

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE APPOINTED TO INQUIRE INTO AND REPORT ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES, SERVICE COMMISSIONS, STATUTORY AUTHORITIES (INCLUDING THE THA), HELD IN THE J HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM, MEZZANINE FLOOR, TOWER D, INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, #1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, APRIL 26, 2017

PRESENT

Mr. H. R. Ian Roach	Chairman
Miss Ramona Ramdial	Vice-Chairman
Miss Khadijah Ameen	Member
Mr. Nigel De Freitas	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Miss Khisha Peterkin	Assistant Secretary
Miss Katharina Gokool	Parliamentary Intern

ABSENT

Mr. Faris Al-Rawi	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Mr. Stuart Young	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Mr. Darryl Smith	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Mrs. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus	Member [<i>Excused</i>]

11.56 a.m.: *Meeting suspended.*

12.08 p.m.: *Meeting resumed.*

STATUTORY AUTHORITIES SERVICE COMMISSION

Mrs. Utra Ali	Executive Officer
Mr. Jagdeo Maharaj	Chairman
Ms. Gracelyn Bholá-Jordan	Administrative Officer IV
Mr. Djallon Frederick	State Counsel II
Mr. Robert Giuseppe	Member
Ms. Gayatri Ramoutar	Administrative Assistant
Miss Nicha Cardinez-Rostant	Director, Legal Services
Mr. Kurt Meyer	Deputy PS, (Ag)
Ms. Sandra Jones	Permanent Secretary
Ms. Joan Mendez	Permanent Secretary

Mr. Chairman: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We would like to resume. This is continuation of this public hearing of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities, including the THA. My name is H.R. Ian Roach. I am Chairman of this Committee and on my right is the Vice-Chairman who will introduce herself, and the other Members.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Welcome gentlemen. Could you introduce yourselves, please, starting with the Chairman?

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. I just want to remind you all this hearing this morning is to evaluate the performance of the Commission in executing its mandate, determine whether the resources, systems and procedures of the Statutory Authorities Service Commission are sufficient to allow it to operate efficiently, and to determine the challenges affecting the operations of the Commission and the

possible solutions for alleviating these challenges. The last occasion this Commission appeared before a Joint Select Committee to account for its execution of its mandate was on June 28, 2013. That is some time. So we are glad to have you here this morning to pick up from where we last—this afternoon, actually, because we have passed lunchtime. I will invite the chairman to make a short opening remark and Ms. Jones thereafter and Ms. Mendez again.

Mr. Maharaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon everyone. Chairman, Members of the Joint Select Committee, thank you for inviting us to discuss matters relative to the operations of the SASC. Some questions were sent previously and we have supplied the answers to you all. I know that you may have further questions. We will be willing to take those questions and answer them to the best of our ability.

Now, this Commission has taken its task very seriously. During the last year, we had 44 meetings and we dealt with 617 matters, the most by any of the commissions in the 50-year history of the SASC. We realized that promotions were being made without up-to-date staff reports and we decided to tackle this thing head-on. We discussed it with the authorities. We also discussed it with the Public Service Association before venturing. So we looked at the staff report which is at section 34. We know section 34 has some kind of connotations. So we made copies of that section 34 from the SASC regulations and we went around to each authority explaining to them the importance of the staff report and therefore how it should be done. We informed them, it is a legal requirement and therefore failure to do this is failure to perform a legal function. And I am happy to report that we have been getting exceptionally good results from the Authorities under our purview.

We also asked for names of those officers who are failing to do the staff report on time. So that last year with the exercise, we are making appointments, promotions

and so on, with 2015 staff reports, and already in 2017 we are using 2016 staff reports to make appointments, promotions, transfers, and so on. So we are well on our way. We are hoping to continue with this exercise and we are hoping to work with the authorities again. We plan to do another visit to see now how they are doing it, because we explained to them how to do it. The first thing, we are getting it done. Secondly, we need to see that is done in the proper way. So we believe that if the staff report is properly done we are going to have a more productive public service.

Buoyed by this success, we did talk to the President about, you know, having other commissions work together because we have the same rules and regulations which we follow, and therefore we may be doing something different to them—so as to unify our processes and so on. So that, for example, if you have somebody who is going on secondment from one commission to a next, it sometimes takes three months for that to be effective. We feel that is too much time and if we work together as commissions, we might be able to do something about it. So in the process we have been having meetings with other stakeholders. The commission held meetings with several stakeholders in the interest of our citizens.

Besides meeting with the President, we had a meeting with: the Attorney General; the head of the Public Service; former Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, Permanent Secretary; Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Permanent Secretary; Gender, Child Affairs; Division, the Children's Authority, the Public Service Commission, the Police Service Commission; the Commissioner of Police and, of course, the Public Service Association.

12.15 p.m.

During our visits to the authorities, we had the Public Service Association with us so that they will be able to lend support to what we are doing, because we are very happy that we are on this drive. It will eliminate a lot of problems we have

when disciplinary matters come because if the staff report is done properly we are going to deal with those problems. We even have the kind of problems we have when discipline matters arise.

The other thing I want to raise a bit is that the question of relevance, and that this came up in the last meeting, whether the SASC is relevant, and I want to say it is relevant today as it was 50 years ago because the principles under which the SASC was formed are the same principles that exist today—to avoid nepotism, favouritism and also to stay away from political interference in appointments.

I will like to read something that Lord Diplock talked about, the 1962 Constitution, *Thomas v The Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago* [1982], and with your permission, Sir, I would like to read this.

Mr. Chairman: A short exercise?

Mr. Maharaj: Yes, very short:

“The whole purpose of Chapter VIII of the Constitution which bears the rubric ‘The Public Service’ is to insulate members of the Civil Service, the Teaching Service and the Police Service in Trinidad and Tobago from political influence exercised directly upon them by the Government of the day. The means adopted for doing this was to vest in autonomous commissions, to the exclusion of any other person or authority, power to make appointments to the relevant service, promotions and transfers within the service and power to remove and exercise disciplinary control over members of the service.”

There is something that we had to answer, whether this commission should continue to exist is part of one of the questions that was supplied to us and this was why we have ventured bringing forth this information to show that we are relevant today as it was 50 years ago. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr. Maharaj. Ms. Jones.

Ms. Jones: Thank you, Chair and members. It is privileged for me to be here today to sit here in the session, and while the relationship with the statutory commission is not very intimate, we do share a common goal of ensuring that the agencies under their control, that human resources manage efficiently and effectively because they are largely the agencies that deal with service delivery to the population. So I am very happy to be here to be able to participate in this session. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Ms. Mendez.

Ms. Mendez: Good afternoon, Chair and members. As well, I am very heartened to be participating in this discussion. We do not have a direct link with the SASC, however, under the authorities we do provide assistance in terms of structure, training, or any other policy decisions advice that we may be requested to provide. So thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Just before we engage in our enquiry, is it 2016—is it correct to say that you all have 12 entities under your portfolio, or is there more than that?

Mr. Maharaj: Yes, it is 12.

Mr. Chairman: It is 12. I saw in your 2015 Report you said the Cocoa Industry Board was repealed by Repeal Act, No. 4 of 2014, and replaced with a company called the Cocoa Development Company, is that company now under your portfolio, or it is not?

Mr. Maharaj: No, it is not. It is under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Mr. Chairman: Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Okay. Please, put on your mike when you speak so it could record. Miss Ramdial would like to ask a question.

Miss Ramdial: Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone. My first question would

be and based on your submissions to us, you identified inadequate funding as one of your challenges, can you tell me what has been your budgetary allocations for this fiscal year?

Mrs. Ali: Approximately \$5.1 million.

Miss Ramdial: Is that adequate?

Mrs. Ali: No, it is not.

Mr. Chairman: How much?

Mrs. Ali: \$5.1 million.

Miss Ramdial: Do you care to give us some details with respect to where you may need additional funding?

Mrs. Ali: Certainly for IT. Under minor equipment, we got \$3,000 and that is for each vote. We got minor equipment for 3 sub-votes. For each one we got \$1,000 which clearly cannot even buy a cell phone. So the statutory authorities' current IT infrastructure is approximately 10 years old. Our computers are 10 years old. By and large, our job right now is largely manual based. The infrastructure for IT is very, very basic, so that would have been one area that we would have liked to improve. We did not get the funding for it. Towards the end of last year, the last fiscal year, based on savings in various votes we tried to ask the Ministry of Finance for approval to transfer funds to minor equipment so that we would have been able to acquire at least the hardware. We were not successful in doing that either, so really that is a huge area that we need help in.

Miss Ramdial: Ideally, what would be the budgetary allocation that you would have requested?

Mrs. Ali: In the last fiscal it would be pretty close to \$9 million.

Mr. Chairman: Tell me something. In your 2015 Report, you had an Assistant Commissioner of Municipal Police was outstanding, has that position been filled?

Mr. Maharaj: Not at this point in time, but plans are afoot for it to be filled very shortly.

Mr. Chairman: At very short notice you said. This is 2015. That was since 2015, we are in 2017.

Mrs. Ali: We have had meetings with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government as recent as Monday and we were informed by the DPS there that those three positions—the assistant commissioner and the two senior superintendents—they are to come on board as early as the 1st of May.

Mr. Chairman: First of May?

Mrs. Ali: Yes.

Miss Ameen: Mr. Chairman, you would appreciate my background in local government and immediately I just want to clarify one thing, of the city corporations—Port of Spain and San Fernando fall under the statutory authorities—are there two boroughs as well? The Arima and Point Fortin.

Mr. Maharaj: Point Fortin and Arima, yeah.

Miss Ameen: Since the initial assignments of the boroughs and the cities as statutory authorities, you have had Chaguanas being named a borough afterwards, it is not under the statutory authorities.

Mr. Maharaj: No, it is not under.

Miss Ameen: The regional corporations fall under the Public Service Commission, and all the corporations, cities, boroughs and regional corporations report to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, do you see the need to realign the local government bodies in terms of who they report to, the service commissions, whether it is statutory or public service?

Mr. Maharaj: I think we will have a problem because I think we have the capacity to take on the extra because we only had municipal police and we have been dealing

with municipal police for a number of years, and municipal police is relatively new to the other corporations. So that we have a little history in that area of which we can piggyback on to try and ensure that the whole municipal police corporation functions as a unit and not you have some under the SASC and some under the Public Service Commission, because we have started an exercise to recruit and we have a number of people waiting.

Miss Ameen: Well, that actually brings me to my next question. Reference is made to the training for recruitment of municipal police officers in those four corporations; in your report that you sent to the Committee are there plans to harmonize training for municipal police with the other 10 local government bodies that fall under the purview of the Public Service Commission; and would there be a difference in the salaries, for instance, or the terms and conditions?

Mrs. Ali: Terms and conditions are handled by the CPO. So we will not be able to speak to that. With respect to the training, in our meeting with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government on Monday, we are in discussion with them to align the training. It has only started on Monday and the commission is now considering what has been put forward to them by the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. So we are looking at that, aligning all of the training for the municipal police so that it would be uniform, notwithstanding that we are not under the same commission.

Miss Ameen: Do you have that kind of collaboration for other staff apart from the municipal police that is being recruited now—for other staff and positions—that you share where you have similar positions in regional corporations that fall under Public Service Commission?

Mr. Maharaj: No. The senior positions when we advertise we find that people from the Public Service Commission apply. Some of them are successful and they

have accepted positions with the SASC. So we do have that criss-cross. As I spoke earlier, you know the thing about trying to get the movement from one in a shorter space of time, the secondment, that is a problem we need to deal with because sometimes three months is a little too long.

Mr. Chairman: You said you have a shortage of—the data shows that the majority of the commission activities were acting and temporary appointments; has that been rectified?

Mrs. Ali: You are speaking to the staff of the statutory authority commission itself?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mrs. Ali: Every quarter we have to make recommendations to the service commissions with respect to filling for vacancies. So as recent as March this year, we have made recommendations for the filling of the vacancies. That has not happened. That notwithstanding, the commission looked at how best it can handle the void. So what we recognized was that there are other very qualified junior officers in the statutory authorities and we have begun an exercise where we are training our officers in all aspects of the functions in the statutory authorities.

