the people and you are fooling no one.

One of the big issues that the Government raised as articulated by my colleague, the Member for Chaguanas West, this afternoon, is the whole question of this Senior Citizens Grant. It used to be old age pension, and this nefarious action was taken by the PNM government to call it Senior Citizens Grant. Mr. Speaker, language evolves as you know. I know you are a man of letters. You can go back to Dane Shawson and some of us today cannot even read Shawson's English.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. ROWLEY]

Friday, July 30, 2010

You can go back 20/30 years ago, and I remember there was a time before we had sewerage of the city, there used to be some activities taking place at nights. "Fellas" used to come and clean the septic tanks behind the houses and so on, and I remember as a child, they were called "night soil workers". Nowadays, nobody will call anybody that. Persons dealing with human waste or that sort of thing are called "sanitary engineers". I remember we used to call people cripple, when you had a problem with your limbs. Nowadays, nobody says that to anybody. You say they are physically challenged. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Differently abled.

Dr. K. Rowley: We have gone beyond that, differently abled. We do not call people old people any more. We call them—not even the elderly—senior citizens. So we soften the language as we go along, but there is nothing sinister in senior citizens. We removed the old age. You brought it back and called it old age pension, and in keeping with your commitment to make the old age yardstick 60, you say, okay, from the time you are 60 you have reached old age and you can get old age pension. That is what you are saying. You promised old age pension. We were saying senior citizens, but the word "pension" is where the issue really hinges. You are saying, by saying it is a grant it can be removed by any whim and fancy. By you saying it is a pension, it is cast in stone. Mr. Speaker, nothing is further from the truth.

In fact, what the Government has before the House, is far looser and more exposed to changes than the old order. So here it is, the Government makes a campaign issue and a song and dance about a grant that somebody could take away, and in amending the law to prevent that, the Government creates an environment in which such a concern can more easily happen.

Mr. Speaker, I draw your attention to the parent Act. Before I go there, let me say something about the word "pension". I did say earlier on that we kept increasing the old age pension over time until it got to \$1,000. I am sure my colleagues can remember when there was some relationship between the old age pension and the NIS pension. As the economy of the country improved and we sought to increase the allocations made available to senior citizens, that grant kept climbing and climbing, and eventually it attracted the attention of the relationship between the grant and the NIS pension and, there was a need based on the demands by people who were saying, "Listen, I have been paying into a pension and, now, old age pension which is the Government free contribution is either equal to or more than my pension."

8.30 p.m.

That issue became an issue when we crossed, I think the \$1,400, or something like that. To make the distinction between what the Government was giving and the contributory pension, the use of the term, "grant", was meant to identify the two things as separate. What you are getting from the Treasury, the non-contributory grant, ought not to be seen in the same light as the contributory pension from NIS. That only arose when the two grants started to compete—the two payments started to compete.

Therefore, the term, "senior citizen", softening of the term, and "pension", the competition between the two payments resulted in the thought that we should separate the two things to make it clear, what they really are. Because there is an issue which this Government will have to confront very soon; and the issue remains the relationship between the "free government pension", as you call it now, which we call the "Senior Citizens Grant". Because now that you have increased it above the NIS pension, do not believe that you are immune from what we faced then.

Those who have contributed to NIS will now say to you that you will now be required to raise the NIS payments to meet the old age pension. That is coming. That is here. Because the argument is that a contributory pension ought not to be less than a free pension. Not to mention, all the public servants who worked and who retired, and whose earned pension is less than the offering now of the old age pension, they have a case and an argument that, "I have worked. I have worked hard. I have earned my pension. Why is my pension lower than your free pension?"

That is not to say that they are saying do not give the recipients what you have offered. We are happy that you could give some more to those who qualify. But having done so, there is an expectation and a demand from other sectors in the country who have a case, either through NIS that, "I have been contributing money all my working life and I should not be getting less than the free pension that you are offering," and those who said, "I have earned my pension by virtue of having worked in a job in the public sector, and I should not be getting less than the free pension."

I have heard nobody from the Government saying how you would address that. So I am saying to you now, and I am putting you on notice, that while you have made adjustments here, like a waterbed, you have squeezed it here, and it is going to bulge over here. So the next issue we want to hear the Government addressing is how you propose to make the contributing pension of the NIS equal to, or superior to, the free government grant? And when you intend to raise public servants' pension for those who are getting less than you are now offering the free pension. [*Desk thumping*]

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. ROWLEY]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Those are issues that did not form part of the campaign rhetoric. Those are issues which have not been addressed by the Government. Those are issues that have to be addressed. So it is not sufficient to pat yourself on the chest and on the back and say, "We have done this," and "We have done that". There are consequences to your actions and those consequences will flow as the days progress.

Mr. Speaker, to get back to the point I was making about the grant and this allegation that because the previous Government called it Senior Citizens' Grant, there was some ulterior motive there to do something quite damaging to pensioners, I am saying that is just so much old talk. It has absolutely no basis in fact. It has no merit. It was pure political expediency by those; and those who believe it do not know better; those who know it thought it was a good tool; you used it; good for you; good luck.

But let me demonstrate to you its "valuelessness". It has no value. Because if you go to the parent Act that is being amended today, the parent Act, Chap. 32:02—that is the section of the law that creates the pension—we are amending it today to do what you promised to do in your campaign promises. I take you, Mr. Speaker, to section 3(5), and I read for you:

“A grant under this Act is subject to review and may be increased, decreased or discontinued.”

It is that clause which has been given a political complexion, where people were told, "You see this grant that the Government is talking about? They could take away your pension." Because the law says, under this Act, it is subject to review and may be increased, decreased or discontinued. It was always so.

And then it goes on to say, Mr. Speaker, and this is the interesting part, section 6:

“Parliament—

And I emphasize “Parliament”.

“—may, by resolution, approve the variation of the income ceiling and the amount of money granted in subsection (1).”

Parliament can do that. So, they can use the Parliament to vary how much money the State wants to pay out in this offering.

What is the amendment? We have the law in front of us, proposed, and I take you, Mr. Speaker, to the first amendment that was offered to us today—to section two. Section 2(2) of the first amendment says:

“The Minister may, by order...”

In fact, the first one did not have that. The first one did not have the clause that is in the amendment. The amendment carries section 2(2). It is not present in the Bill that was laid in the House.

Having made all that argument about the dangers of it being called a grant and it can be reviewed and removed any time, which was the basis of the argument from my friend from Chaguanas West, that role being given to the Minister was not in the Bill. It was not there. Somebody realized after that there is a need to preserve section 5, so an amendment has been done; and hear what the amendment says, section 2(2), which is what we are being asked to pass. Section 2(2) says:

“The Minister may by Order, subject to negative resolution of Parliament, amend the Schedule to this Act.”

Do you know what the schedule is? The schedule is the payments.

So, you write into an amendment and give it to us this evening, something that was not in the Bill as laid in the beginning before the election. Because you thought, had you put it there before the election, we would have seen it and we would have gone on the platform and we would have said, "Listen, the Government is fooling you. Because the very said thing that they are objecting to—right—they are, in fact, doing even worse."

Whereas Parliament is required to make variations of the qualifying arrangements, what you have now put after the election is an amendment which you brought today, and that amendment at section 2(2) says, "The Minister may by Order..." What that means, Mr. Speaker, is that whoever the Minister is—the Minister who was just trying there to cut out my speaking time by asking you to violate your oath of office, to see him and not see me.

As I got up to speak, he saw me getting up to speak; he jumped up on the instructions from my colleague from Oropouche East, because I saw when the Member for Oropouche East instructed him to do that. I saw when my colleague from Oropouche went to him. He was sitting there like a jack-in-the-box; almost jumped into the bosom of my friend from Port of Spain North. As soon as she said the last word, he jumped straight up, hoping to stop the debate.

He was hoping that you would call on him and he would be the last speaker, because the attempt was made to terminate the debate by your ruling, picking him first. That was the attempt. And what is worse, his leader who told him to do that knew that it is our intention that many of our Members will speak; because after I have spoken, my colleague from Laventille will speak; my colleague from La

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. ROWLEY]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Brea will speak; my colleague from St. Ann's will speak; and my colleague from Point Fortin will speak. [*Desk thumping*]

He knew that, because we told him that. He asked for a guillotine and we told him no. We have things to say to him and to the country. And because we did not agree to limit our speakers, he goes and tells him to jump up fast, expecting to use the Speaker's Chair, to ask him to jump up and end the debate. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for keeping your oath of office. Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

The reason they want the debate terminated in that way is because they did not want the country to know that before the election, they put a Bill in that pretended to treat with this issue of the grant being at risk and government playing, but then comes back today, puts in an amendment to preserve section 5 which says:

“A grant under this Act is subject to review, and may be increased, decreased or discontinued.”

They changed the language. That is the same thing as saying:

“The Minister may by Order, subject to negative resolution of Parliament, amend the Schedule to this Act.”

Today, I accuse the Government of nakedly trying to deceive not only the people outside, but the people inside the Parliament. You cannot fool the PNM with that. We came here long time. We did not just come in town. You cannot fool us with that, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: Shame! Shame!

Dr. K. Rowley: The PNM is here to identify your subterfuge, your trickery, and your deceit. [*Desk thumping*] Because all that is required to change the grant, to change the pension upwards or downwards, all that is required now when this is passed, if you pass it, is for the Minister to make an order, bring it to the House, and the order has to be passed by negative resolution, which means that there has to be more votes in the House voting it down. You have the majority. You have 29 votes; we have 12. As long as you use 13 of your votes, you could change the figure. So the Government preserves the power to change the offering to senior citizens. What has changed?

So in one breath, you are foaming at your mouth about the grant, and that the grant could be changed, and giving the impression—[*Interruption*] My colleague from Caroni Central was jumping up and down this evening, giving the impression that he has brought some law here to cast in stone the payment to pensioners, because you are doing them some big favour. You are saving them from some ogre.

