

*Vacant Seat*

*Friday, February 14, 1997*

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

*Friday, February 14, 1997*

The House met at 4.18 p.m.

**PRAYERS**

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**VACANT SEAT**

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Members, the first announcement I want to make is to apologize for the fact that we should have started at 4.00 p.m., and we are late, but the changes created a bit of a delay and I am sorry that we are a few minutes late. I hope that you were not too inconvenienced by that.

Secondly, I want to indicate to hon. Members that section 24(1) of the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago provides that:

"Where a member of the Senate or the House of Representatives is elected as President, his seat in the Senate or the House of Representatives, respectively, shall thereupon become vacant."

I wish to advise that the Member for Tobago East was today elected President by the Electoral College and in consequence I now formally declare his seat in Tobago East vacant.

**PAPER LAID**

The Excise Duty (Petroleum Products) Order, 1997. [*The Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism Hon. Brian Kuei Tung*]

**ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

**Agriculture Sector Loan Project  
(Programme Co-ordinator)**

**16. Dr. Keith Rowley** (*Diego Martin West*) asked the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources:

- (a) Could the Minister indicate whether a qualified panel of interviewers conducted interviews in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources for the position of Programme Co-ordinator to oversee the \$75.0 million Agriculture Sector Loan Project?
- (b) Could the Minister say whether the applicants were ranked by the panel in order of suitability and, if so, what was the order?

- (c) If any selection and appointment was made, could the Minister indicate who was selected and whether this appointment follows on the recommendations of the interview panel?

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources (Dr. The Hon. Reeza Mohammed):** Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources wishes to indicate that during October 21 and 22, 1996, a qualified panel of interviewers conducted interviews in this ministry, for the position of Programme Co-ordinator. The eight applicants interviewed were ranked by the panel of interviewers in order of suitability. The original order of ranking was as follows:

- |        |       |
|--------|-------|
| 1. VTR | 5. KB |
| 2. MR  | 6. SH |
| 3. NG  | 7. AH |
| 4. GN  | 8. GN |

Mr. Speaker, before selection and appointment was made to the post, the Inter-American Development Bank made a recommendation attesting to the extensive knowledge, experience and competence of the applicant, originally ranked sixth, in dealing with matters relating to the Investment Sector Loan between the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the IADB, by performing the duties of Senior Project Administrator of the Ministry of Planning and Development, Restructuring Support Unit.

Mr. Speaker, this resulted in the applicant being re-ranked to No. 1 by the interview panel. Applicant SH was selected and appointed to the post of Programme Co-ordinator. This appointment followed the recommendation of the interview panel.

Thank you.

**Dr. Rowley:** Am I to understand, Mr. Speaker that the Member is telling the honourable House that the selection of the applicant ranked No. 6 was done by the IADB?

**Dr. The Hon. R. Mohammed:** My answer did not say that, Mr. Speaker. What I said was that the panel selected a candidate for that position after a recommendation was made by the Inter-American Development Bank on the quality and negotiating skills of that person.

**Dr. Rowley:** I thank you for giving way, but I still want to ask the Member: is he saying that the selection was made by the IADB? In fact, they have rejected the rankings of the qualified interview panel.

**Dr. The Hon. R. Mohammed:** I did not say that, Mr. Speaker.

**Dr. Rowley:** Let me put it another way. Who selected the sixth ranked person for the position of Programme Co-ordinator?

**Dr. The Hon. R. Mohammed:** The recommendation was made by the IADB, and the interviewing panel selected.

**4.25 p.m.**

**Dr. Rowley:** Are you saying the same panel that ranked persons one to six, subsequently ranked No. 6, No. 1?

**Dr. The Hon. R. Mohammed:** Mr. Speaker, if this is the final decision of the interviewing panel, that is the position.

**Dr. Rowley:** I crave your indulgence, but I would just like to get it clear. Are you saying that the panel that ranked these people one to six, subsequently, on the intervention of comments from the Inter-American Development Bank, reversed its position and ranked the No. 6 person, No. 1, and that person was selected for the job?

**Dr. The Hon. R. Mohammed:** If the interviewing panel decided in the final analysis after a recommendation, then that was the position.

**Dr. Rowley:** Was the recommendation of the Inter-American Development Bank based on a decision that the panel change around the rankings, made in writing to the Government?

**Dr. The Hon. R. Mohammed:** Mr. Speaker, I will have to verify an answer to that question on another occasion.

**Carenage Community Complex  
(Chairman)**

**17. Dr. Keith Rowley** asked the Minister of Community Development, Culture and Women's Affairs:

- (a) Could the Minister indicate whether any member from the Carenage Village was selected to chair the Board of the Carenage Community Complex?

