

9.31 a.m.: *Meeting suspended.*

MERIKINS INCORPORATED LIMITED

Mr. Joseph Burton	Vice-President
Ms. Marva Cooper	Trustee
Mr. Ansen Griffith	Trustee
Ms. Hilary Bascombe	Secretary
Ms. Lisa Atwater	Trustee.

10.00 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Good morning, and welcome to the reconvened session of the Fourth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure. We are reconvening at the J Hamilton Maurice room. I wish to advise that all cell phones should be either placed on silent or deactivated.

Welcome to members of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure. Welcome to the members of the public and in particular our witnesses here this morning, the Merikins Incorporated. This is, of course, our first public meeting pursuant to our enquiry into land tenure issues. The purpose, of course, of this meeting is to determine the land tenure issues affecting Trinidad and Tobago, and more particularly in the instant case to examine strategies to deal with the major challenges affecting the Merikin Society.

I would now like to inform you that this meeting is being broadcast live on the Parliament Channel 11. It is also available on Parliament radio 105.5 FM and the Parliament YouTube channel *ParlView*. Of course, the viewing and listening audience can send comments via email at Parl101@ttparliament.org or on our Facebook page at facebook.com/ttparliament or on Twitter@ttparliament.

I take this opportunity to again welcome members of the Merikins Incorporated to our sitting, and I would now, of course, invite you to introduce

yourselves to the Committee.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite members of the Committee, starting on my right, to introduce themselves.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Joseph Burton, Vice-President, I will now invite you to make a presentation to the Committee.

Mr. Burton: Mr. Chairman, Mr. Stephen Creese, distinguished members of the head table, members of the Joint Select Committee and other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am the Vice-President of Merikin Inc. It is indeed a pleasure and an honour to be invited here to highlight an issue that is dear to us. We are in existence now for the past 12 years, and today we sit here with a joy in our hearts because Saturday, April 09th, will be our 12th anniversary and we are proud of that.

We are deeply committed to Merikin heritage. Our group focuses on the assistance of youths with respect to SEA scholarships and also providing for the elderly with hampers. I now take the opportunity to hand over to Ms. Atwater who will give you a brief history of our group. Thank you.

Ms. Atwater: Good morning to the Chairman and other members of the Joint Select Committee of Land and Physical Infrastructure.

August 20, 2016 will mark the bicentennial anniversary of the arrival of Merikin African-Americans in this country. This group of people has a peculiar history. Our Merikin ancestors were ex-slaves who originated from Georgia, Maryland and the Virginia areas close to the Atlantic seaboard of the United States of America. These ex-slaves had obtained their freedom, and it is said that they were part of the Underground Railroad system which operated to help free other

slaves.

During the War of 1812, the British tried to regain control of the newly independent American colonies. She recruited ex-slaves in batches or battalions of six companies as part of her war effort. They became known as the Corps of Colonial Marines. They were known for their bravery, discipline, expertise in guerrilla warfare and their knowledge of local American conditions. The American soldiers feared the Merikins more than their European counterparts. However, the British lost the war and it was impossible for Merikins to remain on American soil.

You must note that slavery was alive and vibrant in the American south. Giving ammunition to a black man, even during wartime, was unheard of and unacceptable. The British had to find somewhere to house the members of the Corps of Colonial Marines. Trinidad at that time was a newly acquired British territory. In fact, we had been under British rule for less than 20 years. The then Governor, Ralph Woodford, was anxious to see the more remote parts of the island developed through settlement. South Trinidad had vast amounts of virgin territory and the Governor made the British colonial administration aware of this reality.

The Corps of Colonial Marines and their families were offered relocation to Trinidad. They were further offered 16 acres of land per head of each household as payment for services rendered in war. This 16 acres of land, blood land as it is sometimes referred to, was given to them and their heirs in perpetuity. The Merikins arrived in Trinidad on August 20, 1816, in six companies, in the same manner in which they were recruited, and settled along the Moruga road and the outskirts of Princes Town.

First Company was settled in Hindustan. The Second Company settled in Petit Cafe. This holding included 16 acres owned by Ma Mathilda, a fellow Merikin. She allowed Warahoon Indians from Venezuela who landed in Gran

Chemin and were journeying to Mission, now called Princes Town, to pass through her land, thus reducing the distance. Third Company was settled in the Indian Walk area; Fourth Company was settled in Hard Bargain, Williamsville and the New Grant areas. Fifth and Sixth Companies retained their original names.

Pleased to be masters of their own destiny, these ex-slaves, ex-soldiers of the Corps of Colonial Marines settled down to life in Trinidad during the era of slavery. They brought their skills, their legacy of hard work and the Baptist religion to these parts and so their communities revolved around their churches. This group showed resilience and ingenuity, despite being placed in a foreign, inhospitable environment. They were pioneers in many respects.

These Afro-American settlers and their descendants became known as Merikins, the shortened form of "I'm American". Their history is our heritage. The group, Merikin Inc., has been in existence for 12 years. During that time our recurring theme has been towards a richer heritage, keeping in mind that heritage is that which may be inherited, be it circumstances or benefits, and it becomes more important when it is worthy of preservation. Merikin history, Merikin ideals, Merikin culture and Merikin land are all worthy of preservation.

As we sit here today, we are cognizant of the fact that our society is sometimes guilty of not valuing our local history enough. We are guilty of not putting enough effort into preserving what we have, and so we let it go to waste. We cannot continue this way. As such, Merikin Inc. wants to be part of the process that changes this mindset. We recognize our history, we value our heritage and we aim to preserve this heritage. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Vice-President of Merikin Inc., are there any particular aspects of your history that you would like to bring to our attention in terms of the land tenure problems that you have been experiencing?

Mr. Burton: Mr. Chairman, I would like to introduce Mr. Ansen Griffith to highlight our plight in this.

Mr. Griffith: Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. There are a number of challenges in the Merikin area. The first one we need to identify is that we as an organization representing Merikin Inc., popularly called “Merikin”, came into existence on April 09, 2004. The Merikin community and especially our youths are unaware of our legacy and are unaware of land title and their history, and thus it limits their rights in becoming true land owners. Merikin Inc. together with others have been popularizing the history for the last 12 years, and we want to emphasize that the lack of information and misinformation has hindered social and economic mobility in the Merikin community. Land ownership is not synonymous with poverty. In our community we are saying that our foreparents were given 16 acres of land in the initial onset. Added to that, when they were able to produce more, the State granted them excesses in order for them to produce. Today, a lot of our people are disenfranchised because of a process—I will go on to the second point.

Our observation and our rudimentary research and analysis have pointed to substantial fraudulent acquisition of Merikin land. It is even more important that, earlier on this year, the Law Association was saying that a lot of fake lawyers were causing lands to be transferred illegally and fraudulently, and this is one of the areas that is critical in the Merikin area. We have observed that whole new communities are being developed in our community; squatting is the order of the day. So you have squatting in Petit Cafe, Indian Walk, Fifth Company, Hard Bargain, New Grant. The original owners of some of those properties are actually non-existent. We are also saying that in some cases members of the Merikin community are being forced to pay for land that is theirs. So you have people who

are claiming these lands and causing members of our own community to pay them for what is rightfully theirs.

The issue also is the utility companies in Trinidad and Tobago. As a Merikin and as a land owner, it is really difficult for you to get T&TEC, WASA and TSTT to give you a natural supply of their amenities. However, in the squatting communities we do not know what is taking place, but those communities are filled with lights, water, Internet and all the amenities, and persons who have legitimate rights do not have those amenities.

We are also saying that there needs to be definite demarcation of what is state land and Merikin land, because our history also shows us that areas such as Fairfield are supposed to be Merikin land. Even if we go back to John Wise, in his research he said that Manahambre was also given to the Merikins. In addition to that, when the Merikins were moved from Hard Bargain to New Grant, they were granted 16 acres of land in Hard Bargain. When they were removed to New Grant, there is no documentary evidence to claim that those lands were revoked. If those lands were not revoked, we are saying that the persons who were Merikins in Hard Bargain are entitled now today to 32 acres—16 in Hard Bargain and 16 in New Grant.

We are also saying as with respect to Merikin land, because there has been a lack of foresight, a lack of planning and a lack of diligent oversight in the communities, the land has become landlocked. So we have a lot of properties that actually we are unable to get to. There are huge areas of back land where agriculture could be developed and things like that, but we are unable to get access to those lands. We could also say that in times like now there are certain groups that have come into the area and used strong-arm tactics and taken 30 and 40 acres of land, and nobody in the community seems to be able to stand up to these groups.