In fact, what you have done is just changed the wording, giving yourself ministerial power to change the grant upwards or downwards as you see fit. You are fooling no one. No one. But having taken care to leave it out before the election and bring it after the election against the background of the Minister of Finance predicting a dangerous future for the economy, and an empty Treasury, it is my view that whenever the Government brings an order to this Parliament to treat with this Bill, it is to reduce that pension.

That is what they want to preserve. They want to preserve the power in law to be able to change it. If what you have said is true, that it cannot be changed by governmental intervention, why did you see it fit to bring this clause in today? Why? The only reason you want that clause in there is to be able to retain the power to change it downwards. Okay, so what is this long story about the PNM took away the pension and made it a grant? You are not making any substantial change. You are trying to fool people. You are taking credit where none is due. [*Desk thumping*]

I have no problem with the Government coming into office and saying, we are taking a governmental decision—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member for Diego Martin West has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Miss M. McDonald*]

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Before the Member continues, I would like at this time to suspend the sitting of this House for 15 minutes and we shall resume at 9:00 p.m. sharp.

8.44 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

9.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. Speaker: The Hon. Member for Diego Martin West.

Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank my colleagues for the extension. I probably would not take all of it. As I was saying before we took the break, the Government set out to right what it perceived to be some wrongs, and I hope I was able to demonstrate that the wrong that was supposed to be remedied by virtue of changing the name from "Senior Citizens' Grant" to "old age pension" was, in fact, not really anything of any consequence. Because whatever the name, the entitlement was there, as my colleague from

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. ROWLEY]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Diego Martin Central pointed out. It was listed as an entitlement, and therefore, entitlement superseded the title of the Bill.

Mr. Speaker, I also hope that I got the point across that there was some kind of underhandedness and subterfuge on the part of the Government to have laid that Bill without the ministerial order, provision, before the elections and come here after the election and insert that power to the Minister who, by order, may change the grant as the Government sees fit. And that being so, it reads exactly like section 3(5) that it is possible, if the Government so desires to vary that grant up, down or across.

There is something else that my colleague from Chaguanas West raised with great indignation, and it came in under the headline of discrimination. Mr. Speaker, that is a misrepresentation of how the grant operates. As long as you have the use of the means test to determine who should get and who should not get—in other words, who should qualify to access the grant—it is possible for some persons, like my friend from Chaguanas West, to ascribe the word "discrimination" to the process.

I want to draw to the attention of my friend from Chaguanas West that the means test is applied by public servants, away from the involvement of any politician. Politicians do not tell public servants, "Do not give Mr. James or Mr. Singh old age pension." As a matter of fact, it is when public servants make a ruling and a member of the public is either not qualified or they are offered a reduced amount with respect to their expectation, that they then might go to their MP and say, "I have not got what I am entitled to, or what I expected."

So, the first action in dealing with qualification has to be done by a public servant; and what normally happens, if a constituent is aggrieved, based on the impartial arm's length assessment of a public servant, and that constituent wants his or her position reviewed, they go to their MP or any person who they believe has influence—as I said, my grandfather used to go to Sir Solomon Hochoy—that is not discrimination. That is a review.

And a lot of people of means, which make them not qualified to access the grant, take the position not that, "There is a means test, and my means are deemed to make me not qualify to access it," but that, "I am being discriminated against." Yes, it is discrimination, but it is based on you being disqualified, based on your demonstrated or assumed other income. Because, the pension; the old aged grant—whatever you call it—was not meant to be your sole supporting item. It was meant to assist.

That is why a means test was put. So that persons of means who were deemed not to need that grant would not access it, otherwise, everybody will access it. And that is what the Government played on when they said, everybody will access it once they reach age 60. That was the political bonanza, because from the turn of the century to now, whenever the old age pension started, there was always this means test. It was always applied by public servants.

From the colonial days to now, public servants applied the means test. It was always understood by the country, the British colony, or the independent Trinidad and Tobago, that there were persons to whom this grant should not be paid because such persons were deemed to be of a certain means and, therefore, the State should not be providing them with this free grant, or pension, as you may call it. So when the Member got up and said, "Once you reach age 60," our colleagues on the other side were exploiting that, knowing full well that it would be a major charge on the Treasury.

We heard from the Member for Chaguanas West this evening—I assume that his figure is correct—that there are 143,000 people over age 65. But between age 60 and age 65, there may even be more. It is approximately the same figure. There is a huge number of people between 60 and 60. I am not sure if that is a correct figure, but I am just saying, 65 and over, 143,000. It is a long time I have not looked at those numbers so I cannot remember what it is, but it is a large number of people between 60 and 65.

Had the Government kept its promise to make the sole qualifying criterion age, it would have meant that all those persons would immediately have come on the public purse for a charge of \$3,000 a month; and if it was 85,000, that would have been a charge. So by reneging on that promise—that printed promise; that stated promise; that articulated promise—that was how the Government reduced its cash outlay to persons who had an expectation, based on what was promised.

That is what the Government is doing. And if that is what you are doing, then say so. You cannot hide it. We have no problem with the Government saying that, "We think the old age pension is too low. It is at \$2,500. We are going to raise it to \$3,000." No problem with that; but that is not what was offered. What was offered is something that was held out to people between age 60 and 65, which is not being kept.

So, whatever other promise you kept; cut your salary; move in the Prime Minister's palace; take off the emblem—all of those things you have done. Fine. But the one thing you are not doing, you are not offering between 60 and 65 year olds, the pension you promised them. And no amount of bluster and subterfuge on

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[DR. ROWLEY]

Friday, July 30, 2010

your part will convince us or anybody that you have done what you have not done, or that you are doing what you are not doing.

You are not keeping that part of your promise, and it has nothing to do with how long you have been in office. It has to do with you changing your position. They do not have to admit it, Mr. Speaker. They can deny it for as much as they like. That is what is happening. And that is why my friend from Chaguanas West got caught in the Freudian slip when he gave us a story; a very real story.

My friend from Chaguanas West is a man of honour. He would not make up a story like that, but when he gave us the story, he got the age wrong. He said he has this constituent who is 63 years old, and who takes her grandchild to the bus station and uses her pension to get the child to school, paying the bus fare, I think; and said to him that when the pension goes to \$3,000, she will save to send the child to university. And he was roundly cheered for this great altruism.

The only thing is if that constituent was, in fact, 63 years old, they are getting no pension and, therefore, could pay no bus fare with no pension. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Roberts: He did not say that.

Dr. K. Rowley: Because nobody at age 63 qualifies for any old age pension. They have to get to 65. And since the constituent referred to was only 63, they are getting no pension, and, therefore, the story is not a real story. But had they kept their promise, that person would have qualified for a pension now, because the qualifying age would have been removed at 65 and lowered to 60. So, the subliminal mind of my friend from Chaguanas West knew that that 63-year-old should have been on the pension roster, but having reneged on it, as we are doing now, no pension for another two years.

Mr. Roberts: He said another two years.

Dr. K. Rowley: To get what?

Mr. Warner: I said my constituent is 63 years old and takes her grandchild to St. Augustine High School on mornings. I said that she said she is 63, and that she is waiting until she is 65 to get her pension to pay for the child to go to university. Tell me what is wrong with that? What is wrong with that?

Mr. Roberts: That is what he said.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Speaker, I take the explanation. If I misunderstood my colleague, I now understand it very clearly. He was saying otherwise. I still want to ask him if at the time when she said that to him, if he said to her, "Do not

worry. You are qualified for a pension now, because we are going to Parliament to give you the pension we promised you at age 60"? *[Interruption]*

I am simply saying that is what he should have said. Had I been in his position, I would have said that. You do not have to wait until 65. We have made a campaign promise to make you qualify for this.

Mr. Warner: I did not tell her that.

Dr. K. Rowley: You were not forthright with her.

Mr. Warner: I was "fifth right". *[Laughter]*

Dr. K. Rowley: You knew what was coming in the Parliament, so you did not tell her that. Mr. Speaker, that idea of discrimination is something that we reject, and we keep it very clear that persons in Trinidad and Tobago who have expected to get an improved circumstance—those between age 60 and 65—will not now get it because the Government has changed its position.

Even as I put an amendment to you, Mr. Speaker, I am constrained—I think we are all constrained by the Standing Orders. Because we cannot now do what has to be done, except that I ask the Government to go back and try to comply with Standing Order 53(g). Standing Order 53(g) requires that Cabinet permission is required to change what you have brought here, because to change it to keep your promise has a cost.

If you really want to keep the promise you have made, having brought a Bill that does not do that; if you are to change it now, to make it age 60, as we are asking you to do to keep your promise, that cost between 60 and 65 will require Cabinet approval. Therefore, I am asking you to go back to the Cabinet, get that approval, come back and amend the law, as I have suggested, and the amendment is simple. The amendment is to change the law where it says 65 and make it 60.

9.15 p.m.

That is all you have to do if you are going to keep faith with the people who you so proudly boast have given you this large number of seats. One of the contributing factors to that is that you did offer to them to change the circumstances and the conditions and those who could access old age pension you offered to change it for the better. You are not doing that.

Finally, I want to take issue with my colleague from Caroni Central who came here and sought to give the impression that I—*[Mr. Warner stands]*—Where you going? I thought you say you want to learn something in the Parliament.

Mr. Warner: I would not learn anything from you.

Dr. K. Rowley: Your head is not absorbing anything. It might be that there is no space for anything else.

Mr. Speaker, when I look at the schedule that is laid here by the Government, the Government that lays a schedule and says that "we are keeping our promise to give everybody \$3,000 a month", the schedule is very, very clear. He took issue with me talking in St. James referring to the nine bands. What exists now—

Mr. Cadiz: You lost St. James.

Dr. K. Rowley: The only loss here is the people of Trinidad and Tobago who you are not speaking the truth to.

Mr. Roberts: Where is Calder Hart? He is lost.

