

Leave of Absence

Monday, September 27, 1993

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, September 27, 1993

The House met at 1.40 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have granted leave of absence from today's sitting to the Member for St. Augustine (Mr. John Humphrey), and the Member for St. Ann's, East (Hon. Wendell Mottley).

SESSIONAL SELECT COMMITTEES

Madam Speaker: I wish to announce the 1993/1994 sessional select committees. They are as follows:

Regulations Committee

Mr. Colm Imbert (Chairman)

Dr. Vincent Lasse

Dr. Rupert Griffith

Mr. Subhas Panday

Dr. Carl Singh

Standing Orders Committee

Madam Speaker (Chairman)

Mr. Keith Sobion

Mr. Augustus Ramrekersingh

Mr. Hedwige Bereaux

Mr. Shamshuddin Mohammed

Mr. Trevor Sudama

Mr. Basdeo Panday

Privileges Committee

Madam Speaker (Chairman)

Mr. Desmond Allum

Mr. Andrew Casimire

Dr. Linda Baboolal

Mr. Augustus Ramrekersingh

Mr. Ramesh L. Maharaj

Mr. Basdeo Panday

House Committee

Mr. Kenneth Valley (Chairman)

Mrs Jean Pierre

Mr. Colm Imbert

Dr. Rupert Griffith

Mr. Ramesh L. Maharaj

Mr. John Humprey

TRADE (AMDT.) BILL

Bill to amend the Trade Ordinance No. 19 of 1958, brought from the Senate [*The Minister of Trade, Industry and Tourism*]; *read the first time.*

PAPER LAID

Customs (Import Duty) (Caribbean Common Market) Order, 1993. [*The Minister of Local Government and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. K. Valley)*]

ADJOURNMENT (LEAVE REQUEST)**(Late Receipt of)**

Mr. Palackdharrysingh rose—

Madam Speaker: I have not received any prior notice. When I was leaving my office someone brought a document in; it is unfortunate that I have not had the opportunity to look at it. I have been warning Members to send in their notices at least half an hour before.

Mr. Palackdharrysingh: Madam Speaker, I met one of the House attendants and sent the document more than half an hour ago.

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Madam Speaker: Is the Member saying that the Speaker of the House was not telling the truth when she said that she just saw it two minutes ago as she was coming in?

Mr. Palackdharrysingh: No, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: It would have to be accepted that that is when I received it. I have not had the opportunity to look at it. There has to be some kind of system in the running of the Parliament.

**CUSTOMS (IMPORT DUTY)
(CARIBBEAN COMMON MARKET) ORDER**

The Minister of Local Government and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Kenneth Valley) Madam Speaker, I beg to move, the following motion:

Whereas it is provided by section 7(1) of the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01 that the President may, by Order, increase or reduce any import or export duties of customs or impose new import or export duties of customs, and from the date of publication of the Order in the *Gazette* and until expiry thereof, the duties specified in the Order shall be payable in lieu of any duties payable prior thereto;

And Whereas it is provided by section 7(2) of the Customs Act that every Order issued under section 7(1) shall, after four days and within twenty-one days from the date of its first publication be submitted to Parliament, and Parliament may by resolution confirm, amend or revoke such Order and upon publication of the resolution of Parliament in the *Gazette* the resolution shall have effect and the Order shall then expire:

And Whereas the Customs (Import Duty) (Caribbean Common Market) Order, 1993 was made under sections 7 and 10 of the Customs Act and first published in the *Gazette* on the 8th day of September, 1993;

And Whereas it is expedient to confirm the said Order:

Be it Resolved,

That the Customs (Import Duty) (Caribbean Common Market) Order, 1993 be confirmed.

Madam Speaker, this Motion is for the confirmation of an Order made early this month. Under the agreement establishing the Common Market (Caricom), member states are permitted to impose duties on goods imported within the region where similar domestic goods are also subject to the same level of duty. For example, if we were to take Carib beer, because there is an excise duty on Carib

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beer, if we were to import a beer from the Caribbean, Banks, for example, we would be allowed under the agreement to impose a similar level of duty on that import.

In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, certain locally manufactured goods are subject to excise duty, and as I said, where we import any of these goods from the Caricom area the Treaty of Chaguaramas allows us to impose a duty on these goods which is equal to the excise duty which applies to the locally manufactured goods. A list of these goods is contained in the Customs (Import Duty) (Caribbean Common Market) Order.

In 1989 when the Value Added Tax Act was legislated, that removed excise duty from matches, deodorized edible oil and lard substitutes. So that under the terms of the treaty, import duties should then have stopped being applied to these items. However, this was overlooked, perhaps, because the quantity of these goods imported from the Caricom region was small. Today, we are merely correcting that oversight. Basically that is all there is to this measure. Given that in Trinidad and Tobago these items are no longer subject to excise duty, they are now subject to value added tax; everything is.

One would find that if matches, for example, are imported from the Caricom region, that rather than the payment of excise duty, value added taxes are exactable. Under the terms of the agreement these items are now deleted from the schedule of items on which customs duties could be charged.

This Order was made pursuant to sections 7 and 10 of the Customs Act, and in accordance with section 7 it must be confirmed by the Parliament within 21 days. We do apologize for calling Members out for this simple measure, but in accordance with the law it requires confirmation within the 21-day period.

Question proposed.

Mr. Trevor Sudama (*Oropouche*): Madam Speaker, it was only on my arrival in Parliament that I was given a copy of this Order. I must protest—

Madam Speaker: I do not blame you. I think we really ought to get a better system operating in Parliament. I do not blame you at all.

1.50 p.m.

Mr. T. Sudama: I can speak only on the basis of what the Minister has told this Parliament because I was not aware of the contents of this Order, although we have had it on the Order Paper for some time. Therefore, I have come here to debate something of which I had no foreknowledge.

Mr. Valley: Madam Speaker, just a correction. This item has not been on the Order Paper for some time. As I said, this Order was passed on September 6, while the House was in recess. As a matter of fact, it is the first time it is appearing on the Order Paper.

Mr. T. Sudama: Madam Speaker, this appeared on the Order Paper for the last sitting of Parliament, if my memory serves me right, which was last Monday. The Minister was not here last Monday, so how could he say it is not true. It is true. Therefore, we should have thought that with the lapse of time during the course of last week we would have been given some idea of exactly what we have come here to look at and to confirm.

Again, it is a question of an oversight. This Order should have been dealt with some time ago when, I understand, VAT was imposed and these matters that are being dealt with here today should have been taken off the list of items subject to the imposition of customs duty. It leads me to wonder whether this Government is not an oversight itself, for we come here sitting after sitting to deal with oversights; whether all of them sitting on the other side are really not oversights in this Parliament, redundant to the effective working of Parliament, is a question that we have to address.

This should have been done in 1989, when the value added tax was imposed in the country. This Government has been in office for two years. What prevented it from bringing this measure to the House, instead of calling a sitting specifically to discuss this Order. This should not be a very long sitting, but it would seriously inconvenience Members from the South and other parts of the country. We are now told is an oversight of both the previous and current administrations? We have been here for two years with the current administration and it has overlooked this. I say in Trinidad and Tobago we are dealing with regimes of oversights. That is what this country has to put up with.

The Minister said these items which are imported from Caricom countries should have been taken off the import duty list, should not have been subject to import duty and that the quantity of these items imported was small. What is small? What does small mean in this context? We are given neither any indication of the quantities involved nor how much duty has been forgone by the introduction of these measures. Surely, we have the right to know because this measure is not a measure put in a vacuum. This measure is all part of the trade liberalization programme and regime of this Government. It is all part of our Caricom arrangements—the policy of opening up the market in Trinidad and

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Tobago to competition, reducing tariffs and whatever protective measures were there for manufacturers in Trinidad and Tobago. This would all come down. We are going to face the full force and impact of competition and see our manufacturers go through, one by one, as a result of governmental policy.

Therefore, we have a right to know what quantities are involved and how much duty is forgone. The question of forgoing duty is specifically significant at this time when we are told that oil prices and revenues are falling. We want to give tax allowances and rebates to people with a chargeable income of \$16,000; that is forgoing revenue.

If we are forgoing revenue in these various areas, my question to the Government is: Where is the revenue going to come from to meet the budgetary provisions for 1993? What does this measure, among other measures, do to our budgetary estimates of revenue from trade? If it does nothing, then the Minister should have said so.

Mr. Valley: I said that.

Mr. T. Sudama: He did not give figures because I do not know what "small" means. In terms of a deal by the PNM Government, what does small mean? When the Government sells the assets of Urea and Fertrin, what does small mean? What percentage is small? Is it 10 per cent? Is that small? This House has the right to ask for specifics with regard to the amount of revenue forgone.

I want to inform this House that these are not low rates of custom duties which were previously charged and which are now going to be amended. In the First Schedule the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order 1990, imitation lard and lard substitute attracted a rate of duty of about 45 per cent per kilogramme which is a fairly high rate of duty. Therefore, depending on how much is imported, it would be a fair amount of revenue.

Even if it is a few hundred thousand dollars it is nothing to scoff at, in a situation where I cannot get them to spend a penny in Oropouche to deal with the disaster of flooding which occurred last month. Therefore, a couple hundred thousand dollars which could have gone into the kitty of the Government would have been a great source of relief to these unfortunate citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who happen to be farmers, the forgotten people, those discriminated against by this Government for so many years. If it is just a small amount of money, I should have thought that even that amount of money now forgone could have been used otherwise for the benefit of the people of this country.

Matches attracted a duty of 45 per cent per thousand in containers of 60 and 70 boxes. Again, I would say a fair rate of duty is to be forgone at this time. This elimination of import duties on deodorized edible oil which is produced in Trinidad and Tobago; lard substitute, which we also produce, and matches, excluding Bengal matches—I do not have an idea what Bengal matches actually are; any other matches I suppose would come within the purview of this provision. What effect would the elimination have on this part of our manufacturing sector which deals with edible oil, lard substitute and matches?

2.00 p.m.

We on this side are concerned about the effect of Government's fiscal policy on manufacturing and agriculture—particularly agriculture—two of the largest employers of labour in Trinidad and Tobago. If it is going to force a level of competition which will result in some of these manufacturers either reducing their levels of production or going out of business, then it would have an impact on the unemployment situation this country.