We are also saying that in our research we have seen that 15 acres, three rods and three perches were given to the Merikins when they arrived in the Indian Walk area. That was specifically for recreational use. It is 200 years later, and the only thing that was done to that land under the last administration is that the land was surveyed, but 200 years later, that land is filled with teak trees. The land is unoccupied and the legacy that they wanted for us we have not realized that.

We are saying that someone might ask why we are here today. It cannot be that 200 years is 200 years too long. If we lose our legacy, our children and grandchildren and even our present-day people will lose their land, they will lose their property and they will lose their heritage. I do not think that the people who fought in America, in a war that was not theirs, and came to Trinidad and Tobago and was given 16 acres of land, I do not think that they would be satisfied that we will just stand and give away what is rightfully ours.

We are saying that the challenges may be infrastructural, the challenges may be political, but we are saying that as Merikin and as true landowners, because we were here not as slaves, we were here as free men. We came here as free men, and we intend to fight for what is rightfully ours. We are just saying that these are some of the challenges we are facing, and we would like the appropriate steps and measures to be put in place, in order to deal effectively and critically with our issues. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Could you indicate for the benefit of the Committee what legal steps have been taken thus far or what interactions with any state agencies you all have engaged in?

Mr. Griffith: Under the last administration we had the Minister of Gender and Youth Affairs, that was Mr. Clifton De Couteau, he was our MP, and he was really trying rigorously to assist us in that area, but in light of that it would not just take

simple measures, it needs resources, because in order for us to identify those lands, those lands need to be surveyed. To survey, if we deal with the initial count, it would amass to 6,608 acres of land initially, and we are not talking about the expanse that was given after that. So it would take a lot of resources, and I do not think the members of our group have those resources to pay for that type of scope of work.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Others members of the Committee, are there any? Other than the efforts with Clifton De Couteau, have you made any legal claims, legitimate claims with attorneys or whosoever in the private sector at all?

Mr. Griffith: Some of the persons in the community could show you their deeds of comfort, but what was critical was that some members of the Merikin families would have actually told their children that they were inheritors of this land. Some families it seems like they did not. So it could be the state that because of lack of knowledge, you are not even aware that you have this possession and you could fight for it. So one of our thrusts is actually to get people aware in the community of what is their right. Right now there is a person who has come into the community, claimed over 32 acres of land and selling that land for \$35,000 a plot.

If we check the cadastral map from 1925 and before that, we are not seeing their name on that map. Prior to that, after that period we are seeing that person's name. So if the lands were given "minus property", meaning that it could not be sold, we are asking the question how did they get access to that, and cause even government agencies to put their names on that register.

Mr. Khan: Let me ask a couple of questions. The original Merikins came, and each head of household you say got 16 acres of land. Obviously, from my knowledge of land law, that had to be a Crown grant. Am I right? Is there anywhere in the Merikin community that you have residing with some family the

original Crown grant?

Mr. Burton: Mr. Khan, in my possession at this moment, I have here a grant from my grandfather. What it says:

“Royal grant for Crown lands sold”, is what I have got.

Victoria by the grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the colonies of dependencies thereof, Queen, defender of the faith.

It has got the original stamp and it reads:

Know ye that we do by these present us our heirs and successors in consideration of the sum of twenty-eight dollars and 80 cents to us paid, grant unto Henry Burton his heirs and assigned all that parcel of a lot of land situate in Savannah Grande...

—some of the writing here that I am reading is sort of obliterated—

...and in this Savannah Grande, six acres...

Mr. Chairman: Okay, we take your point, Mr. Burton, that members of your Committee do have original documentation. Mr. Khan, do you want to continue?

Ms. Atwater: I would also like to point out that I have in my possession land and building tax receipts paid by Mr. Bobcombe way back in 1857, the original document. So we have been doing our research and we have instances where we have original documents available.

Mr. Khan: You have to realize that this is a very complicated legal matter. It is also, in my personal opinion, a heritage matter that is steeply rooted in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, and we as legislators have to take cognizance of that.

Having said that, there are two ways to approach this, in my view. One, for those families that have the original grant, it means that they have what is called the root title and then from that root title land could be conveyed to their

generations and their siblings and what have you. But obviously you are claiming up to 7,000 acres of original grants to the Merikins; 90 per cent of that you do not have a head title, meaning a Crown grant specific to a family. And then, who are the families? Who were the original 300 or 400 people who each got 16 acres? And then, who now is Merikin? There have been so much intermarriage and what have you. My father is from Sixth Company, so I probably am Merikin too.

The thing about it is that there are two ways to look at it. For those of you who have the original Crown Grant within your family structure, there may be a way to deal with that. In doing land research, any lawyer worth his salt has to go to a root title and then search from there come back down. So obviously the people who are coming in to claim 30 and 40 acres, there are some flawed legal transactions inside there, but that is a different issue. The other way to look at it is possibly the State contemplating by legislation deeming some lands to Merikin heritage.

Ms. Atwater: Mr. Khan, that is our number one recommendation.

Mr. Khan: Because you cannot go to the individual families now—and sorry to say it, but it comes almost like the American Indian reservations—they have a concept like that and say this is heritage land. I think the Carib community in Arima has a semblance of that also, but in your case it is more specific. I think we could take a two-pronged approach to that. I will say no more at this point in time.

Ms. Atwater: I would like to point out the fact that if you look at a cadastral plan—barring that a lot of the original ones would have been destroyed in the Red House fire—coming down the years, the names of the original settlers have not been removed in lot of instances even up to today.

I think we should keep that in mind. I think we should also keep the fact that when oil deposits were discovered on these lands, the said oil companies found the

owners, established who the owners were as per the cadastral plan—and come down the road—met and treated with the owners. I have in my possession an instance of a present-day deed with 13 family members—obviously their business is in order—13 family members' names on the deed, and these people are getting oil rights from Petrotrin up the 1990s. So I think that between the cadastral plan and the fact that the oil companies have been able to trace owners, we should very well keep that in mind. But as I said, the recommendation that Merikin lands be declared a heritage site; that is what we are looking at also.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: I heard you speak about 16 acres given to Merikins. I want to find out, what is the position with occupation? I am getting a sense that these lands are very much unoccupied. Can you tell me something more about occupation from then to now?

Mr. Griffith: What I could tell you is that the prime spots in those areas have been taken by businessmen on the New Grant Road, the Indian Walk Road, Moruga; the prime spots are being taken by businessmen and people's families—some people who just claiming land. A large percentage of the land is really unoccupied, but the problem is the land is landlocked. So you have all the front spots, and no access to the back areas.

10.30 a.m.

Dr. Francis: Mr. Chairman, if I might make an intervention as the person who flagged this issue to the Committee. Now, the Merikins' arrival was unusual in the sense that you had freed people of African origin coming to a community, well a society where slavery was still existing, but it was not unusual given that there were immigrants coming in who would be given land grants, for example, the Cedula of Population, different context, different imperatives, but a similar history. Immigrants coming to Trinidad being given granted land, crown land for specific

reasons. The difference is that whereas under the Cedula those French immigrants would have been given title to their lands. The Merikins when they arrived, in a colonial society that was still dominated by the ethos of slavery did not, were not provided that legal basis. Meaning, they were given land, but they were not given the title to the land. So what you have is this understanding that this 16 acres of land is yours, but you do not have any documentary evidence saying that. Because it will be difficult for you to locate someone who can find a title from 1816 which is the year of the arrival of the group, saying that you have a claim to this land. The titles that have been identified by the members actually date from a generation or two subsequent to that, and it might have been additional land that they may have purchased.

So I, for example, have had personal interaction with members of the community. And what happens is that, okay, this parcel of land and sometimes because of the loss of the knowledge we are not exactly sure how far the land extends, but you know this land is yours. So your grandfather would have built a house, your great grandfather would have built a house, when it comes your time they will say, okay, take a piece of land and build a house. But there is no exactitude in it because of the historical conundrum created by these freed former slaves coming to a society where slavery still exists and where you have to be careful that their presence does not lead to insurrection which was the fear that, even though Governor Ralph Woodford wanted them to arrive, there was that fear that these immigrants could cause social problems. So it is a historical conundrum.

So you would find that—I am not sure if I could ask if anyone is aware that any person in the community has a title dating back from that original time of arrival. It is highly unlikely because of those circumstances. So that might help to explain what might seem today to be unoccupied.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: I just want clarity. So, Mr. Burton—he read something a while ago. What does that refer to?

Mr. Burton: It refers to a royal grant for crown lands which were sold to my grandfather.

Dr. Francis: That would have been additional land purchased by your grandfather which would not have been part of the original parcel of land, crown land given to, or provided to each head of family. It would have been a different issue.