With the permission of the service commission, we have been able to offer acting positions to these persons. That has helped us significantly because these junior officers may not have been able to acquire acting in larger Ministries. So we have been able to retain them for a longer period of time and that is working well for the commission right now.

Mr. Chairman: Now, is it that this commission deals both with public servants and civil servants?

Mrs. Ali: The staff of the statutory service commission—the staff of the commission itself is public officers, and the statutory authorities, that is, the agencies under the statutory authorities, the commission provides officers for them. So the

Statutory Authorities Service Commission does not provide our own staff. The service commission does that for us.

Mr. Chairman: You have a mixture?

Mrs. Ali: No, no, no. The service commission itself is under public service. The agencies under the statutory authorities, this is what the statutory authorities provide staff for.

Mr. Chairman: What is your complement of contract workers?

Mr. Maharaj: We do not appoint contract workers. We deal with only monthly paid—

Mr. Chairman: Sorry?

Mr. Maharaj: Monthly paid workers.

Mr. Chairman: Only monthly paid workers?

Mr. Maharaj: Yes. No contract and those who have permanent positions.

Mr. Chairman: Mrs. Ali, you were about to say something as well.

Mrs. Ali: Yes. Are you speaking about the staff in the statutory authority, or are you speaking about staff in the authorities under the service commission?

Mr. Chairman: Under the service commission.

Mrs. Ali: Okay, good. Under the Statutory Authorities Service Commission we have no contract staff, but in the statutory authorities, the agencies under us, yes, they would have staff but we will not be able to account for that because we only provide persons on the establishment.

Mr. Chairman: Now, I am seeing something that contrasts to the Public Service Commission, who was before us just now, that you all have not delegated, there is no delegation for your powers at all to any your subordinates, what accounts for that?

Mr. Maharaj: The commission is pretty small. We will just deal with a number of authorities—just a few—and we are fully capable of handling all our appointments,

promotion, transfers and so on. We are capable of doing that. We have a waiting list and almost all positions at this point in time. So that if someone should retire, we have somebody waiting to take that position. So we have streamlined our operations and we have this waiting list.

From all the authorities, or the seniority list coming from all, we have composed a seniority list across the board for all the authorities. So therefore when somebody goes, somebody is retiring, there is somebody already waiting to take up the position. So we have been a little proactive in that area and we hope to continue in this vein.

Mr. Chairman: Interesting. Miss Ramdial.

Miss Ramdial: Thank you, Chair. Going back to your last enquiry held at the Parliament on June 28, 2013, there was an issue with the exercise of disciplinary action in children's homes, can you give us an update with respect to that issue?

Mr. Maharaj: Now, there is a little problem with that, in that sometimes the homes do not report to us immediately when something happens. So that in our visit to the homes we have explained to them the importance of informing us immediately because we need to take action immediately and we have been doing that now. As soon as we are informed, action is taken; we will remove the person if the person is to be removed; if we have to get an investigator, we get an investigator. So we have been dealing with that problem now.

Miss Ramdial: But if you remove an officer from one of these homes, how soon before are they replaced knowing the quantum of duties that they have at these children's homes to perform?

Mr. Maharaj: No, once somebody is removed, the commission replaces that person to act in the position until the matter is determined.

Miss Ramdial: Okay.

Miss Ameen: Yes, from what I understand, trained investigators from the Children's Authority report on the homes under the purview of the Statutory Authorities Service Commission. Of course, the Children's Authority came into being long after the Statutory Authorities Act, has any action be taken to amend the Statutory Authorities Act to allow the Children's Authority's investigators to assist in generating reports on the homes and report directly because it appears as, you know, it is an arrangement you have now, but you are not bound to do it back by the Act at this time?

Mrs. Ali: Currently, that is not so. We have been in dialogue with the Children's Authority. One of the challenges that the commission has, is—as Mr. Maharaj was explaining—the length of time it takes for the home to report to the authority. Also, we have a challenge with respect to—the commission appoints an investigator. The investigator is normally nominated by either the authority depending on the positions or grade because the person who is investigating someone has to be of a higher position or grade, and also if the authority cannot handle that, it then goes to the line Ministry and the line Ministry will nominate someone.

That process takes quite a while. So in our dialogue with the Children's Authority, they have been explaining to us that they actually have the resources. So what we are doing right now is looking at the legislation to see if we can amend it so that the authority could piggyback on what the Children's Authority is doing and we can use their report because they have the resources to do it. So we are currently in the process of looking at that.

Miss Ameen: All right. Mr. Chairman, I am keen to see your recommendations because, as I said before, one of the rules of this Committee is to make recommendations for Parliament and this is something when it comes to the protection of children and speeding up the efficiencies where investigations are

concerned. Can you say how long, or when your recommendations may be ready, if it is a document you would be able to send to the Committee for us to put in our report, or is it some time off?

Mr. Frederick: If I may? In our discussions with the Children's Authority, we were very well oriented and we understand that the investigator's slant on their side is with regard to the children. Our difficulty is our investigation is with regard to the worker. So we have to be very careful in our impetus that we want to get the report in and get the person properly investigated, that we parallel the two and we commingle what we have, but we have to go from the both slants. Remember, we are there to deal with the employee, the worker.

Our difficulty is our investigators are not specifically trained in the way that the Children's Authority investigators are trained and with the resources. Many a time we would get an investigator, normally they begin and then some of them deny doing the work. They do not want to do the investigation, and then it is a whole begin-again process to start from scratch. The way the regulation is worded we are not allowed to even direct the investigator as to how to do the job. So what tends to happen is when the report comes in certain questions are not answered, we would ask and send it back, but we cannot tell them how to do it. It must be impartial.

So we have had incidents where reports have come in two and three times and it still does not satisfy the questions. Here is the issue when people send us pre-actions with regard to the persons being investigated: How long is enough to investigate a person before we find that there is no evidence to continue? We have external counsels who we consult with, and when we realize that we have been investigating this person for two and three years and they are on suspension, there comes a point in time where we will be taken to court for the length of time that we are taking to come to a determination. What we would love to happen is that if we

can get on to the Children's Authority and we get investigators trained to do the both, it would save us the time having to find somebody senior who wants to—for want of a better word—do the job of investigating one of their peers.

The issue most times is that the senior person is on the same compound. They do not want to be investigating their peers and I get the impression that sometimes that impacts upon the report that we get in the end, which most times we cannot use, only to be sent back, or consult the line Ministry to get somebody else to do the job.

Miss Ameen: Based on your experiences so far, are you in a position to make recommendations for changes in the Statutory Authorities Act to deal with that blind area in terms of you not being able to direct the investigators accordingly and so on, because you would want at least give the investigators certain parameters, certain questions to satisfy, and if you do not have that power you become toothless. So, do you think you are in a position to make recommendations in that area?

Mr. Frederick: We would love to make recommendations, but you must bear in mind that we are guided by the Act and the regulation. The regulation even though it is silent on it, we cannot simply amend for amending's sake. We would need to get Cabinet approval, the regulation needs to be redrafted, but I would love to see that we are allowed to not just waste this tool we have, which would help us to do the job more effectively and faster.

As the EO indicated, our IT is threadbare at most. We are in the process of working with the IT that we have and many a times, we here, we use our own personal devices in order to communicate—which should not be—in order to get the job done because we do not have the tools available to us to help us move along. If we were able to insert or amend the regulation to allow us to use the reports and then be able to tell the investigators what we want done, train them in doing the reports, it will be a great assistance to us and it will speed up time. And if we had like a

criteria as to who could be investigators and what they can do and how the report should look, it would save us a lot of time of going back and forth to get things done.

Miss Ameen: Mr. Frederick, certainly, you cannot amend your own regulations.

Mr. Frederick: No, I cannot.

Miss Ameen: One of the purposes of this Committee, all Committees of Parliament, is to make recommendations, and if one of your recommendations is to amend the Act, then we would want to hear your recommendations in terms of what should be amended within the Act so that it could be part of this Committee's report and then all the other steps in terms of Cabinet and Parliament coming to approve and amend would come into place, but I really do not like to see things happening from the top down. From the bottom up, you as the practical people who are working with the Act are in the best position to make the recommendations. So, is it something that you can consider to send recommendations?

Mr. Frederick: We would love to assist and we could send recommendations at a later date after we have discussed it fully because I really would like to get the input of my other colleagues—

Miss Ameen: Of course.

Mr. Frederick:—because I have only been at the commission now since November of last year. So I am still in the preliminary stage of understanding how the system works. But just in the time I have been there I have been stymied by getting disciplinary actions moved simply because either the reports are insufficient, or people start and they stop halfway through and we have to start all over again. So if there was a way, as you say, we want to recommend—recommendations must be based on sampling and evidence to show why we need it and we could pull data to assist the commission in that light.

Mr. Chairman: Good to hear you say what you are saying. I want to know has

that impacted upon—I think in 2017 the media reported that National Lotteries Control Board Director had failed—there were five charges. She was indicted, or the person was indicted for misconduct, and there was some sort of, I do not want to use the word “reluctance”, some difficulty in having that person suspended. There were two investigation comments I believe. Can you report on the developments of that at this point in time? And there was another officer I believe also was also subsequently suspended.

Mr. Maharaj: Yes, there were two officers. But you see, we had to be certain about the information that was supplied to us and it took some while for the board to respond to us. It took over a month to get the response. Everything had to be delayed because of this. We wanted to deal with it as early as possible, but because of the fact that the board did not respond in a timely manner, we could not have because we asked certain questions and we were looking forward to the answers to those questions before we could have taken action.

Mr. Chairman: So did you all appoint an investigator in this instance?

Mrs. Ali: Yes. We had to get the investigators from the Ministry of Finance. So we had the Ministry of Finance nominate persons. Again, it is because of the positions that the individuals at the NLCB held and that has been done. The investigations by those persons have been completed. We are in the process of getting it to the tribunal and that is the stage it is at right now—the tribunal stage.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Miss Ramdial: Just going back to the children’s home, in a 2013 Parliamentary Committee Report it was suggested that the children’s home be removed from the ambit of the commission and responsibility for the management of these homes be vested in a board of directors who would be responsible to the relevant line Minister, what are your thoughts with respect to this particular recommendation?

Mr. Maharaj: Now, I think we can still manage and, you know, because we have a history. We know what is happening and we have been having dialogue with the Children's Authority, Permanent Secretary, Gender Affairs, and we are in a position to continue and I feel we are competent enough to be able to do this.

Mr. De Freitas: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To move out to another topic at this point, reference is made to the funds that were allocated for the development of a website for the SASC, and the questions I wanted to question are if you could writing an account for the funds allocated towards the development of the website; as well as, does the SASC have plans to establish a website within the ensuing two years?

12.45 p.m.

Ms. Ali: Okay. This Executive Officer took office at the Statutory Authorities in May of last year. When that allocation was made, I was not there so I would not be able to account. That is stated in the report, unfortunately, even the commission, I do not think this particular commission was in office at that time. So in terms of reporting with respect to what happened with the funds at that time, I am unable to do so. This commission and especially this EO is very, very sorry that that opportunity was lost because I am actually working right now with very, very old—a basic and extremely old system, right, and I tried as best as I could during the last fiscal year to get the computers, at least the hardware.

With the establishment of a website, that will be one of the areas that we are going to be looking at in the year and hopefully over the next two years, because we are actually doing a DP programme right now to ask for funding, and we have spread it over a two-year period. If we were to get the funding so that we could get probably the hardware or so going at this point in time and have the intranet and so. We see that as a benefit to the commission because right now, we have tonnes and tonnes of

paper, tonnes and tonnes of files. We do not have an information management system. We do not have a lot of things.

In advertising, we have to advertise full page ads. It costs us extremely, you know, a lot of money and we just do not have the resources. If we were to advertise now, we would not be able to pay for one advertisement based on the allocations we have. So that opportunity that we lost is really affecting us. So the commission is now, in its estimates, putting forward proposals to get the computers at least, in the first instance, and additional in the year to come.