Apparently they are going headlong in this thrust to impose on us this ideology of liberalization, structural adjustment and conservative economics, which they are now waving like a flag. They are not saying anything about the dislocations and disruptions which will be experienced by the economy. There is no concern at all. All they are doing is right-sizing the utilities and retrenching, selling off willy-nilly whatever they can put their hands on, and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are no wiser whether these actions are in their benefit or in the benefit of certain interest groups.

There was a report in today's *Daily Express* about small businessmen who are being liquidated and who have to sell off assets to the conglomerates at prices which really have no bearing on their value, simply because they are faced with this inordinate level of competition for which they have not been prepared. They have been employers of labour and are going through very, very serious financial crises which will have an impact on the nature of this economy.

What in fact the Government is doing through this policy of fiscal liberalization, is making the conglomerates in this society bigger, the monopolies more powerful with a greater influence on Government's policy, without protecting consumers or giving assurances and safeguards from the consequences these policies will have on the manufacturing and agricultural sector.

Deodorized edible oil has to do with the coconut industry. This Government has over the years, presided over the destruction of the coconut and copra

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industry, and communities like Cedros have been put out of work because they cannot sell the copra to CGA and Lever Brothers, or whoever takes the coconut oil from the Coconut Growers' Association.

Madam Speaker: Is the Member not going too far?

Mr. T. Sudama: No, no, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I just draw it to your attention.

Mr. T. Sudama: Let me emphasize the point that when you reduce or eliminate duty on deodorized edible oil, it must have an impact on the local industry which produces edible oil. My contention is that the impact is going to be negative in the sense that if we import more of this from the Caricom countries, then the local manufacturing capability for edible oil has to be correspondingly reduced. When that reduction takes place, what will be the effect on employment in Trinidad and Tobago—those thousands of people who have been involved in the copra industry, producing the raw product which goes to the Coconut Growers' Association to be processed and sold to Lever Brothers and other companies which use edible oil in their manufacturing processes and also bottle edible oil for local consumption?

It is not good enough merely for the Government to come here and say it is removing import duties of a certain order, without giving this House an indication of what the impact of the elimination of duty is likely to be. It is a trend of the Government to come here and treat this House in a disrespectful fashion by not giving any explanation. In the past we have had Minister after Minister come here and merely read a bill and sit. Now, the Minister has read an Order and just minimal explanation was given. He sits very satisfied with himself that he has given a full explanation to this House and to this country of the reasons and the impact, moreso the impact, that these measures will have on our agricultural and manufacturing sectors.

We also produce matches in Trinidad and Tobago and however small the local wood component, it is still something. If that local match industry has to be reduced in size, then naturally, it would have some impact on the manufacturing volume of the match industry.

So that given the fact that these items attracted a very substantial rate of duty in the past, one cannot scoff at the amount of revenue being forgone. I understand that they said that this revenue was imposed to make up the amount of excise duty, and, therefore, when value added tax was imposed, the need for this

protective measure was no longer necessary. I do not want to go into a discourse on value added tax; that is another area of concern: What are the effects of value added tax today on our finances and the transactions that we are going through right now?

One of the things that they have been shouting from the roof tops is that once we reduce duties, these measures will result in a reduction in prices to the consumer. That is a rationale they are trying to propagandize, and the leading propagandist is the Prime Minister himself—the Member for San Fernando East. The propaganda is that prices are falling because they are reducing the import duties and that these reductions will be passed on to the consumer.

2.10 p.m.

Apparently, it is the same rationale that they are going to propose here, that local manufacture is too costly—they have not actually said so, but that has been their general rationale—local manufacture and local agriculture are too costly, and therefore we must reduce the protective barriers of import duties, manufacturing and agricultural industries will go by the wayside and in the meantime prices will come down to the benefit of consumer. They do not say which consumers to start with, because when you lose your job through their liberalization policy you will not have money to buy anything, whether the price has fallen or not.

This rationale being sold to the country, that a reduction in import duties will reduce prices locally, is an attempt to hoodwink the people. Prices have a way of staying put, of not reducing. Once sales are put at a certain level, prices stay at that level regardless of any reduction in import duties and the *Express* of Thursday, September 23 made that very plain with respect to the Prime Minister's propaganda that prices are going down, and some economists in business have stated categorically that that is politics, not economics.

That has not been our experience, especially in a situation where the items being imported are imported by monopoly conglomerates. They import the goods, therefore, they can set the prices and stick to them. They have the sole monopoly on imports, either because of their size or their contacts with the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Commerce and with the Government. So having acquired that monopoly, when you reduce import duties, it is only going to benefit those importers and conglomerates; the average consumer is not going to benefit. So I hope that they stop this propaganda and stop trying to fool the people that their trade policy is going to benefit the average consumer.

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This measure has to be put in the context of the Common External Tariff of Caricom countries.

"Prices will begin coming down from next year, Prime Minister, Patrick Manning told PNM Women's League on Sunday. Businessmen laughed..."

They ought to laugh at what this Government is proposing and wants this population to believe.

"Businessmen and economists have an explanation for Manning's predictions: he's a politician. So they make apologies for him, noting politicians need to say 'these things'."

They need to propagandize. They need to hoodwink. They need to give false illusions to the population, something to hold on to, false promises. Some of our politicians need to do this.

"I agree with Prime Minister Manning,' said economist Lloyd Best, 'not only prices—we are all going down together'."

All of us, including prices, are taking a downward spiral when it comes to our welfare.

"The Prime Minister unfortunately made a statement that will only make sense if everything else in the economy stays static."

If everything else stays static, then prices will come down.

"...explained Gordon Rauseo, president of the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association. 'That is an economic impossibility'."

"By January 1, 1998 the high tariffs put in place to protect local manufacturers under Caricom's common external tariff (CET) will have fallen from 35 per cent to a base rate of 20 per cent."

Now that is the context in which we have to put this measure. This is a total elimination of customs duties, because, I understand, they were put there as a protective measure to make up for any shortfalls in excise duties.

It is in that context that all external tariffs dealing with imports from Caricom countries will come down from 35 per cent to 20 per cent by January 1, 1998. When that happens, together with this measure that we are considering today—no clear statement has come from this Government with respect to the impact of those measures on the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, the structure of our economy, manufacturing, agriculture and the employment situation and so forth. I

understand that shortly they are going to import rice and do away with the subsidy on rice. That is only to be expected with a non-caring Government, non-caring as to what these people who will be displaced will do.

According to Dennis Pantin:

"It is certainly valid to say that this drop will have a dampening effect on prices, but that is not to say that it will lead to a reduction in prices.

"It is common sense that if prices are determined by the tariff rate, then a reduction in the rate will moderate prices. A politician puts that in a mill and comes out with a fall in prices. "

Obviously, prices are also strongly influenced by the exchange rate, so even if you reduce your tariffs and you say that reduction is going to redound to the benefit of the consumer in the form of lower prices, are you telling us also that the exchange rate is going to remain stable, that there will not be a devaluation of Trinidad and Tobago currency as a result of the fall in the inflow of US dollars and other foreign currencies?

Last week when I spoke about the depreciation of the Trinidad and Tobago dollar, the Prime Minister explained that that came about because of the fall in oil prices and the reduced oil revenues. I honestly hope and pray that this Government will have a little measure of decency to tell this population, if not the whole truth, at least a modicum of it with regard to our economic circumstances. If it tells the truth there would be a bit of trust in the policies and the actions of this so-called caring Government proceeding headlong with the liquidation of substantial sectors of our economy with nothing to put in its place and very little investment.

Apart from the odd investment in the energy sector, no other investment is taking place to create job opportunities for anybody, but at the same time they are moving in this ideological direction to talk about reduction of import duties, liberalization of trade, elimination of subsidies and all the other things which go with an unrestricted free market in our international trade.

2.20 p.m.

And at the same time that this Government is falling hook, line and sinker for this ideological dictation from North America, North America on the other hand is endeavouring to protect its agriculture and its manufacturing. While they may liberalize their markets to a certain degree, this would be done only after measures are put in place to protect their own manufacturing and agriculture. But here, this

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so-called caring Government, is going headlong in a direction, with very little care as to how many will eat or how many people will survive the full impact of its policies.

It has become fashionable for Members opposite to get up in this House and say that this is a simple measure, but when the measure is put in the context of Government policy, one sees that the measure is not all that simple and that the Government is not levelling with this honourable House as to the impact of its measures or the consequences for those involved in the respective industries, whether in the copra industry, in this instance, or in the manufacture of edible oil or other products which require edible oil as a basic item.

Today, quite apart from protesting the fact that I was given this notice only as I arrived here today—which shows the slipshod manner in which Government runs its affairs and its utter contempt for Members of this Parliament—because there is need to rush through a measure which has a time limit, hon. Members are called here on a Monday to spend a little time merely to rubber-stamp a measure which the Government overlooked. I am protesting on behalf of my colleagues and also the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We will not countenance the way in which this Parliament is run, and if the Government wants our co-operation it has to do better than this.

Mr. Krish Jurai (*Nariva*): Madam Speaker, I rise to speak—

Madam Speaker: I was about to say who caught my eye. The Member for Nariva caught my eye first.

Dr. Rowley: I give way to the hon. Member, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The normal procedure is that you let me know the order of speaking. The hon. Member stood and he caught my eye, and then the hon. Minister stood. Really it should have been one/one; unfortunately, the Member for Nariva caught my eye first.

Mr. Jurai: I would give way to the hon. Minister.

Dr. Rowley: I defer to hon. Member, Madam Speaker.

Mr. K. Jurai: Madam Speaker, I rise to speak on the Trade (Amdt.) Bill, 1993.

Madam Speaker: No, hon. Member, we are debating the Customs Order at the moment.

Mr. K. Jurai: I rise to speak on the Motion before the House today. The Minister in the Ministry of Finance said in his opening remarks that this was a minor measure. The import of lard substitutes for 1991, which amounted to \$5.5 million, came mainly from the United States of America with only \$530,000 worth coming from Barbados.