Mr. Solomon: If I may, through the Chair. At the risk of giving legal advice from the Committee bench, but—and I agree with what my fellow members would have said about the complexity of it, but that sounds, Mr. Burton, as if it was a conveyance. So it was not an original grant. But what I want to ask is: has there been any precedence set where a Merikin member has gone to the High Courts, for instance, of Trinidad and Tobago and been granted land on that basis? That could open an avenue of legitimacy for others to follow as a precedence would have been set. Is there any sort of history of that sort of claim being successful?

Mr. Griffith: To my knowledge, there is one particular case in the community, I think the case of *Lena Gillon v the Third Company Baptist Church*. That case was in the High Court and the Court of Appeal made a decision on it. [Crosstalk] Yes. Successfully. Yes.

Mr. Khan: For who? The original owner?

Mr. Griffith: In favour of the church. Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Francis: I have some clarification for that as well. It has already been mentioned that the Baptist faith and the Baptist churches were the cornerstones of the Merikin communities. What would have happened is that many of those patriarchs in the community would have granted land to the membership of a church to establish churches. So it might have been the case where someone now is

claiming ownership of land that would have been granted to the land by the person who was the original grantee, so adding even more complexity to an already complex situation.

Mr. Griffith: The person who granted the land was my great, great grandfather William Weston. He gave the church and the church yard. Yes.

Mr. Solomon: That brings me back to the original question. Have there been any decisions in terms of the claim being a Merikins claim?

Mr. Griffith: The church on Merikins land, but to say if it is Merikins' claim?

Dr. Francis: It would not have been an individual claim. It would be the church as a proxy. Yeah.

Mr. Chairman: Are there any other questions from members?

Mr. Ali: Thank you very much. Let me first say that I agree with Minister Khan that this is going to be a very complex issue both legally via legislation. I would hate to see that your grandchildren will be before a Committee 20 years still fighting this battle. From all that I have heard for the morning, one of the things—now I am very excited about this issue being a student of history. I have deep roots in the Princes Town area also. My grandfather came from Sixth Company, so I am aware of a lot of the areas and the land in that area. So I am excited to see that we move forward.

And being a student of history like Minister Lovell, we may need in terms of a suggestion from you, what are some of the alternatives? Barring the granting of physical title and land, and I know Minister Khan spoke about probably demarking a heritage site that can, you know, be used for a number of purposes both historical, commercial that sits in line with your association. And not only in terms of a heritage site, but I think the history is so rich in terms of the Merikins society that perhaps consideration from the Government of the day to look at historical

observances perhaps integrating some of the history into the school curriculum.

I think this is the way how we will celebrate the Merikins society and the history, the heritage in Trinidad and Tobago. Perhaps a museum of some sort with documents, artefacts, deeds. So at the end of the day they may be lower hanging fruit, but we may be able to accomplish something in the shorter term in terms of validating the heritage and making—and perhaps in some future disposition in terms of an administration, a government, a committee that we may get closer to looking at the land issues. But it is just a suggestion that, I think that you know, the association should really look at in terms of looking at some alternatives in lieu of not having to wait 20, 25 years to go through legal battles with lands and squatting, and you know there are the lot of issues with regularization, 16 years of tenureship, those things would drag this on. So perhaps, you know, a conversation around that line may be very important. Have you all done any alternative suggestions so far perhaps? Thank you.

Mr. Bobcombe: Chairman, I think it is an appropriate time for me to run through some of the recommendations that we have because a lot of things has been said around these things. So I just want to put this on the table.

For example, the first thing is that we feel strongly that the land grants to the 441 families totally 6,000-plus acres, we feel that this land should be surveyed, it should be marked out. As a matter of fact, we have a signage project going on in the group for all the companies and the land should be deemed heritage lands. Now, also legislation must be enacted to protect the blood land and designation of these lands as heritage lands bring with it world-wide attention, the need for preservation and conservation. We are saying that itemizing the lands as heritage land and using the legal system, we have to look at this conundrum of history and try to sort out the matter.

Thirdly, a committee should be set up to identify the fraudulent land transfer issues we have alluded to. Recently evidence has been, as was said earlier, produced by the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago that there is rampant fraudulent land acquisition—fraudulent acquisition of land issues in the country. The same occurred and the same continues to occur in the Merikin community.

Next, we ask that any decision to be made concerning Merikin lands, Merikin Incorporated and I dare say other Merikin groups must be part of the decision-making process. We ask that a Merikin registry with State sanction, this is to track lineage, to track genealogy. We feel that the words of Queen Victoria on the original land grant document “to him and his heirs in perpetuity”, we feel that those words must have some meaning, it must be brought to have some meaning in this time. It is different, but we are saying that.

And finally, Merikin Inc. advocates a national awareness campaign to highlight Merikinism in general. We feel strongly that the school curriculum should reflect that reality. And I am saying a lot of things have come out of those recommendations that we are making, and we could continue to discuss them.

Ms. Atwater: We would like to highlight the fact we understand that this might be a ticklish issue, but our vision is not one of material value. Ours is about cultural legacy and we do not think that you could put a monetary value on cultural legacy. That has been, as we have said before, our recurring theme has been towards a richer heritage and our cultural legacy does not have a monetary value.

Mr. Bobcombe: Let me just add one thing as a former principal, a former school supervisor in the area. This Merikin thing—south east has been one of the poorest performing educational districts in the country, and as an educator in the area my thing is, these kids, these people do not know themselves. They are not really proud of, you know, where they have come from. We have to take this into

consideration when we are deciding what we will do about the Merikins and the Merikin community. I believe that the youths in particular need to understand the past, need to understand how great their foreparents were. The Merikins were runaway slaves in the United States, running an underground railroad from Miami straight up to Canada. You run away from any estate and join them, join the underground—you know. And then the British finding that “they hot”, guerrilla boys, they “cyar” tackle them, they going after them, joined them in their army and they fought for the British and then they came down here, you know. We have been trying to popularize this thing about what it really means to be a Merikin descendent, and this whole exercise we see it in this context of bringing this whole thing alive in the Moruga community. Thank you.

Mr. Khan: One question: What exactly is the Merikin heritage in the context of the historical development of Trinidad and Tobago and your unique culture? Is it the Baptist faith also?

Mr. Bobcombe: That is part of it. That is part of it.

Mr. Khan: But how much a part of it is it?

Mr. Bobcombe: It is a big part. It is a big part. The Merikins brought the Baptist religion from the southern United States, then they established a number of churches. The English came in and tried to put in some reforms and so on and there has been a constant battle between these reforms and keeping the thing as original as possible.

But you asked the question about how, you know, we see the history as being and the Merikins as being important in the history of Trinidad and Tobago? When we came here slavery was going on in Trinidad and Tobago. We were free men. The society was watching at us and we were going out from the Merikin communities. We were—fellas were working all about, all over the country as

tradesmen, mechanics. They were really assisting in the development of the southern part of Trinidad and Tobago. They worked in the oil fields. My father was Moruga, Indian Walk and I spent my whole life in Fyzabad where he worked until he retired and we went back to Moruga Road to live. So Merikins, I am saying, Merikins played a critical role in the development of southern Trinidad.

Dr. Francis: If I might add some more historical context again? It seems to be my role for today. The Baptist faith as it exists today in Trinidad has had a number of inputs, many of them also Caribbean. That movement in St. Vincent which we call “Shakerism” has had some part to play in the development of the faith, but the mecca of the Baptist faith in Trinidad is the Merikincommunity, and that is every single strand of the faith including the Spiritual Shouter Baptist, London Baptist, Independent Baptist. We get all of these strains of Baptist in part because of the intervention of missionaries and it causes a number of schisms, that there are those who wanted to or preferred to parlay with the missionaries. There were those who rejected the intervention of the missionaries and that relationship ends up, in part, in determining all these different strains of Baptists that we have today. But all of them owe their origin to the Merikin community.

So it is not that the Merikins are responsible for the early economic development of Moruga, which they were. They cut the first road into Moruga all the way to Marac. Because basically we need to understand what was given to the Merikins was virgin crown land, basically forest. And the fact that there is any community today in Trinidad called Moruga has to do with the development of the Merikin people. So it is not just infrastructural development. It is not just economic development. It is not just populating what was a very underpopulated area, has to do with religion and culture and all of that as well. So the impact and contributions are numerous, are varied. Thank you.

Ms. Atwater: Do not leave out education, Sir. The Baptist faith—

Dr. Francis: And education.

Ms. Atwater:—through the Baptist faith of Trinidad and Tobago [*Laughter*] provided education. Fifth Company Baptist School is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. Cowen Hamilton Secondary School, the only Baptist secondary school in the country is 53 years old this year, and Merikin communities in Marac. We have in Marac Baptist School (primary) and in First Company Hindustan, we have Hindustan Baptist School and these people concentrated on education, educated their children. Sunday when we were celebrating West Indies victory, we have two Merikins on the team in Melissa Aguilera and Cooper. Cooper is from Mandingo Road—heart of Merikin community—and Melissa is from Marac and she still lives home. Merikin community, again. So we have contributed and we continue to contribute to the development of Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean also.