Mr. Maharaj: I want to add also that we have had five Executive Officers in the last five years so that changeover, rapid changeover of things, Executive Officers, that has created the problem for us.

Mr. Chairman: You have a hostile environment there or something?

Mr. Maharaj: *[Laughter]* I do not know. I suppose, you know, people looking for more lucrative positions and the Deputy Permanent Secretary is a little more lucrative than that of the Executive Officer.

Mr. Chairman: What is the pay range for the Executive Officer?

Ms. Ali: That is it. You would have carried me way into my conclusion because that would be a recommendation. The Executive Officer is at range 68. The level of responsibility for the Executive Officer is great. The Executive Officer is the accounting officer. With the procurement legislation, et cetera, the Executive Officer is exposed to the same sets of challenges, et cetera, as the Permanent Secretary.

Mr. Chairman: So you are saying it should be at what? Range 60?

Ms. Ali: It is currently at 68, it clearly has to go where it needs to be able to attract and keep. Right. Because if somebody is the Executive Officer and they have this level of responsibility and you can get to somewhere else and you may not be held

that accountable, you know. So it is something that we need to look at and address.

Mr. Chairman: Let me ask Ms. Jones to respond to that. “Yuh feel yuh was going to get away?” [*Laughter*]

Ms. Jones: Chair, Committee, as with everything, it is going through the reform. What the Executive Officer said is very true. The issue is really looking at the future of the authority to be able to determine what will be the ideal structure for the commission and, in that regard, you will be able to say what level of leadership and range that would be or whether it should go under Salaries Review Commission and so on. So it really depends on the strategic focus and purpose of the Statutory Authorities Service Commission in the future.

Mr. Chairman: Well, at this stage, I would like to invite the chairman to offer any closing remarks he has.

Mr. Maharaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. We are happy to be here and I hope we have clarified some of the issues that were raised in the questions, and I hope that working together—we are working with all the authorities, trying to improve the productivity in the authorities and hopefully it can be done in the wider public service so that we can have a better public service for Trinidad and Tobago.

We have seen that the staff report or the performance appraisal report is an important productivity tool and if it is done properly, Trinidad and Tobago will benefit and we have taken the lead in ensuring that this is done. I am hoping that others will do the same because we all want to have a better Trinidad and Tobago, especially in the public service. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thanks. I would like to invite member Ameen to have the closing remarks on behalf of us.

Miss Ameen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman, there is no doubt that the Service Commissions play a critical role in—well, insulating the public service from

the warms and colds of the political environment. But you have a serious job to do in ensuring that the efficiency in terms of delivery to the public, and I always say our end customer is the citizen and I am happy that Ms. Jones, the Permanent Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister, sat in this afternoon in this hearing.

From the concerns coming up with the Statutory Authorities Service Commission as well as the Public Service Commission, there is a lot of work to be done. I know that the issue of public service reform is a hot potato but even—well for the politicians at least because any politician who is brave enough to touch the public service could face serious backlash, but it has to come from within. It has to be that the public service and the statutory services want to improve their own administration. And for that purpose, I want to implore you to take the opportunity, as you have today, to make recommendations for changes to be done to improve your own operations and not just leave it up to someone who has the political will, the bravery or stupidity, to go and interfere with the public service. It cannot be done from the top down, it has to come from within.

So I trust that in our future engagement with the Committee here, you will be able to make solid recommendations for reform and the Parliament would deal with the legislative part but in ways that you can improve within the organization as well.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. On behalf of myself and the members, I would like to thank you all for your attendance this morning, your participation. I would like to thank the viewing public. I hope that you all have been edified by the exchanges that took place here today, and there being no further business, this hearing is declared adjourned. Thank you very much. Good afternoon.

Mr. Maharaj: Thank you very much.

12.53 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE APPOINTED TO INQUIRE INTO AND REPORT ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES, SERVICE COMMISSIONS, STATUTORY AUTHORITIES (INCLUDING THE THA), HELD IN THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM, MEZZANINE FLOOR, TOWER D, INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, #1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, APRIL 26, 2017

PRESENT

Mr. H. R. Ian Roach	Chairman
Miss Ramona Ramdial	Vice-Chairman
Miss Khadijah Ameen	Member
Mr. Nigel De Freitas	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Miss Khisha Peterkin	Assistant Secretary
Miss Katharina Gokool	Parliamentary Intern

ABSENT

Mr. Faris Al-Rawi	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Mr. Stuart Young	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Mr. Darryl Smith	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Mrs. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus	Member [<i>Excused</i>]

10.10 a.m.: *Meeting resumed.*

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

Mrs. Maureen Manchouck	Chairman, PSC
Mrs. Parvati Anmolsingh-Mahabir	Dep. Chairman, PSC
Mr. Clive Pegus	Member, PSC

Mr. Martin Franklin	Member, PSC
Ms. Kay Charles	Member, PSC
Ms. Anastasius V. Creed	Dir. Personnel Administration
Ms. Prabhawatie Maraj	Dep. Dir. Personnel Admin.
Mrs. Marcia Pile O’Brady	Dep. Dir. Personnel Admin.
Ms. Natasha Seecharan	Legal Adviser
Mrs. Ramdai Sookdeo	Executive Director, HRM
Mrs. Coomarie Goolabsingh	Executive Director, HRM
Ms. Allison Hughes	Director of Corporate Services
Mrs. Karen Wyllie-Ampson	SHRA
Mrs. Allison Salandy-Bernard	Executive Asst. to the Chairman, Public Service Commission

MINISTRY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

Ms. Joan Mendez	Permanent Secretary
Mr. Kurt Meyer	Dep. Permanent Secretary (Ag.)

OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER

Ms. Sandra Jones	Permanent Secretary
Ms. Nicha Cardinez-Rostant	Director, Legal Services

Mr. Chairman: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Good morning to the listening public. I would like to welcome you and the viewing public to the Fifteenth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions

and Statutory Authorities, including the Tobago House of Assembly, the THA.

This morning, the Committee will first hold a public hearing with officials of the Public Service Commission and at 11.30 with the Statutory Authorities Service Commission. These hearings are being convened further to the Committee's current enquiry into efficiency and effectiveness of the service commissions.

My name is H. R. Ian Roach, I am Chairman of this Committee and I will invite my other members on my right to introduce themselves to you.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. I will now welcome the officials, welcome yourself Public Service Commission, the Office of the Prime Minister is represented here, the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications. I will invite you to introduce yourself please to the Committee, starting with the Chairman of the Public Service Commission.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: And the DPA.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. The Office of the Prime Minister.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: I guess all have been accounted for? Thank you very much.

This morning I just would like to remind members that the object of this enquiry is to evaluate the performances of the commission in executing its mandate, to determine whether the resources, systems and procedures of the Public Service Commission are sufficient to allow it to operate efficiently, and to determine the challenges affecting the operations of the commission and possible solutions for alleviating these challenges.

The last occasion the commission appeared before the Joint Select Committee

to account for the execution of its mandate was on April 24, 2015. I would like to acknowledge the submissions submitted by the Public Service Commission. Thank you for this. It has been helpful in us preparing our hearing this morning. I will now invite Mrs. Manchouck to give a brief opening remark.

Mrs. Manchouck: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I was appointed Chair last July, so this is my first appearance before the Committee in which effectiveness and efficiency of the Public Service Commission are being discussed.

In assessing the performance of the Public Service Commission in executing its mandate, it is important to be mindful of what that mandate actually is and what it is not. There is a lot of confusion or lack of awareness on the part of the public at large around the specific powers, functions and responsibilities of the PSC.

According to section 121 of the Constitution, the mandate of the PSC is to appoint persons to hold or to act in offices in the civil service, prison service and fire service, to make appointments on promotions and transfers, confirm appointments and remove and exercise disciplinary control over persons holding or acting in such offices.

The two main powers therefore of the commission are making appointments and exercising disciplinary control. Before taking any action on these matters, on these powers, we rely on the Permanent Secretaries and heads of departments to submit to the Director of Personnel Administration recommendations for appointments and complaints in respect of disciplinary matters.

To carry out this mandate, the PSC relies on the support services of the DPA and staff of the SCD, the Service Commission Department, in administering the commission's activities, and the commission ensures strict adherence to its policies and procedures.

The SCD is responsible for all the preparatory research work, the technical advice and the preparation of the notes for the commission's consideration and

approval which are the final steps in the process, as well as monitoring compliance by Permanent Secretaries and heads of departments with delegation orders and PSC Regulations.

The commission can by no means be efficient and effective when the SCD is handling appointments and promotions, the bulk of the administrative activities there, on a manual, paper-based system just as in colonial days, with files on trolleys from floor to floor, files on chairs and boxes, and checking around by email for files that cannot be located. Resources have not been provided to the extent that the SCD needs to be efficient and effective. The Ministry of Public Administration and Communications has recognized this and is working on the computerization of records. Hopefully, SCD should see the light of day in the next year and a half or so.

Now, I would like to clarify the misconceptions. These are:

That the PSC is responsible for the management and running of the public service and, in particular, the Service Commissions Department. That is not so. The commission relies on the SCD for executing its mandate.

That performance appraisals are the responsibility of the PSC. They are not. The Performance Appraisal Management System is the responsibility of the Chief Personnel Officer and the Ministries, Departments, agencies. The PSC relies on performance appraisals from Ministries, Departments and agencies when considering appointments and promotions.

That the PSC is responsible for the budget of SCD. It is not. The Director of Personnel Administration is the accounting officer.

That the PSC is responsible for staff training and succession planning. It is not. This is handled by the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications, the SCD and other Ministries. In fact, the courts have consistently held that the PSC is not the employer of public officers.

Some issues from Ministries and Departments and agencies that need to be highlighted as they affect efficiency and effectiveness:

10.20 a.m.

One, approvals for acting appointments coming long after the fact without recommendations and more often than not, were not the correct decisions thereby exposing the Public Service Commission to legal action and liability.

Performance appraisals not being consistently completed and this limits its benefits in ensuring its succession planning and best fit in promotions, and have resulted in legal action against the PSC where promotions were done by batch and some promotions were awaiting receipt of performance appraisals.

It is my understanding that approximately 40 per cent of contract positions are filled by public officers on no-pay leave on grounds of public policy thus contributing, in no small measure, to the high number of officers acting in consequential vacant positions.

Non-familiarity and compliance failure by Directors of HR and PSs with the Regulations.

And five, lack of succession planning for senior managerial positions. The Ministry of Public Administration and Communications has been responsible for a project on the institutional strengthening of the Service Commissions Department recently completed the Deloitte and the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, IPAC outlining recommendations for the future state of the PSC and the SCD. I look forward to the future state of the PSC which will essentially be one of oversight and monitoring, policy direction and reporting with Ministries handling all appointments under further delegated authority. The PSC will continue to rely on the SCD of administering these functions.

The transition to this state has already started, but needs consistent follow through to ensure completion and the necessary resources at both the SCD and the

Ministries. A word of caution, in order for Ministries to handle further delegation in addition to what they handle plus the contract positions, adequate resources need to be put in place otherwise the inefficiencies would be transferred from the SCD to the Ministries and the cycle repeated which would not be desirable.

On before of the PSC, I wish to assure that within the ambit of its mandate, the PSC is committed to an efficient and effective public administration. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Ms. Jones.

Ms. Jones: Chair and members of the Committee, it is my pleasure to be here this morning to contribute to the discussions. From over here I am sitting as the PS to the Prime Minister, as well as Chair of the Board of Permanent Secretaries, it will give me an opportunity to speak to some of the issues that have been raised in report and to be able to contribute to looking towards making recommendations moving forward. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Ms. Mendez.

Ms. Mendez: Good morning, again. We at the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications with the responsibility for the public service, we are very committed in making the public service more efficient and effective in carrying out our various responsibilities which include: structuring of the public service; training and development; performance management and other policy developments that relate to public service administration.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Mrs. Manchouck, after that opening statement, I mean, I am wondering what it is we can ask you. I mean, it was so comprehensive. Right? Like you want to take the wind out of the sail. But I am tempted to ask you immediately concerning, what is the relevance therefore of the Public Service Commission into this public service. Does it still have a relevance? I mean, there seems to be a lot that is not your remit, there is a lot of misconception. Is it still a relevance in offices?