- (b) If not, could the Minister state whether any attempt was made to find a suitable person from the Carenage Village to serve as Chairman of the facility?

**The Minister of Community Development, Culture and Women's Affairs (Sen. Dr. The Hon. Daphne Phillips):** Mr. Speaker, the answer to that question is yes. The chairman of the Carenage Regional Complex is Miss Sharon Jacob from the village of Carenage. Therefore, the second part of the question does not apply.

### **Guyana's Debt to Trinidad and Tobago**

**18. Dr. Keith Rowley** asked the Minister of Finance:

- (a) Further to the 1996 write-off of two-thirds of the Guyanese debt to Trinidad and Tobago, could the Minister indicate whether any follow-up action was taken in 1996 to ensure that the remaining one-third of the debt and the agreed interest payment become available to Trinidad and Tobago?
- (b) Could the Minister further indicate when the first interest payment became due and whether any payment has been made by the Government of Guyana to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago?
- (c) Could the Minister also indicate when the first principal payment becomes due and how much is expected?

**The Minister of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Brian Kuei Tung):** Mr. Speaker, subsequent to the agreement by the members of the Paris Club to stock up debt reduction for the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago appointed a technical team comprising officials of the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the office of the Attorney General. The technical team was mandated to commence negotiations and to conclude a bilateral agreement on the consolidation of debts owed by the Co-operative Republic of Guyana. The negotiations are at an advanced stage of completion, and the substantive issue remaining is the interest rate to be applied on the consolidated debt.

The first interest payment became due on November 23, 1996. This payment has not yet been made.

There is a moratorium of six years on the payment of principal. The total amount of principal expected is US \$176.944 million. The first principal payment of US \$213,879.00 falls due on November 23, 2002.

**Dr. Rowley:** Am I to understand that of the interest payments which are due, the Co-operative Republic of Guyana has already begun to be in arrears of that payment; so there is now a second set of arrears?

**Hon. B. Kuei Tung:** Mr. Speaker, one of the problems is that we got stuck on the rate of interest, but as soon as we can settle—and there has been some hard negotiations going on. The present rate of interest that the Co-operative Republic Bank of Guyana has reached is 6.6 per cent. However, this is not acceptable to the Government this time and it is hoping to get a higher rate of interest.

**Dr. Rowley:** Could the Minister clarify this for me? When this write-off was done, was the interest payment not settled at that time so one would know what the interest would be?

**Hon. B. Kuei Tung:** No, Mr. Speaker. The interest rate was not agreed to at that time. A basis was determined but the basis merely said it could be approximately 100-plus basis points above treasury notes. We are arguing that we received a higher rate than that and that is the reason the negotiations have been stuck at this time; part of the reason being that interest rates for normal transactions of this kind are a little higher. The Co-operative Republic of Guyana is seeking to pay a very low rate of interest. It is not that the interest rate was agreed to as much as the basis was agreed to. The basis is subject to negotiations.

**Dr. Rowley:** Could the Minister indicate when these negotiations actually commenced with respect to the interest rate which he has talked about?

**Hon. B. Kuei Tung:** I think the negotiations started around October, because it was hoped to have been finalized by November 23, in time for the first interest payment, but they were not finalized then.

**Dr. Rowley:** What is likely to happen if no agreement is made on this interest rate matter?

**Hon. B. Kuei Tung:** Mr. Speaker, there must be an agreement in the sense that somewhere along the line, somebody has to give in. It is either they give in or we give in. If we give in, we can collect money quicker, but by the same token, having written-off the debt, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is seeking to get a good interest rate for its money from here on. Whatever interest rate becomes due, it will have to be paid on the date when it became due. If the first payment was made on November 23 and one gets paid tomorrow, one may still collect the interest on the agreed rate. The Government has been holding off for a

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higher rate of interest and the Co-operative Republic of Guyana has also been holding out for a lower rate of interest.

**TRADE MARKS (AMDT.) BILL**

Bill to amend the Trade Marks Act, Chap. 82:81 [*The Minister of Legal Affairs*]; read the first time.

**REGISTRATION OF CHARGES (MOTOR VEHICLES) BILL**

Bill to provide for the registration of charges on motor vehicles and for the amendment to the Bills of Sale Act, Chap. 82:32 [*The Minister of Works and Transport*]; read the first time.

**SUGAR INDUSTRY LABOUR WELFARE COMMITTEE  
(INC'N) (AMENDMENT AND VALIDATION) BILL**

*Order for second reading read.*

**The Minister of Housing and Settlements (Hon. John Humphrey):** Mr. Speaker, I beg to move,

That a Bill to amend the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee (Inc'n) (Amdt. and Validation) Act, and to validate things done thereunder, be read a second time.