Dr. Francis: Yeah. So imagine the irony that there is a community that was transplanted here that faced, I mean, the worst aspects of a frontier experience that still somehow managed to make all these contributions towards the development of the society. And at the end of all that, at the end of all of your contributions you do not have the simplest thing that one would want to have which is title to the land that you know is yours. Imagine that historical irony. This is what this community essentially faces up to today after 200 years of not being called the Merikins, but being very, very Trinbagonian.

Mr. Bobcombe: I would want to use this opportunity to press a note on my baby in all this. There is a 15-acre block on the cadastral map marked Merikins—marked recreational purposes. Indian Walk does not have a recreation ground and we are watching this 15 acres there. And we are saying, if there is anything called

heritage land that should be heritage land. And we would like to get the British who gave it to us, to probably come in with us, come in with the Merikins and really set up a top-of-the-line facility, sporting—well recreation—that word recreation could go “all how”. When you look at the topography, we have the survey map that was done by the last Government. When you look at the survey map, it really needs some top-of-the-line consultants to say what to do with this land to make it into a recreational something. And I hope in a forum like this some kind of work really gets underway in that area on that particular facility.

Mr. Khan: Let me make an intervention here. To me this is a good starting point because if there is a—with the whole issue is extremely complex, as you would realize. If it could be solved at all, it would take years or decades to solve, but at least if we could look for some low hanging fruits at least to say that something is being done for this community, I think, we can flag this area here. I mean, I would even offer as Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to take charge of this project and see if I could bring some conclusion to it in terms of researching the land title and coming up with a plan, coordinating with your MP and your community to see if we can establish this initially as a heritage site for a governance structure, at least to start, to seed something fundamental in the Merikin community. I mean—

Mr. Bobcombe: I would just like to—we are looking for a lot from Dr. Lovell Francis because MP Taylor first went in, drew some buildings and so on. We have those buildings. MP De Coteau got some consultants. NIPDEC is managing the project. They surveyed the land. That is as far as we have reached. When we want to take in—we really want to take that thing further.

Ms. Atwater: I would like—we would like the Committee to realize that we have been working, that we have been trying, we have been plodding and we have not

given up and we do not intend to give up any time soon. And, Mr. Khan, low hanging fruit is fruit too.

Mr. Khan: It is in that context that I made it. I want to make one final point before I close today. You know I feel strongly about also. I do not want to bring politics too much into this things, but the PNM did in fact host a Baptist celebration in Balisier House last week and I made a short address. And I spoke about the Merikins and especially in the context of us trying to rewrite our history to suit our purposes, because our history has been written by other people. And the point I made was that today we call them faith healers and today we call them psychics, but to our own people we used to call them “seer woman” and obeah men. And I refer especially to two Moruga folk heroes which is “Papa Neza” and “Mother Cornhux”. And ask the average Trinidadian and they will say, “Dem is obeah men, dem is a obeah woman”, in a derogatory sense. I had the privilege of meeting Mother Cornhux before she died in 2001. She was a phenomenal faith healer. And I would not tell you what she told me. *[Laughter]* But I just want the records to show that when the history of Trinidad is rewritten, these folk heroes have played their role and they should be so recognized.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. I want to thank the members of the Committee, you know, for their patience and their forbearance for listening to a Merikin tale. I also wish to assure the Merikin Incorporation that this, though it may be a second presentation of Merikins to an official state agency, because I am aware that there was a commission of enquiry in the latter part of the 19th Century with regard to the disposition of the American situation in Moruga and that largely the infrastructure development that was pursued, limited as it was at that time, came as a result of that commission of enquiry. But we are fortunate, of course, today in having on this Committee the Minister with responsibility for local government

and particularly rural development. So that we will hold him to his word and spearheading the corrective measures that we all agree may be necessary in this situation.

So before we close I would like to afford the Vice-President of Merikin Incorporated an opportunity to close your presentation.

Mr. Burton: Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the head table and other members of the Joint Select Committee, again I must say a hearty and well-felt thank you for your patience and for the way you have listened to us and have understood our position at this point in time. We look forward in the future to having more discussions with you as we plod forward to realize our dream of Merikin heritage. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Sir, and I wish you a safe journey, return to your cere-most residences. Have a pleasant day. We will now suspend the meeting for five minutes, before we resume with our other guests.

10.58 a.m.: *Meeting suspended.*

11.00 a.m.: *Meeting resumed.*

AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Mrs. Dhano Sookoo	President
Mr. Mohamed Hallim	Vice-President
Mr. Christopher Greenidge	Director/Court Officer
Mr. Nawaz Karim	Director/Disciplinary Chairman
Mr. Frank Ali	Director

Mr. Chairman: The Fourth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure now stands reconvened. Morning and welcome to the representatives of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago. This is, of course, the Committee's first public meeting pursuant to its enquiry into land

tenure issues.

I would like to indicate that this hearing is being broadcast live on Parliament Channel 11, Parliament Radio 105.5FM, and the Parliament YouTube Channel *ParlView*. Members of the viewing and listening audience, of course, can send comments via email at parl101@ttparliament.org; and our facebook page at facebook.com/ttparliament; or on Twitter@ttparliament.

Again, welcome to the officials of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago, and I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to introduce yourselves to the Committee.

Mrs. Sookoo: Good morning all, I am Dhano Sookoo, President of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago; Chairperson of the Committee of Management; President of the North Manzanilla Farmers Association; Regional Director of the Caribbean Farmers Network; a member of the Regional Steering Committee of the European Union Agriculture Policy Programme that has been funded under the Tenth EDF Fund; and a member of the Steering Committee of the CTA Value Chain Programme that has been implemented in eight Cariforum countries.

Mr. Hallim: Good morning everyone, I am Mohamed Hallim, and I am the Vice-President of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago, and I have been on the Board since the year 2004. Thank you.

Mr. Greenidge: Good morning, my name is Christopher Greenidge, I am a Director of the Agricultural Society Board, I am also the Youth Officer of the North Manzan Group; I am also a committee member of the Plantation Road Aquaculture Association Plantation. Thank you.

Mr. Karim: Pleasant good morning, Nawaz Karim, Disciplinary Chairman of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago; President of the Maloney Farmers

Association; and I am also a farmer.

Mr. Ali: Good morning, my name is Frank Ali, I am a Director on the Board of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago; I am also the President of the Progressive Bon Air Farmers Association.

Mr. Chairman: I, of course, am Sen. Stephen Creese, Independent Senator and Chairman of this Committee. I would now like the members of my Committee, starting on the right, to introduce themselves to you.

[Members of the Committee introduce themselves]

Okay, I would like to make sure that we either put our cell phones on silent or deactivate them. I would now invite the agricultural society to make a presentation to the Committee.

Mrs. Sookoo: Thank you Chairman. The Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago, having just passed 175 years of existence, as an Act of Parliament, Chap. 63:01, has a mandate to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. In our instructing manual, in our Act, it clearly outlines the society's role and function. Most important, is to assist in the advancement of the agriculture sector in Trinidad and Tobago, all branches of the agriculture.

The Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago takes the issue of land tenancy, the regularization of farmers on state agriculture land as the catalyst for agriculture development in Trinidad and Tobago. There can be no diversification; there can be no food security, if as a Government we do not treat with the issue of land tenancy in this country. In 2012, the Food and Agriculture Organizations of the United Nations published a document, *Responsible Governance of Tenure*, which will guide the 189 nations of the United Nations in the context of food security, and how best these guidelines can be implemented in each of the countries to assist in tenancy of farmers and occupants of lands.

If I may read, in this guideline as it states:

“The eradication of hunger and poverty, and the sustainable use of the environment, depend in large measure on how people, communities and others gain access to land, fisheries and forests. The livelihoods of many, particularly the rural poor, are based on secure and equitable access to and control over these resources. They are the source of food and shelter; the basis for social, cultural and religious practices; and a central factor in economic growth.”

Ladies and gentlemen of this Committee, Trinidad and Tobago its history has proven that we have been practising, and still do, weak governance of tenure in this country. And what has weak governance of tenure allowed us to be today? It has allowed us to marginalize the poor; it has allowed us to make already social and economically marginalized women more vulnerable. Weak governance has allowed us to hinder the progress of our rural people.