Dr. K. Rowley: I referred to the nine bands as they existed; what the Government is adding to each band and where the new payment will be. There is one category that will move to \$3,000 in terms of what the Government pays out. The Government pays out \$3,000 to the first category alone. Every other category the Government pays out less than \$3,000. There are eight other bands where the Government pays out less than \$3,000 and the reason for that is that those persons' qualifying income, if you look at the Minister's own table, the brackets range from \$500. If your qualifying income is \$500 equals you have no money at all, that is the only condition where you get \$3,000 from the Government. Everybody else who gets from \$501 upwards, will get less than \$3,000.

I want you to compare that with your campaign promise which says you will get \$3,000 regardless of your circumstances. So if you look at band number two, if your income is between \$500 and \$1,450, you will get \$2,550. The last time I checked, \$2,550 is not \$3,000; it is less than \$3,000. [*Desk thumping*] If you get an income between \$1,650 and \$1,800 and that income could easily be your NIS, you will get \$2,200 from Government. You are not getting \$3,000 plus your NIS. You are not getting that.

If your income is between \$2,000 and \$2,200, the Government will pay you as its old age pension, \$1,800. You are not getting \$3,000. If your income is between \$2,400 and \$2,600, the Government will pay you \$1,400. You are not getting \$3,000. If your income is between \$2,600 and \$2,800 you are going to get \$1,200 from the Government. You are not getting \$3,000.

That is what this says; that is what this means. So your offer of \$3,000 to every pensioner with no qualifying income, no consideration, where they all

expected to get \$3,000 plus whatever else they have, is not what you are doing and you are fooling nobody. Yes, you would have raised the pension a bit, but it is a far cry from giving every pensioner \$3,000 a month. We have nine bands. It is the poorest of the poor, with an income of less than \$500 who will get a \$3,000 pension.

That is what it is and we are not that stupid that we cannot see what you are doing. This is the Parliament. You cannot pull this wool over our eyes and bring your youngest, least experienced Minister to try and pull this wool over the eye of the Parliament. "Eh?" He might be malleable, but he cannot fool anybody in this Parliament or in this country by talking about "I kept our campaign promise", and this is what you put there. It is right here. This is what we are going to pass into law tonight. One category will receive \$3,000 from the Government; the absolute destitute person whose income per month is \$500 or less. Everybody else will get less than \$3,000 to add to whatever they had.

Therefore, I accuse the Government of trying to make a fool of the people of Trinidad and Tobago and you failed spectacularly. [*Desk thumping*] We support the increase but the Government stands accused of trying to fool people for political gain.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Housing and the Environment (Hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Let me say from the beginning that when I am finished, the Government is prepared to listen to our friend from La Brea; we will be prepared to listen to our friend from Laventille West; Laventille East/Morvant; Port of Spain South. Who else is lining up—Point Fortin? We will be prepared to listen to every single Member of the Opposition.

I want to remind my friend from Diego Martin West that I have spent 10 years in Opposition. I have not spent 10 weeks in Government and I understand the need for the Opposition to speak. I have spent 10 years there; not 10 weeks in government. I want to tell my friend that in the build up to the proceedings this evening, I was in touch with the Member for Port of Spain South, as is my duty to be, and our understanding was that when the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West is finished, the Minister, the Member for Caroni Central, will wind up. Indeed, the Member for Tabaquite, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, was prepared to speak and I have asked the Member for Tabaquite to stand down so that the Member for Caroni Central can speak. The Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara asked me—I heard him on the 25th time when he asked to contribute. I asked him to stand down and allow the Member for Caroni Central to wind up.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. R. MOONILAL]

Friday, July 30, 2010

It was never our intention to deny Members of the Opposition the right to speak. What we really sought to do, in consultation with the Member for Port of Spain South, was at an appropriate time that we agree we can wind up and end the debate. At no time did we intend to end the debate, or worse, to deny the Leader of the Opposition or any Member of the Opposition the right to speak, and if need be, there are about five or six Members prepared to speak from the Government side on this matter. [*Desk thumping*]

There was a feeling—and I want to remind you that when we were in Opposition we were prepared to stay here till three in the morning, and we did, and when the UNC formed the Government between 1995 to 2001, Members across that side—the Member for Diego Martin West may be the only one; San Fernando East; he is not here now—will recall that they left this Parliament 4 o'clock in the morning and came back 10 o'clock in the morning. So we have no problem remaining here and debating the people's business. We have no difficulty with that.

So at no time accuse us of undermining a debate or preventing Members of the Opposition from debating and exposing whatever they want to expose. We spent 10 years there. We understand the value of Opposition. We understand the value of your thinking; of your views.

The reason I stand is because the Member for Diego Martin West made some points. In fact, he made a couple new points which before we were not hearing, because there are Members opposite who were not only repeating what each other said; they were even showing the same picture to say the same thing and we felt that the Member for Caroni Central was well equipped to deal with those arguments. But there have been some new issues and I want to respond to them.

Mr. Speaker, may I also join you in congratulating the Member for Caroni Central, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, the Member, of course, for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. I think all three Members delivered their maiden contribution this evening in the Parliament and I want to congratulate them on their delivery. Our friend from Maloney was here with us before, but I want to thank all Members on both sides who contributed to the debate.

Today, the Government comes pursuant to commitments made in the recent general election, but more than that, pursuant to commitments that we feel, to the population of Trinidad and Tobago and, particularly, to the elderly. I am heartened that Members opposite would study in such forensic detail the manifesto of the People's Partnership. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Roberts: Good word, "forensic".

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: I am very happy. I am elated that they would choose to study what we say; they would listen to us notwithstanding that you listen to only a few things and not everything. But you are listening to what we are saying; what we are arguing and I am gratified on that.

But, you know, I am almost bowled over by the argument. The Opposition came today, to use their words, to ask us to keep our promise. That is what they are here for, so we keep our promise. The Member for Chaguanas West was at pains to point out that in a short time—this is an administration that is in place, for all intents and purposes, for 63 days; nine weeks; 63 days we are in office. That is why I told you, not 10 weeks; nine weeks. And our friends opposite would give the impression that we are now winding up our five-year term; our five-year term is coming to an end and in six months we must go to the polls so we can bring the manifesto before us and say, "Let us look at what they have done in the five years they have been here". It is nine weeks; it is 63 days.

Mr. Roberts: We do more in nine weeks than "dem" do in nine years.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Speaker, I will not proceed—the Member for Diego Martin West knows very well the challenges of a new government settling in. He was in a new government in 1991; he was in a new government in 2002 and I think he left government by 2007. He was in a new government at the beginning of 2007. He demitted office after. But he knows the challenges. So 63 days, and we have delivered on almost 80 to 90 per cent of the promises that we indicated—[*Desk thumping*]*]*—and we are working on others such as the laptop commitment.

What is also interesting—and I was waiting for my friend from Diego Martin Central who I want to welcome back to the jurisdiction; he was out for a while, but as soon as July 26 came, he—

Miss Cox: What that has to do with this?

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Well I am happy to see him and because he took me to the manifesto.

Mr. Roberts: He was not here for the election?

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: No, he was not here; he was in Italy or somewhere.

Mr. Roberts: That strange.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Speaker, in the manifesto, which my friend from Diego Martin Central was happy to raise and discuss, there is a 120-day plan of immediate action and I am sure he read it; I am sure. And, you know, there are 32

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. R. MOONILAL]

Friday, July 30, 2010

commitments for 120 days which, by itself, is a rather ambitious proposal, which we are keeping; which we are on sound with; which we are delivering on.

But in this, nowhere in the 32 commitments speaks to the issue of this pension measure. But the Prime Minister in the campaign went on the platform and indicated that within 30 days of the convening of the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, we will take this step to revert to the old age pension and increase the pension to \$3,000. That was a commitment made. Okay? And that is why we are here, in pursuance to the commitment made on the platform by the political leader and later to be Prime Minister of the country.

It is not even in the 120-day plan. There are other matters in the 120-day plan: expanding GATE; rescinding property tax; fixing leaks, which we are working now. We begin the establishment of a Ministry of the People. That is on sound. That is under way; we are working on that. We spoke about deploying police on the streets; we are dealing with that; dealing with the plan for crime.

Today, 12 o'clock, I think, the Prime Minister handed over vehicles to the Police Service of Trinidad and Tobago. We are on the move with our promises.

Mr. Roberts: Not Grenada, eh; Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Life fund, we established that already. You have seen the Minister handing sums of money to save the lives of children.

But they did not focus on that. They are not bothered too much with that today; not bothered with the children's lives, where the former Minister of Health in their administration, would offer somebody a measly \$10,000 when an operation requires \$300,000 or \$400,000. But we are not talking about that.

They took us to the manifesto and they were very happy to read from this manifesto and in the area in the manifesto we deal with ageing population: "Life begins at 60". It is in black, white, blue and yellow—colourful. But there are other requirements here. It is there, but they did not read that. We indicated that pension laws must be amended to provide for national and regional portability of pension benefits. How come nobody attack us on that? How come nobody did not raise that and say, "Look, in 30"—

Dr. Rowley: We need time for that.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Oh, we need time for that. Good, good, good, good.

Dr. Rowley: We need time now.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: We need time for that. All right.

9.30 p.m.

Dr. Rowley: We are very reasonable. You need time to do things like that. Nobody is saying that you would have done all these wonderful things in four weeks. The issue we are taking is that you are changing the commitment. Even if you spend five years in office, having changed the commitment, it will not be done because you are saying: We did not say that. That is the only issue. Had you said: "During our term we will increase pensions" we would not be asking you anything today. You are only two months. Having said that, you did not say age 60. We are to expect that nowhere through your five-year term will you do that. It is not a matter of how long you began office, it is the fact that you are changing the commitment.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West in his maiden address, made a very fundamental point when he said that we are on a road. He used the example of being on a road from Arima to Port of Spain. "Yuh stop us when we reach Arouca, not even Tunapuna and you say: 'What is the weather like in Port of Spain?' 'How come yuh not in Port of Spain?' 'What is happening in Port of Spain?'" We have not reached there. We have begun a process of dealing with the needs of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and particularly the elderly and we will continue that process of addressing the needs of the elderly and all in need. We have begun today and you will not congratulate the Government for beginning. They will not do it.