Mr. Speaker, there are two very simple Bills relating to the same issue. If I have your leave, I can deal with both Bills in the discussion stage and then we can formalize the passage.

*Assent indicated.*

**Hon. John Humphrey:** There is a situation which exists where the *de jure* Minister with responsibility for the Sugar Welfare Committee is the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, but, the *de facto* Minister is the Minister of Housing and Settlements. It is an anomaly in the legislation whereby this situation exists. We just need to clarify that with a very simple amendment to two measures making the Minister of Housing and Settlements the Minister with responsibility for the Sugar Welfare Labour Committee.

We also need to validate the matters which had been done with that committee while the anomaly existed. Let me just spell out for the sake of hon. Members some of the things that committee has done.

It was brought into being when sugar workers lived in very deplorable conditions in what was described as barrack houses. There is evidence of these still to be found in Trinidad and Tobago today. A levy was imposed on the producers

of sugar on the basis of each tonne produced so that funds could be derived to improve the housing conditions of sugar workers.

In a period of almost 50 years the committee has performed very well indeed, because it has produced with very meagre funds and, of course, with the mobilizing of communities, in excess of 20,000 three-bedroom houses, very high standard houses.

The things that the committee has done over time that would need validating are as follows:-The committee granted loans for the erection of new houses as well as repairs, renovation and extension of existing houses. All approvals are recorded on duly constituted and confirmed minutes of meetings of the Sugar Industry Welfare Labour Committee.

#### **4.35 p.m.**

The Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee also conveyed housing lots to beneficiaries whose 20-year leases were expired. Certain allotments were also conveyed to religious bodies for construction of places of worship and conduct of community activities and such decisions are recorded in confirmed minutes.

The Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee recommended, and on the advice of the Minister of Housing and Settlements, Cabinet approved the system of service charges for legal matters in 1994 as follows:

1. Increase in erection loans from \$55,000 to \$70,000 in 1994 when the PNM was in office.
2. Increase in repair, renovation and extension loans from \$15,000 to \$25,000.
3. Introduction of a flat interest rate of 5 per cent.
4. A non-refundable processing fee of \$50.00 for any application for a loan.

These are very, very soft terms indeed, Mr. Speaker, and it would certainly be my wish to see terms as soft as these extended to all the poor citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee recommended, on the advice of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, the regulations of the Sugar Welfare Special Funds Act which were amended in March 1996 to allow

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workers of the diversified programme of Caroni (1975) Limited to source housing loans. So they extended the facility to more workers in Caroni (1975) Limited.

The committee recommended, on the advice of the Minister of Housing and Settlements, and Cabinet approved in 1995, the award of three bursaries for final-year undergraduate studies leading to a social science degree at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine with effect from 1996 and continuing on an annual basis. The committee has also approved the award of book grants to children of sugar workers on the basis of needs.

On the recommendation of the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee, the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, in 1995, approved investments of \$5 million from the provisions of the Sugar Welfare Fund.

I wish to assure hon. Members that the committee has managed its funds in a very meticulous manner and has accounted for everything done, so this honourable House is asked to correct this simple anomaly by the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee (Inc'n) (Amendment and Validation) Bill 1997 to assign responsibility of the operation of the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee (Inc'n) Act, Chap. 64:05, to the Minister of Housing and Settlements and to validate acts done by the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee. The other Bill is merely transferring responsibility for the operation of Chap. 64:04, the Sugar Industry Special Funds Act, to the Minister with responsibility for Housing and Settlements from the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources.

I beg to move, Mr. Speaker.

*Question proposed.*

**Mr. Speaker:** May I point out that it has been agreed that one would be free to talk on the second Bill, which is an Act to amend the Sugar Industry Special Funds Act, Chap. 64:04.

**Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis (Arouca South):** Mr. Speaker, we have no difficulty in correcting this anomalous situation. We on this side are very interested in finding out, however, what is the situation with regard to the tripartite agreement in the sugar industry.

We notice things happening with regard to sugar workers, but we are not privy to what is happening with regard to the progress and the implementation of the tripartite agreement that was signed by the Member for Couva North and we are interested in finding out about that situation.



It is interesting that this committee which was formed in 1952 was under the administration of the PNM Government in 1957, which at that time took on the responsibility of funding that particular fund even though it was specifically for sugar workers. The government of the day—the PNM government—subsequently funded that special fund in order to ensure that sugar workers whom the hon. Member for St. Augustine indicated lived in barrack houses, could access loans to obtain housing for themselves at very reasonable rates.

We are of the view—and this view was articulated in the other place when this Bill came before that place—that this may also be an opportunity for other workers to be allowed to access funds in this way at very low rates of interest, and at repayment rates that are very reasonable.