It is in this context that we appreciate this discussion before this Joint Select Committee. We do not expect our presence here today to be part of a continued talk shop of which this country has been accustomed to. Over the last few years we have advocated publicly, in every arena that was possible, even on the streets of Trinidad and Tobago, the importance of tenure of land to the people. If we are really serious about food security to Trinidad and Tobago, ladies and gentlemen we must address this issue. We at the agricultural society submit ourselves today to this Committee, because we have recognized that like most of Trinidad and Tobago, that it is bad policies and bad politics that has brought us to the mercy of the rest of the world where we have now so grown accustomed as a country to imported food. And we present ourselves here today to this Committee and we hope that this discussion will chart a new way forward for the people of Trinidad

and Tobago.

Mr. Chairman: Does any other member of the committee wish to address our Committee?

Mr. Karim: My intervention here would be specifically to youth and the social ills of society presently. I come from a community that is somewhat high risk, you know, the windy hill area. I farm in the Maloney area, so we are accustomed to the crime activities in the area, and we have seen through the agricultural society for the last four years or so, trying to promote youths to get into agriculture and basically stop liming on the block. We have been successful so far in doing this, but, you see, you want youths to be farmers, you do not want them to be farm workers; and to go from a farm worker to a farmer one of the most important things is land. So, today, I want to commend the Committee for giving the ASTT the opportunity to be here to express our concerns. Thank you.

Mr. Hallim: Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I have been around in the agricultural sector. My whole career has been with the Ministry of Agriculture since 1969, and that year I was an extension officer who had to look after the needs of farmers in terms of incentives, for example. And since 1969 to now the same problems that occurred then are occurring today. For example, farmers need land tenure to get an incentive. And since 1969 we were not able to give incentives to our farmers from that time, and up to today those same farmers that I know, well most of them have died really, because I was a younger man and they were older people. But, many of the farmers that I knew still up to this day which is 40 years later or more, they still do not have tenancy to their land. So, the problems remain and they stay there and, hopefully, with a forum like this, we could find ways and means of quickening up the process, of getting these people some legal status. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Does any other member of the society wish to speak? Okay, the floor is now open to members of the Committee.

Dr. Francis: Good morning everyone. Full disclosure, I did my PhD dissertation on agriculture, specifically the sugar industry, but the references will translate. When I was doing my research I came across a dissertation from 1963 by someone, subsequently a Dr. Maharaj, talking about what is wrong with agriculture in Trinidad, in particular. His evaluation was that land tenure was the issue. The main specific recommendation was that we need to look at the size of holdings as the main component of that issue. What I am really asking you, or I want to ask you is, the specifics of the problem in terms of land tenure, can you outlay them for us? Thank you.

Mrs. Sookoo: The food that has been presently produced from this country, 80 per cent of that food that is being produced by what we term squatters in this country. Approximately 80 to 85 per cent of the farmers, the food producers, are untenanted. We find this most prevalent in the rural communities, in the Sangre Grande, Plum Mitán, Mayaro, Rio Claro areas. There is some level of agriculture production along the East-West Corridor including Maloney, Orange Grove, Bon Air; as we go down into central in the Felicity area, in the Bonaventure/Gasparillo area. All of these areas that I have just called, there is less than 1 per cent of farmers/food producers that have any tenancy to these lands.

Mr. Khan: Are they farming on state lands?

Mrs. Sookoo: Yes, Sir. All of these areas that I have just called, and there is much more that we can let you know by written information. We can produce that information. They are all untenanted.

Mr. Khan: How do they farm in the first place? They just went and farm or did they have an initial tenancy that expired that was not renewed? Because there

cannot be lawlessness either. So, you just cannot appear on a piece of state land and say I have farmed it so I am a farmer, so I have some rights. There has to be order. So, what I am asking you, if there are so many untenanted lands, is it because there were “illegally occupied”, or is it because bureaucracy in the system that has not been giving them their agricultural leases?

Mrs. Sookoo: I would say both. But, more so the bureaucracy in the system. If you look traditionally how farmers were supposed to be tenanted on lands, and we look at the institutions, we look at the divisions that were responsible for having these farmers given their rise, their tenure to these lands, there is an entire breakdown in the system. What we have seen is two and almost three generations of occupants of these lands that are still untenanted.

Let us take for example, to my extreme left here is Mr. Nawaz Karim, he is a third generation farmer farming in the Maloney food crop area, he is now regarded as the hot pepper king of the world. Recent reports coming out of the United States revealed that the best hot pepper entering the US market is coming from Mr. Karim’s farm in Maloney, and he is also a third generation squatter. It is the responsibility of the State. It has always been and still rests with the State to look into this aspect and regularize farmers. So, a great part of the problem lies with the institution, the way the bureaucracy within the system that has not allowed the individuals to be tenanted.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: I would like to start with some of the policies that were in place. Can you tell me as chairman—madam president, sorry—of instances in Trinidad of persons who were legitimate farmers who got lands legitimately for farming purposes? Can you tell me of what percentage of those engage in farming to any large extent?

Mrs. Sookoo: To my knowledge there is a percentage, I will say probably about 7

per cent of individuals who would have had some tenancy to land still engaged in farming. What we have recognized at the agricultural society having gone on the ground over the past few years is that there has been issued to many individuals tenancy to land under the pretext of farming and agriculture which never occurred and the genuine farmers of this country are the ones that have not been tenanted. If you look in the Orange Grove area, for example, there are 434 acres, I think, approximately that is tenanted to a particular company. But, behind that 434 you have over a thousand acres of agriculture lands that is under production and not one of those farmers, over the last 30 years, have been tenanted on those lands.

Mr. Smith: Of the 7 per cent, that 7 per cent is from the 85 per cent you spoke about?

Mrs. Sookoo: No, 7 per cent will be about 7 per cent who actually have some tenancy in their hand. About 80 to 85 per cent of the farmers, the food producers, are still yet untenanted.

Mr. Smith: And what is the process? Are any of that 85 per cent closer to it now? Is there a process going on, or any negotiations or talks going on, that a percentage of that 85 is moving forward at all, or is it all a stalemate right now?

Mrs. Sookoo: Well, Sir, in 2009—if I may go back, and I want to present this to this honourable gathering here today—then Minister Piggott, who was the Minister of Agriculture, we would have had a meeting with Mr. Piggott to address this issue of land regularization. The agricultural society proposed a process where we can look at—I do not want to use the word “fast tracking”, but we could accelerate the process, and we got buy in from the Minister.

What it entails is the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago coming together with a team that would partner with the Ministry's Extension Division, and we went out on the fields, and we did what was called an occupation survey of

the lands, and in so doing we used Plum Mitan Food Crop Project as the area that we will treat with first. And we went in there and we did what was called an occupation notice. We took up plot by plot, the individuals who were actually farming the land, and not persons who would have applied for the land. We were able to identify in that process vacant plots of land. What we have seen coming out of that programme in 2013 where 120 individuals—I think it was the largest distribution of leases in this country coming out of that programme, where they were able, the process was certified by the stakeholder, which was the agricultural society and the Ministry of Agriculture Extension Division—and we were able to see some 120 farmers being given their tenancy.

If I may add, Sir, further to that, what we did, we tied the issue of land tenancy to food production in the context of food security. So, we then proposed in the project document we had submitted then, we proposed a holistic development of these communities. So, what we did in regularizing the farmers, we went in and ensured that there were proper irrigation systems; we ensured there was proper infrastructure, roadways and so on; proper drainage for the farmers; and we were also able to introduce the Agricultural Development Bank to provide financing to these farmers. We were able to put a proper crop production schedule model in place that will allow some level of sustainable production for particular commodities. And that is how we were able, around 2012/2013, to have supplied certain franchises, restaurants, in this country with cucumbers, coming out of that project in Plum Mitan.

Mr. Paray: Morning madam President, I am hearing a lot of good things coming out of the agricultural society, and listening to what you would have said in terms of the conversation with Mr. Piggott back in 2009, it tells me that, you know, the agricultural society is well oiled and well tooled to push this process forward.

Now, in your view, if you had to identify the top five reasons why legitimate farmers in legitimate areas are having difficulties in getting their lease processed in a timely fashion, what would you determine as the top five or six areas that are bottlenecking the process? Thank you.

Mrs. Sookoo: Presently there exists a system at the Ministry that is dependent on a public officer to go out there in the fields and collect data and information and make recommendations. That has been the catalyst for this process not being efficiently operated. Many a time these officers they go on the field but they stay in a sheltered area. There is no verification of whether these individuals actually farm on these lands, the level of production. So, we are saying that that is one the major problems, the identification process, and we were able to prove that in the 2009 programme that we did with Mr. Piggott, where the agricultural society, the stakeholder body, went out there and led the way in gathering this kind of information.

So, one, the present circumstances that exist with the relevant personnel, it has to be changed. So, we need to have more stakeholder intervention, and who knows farmers best, but farmers. And the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago, being the legal voice for the farming community is the institution most poised to treat with this issue.