Mr. Valley: Madam Speaker, I wonder if the hon. Member could repeat those figures for the benefit this honourable House—the total amount and how much came from Barbados.

Mr. K. Jurai: The amount from Barbados was \$530,000.

Mr. Valley: Yes, but how much came in altogether?

Mr. K. Jurai: Altogether, \$5.5 million.

Mr. Valley: Thank you.

Mr. K. Jurai: Madam Speaker, to date, the Government is forgoing revenue as a result of this measure. Revenue from customs duties plays an important part in the development of the country, and if the Government is forgoing this revenue it means that it has to earn revenue elsewhere. I am very disturbed—as I am sure the country as a whole is—at what is taking place in the Customs Department. The *Sunday Mirror* dated September 26, 1993, says:

"Multi-million \$ Customs racket."

Before I go into that, however, I would like to read from page 48 of the *Budget Speech 1993* where it says:

"The need to look into our administrative inefficiencies in one area of taxation led us to scrutinise several other areas of tax administration and to take the necessary action to improve performance. Therefore, in conjunction with technical advice provided by the United States Customs Service, efforts to improve the efficiency in the Customs and Excise Division which began in 1992 will continue in 1993."

I purposely read this so that the people of this country would know that the PNM Government is very serious about corruption in this country. The *Sunday Mirror* article continues:

"A multi-million-dollar scam in which duties and taxes paid by importers to the Customs and Excise Division of the Ministry of Finance have been stolen, is currently being investigated by several agencies, including the Police Fraud Squad."

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I am not going to read the entire article, Madam Speaker, I am going to be selective:

"It is believed that certain top officials at Customs, the Ministry of Finance and a handful of brokers, are behind the grand theft, which could amount to tens of millions of dollars in the past year alone.

The well-organised racket came to light after several importers—having had their goods examined by Customs officers, and later, having paid customs duty, stamp duty and VAT—tried to clear their shipments only to be told that their documents were false.

That was about one year ago.

Since then, investigators have found scores of importers who have been similarly affected.

Within the past two weeks, at least two importers—one from Charlieville, the other from South Trinidad—were boarded by officers of the CPI department, who sought to have them pay huge sums for goods they had cleared some time ago.

The importers were shocked, since they had paid all duties and taxes by certified cheques.

'It is madness,' one irate importer told *Sunday Mirror*.

'I paid these people over \$200,000 by bankers cheque, made out to the Comptroller of Customs, and now they are insisting that I have not paid.

'I showed them my stamped documents, only to be told that these were false.

'I want to know who cashed a certified cheque made out to the Comptroller.'

The current Comptroller of Customs is Ken Superville.

Insiders claim that a ledger in which cash payments are recorded had pages torn from it, and a cheque book is missing from the Division.

'There has to be very high people involved in this racket which is robbing the Treasury of huge sums every year.'

In fact, people involved are said to be so powerful that investigators are treading very cautiously."

That is only the beginning. Another article in the *Trinidad Express* of September 9, states:

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“Expert: Fraud on the rise in T&T”

The *Trinidad Guardian* of September 12, 1993, headlines:

\$1.3 m lost through fraud.'

Trinidad Guardian September 16, 1993:

"Government overpays \$1.9 m in salaries"

It continues in this vein.

Having read what the Minister said in the Budget Speech, this trend will continue under the PNM Government, as it has done in the past, and it will continue to go unabated, so long as the PNM Government sits there and turns a blind eye to everything.

2.30 p.m.

I want to quote from *Newsday* of September 23, 1993. It says: "Price Controls too complex says Kuei Tung".

I continue, Madam Speaker:

"According to Trade Minister, Brian Kuei Tung, price control has become such a complex issue that the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism has decided to drastically reduce its Price Control List of 35 items to only five basic commodities—rice, counter flour, sugar, pharmaceuticals and school books.

He told the Senate on Tuesday that the price scheduling system became more complex due to the variety of brands....

Kuei Tung said the move to de-control prices would provide an atmosphere competitive in nature and would allow the market forces to determine the prices..."

Mr. Valley: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Obviously the Member is still speaking on the Trade (Amdt.) Bill.

Madam Speaker: I was just about to ask the Member to direct his attention to the Order.

Mr. K. Jurai: Yes, Madam Speaker, this is all to do with industry and trade and the measure the Minister has introduced is a trade measure—importing of oils and fats into this country.

Mr. Valley: The matter before the House, Madam Speaker, is a finance matter. It is the deletion of some items from the payment of duty. It is not the Trade (Amdt.) Bill in which the Member seems to be very much interested. He will have sufficient time to make a contribution in that debate and I would ask that he confine himself to the Motion before the House.

Madam Speaker: The deletion of three items. I do not know if the hon. Member has the Order.

Mr. K. Jurai: Exactly, Madam Speaker. I know it is.

Madam Speaker: The deletion of three items: deodorized edible oil, lard substitute and matches.

Mr. K. Jurai: This is exactly what the Member for Oropouche was trying to explain earlier, that the Minister wants to come here and push this item and we must agree with whatever the Government says and give the okay. These matters deal directly with trade and I think it is relevant that we should touch on these issues. These are policy matters and we need to address these issues. We cannot deal with them in isolation, hence the reason I am going into detail, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The only way I would allow the Member to go into detail is if he would relate it to these three items—deodorized edible oil, lard substitute and matches. I will not allow him to go beyond that.

Mr. K. Jurai: I quite agree with you, Madam Speaker; I was going to talk about bread which deals with cooking oil, lard, matches and so forth. That is how I was relating it.

Madam Speaker: No, I think the Member should relate these items to the whole situation and move on.

Mr. K. Jurai: These are manufacturing inputs that are affecting the whole economy, Madam Speaker, hence the reason I am bringing all this in. It has direct impact on the cost of living and we have to understand this and the Minister also has to understand. I cannot see how we can deal with it in isolation.

Madam Speaker: Maybe what the hon. Member intends to do is to show how these relate, with respect to the inputs, to manufacturing. Phrase it and put it in that context, but he is meandering into all the other realms except the realm of how the inputs affect manufacturing. I am trying to follow the argument and waiting to see where is the relevance.

Miss Bhaggan: Inputs into manufacturing.

Madam Speaker: Proceed.

Miss Bhaggan: They are trying to intimidate you.

Mr. K. Jurai: Madam Speaker, I know that the Members on the other side are trying to throw me off-track, but I am sure they will not succeed. As the Minister in the Ministry of Finance says, I can deal with these trade matters when the appropriate time comes. If today he does not want me to link it with the measures he has introduced in this House, I would bring it at the appropriate time and deal with him and everyone on the other side accordingly.

Mr. Maharaj: We will talk about Pegasus again!

Mr. K. Jurai: I hope that those measures will be coming to this House as soon as possible, so that I can deal with them.

Madam Speaker, the importation of these edible oils and fats is definitely going to have an impact on the local economy, and that is why I was trying to give way to my hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Member for Diego Martin West, so that he could tell us more. Probably today he has some good news for us about the coconut industry, and, very soon he will have his turn. I am hoping that with these measures in the House today, the impact of what the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources has to say will be greater than what we shall be losing from the customs duties coming in from these items.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources (Dr. The Hon. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, my intervention will be very brief and I must apologize for any inconvenience caused by rising a little too late. As you would realize, sometimes during the debate matters arise which require *ad hoc* intervention and I should like to regard this as an *ad hoc* intervention.

Mr. Maharaj: You are an expert on that. The Government is an *ad hoc* one.

Dr. The Hon. K Rowley: Madam Speaker, I must first express surprise at the comments of my Friend the Member for Oropouche, who claimed, speaking on behalf of his colleagues, that they were inconvenienced by being called to Parliament to deal with this matter today. I seem to recall, and the record will show, that those persons on the other side are the only ones who are in receipt of substantial increases, which they gleefully accept, while they try to ridicule everybody else in the country. Accept their increases, do no work, go off and do

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their own private business; and the one day you call them to do parliamentary business is an inconvenience! A Member of Parliament, collecting a salary every month, is inconvenienced by coming here. If they come here ill-prepared, that is their business! They demonstrate to the public and to themselves why they should not even be where they are. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Maharaj: You have come for the tea!

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: Yes, they came for the tea.

Mr. Maharaj: A stupid Motion like this?

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: Do you think you are in the courthouse? Do you think somebody in here is afraid of you ?

Madam Speaker: Order, please!

Mr. Maharaj: I am not afraid of anybody in here.

Madam Speaker: Order, order! Move on please.

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, they are asking for a response from the Government. One Member gets up and he does not even know what is the business before the House—what Motion we are dealing with—but he is making a presentation! Does that surprise any of us? Or should it surprise any of us that the information they try to impart in the debate is either wrong, or malicious, or misleading—or all three?

The Member for Oropouche talked about farmers being the forgotten people in the country, and so on. He makes a good living by that—misrepresenting the facts—especially insofar as it relates to Oropouche. The Minister of Finance is the custodian of the Treasury and we all know—it has been debated time and time again—there are serious financial constraints. Therefore, when we seek to put any action in place, there is a cost involved. There is virtually no action this Government can take that will not involve some kind of expenditure.

2.40 p.m.

Recently we had a situation where, in one day, there was more rainfall than we would normally get in an entire month. I think it was 147 mm. In fact, it was centred on southern Trinidad, largely around the Oropouche area. Because of the way the area drains—the Oropouche River drains into the Gulf of Paria—if the tide is high, the Oropouche River has difficulty flowing into the sea, and, of course, there is backing up in that situation. The result of all that, given the

unusual circumstance of the excessive rainfall and the drainage problems, was severe flooding in Oropouche. What do we do in a situation like that? There was a time in this country when more resources were available to us, and when such a situation arose, the most palatable thing, given the kinds of demands and expectations, would have been for persons to make demands on the Treasury, and the Cabinet would have made some allocation to farmers to compensate for their losses.

The situation today, even if one is so inclined, is that funds just are not available to approach the problem in that way. However, in recognition of the nature of the problem, within the constraints we have, certain aspects of relief have been advanced. Last year we had a similar problem, but not on the same scale because the rainfall was not that excessive. There was flooding on a minor scale and not being in a position to offer the expected compensation, the Government bought 20,000 pounds of seed rice from Caroni Limited and made that rice available to the farmers who had lost their nurseries to replant; replanting took place and, of course, we had our rice crop.