Mrs. Manchouck: I would say so. There is the need for oversight of the issues if, in fact, we are going to be doing further delegation, it is important to ensure that we are neutral in terms of how we make our appointments, and that the appointments are fair. And with respect to monitoring and evaluation, that, to me, would be key in terms of the new state that we in. We do do some monitoring and evaluation for the delegations that are already there. And if, in fact, we go along the route of further delegation, the monitoring and evaluation of the human resource and the appointments and so would be key.

Mr. Chairman: So you would see in the Public Service Commission, significantly, as an oversight body then?

Mrs. Manchouck: It could be. Yes. That is the idea. Policy, reporting, oversight, and monitoring. To make sure that all the processes were followed in the delegation of the appointments and promotions, the procedures and so are followed.

Mr. Chairman: Tell me something, I mean, to get to ask your commission, what is the size of the public service in Trinidad and Tobago in numbers? What is the number of public servants?

Mrs. Manchouck: As I understand it is between 27,000 and 30,000, about 30,000.

Mr. Chairman: Servicing 20,000 to 30,000—27,000 to 30,000?

Mrs. Manchouck: Twenty seven to thirty thousand.

Mr. Chairman: Serving how many Ministries?

Mrs. Manchouck: Right now it is about 28 Ministries, 23 Ministries.

Mr. Chairman: Twenty-three Ministries.

Mrs. Manchouck: Yeah.

Mr. Chairman: Now, has a comprehensive study been done thus far to measure, to ascertain, really and truly, what is the required and the efficient number of public servants to service these Ministries? Is it over—do we have an oversubscription of public servants to man the Ministries or is there an undersubscription of public

servants to man the Ministries?

Mrs. Manchouck: That is an exercise, information of which I would like to know too. I do not know. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Anybody, from Mrs. Manchouck, I am sorry, the PS, Ms. Mendez or Ms. Jones.

Ms. Mendez: Yes. This is one of the exercises that we at Public Administration and Communications would like to engage in. Following the strategic plans and work plans that are prepared by the Ministries and Departments, we expect that we can undertake such an exercise. From where sit we see some areas that there may be over staffing, and then there are some other areas that they are understaffed. So a rationalization needs to be undertaken and we are hoping that we can engage in that exercise.

Mr. Chairman: But has not been done? Up to now that has not been—to me, that is the first start, you start with first to know what you require to service how many Ministries?

Ms. Mendez: Actually this preliminary would have been undertaken with the realignment of Ministries. In the previous administration there were about 33 Ministries. The current administration we are carrying 23 Ministries, for the first alignment would have looked at the various units and departments collapsing into the 23 Ministries. So further restructuring needs to be undertaken, but at this time we are looking at the top level and we do hope as the Ministries complete their strategic plans and work plans, we can engage in further realignment.

Mr. Chairman: Following from this, if you are estimating between 27,000 to 30,000 public servants, in your submissions I was reading somewhere there, you have a problem with the alignment of contract workers or non-public workers. Is that estimate of 27,000/30,000 include contract workers?

Mrs. Manchouck: We do not have a clue how many are there, at least, I do not.

Mr. Chairman: Wow. You do not have a clue of how many contract workers there are?

Mrs. Manchouck: No. Because we are not responsible for contract workers.

Mr. Chairman: Who is?

Mrs. Manchouck: Each Ministry, I guess. I do not know.

Mr. Chairman: Ms. Mendez, again.

Ms. Mendez: I would not like to provide an estimate, but we can provide that in written form. From where we view it, it can reach 15,000 to 20,000 in contract, but I do not want to—

Mr. Chairman: In addition to the 27,000 to 30,000 we just heard from the public servants?

Ms. Mendez: As I said, it is an estimate, but we can do that exercise with the Ministries, but it can be—Deputy PS oversees the areas for me regarding structure and size, probably he might have a fairer view, but from where I sit because we have Ministries embarking on retention of posts and further employment on contracts or every week we might have two or three Ministries seeking for the retention of positions and, you know, it is a fair number that does come in terms of those requests.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. De Freitas.

Mr. De Freitas: Good morning, again. You gave an estimate of 27,000 to 30,000 public servants. I want to ask: Is that fluid? And I use the word fluid because as Ministries as you increase the number of Ministries or decrease the number of Ministries, does the number of public servants increase or decrease or is it that you have that stable number and you just restructure to suit?

Mrs. Manchouck: There is that stable number and we restructure to suit.

Mr. De Freitas: Right. And I thought it was stable. So the question I want to ask is that: given that we have reduced the number of Ministries in 2015, has the number of vacancies increased or decreased since then? Because ideally if what you are

saying is true and the number of public servants does not change, but the number of positions by way of Ministries does and it decreased, then you should have a decrease in the number of vacancies.

Ms. Creed: If I may, Member, the number of vacancies has not decreased. What there has been is a shifting of offices due to the realignment, but overall there has not been an impact on the number of vacancies being decreased, the number of positions. Let me put it this way, the number of positions being decreased. So the size of the public service has not decreased, it is a realignment from where I sit. That is how I understand it, how I see it. Public Administration and Communications would be the Ministry that will be able to give further information on that.

Mr. De Freitas: All right. Well, I was just seeking clarification. So, for example, the Ministry had existed in 2014 having a generic post like Clerk III and that Ministry no longer exists, does that post of Clerk III still exist in that Ministry?

Ms. Creed: Yes. It would have gone to another Ministry.

Mr. De Freitas: Oh. So the other Ministry would have increased the number of Clerks that they had.

Ms. Creed: Yes.

Mr. De Freitas: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Pegus: If I may say, Mr. Chairman, whenever a Ministry is restructured, the Public Service Commission has to do a realignment of all positions that have been affected. And I think for last year we did almost 10,000 realignments, that is each person has to get a new letter of appointment for the restructured Ministry.

Mr. Chairman: What is the cost involved in doing something like that? Is it an extra cost or this is absorbed in the normal bureaucracy of the public service?

Mr. Pegus: Well, what happens is that the Director of Personnel Administration has to direct or deflect from the resources to be used in other areas in order to do this exercise. I understand that it is a very time consuming exercise.

Mr. Chairman: We are talking about human resources or are we talking about financial resources as well?

Mr. Pegus: Human resources, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Just human resources.

Mr. Pegus: Human resources. It adversely affects the other areas of operations of the Service Commissions Department.

Miss Ramdial: All right. So how do we reconcile that with the special project to fill vacancies, as well as the implementation and utilization of the information chart developed to indicate all vacancies filled, unfilled and unfillable? And from what I am seeing here from the last report, 13,578 offices were filled and due to a lack of funding the project came to a halt in 2016. So how do we reconcile that now with the existing number of vacancies there are and then, of course, with these Ministries being realigned and having these positions restructured and realigned, how do we reconcile that special project with the existing environment?

Ms. Creed: If I may, Chair, the special project came to an end because we have no financial resources to have kept that special project. The special project was a project where we sought persons who had experience working in the Service Commissions Department that came on board to assist us with the filling of vacancies. That was the special project. That came to an end last year. I do not know if I am answering you clearly.

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Ms. Creed: What is happening now, whatever has to happen, the filling of vacancies, the realignment exercise is being done with the present resources in the Service Commissions Department.

Miss Ramdial: Okay. So based on that, a follow-up question, based on that, how many existing vacancies are there at this point in time?

Mr. Chairman: Across the board?

Miss Ramdial: Yeah.

Ms. Creed: Ms. Maraj who has responsibility for client services will respond.

Ms. Maraj: Good morning again, Chair, and members.

Mr. Chairman: Sure.

Ms. Maraj: If I may, I would just like to give a small explanation in terms of the realignment.

Mr. Chairman: Sure.

Miss Ramdial: Could you just, before you go to realignment—

Ms. Maraj: How it affects us, but I know I will get to your number. A *Gazette*, sorry, the notice of the change in portfolios are in the *Gazette*, published in the *Gazette*. The Public Management Consulting Division of the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications would now have to match the portfolios with the Ministries and Departments, the current Ministries and Departments, and then they try to allocate positions, you move the positions.

So take for example, a Ministry of National Diversity and Social Integration, for example, they now have to move these positions to another Ministry and Department where the functional area is. So, for example, Archives was there, they would move Archives to another Ministry. After the Public Management Consulting Division does that, we would get the information now from the Ministries and Departments. Who are these persons and where are they now, and we will then go ahead and do the transferring of those persons from that Ministry to the new Ministry before they can get paid. All right?

So what we have been doing, and to answer a question from another member, the situation is fluid in terms of how the positions move. So the Service Commissions Department at all times we need to know where the positions are, and it is a term we use, you may have seen in other documents the identification of the vacancies. So when the Clerk III moves from one Ministry to another Ministry, we

have to make sure that that Ministry has that office of Clerk III.

So, we have been doing some updates. The last official update we did was in May 2016, but for purpose of this exercise what we did, we went to each Ministry and Department from our records and we broke them down in what we call specific offices, those are specific to a particular Ministry or one or more Ministries. No. Sorry. When it comes to one and more Ministries, it becomes what we call a generic office. So it is a different way of filling.

So as of the 31st of March there was a total, the specific offices, we had a total of 4,636 vacant, and for the generic offices 4,551 that were vacant.

Miss Ramdial: So let us just assume a total an average of 8,000 vacancies.

Ms. Maraj: Nine thousand.

Miss Ramdial: Nine thousand.

Ms. Maraj: Approximately 9,000 vacancies.

Miss Ramdial: Existing.

Ms. Maraj: Yes. And these, of course, will be subject to confirmation from the Ministries and Departments.

Miss Ramdial: So with the realignment with the Ministries being decreased over the past couple of years from 33 to 23, these vacancies are they being filled by the existing workers who were there previously?

Ms. Maraj: We try as far as possible. So when I speak to the specific offices, those the Permanent Secretaries and heads of departments will submit recommendations to us to fill with the person, the incumbent in the office. If that person—we will need to see, as the Chair said, the performance appraisal and the specific recommendation, and most times that person is appointed to the position.

In terms of the generic offices, those are a bit more difficult in terms of clerical. We have to look to see where the vacancies are. So, take for example a Clerk may be in one Ministry, but is he on that seniority list ready for promotion? If

he is ready, we have to look to see where the vacancy exists. And sometimes in those cases that person will have to move. We try as far as possible to keep persons where they are, but in most cases where the offices are generic, they have to move because it all depends on where the vacancies are.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Ms. Maraj. Could I ask a question? I do not know who will be competent to answer it among you all now, but I am trying for the purposes of the public as well. When Governments change, okay, you have a number of Ministries either they increase or they decrease, you have a fixed amount of public servants, so to speak, a stable, for want of a better word, 27,000 to 30,000. The last administration, there were how many Ministries? Does anyone know offhand? [*Crosstalk*] How much?

Ms. Creed: Forty-one Ministries and Departments.

Mr. Chairman: Forty Ministries and Departments?

Ms. Creed: And Departments.

10.40 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Right, and you had 27,000 to 30,000 public servants servicing these 41 Ministries?

Ms. Creed: That is right.

Mr. Chairman: Now, under the present administration how many Ministries are there?

Ms. Creed: Twenty-three Ministries.

Mr. Chairman: So, it is almost half?

Ms. Creed: No, remember it was Ministries and Departments. The Departments stayed and the Ministries' numbers reduced.

Mr. Chairman: By how much, half?

Ms. Creed: I do not know if OPM or Public Admin could give you the exact figure.

Mr. Chairman: Please, anybody that can assist us?

Mr. Meyer: The number dropped by about—it was 10. We lost 10 Ministries. Approximately 10 Ministries.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, so what became of those public servants?

Ms. Creed: They were assigned to other Ministries. So, the size of the public service does not change with this exercise. And I do not know if you would like me to share a little additional information.