Secondly, when this information is collected at that level it goes now to your land management unit, your regional offices. Again, we are dealing with public officers, people who work eight to four. We are not dealing with individuals who have a real passion, have a stakeholder in this process; is a stakeholder in this process. So, what we are seeing even at that point, the terms of verification of the information that came forward from the county offices, the time they have to go back to the farms to verify whether that information is correct, how much of it is

correct, that is another sticking point. Again, if at the very early stage you had the stakeholder sign off participation in the process, we would have alleviated that bottleneck situation.

My third point is that when all of this information is collected, many a time you have an issue with the survey, the Director of Surveys. Sometimes you have a survey plan that is not approved. So, when you reach, probably at the land management unit they will say, okay, yes, we do have this; but this plan, it is surveyed, there is your cadastral, but it has not been approved, maybe, by Town and Country Planning. Because, they also have to approve. And, I will use a classic example: the Maloney Food Crop Project which has been surveyed for over 25 years, those farmers could not have been regularized, and when the agricultural society went in to investigate why, it was because the lay by road, when you turn right on the traffic light that takes you to Bestcrete, that layby road that was constructed there was not appearing on the map. So, Town and Country could not have approved the survey plan.

So, there it is, you do not have the agencies that are responsible for guaranteeing these farmers their legal right, their tenancy to these lands. There are these agencies all operating in silos. There is not a common ground for the operation of these agencies. So, we need to really and truly find a mechanism, some stakeholder committee, some stakeholder platform that could bring the agencies more regularly together to address some of these issues.

And, may I say number five, Sir. I know we are in a room of politicians, but sometimes it is the politicians who stand in the way. As I said in my opening remarks, you know, sometimes we just do not have the political will to do that. We have the political will to deal with other issues, housing and industries and everything else, and only because we are now faced with a foreign exchange crisis

and everything else, we are now finding the agriculture conversation so interesting.

11.30 a.m.

So sometimes it is the political will to get the job done, you know, we are not seeing that political will. I always emphasize to people when I speak, that in 2009 Minister Piggott and when Mr. Noel Garcia was brought in as the Chairman of EMBD, ADB and NAMDEVCO, the sector had really taken a positive turn. So we were seeing that kind of intervention, direct intervention that is required. So maybe you need a Noel Garcia in the sector to drive this process forward, because he had engaged the Agricultural Society and we were partners in this process.

Mr. Smith: Nothing is new. You know things happen all the time. I am sure out there, worldwide, and you all would be doing your research that there have been situations such as Trinidad and Tobago right now that a country was able to become over it and get over it and do certain policies and procedures to ensure that it was cleared up. Is there any country that was similar to where we are now that was able to break through and get this cleaned up that you all know of, a model that was done anywhere in the world, in the Caribbean or in the Americas to be precise?

Mrs. Sookoo: I cannot say, but what I could say is that the model we did in Plum Mitan and the processes that the Agricultural Society had put forward and we were going forward with in 2009. In 2013, as President of the Agricultural Society I was invited by the United Nations to address the global commodities forum in Geneva and at that forum I had the opportunity to address on the issue of poverty eradication using agriculture and the development of rural communities. And I used that Trinidad and Tobago model and I put forward that to the United Nations and my understanding is that that information was being used in other countries as to involve more stakeholder development in the process.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: Through you Chair, I really want to go back to my first question. I do not think you answered my question, because, you know, as a citizen I drive through Trinidad and I see many places which were declared as agricultural areas which I now see huge buildings, for example, the Aranguez area. As an agricultural society, tell me, what are some of your concerns with regard to that?—because as a citizen you expect places which were regularized for agriculture to engage in large scale farming, and I really recognize Mr. Karim. I want to compliment you on your hot peppers recent success on the market, and these are the places that young people would look to and realize that they could have a future in agriculture.

If it is that Government would have given out large parcels of lands to some people and then it is seen that you see concrete structures going up on lands which were identified as agriculture lands, what have you as an agricultural society, what have you done about those things to promote, because we are talking about land tenancy and regularization for land for agriculture, and as a government we must be concerned as the process we would engage in regularizing land. Bearing in mind these are some of the situations that have occurred in the past. What are some of your concerns in going forward?

Mrs. Sookoo: To answer your question directly, we do have a concern with so many arable agriculture lands throughout this country that we now see industries and housing. And back in 2011, I was that individual who led that march through Port of Spain for almost two weeks, advocating for a land use policy for Trinidad and Tobago. We were promised it in 2011, we are now in 2016 and we are yet to see or yet to be called forward to participate in any discussion on a land use policy for Trinidad and Tobago.

The issue of these concrete structures being on these lands, the State is the

regulatory body that is responsible for ensuring that when you give someone a parcel of land for agriculture purpose that it remains in agriculture. This is why you have a land management unit at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. As I indicated earlier, one of the problems is because we have is a serious breakdown in the operation management at these institutions. So who is out there? The Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago we are doing our very best.

At present we do not have an office, we do not have any resources available to us to continue that exercise that we started in 2009 and continued up to 2013. So we, ourselves are very constrained in even fulfilling our mandate as enshrined in our Act, Chap. 63:01.

Mr. Paray: Madam President, you made a statement there about no office space and so on and as a statutory board, are you funded by the State?

Mrs. Sookoo: Annually, the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago receives a grant as approved by the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. We write our request to the Minister of Finance, we sit in the round table discussion with the Minister of Finance, we also propose policies and programmes as to setting forward the direction for the agricultural sector.

Since 2013, through someone's political decision, the Agricultural Society was deprived of its funding. Even into 2014, 2015, we are now in 2016 and we are still left without an office although there is a line item in that approval from the Ministry of Finance for rental of office space for the Society. The Society also has as part of its assets, two vehicles of which we have no use for 2015 and 2016. We are now paying thousands of dollars. We are spending thousands of dollars transporting members of the committee throughout the country and we are a 26 member committee that is strategically located throughout this country as far as Los Iros to Rio Claro, to Plum Mitán, all over, our 26 directors come from.

So when we sit as the Agricultural Society we discuss agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago. So at this point our hands are tied, our feet are tied, we are a group of people that has the power, a power in the sense of the energy, we have the drive, we have the commitment to support an initiative of regularizing farmers, but the status of the Society according to the politicians does not allow it to go forward.

Mr. Paray: Would you say, Madam President, have you brought this to the attention to the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in terms of—

Mrs. Sookoo: Since September of last year, Sir, I would have met the hon. Minister when he came into office and prior to that we would have had discussions. Since September we have been begging at the Ministry's doors to have this process regularize. We have a four member staff that comes from the Statutory Authorities, Service Commission and imagine almost two years, four public officers, a secretary range 54D, assistant secretary, a clerk/stenographer and a messenger that is being paid by the taxpayers of this country and are performing no duties, no function on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. They are all in an office somewhere down in St. Clair.

Mr. Francis: I want to ask a different question.

Hon. Member: Go ahead, Sir.

Mr. Francis: How much of the current food needs of this nation does the farming community provide? And the next part is a bit unfair but I will ask it anyway. How much do you expect if we rationalize this problem within a reasonable period, how much do you expect that to improve?

Mrs. Sookoo: What I am about to say to you, Sir, is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God. So, Sir, presently based on our food consumption I will say we are producing somewhere around 15 to 20 per cent,

maybe less not more. It could be less. If you go back to 10 years ago, there are records at NAMDEVCO that will show that we were exporting to one country, Barbados, over 1.5million pounds of fresh agriculture produce. Ten years ago we were loading six 40 foot containers of pumpkin to North America and Canada. We were then the food basket of the region.

So over the years when we had the shutdown of Caroni (1975) Limited, and as you know on those Caroni lands there were a lot of private tenants and we had these individuals removed from those lands. Since then you would recall the crisis we had in 2007—2008 with escalating food prices, all of these were contributing factors for individuals being removed from lands that they were farming for over a number of years.

So I can say for the second question that you asked, if this process is addressed, if this issue of land tenancy is addressed and not just address, it must be addressed in an effective and in an efficient way in the context of food security, I can safely say that there is no reason that within the next three years we cannot be producing 65 per cent of the food that we consume. And the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago once given the resources, our tools we are prepared to hold the hands of those in power, those in authority and assist this process in achieving that goal.

Mrs. Jennings-Smith: I speak as a Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande which is a noted area for agriculture and lots of land area. And I can say that I have had the privilege of touring that area with our Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries over an entire weekend where we not only looked at land but we looked at fisheries and other type of development for agriculture. I want to ask you as President, Madam President, have you brought other recommendations to our Minister with regard to acquisition of estates, because in Toco, Matura,

Matelot and those areas we have huge amount of lands just lying there. Have you all as an agricultural society, done any research into areas in which you could may be recommend to the Minister for acquisition relative to some kind of agricultural engagement?