This year, a similar situation developed on a slightly larger scale. The Minister of Works and Transport and I looked at the situation and we approached the Cabinet for some kind of relief. Granted, the Member and other persons expected compensation, but we approached the matter in three ways: We once again got approval to purchase and make available to the farmers, seeds lost as a result of the flooding. If they had used their seed supply and the nurseries were damaged or destroyed, we made seed available to them at peppercorn rates with the Government picking up the tab.

Mr. Palackdharrysingh: Is this under the Caricom Order?

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: It is not under the Caricom Order. Madam Speaker, I am responding to positions taken in this debate by Members on the other side.

Some farmers had planted their fields and had lost their fertilizers in the process. So in addition to the supply of seed material at peppercorn rates, the Cabinet also agreed to make available to the farmers a substantial amount of fertilizer. As a result of the problems in the drainage system—we are virtually into October and still being in the rainy season—Government cannot address the specific problems. We have taken steps, anticipating releases in early January, between the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources and the Ministry of Works and Transport, to address, within the confines of the resources available, some of the specific drainage problems that resulted in the flooding which we experienced last year and this year.

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Insofar as we can access resources, we would seek to use those, not directly to compensate the farmers in cash, but to solve the problems so that next year we would either alleviate or eliminate the problem. That is the way we have approached that problem. So when Members come here and talk about farmers being the forgotten people and the caring Government does not work, they are doing that purely for their own benefit, seeking to cement their own positions, but it is far from the fact.

The Member for Oropouche also made presentations about reductions in duties. He is quite right that the Government needs to indicate to the public what these things mean in terms of revenues forgone, in terms of directions to be followed, and so forth. I have no argument with that. The Government has a duty to do that. In fact, if it is not coming across, then, of course, the Government has to take steps to see that it does. However, I do not think anything the Government says would influence the Member for Oropouche in any way, because he gets up here, day in and day out, issue "A", issue "B", and says the same thing over and over again.

When he spoke about the threat to the edible oil industry, I recalled that there was widespread support in this country when Trinidad and Tobago entered into an arrangement with our Caricom partners under Carifta. We started off with Carifta—Caribbean Free Trade Area. That was deepened a little later on into Caricom. By virtue of signing that treaty—for which I think there is widespread, if not unanimous support in this country—we have agreed to share our market. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot agree to share our market by treaty and say we are members of Caricom, with all the benefits that go with that, and also go further and say that we should talk about economic and political integration—In fact, in the debates now taking place, we are talking about deepening and widening Caricom. If, in fact, those are our positions, it is then quite irksome to come to Parliament and have so-called senior parliamentarians like the Member for Oropouche get up and say we are allowing products to come into Trinidad and Tobago to the detriment of local farmers."

That is an absolute misrepresentation, to use a kind word. By virtue of being members of Caricom, we have agreed to share our market with the coconut producers in St. Lucia, Dominica and St. Vincent. In fact, so important was that aspect of the regional economy within Caricom, that a separate protocol called the Oils and Fats Agreement was entered into, whereby we are duty-bound by treaty to import edible oil from those countries. So how could the access of those

materials into our market cause a Member of Parliament to portray it as though the Government is being irresponsible and uncaring?

It is total irresponsibility on the part of the Member who, in one breath, says that the public is not being given the information it deserves—and I agree with him on that—but in the next breath misrepresents a situation, hopefully for the benefit of his constituents to give them the impression that he is fighting for them—totally misrepresenting the facts.

The Member for Oropouche talked about importing oil. The importation of edible oil into Trinidad and Tobago was done by those who handle copra in this country. The records will show that. Unless the Member for Oropouche can get up and tell this Government that his position and his party's position is that the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago should put up a barrier to Caricom products, he should not make those kinds of comments, because they make no sense.

The effect is that we have had to put coconut oil on the market here. Coconut oil, a product available to the local housewife in this country, was re-introduced in the market here under this Government, under my tenure. When he was Member for the area and Minister of whatever—before he was dismissed, summarily—the problem was there, but local coconut oil was not being made available on this market. When the fraternity came, arguing along his lines: "What are we doing for ourselves," the question I had to ask was: "Are we putting our coconut oil on the market?," The answer was, no. I encouraged them to do that. They took my advice, and I went in person and launched the product at the Trinidad Hilton. Today, we have two brands of local coconut oil on the market competing with other oils.

Some of the solutions they put forward are nonsensical. They tell you, close down the National Flour Mills' soya operation. That is not a feasible situation at all, because that oil at National Flour Mills is not an end in itself; it is a by-product of soya meal which is imported for animal feed. So either way we can be involved in some kind of importation. But they tell you, do not allow St. Lucian oil or Vincentian oil to come in here; that makes no sense under the Caricom Treaty. What we have done though, in recognizing that the importation of oil from outside Caricom was not coming in here as fairly as we intended it to be, is that we have examined the situation and put it to our interest.

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2.50 p.m.

In fact, only recently in Guyana at one of the regular meetings where we reviewed the situation, Trinidad and Tobago managed to get some opening up of the protocol and some acceptance on the part of our Caricom neighbours with respect to the conditions under which oil is going to come into Trinidad and Tobago. The next question we have to ask is: Does the Government of Trinidad and Tobago cook?

The oil that comes into this country is bought by private enterprise and no director in any private enterprise will buy any oil he does not need, because he has to account to his shareholders. All these complications come up and a Member of Parliament should understand that and not get up in the Parliament and talk about being called at great inconvenience to waste time, and then gets up and talks about matters of this nature which when summarized—in fact, to sit and listen to that is a waste of time.

The whole question of the coconut industry boils down to one of taste and markets. Under this Government we have managed to put coconut oil on the shelves, so we are marketing it. Taste! People are becoming more aware of what they use in their diet. People in this country are concerned about cholesterol and its effect on their health. It affects the marketing of the product. Is the Member for Oropouche holding the Government personally responsible for the choice of oils on the shelves in this country? You cannot.

There are certain tangibles in the market place which are beyond government control. If a housewife chooses to buy—for reasons best known to her and for reasons which she believes will protect her family's health—another product, the Government cannot intervene and say buy this or that. What we can do is take steps to ensure that the choice is there at competitive prices. We are doing that, and the Member knows that. He has been here long enough. If there was any simple solution to the matter, he would have put the solution since 1987. He spent 15 years in Opposition and five years in government and gets up here this afternoon and talks that kind of nonsense—I am sorry, five days.

Mr. Sudama: Madam Speaker, my pension should be accordingly adjusted according to his report of my tenure.

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: One day in Cabinet, or fired before the first Cabinet meeting. The Member goes on to appeal to his constituents. We could do the same thing. Everyone on this side represents a constituency and we can come every Friday and appeal to our constituents and seek to get them to become

emotionally involved in matters on misinformation. In seeking to appeal to his constituents, the cheap shot he is trying is to talk about the Government opening up the market for rice and eliminating subsidies.

What are the facts? The Government of Trinidad and Tobago in 1985 took a decision to produce more local rice. We were importing the vast majority of the rice we use in this country. The arrangement was that the profit from the imported rice would be passed on, through the National Flour Mills, as a subsidy to local rice producers to get them to produce more and more local rice. One does not need a university degree to understand that if the profits from imported rice are being used to develop a local rice industry, as those profits bear fruit in the local rice industry, as more and more rice is produced locally, less and less rice will be imported and there will be less and less profit to be passed on to the farmers.

It was a kind of seesaw arrangement where initially we had a big profit on imported rice, which was passed on to the local farmer to develop that industry. As more rice is produced then the amount available for subsidy would fall as the import tends towards a lower and lower level. That was the arrangement started in 1985. Today, in 1993, the situation is contrary to the misrepresentation by the Member for Oropouche. It is not that the subsidy has been removed; it is that this year, 1993, the subsidy stands at the order of \$20 million. No position has been taken by this Government at this time to remove the subsidy.

What the Government has done is to put a cap on the level of subsidy, because if one examines the situation, one would see the subsidy moved from a very small amount—a couple million dollars to \$5 million, to \$10 million, to \$14 million, to \$20 million. In fact, if a cap is not placed on the amount of subsidy, you could find yourself producing as much rice as possible and paying as much subsidy. In this case there is no subsidy from imported rice if you move towards full supply. That \$20 million, \$30 million or \$40 million would have to come from the Treasury. That was not the intention of the arrangement. So even now, capping it at \$20 million may require injection from the Treasury, because the profits from imported rice would not be able to meet the subsidy.

When Members of Parliament from rice-producing areas get up and misrepresent the facts to their constituents, seeking to give the impression that they are the only ones concerned about these people and the only ones to look after their interest, they are having the cheapest shot at those who do not have the facts. Today, while I agree with the Member for Oropouche that information is required, I call on him to be part of the information process and insofar as he

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knows the facts, to confine himself to the facts and not misrepresentation. Today, Trinidad and Tobago has a rice industry with a substantial element of subsidy and no Member of Parliament should be allowed to come into this House and misrepresent that to prolong his own unproductive career.

Mr. Jurai: Would the Minister be so kind as to tell this House what he is doing to improve the production of rice in this country today?

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, do you understand? I gave way to him a while ago. He got up and did not know what Motion we were dealing with. He said nothing. He gets up again and is doing the same thing.

The senior Member for Oropouche talked about opening up the rice market to put rice farmers in whatever and treat them like third-class citizens. He has made history in this country by seeking to tell certain persons that others in this country are making them second, third and last class. That has been his political career. That has been his sustenance. And I decry that.

Madam Speaker, I come back to the Caricom agreement. One of the best rice-producing areas in the region is Guyana. Guyana is a member of Caricom. Is the Member for Oropouche saying that, God forbid, one of these days if his party come into government they will close Trinidad and Tobago's borders to Guyanese rice? Is that his party's position? Guyana is a Member of Caricom so, therefore, rice produced in Guyana ought to have unimpeded access to the Trinidad and Tobago's market under the arrangements intact. How could a Member of Parliament get up on a Monday afternoon and talk about opening up the market to suffer Trinidad rice farmers!