Mr. Chairman: Just now, I do not want to lose the trend of thought just yet. You have it there, right? You see, I am trying to get to the efficiency of the use of public servants. If you move from a larger number to a smaller number and all those persons are being reassigned, we are going to have a situation of duplication of efforts of offices? How are they reassigned? So, if you had 41, you would have had, say, 41 PSs and now you only have 20, what becomes of those other PSs? How are they going to be utilized?

Ms. Creed: That is an exercise that is conducted by the Public Management Consultant Division of the Ministry of Public Administration, and maybe that Ministry could explain how they do the shifting and the placement, because what we get is the end product.

Mr. Chairman: Right. Could you assist us, please? Yes, Ms. Mendez or Ms. Jones.

Ms. Jones: Yes, thanks. With respect to the issue of Permanent Secretaries—

Mr. Chairman: No, I just use Permanent Secretaries as an example. I want to know what happened generally with the staff that is being realigned or the surplus staff.

Ms. Jones: Public Administration can assist.

Ms. Mendez: Chair, this will be guided by the portfolios. So, for example we may

have 33 Ministries; with the change of administration we have 23 Ministries. The responsibilities will be outlined in the *Gazette* for each Ministry. So, the portfolio of X, for example, National Diversity, would have had the portfolio of archives, arts, music, whatever, and these responsibilities may go under Community Development, Culture and the Arts.

So likewise, the staff who would have fulfilled the responsibilities under national archives, culture, music, will be transferred. The positions will be transferred to the new Ministry, the Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts. When the positions are transferred, the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts will approach the Service Commissions Department and identify: John Smith was the Clerk I under National Archives, this person is to be transferred in this position now under the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts.

Mr. Chairman: So, in other words there is a consolidation?

Ms. Mendez: That is right. Similarly, for the Permanent Secretaries this would be determined between the Office of the Prime Minister and the Public Service Commission as well as PMCD, we might determine so many portfolios in a particular Ministry may require two Permanent Secretaries at that Ministry. Or, you might have a smaller Ministry may require only one Permanent Secretary. So, with PMCD and the Office of the Prime Minister, and the service commissions, the positions will be transferred to the various Ministries. One Permanent Secretary where it is needed in one particular Ministry, two or three Permanent Secretaries if it is needed in a Ministry that has amalgamated with various portfolios.

Mr. Chairman: If you look at all the Ministries, yes, and you have an adequate supply of Permanent Secretaries, what becomes of the surplus Permanent Secretaries? Where are they facilitated?

Ms. Mendez: They may be in a pool within the Office of the Prime Minister where

they can be assigned, or, as I said, within the Ministries and given portfolios. This would have happened in the case of the Ministry of National Security or the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Mr. Chairman: Ms. Mendez, does that lend itself to efficiency?

Ms. Mendez: That is why at Public Administration we engage in further review of structures and portfolios and the necessary requirements. At this time we are doing it for the top level part of the public service.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, but could you answer my question, please. Is it efficient?

Ms. Mendez: In some instances, yes; in other instances, no. We have various challenges may arise.

Miss Ramdial: Going back to the issue of promotions within the public service, now over the past couple of months you would have been in the media space with respect to a court case where a senior public servant was bypassed for promotion four times in the space of two years, what are you doing as a body to prevent further instances and incidents like this?

Mr. Pegus: In that particular case you are referring to, the issue concerned acting appointment and not promotion as I understand it.

Miss Ramdial: It was promotion.

Mr. Pegus: It was acting, an acting appointment.

Miss Ramdial: Page 10 of the—I will just read it over for you. It was a senior public servant who was bypassed for promotion four times in the space of two years, and of course it was found that that individual was unfairly treated by the Public Service Commission.

Mr. Pegus: In that particular case the Public Service Commission had taken a decision in 2004 concerning the basis on which acting appointments would be determined. The Circular Memorandum No. 1 of 2004 had provided that, with effect from 1st January 2005, for a public officer to be eligible for acting, he must have the

requisite qualifications and experience for the particular job. Prior to that, acting was determined on the basis of seniority within a department. May I?

Mr. Chairman: Sorry, Mr. Pegus, are you dealing with the Regulations as exist now. Regulation 18, if I recall, deals with—

Mr. Pegus: Regulation 26.

Mr. Chairman:—the point when you are acting temporarily and acting towards promotion, which one are you speaking and addressing at this point in time?

Mr. Pegus: Regulation 26, acting arrangements, not as a prelude to promotion.

Mr. Chairman: Not as a prelude to promotion?

Mr. Pegus: Not as a prelude to promotion. So, that happened in 2004, and then there was a Privy Council case in 2011 which indicated that acting for short periods where there is no substantive office holder, where someone is just filling—“standing”, as the court said—that that acting should be done on the basis of seniority and not on the basis of the person having the requisite qualifications and training, provided, however, that the person had the ability to assume and discharge the functions of the position. But since then, the Public Service Commission has taken a decision to revoke that circular, and we had sent a circular memorandum to all Permanent Secretaries to the effect that for short-term acting where there is no substantive office holder in a position, that acting would be done on the basis of seniority, provided that the person can assume and discharge the functions.

Mr. Chairman: That takes me to a question I would like to ask you right now, dealing with the Regulations, the redrafting, the review, or the redrafting regulations, this being pending some time. I read in your submission where it has been now forwarded to the Prime Minister’s office for his review and consent, could you give us an update on that? Mrs. Manchouck, you might be able to.

Mrs. Manchouck: It was submitted to the Prime Minister’s office and we got some comments. The amended regulations were submitted, but we were supposed to have

put it in a context, a framework. We were supposed to have a draft policy framework and guidelines to go along with the amended regulations, that has been done, and it will be forwarded shortly, in the next week or so, back to the Prime Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Now, in your consultations—I noticed your consultations you all consulted with—the revised submissions, you all consulted with the Public Service Commission—the Director of Personnel Administration; you also consulted with the Chief Personnel Officer; you also consulted with the Ministry of Public Administration, the Permanent Secretary; and also consultants engaged for the Human Resource Modernization Project in the public service. But, I did not see other stakeholders like the unions? I did not see the Law Association? I did not see the Employers Consultative Association? Those are key members in this, so why were they left out of this consultation?

Mrs. Manchouck: Our legal advisor will answer that.

Mr. Chairman: Please.

Ms. Secharan: At the point when the commissions are preparing the draft to go to the Prime Minister, it is done under the section of the Constitution that allows them as an independent autonomous body to regulate their procedure. If you look for instance at the Civil Service Act you see where there is a prescribed role for the unions and the CPO, but that is not in the commission regs, because they are an independent body. So, no they did not have consultations with the unions.

Mr. Chairman: But I am seeing here that you had consultations with the CPO and so forth, right?

Ms. Secharan: “Hmm, hmm.”

Mr. Chairman: As stakeholder you are going to revise something to make it more efficient and applicable to the parties who are going to be dealing with on a regular basis, to me the wider consultation, I mean, one does not have to follow the letter of the law to its T, you have to give some sort of breadth and interpretation in terms of

giving some realistic approach to this consultation, so the wider the consultation the better informed the legislation would be and more acceptable and user-friendly, so I think it is a shortcoming. You do not think so?

Ms. Seecharan: No, I do not.

Mr. Chairman: You do not.

Mr. Pegus: Chair, if I may?

Ms. Seecharan: Based on the role and function of the commissions and the specific functions that the Chair referred to, which is appointment and promotion, transfer, discipline, removal, and vis-à-vis, the Endell Thomas decision, and the peculiarities of our island states and our political systems—no, I do not think it is.

Mr. Chairman: So, what have you to lose by consulting with these persons, the Law Association, with the unions, with the other stakeholder? What do you have to lose from that?

Ms. Seecharan: No, well, okay. Commissioner Pegus.

Mr. Pegus: Chair, if I may say, with respect to consultations with the union, it is presupposed that the Chief Personnel Officer.

Mr. Chairman: Indirectly?

Mr. Pegus: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: What about the Law Association?

Mr. Pegus: The Law Association, I am not aware why consultations were not held with the Law Association. But my view would be, yes, consultations ought to have been held.

Mr. Chairman: To me it makes sense, because, here it is the Vice-Chair is referring to a case where somebody was bypassed because X, Y, and my personal experiences going against the public service on many occasions for judicial review was always because something like that repeats itself. So, why would you not consult those persons who will be involved on a regular basis to give some sort of input to avoid

these kinds of things, so when you are making new regulations they will take breadth of the history experience that has gone by so it is not replicated or it is covered in it, moving forward? To me it makes much more sense. More information cannot be a deterrent, cannot be a hindrance or a negative. Mrs. Manchouck, could you say something?

Mr. Pegus: Chair, if I may?

Mr. Chairman: Sorry?

Mr. Pegus: Yes, if I may? An external consultant was engaged and the external consultant is the person who would have had to make the consultations. That person would have made the consultations. I am not aware whether in fact she made consultations with the Law Association, and if she did not, I am not aware why those consultations were not had.

Mr. Chairman: Mrs. Manchouck, can you?

Mrs. Manchouck: Yes, Chair, what I would say is I heard what you said, particularly in terms of the Law Association, and really there is no harm in letting the Law Association have a look at it, and even you.

Mr. Chairman: Sure. I have heard your name many times in the public service, so I think you have given yeoman service to the Trinidad and Tobago public service. So, it is a pleasure me meeting you here for the first time. I have heard your name, I have probably seen you sometime, and I know you come with a significant amount of experience, and I think the public must owe, indeed, a sense of gratitude to your service to the country. Because public service is not always a rewarding thing where the public is concerned. You know, you do many good things but they remember the little flaws we may make from time to time, unfortunately, but it is all par for the course. So, on behalf of the public I would like to tell you thank you for your service, and again it is quite obvious from your opening remarks and understanding comprehensively the nature of the beast, [*Laughs*] we are dealing with the public

service. Right?

Having said that anyway, there is something again with the regulations, in terms of the merit list. The merit list I remember my dealings with it, it was in existence, a merit list lasted for a year, and then I think there was some proposal that it would go to two years. I do not know what it is at this point in time; probably Ms. Anastasius Creed may be able to assist us with that?

Ms. Creed: The commission's policy at this point in time is an order of merit list is valid for two years.

Mr. Chairman: For two years?

Ms. Creed: Two years, and there are special instances when the commission may decide depending on the instances to extend the list, but under the special circumstances.

Mr. Chairman: Is that provided for? Would that elicit legal challenge?

Ms. Creed: That is a policy of the commission. I do not know from a legal—order of merit list first of all is a policy that was determined by the commission, and they regulate that policy. I do not know if the legal officer can recall any challenge that we had with regard to order of merit list and its duration.

Ms. Secharan: No, the order of merit list and the procedure relating to the validity of the lifespan and all of that, it was done by way of policy decisions, because the commissions have the powers subject to 129 of the Constitution to do so. And there have been some challenges with respect to placement on order of merit list in terms of prisons and fire, but not in terms of, you know, lifespan and—really, no.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, thank you. Miss Ramdial.

Miss Ramdial: Thank you. Do the regulations have a provision where a Permanent Secretary who has reached retirement age, can that Permanent Secretary be reappointed to the substantive position? Do the regulations allow for that?

Ms. Secharan: May I?

Miss Ramdial: Sure.

Ms. Seecharan: If you would recall when Chair gave her opening remarks, she tried to clarify the role and function of the commission in terms of appointment, promotion, and all of that. So that, the extension of that would be a term and condition that will have to be done in the Civil Service Act, and then it would also be reflected in the commission's Regulations so that they would do the actual extension. So, currently, no. It is not within the Public Service Commission Regulations because it is not within the Civil Service Act. They work in sync together.

Miss Ramdial: Okay, so, can you explain to me the reappointment of the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, Mr. Selwyn Lashley? Can you explain to me the process there?

Mr. Pegus: The Civil Service Regulations provide in Regulation 15 for the re-employment of pensioners, and if I may read it for the record.

Miss Ramdial: Sure.

Mr. Pegus: It reads, 15(1) reads:

“A pensioner may, with the approval of the Prime Minister, be re-employed in a public office on contract, if it is established to the satisfaction of the appropriate Commission—

that the pensioner is in possession of essential experience or technical qualification which makes him particularly useful to the specific Ministry or Department;”

And:

“(b) that it is not possible to fill the particular post by the promotion of a suitable officer or by a new appointment.”