I am told that there are 50,000 citizens who will benefit from this measure and another 72,056 who will benefit from the increase. We are dealing with 72,000 citizens of Trinidad and Tobago today. I do not think Members opposite understand the enormity of this measure. There are times when we debate in Parliament and we do not touch lives as we do today. You are upgrading and enhancing the quality of life of 72,000 people, but they behave as if this matter is not—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Rowley: But we agree.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: A few people—what are we doing with this? More than that, what did they promise? They promised nothing. I did not want to do it, but I have to. In 63 days, they are holding us to the 12 parts of this area, when we are on the move delivering in every area; 63 days. They were in government for 10 years in the last instance. The Leader of the Opposition spent eight out of 10 years, 80 per cent in Parliament. They promised the Mamoral Dam, where is that in 10 years? They promised Scarborough Hospital, the Tarouba Stadium, four desal plants, a highway to Point Fortin and an oncology centre. Where are they?

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. R. MOONILAL]

Friday, July 30, 2010

In 63 days, we must deliver. You are holding us as if you are robbing a bank. You draw and hands up, deliver. That is what they are doing.

The Scarborough Hospital, I am told that this is the most expensive hospital, if you do the costing per bed in the plant. You can write the *Guinness Book of World Records* and enter it. We are waiting for that. What about that promise? It is almost shameless to come here and ask the Government about delivering on promises, when you have a track record which I just read. That is what they are about.

Today we begin a process, we are very clear on that, of addressing the plight of the elderly and it is not only the pension. The Minister was at as pains in his maiden contribution, to point out all the different ways in which we will address that, including the food card. The Member for Diego Martin Central who spoke earlier forgot that he came in this House and confessed that there was mismanagement, efficiency and waste bordering on corruption in the distribution of the food cards and said that he would do an investigation. I hope the Member for Caroni Central will get the report on this investigation that he promised us; the report into the distribution of the food cards. You said that. In fact, the last administration confessed to five out of 10 acts of corruption, the other five they are discovering now, but they confessed to about 50 per cent. We are on the way to delivering on our promises; whether it is for the elderly, the sick, the infirm or any group of people. We are very clear on that.

To make matters worse, the Opposition Leader came, and he must have been doing this as a gimmick—because I think he has 20 or 30 years because served as a Senator. He has 25 years of parliamentary experience—and brings for us a one-page, one-line note for an amendment. He knows that is a gimmick. It is a political gimmick. He knows, according to the Standing Orders, which constitute part of the laws of Trinidad and Tobago, that he cannot do that. A Member of Parliament cannot bring an amendment that touches on concerns and increasing the charge. Revenue measures are dealt with by Cabinet. They are approved and then they come to the Parliament. “Yuh did not bring it tuh amend, yuh bring dis for we tuh go home wit it. Yuh put it here for we tuh go home wit it.” He knows that he cannot go anywhere with it. This is what you fold up, make a jet and fly away. He knows that. He is not in a position, he does not have the authority under the law of Trinidad and Tobago, to propose this amendment. He knows that. This is political gimmickry. You could have stood up in your contribution and asked me to do it. "He say he asking me tuh do it. Yuh could ah stand up and say dat."

You wrote a list of proposed amendments to be moved. Let me read it. He is trying. Since he became Opposition Leader, he has been guilty of "vupping".

Your first time you flew out the crease with the Member for Chaguanas West by saying the thing about South Africa, FIFA and the Minister. "He jump down de crease and swing and four legal luminaries bowl him out." That is the first "vup". He had a couple of "vups". Look at this, it is a list of proposed amendments. "Is one eh." The amendments to be moved at the committee stage of the Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill, on Friday. "Whey yuh thought we woulda suspend, go for ah Cabinet meeting and come back today?" I understand. "We have tuh come back today. We go hole de Cabinet meeting an come back. We could go in the rotunda and just hole ah Cabinet meeting and come back." This amendment to be moved today states:

“Delete the words ‘sixty-five’ and ‘sixty’”.

He knows he cannot do that, but this is part of the propaganda and gimmick and is another swing. This is "vupping", hoping that somebody will hear him somewhere. "Nobody have nothing to do tonight but sit down and listen to him. Ah holiday weekend", so somebody might have time to listen to him and he starts to "vup". He knows that he has to withdraw this. In fact, this is illegal. You cannot be the Opposition Leader and perpetuating an illegal act . This is against the law.

You cannot begin your term as Opposition Leader and—he came here and then invited the Government to break the law. That is what you were doing. You called upon the Government, as Opposition Leader, to break the law. No man! I think you have spent too much time with the Member for Diego Martin North/East, that is the problem, who has abandoned you for the second time in one week. You have spent too much time with the Member for Diego Martin North/East. He is encouraging you in mischief and to share illegality. He knows what he was doing was improper. He knows what he was doing and the effect he wanted.

I want to go to one other point before I close. The Act that we are amending is the Senior Citizens' Grant, Chap, 32:02. It was the Finance Act, 2007 which dealt with amendments to several pieces of legislation relating to pension. In the Finance Act, No. 7 of 2007, clause 11 dealt with the Old Age Pensions Act. At subsection 11(5), it states:

“A grant under this Act is subject to review and may be increased, decreased or discontinued.”

That is the issue. They went on to even confuse people more by saying that:

“Parliament may, by resolution, approve the variation of the income ceiling and the amount of monthly...”

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. R. MOONILAL]

Friday, July 30, 2010

But it was not clear by what resolution, how resolution, by Motion, by Bill, by affirmative resolution or by negative resolution. With that in mind, the Government innocently brings an amendment which clarifies the process, so that there can be no increase or decrease. The Minister will not sit in Rousillac or Barrackpore and write out something and change band, watch, earring and whatever; we are not doing that. The Minister may, by order, subject to negative resolution, which clarifies the nature and character of the resolution that is required from Parliament.

Members of Parliament, in the required time, will file a Motion to debate the Order which the House may either approve or not approve. It becomes the business of Parliament that the Government cannot *vaille que vaille*, ad hoc, by "vaps" or "vup" change the pension requirement; the grant. Today is an instructive day because it tells us the line that he is "vupping" on. It is not only "vupping", it tells you the line he is taking when he jumps down the crease. He has come today to tell the population, the few people: "I want to tell you that any time they implement this measure: Minister by Order, it will be to reduce the pension." Unless I am mistaken, no time in post-independence history of this country, has pension been reduced. But to plant in the mind of the citizen that the Government will use this to reduce their pension, they are doing all of this in a secret manner to reduce pension. They want to scare. Mr. Speaker, they will discover that, I hope they discover, strategy of campaigning cannot work in the strategy of Government and Opposition.

9.45 pm

They told the population before May 24, 2010, that we will dismantle this and we will dismantle that—GATE, OJT, CEPEP and URP—but they were scaring people. Their scare tactic failed. They have come now in Opposition and bring the same tactic. It failed once and if it was not bad enough, it failed twice. You have failed the caring people twice about what this Government is about, and nobody believed you then and nobody will believe you now. So, abandon that strategy scare tactic; abandon ship with that. That will not work. You have lost everything on May 24, 2010.

The Members for Diego Martin North/East and Diego Martin Central found it better to relax in the summer of Europe in Scandinavia, I believe—relaxing enjoying the summer—than to come here and face the heat of the election campaign, and then the Member for Diego Martin North/East gone. The rootedness of the Members of the Opposition and the senior Members are in Diego Martin. They are rooted in Diego Martin and they have lost the council in Diego Martin, because they have abandoned ship—bolt out and gone—and leave

the Opposition Leader by himself with a character from the other place—another recycled politician—to campaign. You were scaring people, but the scare did not work, so abandon ship with that as well. That is my advice now.

The Government is attempting to bring clarity on this matter, by giving the Minister the responsibility by order, subject to a negative resolution of Parliament, to amend the schedule. So, amendments were done and the Parliament has the final say—the representatives of the people have the final say. It is not that the Minister will sit in his office and wake up one day and say, I think I will increase or decrease or discontinue or pull the genie from the bottle. The Parliament will do it.

The Member understands that because he has been here for 25 years. He understands the working of Parliament. So, to come and accuse the Government of trying something at the last hour, and then to bring an illegal amendment and encourage us to break the law will not work.

Today, this Government continues a journey that it started 63 days ago. That journey now starts to use the term of Christopher "Tambu" Herbert. We do not have to repeat promises. I do not know who does not know, but they know it all.

The Prime Minister upon assuming office dealt with flooded waters on the first day. Yesterday and today we discovered flooding in certain areas. This poor infrastructure that the Minister of Works and Transport is dealing with every minute of every day is what we have inherited. We are delivering on every single promise in the manifesto. In time, we will come to more. There are more policy issues and legal issues to deal with as we meet and treat with every disadvantaged group, including the elderly. That is why today we have taken this step. This is not a small step if you are helping 72,000 citizens of this country. That cannot be a small step. I challenge you to tell me how else—apart from a national budget and very few pieces of legislation—will the lives of 72,000 persons be enhanced? So, this is an historic moment. When you hear them you will think that what we come here today to fool the people, to pull wool and to do this and that. That is what they are saying.