What we have to tell our rice farmers in this country, which is what I have to tell them as Minister responsible, is that insofar as there is a housewife in this country buying rice—she has no particular preference for the rice she buys once it is good rice. If rice goes on the shelf and Trinidad rice sells at \$1.00 per pound and Guyanese rice at \$.10 per pound, I believe she is going to buy the Guyanese rice. The problem is that within Caricom there are disparities in terms of production costs.

3.00 p.m.

Therefore, if we are in Caricom, as we unreservedly and unapologetically are, this party and this Government are in Caricom to stay. Therefore, we have to take into account how we deal with our neighbours.

The fact is that Guyanese rice, ready for cooking, can be landed on the Port of Spain docks at approximately 41 cents per pound. That is a fact. Insofar as they are members of Caricom they can access that rice at that price. We, with government support and subsidy, are paying in this country 89 cents per pound for paddy, which when milled gives us 50 and 60 per cent in rice. Do you see the relationship between Trinidad rice production and Guyana rice production? If you convert 89 cents per pound for paddy, with a 60 per cent yield in rice, you are talking about \$1.00-plus in terms of rice per pound.

There is a situation where to compete one-on-one, Guyanese rice could enter this market a lot cheaper.

Miss Bhaggan: Would the Minister indicate to this House what is the labour cost per day in US dollars in Guyana?

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: That is irrelevant. We do not set Guyanese labour costs. Insofar as we are members of Caricom whatever they pay in Guyana is not the point. The point is that the finished product is going to enter this market under Caricom arrangements.

Mr. Palackdharrysingh: Less monetary policy.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: If that is an argument, then we should be saying that we should not enter into any multilateral arrangement like Caricom comprising any country that does not pay our wages. These are the trading realities of today. The daily wage in Jamaica is different from that of St. Vincent, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, but we are all members of Caricom, a multilateral trading bloc.

In fact, Caricom is now working towards a one market economy. Is it that Members on the other side are saying that they are against a one-market economy in Caricom?

Mr. Sudama: Could the Minister tell us what would happen to the people who would be displaced as a result of Government's policy?

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I do not understand the question. I am stating the facts as they relate to our association in Caricom.

I am asking Members and they are getting up one after the other, but they are not answering me. Are Members on the other side saying that what we should do is to close our borders to imports such as rice from Caricom neighbours? Is that what they are saying to us? I want to hear them very clearly. Are they saying to us that we should break ranks with Caricom?

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If the direction of Caricom is towards a one-market economy where no questions are asked, whether it is made in Kingstown or Port of Spain—I distinctly recall when my colleague the Member for San Fernando West came here with a bill to create the OCC, there was a big debate on the whole idea of Caricom, and every one of them to a man and lady, if there was one, got up and professed to be in support of Caricom.

Mr. Maharaj: Madam Speaker, I think the hon. Member by saying ‘if there was a lady,’ made a very serious allegation.

Madam Speaker: I thought that was a compliment.

Mr. Maharaj: No! No! I do not think so. I would ask the Member to withdraw that.

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I would be very surprised if my Friend on the other side took objection to that, but if that is what he wants to be so addressed, I did not do that, but if he asked me for it, then there is no skin off my nose.

Madam Speaker: I got the impression that the Member is saying that indeed there is a lady.

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: But Madam Speaker, you know that that is the only thing I would say.

When we had that debate here a lot was said about Caricom. My understanding was that every Member on the other side spoke in support of the direction that Caricom was going in. In fact, if I am not mistaken, at a subsequent date the Member for Tobago East even made some comments about the fact that we were not going as fast as we should. I seem to recall that.

If in one debate that is their position and a few months later in another debate their position is to talk about closing the borders to imports from Caricom, then I must say that it seems to me that the whole question of regional integration is up for discussion on the other side. We on this side have settled it, but we are listening to them.

In what context do we place this? I talked about being a member of Caricom and the access to very small quantities of coconut oil in the market of Trinidad and Tobago and, of course, rice from Guyana which is better produced. We do not have an advantage in those two products. If, as they are signalling we should do something to close the door to these products, what does it mean in terms of what we get out of being members of Caricom?

They always get up and profess to talk on behalf of those who would lose their jobs. There is nothing that would bring greater job loss in this country than any policy that they are suggesting with respect to Caricom. You only have to walk into any supermarket in Bridgetown or Kingstown and look at the shelves, and you would see how many of those items are made in Trinidad and Tobago. You would understand something: We are a trading nation and our Caricom trade is very important to us, especially insofar as jobs are concerned. Any suggestion whatsoever that we—

Mr. Maharaj: Would the hon. Member give way? As a Member of Cabinet, since he is talking about jobs and Government's policy, could he tell us where these jobs would come from?

Dr. The Hon. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, if I do not permit another interruption, you would excuse me.

The point I am making is that insofar as we are trading with Caricom, many of the products made in the factories of Trinidad and Tobago, that employ people in this country, are made for Caricom markets. If those products cannot access Caricom markets, then there would be a loss of jobs in those factories of Trinidad and Tobago. How in one breath can they talk about saving and creating jobs, and in the other indicate that they want to have some kind of arrangement where the Caricom arrangement ought not to be allowed to prevail.

When Members get up and talk like that, they are simply being irresponsible, or as our Friend the Member for Nariva has shown, totally unprepared and uninformed; neither of which is a position to permit anyone to get up in Parliament to make any presentation worthy of listening to.

What we have to do is seek, insofar as we are involved in these situations, to do our best in terms of producing, so that when we put our products on the shelf whether it is in Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Jamaica or London, our products would be the ones chosen by the purchaser. Anything other than that would not do, and to come here and shout at the Government, be it this Government or any other government and ask the Government to buy this or that is getting us nowhere. The situation is that the Government does not purchase these products for use; it sets the stage for the activity to take place and for international trading arrangements. That is the role of the Government.

A Member who knows better—or who ought to know better—seeks to advance solutions which cannot work, and talks about opening our market to Caricom, rather than telling the people what the exact situation is and what we

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have to work towards. If he does not do that and persons decide, based on what he is saying, that somebody is selling us short, then that might be a benefit to him. Fortunately, the average farmer out there is far more alert and aware than the Member for Oropouche, and knows the facts.

3.10 p.m.

One will understand that the farmers have been in a position where, prior to the availability of funds, certain situations prevailed. During the period of the availability of funds, much cash support was given to farmers. I can say, Madam Speaker, at this point in our economic development, with the difficulties we are facing, yes, the approach of the Government is to direct available resources to providing farmers with the bases to move forward in their respective fields, but not just in terms of paying them cash compensation for the crop, because that only relates to the crop.

This year, the Government is committing, over and above other commitments, \$60 million towards the improvement of access roads. We are talking about further commitments towards drainage. We are talking about commitments which are being discharged at Caroni Limited. All these are commitments which have cash considerations for the Treasury.

So, when anyone gets up here and talks about farmers being abandoned, he is simply being dishonest. When Members speak like that and the Government does not take such contributions seriously, it is not because we are contemptuous of the Members, but we prefer to spend our time on valuable work, providing accurate information to the farmers involved.

With respect to the matter of import duty before the House, it is something that has been there for some time and which needs to be addressed. It requires parliamentary involvement. If it is the duty of Parliament to do that, I, as a Member, have no difficulty in coming here whatever time, whatever day, to do my duty. If other Members feel inconvenienced, well, I am sorry, but I will do my duty as I am being paid to do.

Thank you, Madam Speaker,

Mr. Shamshuddin Mohammed (*Caroni East*): Madam Speaker, I had no intention whatever to make a contribution on the matter before this honourable House. However once more, we have had the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, make a contribution on the matter we are discussing, and not let anybody down as regards his usual arrogance and posturing, his advancing of

solutions for every matter that comes up; his usual pontification about everything being nice and beautiful and going good with agriculture in this country. I cannot remain silent in these circumstances.

He talks about misrepresentation to this honourable House. He is misrepresenting the facts to the entire nation of Trinidad and Tobago. He seeks to belittle good, constructive contributions in this House, making it appear that what is said on this side is of no value.

Madam Speaker, I will crave your indulgence for a while to deal with this because it is a question of credibility. We have many things being documented. We have many things being said here and there. We have had White and Green Papers. If after two years in government all that can come out is another Green Paper which will take another two years before implementation, it shows the low state to which agriculture has gone in this country.

I am going to refer to an article which appeared in the *Trinidad Guardian* of June 1, 2, 4, 5 and 7, 1993. This is not a summary of the views on agriculture emanating from this side, but a document, *An Action Plan for Agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago*, prepared and made public a couple months ago by some distinguished citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. The authors are John Spence, Frank Rampersad, Lloyd Best, Dennis Pantin, Frank Barsotti and George Bovell. None of them is a Member of the Opposition, and I am sure that the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources knows these people quite well. This is what they had to say in connection with agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago now. I want him to listen carefully. Do not steups! Listen! He is highly provocative. He accuses others of misrepresentation. Everything is nice in agriculture as far as he is concerned. I want to disabuse the minds of hon. Members here and the country that things are well with agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago.

In the said article dated Tuesday, June 1, 1993, we see that four of the country's leading economists have called for a re-examination of the current policies on agriculture, a sector which they say is in deeper crisis than the rest of the economy.

This is what the experts have said: Agriculture is in deeper crisis than the rest of the economy. The hon. Minister does not put forward that point of view to this honourable House. To him everything is nice and going good with agriculture, but in that document entitled *An Action Plan for Agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago*, John Spence, Frank Rampersad, Lloyd Best and Denis Pantin, together with Frank Barsotti and George Bovell, have called for urgent action to restore confidence in the agricultural sector, submitting several recommendations to this end.

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So, an important note struck there, which is paramount and which permeates every aspect of agriculture in this country, is the lack of confidence. The people who are in agriculture are fearful. That sense of stability is not there. Learn to create that, my friend! That is what they are saying, lack of confidence.