And then 15(2) says:

“Where the re-employment of a pensioner is contemplated, the Director

of Personnel Administration shall, before making any recommendations thereof to the Public Service Commission, report the matter to the Chief Personnel Officer who shall consult with the appropriate recognised association, so, however, that in a case where there is disagreement between the Chief Personnel Officer and the appropriate recognised association, a dispute shall be deemed to exist and the provisions of sections 18 and 20 of the Civil Service Act may apply.”

And then subsection (3) defines the term “re-employment of pensioner” to include:

“the continuation of employment of an officer beyond the age of compulsory retirement, i.e., 60 years;”—of age.

Miss Randal: So my follow up question would be, in light of what you have just read, does the Public Service Commission hold the opinion that it is okay, and you would agree to that, based on what is there in the provisions, in light of persons waiting to be promoted to those positions, and who have written exams, who have passed it, and who are just waiting to be promoted rather than reappointing a Permanent Secretary, who is a retiree by the way?

Mrs. Manchouck: Only in exceptional circumstances. Only in exceptional circumstances. We considered it very carefully and we came to the decision that it was justified.

Mr. Pegus: In addition to that, if I may say, a very strong case was made to the Public Service Commission by the Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister, and the matter was reported to the Chief Personnel Officer in accordance with the Regulations. The Chief Personnel Officer had consultations with the union, and there was consent given by the union before that decision was taken.

But, the commission was convinced that there was no suitable person within the Ministry to assume the functions at that particular point in time. We had done

an assessment exercise for promotion to the Deputy Permanent Secretary, and the Deputy Permanent Secretary to that particular Ministry would be the person who would be eligible to act, and the persons in our view did not have the requisite experience to assume that portfolio at this particular point in time. And we made very strong recommendations to the PS to the Prime Minister to ensure that succession planning takes place, so that we would not be faced with this situation again.

Mr. De Freitas: Through you, Mr. Chairman, I wanted to ask, understanding that that particular circumstance could happen, is there a stipulated time period by which you would have the retired Permanent Secretary come back? So, for example, a year or two to train the person who does not have the experience understanding that you are here for that particular purpose, is there a stipulated time period?

Mr. Pegus: Yes, there is a one-year time period. The appointment is for one year, and the commission had strongly recommended to the Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister, who has overall supervision of Permanent Secretaries to ensure that that succession planning takes place.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Let me just change the focus a bit since we are dealing with efficiencies. One of the things in your overview of challenges, 5.1, draws specification of Permanent Secretaries; I was quite concerned about that, with the juggling and the moving of Permanent Secretaries easily from one place to the next place it seems, I do not want to say willy-nilly, but, to me it seems to act against the efficiency of competence developing a particular industry. For instance, if you are moving somebody who has been in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries who has a required special knowledge in that type of critical skills and so forth, and you move that person to Sports because of whatever reason, how are you all treating with this? I am seeing that as an issue. I see this as a problem, eh.

Mrs. Manchouck: Mr. Chair, this is something that the commission has been

discussing very often. And, as a matter of fact, we have not finalized yet, but we are coming to the conclusion that certain Ministries really should have Permanent Secretaries specific to them. And, in discussing this I think it will have to be underpinned as well by the whole philosophy of the public service. It is something, you know, if we are going to be having—because more and more we are seeing that Ministries and so are really gearing their staff and so to be specific to them. So, yes, I would say that we may have to give consideration that some Ministries, some specialized Ministries may have to have their Permanent Secretary, special Permanent Secretary, assigned to their Ministry with the technical expertise and so.

Mr. Chairman: And as it stands now, once a person is appointed as a Permanent Secretary or a Deputy Permanent Secretary, is that person given specialized training?

Mrs. Manchouck: You are absolutely on target. We have been having discussions with the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications about training, particularly for the new batch of Deputy Permanent Secretaries that we are about to appoint. They have already put some things in training for that. So, maybe, PS would you like—

Mr. Chairman: You can answer, Ms. Mendez?

Ms. Mendez: Yes, at the Ministry of Public Administration we have designed an executive development programme for our Deputy Permanent Secretaries. Those who have just gone through the Deputy PS assessment, as soon as we have received the list of successful candidates we will be mounting that programme. At the same time we are working with the Ministry of Planning and Development. The IDB has also proposed training for the Permanent Secretaries, so we are in discussions, designing and developing a suitable programme that will fulfil the needs of the executive level of Permanent Secretaries.

Mr. Chairman: And of course, by extension, a continuous process of retraining, ongoing training?

Ms. Mendez: Yes, this will be continuous. Actually our executive development programme has initiated, targeting the middle level personnel in the public service, and as we move up we will have a series of training and other interventions to develop our cadre of professionals.

Mr. Chairman: Can I ask a further question? Again, a bit off. When somebody leaves the public service, how long it takes that person to transition from an active public servant to a pensioner? From what I remember from the Regulations, I am asking from my recollection, I think you are supposed to have something like three months' notice that you are going to retire or the PS is supposed to give that information to the DPA that you are leaving in three months. So, it is supposed to be a smooth streamline of transitioning from an active employee to a pensioner. And most times, from my understanding, from my information, that does not happen. As a matter of fact, people are sometimes months without a pension, moving from a salary with your same financial commitments, is that still an ongoing process? And correct me if I am wrong with anything I have just said there?

Ms. Jones: Chair, the challenge exists. Currently, the Ministry of Finance, they are looking at it, to actually address that. Recently at the Board of Permanent Secretaries, the Ministry of Finance drew it to our attention, all the regulations and so on, and clearly identified some of the issues that really and truly have been causing the problems with persons not getting their pensions on time. The whole issue of persons moving from Ministries to Ministries and not having their circulating personnel files developed and transferred, so at the end of their journey in the public service—you know, it is difficult at the end. So, when those records go to the pension department in the Ministry of Finance, sometimes it is wrong, a lot of pension and leave issues are outstanding. Currently, it is a major reform initiative, and we at the board have recognized that it is really the Permanent Secretaries of a Ministry who must take that responsibility to ensure that your systems are in place

so that persons' records are done on a timely basis. That is currently ongoing.

Mr. Chairman: So, what is the correct period of time? Is it not three months?

Ms. Jones: Yes, it is three months.

Mr. Chairman: And what is the average time a person takes currently to get their pension?

Ms. Jones: In some instances, if your records are up-to-mark, you may take at least about six months, or some persons have been fortunate, if they remain in a Ministry all the time they may get it within three months. And in some cases, because you have had issues where you cannot find the records, it may take a year or two, or even more.

Mr. Chairman: Just now, is this underscoring the need for the information system, the management system, I see you all trying to reach?

11.10 a.m.

Ms. Jones: Certainly. Yes.

Mr. Chairman: That would clear up this?

Ms. Jones: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Because as you move, your records will be able to follow you, wherever you go. You can pull it from wherever.

Ms. Jones: That is true. In addition, what we have also recognized is that some training is required, because to develop that pension and leave record, it requires a certain kind of skills and competencies and the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications they are actually treating with that issue of ensuring that persons are trained on a continuous basis, how to really and truly prepare pension and leave records.

Mr. De Freitas: I just wanted to add to that, on that very particular topic, is there any awareness going on whereby you make staff in the Ministries aware that they too should follow up over the years in terms of their records, because what you are

saying is absolutely true. I have heard that before where people may be working for 30 years to 35 years in the public service only to find out that a document is missing from year two and that will slow down the process by way of pension for a very long time. But if they were following up year to year, then they would not have that problem when they come to the end of their tenure. So awareness for the actual employees in terms of making sure that they follow up with their records from time to time, maybe yearly, may alleviate a lot of that problem in the short term as you get the management system in place.

Ms. Jones: Thank you. That is part of the strategy as well, communicating and ensuring that the Human Resource Management Division really and truly lead the process in that regard with communicating with the employees even with the orientation and the employee manuals to make sure that they know that as well.

Miss Ameen: Mr. Chairman, with your permission I would like to touch on an issue that—I mean, all morning we have dealt with internal matters. The fact is that the efficiency, or lack thereof, within the public service has an impact on the quality of service delivered to the public and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. In many instances where citizens make complaints against an officer or a department, but specifically an officer, where it has come to the point that you even have complaints that are not being responded to for years at a time.

There are instances where members of the public send pre-action protocol letters and they never get a response. Years pass and they do not get a response. There is a procedure for that in your regulations, in terms of how to treat with that, yet it is not being done. And I know there are many other things that you have to treat with, but as a result the public feels that you are not responsive to their needs and to delivering quality service.

I wanted to just touch on that in terms of how do you treat with complaints from members of the public against officers, particularly when it gets to the point

where there is a pre-action protocol letter and it could become a legal matter.

Ms. Creed: If I may, Chair, I will start and the Deputy DPA with responsibility for those units will give further information. There is a system in place in the Service Commissions Department that upon receipt of a complaint that must be immediately acknowledged. So at least the person would know that we have received it. Now, that is the system in place. The issues we have in the Service Commissions Department is that we get complaints from persons, especially, not about matters that are recent, but matters that have history.

We work in a paper-based environment. At the head office we have over 80,000 personnel files for staff and over 40,000 main files, which is what we deal with matters.

I am saying that to say, that to do research if someone, for instance, is speaking about how many years ago, we have to go back and trace to see what is the issue, if it was a promotion, who was promoted, who was senior, you have to get all those documents. And we have a lot of difficulty sourcing files as we work in a paper-based environment. So it takes us a long time to respond because of, one, records; two, the resources we have in that unit.

I can tell you right now, for instance, that we had, like for instance, we had over 240 representations in 2015 alone in Service Commissions Department and that unit is housed with about four officers to do this amount of research. So at the end of the day—*[Interruption]*

Miss Ameen: These are complaints from the public?

Ms. Creed: We get complaints from the public, we get complaints from public officers, we get freedom of information—

Miss Ameen: And it all would have been dumped in one?

Ms. Creed: It is one unit. We have a Freedom of Information Unit, we get representations from the associations; we get representations from Equal

Opportunity Tribunal and we have one unit at this point in time that has to handle all these matters.

Miss Ameen: The process begins by sending an acknowledgment letter?

Ms. Creed: An acknowledgment.

Miss Ameen: How far do you reach in terms of—

Ms. Creed: We have—

Miss Ameen:—acknowledging complaints that come in, to begin with?

Ms. Creed: How far we—that is what we do. We acknowledge the complaints that come and then we have to therefore go and do research. So when your complaint comes, it comes into a pipeline, because we have how many matters before your complaint and we are attempting to deal with them. So we deal with the matters as we get. So not only when we receive them but when we get the research that we are looking for to be able to address it. I do not know if Mrs. O’Brady would want to give some further details.

Miss Ameen: All right, I will appreciate her input because what we have is that, when a member of the public makes a complaint against a public officer, I just want to use an example in a Ministry delivering social services for example. If there is a report of consistent and unfair treatment or abuse to the public from a public officer and complaints are made, I mean the level of response in terms of acknowledgment, just an acknowledgment of the complaint by letter. I mean, many times people complain and they have not even had an acknowledgment of their complaint. And when it reaches to the point where it is so serious and they decide I am going to send a pre-action protocol letter, even that you have a low level of response even to acknowledge, before even an investigation begins. And I am concerned where there are complaints from members of the public of public officers who may be abusive to them, who may be hindering the delivery of social services and other necessities and there is need to treat with that. And if it takes a very long time to even send an

acknowledgment to the member of the public.

Ms. Creed: But before I ask Mrs. O'Brady to step in here now, I am not sure in this instance that you are speaking about, whether they are making a complaint to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry or whether they are making a complaint to the DPA to place before the Public Service Commission, because those are two different scenarios. If it is that a complaint is being received in a Ministry, that is to be handled by the Permanent Secretary following the process that is set out in the relations. If it comes to the Service Commissions Department we have a policy where within a week we attempt to acknowledge all correspondence.