Mr. Speaker, I do not want to debate now the track record of those opposite—not those in personality, but the administration. I do not want to debate their track record. I think their track record is clear and the population pronounced that on two occasions, so the people know. I do not have to remind anyone. They pronounced on May 24, 2010 and July 26, 2010. So, they are aware of their track record and there is no need to repeat it.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. R. MOONILAL]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Mr. Speaker, we are now building a track record and as we do so we are delivering on a platform promise. We are delivering on our manifesto commitments to enhance the lives of citizens and, today, we are dealing with 72,000 persons. On another day we will deal with 25,000 and on another day; 100,000, and at the end of our five-year term, please, I am encouraging you to return with the manifesto, hold it up, and then you can legitimately question us as to what we have implemented and what we have not implemented. So, as we say in Trinidad and Tobago, "Gih we ah chance". You had 10 years; you had a nice 10 years. "Gih we ah chance". You had 10 years. Many of the projects and promises that you made were not kept, and the population knows that. It does not make sense repeating. Just allow us to meet and treat with our promises that we have embarked upon.

Mr. Speaker, I heard the Member for Diego Martin North/East gone off and said that the former government never intended for the grant to be discontinued and so forth, but do you know what is quite instructive? In their law which they made in 2007, they placed into an Act of Parliament—the legal authority of the Government to discontinue the grant. That was placed in the Act. It is here. This is in the Finance Act of 2007, and this was until then unheard of. This was put into law—a grant under this Act is subject to review and may be increased, decreased or discontinued. They placed that in law; not that it will be varied, but it will be discontinued. Today, we are doing no such thing. By virtue of our amendment, the Minister can vary, the Minister may by order amend the schedule but not discontinue.

Mr. Speaker, I wanted to clarify these few matters. As I said before, there is much work to be done. The Member for Diego Martin West, when he was not "vopping" and he stayed in his crease batting, he did make mention that there are other challenges facing us as we reform the structure for pensions and payments and so on. Mr. Speaker, these are the few points I needed to make at this time in response.

I thank you.

Mr. Fitzgerald Jeffrey (*La Brea*): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. I want to offer congratulations to the Members of the Government on its recent success at the local government election. Secondly, I want to congratulate my good friend, the Member for Caroni Central on his presentation in the House.

Mr. Speaker, for a moment, during his presentation, I was tempted to use Aunty Kay's refrain: "Bravo Bravo", but I had to stop, because of great trepidation. Why? It had to do with the various pronouncements from the Minister of Finance, the hon.

Prime Minister, the Minister of Planning, Economic and Social Restructuring and Gender Affairs about the state of the economy—no money, the Treasury is dry and so on—but yet they could increase pension by \$500, even though the last Government had increased the pension by \$650. The question is: If the Treasury is dry, where is this money going to come from? That is the frightening thing. [*Interruption*] Talk is cheap; empty vessels make the most noise, so you go ahead.

Mr. Speaker, I am no seasoned parliamentarian, but I am a seasoned politician. [*Laughter*] I have learnt that it is not what was said, but what is not said that is frightening is the sting in the tail. Mr. Speaker, we only have to listen this evening to recognize what is taking place. I want to warn those on the other side that there is a similarity between 1986—1991 and 1995—2001 and this period here. We are seeing deception and we are seeing arrogance. Continue and you are going to see how long it is going to last. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I plan really not to say much about this, but I have to go back here. When we look at this advertisement here—I have no problem here with what is in here. [*Manifesto in hand*] You see, manifesto is promises and so on. When you go to the newspaper three days before an election and tell the people about \$3,000 for old age pension, and upon reaching the pensionable age 60, every citizen will automatically qualify for a state-funded old age pension, that is cause for concern.

Mr. Speaker, I want to ask those opposite here this evening: What was the intention when they put this advertisement in the newspaper? [*Advertisement in hand*] What were you trying to convey to the voting population? Was it general information or were you trying to convey to them that what you have in the 120-day plan on page 12—we will replace the Senior Citizens Grant with old age pension and increase it to \$3,000. Three days before the election you said that once a person has reached age 60, that person automatically gets \$3,000 old age pension. Mr. Speaker, that is reprehensible and deception to the highest. [*Desk thumping and interruption*] We won the La Brea seat.

Mr. Speaker, when our beloved Prime Minister talked about: "We will rise", I had a joy in my heart. Do you know why? In our party we talked about Vision 2020, and that we will rise to acclaim Vision 2000 that was, indeed, good. We also talked about morality, honesty and decency, but now they have come with this and this is, indeed, a sad day.

Mr. Speaker, you see, what has happened is that they have fooled the population and they have won on May 24, 2010 and July 26, 2010, but 2015 is coming or before.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MR. JEFFREY]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Mr. Speaker, I want to deal a little with what is going to happen here. You see, in 1995—2001, they talked about how the Treasury was dry and so on, but what happened? They cut the OJT programme. Do you remember that?

Hon. Member: Yes.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: The Civilian Conservation Corps and they run down the youth camps, John S. Donaldson Technical Institute, San Fernando Technical Institute and these institutions suffered. Do you know what happened?

Dr. Moonilal: When was this?

Mr. F. Jeffrey: In 1995—2001. Mr. Speaker, because of what happened then, we have to be very careful about what is going to happen now. My dear friends opposite were talking about how the Treasury is dried and yet we have to meet these expenses. Mr. Speaker, I want to ask those opposite: When do you hope to deliver on this advertisement?

10.00 p.m.

Let me assume for argument sake, you had no intention to do this before 2010. [Interruption] But hear this, in 2015 the number of people over age 65 would have increased by 39.11 per cent over the 2009 figure; by 2025 the figure would have increased by 62.24 per cent; where would that money come from to pay those pensioners? Where? [Interruption] I want us to examine the options that are open to those opposite. If in fact we have falling revenue, we already have increased expenditure—

Mr. Sharma: What is your point?

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Why you do not listen?

Mr. Sharma: What is your point?

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Follow your Minister of Health. [Laughter and desk thumping] The options that are open to the Government are as follows, and let us look at them: One, to draw down on the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund to fund the pension.

Mr. Speaker, that has implications for the simple reason that our rating by international rating agencies will go down, and therefore it has implications for borrowing. [Interruption]

Secondly, drastic cuts or termination of subsidies; for example: the \$1.6 million subsidy on gasoline that we hear already, that they intend to interfere

with. *[Interruption]* If they interfere with the subsidy on gasoline *[Interruption]* transport cost will increase and the goods and services that the poor pensioners would have to use will also go up.

Hon. Member: Who write that for you?

Mr. F. Jeffrey: And therefore that \$500 would be eroded. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker, we heard from the Member for Chaguanas West *[Interruption]* that the cost for the water taxi per passenger is about \$8,000; whereas the passenger pays only \$15, and may I add, the pensioners and them travel free. *[Interruption]* Listening to the Member for Chaguanas West, he said it is either the cost reduce or else and therefore, what it means is that our pensioners who normally would travel free on the water taxi in comfort and within a short time-frame would now have to spend money to travel alternatively. Part of the \$500 start to go already.

I also ask the question, what will happen to PTSC? Those PTSC buses that operate in areas that are remote that are uneconomical and where pensioners use to commute? *[Interruption]* If you make PTSC buses not to operate in those areas what would happen to those pensioners? It means that they will have to use from the \$500 again to travel. What will happen to the ferry from Tobago to Trinidad and so on, where the pensioners and them travel free? *[Interruption]* What is going to happen to those pensioners if, indeed, you have to operate the ferry on an economical standpoint? *[Interruption]* So it does not really make sense interfering too much in those areas.

We may see the termination or drastic cuts in social and training programmes. *[Interruption]* They indicated that the Senior Citizens' Grant, the reason why they changed it to pension is because the grant is something that you would take back. I am wondering here this evening, does this Government plan to take back the House Repair Grant, the dietary grant, the clothing grant, et cetera? Why not make those things mandatory? I noticed as well, I read this document from cover to cover. *[Holds up manifesto]* *[Desk thumping]* And nowhere in this document it says anything about the HELP programme. They mentioned GATE, but the HELP is nowhere in that document.

Hon. Member: The what?

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Higher Education Loan Programme (HELP).

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: So you want to file a Motion to debate the manifesto. *[Laughter and desk thumping]*

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Mr. Speaker, our hon. Prime Minister seems to be at a loss, she did not recognize that the HELP was nowhere in this manifesto. *[Interruption]* But I am saying here to you this evening that the HELP is not in the manifesto, and therefore it means, that one of the ways in which they are going to finance that old age pension is to cut out the HELP programme.

There are thousands of persons—as a matter of fact, over 7,000 persons access the HELP programme to help them attend the university. *[Interruption]* This would be a sad day if we were to deny our students the opportunity to access the HELP loan. *[Interruption]* The HELP loan assists students from remote areas in Mayaro, La Brea, Matelot, Chaguanas and Rio Claro. *[Interruption]* Because under the HELP loan you can get up to \$25,000 per annum to do, for example; the paper, your groceries, for rent, for transport, and it seems as though that is one programme would get the knife or the guillotine from the Government.

I would like some clearance from the Member for Caroni East on this. *[Interruption]* My grandmother says "Where there is smoke there is fire". There is a rumour going around in this country right now, that come September students would have to pay \$6 or \$7 for breakfast and \$15 for a box lunch.

Dr. Gopeesingh: You want me to answer that? I think it is the biggest joke you are making in Parliament. *[Laughter]* I think you are making a joke of yourself. There is no way that the People's Partnership Government interfering whatsoever in the School Feeding Programme. We want to increase more for children. *[Desk thumping]* *[Continuous crosstalk]*

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Mr. Speaker, I am glad that the Member for Caroni East—

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the Hansard reporter needs to listen so she can accurately record, but the crosstalk is going to disturb her. So I would like you all to really observe the importance of making sure that the notes are properly recorded. So if you could be more cooperative and more silent when one is contributing.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am not here for mischief. There is a real rumour outside there about that box lunch thing, and therefore I believe that I owe it to my constituents and the rest of Trinidad and Tobago to get some clarity on this matter.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to raise another issue and it has to do with the impending closure or downgrading of UTT. This is indeed another reprehensible act. Right now there are over 6,500 students at UTT.

Hon. Member: What is your point?