The document states that Government must "announce its intention to support the agricultural sector through managing the trade in agricultural products and through subsidies, where necessary, using funds derived from tariffs on competitive food imports."

Other recommendations made included: "Pay subsidies now due to farmers; develop policies to ensure long term support for the agricultural sector with reference to food security and national nutrition requirements and the possibilities arising from Caricom trade."

The document also recommends:

"analyses commodities on an individual basis in terms of the social and economic issues they raise"; and "commission studies on the effects of conditionalities attached to agricultural sector loans before entering into any loan agreements."

It was also suggested that a role be developed for UWI and ECIAF graduates in farming.

The document argues that:

"The country's farmers feel abandoned by the State; the objective facts relating to current actions lend support to their feeling of having been neglected."

These are very strong words "abandonment" and "neglect". These are not my words, Member for Diego Martin West. *[Interruption]* They are wrong, too! Everybody in this country is wrong, but you are right. Live in that fool's world.

"The consequences of the present set of actions could be disastrous for the agricultural sector; but the economy as a whole will not emerge unscathed by the demise of the sector;...".

I am quoting from a document which is public property. Do you wish to deny me my right to quote from the document to deal with the statement that you have made? You are misleading the country, not this House alone. *[Interruption]*

3.20 p.m.

I will show you how that is negative and inaccurate, noting that farmers are already being abandoned. I continue:

"Farmers are resigning themselves to inevitable bankruptcy."

That is what is happening, Mr. Minister! Is he not aware, that that is what is taking place in this country? In every sector of agriculture people feel insecure, they have problems and I will come to those in a while. The action plan maintains that the perception is as follows:

"In their perception, the official machinery has singled them out for the harshest treatment."

All that the hon. Minister has said here today is indicative of the fact that that it is true that these farmers are being singled out for the harshest treatment. He talks about rice from Guyana and the Caricom Treaty. Okay, we agree with that, but what is he suggesting to the rice farmers of Trinidad and Tobago? What is he telling them? Right now they just feel that the subsidy is going to be removed, and there is an air of uncertainty existing among them.

He has explained our commitment to the Caricom Treaty, but he has not put forward a proposal to say what will become of the rice industry in Trinidad and Tobago.

"The moneys which Government owes to them are not being paid; the official institutions to which they owe money are foreclosing on them; the markets for their products are being preempted by subsidised imports which Government policy encourages; the quality of infrastructure which supports their activities is derisory; and the Government is unable to respond to the other concerns that are eating out the heart of the sector—praedial larceny, flash floods, droughts and forays into the local market by marketers of dumped goods."

The document noted that while the consequences and the requirements of the trade liberalization programme are being debated, the crises situation facing farmers, especially small farmers, is leading to the consumption of capital stock, the last stage in the dismantling of the sector. You were not here!

Dr. Rowley: Madam Speaker, could the Member say whether he would consider \$20 million in subsidy and \$60 million in access roads in this year alone, as being inconsequential for agriculture?

Mr. S. Mohammed: Madam Speaker, on that matter of access roads, the Prime Minister made a statement in this House on January 4, in which he talked about the access roads, the IADB loans. Is that not so? I do not think a single access road has been touched anywhere in Trinidad and Tobago. Am I right, hon. Members? Which hon. Member has? My colleague on my right, have you got any? None! Member for Diego Martin West, that is the same point I have made. It is nice to have things on paper!

Dr. Rowley: Madam Speaker, only recently the Government, through the procedures, via Central Tenders Board, awarded contracts for \$60 million for the development of access roads. They are asking, where! As the Minister responsible, I have stood in Parliament in answer to their questions and identified every single road to be worked upon in the first phase. I am again asking, would the Member consider \$20 million in rice subsidy and \$60 million on access roads in this year as being inconsequential and an abandonment of farmers?

Mr. S. Mohammed: Madam Speaker, I did not say anything about "being inconsequential." He is misinterpreting what I am saying, I am taking a general view of the situation of agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago. The Minister went on a tour with us; the sum of \$100 million would not even touch the sluice gate in Felicity. He was there! He saw! And he is talking about things that he says are there. We have not witnessed any. I am giving a total view of agriculture which has declined substantially during his tenure. *[Interruption]* There has been no improvement in agriculture!

Let the Minister tell me which one of the sectors in agriculture has advanced in any way since his assumption of duty as Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources. Instead, I have it on credible evidence—and I can bring the evidence for him—that he was arrogant to officers of National Fisheries; he refused to sit and talk with them; he treated them with scorn and contempt. He did it! They are not even replying to letters. All sectors—pig, poultry, dairy farmers, everybody; the cry is everywhere. The Minister is not hearing the cries; I do not know who is fooling him.

Hon. Member: The only humane Minister there is the Minister of Public Utilities.

Mr. S. Mohammed: Well he is in a "cocoon".

Madam Speaker, I have quoted here; these are not my words or those of any of the hon. Members here. The fact of the matter is, these are people who have

analyzed the economy. The Member for Diego Martin West who holds the portfolio of Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources is probably saying that all this is nonsense too, that they are all wrong. That *Action Plan for Agriculture* has been out only a few months and it expresses the concerns of the people. I think that the hon. Minister, the Member for Diego Martin West, should cultivate the habit of being a good listener. He must not dub every contribution that comes from this side nonsensical. The fact of the matter is, we represent constituencies. In the constituencies we represent, there are varying interests, agriculture, being major, and other forms of trade and activity. If problems exist and we talk about problems in agriculture, it is because we open our ears to what is going on with the people in the country. We do not sit in an office or do as he did when he went with the big Mexican hat, his nice shoes and clothes to tour flooded areas. *Interruption]*

We are concerned, Madam Speaker, we would be happy to see that we move in the right direction. Do not feel that everything is negative. Do not say that everything that we are doing is wrong. What is being done is not consistent with the oath that we took. We are all elected; we belong in this place. I have repeatedly said that we represent the sovereign will of the people. Yes, it is the point!

Dr. Rowley: —foolishness.

Mr. S. Mohammed: Yes! Well that is it! These economists are talking foolishness too. You had a copy of this, you know. All of this is foolishness. Everything everybody does is foolish to him. Now he has concluded that the four economists are foolish too.

This one is a publication that came out, headlined, "The Coconut Industry hanging in abeyance." Does the Minister really know what is going on in Cedros? Does he know that more than 12,000 people in that—he should ask his colleague at the back about Point Fortin; I am sure he has some tender spot for the people of Cedros. The main vocation of those people for long, long years is the coconut industry, of course there is fishing as well. Does he know that at the present time coconut trees are being bulldozed? The people have become so desperate, they are trying to cultivate water melons and these things instead. Is the Minister aware that, if you destroy a coconut field you cannot have another? Yes, you cannot. If he is au courant with the developments in agriculture he would know that there is a disease called red ring that will not permit one to plant coconut on any large scale in this country, unless control of that disease is achieved.

Customs (Import Duty) Order
[MR. MOHAMMED]

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Does he know what is happening with the floating of the Trinidad and Tobago dollar and the changes in the exchange rate? Does he know whether any of the foreign products will be priced so high that it would become more expensive to produce our cooking oil here?

3.30 p.m.

This Government cannot say that it is giving any great encouragement to the coconut industry and to the coconut farmer. There is an article in one of the newspapers which reads:

"Towering coconut trees swaying gently in the wind along the coastal villages of Cedros."

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, I really cannot see the relevance of waxing poetic at this point. I think the hon. Member has dealt very concisely with the Minister's contribution on the question of agriculture, so could we move on now to the Order before this honourable House.

Mr. S. Mohammed: Madam Speaker, I always like to make my position clear. I was not reciting poetry; this is a newspaper article. It was not my composition.

Madam Speaker: It is irrelevant at this point. As I said, you have dealt extensively with the points made by the hon. Minister with respect to agriculture. I think you have done very well, so could we move on to the Customs Order!

Mr. S. Mohammed: Madam Speaker, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources dealt almost totally with agriculture in his contribution; he hardly dealt with the Order and I cannot allow him to get away with that. I am dealing with issues that he raised.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Minister dealt very exhaustively with the issues involving Caricom; maybe the hon. Member for Caroni East could concentrate on that a little now.

Mr. S. Mohammed: That is precisely what I have been saying, Madam Speaker; my contribution is solely within Caricom. The hon. Minister talked about rice in the context of Caricom, telling this House and this country that rice can be produced in Guyana and be landed here at 40 cents per pound, and that we are paying a subsidy of 89 cents for paddy, so that when the husk is removed and a price is given for the Trinidad rice, it is going to be more expensive than that from Guyana. So the Minister was making the submission to this House about the

Caricom Treaty, that we have to follow the Caricom Treaty so we have to take the rice from Guyana. My question is: When that is being done what is going to happen to our rice farmers here?

The hon. Minister talked at length on the coconut industry, which is important, because we are talking about other edible oils. Soya bean and all those other oils are important and relate to the coconut industry. If the Government continues to support importation without any control or any help to the coconut industry and soya bean oil or the oil that is mentioned in the Order is allowed to be imported, it would be in competition with our oil that is made from coconuts, on which some 12,000 people depend for their livelihood. So when we are taking what we have—whether it is St. Lucia or Dominica that sends soap, coconut oil or any kind of oil to Trinidad and Tobago—we produce oil, too, so we need to balance our situation and see how we stand. So it is well within the confines of the Caricom scenario that I am making my submissions to this honourable House.

What assurances and what does the future hold for a coconut industry in Trinidad and Tobago if we are being asked to pass this Order, through which these oils would be allowed into the country? If on the Minister's own admission National Flour Mills is dealing with soya oil which is an extract from the beans, then again that impinges on the oil from the coconut. That is precisely what I am saying. Therefore, what is the Government's proposal with regard to this whole situation involving imports into the country which are in competition with our products?

The economists made the same point; the *Action Plan* called for an assessment to be made with regard to the impact of trade liberalization on agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago. What study has been done by the Minister or the ministry or anybody else in the Government to seek to analyze what is taking place? Madam Speaker, this is important for the country. If a trade liberalization system is being put in place, and items are being imported which impact on goods produced here, is it not prudent management and prudent government that some mechanism be set up whereby the impact on our own economy can be assessed? I am saying that this House has not been told. This is a secret Government, maybe.