I will ask another question to Mr. Karim. As an agricultural society, you spoke about farmers, young people being farmers and not farm workers, and I really like that statement. As a body, have you done any engagement or any plans or any sensitization for young people to get them interested in farming, especially in my area where there are a number of young people unemployed and they too are seeking ways and means where they can make a contribution to this country, Trinidad, especially now where we need to get food to feed our nation. So could you please tell me if you have that, if you have done that? I know too there is an area in Valencia where some young people are engaged in tilapia farming and they need that kind of guidance. Could you tell me what you have done so far as the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. Karim: Well first of all as our Act would state we have to disseminate information and knowledge. What we basically do for the Society and as a young person as myself and Frank and many of us are young, basically under the age of 40, we go to the farming communities, mostly rural communities and we promote agriculture. What the Society also does, we try to bring young persons into our successfully farms. So for instance, we are going to have some workshops soon in the Maloney area, Orange Grove area, North Manzanilla area. But I want to add here and I want to plead also to this committee, you may have the will, right, you dedicate your time to Trinidad and Tobago but when you are placed in a situation that the Society is in presently it is very difficult for you to have any level of success. And I want to just give you a bit to just explain something.

This hot pepper article was something that basically rocked the world. And what happened is that we got investors, persons from the United States calling us in Trinidad wanting to get involved in this Trinidad and Tobago hot pepper and they will ask you questions. They want to know how you operate down here and one of the critical things was land tenure. Because if they are to come here to invest in your operation and you do not have land tenure they do not want to be part and parcel of that. I mean, it is obvious, that is just sense. And for too long in Trinidad, and I do not want to be lashing the politicians here, but this is how I see it as a farmer and I have been farming for quite some time, straight out of school and I am now 34, right, the sector is dying. We are out there night and day as the Agricultural Society promoting agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Government now is talking agriculture as the president said because of the issues with the economy and what not, but we have been doing it all the time and for some reason we do not seem to get the support from the politicians and it is really, real disheartening for this to keep continuing in 2016. So I personally am pleading with this Committee and to the Government of the day, let us stop the talking, I have been to many talk shops. I get fed up. Let us really get something done and do something for agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago. And one thing I feel proud when I go to New York and Miami and you see hot peppers there and hear the thing, and I feel proud about that because I could identify Trinidad hot peppers anywhere in the world. But you know what I saw in New York on the labelling, Jamaica pepper. It was not Jamaica pepper. It was pepper from my farm and that is how it was labelled.

So we need the assistance of the politicians, we have to work hand in hand to promote this sector. I want to repeat this, the sector is dying because there are no young persons coming on board and this land tenure issue is a critical issue. I am

going to state this here, I am on a one hundred and something acre parcel of land and I have been squatting there. And that land was squatting land since 1986. We have made applications for land year after year and we are the producers in Trinidad and we were never successful. So something is fundamentally wrong with the system and we cannot take a next five or six years to fix it, it has to fix now. Thank you.

Mrs. Sookoo: To answer the earlier question from MP, Mrs. Jennings-Smith, whether or not we made recommendations to the Minister with regards to the amount of land and how best these lands could be utilized, that was what we started in 2009 continued into 2010, 2011. In 2013 we saw that Minister just brushing everything aside. Then came a new Minister in September 2015 and we were very hopeful that we would have reentered this kind of discussion and close collaborative working relations. However, at a recent seminar, workshop at Cara Suites in Claxton Bay, I heard the Minister in his address stating nobody is going to tell him what to do, so I do not know as the agricultural sector maybe we will come by Sen. Franklin Khan and probably have some discussions on rural development and agriculture.

So sometimes, you know, we just do not know where to go, who to talk to because sometimes you get that kind of response from people and when you have your line Minister making an open public statement like that then as the Agricultural Society where do we go, who do we talk to. The Commissioner of State Lands and I want to make this point, the Commissioner of State Lands in this country is a very, very important person, strategically placed to deal with the issue of land tenure. And when you have to be taking six months and only appoint an Acting Commissioner and you have to wait another year or so to appoint a Commissioner, where do we go?

Where is the role of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago who supposed to be the landlord of this country in this whole context of regularization of farmers and food security and all of these things? So there are people involved in this whole process of land regularization and the time has come, as young Karim has said, for everyone to step up to the plate and adhere to their responsibility. It is written in black and white. If you go back to the State Lands Act you will note the responsibilities of each and every one.

So Madam MP, the Agricultural Society is ready and willing to work especially in your area. The president and almost half the board is from the Eastern part of Trinidad and you know most of the agriculture presently is coming from that area. Valencia have been known to be producing some of the best hot peppers, pimento peppers for export. We have much of our bodi beans and other commodities coming from that area. We have started work with a group of young men in the plantation area as we have started in Windy Hill. Part of the Agricultural Society's work is to make that kind of social intervention. What we are doing is meeting with these, what we called "high-risk youths" and we are getting them involved in agriculture.

There was a recent intervention by Mr. Frank Ali and Mr. Karim in the Windy Hill area where we got some 67 young people involved in agriculture. And again, to take them to the next level we do not have the resources. It is sitting down somewhere in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries by a political decision not to allow the Society its resources. In the plantation area, our young guys in plantation, they are using these abandoned gravel pits, right, and they are doing aquaculture. We recently did a one day crash course with them in aquaculture production. Part of the Agricultural Society's work is every month to have the stakeholder platform throughout the country and bring all the stakeholders

together to discuss agriculture and its challenges. Again, without the resources and the tools to do so we cannot.

There is a delegation from Panama that is coming to meet with the Agricultural Society, the Ambassador to Panama and this delegation in Trinidad. And where do we have to host them, on a farm. Or either the members take money from their pockets, their pocket money, and pay some meeting room to host these people. We have our colleagues coming in from the Caribbean Farmers Network, the Jamaica, Barbados, I am presently leading the marketing programme with the Massy Stores regionally to try to get, you know, more markets are better market access for farmers and so on. And where are we meeting? We are meeting on the streets.

We have investors ready to come into Trinidad and Tobago to invest in our hot pepper project to set up some factories to do processing that could earn foreign exchange for this country. Where do we have to host these people? On the streets or on somebody's farming plot.

So ladies and gentlemen to this committee we implore you, we ask of you to allow the Society, make that recommendation and allow the Society to be able to proceed with its work programme. All we want to do is fulfil our mandate as enshrined in our Act.

Mr. Paray: Madam President, just coming back to the issue on the land tenancy. Would it be safe to say that when we are going forward in terms of moving the process forward, if consideration to do the setting up of a special agency or a secretariat that can have components of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, EMBD, State Land Division, your Society, Caroni (1975) Limited, as a secretariat, do you think having this new secretariat in a unit may be able to speed up that process where you have all arms of the specific agencies sitting under one

room looking at these requests for the land tenancy. Do you think that is something that could move this process much faster than the silos that you referred to in your original contribution?

Mrs. Sookoo: Most definitely. As one of the recommendations to this committee that we are submitting today in going forward, in treating with the issue of land regularization is the immediate setting up of this committee that will be meeting at least twice per month, right, because we must set some time frames and so on to effect this work. Presently, there are some 800 files at the Solicitor General's office waiting for regularization and these files are incomplete and they were incomplete by whom. So we want to start the process. There is a good starting point.

The Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago has identified 17 food baskets in this country that we need to treat with the issue of regularization and infrastructure development. And in so doing we will start to treat with the food security issues. So there is the urgent call for the setting up of this stakeholder committee and we are saying that, I do not want to say the private sector, the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago, the legal body, must have a representative or representatives on this committee that will make representation on behalf of the farmers.

I want to make this point and it is a very, very important point. Because this process over the years has been left in the hands of public officers we have evidence, we have information where we have seen these individuals became real estate operators over the years, buying and selling of these State agriculture lands and that is a fact. So this committee could eliminate some of these corrupt practices that we have grown so accustomed to in this country if we want to treat with the issue of food security.

Mr. Khan: Yes, Ms. Dhano, where should I start? [*Laughter*]

Mrs. Sookoo: From the beginning.

Mr. Khan: Let me say, as the only Member of the Cabinet here, I want to make a few comments on behalf of the Government. As we speak we are saddled with a \$4 billion to \$5 billion food import bill. As we speak the agricultural sector contribution to GDP is 0.5 per cent. I have been researching this. I know of no country in the world where agricultural input to GDP is as low as that, 0.5. Even Saudi Arabia is higher than that and Saudi Arabia is only desert.