Mr. F. Jeffrey: And if you are studying to downgrade UTT, what are you doing in fact to those 6,500 students? [*Crosstalk*]

The quality of staffing and the quality of programmes can stand scrutiny at UTT. UTT is closely aligned to many prestigious universities around the world, and therefore, to close UTT would be a colossal mistake that we may never be able to recover from. If we do not go that way we may have to borrow from international agencies, and again, we risk downgrading if we are borrowing to pay pensioners. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker, if I were to respond to the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara—mention is made of recovering money from alleged corrupt officials. [*Interruption*] We will have to identify or specify those areas from which the money is going to come. We are yet to hear about anyone found corrupt and we may be grasping at straws.

Hon. Member: "Oooh". [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, we will know sooner or later, because I guess when we recognize this pension payment, the quantum that is required, all the ol' talk will stop.

Mr. Sharma: And you will start.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Mr. Speaker, our Prime Minister mentioned, read my lips, "no new taxes". But listen, in the *Guardian* of July 12, 2010 our Minister of Planning said, "It was too early to say whether the Government will be forced to increase taxes or reduce subsidies". What does that tell us? It tells us that, look out, it is either new taxes coming or some of those programmes would get cut. [*Interruption*]

I want to make the point here this evening that the whole propaganda about the People's National Movement government, they mentioned for example, that we were responsible for scare tactics during the election.

Mr. Sharma: Still is.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: I wonder who it was that was trying to scare people away from voting for the PNM, saying how we would take away the pension or the Senior Citizens' Grant. Who was doing that? Who were the people doing that? [*Inaudible*]

The PNM has a proud 43-year record of never reducing or attempting to cut pension. Never! On top of the pension or the Senior Citizens' Grant, we have had the House Repair Grant; we have had the Targeted Cash Transfer Programme; we had CDAP; we had the Dietary Grant; we had the clothing grant, as well as free spectacles, hearing aids and wheelchairs. I am wondering, that yes, on the one hand, they are going to give the \$500 pension and what are you going to take it away from? [*Interruption*]

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MR. JEFFREY]

Friday, July 30, 2010

"Fyzabad, listen, Fyzabad, listen a bit nah; stop babbling, you are senior now."
[*Interruption*] I want us to know right now that our Government has reached the stage whereby they must take a note and listen. As far as the minimum wage is concerned, [*Interruption*] the Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre, in the OWTU speaks, on August 28, 2006. He was demanding a minimum wage of \$14 per hour then. With rising inflation the new minimum wage should be \$14+. What we recognize now is that the people's democracy, in which the OWTU and many other trade unions are members, we are proposing \$20 an hour. What we are trying to say here this evening is that, that minimum wage of \$20 would go a long way in helping workers to subsidize their parents' income.

10.15 p.m.

In other words, there are many pensioners who get Senior Citizens Grant, but they also get a little \$200 or \$100 from their children. So if in fact we are to operate, we will understand the importance of the minimum wage as well.

Mr. Speaker, what we do know as well is that things are not as bad as it is proposed. Our Prime Minister at a dinner in Fort Lauderdale on July 12, spoke about strong and stable democracy, skilled workforce, vibrant financial system, a real GDP growth of 8 per cent, et cetera, et cetera. It means that the proposal to pay the pensioners from \$860 is indeed valid and so we proposed to them that the pension should not be regulated to just 65 years and over, but 60 years and over.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon (*Point Fortin*): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for the privilege of making a very brief intervention. This Bill has been battered and bruised for the night and, I want to make a very, very brief intervention here on the Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill, 2010. At the same time, I think it is my distinct privilege to congratulate the people of Point Fortin and to thank them for voting for the People's National Movement in the local government election. [*Desk thumping*] They were victorious. They were victorious on May 24, 2010. The Member for Point Fortin is in this Parliament, and again, repeated this feat on July 26, 2010; a feat which they will continue to repeat in favour of the People's National Movement.

Mr. Speaker, my concern about this Bill—I am not going to repeat the things that have already been said—is why money and why \$500, especially when this Government had done so, when it was in power just earlier in 2010. Tell me what difference would another \$500 do? The question is: Could they not have considered kind rather than cash? The over 60s are in their golden years and, there are good sides to that and also there are negative sides to that. The upside, of course, is that these are

their best years, and they have completed their contribution to society and so on. There is a downside in terms of their physical deterioration and, in some cases mental deterioration as well. Some people become overly anxious, depressed and, there is alcohol abuse and so on and we know that. It is a living example. But at this stage, they are looking forward to a life of peace, good health, comfortable living, proper sanitation, no traffic congestion and, simple processes in the everyday things that one does in life, and I am not sure the \$500 will just cut it.

In fact, I know that there is a diversion of views coming from this side. The Member for Caroni Central has advocated the \$500 increase, but I know that is not the thinking of the Member for Chaguanas West and I am sorry he is not here to defend his position. In fact, it was in 2008, when the Member for Chaguanas West was on this side and spoke on the Pensions (Amdt.) Bill which we were discussing at that time, but today he said and I quote:

“That my emphasis today is not so much on the money, the finances and so on, because far too often we get the impression that the belief on that side is that everything can be cured with money.”

Traffic jam through money, crime through money, senior citizens— I am not quoting any more, but this is what they are doing now, throwing money at senior citizens and this is not the thinking of the hon. Member on that side. He went on to say:

“It is not always about money. If a pensioner is given care, love and attention, it means more to him or her than gold. Treat our pensioners with love, understanding and care.”

Mr. Speaker, I want to say, treating pensioners with love, understanding and care, is love and caring the PNM way. But I can well understand the anxiety of giving \$500 to the point when this Government has to face double digit inflation, which we were so careful in keeping down at a single digit level. Now, it is uncontrollable at a double digit level and I can understand their thinking, but I would have liked them to think of other ways of ensuring the comfort and happiness of the ageing, ensuring that their needs are met, and their responsibility should ensure that the nation's resources are used in a better way to help the ageing community.

This is a tall order because I think what they had proposed to do was to give \$3,000 carte blanche to everyone who has crossed the age of 60, and that would have amounted to something close to \$5 million per annum. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Roberts: Calder Hart could have paid—*[Interruption]*

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: You will have your turn after me and you can contribute then. The question is: If you are going to spend that kind of money, did you really consider your alternatives of what you could really have done with that money?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Spent it on CHOGM and Fifth Summit of the Americas.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: In doing so, you are spending a hefty sum of money, and I am asking at the same time: Were you really able to take care of those persons who are cancer patients?

Hon. Members: Ooooh!

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Were you really ready? [*Crosstalk*] Mr. Speaker, please? Did they take care of the blind; did they provide wheel chairs for the physically disabled? The point about it that I am not going to belabour is that, there is a sensible path that the Government could have chosen if it is that they were really concerned about the lifestyle of the ageing and the members of the senior community. The point about it is that this \$500 amounts to nothing but an election gimmick—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Nothing!

Hon. Members: No! No!

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon:—Member for Fyzabad and, you have come around at this time and attempting to say, now that it cannot be fulfilled, that the Treasury is empty. I am saying that at the time when the promise was made, the—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Sharma: You are on TV.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: That is okay—Member for Tunapuna, who was once the Central Bank Governor and is a well known economist, and the Member for Caroni East who is the jack of all trades and well versed in all areas—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Sharma: He is a doctor.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: I am not denying that. There are a number of MBAs on that side as well, and I feel that you had a full understanding of the economy at that time. The fact is nothing has changed between then and now. You knew what the state of the economy was then, and you proceeded to make these carte blanche promises to the senior citizens, all for the exchange of a vote.

We have come a long way in terms of enfranchisement and it is really disappointing that at this stage all that you could do, is to illegally give \$500 in return for a vote, and that does not get you anywhere at all. It certainly did not get you anywhere in Point Fortin.

It was a fact at that time—I am talking about the time when those promises were made and even prior to that—that there were a number of discussions in this honourable House. A number of pieces of legislation were presented on matters of finance, regulatory institutions and that kind of thing, so the whole situation of the economy was bandied about.

Mr. Sharma: So what is it you are trying to say?

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: The fact is nothing has changed when that promise was made. Now what you are purporting to say is that the economy is in shambles, and I am saying no to that. You are preposterous. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: You are not supporting it—[*Inaudible*]

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Support, I am not showing you that. So what I am asking you to do is to reconsider, and really consider providing a decent standard of living for the senior people over 60 years in this country. That decent quality of living is a moving target. So I expect the Government to be a little more innovative, to have a little more vision, to think of what will satisfy the new 60-year-olds and not just throw \$500 at them. What could that do?

I am not going to speak long, but what I want to say is that today 60-year-olds are truly not like long ago 60 year olds.

Mr. Sharma: You look good. [*Laughter*]

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you very much, Member for Fyzabad. But I can tell you something, I am close to being a senior citizen. I am not too far from being 60 and I do not want your \$3,000. So today, a 60-year-old is very capable and has great capacity, and some of them still do in fact want to work. So I would have thought that you would have come up with some other programmes to keep them employed, perhaps less hours and perhaps in their communities. Perhaps in the area of farming or agriculture, something else, but certainly not just to throw \$500 at them and to think that is going to satisfy them.

The Leader of the Opposition is 60 and the hon. Member for Siparia is almost 60, what do you want us to do? Pack them home and give them \$500 a month each?

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: No.

Hon. Member: That is what you just said.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Listen, I would prefer two cows and two goats, and milk them daily, rather than \$500. You understand? But I expect that you would think a little more than just a slapdash and give \$500. I know about that. The fact is, it amounts to a bribe and it is immoral, especially coming from you, who are supposed to be the corruption busters. It is nothing more than another corrupt initiative by the People's Partnership.

Hon. Members: What? Ooooooh! [*Interruption*]

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: As I was saying, what—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Sharma: You see how hard it is to be in Opposition? [*Laughter*]

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon:—the 60-year-old is looking for is happiness, peace, comfort and confidence and, that is exactly what we are not getting from the People's Partnership.