We are pontificating on the question of a secret government and if, in fact, that has been done or is being done, let the Government tell the House who are the people making the assessment. This needs to be done. *[Interruption]* That may be so. You may have your point of view. We represent people, you represent people. You can come here and attack the Opposition. You get all the exposure you want; you attack the Opposition and we cannot reply.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I do not want a quarrel between Members. Please just carry on with the debate and refrain from arguing.

Mr. S. Mohammed: The hon. Minister has a penchant for provocation; ask the hon. Member for San Fernando West about that; he would translate that for you. Once he does that he would be at the receiving end—he gives wind ball; I will give him cork ball.

I wish to make it abundantly clear that nobody on this side ever made any submission in this honourable House that we were closing any doors on Caricom. We never said that and that must be made abundantly clear. That is not our position. Our concern is that whatever is done must take into account the interests of our people, and especially our farmers in this instance. We know what is involved in a treaty, *consensus ad idem*, I think we say in the law—both sides reach an agreement, you sign it and you are supposed to observe it. We are asking the Government what mechanisms are being devised in order to ensure that our interests are best protected, whatever the treaty might be. So Madam Speaker, these matters need to be taken into account.

The hon. Minister has said that \$60 million is being assigned to the Access Roads Programme, that infrastructure is needed in agriculture. Members on this side of the House have not seen the implementation, but we say congratulations on putting \$60 million. We need much more. We have also spoken about other inputs of infrastructure. A very debilitating aspect of farming in Trinidad and Tobago needs to be noted and the Minister has not given his attention to this matter, at least, he has not brought it to the honourable House.

I refer to the extent to which the various sectors of the agricultural community in this country—and the point is made in the report by the economists that this is a serious thing that must be looked at, it is a barometer to assess how we are proceeding in agriculture—need to dispose of their capital stock in order to get money to run their enterprises. That must be looked at. It is happening in dairy farming; it is happening in other sectors. People are selling their tractors; they are slaughtering their animals and they have to take that money to run their enterprises.

Dr. Rowley: I thank the hon. Member for giving way, Madam Speaker. The report to which the hon. Member makes copious reference has as one of its solutions for dealing with the dairy industry, Government's purchasing all dairy stock from farmers at market price and having done so, resell the same stock to the farmers at a considerably reduced price. What is the hon. Member's position on that?

Mr. S. Mohammed: Madam Speaker, why does the hon. Minister wish to test my knowledge of the implication of a particular aspect of a report propounded by the economists? What is the relevance or importance of my view? The reason the experts probably suggested that was to demonstrate the fact that the farming sector lacks liquidity and they are proposing that Government buy and sell back. It is for the Government to say whether it can or cannot do it. I do not see why the hon. Minister is asking my view on that. The position is that the farmers lack the liquidity; you test it out, you do it. It is here in the report. I am aware that that provision is in the report of the learned economists, so to speak. There are various suggestions. When suggestions are made it is for the Government analyze to them and to see to what extent it can accept and implement these suggestions. I am not pre-empting anything. This is a document made available to the Opposition. Because I am the shadow Minister of agriculture, I got a copy from them, and I thank them very much for their kind indulgence.

What we are saying is that the infrastructure and the related aspects of agriculture—and I am sorry the hon. Member for San Fernando East is not here this evening because I would have liked to appeal to him to take a personal interest, now that he has become a television star with “going down the road.” I want him to join with the farmers of the country and go down the road, too.

This is important, because right now there is human evidence—have you ever heard about “*poco loco* in the cocoa?” We are now developing a parliamentary vernacular, a booklet would be available in due course—what it means is that many of these farmers are virtually going crazy. They cannot pay the ADB and their other creditors. What I am saying to the hon. Minister is that he must understand our position if it represents a situation. This is just an Order we are being asked to approve today, but inherent in that Order is the whole gamut of agriculture.

3.40 p.m.

We are asking the Government to be a little more sympathetic to the issues and not cry down everything as being bad.

I am saying that agriculture in this country today is not on a sound footing. We on this side are not convinced that Government really and truly demonstrates that care and commitment to agriculture that ought to be symptomatic of a country that is moving ahead, knowing full well that oil is a depleting resource; and that if we can develop our agriculture to feed ourselves it would help to sustain life in this country.

Customs (Import Duty) Order
[MR. MOHAMMED]

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Other parts of the world are subsidizing—and the great writers here quoted a number of countries—we are *chinksing* or we are removing subsidies. It is a redeployment of our resources. To what extent has assistance to the farmers been considered in light of the \$130 million that has been given in the Unemployment Relief Programme? Madam Speaker, the Government needs to have an attitude of compassion and willingness to help build confidence in the farmers of the country.

If my Friend the Member for Diego Martin West who is otherwise a co-operative gentleman, would allow considerations to farmers to be paramount, that would serve him in good stead. *[Interruption]* Do not tell me anything again; you are going to provoke me and I will start again! Keep quiet until I have finished—I am nearly through!

So, Madam Speaker, I want to thank you very much for your kind indulgence. I really had no intention of speaking but, as usual, the Member for Diego Martin West, with his unqualified penchant for provocation, has caused me to make a small contribution to the debate.

Thank you very much.

The Minister of Local Government and the Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Kenneth Valley): Madam Speaker, I apologized for bringing the Members out today. I think I should really now take that back because they seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed this. They spent very little time on the issue before us. The first speaker, the Member for Oropouche, demonstrated complete ignorance, as it were, of arrangements within Caricom. My Friend the Member for Nariva thought we were debating the Trade (Amdt.) Bill and the last speaker, the Member for Caroni East, spent his time on agriculture, when the Motion is, quite simply—

Mr. Sudama: What about the Member for Diego Martin West?

Hon. K. Valley: I want to thank the Member for Diego Martin West for his intervention!

Madam Speaker, the critical issue in this piece of legislation arises out of the Treaty of Chaguaramas, and the Member for Oropouche told us that we were really reducing duties from some 45 per cent to zero with respect to lard substitutes and so forth. That is the furthest thing from the truth. Under the Treaty of Chaguaramas, the member countries of Caricom are in a common market. That is the whole concept. Thus in the normal course of things the rate of duty on

goods imported from a member country is zero. Article 17 of the Treaty makes it clear:

"Except as provided in Article 52 and Schedule IV to this Annex Member States shall not—

apply directly or indirectly to imported goods any fiscal charges in excess of those applied directly or indirectly to like domestic goods or otherwise apply such charges so as to protect like domestic goods;..."

The concept, Madam Speaker, is that within Caricom there is a special schedule even where the duty is charged. Outside Caricom, that is, third countries, there is now a common external tariff. So that the 45 per cent the Member spoke about related to goods coming into the Caribbean from third countries and not from one member country to another. So that his whole argument concerning the need for information concerning how much would be lost, is nil, Madam Speaker.

I made the point that whereas before when there were excise duties on domestic goods, one could have charged customs duties on goods coming from a member state to the equivalent of the excise duties, as excise duties went with the introduction of VAT, one could no longer charge customs duties on those goods. The rates of customs duties which were applicable under the schedule—deodorized edible oil, 10 cents per gallon; lard substitute, 42 cents per hundred pound—this is what went out when the VAT was introduced. As you know, all goods, including imports, are subject to VAT. That is the only point that one needs to respond to, saying quite simply, that the duties forgone are in fact nil. There is a treaty by which one is bound and in any case there is value added tax which picks up from the customs duties.

Then the Member went on, again being irrelevant—

Mr. Sudama: Will the hon. Minister tell this honourable House what was the percentage rate of duty charged on these imported items before the value added tax was introduced?

Hon. K. Valley: Madam Speaker, that is what I just provided.

Mr. Sudama: Percentage—not 10 cents per gallon! I want to compare that with the 15 per cent value added tax.

Hon. K. Valley: Madam Speaker, the point I am making is that there were excise duties, for example, on lard substitutes in Trinidad and Tobago and by

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implication that was 10 cents, and so forth. Therefore one could charge a similar amount in customs duties. One is removing that, therefore, one has to remove the customs duties. One is putting a value added tax system in place that is going to apply not only to goods made in Trinidad and Tobago, but also in the rest of the Caribbean.

One has to remember the basic concept, which is in our manifesto; We treat Caricom—that is the fundamental point made by the Treaty of Chaguaramas—as one market. So that there ought to be no differential in duties between one country and another. One saw that point clearly coming through in our manifesto, stating that our vision is for a Caricom that is competitive, and sees all Caricom as part of that market. Again, I say, Madam Speaker, that is, in effect, a nil argument.

3.50 p.m.

I was making the point that the Member went on to say that this was part of trade liberalization. This has nothing to do with trade liberalization, Madam Speaker. If this has to do with trade liberalization it was done way back in 1973-1979 when we negotiated the Treaty of Caricom. Trade liberalization today must talk about third countries coming within Caricom. There is a common external tariff in Caricom.

He went on to link this with structural adjustment and all types of irrelevancies, having nothing whatsoever to do with the matter before us. Then it took his colleague the Member for Nariva, confused as he was, to make one point which I consider significant. He made the point that with respect to customs duties on lard substitutes of some \$5.5 million—I do not think he stated the year—most of that came from the United States, and only \$530,000 came from Barbados, making the point that the bulk of this—the point I made—with respect to these items, was very little importation from the rest of the Caribbean. With respect to third countries, that rate of duty of 45 per cent, or whatever it is, still obtains. It is merely within Caricom that there is this free market concept.

Then my Friend the Member for Oropouche took issue with the Prime Minister's statement that from January next year prices would trend downwards, quoting some economist. That fundamental assumption was one of the reasons that very early I moved away from straight economics and concentrated on business. This is basically what this statement is saying: Given that import prices are reducing, other things being equal, prices would trend downwards. That is an incremental point which is valid in any state of the market, that were it not for the

planned reduction in import prices over time, prices otherwise would have been higher.

Mr. Sudama: Would the Member give way? I know he left economics a long time ago—provided, of course, that there is a competitive situation, is that not one of the assumptions one has to make, that there is competition and, therefore that would force the passing on of the lower prices? Is that a valid assumption?