Mrs. O'Brady: Good morning again. So I just want to support what the DPA has said. Where the complaints come to the commission. Sometimes persons write directly to the Chair, the Chair will pass it on to the DPA, she will pass it on to me and it goes to the unit, they acknowledge. The Chair receives a copy of whatever acknowledgment was sent out and then we have to investigate. Depending on how accessible the files are because the nature of the matter will mean that we have to access the files.

Now, we have four senior—well, middle managers in that unit so they have to direct their staff and we have a backlog of matters in that unit. However, if a matter comes in from the Equal Opportunity Tribunal, that is priority because we have more tight timelines to acknowledge and respond to those matters and there is a cost attached if you do not comply in the time period.

So you would appreciate that member of the public now has to wait in line while we do this matter. But again, it is the same unit. Then we may have, the persons who go before the court because they have a complaint or a representation, again the court gives us a specific timeline and then, of course, you are contravening. So I do not know if that helps in answering the question.

Miss Ameen: It certainly does shed some light. What I want to get into as well is

where people complain several times, get no response and they send, let us say they send a pre-action protocol letter, you would probably have your legal department treat with it. There are a number of instances where people do not get acknowledgments even to the pre-action protocol letters and they cannot make a step further, but tell me your process with that and how efficient or how well is that department managing where you get pre-action protocol letters or threat of legal action.

Mrs. O’Brady: Okay, the pre-action protocol is a schedule of three officers. They are not legal officers, they are not trained. So previously we had two, now we have a third officer we were able to snatch from somewhere. And they are not legal persons. So once the matter comes into us, the attorney writes, we acknowledge. Depending on the timeline we will ask the legal unit to draft a letter asking for more time. If we are given more time they then have to access the files again and prepare the statement of facts. That can take anywhere from a week to two weeks, because you are looking for files to get whatever is the specific information.

In the meantime, the legal advisor will write to the Chief State Solicitor’s Department and ask if they can give us legal representation because up until, maybe about a year or two ago we would have retained our external counsel, but of course we do not have the funds for that. So now we are in the line with chief state to get legal representation. We prepare the statement and it goes to chief state and they proceed from there. The legal advisor will have to give you details on how they proceed because I am not quite sure. But once the affidavit is prepared to be filed then we, well myself or the DPA or Deputy DPA goes to chief state and we sign off on that and then they update us on the outcome of the matters.

Miss Ameen: And that can take some time.

Mrs. O’Brady: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Mrs. O’Brady, thank you very much for that. That will have to be

an improvement from my experiences where those things are concerned, because what member Ameen is saying, I have personal experiences dealing as a practitioner at the Tribunal and sending pre-action protocol letters that will go very much more than two weeks, months sometimes you will get—I mean, it is very tardy in terms of response.

Mrs. O’Brady: Well Chair, if I may add, we did not have officers specifically assigned to that. We got two officers and then a third one. So as they started to deal more and more with the matters they became much more efficient, they became aware of what they had to look for, how urgent it was and I might add it was without much training. We were able to get training for them, but not much training. So they are learning as they go.

Mr. Chairman: No, no. Perhaps I may want to recommend from here that probably one should bring in a legal person within that unit and probably enlarge the unit, because our society has become very litigious, good or bad I do not know what. People have become more litigious, people have become more right conscious and therefore I am sure you have a proliferation of matters coming in on a constant basis to your commission.

Ms. Creed: Chair, I welcome your recommendation and I hope that the Public Management Consultant Division of the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications is also listening to your recommendation.

Mr. Chairman: I do hope so and we will put in our recommendation as well.

Miss Ameen: Chairman, a number of the issues that came up here, some we dealt with, specific incidents, but the underlying inefficiencies, the need for reform as mentioned by, I think it was Mrs. Sandra Jones, Permanent Secretary and others. Several of these recommendations were made before.

In 2013, there was a Public Service Commission Report with a number of recommendations and things that should be implemented. Can you give us an idea

if you are working with the recommendations of this report, how are you progressing in terms of implementing the recommendations and if you have a time frame by which you see yourself achieving it? Because the bottom line out of these Committees of Parliament is to make recommendations to the Parliament and it may mean that we could include some of your recommendations for reforms.

So, are you working with the recommendations from the 2013 report and how is that progressing?

Mr. Chairman: Sorry. You are speaking about the report of the Joint Select Committee, “eh”. Yes? Okay.

Ms. Creed: The recommendations from the Joint Select Committee are taken into consideration. So for instance you would have recognized that I just made a reference to public administration. So if it is a staffing recommendation we will sit with public administration and we will say look this is to help us support whatever it is we are doing.

There was a recommendation, if I recall, just off the top of my head, for instance, from IT perspective, databases and—we do take those things into consideration. So it is not that the report is received and ignored, we try in going for funds or whatever we need, we make reference to the Committee’s report to help support whatever resources we seek to acquire.

Miss Ameen: So there is no specific set, like if you have a committee or a clear programme to implement those recommendations? Is there?

Ms. Creed: The recommendations come to the Service Commissions Department and the commission. The commission will give us certain directives as things that pertain specifically to the commission and we will go to see how we could implement it as soon as possible.

With regard to the administration of the Service Commissions Department the Executive of the Service Commissions Department will sit, brainstorm and see how

we could resolve it with whatever resources we have at that point in time or seek additional resources if necessary.

Mr. De Freitas: In keeping with the key issues raised by member Ameen from the last enquiry which was done, April 24, 2015, it was stated in regard to the Regulations:

In the new Regulations the timelines for action with regard to appointment and promotion will be tightened. The new Regulations will also mandate Permanent Secretaries or Directors of Heads of Departments to be compliant with submitting information or data necessary to process appointments and promotions and will provide that failure to do so is an act of misconduct and disciplinary action and it can be respectively imposed.

So the question is, could you describe for me if that has been implemented in the new Regulations? And what is the process for appraising the performance of Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Departments, because you indicated earlier on in this enquiry that one of the issues you are having is that data coming forward in respect to filling these vacant positions from the Heads of Departments and Permanent Secretaries.

Mrs. Manchouck: With respect to what you have just outlined in terms of appointments and so, and the timelines, they are included in the amended Regulations, but as I said earlier we have the draft policy and the framework now and it is going to be submitted for approval.

With respect to performance appraisals and so, we are really behind the Ministries and Departments to submit performance appraisals properly and on time. Some Ministries do comply, some do not. And we do plan to bring this again to the attention of the Board of Permanent Secretaries to ensure more compliance with performance appraisals.

Mr. De Freitas: So until the amended Regulations are improved—

Mrs. Manchouck: In terms of the timelines—but there is follow-up as much as it can happen. The real problem is the paper-based system. I know that there had been funds allocated to an electronic database management system, some of the funds, not all of the funds had been allocated. The hardware was purchased but not the software and I guess by the time we get funds for the software, the hardware will need to be upgraded. So the DPA could help with that.

Mr. De Freitas: But with the software system—sorry to cut you off—would the software system improve this, given that you still require the Heads of Departments and Permanent Secretaries to, I guess, approve or recommend for these vacant positions? So the database will give you better information in terms of how many vacancies are there, you may have some red flag to certain Ministries that are critical. But in terms of these recommendations coming forward from the Permanent Secretaries, you still require them to actually do that step. So what I was saying before is without the amendment to the regulation being approved you are still at a lost, so to speak, in regard to getting them to follow up by way of any kind of repercussion if they do not do so—

Mrs. Manchouck: The issue here is one of management. That is the issue. So I agree with you. It has to be tightly managed to ensure that we get the performance appraisals on time. So it requires follow-up and so for it to happen and maybe the DPA could help in that regard.

Ms. Creed: On behalf of the commission, circulars have been issued to Permanent Secretaries indicating the commission's requirement that promotions will not be done unless performance appraisals are submitted on time. And now I am speaking to performance of persons in their Ministry. And then I will speak separately to the performance of the Permanent Secretary themselves, because I gather you wanted to look at the whole picture.

What the commission has been reminding Permanent Secretaries within

recent time, the commission has been doing two things, they have been meeting with Permanent Secretaries and drawing issues to their attention, one. They have also been included in correspondence to Permanent Secretaries where they are seeing gaps in their performance. And they are reminding them of the code of conduct which could impact if they do not perform their duties as required according to the Code of Conduct. So the commission has been taking all those actions while awaiting, yes, all the timelines in the revised Regulations.

With regard to the performance appraisals for the Permanent Secretaries, that is something that falls to the PS to Prime Minister and when such performance appraisals are required we will write to the PS to the Prime Minister, I would write on behalf of the commission requesting performance appraisals on the specific officers and up-to-date performance appraisals.

Mr. De Freitas: Okay, one more question. And this is to the PS to the Prime Minister. Can you impose, I guess a timeline, for those performance appraisals in regard to the employees or the vacant positions that are needed? And as much as it would not be in the Regulations, can you impose one that if they are in breach of that in the appraisal for the Permanent Secretaries under their purview you can say, listen this is taking a little too long? It is not a regulation, but I think it is taking a little too long.

Ms. Jones: Member, certainly. That is done through the Board of Permanent Secretaries. I must say that the performance appraisal for Permanent Secretaries, that is not a formalized ongoing system where the Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister does that. What happens when there are instances where persons who are acting and the commission wants to be able to do promotion, a request is made of the Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister to send forward some sort of assessment on the performance of the Permanent Secretary or Secretaries.

What we are currently doing, the purview of performance management and

performance appraisals, falls within the remit of the Chief Personnel Officer. Currently, what we are looking at is really and truly having a proper structure in place by which to make the position of head of the public service establish, whereby that person/officer would have the responsibility to do ongoing assessment of Permanent Secretaries.

Right now the Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister largely use moral persuasions to get the Permanent Secretary to comply. But I must say that within the current Public Service Commission Regulations, the Public Service Commission can call for a Permanent Secretary, if the Permanent Secretary is not complying to really and truly address the issues, the problems therein.

Certainly, as the DPA clearly articulated, we do get the circulars on a continuous basis, but sometimes too there are other challenges within the system which prevents a Permanent Secretary from actually treating with the system on a timely basis and it speaks to operational management issues as well. But we are working on that right now.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Just a few questions before we close. We are coming to a closure shortly. Just picking up from the point of the disciplinary revision of the Regulations. I must commend that I am looking forward to seeing that it is a more efficient type of regulations we are moving to, to make the disciplinary process much more effective and efficient, because I think that is lacking significantly in managing the public service in that aspect.

But something that has been brought to my attention on several occasions is, once a person is being disciplined or go through the disciplinary proceedings and they are absolved from whatever allegations that have been made against them, during the time of disciplinary suspension as the case may be their increments would have been certainly not have been paid. How long does it take for that to be reinstated before a person could be given his or her outstanding increments?

Ms. Creed: I just want to be clear. You are talking about, I have been on discipline, my matter has come to an end and to regularize me back?

Mr. Chairman: That is right.

Ms. Creed: That would be done at the level on the Ministry. So that would be Ministry by Ministry, Permanent Secretary by Permanent Secretary.

Mr. Chairman: Do you know the timeline for that, Ms. Jones?

Ms. Jones: Chair, sometimes that could happen within a month depending on the efficiency of the HR system in the Ministry.

Mr. Chairman: In a month, right. A question that you know, you are not going to leave here without me asking you this. What is the policy going forward for the Public Service Commission dealing with people who are differently abled in terms of recruitment and staff? Is there any policy on that at this point in time?

Mrs. Manchouck: Not as far as I know, but it has been raised and I think we are looking at policy issues now and we will be looking at that one in more detail.

Mr. Chairman: Do you know how many differently abled people are employed as public servants in the various Ministries at this point in time? Is there any number or so?

Mrs. Manchouck: No, we have no report on that, but it is something that we would need to know if we are going to be having a policy on that. That, actually, and mental health are the two policies that we have on the agenda to discuss.

Mr. Chairman: The fact that I am going to ask you almost coming to the end of this does not necessarily put it in terms of lack of importance, but the Tobago aspect of being serviced. How is Tobago staffing serviced by the Public Service Commission, is that adequate? Is there an arrangement between the THA and the Public Service Commission? Because I know they have a problem with staffing.