Mr. Sharma: You have five more years.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: I am telling you, all that we are getting from you, all that exudes from you, is a lot of negative emotions and that is what you have imposed on the people of this nation. It is that you always know.

What we want coming from you is comfort and confidence. We want to wake up the next morning to hope, and that is not the case because the Members on the other side seem to live in a state of constant anxiety. You are always anxious to hang, and eager to have persons incarcerated. It is investigation after investigation, and you wake up the next morning and do not know what to expect from the People's Partnership government. Murders have skyrocketed and you seem to be ruling by anger. It is almost like putting pressure on a hose and shutting off the real flow of things happening in this country.

Just look at the malls, the state of the economy. Business people are complaining. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Peters: Whose fault is that?

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: It is because you have shut off the flow with your negative emotions. I really want you to think about all the karaoking that you are doing and let the love flow. Let the people once again feel better about this sweet country, Trinidad and Tobago.

You talked about bringing back the "ol' time" days. Well, the "ol' time" days, I want you to emulate the PNM, the People's National Movement, and you will do well to do so, and change your spirits and the mood in this country.

Last week, I was in Point Fortin and I visited the senior citizens centre at Techier Village, only to realize that the GAP programme has been stopped by you. GAP personnel have been sent home. That is a very, very successful programme which was set up by the PNM. It is a geriatric care programme at no cost to the individuals; and it is very helpful to those persons whose children, perhaps, live out of the area, or so, and they are not there to assist. They help with meal preparation and heavy housework, and doing the laundry, and so forth. The fact is, we were paying for that, and you have taken this programme and you have shut it down. What you are now subjecting these elders to is neglect and abuse, and I am suggesting to you that you reconsider and you bring that programme back on.

10.30 p.m.

Dr. Rambachan: When was it closed?

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: I do not have the date but it has been closed down. It was closed down only after the People's Partnership came into power.

Dr. Rambachan: What was the date?

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: In asking you to be a little bit more visionary in treating with the aged, I want you to think about the importation of the laptops, and if, perhaps, you can extend those to the senior citizens as well. [*Laughter*] Because we are in the age of cyber-seniors, and they are a fast growing group of Internet users as well. They are a fast growing group of Internet users as well. I want you to open your minds and look at that as well. It is very progressive, and it will be exciting and informative for them, and it keeps them in close contact with their families, and so forth, who live abroad.

Of course, I want you to pay attention to the hospitals to make sure that they are all created equally; equal for the seniors as well. Point Fortin—[*Interruption*] Do not talk about the Point Fortin hospital, because every week, Mr. Speaker, I have been trying to meet with the Minister of Health to discuss the Point Fortin hospital. [*Interruption*] And the latest I have been told is that I have to put it in writing. I have to make a formal request to the Minister of Health to speak about the hospital in Point Fortin. I have done that and I am now waiting for her response, but I am attempting to deal with the people's needs and I am not able to meet with the Minister of Health on that one. I am looking forward to that.

I also want you to think about, perhaps, expanding—[*Interruption*] No, listen, please. I also want you to think of expanding the legal aid service so that you may have a specially tailored service for the elderly where you can assist them with

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[MRS. GOPEE-SCOON]

Friday, July 30, 2010

protecting their assets and passing on their inheritance as well, and relieve them of an amount of stress, and so forth. It is a new specialty of lawyers and I think you would do well to think of expanding that service under the legal aid.

I am going to end soon—perhaps now—but there is something else I want you to think about, and it is the fact that many of these people are also house rich and cash poor. I think that you can come up with perhaps a new plan of having—[*Interruption*]. Five hundred will mean nothing for them and you have to think a little wider than that. Open your brain. [*Interruption*] No, you have to think a little wider.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Point Fortin, just if you would address the Chair and not address other persons, I think you would be less interrupted. So I would like you to address the Chair, please.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: I am going to wind up, Sir. I want you really to think about the reverse mortgage system. I think you would do well to examine that as well. Also, finally, I think you should go back on your promise made very early about using the Diplomatic Centre for a senior citizens' home. [*Interruption*] It is one of the early promises that you made, and I want to remind the public of that promise. And now that the President has indicated, Mr. Speaker, that he will not be using it, I would like you to go back to your promise of using the Diplomatic Centre as a senior citizens' home. Put it to good use. [*Laughter*]

You said, Member for Caroni Central, that with this measure, this country will move to a new dawn. Well, all I see is darkness coming from your side, so I really want you to closely think about what you have said. Mr. Speaker, I think I better end there. Thank you.

The Minister of the People and Social Development (Hon. Dr. Glenn Ramadharsingh): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I must say that I was beginning to get tired, but the contribution by the Member for Point Fortin was very entertaining. [*Laughter*] I wish to congratulate my fellow Minister in the Ministry of the People and Social Development on his maiden contribution. [*Desk thumping*] It was a powerful and riveting contribution. I also wish to acknowledge the strong contributions of the Members on my side who have left me with very little work to do. The MP for Chaguanas West stands out, and the MP for Oropouche East dealt with the legal issues.

I listened. You know, it is a lot of people to respond to, and I cannot really—I have a lot of notes here to respond, so I will try to generalize, because some of the statements—[*Interruption*] Yes. I mean, besides the picture, which was the consistent theme, and which has been dealt with by the MP for Oropouche East, there are a lot

of conflicting views, actually. Some people want us to give the increase. Some do not want us to give the increase; and I will give you an example.

The MP for Diego Martin West is concerned about how we are going to actualize this because he said he has a vested interest and he wants to get the increases, apparently; but the MP for Point Fortin will not have the increase. In fact, she says give her two goats and she will milk them every day. [*Laughter*] Now, I want to tell her, from my experience, goat farmers do not do well in Point Fortin. [*Laughter*] And you will also have limited veterinary capability in that area, as of late.

There seems to be a real sense of confusion across the floor, but I want to congratulate them for reading a fabulous manifesto with great ideas; with great vision. They seem to have enjoyed the reading. They hug on to the manifesto lovingly. They hold it under their arms as if they have seen the light. [*Desk thumping*] And I do not blame them, because they just came from a very brutal election campaign, and they had no manifesto, so they were probably reading the manifesto of the People's Partnership; and probably that is why we had a lot of crossover in that election.

I want to say, though, that the manifesto—and the manifesto was dealt with in great detail. It was almost like the *Bible*. Many different sects have different opinions about it. But certainly, what we are doing here today is fulfilling the campaign promises of the People's Partnership, which is to change it from being a grant, which we do not like; although the MP for Diego Martin North/East said it was a matter of terminology, asking what is the difference.

In any event, you are entitled to it. But, we feel, when we study the legislation and we look at the words, the pensioners have been through a lot of trauma when it was changed to grant, and we take pleasure in giving the people, 65 years and over, a guaranteed pension in this country. [*Desk thumping*]

We feel also very privileged against the background—and Members on this side have contributed as to why we are being economically challenged. The wastage; the corruption in many instances; the mal-administration; the state of the economy; the management of the economy; and, therefore, we also feel that against this background, we are able to run the country in a way to afford \$500 more for the senior citizens. We feel very proud to give everyone \$3,000 or more. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, this has been the crux of the matter. As I said, the former Minister of Social Development brought up a lot of issues. I just want to let you know, the Guyanese figure of pension that I quoted, I did say 2006, and I quoted a figure at that period. I made a further point that there were reforms after, but you

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

gave me a figure after that. So I think the figure I quoted was correct for the time I quoted, however, you can check that in the *Hansard*.

I am very happy to know—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Browne: I thank you, Member, for giving way. I just want to clarify. I was not imputing that you gave the wrong figure for 2006. It is just that the figure was dated. So please do not take offence of that. I was not doubting your figure. I was just updating you on your database and knowledge.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Thank you very much. I think the basic point, Mr. Speaker, is that when you really look at the figures, you will see that every time the PNM has been in Government, they have not given proportionately as to how the economy did. For the period 1996 to 2001—that is when the UNC administration was in power—pension was increased five times, and the total increase was \$444. This is significant, compared to 1991 to 1995—this was the PNM period—when the old age pension was only increased once by \$41.

Mr. Roberts: By how much?

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Forty-one dollars. What this is indicative of is the fact that under the administration of the UNC, the old age pension was raised by 100 per cent, compared to the 1991 to 1995 fiscal period. This was effective under economic conditions which saw oil prices at a low of US \$9 a barrel.

In 2002, the pension was increased to \$1,000, and remained fixed until 2006, when it saw an increase to \$1,350. This means that for a period of five years, there was, again, no increase in the old age pension.

Mr. Roberts: During a boom.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: While there was an increase in the income ceiling, that did not automatically guarantee that there would have been an improvement in direct transfer of funds to senior citizens experiencing hardship. It may have resulted in more persons being able to access the old age pension, but it did not guarantee that a demand side intervention was realized by increasing the purchasing power of the existing beneficiaries.

When one looks at the fact that the oil price increased from US \$22 in 2002 to US \$64.60 in 2006, with the resulting increase of only 10 per cent on the old age pension only once for that period, it is very clear that there was no positive correlation between the increases of the price of oil—that is increase in wealth—and the proportionate increase in the quantum of transfers provided to the senior citizens for this period.

If we look at 2006 to 2007, there was an increase of 22 per cent on the Senior Citizens' Grant, which moved from \$1,350 to \$1,650 using the sliding scales. However, for this same period, oil prices increased by 67 per cent. This, again, was indicative that there was not a positive correlation between the increase in the price of oil—that is increasing wealth—and the proportionate increase in the quantum of transfer provided to the senior citizens for this period.

While the old age pension was increased from 2007 to 2010, it was not proportionate to the oil price increases during this period of economic boom. Although there was no increase at all for the period 2002 to 2005, for the period 1996 to 2001, there was a consistent and proportionate increase in pension, when compared to the prevailing oil prices for the period in question.