It is interesting, however, Mr. Speaker, that the leases that are granted under this fund for those who own houses are for a period of 30 years, and it may be a suggestion that can be taken by the hon. Member for St. Augustine that the period of leases be extended to 199 years, a period perhaps, that makes tenure of those properties even more secure than the 30-year period granted. That 30-year period can be extended but, perhaps, the other side may want to take the suggestion that it be extended to 199 years.

As I indicated, we have no difficulty with this amendment, this attempt to correct what is called an anomaly. It is interesting that the Member for St. Augustine, who was of the view that there should be no Ministry of Housing and Settlements, is now enlarging his portfolio as he goes along his path. I am merely reiterating the fact Mr. Speaker, and—*[Interruption]* The Parliament's status will be raised if the Member for St. Joseph would leave.

It is clear that the cries of alienation and discrimination that came, particularly from the Member for Couva North, as it related to persons who worked in the sugar industry, were merely crocodile tears. Clearly, the history of the operations of the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee indicates that at all times the Government of the day, starting with the PNM government in 1957, was very interested in ensuring that sugar workers were properly housed.

Maybe under this particular Government, which seems to be recently sharing gifts, we would see the institution of a housing fund for other low-income workers and, probably, for teachers. I must state that perhaps no other sector has been as lucky as the sugar workers.

**4.45 p.m.**

**Mr. Panday:** You should not use that word in this House. “Lucky”!  
*[Laughter]*

**Mrs. C. Robinson-Regis:** Maybe the Government should consider the expansion of this programme, so that the last minister to join the Cabinet would have the portfolio which he so desires.

Thank you.

**The Minister of Housing and Settlements (Hon. John Humphrey):** I thank my colleagues opposite for supporting this measure. It is quite true that PNM governments have continued the work to improve the housing conditions of sugar workers that was started in colonial times. We have to give credit where it is due.

The concessionary terms which are offered to the sugar workers where the fund is derived from the sale of sugar which they produce, cannot be shared with other workers of the country. However, we are actively examining ways to enable the poor, generally, to access housing on very concessionary terms. The ministry is having continued discussions with the financial institutions, especially, the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company and the Home Mortgage Bank, with a view to possibly segmenting the market, so that the higher rungs of the market where people can afford to pay market rates, will be financed by the commercial banks—those would be viable mortgages—and the low and no-income groups in the society would attract the greatest concessionary funds from the state.

We have already taken a policy decision that we do not intend to condemn any of our people to perpetual poverty, through housing. When poor housing conditions are imposed on poor people, they are not given the opportunity to be upwardly mobile and they cannot aspire to attaining middle-class standards. A decision has been taken that all the housing developments of the National Housing Authority and the Project Execution Unit of the ministry would be of a certain reasonable standard, which would allow people to attain middle-class standard.

Squatter regularization projects would not be the mere removal of squatter shacks from one location to another, but would be housing projects properly designed where minimum sized lots provide enough space, so that people would not be living in crowded conditions. There would be room for fruit trees and others, landscaping and a beautiful living environment for all. We are hoping that all our housing settlements would attract mixed income groups, so that the middle

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and upper income groups would be happy to live side by side with the low income groups of the society, in good standard housing. This is really the aim.

I am delighted that hon. Members opposite are giving the encouragement and support. I suggest that the door remains open for all of us to work together in the national interest. We on this side are committed to national unity and welcome our recent addition to the line of ministers. I particularly extend an invitation to the Member for San Fernando East to join us in this regard and to bring his colleagues.  
*[Desk thumping]*

I believe that Trinidad and Tobago is on the threshold of an economic take off, where we are going to break out of the historical dependence on the petroleum sector and would be able to make full use of our natural and human resources in the development process. I also believe that if we could achieve genuine national unity and close ranks in the interest of building our country, there would be no power on earth that would hold this country back from improving the living conditions of all our people.

With those words, I beg to move.

**4.55 p.m.**

*Question proposed.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

*Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.*

*House in committee.*

*Clauses 1 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Question put and agreed to, That the Bill be reported to the House.*

*House resumed.*

*Bill reported, without amendments; read the third time and passed.*

**SUGAR INDUSTRY SPECIAL FUNDS (AMDT.) BILL**

*Order for second reading read.*

**The Minister of Housing and Settlements (Hon. John Humphrey):** Mr. Speaker, I beg to move,

That a Bill to amend the Sugar Industry Special Funds Act, Chap. 64:04, be now read a second time.

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*Question proposed.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

*Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.*

*House in committee.*

*Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Question put and agreed to, That the Bill be reported to the House.*

*House resumed.*

*Bill reported, without amendment; read the third time and passed.*

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

**The Attorney General (Hon. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj):** Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday, March 7, 1997 at 1.30 p.m. We have agreed that day will be Private Members' Day.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 5.05 p.m.*