Mrs. Manchouck: Well, in terms of the PSC and the Chief Administrator for Tobago, we do have a very good working relationship and indeed—the DPA may

wish to take this—there is an office of the Service Commission in Tobago and, of course, we treat all our appointments and so, all the appointments, Trinidad and Tobago, we treat everybody on an equal, fair basis. DPA would you want to comment on this?

Ms. Creed: The Service Commissions Department have been, since it was about 2009 an office was set up in Tobago for Service Commissions Department. We have had some difficulties though with the staffing for that office. We have advertised—first of all when we went for the establishment of the offices, we got contract offices and not public service offices.

We have advertised on a numerous occasions and we have not been fortunate enough to get persons either to stay or to accept the contract that is being offered. Or we have also had an issue with persons not having the knowledge, the competencies and the experience to be able to operate, to represent the Service Commissions Department totally. So that is one of the problems we have. So right now, again, we are back in discussion with PMCD to review the offices, the positions that have been allocated there.

In the meantime, our Monitoring and Evaluation Unit visits Tobago to report, to redo the review on the delegation. They do not only focus on the delegation when they make the visits, we focus on—they visit the office to see what is happening in the office, if they see the public and any other matters outside of the delegation they also bring it back to head office for us to deal with.

One of the issues we are having with the Tobago office, of course, is if we had—and working from Tobago—all our records on the electronic document management system up it will help us when we are there to be able to interphase and to give feedback immediately, but we have to take the information, come back to Trinidad and send back. I must say though, within the last financial year we have had to cut down on the amount of visits we have made to Tobago, because, of course,

of financial constraints, but we are in regular contact with them via email, telephone, whatever, however we could assist them.

Also, there has been a shortage of persons to work in Tobago, so, for instance, we have—the Public Service Commission would have requested that an office be advertised. Sometimes we cannot get persons to work in Tobago. The Public Service Commission in instances like that has been issuing advertisements specific to Tobago. So the persons who applied will know it is recruitment for Tobago purposes and that was an approach taken by the Commission to assist Tobago to fill their vacancies and to get their staff complement quicker than doing it through the entire public service roadway.

Miss Ramdial: Thank you. Just to—from listening to the Chairman of the Public Service Commission, there seem to be some issues with funding. What has been the budgetary allocation for this fiscal year for the Public Service Commission?

11.40 a.m.

Mrs. Manchouck: If you are talking about Public Service Commission, it is very small. It is just about \$1 million.

Mr. Chairman: What?

Miss Ramdial: One million?

Mrs. Manchouck: For the Commission. I do not know what it is for the Service Commissions Department—for the Commission.

Miss Ramdial: Probably the DPA could clarify.

Ms. Creed: In the estimates underneath Service Commissions Department there is a vote that pertains to the Public Service Commission. So when the Chairman was indicating that amount of money, that is what comes under the Commission and that is utilized for, like legal fees, assessment centres, et cetera. For 2017, the total allocation to the Service Commissions Department was \$67 million—to Service Commissions Department—but to the Public Service Commission, their allocation

was about a total about \$1 million.

Mr. Chairman: Is that adequate, Miss Manchouck?

Mrs Manchouck: No, it clearly is not and I will let you know what we use the \$1 million for. Most of it went for the assessment centre exercise for the deputy permanent secretaries and legal fees—and some legal fees.

Mr. Chairman: So you do not even have money for training.

Mrs. Manchouck: Well, do not forget, you know, for training, it would be for commissioners and for the Commissions Department which is a personal assistant and an executive secretary; all the staff, Service Commissions. That is the distinction I was trying to make.

Miss Ramdial: So under the Service Commissions—and I think the DPA can answer this—do you have adequate funding to do your work?

Mr. Chairman: That is a trick question? [*Laughter*]

Ms. Creed: I would say no. For instance, you asked a question pertaining to training. We have been allocated for this financial year, \$40,000 for training—

Mr. Chairman: To train what, the public service?

Ms. Creed:—for the entire Service Commissions Department. That is just for training. We got \$1,000 for an EAP, and I really have to bring up the EAP because that is very dear to my heart. We are a department that has experienced in the past, we had an officer that was shot on our compound; someone who was killed. We had an officer who, two years ago took his life. He committed suicide. We have had threats from members of the public and public officers against our lives. And therefore we work in an environment—people may not realize the type of environment you may work in in Service Commissions Department, because persons attempt to bribe you; they attempt to—

Mr. Chairman: Coerce you.

Ms. Creed: Yeah. They threaten your life for employment, et cetera. Plus the staff

works long hours. It impacts on their family life, et cetera. And for this financial year I got \$1,000 which—I do not need to say anything further.

Mr. Chairman: Wow. I am embarrassed to hear that, really. You know, I hoping to be able to bring this hearing to a positive conclusion and a positive note, but that is very dismal information coming from you, disheartening. It is very disheartening, and I think the public service that provides such a critical service to the country as a whole, that some focus of its critical needs must be addressed as a matter of urgency and as a matter of necessity. So I hope that whoever is hearing us today—and when we finalize our report and we reflect some of these comments coming from you, that something will be done as soon as possible because it cannot continue like this. If we are going to demand high performance from our public service, and efficiency, obviously they have to be resourced properly in those circumstances. And I know we are living in a very hostile environment in the country, unfortunately. It is a problem in the world today. People are less loving and more angry. So I guess even dealing with what you said, the mental health issue, stress is a growing problem across the employment spectrum and it is something that probably people would start coming forward now with litigations in terms of stress. Because you are seeing that coming up on the radar in the medical environment as a very chronic problem, a very frequent problem which never existed before.

So all these things I know we must bear in mind, but still I am hoping that what I have heard from you all, there seems to be some sort of a plan; there seems to be persons who are highly motivated in bringing about a change for the better in the public service and that I know you are hamstrung by not having resources. Resources are always a challenge in any environment. The needs are always infinite and the means are always limited. So I hope that somehow as we are moving forward that we would be able to attract the type of assistance and resources you need to make your job much more efficient and deliver the service that the public

is requiring of you all.

So coming to a conclusion, I would like to invite members—Mrs. Manchouck, you can please give your closing comment, and followed by Ms Jones, Ms. Mendez and Ms. Creed.

Mrs. Manchouck: Thank you, Mr. Chair. But before I make my closing comments, just two little points. Is it possible?

Mr. Chairman: Sure.

Mrs. Manchouck: One, with respect to the performance appraisals and working with the Ministries, we have been calling the Ministries one by one to hear their concerns and to let them know of our concerns so that we can have a better relationship and that they would comply with our directives. So that is one. And the second one with respect to the budget, I think it would be better if the Commission had within its budget—within the budget line—funding to carry out the major activities that are required of us in terms of making the appointments and promotions and so. I think it would be better if we have—

Mr. Chairman: Do you have a figure—an estimate of the figure you will require?

Mrs. Manchouck:—if we have our own budget. So for example, for the assessment centre for Deputy Permanent Secretaries, this was a total of about what, \$3 million, \$4 million approximately. So some came from the SCD, some came from our budget. But, you know, we would be better able to manage if it were all in one place.

So, Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you, first of all, for your kind comments that you made earlier and I would like to say that the PSC is cognizant of the fact that it depends on a number of stakeholders to assist us in the execution of our mandate. We depend on the Permanent Secretaries, we depend on the Heads of Departments, the CPO and the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications for compliance with regulations and the delegation order. The Commission looks forward to the implementation of the future state of the Service

Commissions Department and the reinforced monitoring function. It is hoped that the revised Regulations will be fully approved and implemented, and above all, will certainly take on board the recommendations that you have made, and particularly the input of your good self. We take on board the recommendations of the Joint Select Committee and particularly the input of your good self. So thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Ms. Jones?

Ms. Jones: Thank you, Chair. Like you, I am very appreciative of the role and responsibility and work of the Public Service Commission and the Service Commissions Department with respect to how the public service is managed. I must commit as well to the fact that the Board of Permanent Secretaries, we are very mindful of our responsibilities with respect to executing and administering the regulations. Currently, we are at a place where we, at the board level of Permanent Secretaries, are looking at ourselves and as far as possible working with the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications to really and truly work towards developing ourselves and looking at operational management issues. A lot of training is currently being executed by the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications as well as the Personnel Department with respect to performance management.

I would like to think that very soon the Service Commission can really and truly record that they are seeing a leap with change in some of the issues that they have raised here and some of the challenges at the Ministry's level with respect to the executing of some of the responsibilities. Concerning the member's concern with respect to complaints, I truly believe that those matters should be addressed at the department level and it is the role of the Permanent Secretary and the HR persons as well, to ensure that complaints are addressed very promptly, and we would try our best to really and truly treat with those issues. Even the general issues of

customer service and responding to the public when they respond, this is something that we hold very dearly at the Office of the Prime Minister and we have been speaking to Permanent Secretaries and many of them have been working to comply with a lot of those issues.

So I truly believe that with the level of commitment and leadership, working with the Public Service Commission, we can really and truly make a difference in addressing the key management issues under this particular area of HR management. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Ms. Mendez?

Ms. Mendez: Chair, and Members, I just want to provide an update provided by my Public Management Consulting Division. At current, we are servicing 13,800 contract positions in the public service. We, at the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications, are committed to assisting in the modernizing of the public service. We are engaging in various projects and working with the Public Service Commission and the Service Commissions Department as they follow through on their institutional strengthening projects, in looking at their appropriate structure that is required for them to carry out their mandate.

We are also committed in the capacity building of our public officers through our Public Service Academy. We are also surely going to be engaging in some restructuring and reviewing of our public service Ministries and Departments and various agencies that approach us for staffing and structure. We are very committed in terms of our work for the public service. Dedicated officers at the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications, we do face our constraints and challenges, not only in human resources but in financial resources but we are embracing ICT. We see ICT as the new wave for public service modernization and improving our service delivery to the public. Thank you for this engagement and surely we will continue with our consultations.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Ms. Creed?

Ms. Creed: Chairman, thank you. I want to utilize this opportunity to thank the executive and the staff of the Service Commissions Department because although we have limited resources we keep plodding and we keep looking and finding ways to get what we have to get done. It may not be to the extent that our customers would prefer, but we are doing as best as we can with the resources. So we even have a plan as limited resources. We came to the Commission with a plan of how to go about filling, prioritizing Ministries, et cetera. There must be a way. We are of the opinion there must be a way.

The institutional strengthening exercise to which PS referred to came to an end in March 2017, and now it is for the Service Commissions Department to try to see how we could reinvent ourselves, how we could suggest to the Commission ways and means to bring a change so that we are more effective. But I have to say that I have been coming to Parliament since I started to act in this position since 2014 and I feel as though I sit here every year to say the same thing. So at this point in time I would like to say, at the end of the day, whether there is one Service Commissions Department, or there are four Service Commissions Department, whatever is the way forward, if the Service Commissions Department, whichever, one or four, is not provided with all the resources that are required to support the commissions to fulfil their mandate, we will not be successful. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. A word to the wise, eh. I hope it falls on the ears that are listening, that can do something about it. But on behalf of my fellow members, I would like to thank all of you for your participation this morning. I think it has been very informative. Some of it sounds bleak, but I think there is a lot of hope in terms of the commitment of those who are at the helm at this point in trying to usher us into a 21st Century efficient public service, and I take on board exactly what Ms. Creed has just said in terms of resources. I mean, it is self-evident. You

cannot expect persons to perform at their best with certainly being under-resourced. I think we have moved away from Easter where the miracles were being performed with seven loaves and fishes. Was it three loaves?

Miss Ameen: Five loaves and two fishes.

Mr. Chairman: And five fishes. Here we go. So I am hoping this is not a case that we are going into. But certainly I am hoping that we as a people will play our part in trying to turn around the public service to be the public service that we want it to be, because it will only serve Trinidad and Tobago to be a better country. I thank you again, and good afternoon.

We will suspend. I will ask the listening public to remain tuned because we are going to suspend for about five, 10 minutes, and then we are going to meet with the Statutory Authorities Service Commission.

Thank you very much.

[Officials Depart]

11.56 a.m.: *Meeting suspended.*