We all would have seen that after the expenditure of \$300 billion, we would have seen that the social fabric of the country was ripping apart. In my own experience, I received a call and had to go see a 102-year-old lady more or less marooned off a cliff in Morvant, and we had to take action to rescue this lady. Subsequent to that, we received many more calls, and my Minister in my Ministry was asked to go and rescue people living in the cemetery.

The levels of poverty outside there are very high. The levels of suffering—I am happy to hear that the Minister went on tours.

Dr. Browne: Not the Minister. The staff. The Ministry. It is a team.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: The staff went. But the impact was not tremendous, Mr. Minister, with all due respect. And, also, the policing; getting the goods and services to the neediest, the sick people and the elderly. Much work has to be done.

Today, we start a journey by sitting in the vehicle and turning on the ignition. There are many things to do and we cannot do it alone as the Government. We will need to partner with the technical people; with NGOs; with the private sector, and with community-based organizations and faith based organizations. And Members with expertise on the Opposition Benches also have a role to police and guide us and give us ideas as we move along.

This is an initial step that will release a cascade of events that I have said time and time again will bring sweeping reforms to the treatment of our senior citizens who have given so much to the society. Today, we are proud to change it from a grant which is perceived—you could say what you want. The word "grant" outside there is perceived to be unstable. It is perceived that it could be taken away. If you give anybody a grant; if you have a consensus and you ask senior citizens to vote for

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill
[HON. DR. G. RAMADHARSINGH]

Friday, July 30, 2010

what they want, a grant or a pension, everyone will prefer a pension. A pension sounds like an entitlement, and the perception of the people is very important in anything you do; in governance, in politics, and in dealing with people.

We are also happy to give them extra support, extra help along the road of life, while they take care of their children and their grandchildren, and play a critical role in building the society. We are committed that life begins at 60; and as I said, we want to keep our senior citizens energetic, motivated, and inspired. We want to bring about a renaissance in the way that the senior citizens contribute to national development.

Mr. Speaker, with these words, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.

House in committee.

Clause 1.

Question proposed, That clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that clause 1 be deleted and amended as circulated as follows:

Delete clause 1 and substitute the following clause:

“1. This Act may be cited as the Senior Citizens’ Grant (Amendment and Validation) Act, 2010.”

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2.

Question proposed, That clause 2 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Ramadharsingh: Mr. Chairman, in paragraph (d) delete subparagraphs (i) and (ii) and substitute the circulated subparagraph, as follows:

“(i) by repealing subsections (1) to (6) and substituting the following subsections:

“(1) With effect from September 1, 2010 a person who satisfies the conditions specified in section 4 and receives a monthly income in the sum specified in the first column is entitled to a monthly Senior Citizens’ Pension in the sum specified in the second column of the Schedule to this Act.

(2) The Minister may by Order, subject to negative resolution of Parliament, amend the Schedule to this Act.”

B Renumber sub-paragraphs "(iii)" and "(iv)" as "(ii)" and "(iii)", respectively.

C Insert the following new paragraph:

“(e) by inserting the following Schedule:

“SCHEDULE

<i>First Column</i>	<i>Second Column</i>
Income	Pension
not exceeding \$500	\$3,000
exceeding \$500 but not exceeding \$1,450	\$2,550
exceeding \$1,450 but not exceeding \$1,650	\$2,350
exceeding \$1,650 but not exceeding \$1,800	\$2,200
exceeding \$1,800 but not exceeding \$2,000	\$2,000
exceeding \$2,000 but not exceeding \$2,200	\$1,800
exceeding \$2,200 but not exceeding \$2,400	\$1,600
exceeding \$2,400 but not exceeding \$2,600	\$1,400
exceeding \$2,600 but not exceeding \$2,800	\$1,200”

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3.

Question proposed, That clause 3 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Ramadharsingh: Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that clause 3 be deleted and substitute the following as circulated:

Delete clause 3 and substitute the following:

“3. Any increase in the grant paid by the Board to any person eligible to have received the Senior Citizens’ Grant from 1st May 2010 to 31st August 2010 is hereby validated.”

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 3, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Chairman: Members, there is a proposal to amend the long title.

Long title.

Question proposed, That the long title stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Ramadharsingh: Mr. Chairman, in the long title to the Bill insert the after the words "Chap. 32:02", the words "and to validate certain actions of the Board".

Question put and agreed to.

Long title, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to, That the Bill, as amended, be reported to the House.

House resumed.

Bill reported, with amendment.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the third time.

The House voted: Ayes 32

AYES

Moonilal, Hon. Dr. R.

Persad-Bissessar, Hon. K.

Sharma, Hon. C.

Alleyne-Toppin, Hon. V.

Gopeesingh, Hon. Dr. T.

Rambachan, Hon. Dr. S.

Seepersad-Bachan, Hon. C.

Roberts, Hon. A.

Cadiz, Hon. S.

Baksh, Hon. N.

Griffith, Hon. Dr. R.

Ramadharsingh, Hon. Dr. G.

Senior Citizens' Grant (Amdt.) Bill

Friday, July 30, 2010

Ramadhar, Hon. P.
 De Coteau, Hon. C.
 Indarsingh, Hon. R.
 Partap, Hon. C.
 Samuel, Hon. R.
 Douglas, Hon. Dr. L.
 Ramdial, Miss R.
 Roopnarine, Miss S.
 Seemungal, J.
 Khan, Miss N.
 McDonald, Miss M.
 Rowley, Dr. K.
 Cox, Miss D.
 Hypolite, N.
 Mc Intosh, Mrs. P.
 Jeffrey, F.
 Browne, Dr. A.
 Thomas, Miss J.
 Hospedales, Miss A.
 Gopee-Scoon, Mrs. P.

Question agreed to.

[Desk thumping]

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

EMANCIPATION GREETINGS

The Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Arts and Multiculturalism (Miss Nela Khan): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to wish the country a Happy Emancipation, 2010. This weekend, Mr. Speaker, we commemorate the 172nd year of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, which includes the freeing of the remaining 17,439 slaves in

Emancipation Greetings
[MISS N. KHAN]

Friday, July 30, 2010

Trinidad and Tobago. We also note the elimination of the scourge of slavery in other Caribbean territories in which there were sustainably more domestic and field slaves.

Mr. Speaker, we are all painfully aware of the cruelty of the wretched system of slavery, but the lessons of this ugly chapter in modern history remains ever relevant and alive to us. Trinidad and Tobago has commemorated the end of chattel slavery from as far back as August 01, 1838 with emancipation festivals. This freedom called "emancipation". Indeed, Mr. Speaker, this country has marked the suffering, sacrifice, struggle and victory of African slaves in the manner that is quite possibly singular in the entire world. This is most justifiable in the light of the roles played by pioneering Pan-Africanists from this country, and of the modern and socially conscious rainbow nation that we are.

11.00p.m.

From George Padmore to Kwame Ture and CLR James, Trinidadians and Tobagonians have played frontline and essential roles in the ongoing liberation movement. The People's Partnership administration strongly identifies with the commemoration of Emancipation and re-affirm its critical place in our nation's history.

The Government is also committed to honouring our diverse past and celebrating our unified and common future. This is manifested in, among many other areas, the establishment of a Ministry of Multiculturalism. The distinguished Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, has disbursed funding to the Emancipation Support Committee and other similar organizations. The Government further commits itself to partnering with relevant organizations in appropriately commemorating Emancipation and other aspects of our varied and momentous past.

For now, I bring Emancipation greetings to all the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. On behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, I wish everyone a weekend of reflection and celebration.

I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Keith Rowley (*Diego Martin West*): Mr. Speaker, I would like to join with all the sentiments expressed by my colleague who just spoke and on behalf of those of us on this side, would like to wish Trinidad and Tobago a safe and joyous celebratory Emancipation 2010.

For those of us who are descendants of slaves, Emancipation Day is always a time of reflection and as a country, we acknowledge that we note the historical significance of that day, of a holiday, a moment of time in history, but it also is a record of some of the worst aspects of man's inhumanity to man, suffered by our ancestors.

Even those who had not directly been subject to the lash and the dehumanization, recognize that slavery was, in fact, one of the worst things ever experienced by the human race and for those of us on this island who are descendants of slaves, to have come this far without losing sight of the fact that where we have come from, we should acknowledge that Emancipation Day must always be a day of joy and celebration.

So with these few words, I look forward to seeing my colleagues on the march tomorrow and we have good weather Sunday and I hope, Mr. Speaker, to see you in your usual raiment as we acknowledge our past and moving confidently into our future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and the Environment (Hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal): Mr. Speaker, at this time and on such an historic day, I beg to move that this House do adjourn to a date to be fixed.

Dr. Rowley: December.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: It will not be December, as my friend from Diego Martin West said.

There are two points, to put all Members of the House on notice; that if there are exigencies or emergencies of one type or another, we reserve the right to call Members out during the period. Mr. Speaker, it is customary, as you are aware and some Members are aware, that at this time the House will take a short recess to allow Members a bit of relaxation and rest and some very important time—short time—to spend with their families and loved ones and to give the parliamentary staff also a short time to relax away from this hustle of the sittings.

So I wish all Members a very peaceful period for the recess. Members of the Government, of course, continue to work and other Members, but we will take a short recess. So I wish all Members well during this period and we will, indeed, return. We are looking at sometime very early in September.

So, Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much, Leader of Government Business. Before putting the question to the House, may I also take this opportunity to join my colleagues, both on the Government Benches and the Opposition Benches, in extending congratulations as well to the national community on the occasion of Emancipation 2010. We are celebrating 172 years since the abolition of slavery in

Emancipation Greetings
[MR. SPEAKER]

Friday, July 30, 2010

1838 and I would like to join the House in extending a very peaceful and happy Emancipation Day 2010 to all members of the national community.

I would also like to take this opportunity to extend again my congratulations to all those Members of the House on both sides on their maiden contributions here today. Finally, we have made available some refreshments to all Members in the Members' Lounge, so as you leave the Chamber you join us in the Members' Lounge where we have some refreshments available for all Members of this honourable House.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 11.06 p.m.