Hon. K. Valley: Madam Speaker, we have a manifesto by which we are guided. If they look at what we are doing—one of the key things that we spoke about was a competitive and market-oriented domestic economy; that, in fact, we see our role as providing for that. But there is another point. The basic issue is, other things being equal, which is, as I said, the fundamental political assumption. We can say a number of things.

Mr. Sudama: Did the Prime Minister say, other things being equal, prices will drop?

Hon. K. Valley: As an economist the Member knows, but he goes about saying all sorts of things, forgetting the assumption under which these things work. The Opposition is known for that. I have said time and time again that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The next election is 1996, and that is after next year, so that he is going to be here.

I remember when we floated the currency on April 13, there were those who were saying that it would be \$10 in two months or what have you, failing to recognize the fact that there are managers in the Government, people who know what they are doing. It is not guesswork.

In closing, let me just say quickly that I interjected to make the point that this was the first time this matter came before the Parliament. The Member took me to task, stating that I was not here last week and that it was on the Order Paper of last week. I have a copy of the Order Paper of Monday, September 20, 1993 and there is no such Motion on this Order Paper, and I am informed that there was no supplemental Order Paper.

Mr. Sudama: In other words, this Order for confirmation was brought today to the House and we were asked to come here and debate something about which we knew absolutely nothing, of which we had no foreknowledge. Is that what he is saying? He should resign as Leader of the House.

Madam Speaker: The Leader of Government Business on the last occasion did indicate that it was to be debated today.

Hon. K. Valley: He indicated, but it was not on the Order Paper. I make the point that this is the first time it appeared on the Order Paper.

Mr. Sudama: He is trying to split hairs.

Hon. K. Valley: I am not trying to split hairs, I am making the point.

The Member, again going on with his irrelevant contribution, tried to tie this in with the whole concept of structural adjustment and our state enterprises policy. Last week I had the privilege to attend the Commonwealth Finance Minister's meeting in Nassau, and I was honestly quite surprised that among some 40 Commonwealth countries—including countries like New Zealand, Australia, Lesotho, Botswana—one of the issues for discussion was the transition to the market economy. While many ministers spoke about some of the problems in the transition, everyone accepted that that was the way to go, to move towards a competitive market economy.

My colleagues on the other side are still debating, as it were, issues of the 1960s and 1970s which are no longer relevant in an environment where China is talking about private sector participation in electricity generation; all over the world, in Eastern Europe, everybody has accepted that what moves one to the ideal state is competition. Members of the Opposition are still living in the world of the 1950s and 1960s.

4.00 p.m.

We said quite clearly that in addition to the competitive market economy, the state's role will be that of a facilitator. There are four principles on which our economic policy is based. One is export oriented growth; and underlying all that, the strong people orientation and the caring for the people. And as we go along that is all we are doing. So that we listen to them, but we know they are irrelevant as their Friend upstairs.*[Interruption]* Three hundred thousand—that definitely was not caused by this Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Customs (Import Duty) (Caribbean Common Market) Order, 1993 be confirmed.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made, That this House do now adjourn to Friday, October 1, 1993 at 1.30 p.m. [Hon. K. Valley]

**Agricultural Holdings
(Subdivision of)**

Mr. Sahid Hosein (*Siparia*): Madam Speaker, the Motion is on:

The apparent refusal by the Town and Country Planning Division to exercise an element of discretion which is evidenced by their blatant refusal to subdivide certain parcels of land formerly or presently classified as agricultural holdings.

This has been a very sore point for quite a number of citizens. The Town and Country Planning Division seems to be operating under a law and under premises that came into being in the 1940s and 1950s which today are no longer relevant. It also seems to me, the Division has not taken into consideration the immense development that has taken place throughout the country. It seems to me also, after listening to today's debate and following the direction the Government is taking, the policies it is pursuing, that the question of agricultural holdings will no longer be relevant, because there will no longer be people involved in agriculture.

I make an appeal today that the Town and Country Planning Division take cognizance of what is happening. Do they prefer that people who are affected because of these archaic laws squat on Government land as seems to be the case?

Mr. Manning: Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. Member for Siparia for giving way. I wonder whether he could be very precise in saying what aspects of the law he considers archaic. I should like to know for the purpose of being able to respond.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, the refusal to subdivide the lands, lands that were classified as agricultural holdings, which bear no relevance to the usage today. This is what I am speaking about. And the refusal by the Division seems to be telling people that it is okay to squat.

These people are not making any demands on the state; all they are saying is subdivide the land and allow us to utilize our own lands. They are not making demands on the state for infrastructural development. They are asking for subdivision of the lands so that they can get individual title enabling them to go to WASA, T&TEC and the banks and use the lands as collateral to provide houses and whatnot, instead of making demands on the state.

In fact, one would tend to think the refusal by that Division is a deprivation of the right of the individuals affected to use the lands as collateral and for other uses. What has brought this about? You would find that a parent with five or six children, having a piece of land—it might be three, four acres—and he wants to

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leave something for his children so they do not have to squat, or go into other rural areas. So he leaves this land for them as an entitlement but because of that law, they do not have the right or entitlement to that land. I cite two specific cases to emphasize the point I am making.

One has to do with Mr. Guyadeen Ramlochan and others. Their father left an acre of land for four brothers. Since 1989 this family has been appealing to the Town and Country Planning Division to subdivide the land so that the members can get their share to build their homes, to get on with their lives. The other is the case of Mr. Saheed Mohammed involving five acres of land and ten persons. Mind you, we are not talking about a backwater area; we are talking about the San Francique Main Road, a heavily traversed road with lands divided by the San Francique Main Road. Agriculture is not practised there and up to this time—again, the appeal goes back to 1988—the Town and Country Planning Division has not seen it fit to acknowledge the same. It makes one wonder whether it is a given policy or whether the people in that Division have no clue as to what is taking place on the outside.

I expect to hear from the Minister responsible whether something definite is going to be done. I ask: Does it form part of the Government's land reform programme? How does it fit into the Government's land reform programme? For it affects far too many citizens of this country to be simply brushed aside. I expect this afternoon, when the Minister replies, that this matter will be addressed.

I thank you.

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister and Minister in the Ministry of Planning and Development (Sen. The Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, it is amazing that we have heard quite a bit about agriculture and the use of agricultural lands this afternoon, first of all, irrelevantly, on the Resolution that was before the House, by Members on the other side, who are insisting that the Government do things to assist farmers in agriculture and the like. *[Interruption]*

4.10 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Would hon. Members allow the Minister to speak!

Sen. The Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: When the Member for Siparia spoke about agricultural land and its use, he was suggesting quite clearly that agricultural land and land specifically for the use—

Mr. Hosein: I was suggesting no such thing. What I said was that taking into consideration the development that has taken place since certain lands were declared agricultural holdings, it no longer has any relevance to what is taking place today.

Madam Speaker: I suppose the hon. Minister's answer to that argument is going to develop, but it is agricultural land. Let us hear what she has to say.

Sen. The Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

As I was saying, they are asking that agricultural land be subdivided, to build houses. The Town and Country Planning Division does not operate willy-nilly. It operates by an Act, or if I may quote a previous Member, it does not operate *poco loco*.

Mr. Mohammed: Madam Speaker, when it comes to those technicalities, I think the hon. Minister is misquoting me. Those are areas with which I am sure she is thoroughly unfamiliar. However, I must thank her for giving way. I want to know from the hon. Minister whether she is suggesting—

Madam Speaker: She has not given way.

Mr. Mohammed: She has given way.

Madam Speaker: Given way on what? *Poco loco*?

Mr. Mohammed: No. We are finished with that. That has since been sealed with the Member for Diego Martin West, unless he resurrects it.

I wish to know whether the hon. Minister is suggesting to this honourable House that there are no instances in respect of which agricultural lands have been changed for housing purposes; in other words, a change of land use.

Sen. The Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker the Town and Country Planning Division operates by way of legislation that is dated August 1, 1969 and not the '1940s or the 1950s. The Act by its long title suggests that it operates in a particular manner. I would just quote the long title of the Act which is:

"An Act to make provision for the orderly and progressive development of land in both urban and rural areas and to preserve and improve the amenities thereof."

The Town and Country Planning Division does not operate by refusing applications blatantly. Indeed, it operates on the basis of a land development policy. There is a plan that was brought to Parliament in 1984 to determine the

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use of land throughout Trinidad and Tobago; which land is classified as agricultural land and which land is classified as housing land. Before this plan actually came to Parliament, it was shown to the local authorities in the specific areas—I am sure Siparia was included—to ensure that the land that is being specified for a particular use is in fact agreed upon by the local authorities.

I repeat, that the development plan came to Parliament for approval and prior to this the local authorities were consulted to ensure that the development was in keeping with the type of land use in the particular area of the country.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, is the Minister aware that agricultural lands at Debe were taken over and divided into lots by NHA without the approval of the Town and Country Planning Division or the local government authority?

Sen. The Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, I am not aware of that.

In addition to that, if a change in the use of any land is desired, a proper application needs to be made to the Town and Country Planning Division; following that, if that change of use is agreed upon, then, change of use will take place.

Additionally, where agricultural land is concerned, it must be made abundantly clear that if it is improperly used, used for a purpose other than agriculture, and precautions are not taken, we would be faced with the problem of environmental degradation. At a time like this, we cannot agree to a situation where agricultural land is improperly used.

Further, the Government clearly realizes that agriculture is one of the most important aspects of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. As a consequence of this, land that has been designated agricultural land would not, without proper authority, be subdivided for building houses. Are we to find ourselves in a position where land that has been designated agricultural land is subdivided just to ensure that people are allowed to build houses? Is it that the land now designated agricultural land is being improperly used?

Clearly, if the persons who have requested a subdivision—and I must point out that if a subdivision is requested, clear guidelines must be set out to ensure that the land is properly used. I repeat, the Town and Country and Planning Division operates properly. It does not exist in a system of blatant refusals. Once there are conditions that exist to ensure that the land use can be changed, it would be changed; but if it is going to be to the detriment of the land and others who

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may have to use it, the Town and Country Planning Division would refuse the application.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 4.20 p.m.