Saddled with significantly declining petroleum revenue, agriculture is coming on the radar as a matter of not choice, as a matter of necessity. This country has to wake up. Previous administrations, past administrations, I do not want to go back there, but this administration is committed out of both policy directive and necessity that we have to boost agricultural production, because even though you said land tenure and I know land tenure is an issue there is not a squad now that is putting you out of the land, you know. So, in fact, you may be on the land illegally or without title but there is not a hit squad putting you out of the land. So still there are other issues in agriculture that has agricultural production so low outside of tenancy. But that is for a different forum.

The point we are making is that agriculture and you used the word rural development on many occasions because that was the rationale in refocusing the spatial developmental agenda into rural areas. And the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government's partner Ministry, is really agriculture. So I will be working closely with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in the context of this programme. But I want to give you the assurance, on behalf of the Government, that I know you say politicians talk and we provide lip service but this time lip service would not work, because ladies and gentlemen this country is in serious crisis when it

comes to our numbers. Under no circumstance and I mean absolutely no circumstance can we afford a \$4 billion to \$5 billion food import bill.

So, by that token alone, if that bill has to cut down to \$2 billion or two and a half billion or what, you have to fill the commodity gap somewhere and you can only refill by local food production. Luckily, and I say this, luckily, a lot of our food import bill is short-term crops. So you do not have to plant a cocoa tree and wait five years for it to bear to make chocolate. You are looking for food, and God knows what he was doing when he put food in a short crop scenario. So that we have the timeline now that we can work with. And I want to give you the assurance on behalf of the Government that both the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in particular, myself, the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government will be working closely with you and all the other stakeholders in Trinidad and Tobago. Because what has been happening in Trinidad these days is that, in all sectors you see it, everybody claimed to represent something. So you go into sport and five groups say they represent basketball. You come into agriculture the same thing.

So as a Government you have to do a dancing act. You are on a tight rope and you have engage everybody. So it is our intention not to—I know you said the Minister said, nobody will tell him what to do, what have you, but in what context I do not know what he means. But the point about it is that we will be engaging with all the stakeholders and try to bring some sanity to this agricultural sector because the numbers that I drive in my head I do not want to hear anything else. Five billion dollar food import bill, unacceptable; 0.5 per cent of GDP, unacceptable and we have a sheet here that was prepared by the Parliament that shows for each commodity by food group, the current consumption and the current production. And the variance is astronomical. I will quote one example here, sheep

and goat, current consumption, 3,369 tonnes. You know what is our production?—355. So that mean all that goat and sheep are coming from Australia and New Zealand. And while we come close to things like cucumber and pumpkin and stuff like that, there is still a major deficit on basic agricultural food items.

12.00 noon

So there is a lot of work to do. I want to give you the assurance that you have the support of the Government, you have the support of the Cabinet, and I do not want to sound political, but let us do it together.

Mrs. Sookoo: Well, you know, Sir, in response to you, we are prepared. We have indicated so that we are prepared to do it together. I want to make a point to the MP for Moruga/Tableland area there, I do not know if you are aware but in the past years, probably seven/eight years ago, we exported approximately 20,000 pounds of pineapple weekly to Barbados, and that is the kind of potential that is out there. What we need to do is put the mechanisms in place, and reducing that food import bill, Senator, it is no rocket science; it is just all hands on deck. When the budget was read in Parliament in September and the media spoke to me and asked me, “Well, what are your comments?—agriculture just got eight hundred and something thousand dollars”. I said, “Agriculture has nothing do with the quantum of money, it has to do with the management, the administration of the sector, because agriculture is the most fortunate Ministry where you have the people, you have the resources, land, you have your own bank in the ADB. All you have to do is manage the people and you can get where you want to be”.

In going forward, apart from us asking for this stakeholder platform, this Committee, with representation from the Agricultural Society, as the legal representative body for farmers, we would also like to see the Government of today adopt a new process. From the time someone is given a letter of offer—

right?—to accept the tenancy to a parcel of land, we must have within six months those documents being delivered to that farmer. We must not be waiting 15 and 20 years on some offices, some lawyer somewhere; Government must now look at a process—right?—that can hasten this task that the farmers are faced with.

Mr. Khan: We are running out of time, I just want to ask one very pertinent question. I want to know what is your view on this—there is something called free trade, which, based on World Trade Organization protocols and stuff which we have to take a hands-off approach on, so the Government cannot impose a ban on foreign food; there may not be foreign exchange available to import it to the quantum you were doing it in the past, there is still the avenue to import. So let us take pineapple, for example: Dr. Francis and his team from Tableland, pineapple farmers, produce pine, sweet-tasting pine, but Dole also brings down their pine, it looks better, better shaped, better colour, whatever that means, and you do that, but in the event that a Dole pineapple could still sell cheaper than a Tableland pineapple, what are our options? In fact, you should be asking me that, but I am asking you that.

Mrs. Sookoo: I prefer me answering this question to you, Sir, as the advocate for farmers and agriculture development in this country. You know there is something called the non-tariff barriers—right?—and we would not there into this discussion, but we have a next-door neighbour called Barbados, a country called Barbados. I have been one of the main exporters to Barbados over the years and you know what they do? They have a foreign exchange control system and for you to get a licence to import anything you have to have collaboration between the Ministry of Trade and the Ministry of Agriculture, and you have to show proper justification that this commodity is not being produced of sufficient quantity at that time on the island, only then you will be granted a licence, and they are operating within the

Caricom trade agreement, the Treaty of Chaguaramas.

So I am saying that even within CARICOM—right?—we still do not enjoy free trade, right? So we just have to look closely, there are areas, right? There are areas where we could treat with those issues. We talk “eat local”, we talk “buy local”, but we have to produce local, you know, and everything else falls in place, but that is for another discussion which I will be happy to share all that information with you and more.

Mr. Khan: Okay, thank you very much.

Mr. Paray: Thank you. Madam President, Minister Khan now identified a number of shortfalls in terms of our production, especially like in the sheep and goat area, and a number of other agricultural areas, would you say that the land tenancy issues in terms of having documentation for farmers to get financing, to push mechanization, capitalization of their farms, and so on, do you think that the land tenure issue and financing is directly related to the low production in terms of our local production that we are seeing on this document?

Mrs. Sookoo: Of course, food cannot be produced on our rooftops, it has to be produced on land; and land tenancy, regularization, land availability to farmers is the catalyst for the growth of the agriculture sector, and only when we treat with that issue we could treat with the issue of financing, mechanization. In fact, the Agricultural Society is putting it to this Committee today that if it is that this Committee stands firm in its commitment, and the Government of the day, in treating, in an aggressive way, the issue of land regularization, we are prepared to walk with you day and night on this process, and we are saying that in the next 18 months we could see a significant reduction in the food import bill.

We could become more competitive on the export market because we will be able to reduce our cost of production through the mechanization introduction of

new technology. Nobody wants to invest on a parcel of land which, maybe tomorrow, somebody could come and say, "Listen, you have no title to this land, you need to get out and we are going to build some housing, or so". And, in that context, I want to bring to Sen. Khan, Sir, as the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, I challenge you today, Sir, North Manzanilla farming community, that is in MP Smith's adjacent constituency, the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, IICA, partnered with the farmers in that community and put together a wonderful document. It is a project proposal of the North Manzanilla farmers for the establishment of an agro-processing facility and a spa to see the development of the coconut industry in Trinidad and Tobago. That is an area that is very rural, very underdeveloped. Illiteracy among the people is very high, and you all have all sorts of social issues.

The Society went in there, we started a programme; we have about 40 young people already on the land. Let us go in there, let us regularize those farmers, let us bring in the financiers, let us bring in the community development, let us bring the agencies together, and let us say to Trinidad and Tobago, this is a model for developing rural communities, and we are committed to working with you in that regard.

Mr. Khan: You are pushing against an open door there.

Mr. Francis: Mr. Chairman, one thing, I do not want to be crucified when I go back to Moruga, so I just need to say to Mr. Karim about this hottest pepper from Maloney, I am not so sure about that, eh. I want to go home safely.

Mrs. Sookoo: Not hottest, Sir.

Mr. Karim: We would not want to take that from Moruga, we really produce a high-flavoured hot pepper, not the hottest. We will leave that with Moruga.

Mr. Francis: Thank you very much, Sir. I can go home in peace now.

Mr. Chairman: I thank you all very much. I wish to convey our thanks to the President, Mrs. Sookoo, and other representatives from the Society, for your contribution here today, and sharing your experience with the Committee. I would also like to thank fellow members of the Committee, and the parliamentary staff for their assistance rendered in the conduct of these proceedings. And, finally, last not least, I want to thank the media for their coverage of the event, and our viewers on the parliamentary channel, and the listeners on the FM station. With that note, I bring these proceedings to a close and adjourn the sitting.

12.09 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*